

Advent 2023



A Calendar of Devotions

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ISBN 9781791025441 (up to 50 addresses)

ISBN 9781791025458 (51-100 addresses)

ISBN 9781791025465 (101-250 addresses)

ISBN 9781791025472 (251-500 addresses)

ISBN 9781791025489 (over 500 addresses)

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 3

Isaiah 64:1-4

*If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!
Mountains would quake before you
like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.
If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence.*

*When you accomplished wonders beyond all our
expectations;*

*when you came down, mountains quaked
before you.*

From ancient times,

*no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any god but you
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him!*

Advent is a season to linger in longing. This poses a challenge in our tired, time-tabled culture. We are used to having what gratifies and satisfies at the tips of our fingers. We are used to finding quick solutions to our problems. We prefer to keep pushing through rather than pinpoint our pain.

These luxuries were not afforded to the people of Judah, Isaiah's audience, scattered and exiled from their homeland for years upon years. When the prophet spoke these words, they were either still in exile or newly returned from it. Yet, even if the exile had ended, God's people were still under foreign rule. They were still trying to establish their identity among different cultures. They were still wrestling with the resistance from those who did not think they belonged in the land. Still rebuilding. Still seeking ways to have total freedom. Still lingering in longing.

It is under these conditions that they cry out to God, "If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (v. 1). If only you would come

and ignite brushwood and make water boil. If only you would make your name known.

This wasn't an out-of-bounds request of their God. The storytelling around their desert fires was full of wonders beyond their expectations: a water-to-blood plague instead of a water-to-wine miracle. Big-bellied frogs. Greedy, gross gnats. Fierce flies. Dead donkeys. Blistering boils. Dousing downpours. Leech-like locusts. Days drenched in darkness.

God had shown up in big ways before, delivering them from Egypt with plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. Now they wanted God to show up again, to perform a sign and deliver a wonder so that they would know they were not forgotten—so that everyone could see the power of their God.

Our longing is not so different. In our grief, we cry out, wanting to know when the heart that feels exiled from our body will return to its home. In our suffering, we resent the racing rumination that disturbs our dreaming. In our pain, we want to pinpoint the endpoint. When will there be relief? When will the Red Sea part? When will the sea billows of sorrow turn to puddles of peace?

We want to know that God is with us. That God has our back. That God will move mountains to restore our joy and delight.

The prophet's words show us that we cannot press fast-forward. We cannot travel through desolation and despair with haste. God will act on behalf of those who linger in longing—those who know how to wait and work through. If that sounds uncomfortable and excruciating, it is. But this is our starting place.

Prayer: *God, as I enter the season of Advent, help me to believe you act on behalf of those who wait. Tear open the heavens and come down. Deliver me from my longing, from any place in my life where I am still rebuilding, still seeking freedom, still working to belong. Amen.*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

Isaiah 64:5-9

*You look after those who gladly do right;
they will praise you for your ways.
But you were angry when we sinned;
you hid yourself when we did wrong.
We have all become like the unclean;
all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag.
All of us wither like a leaf;
our sins, like the wind, carry us away.
No one calls on your name;
no one bothers to hold on to you,
for you have hidden yourself from us,
and have handed us over to our sin.

But now, LORD, you are our father.
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.
Don't rage so fiercely, LORD;
don't hold our sins against us forever,
but gaze now on your people, all of us.*

The people in exile feared they were there because of their own moral omissions. This is why they say to God, you “have handed us over to our sin” (v.7). Their inequities and failings may have contributed to their circumstances. But over time we learn that God does not work by a simple system of reward or punishment.

I know that is how many of us operate because I hear myself when I talk to my children. “If you make it through your entire bath without complaining, you can have a lollipop.” “If you ask me one more question before I turn the lights out, no YouTube tomorrow.”

I believe God is somewhere in the middle of this line of thinking. Love cannot be hard and harsh at all times, only speaking of what we have done wrong. Neither can it be too ego-inflating, only telling us what we want to hear. Love strikes a balance. We need to be aware of our sins and accountable to God, ourselves, and others. We

also need the abiding grace of Jesus that reminds us we are not inherently shameful.

As the people of Israel are crying out to God, asking for a wonder, they are reckoning with their righteousness. Their verbal processing sounds something like: "God, we think you look after those who do right and are angry with those who sin. We admit we are among the unclean. Perhaps you have turned away from us because of that. But please remember that we are clay, the work of your hands. Come now and gaze on us. We need your looks of love."

Advent beckons us to reckon with our righteousness as we wait. As we linger in longing, we may find ourselves wrestling with what we perceive as God's inactivity in the same way Israel did. Perhaps we are in a period of waiting because of our sin. Or perhaps we are in need of the assurance that our sin has nothing to do with our waiting.

In my ministry, I witness this wrestling within women struggling with infertility. Is God waiting until I am ready? Is God trying to teach me a lesson in the waiting? Did I do something wrong?

Perhaps when our waiting is over, we can look back at the long journey and see that our experience led us to be more ready than we first were. Perhaps when our waiting is over, we can see how the Potter took hard lessons and molded and shaped us as clay so that something good was produced. But I do not believe God's intentions are to withhold from us or test us. Instead, in the waiting, we have the gaze of God upon us—a comforting, affirming look of love.

Prayer: *God, when the waiting is hard, gaze upon me. Where I have done wrong, help me make amends. In my longing, help me feel the balance of your love. I admit my sins to you and I accept your abiding grace. Amen.*

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

Shepherd of Israel, listen!

*You, the one who leads Joseph as if he were a sheep.
You, who are enthroned upon the winged heavenly
creatures.*

Show yourself before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh!

Wake up your power!

Come to save us!

Restore us, God!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

LORD God of heavenly forces,

how long will you fume against your people's prayer?

You've fed them bread made of tears;

you've given them tears to drink three times over!

You've put us at odds with our neighbors;

our enemies make fun of us.

Restore us, God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!...

Let your hand be with the one on your right side—

with the one whom you secured as your own—

then we will not turn away from you!

Revive us so that we can call on your name.

Restore us, LORD God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

I grew up in a small community outside of Birmingham, Alabama, called Bluff Park. Those of us who are from Bluff Park claim it over the more well-known suburb, Hoover. We are a proud people, believing we had something in our childhood others didn't: the best neighborhood pool, an ice cream man who knew our names, a place to hide in the woods and light fires, streets we could walk on at any time of day without fear of harm.

Tucked in our community still sits Bluff Park United Methodist Church. It was my place of refuge growing up. I loved listening to my preacher, Reid Crotty. I watched how he held the pulpit, swaying and leaning with the words as if throwing them at us. I loved my youth group, a hodgepodge

of kids who held one another up. I was at church almost every Wednesday and twice on Sundays.

My youth group first met in an old room across from the gym. It held cozy couches and an old fireplace that I can't remember ever seeing lit. But when I think about that room, I feel warmth and see light. I see the closing circles we used to create as we held hands to sing our benediction. Every week the same refrain: "May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face. May the rain fall soft upon your fields. And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand."

This moment was a parting, communal blessing. In a way it counters the communal lament we hear in Psalm 80. "Restore us, God! / Make your face shine so that we can be saved!" (v. 3).

There is nothing wrong with lament; it is a companion in our longing. Ask your questions. Make your demands. But perhaps you could hum this communal blessing as a ritual reminder: to look for where the road rises, to feel the steady strength of the wind that has your back, to notice the joy and warmth of the sun, to believe God's got you even when rainfall isn't soft.

Practice: *Read today's communal lament out loud. Name the areas in your life causing you to lament. Then sing today's communal blessing. Try to make each line your prayer and see if you notice these elements coming to life throughout your day.*

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always for you, because of God's grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus. That is, you were made rich through him in everything: in all your communication and every kind of knowledge, in the same way that the testimony about Christ was confirmed with you. The result is that you aren't missing any spiritual gift while you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also confirm your testimony about Christ until the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and you were called by him to partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Have you ever been on an airplane with a toddler? Not any toddler, I mean your own toddler. The one you are responsible for when they yank on someone's seat or smash Goldfish into the carpet. My sweet daughter Madeline is a peach, but she does not like to be confined on an aircraft. Our most embarrassing moment so far was when she opened her water bottle and liquid flew out on the man behind us. I turned around and said, "It's just water! Remember your baptism!" (Just kidding about that last part.)

My spouse, Mark, and I have many tactics of distraction. One is letting our daughter pull every single tissue out of a tissue box. We just put them back in and she starts over. In and out. In and out. Our backpack is full of tricks, but we disperse them out over time. Done with the tissues? Here's a book. Bored with that? Here are some stickers. Mom is covered with stickers? Here is another snack. You could call them gifts for everyone on the plane as we try to make it from point A to point B with minimal damage. Or you could call them little pieces of joy and delight for a hard journey.

In Paul's greeting to the Corinthians, he offers a word of grace and peace. He says, "I thank God for you because of God's grace given to you in Jesus." And then Paul reminds them that in their waiting for Jesus, they are not without a backpack of tricks. Along the journey, gifts are dispersed. People come along with words of affirmation and hope. As they long for Jesus—for the in-breaking of God—wisdom, hospitality, and exhortation are theirs.

Part of learning how to linger in longing is to pay attention to the gifts dispersed along the way. You may be traveling through a period of longing that is simply annoying. You may be traversing a tightrope that is tense. You may be wading through grief that feels unrelenting. No matter the circumstance, we become better at sitting in whatever it is when we open our eyes to see the crumbs on the trail. This isn't a trite endeavor, a way to see the positive instead of the negative. This is a lifeline to the lingerer, a friend to the faithful.

As we wait, God does not leave us or forsake us. God greets us with grace and peace. God litters our path with people. God sends spiritual gifts that help us make it from point A to point B with minimal damage—little pieces of joy and delight for a hard journey.

Practice: *Show up with a meal. Send a card. Give someone a book of stickers. Pepper someone else's path with spiritual gifts for the hard journey.*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

Mark 13:24-27

“In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven.”

If this apocalyptic vision of the end-times in Mark 13 confuses you, you are not alone. I had to phone a friend to ask why it is a part of our Advent readings. It isn’t something that has stuck with me or resonated with my soul all these years in the church. But I got a good answer: Advent is not just a time to anticipate the birth of Christ, but a time to anticipate the second coming of Christ. In my own words: We anticipate God-in-the-flesh coming again and again each year, but we also anticipate the final day of no more mourning, crying, heartache, or death. We are waiting for two arrivals—the baby of the cradle who cradles our fears, and the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

People who have gotten carried away with visions of rapture may anticipate this second coming like a scene from the *Left Behind* series. All of a sudden a person vanishes while the person’s loved one remains. Earthquakes, floods, and volcanoes destroy the planet. The elect are the chosen, the “real” Christians. The power, the glory, the winds are to be feared.

When I read this passage, I see something different. Revelation 21:1-3 reveals John’s vision of the end. It describes a new heaven and a new earth, a Holy City that comes down. As it descends, a loud voice booms a resounding joy from the throne: “God’s dwelling place is now among

the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” It is a megaphone message for the world.

When you couple that with Revelation 22, it gets even better. A river, as clear as crystal, flows from the throne of God. On each side of the river are trees that bear fruit with leaves that heal the nations. There is no longer night or a need for a lamp or the sun because Jesus gives off all the light that is needed.

So maybe when the sun is darkened and the moon does not give off light, when the stars fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies shake, it is because the light of the world is descending with glory, power, and honor. Maybe it is the moment of grand arrival, the day when waiting ceases for good. Maybe it is the fulfillment of a promise that all of the faithful will be gathered under the wings of angels and once-and-for-all ushered to the eternal embrace of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Practice: *Write down everything that scares you about the end-times (your own end-time or the second coming of Christ). Then write down everything that gives you hope and promise. What is the megaphone message you need to hear from God about the end?*

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

Mark 13:28-31

“Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he’s near, at the door. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.”

In Mark 13, Jesus is responding to two questions from his disciples. They have just marveled at the structure of the Temple and they are gushing over the mastery of its masonry. Jesus reprimands them as he says: “Do you see all these great buildings?...Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” What exactly did he mean? Perhaps he was pointing to its coming destruction by the Romans, which eventually happened in AD 70. Perhaps it annoyed him that the material world caught their attention. Perhaps he was reminding them that *he* is the temple—that they are a temple. So, like any one of us would do, they ask some clarifying questions: “Tell us, when will these things happen? What sign will show that all these things are all about to come to an end?” (v. 4).

It would be nice to have signs, right? We would appreciate an indication that what we are going through is about to be over. So, Jesus gives them some signs: There will be false prophets, deceptive acts, men trying to be messiahs. The disciples will be persecuted for their belief in him, brought before councils, even tortured. Brother will rise up against brother. Child will rise up against parent. There will be earthly destruction and death. Then he says this interesting bit about a fig tree. He reminds them what they learn from watching it: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.

When we put all this together, without too much attention on the literal events, perhaps Jesus is saying: When what looks dormant blossoms, the end is near. When things look bleak, resurrection is right around the corner. In fact, if you look to the very next chapter of Mark, you see that Jesus's journey to the cross begins. The present suffering will soon be met with the bud of new life.

In my own life, I have found the precipice of bleakness, desperation, and deception to be the number one indicator that something is about to sprout. When I am at a breaking point, on the cusp of giving in, on the bathroom floor in tears, it is shortly after that moment that the sky parts and the sun comes out. Is it because I finally surrendered it to Jesus? Is it because I finally let go of everything I was holding on to in my body? Is it because the Holy Spirit gave me a new perspective? Or as one of my favorite songs from Maverick City says, is it because “the end of me . . . is just the beginning of You”?¹

I can't tell you the answer for sure, but I can tell you to hold on, to learn from your own tender twigs and budding leaves. When you reflect on your life experiences, you see your indicators; you see the signs that always present themselves right before the fig tree blossoms.

Practice: *Take time to reflect on your life experiences. What are your indicators that the end is coming? What signs present themselves right before the fig tree blossoms?*

¹ From “Isaiah Song” by Maverick City Music, track 12 on Maverick City, Vol. 3 - Part 2 (2020).

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

Mark 13:32-37

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. Don’t let him show up when you weren’t expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!”

When I was younger, I lived in a two-story, redbrick house. The front staircase descended straight down into the hill of our front yard. Beside that staircase was a natural fortress: a huge green bush with a sturdy trunk that bore initials from our pocketknife carvings. That covert canopy hid us from our across-the-street neighbors, Chase and Daniel. Half the time they were our friends, the other half our archenemies. Sometimes we played in their tree house, other times we tied them to the trampoline. So, like excellent watchwomen and men, we stood guard in that fortress. We had eyes on them all the time. Was today a day for friend or foe?

One time we devised a secret plan to learn which girls they had crushes on. Two of us hid in our fortress as the other one lured them to walk in front of the bush. At just the right time, the girl on the outside would ask the question and the two of us on the inside would listen as they spilled their guts. No doubt this was ammunition to use against them later.

Yesterday, we talked about indicators that let us know when the end is coming. Yet today’s passage reminds us that we can’t know the exact times and dates our longing will end. Jesus says,

“Be on guard! Be alert!” Like children spying on their neighbors, keep watch.

This need to stay awake and be alert is peppered throughout Scripture. God wrestles Israel from their slumber, telling them to clothe themselves with strength (Isaiah 51:9). We see Jesus get upset with his disciples who cannot stay awake as he prays in the garden (Mark 14:41). Paul tells those in Ephesus, “*Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you*” (5:14). And here, Jesus talks about a man who leaves his house and puts his servants in charge. They have to keep their tasks going, keep watch at the door, and make sure, if he comes back suddenly, he will not find them sleeping. Another story that makes a point for all: “Watch!”

While Advent is a season of longing, it is also a season of watching, of staying alert to the goodness already present and the joy coming soon. All the way to Bethlehem, we will see signs that point to the end of our waiting and a new beginning with the birth of Christ. Our job is to keep our faith fresh and our eyes open, to be like the God who watches over us, who never slumbers (Psalm 121:3). Keep watch and believe: Jesus will come at just the right time.

Practice: *Write down what you are falling asleep to in your faith. What ritual, volunteer opportunities, small group, or experience is not keeping you fresh and expectant? What can you eliminate? What can you start?*

DECEMBER 10

Isaiah 40:1-8 (verses 1-2 printed)

Comfort, comfort my people!

says your God.

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended,

that her penalty has been paid,

that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins!

Isaiah 40 marks the beginning of what is known as Second Isaiah, where a new prophet addresses God's people living in exile in Babylon. They have been wrestling with God's presence, or lack thereof, in their experience of desolation and the trauma of war. They are holding on by a thread, more hopeless than hopeful. Their relationship with God is tenuous, as they believed God brought destruction for the weight of their sins. God has felt hidden to them, out of reach in the midst of their exilic plights.

It is with this backdrop that we hear Isaiah 40:

Comfort, comfort my people!

says your God.

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended,

that her penalty has been paid,

that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins!

Some scholars believe that in verse 2, God is admitting that the destruction went too far, that God's doubling down had the opposite effect. It did not result in submission, but in separation. Like when we scold and punish our children rather than bearing with them patiently in love.

Sometimes it doesn't feel right to talk about those exilic periods in our lives where we feel far off from God. We would rather not admit when we are unsure of God's purpose and presence. It feels wrong to say out loud that we blame God for what has happened and feel like God has doubled down on us.

I was recently at coffee with a mother who lost her young adult daughter. Through tears she told me how mad she is at God. She told me she isn't able to pray or read her Bible or come to church. She blames God and feels as if God is far off.

I told her it was okay to feel that way and to admit it out loud. God can take our questions, frustrations, and disappointment. It is not unusual in the wake of death and destruction to be skeptical of God.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "No feeling is final."¹ I like to add: every feeling is faithful. If you are feeling more hopeless than hopeful this season, that is okay. You can name it. You can admit it. God doesn't give up on you when you resist or push back. God is with you as you work it out. God stays close by in your silence. Like a faithful parent, God stands ready to shower you with comfort and compassion regardless of how you feel about God.

Prayer: *God, I want to believe in your deliverance, but first I need to admit where I have felt your absence. In my pain, I am angry. I do not understand what has happened. I cannot reconcile it. I grieve my loss. Here are my truest feelings (name them). Stay close to me. Hang on to me. Shower me with comfort and compassion. Amen.*

1 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 88.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

Isaiah 40:9-11

*Go up on a high mountain,
messenger Zion!
Raise your voice and shout,
messenger Jerusalem!
Raise it; don't be afraid;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
Here is the LORD God,
coming with strength,
with a triumphant arm,
bringing his reward with him
and his payment before him.
Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;
he will gather lambs in his arms
and lift them onto his lap.
He will gently guide the nursing ewes.*

Yesterday we talked about the context of Isaiah 40. Many of God's people were surely skeptical of God in their experience of destruction and exile. They must have treaded lightly in preparing a way for this God. In verses 9-11, we hear that God wants the Israelites to be heralds of the good news, to go high up on the mountain, raise their voices, and shout, "Here is your God!" I imagine if some were holding back, others were ecstatic—hearing this announcement with jubilation and equally thrilled to shout it from the rooftops and mountain peaks. It was still an end to exile!

Here we also see that the message "Do not be afraid!" comes right before "Here is your God!" It is the same one that bounces through our Advent stories with bellowing bliss. Angels appear to Elizabeth and Zechariah, Joseph, Mary, the shepherds. They all make the same pronouncement: "Do not be afraid!" Why? "Here is your God!"

In these verses we not only hear that God is present, but we hear what God is like. God is full

of strength, with a triumphant arm, yet is also like a shepherd: tending, gathering, lifting, gently guiding.

Do you have people in your life who embody both power and tenderness? My grandfather, Lee Powell, was one of those people for me. Pop was a big, tall guy. He had very long ears. (For some reason this feels important to share.) He spent his life in the trucking business, driving for J. B. Hunt. But in his sixties he transitioned to driving a school bus for the local elementary school. He loved that job and he loved those kids. Their cards and pictures always adorned his refrigerator.

I can't speak for the first part of his life, where I did not exist as his granddaughter. I only know that when we came along, he tended, gathered, lifted, and gently guided us. He was stern and a teddy bear, a soft place to land, a big lap to climb up in. He supported me working at a nonprofit ministry camp in the summers of college. He took my siblings and me on camping trips. He visited me when I lived in a cabin in the woods and gave me words of warning. He spoke words of wisdom and promises of faith, particularly of the Good Shepherd as he neared his death: "I am not afraid to die."

Perhaps this Advent, we need to hear it for ourselves and we need to shout it out for others: God is a powerful God, able to do more than we could ask for or imagine, and God is a tender God, holding us like a mother in the shadow of her wings. We do not have to be afraid because God is already here, and God is coming. Both divine and human. Mighty and dependent. Triumphant and tender.

Practice: Write a note, text, or email to someone in your life who exudes power and tenderness. Let that someone know how his or her presence makes you feel. Tell that person what he or she has taught you about God.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

*LORD, you've been kind to your land;
you've changed Jacob's circumstances for the better.
You've forgiven your people's wrongdoing;
you've covered all their sins. Selah...*

*Let me hear what the LORD God says,
because he speaks peace to his people and to his
faithful ones.*

Don't let them return to foolish ways.

*God's salvation is very close to those who honor him
so that his glory can live in our land.*

*Faithful love and truth have met;
righteousness and peace have kissed.*

*Truth springs up from the ground;
righteousness gazes down from heaven.*

*Yes, the LORD gives what is good,
and our land yields its produce.*

*Righteousness walks before God,
making a road for his steps.*

In the first two verses of Psalm 85, the psalmist looks back with gratitude for Israel's deliverance from exile. He acknowledges that God's love covers all. Then he includes this wonderful word: *selah*. It is known to indicate a break in the music. We might call it a peaceful pause. A moment in this instance for the people to breathe, to close their eyes and really soak up their gratitude for God's faithfulness.

The next few verses are not included in our reading for today. In them, gratitude quickly shifts to a request for more:

*Won't you bring us back to life again
so that your people can rejoice in you?*

Show us your faithful love, LORD!

Give us your salvation! (vv. 6-7).

The joy of return from exile must have been short-lived, feeling more like distant past than present reality. Or maybe that is how life goes:

we find ourselves constantly vacillating between feeling full and feeling empty, having just what we need and not enough to feel alive.

A single voice pipes up in verse 9 to provide reassurance, essentially reminding the fretful that God's redemption is still near. God's deliverance is still active. Faithful love, righteousness, and peace are as close as their very lips. Truth is as plentiful as dandelions in the summer months. God's gaze as near as the constellations that light up the sky.

Some days it takes ample self-talk to stay centered and grounded on God's truth, to live out of the abundance of thankfulness rather than the scarcity of not feeling invigorated by everything we do. Our gratitude for waking up quickly shifts to stress over our to-do lists. Our moments of serenity in nature collide with a culture centered on consumption. Our joyous stretches of vacation are soon met with adult demands. We do not have enough energy, enough time, enough margin in our life that feels salvific.

I wonder if we need a good re-centering in this season. A single voice that pipes up and says, Don't forget God's faithful love, righteousness, and peace. Maybe we need a break in the music that feels like monotony. As Advent and Christmas collide, we are pulled in one hundred different directions. We are busy making sure our children have memories that last, handwriting cards, purchasing presents, trimming trees, celebrating at soirees. But what if we chose to live with and acknowledge more selahs? What if we stopped to express our gratitude? What if we halted to remember that God brings us back to life again and again?

Practice: Set your phone alarm for three different points in your day. When it goes off, take a break and a breath. Express gratitude for something that has taken place. Find joy in the season of Advent that brings the hope of Christ's birth.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

2 Peter 3:8-15a (verses 8-13 printed)

Don't let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. On that day the heavens will pass away with a dreadful noise, the elements will be consumed by fire, and the earth and all the works done on it will be exposed.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be? You must live holy and godly lives, waiting for and hastening the coming day of God. Because of that day, the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements will melt away in the flames. But according to his promise we are waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Advent is a season of watching and waiting both for Christ's arrival and for Christ's second coming. This theme returns with today's reading from 2 Peter 3. The author tries to reassure his readers that time is in God's hand, not calculated in the same ways with which they numbered their hours and days. It was meant to be a calming message in an anxious time. Years had passed since Christ's expected return. The faithful were becoming weary. So Peter reminded them what was most important: not knowing dates and times, but staying committed to living holy and godly lives, pushing forward with peace and patience, seeking to be pure and faultless.

This passage strikes me differently now, having survived more than two years of a pandemic. I am not sure we have collectively processed it. Our brains are built that way, protecting us from taking in too much at one time. In many ways, life goes on, and we have to move with it. But I can still remember that feeling, not knowing

when this horrible time in our lives would end. I remember how hard it was to not grow weary—to stay focused on living well, practicing patience, and providing peace.

When we are holding on and waiting for an end, trying not to grow weary, Peter's words can bring encouragement. Sometimes all there is to do is stay focused on living well. Sleep, eat, drink water, move. Practice patience: breathe, create more margin between meetings and events, take your time. Provide peace. No. First, find peace.

Several years ago my mother-in-law, Denise, bought our son Lewis a snow globe. It is black with a red truck encased in the glass. The truck is surrounded by Christmas trees, and there is a brown dog with a scarf in the driver's seat. It is electric, so the snow circulates by itself when you flip the switch on the bottom.

Last Advent, I stuck it above my sink. Every night it would be the last Christmas item I turned off. With the rest of the room's lights completely extinguished, I paused in the light of its glow. I breathed, I prayed, I asked for strength to keep going. It provided me peace, the reminder that my heart could be at rest, that I could be an unanxious presence, even if chaos swirled around me.

In a world full of fretful and fearful people who are hanging on in hard times, growing weary and not knowing when it will end, Christ's people can be people of peace. We can be people like Peter who say: Stay faithful. The One who is the beginning, middle, and end is still coming, and his clock will birth something new.

Practice: *Find an item that makes you feel peaceful. Put it where you will see it right before you go to bed each night. Let it serve as a reminder that your heart can be at rest, that you can be an unanxious presence, even if chaos swirls around you.*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

Mark 1:1-3

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

Look, I am sending my messenger before you.

He will prepare your way,

a voice shouting in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the LORD;

make his paths straight.”

In today's passage, the author of Mark connects the good news of Jesus to the ancient prophecy from Isaiah 40. Just as God said it was time for the exile to end, Mark announced that the period of waiting for Jesus was about to end. A messenger would be sent to prepare the way, and his name was John the Baptist.

We learn that John's main role was to lead people to repentance, to help God's people prepare their hearts and minds to receive Jesus. John would baptize them with water, giving them a marker of their commitment to turn their lives toward God. But Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, the ultimate comforter, counselor, and course corrector.

Last year on the first day of fall, my husband and I took our two children to a huge festival with pumpkins, games, animals, a hayride, and a corn maze. Our son, Lewis, was four at the time. After a trip to the barn and a round of miniature golf with neon clubs, we took off through the corn maze as a unit. We weren't in there long before Lewis quickly darted down one row and then another, laughing as he tried to find his way out. We decided to let him run ahead of us because most of the time we could see his head as he weaved through the cornstalks. But then came the moments of squinting our eyes to look for him or running ahead to keep up with him. He soon

became determined to do it alone, turning back and yelling, “I can find my own way!”

One way we have talked about sin in the church is “missing the mark.” I imagine it like a bull’s-eye. Our efforts to follow God’s leading and live according to God’s desires are like arrows flying at a target. Sometimes we hit it right on, other times we miss it. As we repent and seek grace, we keep working on our aim.

What I see in this passage is another image. We are trying to forge a straight path, one that helps us live how God intends for us to live. Yet there are times, like Lewis, when we are more determined to trudge forward alone. We veer off the trail. We go over the river and through the woods. We look back at God and yell, “I can find my own way!”

As we walk this path of Advent that will lead us to Jesus, where might we be missing the mark or veering off the road? What clutter do we need to clear off our path? What distractions do we need to push aside? How will we use this time to prepare the way for our newborn king?

Practice: Draw your path. It doesn’t have to be a straight line. What does it look like? Make notes about where you have missed the mark or veered off the road. Name what is cluttering your path to Jesus. Name what you need to clear out and push aside in order to prepare for his arrival.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

Mark 1:4-5

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins.

In Luke's version of this wilderness scene, people who had come to the river to be baptized by John started asking questions. John tells them that to truly change their hearts and lives, their repentance must bear fruit. Their newfound faith must be put into action.

Some people in the crowd ask, "What then should we do?" (Luke 3:10). A good question. We cannot just give people theology or lead them to significant moments without practical application and a plan for the future. John responds by saying, If you have two shirts, give one to someone who doesn't have one. If you have food, share it with people who do not have food.

Then some tax collectors ask the same question, "Teacher, what should we do?" (v. 12). Now, knowing their propensity to pocket a little money for themselves when collecting taxes, John says, Don't collect any more than you are supposed to!

Then some soldiers say, "What about us? What should we do?" (v. 14). John says, Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be content with your pay.

I wonder what specific responses you might hear if you asked God: "What should I do?"

If you read closely, you will notice that each of these responses points to how these groups of people could live outwardly. Give away clothes, share food, do not make money at someone else's expense, do not misuse the power you have over others. To put it another way: Each of these

responses points to how these groups of people could take care of their fellow human beings.

As we head to the manger, I wonder how we can make sure we are being other-oriented. I find myself so absorbed by my own list, my own responsibilities, that even in a season of giving, I feel self-focused. I realize as a pastor my work affects a large number of people. Still, I need those hands-on encounters. I need to share clothes and food with my neighbors.

The point of John's message is this: We can prepare for Jesus by confessing our sins and becoming more aware of how we have veered off the straight path. But the spiritual life requires more than our verbal piety. Let our path this Advent include opportunities to be truly changed and transformed because of how we notice, respond to, and sit with others. To love people and satisfy the necessities of their flesh may be the only true way to receive the Word made flesh.

Practice: *How can you satisfy the needs of others in a tangible way this Advent? Pick an action item and fulfill it over the coming weeks.*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

Mark 1:6-8

John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In today's reading, John is careful to make a distinction between being baptized by water and being baptized by the Spirit. This tells us that we should try to figure out why.

When we look at the role of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, we see that the Spirit does many things. The Spirit sends, drives, and leads. We know this because after Jesus receives the Spirit at his baptism, he is led into the wilderness by the Spirit (Luke 4:1). We also know the Spirit anoints because after leading Jesus into the wilderness, Jesus proclaims in Nazareth:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
(Luke 4:18-19)*

I don't think this means that those who were baptized with water didn't live sent, anointed lives. As we saw in yesterday's reflection, John the Baptist told people that their repentance must bear fruit; their faith must be put into action.

I wonder if the distinction comes when we consider the difference between being led by God externally and being led by God internally. In other words, with a baptism of the Holy Spirit, we receive a guide from the inside. We receive a God that lives in our belly and in our bones. We

are empowered to do all the things Jesus did by the God-made-flesh now living in our flesh. Life is different when you believe the Holy Spirit is a part of your inner being.

I think it is that Spirit that helps us continue the commission and call of Jesus. And I think Jesus outlines that mission here: proclaiming good news, release, recovery, liberation, and forgiveness. Sometimes our eyes glaze over when we hear this litany, like we have become numb to it or it feels unobtainable. But there are a myriad of ways to deliver good news, release, recovery, liberation, and forgiveness to the world. It is a call we can take literally and metaphorically. It is a call that allows us to keep Jesus's anointing alive.

Just as Jesus was sent in the Spirit, we are sent in the Spirit. Just as he was anointed, we are anointed. His mission has truly become a co-mission. We are the coheirs, cocreators, coconspirators of this Kingdom calling. As we travel through Advent, how will we allow the Spirit to drive, lead, and send us? How will we make room for the God-in-our-flesh?

Prayer: *God, do not let me slumber or stay silent when I hear I am a coheir, cocreator, and coconspirator of our co-mission. Help me see the ways I can deliver good news, release, recovery, liberation, and forgiveness to the world. Amen.*

DECEMBER 17

Isaiah 61:1-4 (verses 1-3a printed)

*The LORD God's spirit is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me.
He has sent me
to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and a day of vindication for our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for Zion's mourners,
to give them a crown in place of ashes,
oil of joy in place of mourning,
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.*

The first verse of Isaiah 61 is familiar. Jesus reads these words and claims them as his own mission in Luke chapter 4. The next verses in Isaiah go even further: the anointed one will bind up the brokenhearted, comfort all who mourn, give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. It is a promise for the people of God. What is broken can be mended. What feels isolating can be soothed. What once was gut-wrecking will one day be redeemed.

In yesterday's reflection, I spoke of our commission to proclaim good news, release, recovery, liberation, and forgiveness. Today we add: to bind what is fractured, frail, and frangible.

One of the most poignant moments I have witnessed in ministry happened this past January. A beloved woman at our church passed away. I was there minutes after she took her last breath. She was one of those people who touched all generations in our congregation. She was a shepherd at vacation Bible school. She knew the

kids at our children's center. She peeled pounds of potatoes and made homemade dishes for men experiencing homelessness. She was the first to show up on a new parent's doorstep with a fresh meal and word of encouragement.

Following her death, nurses came into the room to wash her body. It made me think of how tender Joseph and Nicodemus must have been as they cared for Jesus's body (John 19:38-42). It is truly a pastor's privilege to be present in these sacred, vulnerable moments. This beloved woman's sister also wanted to wash her. By craft, her sister was a nurse, but of course it was deeper than that. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she lightly, meticulously wiped her sister's skin. She spoke over her. I could not hear what she was saying, nor did I try to. I could imagine it: I love you. I will miss you. You are going to be okay now.

The brokenhearted was doing the binding, an anointing in her mourning that may one day be her oil of joy. An unbelievably hard but equally beautiful and redemptive washing. A crown in the place of ashes.

As you think about your own suffering, I am sure you have had these moments. What was tragic was also somehow stunning. What brought you to your knees, God somehow redeemed. As stitchers of shattered souls, we can be healing balm for others. The ministry of our presence is hard, especially when we do not know what to say. But most of the time all people need is a touch; a person bearing witness to their pain; an anointing in their mourning that may just one day be their oil of joy.

Practice: *Think of friends who need to know they are not alone in the midst of their suffering. Make a visit. Offer the ministry of your presence, a hug, a touch. If you cannot be physically present, send flowers, call, write a note, or do something specific to that person that you know will lift your friend's spirits.*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

Isaiah 61:8-11

I, the LORD, love justice;

I hate robbery and dishonesty.

I will faithfully give them their wage,

and make with them an enduring covenant.

Their offspring will be known among the nations,

and their descendants among the peoples.

All who see them will recognize

that they are a people blessed by the LORD.

I surely rejoice in the LORD;

my heart is joyful because of my God,

because he has clothed me with clothes of victory,

wrapped me in a robe of righteousness

like a bridegroom in a priestly crown,

and like a bride adorned in jewelry.

As the earth puts out its growth,

and as a garden grows its seeds,

so the LORD God will grow righteousness and praise

before all the nations.

These verses describe the redemptive work of the Lord, continuing the thread begun earlier in Isaiah 61. The Lord declares his love for justice and his disdain for robbery and dishonesty. Those who rejoice in him do so because he has clothed them with victory, wrapped them in a robe of righteousness. They have joy in their hearts because God has promised to grow righteousness and praise before all the nations. Upon return from exile, Israel will be the advent of something new.

Another motif running through this passage is that God wants the people who have experienced destruction to help rebuild and care for those now facing circumstances like their own. This makes sense to me. We are able to use our experiences of survival to help others survive in similar circumstances. Although no two experiences are exactly the same, the more vulnerable we are in sharing pieces of our stories, the more opportunities we have to heal. I have seen this play out like a domino effect.

One morning in worship, I shared about my own miscarriage. At the time I had only had one, but now I have had two. A young woman who was visiting our church reached out to me. We took a walk around the parking lot as she shared her grief over not being able to get pregnant. After that same sermon, another woman in our church shared her experience with infertility. Because of that, I was able to connect the two together. Fast-forward another year or so and another young woman was devastated after three years of trying to get pregnant. The duo became a trio—a trinity of faith, hope, and love cheering one another on.

I often wonder if the women of the Advent and Christmas stories used their pain to help others. I wish we could hear their full stories. Elizabeth, who struggled with infertility: old, righteous, blameless, shamed. Mary, who chose to bear the potential scorn of society, shock of her fiancé, and disgrace of her family. Elizabeth and Mary, who knew the fears and worries of pregnancy, felt the excruciating middle ground of not knowing if the baby would be safe, how or when they might deliver, what it would be like to incubate and sustain a life. And the mothers of Bethlehem suffered a different kind of pain after Herod's terrible orders were carried out—Rachel wept for her children, and she would not be comforted (Matthew 2:18).

If you know the wait of infertility, the anxieties of pregnancy, the horror of child loss, then you are among the faithful. You are written in the holy pages. Do not give up hope. Hold fast for tidings of comfort and joy. The miracle of Christmas is that God comes close, cradling your fears, collecting your tears. Somehow, somehow, Jesus will be born to you, for you, and in you; and his light will bring you to life yet again.

Practice: *Find a way to share your pain in a way that is appropriately vulnerable and authentic to you. Who can you help because of what you have been through?*

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

Luke 1:46-49

Mary said,

“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored

because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.”

Today’s passage begins with what is known as Mary’s Magnificat. To appreciate its depth, let’s consider Mary’s story. I encourage you to read Luke 1 in its entirety. It contains the details of the faithful and righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth, two of our main Advent characters. Couched in their story, we see the angel of the Lord visit Mary (Luke 1:26-38).

Mary lived in the part of town that was not for the wealthy. She was likely a servant of some kind. She was a teenager, maybe as young as twelve or thirteen, and she was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, which in her day pretty much meant she was already married.

The first thing the angel says to Mary is: “Rejoice, favored one!” We’re told that Mary was confused and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Nothing about her social circumstances would have made her feel favored. So the angel reiterated what she needed to hear: “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you” (vv. 28, 30).

Right here in the beginning of Luke, the writer is already setting up the reversals of the kingdom of God. He will go on to say things like:

“Happy are you who are poor,

because God’s kingdom is yours.

*Happy are you who hunger now,
because you will be satisfied.
Happy are you who weep now,
because you will laugh." (6:20-21)*

...

"All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." (14:11)

In Mary's song, she captures this characteristic of the Kingdom:

*"He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone will consider me
highly favored..."*

*He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed."*

(1:48, 52-53)

This is no metaphor. God promises literally to feed the hungry, to respond to poverty by lifting up those who are poor.

The Word for those of us with resources, then, is to follow the command to satisfy the hunger of others, to keep the conditions of our brothers and sisters who are economically impoverished before our community leaders who can work to create solutions. Every instance where the "lowly" are exalted or the hungry are filled with good things should be a moment of our collective rejoicing. Mary's song then becomes a song for all.

Prayer: *God, prompt and nudge me by your Spirit to see the ways I can satisfy the hunger of others and improve the conditions of my neighbors who are economically impoverished. Help my prayers be more than words. Help me exalt those the world labels as lowly, knowing your kingdom holds the right reversals. Amen.*

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Luke 1:50-55

*"He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.*

He has shown strength with his arm.

*He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and
proud inclinations.*

*He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.*

*He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,*

*just as he promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants
forever."*

When I got married in 2013, I moved to Nashville to live in a small apartment with my spouse, Mark. We didn't need many furnishings, so we filled our home with items from our families. A tall, brown, bar-height table from his parents. A wicker set of drawers from my grandmother. An old, fragile hutch that was my great-grandmother's.

I didn't realize that ten years later I would still be holding on to those things. We moved from an apartment to a house. Then another house. And another house. The value of each item increased over time. The table now hosts friends who stand and sit around it, sharing laughter. The set of drawers held diapers and a changing table for my daughter when the two of us were trying to live out of my bedroom. The hutch lost a decorative topper during one round with the moving truck. We kept trying to glue it back on. Now, as my daughter eats breakfast, she stands on her chair and looks at her reflection in its panes.

In today's portion of Mary's song, she speaks of God's mercy from one generation to the next, of the promises God made to Abraham and his

descendants. What I hear in her merciful melody is God's faithfulness through the ages. Just as God stayed close to Abraham, just as God delivered his descendants to the Promised Land, God was now announcing another deliverance. His impending arrival would be the fulfillment of promises made long ago: a king from the line of David. The value of God's Word increased over time.

As you gather with your families this season, can you look around the room and see God's faithfulness through the ages? Can you see God's deliverance and mercy from generation to generation?

From another perspective: the hope we have in a God that sustains humanity through the ages is that our Kingdom work now has lasting effects for generations to come. Sometimes we think our efforts are fruitless. We can't see the change, or we feel defeated knowing how long it will take for change to really come. This passage is a reminder to keep moving the furniture around. The value increases over time; God's faithfulness and mercy carry on with each move. From one generation to the next, God yields a crop for those who do not grow weary, for those who do not give up (Galatians 6:9). This Advent, what can you recommit to cultivating? What can you stick with and trust God will see it through?

Practice: *Draw a line on a piece of paper. Write the name of an older family member on one end and your name on the other. Think of people in between and include them in the middle. Where has God been faithful through the ages?*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't suppress the Spirit. Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil. Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming. The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.

Each Advent, my husband Mark and I create a list of fun things we want to do with our children. It always includes the essentials: driving around to look at Christmas lights, putting up the inflatables, and baking Christmas cookies. Last year we added a trip to the ICE exhibit at Gaylord Opryland Hotel here in Nashville. It is an icy wonderland: scenes, statues, and slides carved out of thick blocks of ice. As you could guess, the room has to stay at nine degrees at all times to keep the structures sturdy.

When we arrived, we were handed heavily padded blue parkas. We laughed as my daughter, Madeline, just one year and three months old at the time, was engulfed in her jacket. She waddled around like a penguin with glee, but she did not like that she couldn't find or use her hands!

As we entered, we marveled at the magnitude of each carefully crafted carving. We weaved in and out as our son, Lewis, eagerly bounced from one to the next. We soon discovered the large ice slides, which took all of his attention. As Lewis and I stood in line waiting our turn, he continually asked, "Why is this taking so long?"

When it was finally our turn, I went down first so I could turn around and see him. His little body flew down like the Jamaican bobsled in *Cool Runnings*. He giggled, smiling as he normally

does with every part of his face. After another round with his dad, we headed out for a snack and a walk through the historic, grand hotel.

Both kids marveled at the wide array of lights, the tricks of the water displays, and all the Christmas decorations. There were unexpected guests, like a gingerbread man walking around high-fiving kids. There were places to take Christmas photos and sip hot chocolate with marshmallows. The whole night filled our family with the joy of the Advent season, and it was needed. Months earlier we had received the devastating news of a terminal diagnosis for a beloved family member. We were working to hold our joy and sorrow in tension, determined to still rejoice, pray, give thanks, and be attentive to the movement of the Spirit in Advent.

In 1 Thessalonians, we find Christ-followers who are trying to wait patiently for Jesus's return, people asking, "Why is this taking so long?" I imagine some were full of sorrow, trying to hold on to rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, and being attentive to the movement of the Spirit.

When we find ourselves impatient in our waiting or full of sorrow, perhaps we can try cultivating these spiritual disciplines. They make the instructions to rejoice always and pray continually a little more feasible. When we practice them, our perspective shifts and somehow even the hardest journeys are made more manageable because we found a way to delight in the good.

Practice: *Do one thing today that brings you joy. Write down or say aloud one thing you are grateful for.*

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22

John 1:6-8

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

I have immense pride in being my mother's daughter. Her name is Edith. My mom has worked at a children's hospital in Alabama for over thirty years. She is trained as a NICU nurse and ECMO primer. ECMO is a heart-lung bypass machine, often the final effort to save a child. My mom is the person who runs to the room with the pump and sets it up under the pressure of failing vitals. She is one of the strongest people I know.

At my mom's house are all sorts of fun things. She has eight grandchildren, so there are shelves of toys and outdoor gaming equipment and rows of books. But before any of our kids were even a thought, there were wind chimes, twirly straws, and bubbles. Lots of bubbles.

You might find that silly for a woman in her sixties, but the more I experience death in my own ministry, the more I get it. Her love for surprises and science experiments, glitter and glow, are all ways to have joy in the midst of the darkness she sees. Daily, she is surrounded by death, but she chooses to see all the life. She chooses to produce her own light.

In today's passage, we are told that John testified about Jesus, the coming light—a light that would give life, a light that could not be extinguished by all the darkness in the world. That was a Word of hope for the people of God who were aching for the long-awaited Savior. That sounded like celebration and victory in the midst of the death-dealing circumstances of empire.

Perhaps this season, all you feel is darkness. It's on you like a garment, in you like a gut punch.

Admittedly, I felt that way the week before Christmas Eve last year. Four days before our services, my car window was shattered and my computer and purse were stolen. Two days later, my beloved colleague lost his daughter to addiction. Sadness, sickness, and suffering were making my soul feel like a game of Jenga. One more removed block threatened to knock me down.

We have to honor these emotions while also reminding ourselves that our feelings can be deceptive. We may be overwhelmed by darkness for good reason, but our lives are not utterly dark. We are not what we think at one given moment. We are not what we feel at one given moment. We are people made in the image of the Word, the One who comes as Light and Life. He is the place where we can land, rest, and ground our darkness.

If darkness surrounds you this season, create some light. Blow bubbles with bliss. Celebrate every little thing that gives you joy. Find a way to turn your eyes upon the One who is coming with a godly glow. He is the Light no darkness in this world can ever extinguish.

Practice: *Light a candle, throw some glitter in the air, crack a glow stick. Look at the light and remember that the Light of the World is on his way.*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

John 1:19-28 (verses 19-23 printed)

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"

John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ."

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

John said, "I'm not."

"Are you the prophet?"

John answered, "No."

They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied,

*"I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,
Make the Lord's path straight,
just as the prophet Isaiah said."*

There is an exchange between the disciples of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke 7:18-23. John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one they had been waiting for, or if he should start looking for someone else. Jesus responded by pointing to his actions. He said to the disciples: Go, report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind see. Those who were crippled walk. People with skin diseases are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised up. Good news is preached to the poor.

Here, we encounter similar questioning. John gives testimony to who he is as the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem send priests and Levites to quiz him. Only, John would never claim to be the Christ, or Elijah, or a prophet. He labels himself as the one crying out in the wilderness. A voice. They ask him why he baptizes if he isn't the Christ, Elijah, or the prophet. And he answers with a variation of the line he proclaimed from the beginning: I baptize with water, but someone greater is among

you. As John says in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: He baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

These conversations make me wonder: How can we be like John, a voice proclaiming the coming of Jesus, a disciple pointing to the more powerful One? What do people see and hear from us?

Years ago when I was working for a nonprofit camping ministry called Mountain T.O.P. (Tennessee Outreach Project), I encountered a bus driver that worked for a college swim team. The swim team would practice in the mornings and then spend their days on minor home repair projects in our rural stretch of Appalachia. In the evenings, we would gather for worship in our dining hall. I remember this man sitting near me as we sang songs and listened to the witnesses from these college students. One by one they shared how God was touching their lives and teaching them lessons. When I looked over at the bus driver, he had tears streaming down his face. I asked him if he was okay, and he turned to me with a loving gaze. Eyes locked, he said with so much conviction, “Jesus makes me weep.”

That man is etched in my memory because I want that kind of faith. I want to point to Jesus and his work and his mercy instead of taking the credit for myself. I want to give praise, glory, and honor to Jesus for any good that I might be proclaiming or doing in the world. John’s testimony and witness are a model for us to follow. No, I am not God! I am not a prophet. I am a voice, a disciple paving the way for Jesus, trying to heal, give sight, restore hearing, raise the dead, and preach good news just as he did.

Prayer: *Jesus, I want to be the voice that speaks of your goodness and points to your glory. Humble me where I need humbling. Jesus, I want others to know I am yours because of what they see and hear. Give me eyes to see where I can heal. Give me ears to hear where I can proclaim your promises. Help me unashamedly share the ways you make me weep. Amen.*

DECEMBER 24

Luke 1:35

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son.”

2 Samuel 7:1-9

When the king was settled in his palace, and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to the prophet Nathan, “Look, I’m living in a cedar palace, but God’s chest is housed in a tent!”

Nathan said to the king, “Go ahead and do whatever you are thinking, because the LORD is with you.”

But that very night the LORD’s word came to Nathan: Go to my servant David and tell him: This is what the LORD says: You are not the one to build the temple for me to live in. In fact, I haven’t lived in a temple from the day I brought Israel out of Egypt until now. Instead, I have been traveling around in a tent and in a dwelling. Throughout my traveling around with the Israelites, did I ever ask any of Israel’s tribal leaders I appointed to shepherd my people: Why haven’t you built me a cedar temple?

So then, say this to my servant David: This is what the LORD of heavenly forces says: I took you from the pasture, from following the flock, to be leader over my people Israel. I’ve been with you wherever you’ve gone, and I’ve eliminated all your enemies before you. Now I will make your name great—like the name of the greatest people on earth.

Today, many of us will celebrate Jesus’s birth with our families, friends, or faith communities. Many of us will make our ways to church in fading sunlight. We will help kids get into Nativity costumes and watch them bring the Christmas story to life. We will greet one another with, “Merry Christmas!” We will listen to choirs and

soloists who bless us with songs of the Savior. We will hear the full reading of Jesus's arrival in Luke 2. We will think about Mary's commitment to carry Jesus in her body and support him with her blood. We will picture Mary and Joseph delivering away from home, wrapping Jesus in swaddling clothes. We will be reminded yet again of his humble birth, born in the mess, mire, and muck of life—the lowly coming for the lowly. We will hear of those shepherds out in the fields terrified by the arrival of the angels but comforted by their heavenly tunes. Like them, we will be amazed at Jesus, glorifying and praising God for this gift of a God who will learn what it is like to be human.

Whether this is your first Christmas Eve or your ninetieth, can you marvel at the miracle of Jesus's birth?

His birth means God is coming closer than God has ever come before. God came close in the Exodus, in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God came close to Moses, speaking to him from a blazing bush. God came close to Elijah, brushing by him on the misty mountain top. But today, God comes as a baby, in flesh and bone, in breath and touch, offering new depth of relationship, human-to-human.

God shows us more pointedly what God has wanted all along: to dwell with us and within us. In 2 Samuel 7, we see that David is trying to build a home for God that is ornate, clean, and established. But in the night, God visits Nathan and says, Go tell David this: don't build me a temple. I haven't lived in a temple since I brought you out of Egypt. In all that traveling, did I ever ask you to build a temple? In your coming and your going, David, I've been with you wherever you've gone.

Like David, we may be tempted to make a home for God in our sanctuaries; to feel like we can only access and experience God in those four walls. But God isn't interested in our stained glass windows and freshly polished pews. God first

inhabits Mary's body for nine months. God is then dependent on her and Joseph's tenderness, touch, and care.

So perhaps our message this Christmas is this: God does not want to be chiseled into our churches; God wants to be cuddled, cradled, and coddled. God wants to get as close as God can get. God wants to be with you wherever you go, in flesh and bone, in breath and touch, human-to-human.

Prayer: *God, I do not want leave your behind in temples and tabernacles I try to fashion for you. I want you to make a home in me. I want you to reside in my very being. As you draw close to me, I draw close to you. Thank you for being the God in my flesh and bone, my breath and touch. Thank you for meeting me human-to-human, face-to-face. Amen.*

DECEMBER 25

John 1:1-14 (verses 1-5 printed)

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.*

*The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.*

*What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.*

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.*

When I graduated college in 2008, I went to work for a nonprofit ministry called Mountain T.O.P. (Tennessee Outreach Project). That transition from Alabama to Tennessee had me moving from a house with four other women to a cabin in the woods by myself. I loved the woods and that meticulously crafted cabin built by a local artist.

Those next four and a half years were incredibly formative for me as a person. I learned the value of silence and how to deal with the demons that arose because of it. I asked hard questions as the floodgates of my faith flew open. I leaned into the God of the thin trees that swayed like toothpicks and the God of the river that rushed with the snowfall.

My full-time job at camp was to recruit people to come volunteer on the mountain, serving with families in that rural part of Appalachia to repair their homes. During the spring, college students would come serve on their spring breaks. When their work wrapped up, or they had a free half day on the weekend, we led them on adventures through Lost Creek Cave. The opening to the cave was massive, but the sunlight quickly turned to

total darkness as we walked in. A cave is one of the only places to experience such a phenomenon.

At a certain juncture in the cave, we always split into two groups: those who wanted to shimmy through a tight space, and those who did not. I tended to hang back with those who valued their lives. We would sit and feel the brisk wind of the cave. Then we would turn off our headlamps, attempting to see, hoping some sliver of light might come in and prove the world wrong.

On one such occasion, I very vividly remember someone started to sing a hymn. Then other voices joined in as one by one we continued to extinguish our headlamps. It was one of the most peaceful moments I can remember in my life. And then it got even better. In the distance, the army crawlers returned. As they made their way over the ledge, one headlamp at a time pierced our total darkness, ushering the light forward as we sang.

Today, we sing because the Light has come. We celebrate because the world is proven wrong; the Light always finds a way in. We can be singing when he comes or we can have no melody left in us. We can be navigating the silence and the demons it brings or we can be standing in awe of the God of the trees. No matter our circumstances, today we can rejoice. Jesus is the Light that shines on all people, and he has come to pierce the darkness one song, one lamp, at a time.

Practice: Read Psalm 98:1-8. It begins this way: “Sing to the Lord a new song / because he has done wonderful things!” What are you singing today because of the Light of Life, the Word-made-flesh? What new song has he planted in your heart?