



2021 Advent Devotional

Grateful thanks to the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for the use of their free 2021 Advent Devotional. Rooted in the Reformed tradition, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is committed to the formation of women and men for theologically reflective ministry and to scholarship in service to the global Church of Jesus Christ. This year's devotional is written by alumnae/i of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.



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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2021

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Caitlin Rohrer Werth '10

In today's context, it can be difficult for us to wrestle with a passage that seems to draw so much attention to dualism, judgment, and the anticipated apocalypse. We do live in a world divided, and we have seen well-intentioned people use religion to increase this divide—to pass judgment on others and react out of fear.

But the overall message of the gospel guides us away from that reaction. It reminds us followers of Christ that we are all broken by sin, all connected as a body, all grafted onto the vine, not called to judge, and that nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus. So also *this* passage can remind us that as Christians we are called to see duality in a different way: it's not "us versus them," but holiness versus separation from God—faith, love, hope, and salvation versus destruction and pain. We know enough to live differently. And we are reminded that we can't do so alone. We need each other to continue to live in and through God's love.

The church in Thessalonica was being reminded to put on armor—not for battle, but for love. We are meant to be ready for whatever God brings. We don't know the day or the hour, or even what the future holds, but we can be open and alert

to what will come. We are also reminded in this passage that we live with Christ even if we fail—whether awake or asleep, we live with him.

PRAYER

God of love, thank you for holding us in your care, for reminding us that we know a different world in you. Help us to be ready for whatever you bring forth, and keep our eyes open so we don't miss your movements. May your love radiate within us and spring forth from us as we live our daily lives, and may we continue to connect and build each other up to further spread your love.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 145

- 1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
- 2 Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
- 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
- 4 One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
- 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
- 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.
- 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.
- 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
- 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
- 12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
- 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,

and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
14 The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
15 The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
16 You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
17 The Lord is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.
18 The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry, and saves them.
20 The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.
21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Michelle Wahila

An acrostic, Psalm 145 uses the letters of the Hebrew alphabet successively to begin each phrase of praise throughout this piece of poetic wisdom. With each letter of the alphabet used, God is lauded. It's like saying everything, even every word from A to Z gives praise to the Lord. The Lord is "great" and "good." Gracious and merciful, God's steadfast love is abounding, and God's compassion is over all things.

This hymn of praise could be a rather fitting angelic chorus – perfect for the Christmas season. But what about those years when Christmas carols don't resound in our hearts and our cup of cheer is empty? As 2021 draws to a close, we may not be ready to string up twinkling lights; we may not be able to gather with family and friends to celebrate.

This Psalm, like the others in this section (139-144), is attributed to David. As we read the words of praise, we would do well to remember David's own narrative. Assassinations, exploitations, war, grief, power, and privilege—David's story is filled with turmoil. Amid dark valleys, David found words of praise for a King greater than he.

A life in turmoil and a world in turmoil is set in contrast to hope penned with poetic prose. From A to Z, we come to understand not just that God is to be praised, but why: the Lord upholds all who are falling ... the Lord is just in all his ways ... the Lord is near to all who call on him.

God sparks hope within darkness through mighty acts of justice, compassion, and mercy. The Lord picks up those who are falling and satisfies need. Forever and always on the side of the marginalized and suffering, these words describe a kin-dom where the foundation is God's faithfulness to the weary and worn. God gives steadfast love to the failing and faltering.

The challenge for David and for us is to speak words of praise "in the midst." We need not look far to see the faces of those suffering. Perhaps we ourselves are walking dark, tumultuous valleys. Praise "in the midst" must look like hope, and hope is sparked when holy words of justice, mercy, and compassion are put into action.

For hope to be concrete, it must be experienced, and we experience God's steadfast love in our kinship. Words of praise are passed from generation to generation, because God's mighty acts call us all into a new world and a new way of being—together.

Together, we await the birth of Emmanuel, "God with us." May we do so "in the midst" with the justice, compassion, and mercy of God guiding our hearts and hands.

PRAYER

God of abundant goodness, guide us in your compassion and justice. Draw us into new ways of being and living together. May our kinship be marked by your love; our actions marked by your mercy. May hope be sparked "in the midst" of turmoil. May our lives resound with songs of praise for the One who is with us, intertwining all into a story of eternity. Amen.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Amos 3:1-11

1 Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: 2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all

your iniquities. 3 Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment? 4 Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from its den, if it has caught nothing? 5 Does a bird fall into a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it? Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing? 6 Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster befall a city, unless the LORD has done it? 7 Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. 8 The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? 9 Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod, and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, "Assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria, and see what great tumults are within it, and what oppressions are in its midst." 10 They do not know how to do right, says the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds. 11 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defense; and your strongholds shall be plundered.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Dr. Graham Deans '06

As a Scotsman, I am aware that a great deal has often been made of the "special relationship" between the U.K. and the U.S. Similarly, a great deal has been made of the special relationship between the Lord GOD and the people of Israel.

But it cuts no ice with Amos, the rank "outsider" who, despite his lack of official prophetic credentials (7:14), demonstrates that the proclamation of theological truth is often far too serious a matter to be left solely to the professional theologians. He lives in an age of wealth and prosperity but is rightly dismayed by the moral complacency and spiritual bankruptcy of his times. This situation leads him to launch a powerful and passionate polemic against the shortcomings of God's people, as he proclaims an uncompromising theology of judgment.

His message is reinforced by a series of rhetorical questions, drawn from his experience of life and his observations of nature. Certain things happen because people have arranged to make them happen (3:1), and nothing that does happen is ever without significance. All actions have consequences, and each example he cites illustrates the principle of cause and effect. Appalled by the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, Amos declares that the lion has roared and is even now leaping on its prey. Through the crisis of contemporary events, judgment is inevitable. Those who store up violence and

robbery in their strongholds are therefore living on borrowed time and will be rendered defenseless before the Lord.

There is no possibility of calling in imagined favors to influence or, worse, pervert the course of divine justice. As commentator William Neil succinctly puts it in his One Volume Bible Commentary, “Nothing can prevent the collapse of a civilization that violates divine law. Religion is no insurance, nor is tradition, nor any racial privilege.”

Advent is a time for us to get our lives in order before it is too late. In short, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” This is of supreme importance for everyone, whether one is a Scotsman writing for St. Andrew’s Day(!) or a member of the beloved “whole family” that God brought out of the land of Egypt and who can trace their ancestry all the way back to Abraham. For ultimately, the only “special relationship” that counts is the one we are enabled, by grace, to cultivate with Almighty God—the Judge who alone is holy and wholly just.

PRAYER

Great Judge of all the earth, whose ways are always just, and with whom perfect righteousness is found; subdue our rebellious spirits and point us in the proper paths that will lead us at the last to our eternal home in Heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 147:1-11

- 1 Praise the Lord!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
- 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
- 3 He heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.
- 4 He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
- 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.
- 6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.

- 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.
- 8 He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
- 9 He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.
- 10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;
- 11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

DEVOTIONAL

Brenda Henry '17

During the season of Advent, we sing songs proclaiming God's steadfast love. We sing of the hope and promise of the soon-coming Savior. Our songs often depict a duality: we remember Jesus' birth as the promise given to the Israelites of the coming Messiah, while we also keep in mind that Jesus came and died on the cross, ascended to heaven, and will come again. Thus, we await the second coming with great anticipation. We live in the tension of now and not yet.

So much of our world seems caught between this tension of how we are to be now while we await the future promise of that world to come where all will be well. The psalmist points us to this duality by inviting us to praise the God who heals the broken-hearted and binds up the wounded. The emphasis is on what God is doing now even as we live amid difficulties. The same care that God gives to the animals and to the plants, God gives to us. God tends to the smallest detail. We are precious in the eyes of God.

The psalmist reminds us that the faithful response is to continually praise God. Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving, we are told. And so we do. Assured that God's delight in us is not for our strength or might, but for our hope in God's steadfast love. And so we sing:

Creator of the stars of night,
Your people's everlasting light
O Christ, redeemer of us all
We pray you hear us when we call
When this old world drew on toward night,
You came; but not in splendor bright

Not as a monarch, but the child
Of Mary blessed mother child
At your great name, O Jesus, now
All knees must bend, all hearts must bow
All things on earth with one accord
Like those in heav'n shall call you Lord
Come in your holy might we pray
Redeem us for eternal day
Defend us while we dwell below
From all assaults of our dread foe
To God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, Three in One,
Praise, honor, might and glory be
From age to age eternally.
Amen.

(from "Creator of the Stars of Night")

What is your favorite Advent song? How does it draw you closer to God's presence?

PRAYER

Loving Creator God, how wonderful it is to sing praises to you. You came as a child, walked this earth in human form, and died to redeem us, all out of love for us—your creation. As we await your return, help us to do as you did and care for the wounded and broken-hearted, share food with the hungry, and be good stewards of your creation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2021

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 3:11-18

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and

regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Alice L. Phillips '94

Waiting is usually pretty difficult for most of us. Whether we are waiting in line in a crowded grocery store or a traffic jam, or waiting for a special event like Christmas, a new baby, or a wedding, often our very best doesn't shine through. Unfortunately, waiting—even in joyful anticipation—can sometimes cause us to be impatient, anxious, fearful, on edge, short-tempered ... just to name a few descriptors! In this passage of Scripture, Peter instructs us as we await the most important event in life: the coming of the Lord. What sort of people ought we to be? He tells us we should be leading lives of holiness, godliness, and peace, without spot or blemish.

When we think about being holy and godly, without spot or blemish, it may conjure all kinds of thoughts in our heads, like a “holier than thou” attitude, or maybe something that is reserved for a saintly Mother-Teresa-type person. But the Scriptures tell us to be holy because God is holy. Only our Lord God is fully holy. The Lord is the one who has called us to be more and more like Jesus. Being holy means being different, living by a different standard than the world around us; it means being set apart for a unique purpose.

Author Stuart Briscoe recalls how unprepared he was more than fifty years ago on the day he was married to his wife Jill. He says, “I had been set apart from the old life ... there had been a cut. I was in a new environment. I had a new status. I had been set apart uniquely to my wife. There was only one problem. I never had been married before, and I didn't know how to be married. Fortunately, God in his wisdom had prepared all of this.”

Stuart goes on to describe how all these years he has been learning how to be married. He then equates that to how we are to live holy lives. He says, “When I came to Jesus, I was made holy. And since I was a little boy, I've been learning

only too slowly how to be what I became. Or if you like, he set me apart to himself and now he says, 'Get on with it...and be what you became.'"

I love how he describes this! So how do we "be what we became" when we said yes to Jesus in our lives? Peter describes it best when he says, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." As we grow each day in our relationship with Jesus by spending time with him, meditating upon his word, and worshiping him, we more fully understand. As we grow in Jesus, we become more and more like him. As we become more and more like him, then we are able to live holy and godly lives, experiencing his peace without spot or blemish.

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, we thank you and praise you for being the Lord of our lives. We thank you for your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Heavenly Father, as we remember his coming into this world, we also anticipate his coming again! As we wait, help us to be good learners as we draw close to Jesus, seeking to grow in his grace and knowledge each day. Lord, help us to get on with it each day to be what we became when we welcomed your great invitation of the Savior into our lives. With joyful anticipation we wait! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 22:1-14

1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10 Those slaves went out into the

streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.”

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. John Bower '00

When I was pastoring a church, one of the events my wife and I enjoyed hosting was our annual Christmas open house. It was a chance for us to welcome the church into our home for an evening of Christmas cheer and fellowship. It was always enjoyable and memorable, except for those times when it had to be canceled due to inclement weather. There is nothing more disappointing than planning an event, then having to cancel it because no one can come.

That situation reminds me of this passage. In the parable, God, the great King, has prepared the most wonderful Kingdom (so joyful and bountiful it is compared to a wedding feast). God called the people of Israel to join the Kingdom and pledged to be their God, but they rejected the invitation, so God rejected them, punished them, and destroyed their city.

Then he sent his servants into the entire world to gather all the people he could find in the name of the Son. It is the universal call of the gospel to all people. Those who respond are gathered into the church, the visible representation of God's Kingdom on earth. Yet even as they gather, only those who are wearing wedding garments are given permission to stay and take part in the celebration—only those clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Any other righteousness or claim will not suffice.

How then do we attain this garment? This question brings us back to Christmas. God's own beloved Son was sent into the world to provide the garment of righteousness for us. He lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death on our behalf. He, though righteous, took our sin upon himself to pay the penalty for it on the cross, and he offers us his righteousness in return. All who place their trust in him receive this gift through faith. This is why Jesus' birth is good news

of great joy—for we who were once alienated from God by sin are now welcomed to the Kingdom now and forever. Amen!

PRAYER

Almighty and gracious God, thank you for creating us, for loving us, and for not leaving us lost and separated from you by our sin. Thank you, loving Father, for sending your own Son into this broken world in order to redeem us and bring us into your Kingdom. Give us all joyful, thankful, and loving hearts this Christmas season as we celebrate once again your saving work on our behalf in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” 21 They answered, “The emperor's.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Beth Creekpaum '10

For many who read this, we find ourselves reading from an American context. We have been given immense freedoms through our system of government, but often as a Church we have had trouble distinguishing between faith in God and patriotism. Often when we talk about missions, we worry about syncretism, the mixing of the Christian faith with local people's beliefs, but the American church is far from immune from the sin of its own patriotic syncretism.

In this story, the Pharisees are trying to set up a false dichotomy. They are trying to trick Jesus into renouncing the kingdom of Caesar to his detriment. But

Jesus knew what they were up to. He also knew that although we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, we are also resident aliens in the places we call home here and now.

Jesus reminds us that we do owe things to our country. We do owe our respect. We do owe our money and resources. Maybe we owe our vote or our public service. But our heart? Our ultimate allegiance? Nope. These belong to God and God alone.

In this time of Advent, we remember not only that Jesus came, but that he will return. In the same way, we remember our earthly duty—but we cannot ever forget that our allegiance belongs to the Kingdom of God. Advent is a time of preparation for the return of Christ, so it is a good opportunity for self-examination. Does my heart belong to God alone? Is this reflected in the way I spend my time, my talent, and my treasure? And at the same time, do I respect the authority of the government (even those I disagree with)?

Do I honor God with the way I submit to God's lordship and earthly laws?

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, may I always keep my eyes on you. May I receive my identity in the Kingdom of God. Where I need to remove allegiances or add earthly duty, help me O God. Forgive me and lead me on this Advent path with the promise of your return that will set all things right. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Amos 6:1-14

- 1 Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts!
- 2 Cross over to Calneh, and see;
from there go to Hamath the great;
then go down to Gath of the Philistines.
Are you better than these kingdoms
Or is your territory greater than their territory,
- 3 O you that put far away the evil day,
and bring near a reign of violence?

- 4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
- 5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
- 6 who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
- 7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.
- 8 The Lord GOD has sworn by himself
(says the LORD, the God of hosts):
I abhor the pride of Jacob
and hate his strongholds;
and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.
- 9 If ten people remain in one house, they shall die. 10 And if a relative, one
who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall
say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, "Is anyone else with you?"
the answer will come, "No." Then the relative shall say, "Hush! We must not
mention the name of the LORD."
- 11 See, the LORD commands,
and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.
- 12 Do horses run on rocks?
Does one plow the sea with oxen?
But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood
- 13 you who rejoice in Lo-debar,
who say, "Have we not by our own strength
taken Karnaim for ourselves?"
- 14 Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation,
O house of Israel, says the LORD, the God of hosts,
and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Wadi Arabah.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Michael Haddox '12

"Daddy's a liar!"

My son was only two, but through his tears, his words were clear: “Daddy’s a liar!”

I was totally taken off guard. Five minutes earlier, he was a ball of excitement. He’d just finished his Happy Meal as I was double-checking the diaper bag. I wanted to make sure we had everything we needed for his first trip to Kennywood. Now, trudging across the parking lot, he was having a full-blown meltdown.

I was confused by the amused look on my wife’s face. “Daddy didn’t lie,” she explained. “We’re going to a bigger playground. A better playground.”

I finally caught on. I had described Kennywood in terms he could understand. I had explained the day to him simply: “Finish your French fries, then we’re going to a big playground.”

What I failed to realize was my son’s inability to envision anything other than the indoor play area ten feet behind us in the fast-food restaurant. He heard the promise, but his imagination wouldn’t go beyond what he could see.

This passage in Amos forces us to consider what would make God’s chosen settle for a complacency that leads to their destruction. This isn’t just a question aimed at a group of people living thousands of years ago. It’s a question relevant for our churches today.

I believe we often lack the imagination to picture who God is calling us to be, so we settle for what we can reach for on our own efforts. Our complacency has robbed the church of its vitality and witness.

Looking at my son, I realized I couldn’t explain where I was taking him. I could only ask, “Can Daddy show you something different?” Through his tears, he simply said, “Yes,” letting go of what he saw, to follow his dad to something better.

PRAYER

Father, forgive us when we look to ourselves before we look to you and complacently settle for less than who you call us to be. In this season of preparation, may we have a faith that goes beyond our understanding, as we live a life rooted in the promises and call of your grace and love. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 145

- 1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
- 2 Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
- 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
- 4 One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
- 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
- 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.
- 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.
- 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
- 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
- 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
- 14 The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
- 15 The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
- 16 You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
- 17 The Lord is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.
- 18 The Lord is near to all who call on him,

to all who call on him in truth.
19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry, and saves them.
20 The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.
21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Jeff Eddings '08

Life often confronts us with challenging relational situations that immediately recall in us some form of response. Depending on the nature of the conflict, those responses can stir in us a multitude of feelings. Anger or frustration at someone who has wronged us. Guilt or anxiety over ways we may have wronged others. Often the first response in such a scenario is anything but compassion. But what if we were able to make compassion the first response instead of the last?

When Jesus was approached by the hungry multitudes after a long and tiring day, his first response was not to send them away (as the disciples suggested!), nor was it to get angry at their unending demands. His first response was compassion. "He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion on them" (Mark 6:34).

The psalm says "the Lord has compassion over all that he has made." The incarnation is the compassionate response of God to a world that is often in conflict with God's love and purpose for God's creation. It is God's first response to us and not the last!

So in this season of incarnational compassion, let our first response also be one of compassion. Whatever the challenge or conflict, can we first respond to our friend or sibling with compassion? Can we respond compassionately to ourselves when we know we have failed or fallen short of the love required of us? This Advent season, let us follow Jesus more closely by letting our first response be one of compassion.

PRAYER

Gracious God, may we celebrate who we are as we celebrate who you are this Advent season. Thank you for the compassion that comes to us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. May compassion be our first response to ourselves,

others, and all that happens in the world around us as we seek to follow you this Christmas season.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Amos 7:10-17

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. 11 For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" 12 And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; 13 but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." 14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, 15 and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' 16 Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' 17 Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

DEVOTIONAL

Judy Zimmerman Herr '82

In the midst of the prophet Amos's thundering calls for justice comes a scene from his life. Amos's conversation with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, is a classic confrontation between the establishment and the prophet, the insider and the protester. And as can be expected, the priest tells Amos to be quiet. Amos comes from the other kingdom, Judah, and he should take his message home and stop bothering Israel.

"But," says Amos, "I have no choice! I'm not a prophet, a professional who does this for a living. No, I'm really just a farmer. But God has put these words in my mouth and sent me to you."

We live in a world that would look familiar to Amos: a world in which many have little and a few have more than they need, a world in which power protects itself

and cares little or nothing for equity and right, a world in which even God's people do not always live by God's word.

Who are you in this story? Being a prophet is not a choice so much as a compulsion to speak, a fire in the belly, a push from God. Do you see wrongs about which you cannot remain silent? Or are you part of the establishment—one of those being called to account by prophets marching through the streets proclaiming a message the dominant culture doesn't want to hear?

How is God pushing you to act? Where is God sending you—maybe out of your comfort zone—with words that must be heard? Or who is God bringing into your life with uncomfortable words that call you to change or that warn you of judgment to come?

In this Advent season of waiting, may we be open to hearing God's call to us.

PRAYER

Our God, your call to us is not always comfortable or easy. Help us to know when we need to speak and when we need to receive words of judgment. Make us open to being channels of your healing and hope to our world. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Amos 8:1-14

This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. "What do you see, Amos?" he asked.

"A basket of ripe fruit," I answered.

Then the Lord said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.

"In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!"

Hear this, you who trample the needy
and do away with the poor of the land,
saying,
"When will the New Moon be over

that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath be ended
that we may market wheat?”—
skimping on the measure,
boosting the price
and cheating with dishonest scales,
buying the poor with silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
selling even the sweepings with the wheat.
The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything
they have done.

“Will not the land tremble for this,
and all who live in it mourn?
The whole land will rise like the Nile;
it will be stirred up and then sink
like the river of Egypt.
“In that day,” declares the Sovereign Lord,
“I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your religious festivals into mourning
and all your singing into weeping.
I will make all of you wear sackcloth
and shave your heads.
I will make that time like mourning for an only son
and the end of it like a bitter day.
“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord,
“when I will send a famine through the land—
not a famine of food or a thirst for water,
but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.
People will stagger from sea to sea
and wander from north to east,
searching for the word of the Lord,
but they will not find it.
“In that day
“the lovely young women and strong young men
will faint because of thirst.
Those who swear by the sin of Samaria—
who say, ‘As surely as your god lives, Dan,’
or, ‘As surely as the god of Beersheba lives’—
they will fall, never to rise again.”

DEVOTIONAL

Jon Mathieu '21

Bodies—flung everywhere.

This is the prophet's imagery of anger and judgment. It would be natural, and perhaps necessary, for us to question this imagery. To feel uncomfortable with a prophetic word of punishment that takes shape as physical violence.

But Advent invites us to pause and ask all our questions. We not only look back to prophets like Amos, but we look ahead (from their vantage point) to the promised one, Jesus. So let's ask some questions.

Why is God so angry in this discourse? In a word: oppression. Needy and poor people are being trampled by the rich. What little they have is being taken away from them by the merchants' corrupt and greedy business practices. We are invited to examine our own practices toward those who are barely able to survive.

At whom is God angry? Specifically the corrupt and oppressive ruling class within "my people Israel." This is not an us-versus-them moment where some other nation or religion is being vilified. We are invited to consider how our families, our churches, our governments are treating the most vulnerable.

How will God answer this grave injustice? It turns out not to be violence against bodies so much as spiritual devastation. Religious festivals will turn to mourning. Shaved heads and sackcloth will mark a time of famine—but it will be the absence of God's revelation, not a famine of food or water. We are invited to acknowledge the pain of God's absence in our own lives.

And yet Advent points us to something, or someone, beyond the famine. It will not be violence that topples injustice or lifts up the poor. As Mary would sing centuries later, God will scatter the proud and bring down the mighty from their thrones through a baby's humble birth.

PRAYER

God, we must repent. Help us to see the ways we oppress people and peoples. If we must shave our heads or put on sackcloth, teach us the humility and give us the strength. And yet we look for the same hope as the most poor and vulnerable among us—that you are near to us and will lift us up.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 2:8-17

8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

9 “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

13 “I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. 15 So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Alan D. Olson '14

I have to admit, Revelation is one of the last books of the Bible that I think about reading as a devotional exercise in Advent. Yet it somehow seems appropriate here in the year 2021. For nearly two years, our lives have been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. This season of pestilence has been a revelation to all of us. The pandemic has removed the scales from our eyes and shown us how deeply divided we are; how far we are from Jesus' command to love one another, as he has loved us. In this season of Advent and pandemic, as we

prepare for the arrival of our Lord, it seems appropriate to spend some time in the uncomfortable spaces of the book of Revelation.

In this reading, we encounter the instructions of John of Patmos for two different congregations: Smyrna and Pergamum. These are two very different congregations, with different problems. The church in Smyrna was rich in spirit and firm in its faith, yet it had few resources and was threatened with persecution. In Pergamum, there was great pressure for the congregation to assimilate to the cultural pressures of the Greco-Roman world—rather than being threatened, they were being seduced.

In our lives of faith, we reflect bits and pieces of all the problems from these congregations. We see this in our fights over wearing masks in worship. These internal conflicts threaten to overtake some congregations. At the same time, some pastors choose to erect walls of hostility, telling worshipers that they will be turned away from God's house if they choose to wear a mask. These instructions to the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum invite us to contemplate where we are in the midst of our own conflicts, and how we witness to the love of Christ for all of humanity.

PRAYER

God of grace and mercy, in this season of Advent, we ask that you open our eyes and ears and hearts. We ask that you help us to see where we are in the midst of all the chaos and strife in our churches and in our world. Finally, we ask that you use us to reveal the love of Christ in and for the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 2:18-29

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

19 “I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. 20 But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. 22

Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call 'the deep things of Satan,' to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; 25 only hold fast to what you have until I come. 26 To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,

I will give authority over the nations;

27 to rule them with an iron rod,
as when clay pots are shattered

28 even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. 29 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Samantha Lowery-Coggins

At Advent, Revelation is not among the portions of Scripture that pop into my head, or my heart.

Isaiah? Yes. John? Definitely.

This extended metaphor about a woman false prophet? No.

But recently that changed for me, thanks to a rabbi. During the Jewish high holidays in early September, my colleague in Morgantown, WV, where I live and work as a campus pastor, pointed me to Psalm 27. One refrain of that psalm is "Wait for the Lord!"

When he referred me to this Scripture, which his Jewish tradition and my Presbyterian tradition have in common, the rabbi told me, "Think of us [those celebrating Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur], when you read about coming home to God."

As we wait for God—like Psalm 27 insists we do—to show up as Emmanuel, I believe this passage from Revelation 2 has something to say about how to live in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives (Ps. 27:4).

It is one of seven letters written to churches in Asia Minor, and it shows off the wily blend of genres in Revelation as a whole. Like other Jewish apocalyptic literature, this Scripture is full of symbolism, and it reflects a context of oppression. And like other prophetic literature, it looks forward, not just backward into history.

The passage is not actually about an unfaithful woman, as the Jezebel references to 1 Kings and 2 Kings may lead us to think. We know this analogy was a typical format used to express the importance of discerning what is of God, and what is not, in the context of a patriarchal society.

Discerning how to avoid what is not-God is a task, in and of itself. As a new parent to a baby born in February, I am all too aware of what I idolize in my life right now: sleep. If there was a not-God who could promise me one extra hour of sleep every night, I would worship at their feet (yesterday).

It is a cliché about parenting, and it sounds hyperbolic. Yet for me, it is undeniably true. So what saves me from this not-God (in addition to naps on the weekend)? Remembering that there is a fourth reality which is Jesus Christ, a layer atop the brokenness of our pandemic-riddled, productivity-laden world.

There is a reality in which my zombie-like, tired body is enough for my daughter. There is a reality in which I am not alone at 4:15 a.m. rocking my child back to sleep, but together with other caregivers who are doing the same. There is a reality in which it is ok to function with the new brain synapses that come with parenthood. There is a reality in which I am not lazy or unproductive, but carer and keeper to a vulnerable human being.

This is the reality of Jesus Christ, the reality of God intervening in human form, affirming the sacredness of our physical selves: we are nothing less than children of God.

PRAYER

God who intervenes in human form, during this Advent, may we come home to you with this deep knowledge: we are your children. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 24:1-14

1 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

9 "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10 Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come."

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Lawrence James Lalama '93

During the liturgical season of Advent, we are encouraged to reflect on a multitude of themes: anticipation and expectancy; preparation and readiness; hope and peace; joy and love. These themes inform and infuse both our spiritual and physical practices in the days leading up to the celebration of the first coming of Jesus Christ.

Another theme which is brought into the light of our self-examination, yet is lesser welcomed into our Advent devotional praxes, is that of Jesus' so-called "second coming," the apocalyptic aspect of Advent. Generally, the first Sunday of Advent invites us to consider this *Parousia* of Jesus which will mark the end

of the age his first coming ushered in. The gospel lesson today from Matthew features Jesus speaking to his disciples of this very thing.

In the passage, Jesus is leaving the temple courts following a very contentious encounter with the religious leaders. His recent triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his populous support have greatly intensified their opposition to his mission. On the heels of his woeful indictments leveled against the scribes and Pharisees and his passionate lament over Jerusalem, the disciples can only marvel at the scope and grandeur of the temple, encouraging Jesus to do the same. His reaction is sharp and instructive.

In a private moment later, outside the walls of the city and out of the temple's shadow, the disciples need to know more. Their questions of when the temple's destruction would come to pass compel Jesus' sober assessment of the period between his first and second appearances. The very themes we incorporate into our Advent preparation and practice are fundamental to Jesus' discourse and parables, both in this passage and beyond: anticipation of his return; expectancy and joy of his appearance in power and great glory in the midst of the world's chaos; hope of being found in a state of readiness, esteemed trustworthy, and ultimately rewarded for good and faithful servanthood and love to others.

So this multitude of themes bridge the gap, in a manner of speaking, between the already and not yet; between the first and second comings of Jesus. Jesus, however, offers no false expectation that this time between would be a time of ease and casual observation. Rather, it would be a time marked by tribulation, trial, opposition, deception, hatred, sacrifice, and endurance, the very things with which Jesus was confronted in his incarnated life. And these are the very things we face in the life of our incarnated communities of faith in the midst of this, our 2021 Advent journey.

So perhaps this season we might offer a greater welcome to Advent's apocalyptic aspect. It calls us to less fascination with the worldly glitz and glitter and to more sober reflection upon spiritual preparation and readiness for the not-yet second advent of Jesus Christ, which will usher in a new and glorious age. In this waiting time, Jesus counsels us to not be alarmed, but to be expectant; not to be anxious, but to be steady; not to be foolishly led astray, but to be wisely discerning the times, all the while praying for endurance and confident that the good news of the Kingdom, now proclaimed, will be all in all.

In that spirit, we add to the proclamation, "*Come, Lord Jesus!*"

PRAYER

Lord our God, help us to be faithful in our preparation, honest in our assessments, wise in our judgment, zealous in our service, and confident in the promise of Jesus' return in power and glory. Help us to cast our vision forward and upward to that day when all is fulfilled in your new heaven and earth. This we pray in the name of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate and whose return we anticipate. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 150

- 1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
- 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
- 3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
- 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
- 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
- 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Ben Phipps '15

“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” It’s a refrain that’s only fitting to conclude the great prayer book of God’s people. But it may also serve another purpose—to remind us that we must choose to praise God. The psalm urges and compels us to praise the God of surpassing greatness, the God who is great and mighty, the God whose deeds are known throughout the cosmos. Yet isn’t it too often the case that instead of choosing to praise this glorious God, many of us spend our waking hours finding an excuse not to praise? Deadlines. Distractions. Disagreements. The brokenness of this world and the weight of our sin tend to smother us into a “praise-less” routine. Praising God with passion

seems impossible, and we long for something to remind us of God's greatness and power, something to compel us to praise.

Perhaps the Psalms' final verse is the clue: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" Sometimes we just need to slow down and take a breath. When we feel the air rushing into our lungs, we are reminded that we have life, and it just might compel us to praise. To praise the God who not only breathed life into humanity, but also took the form of a newborn baby in Bethlehem so many years ago, gasping for air to fill his tiny lungs for the first time. The God of surpassing greatness learning how to breathe in our midst, the God who would one day give up that breath on a hill far away.

That seems reason enough to praise. The God who gives us life came so that we too might have it! So do not delay. "Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!"

PRAYER

Mighty God, fill me with a longing to praise you! May I praise you with every breath I take. Thank you for coming to earth and showing us the way to your kingdom. Show me how I can choose to praise you every day of my life. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Zechariah 1:7-17

7 On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berechiah son of Iddo; and Zechariah said, 8 In the night I saw a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. 9 Then I said, "What are these, my lord?" The angel who talked with me said to me, "I will show you what they are." 10 So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, "They are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth." 11 Then they spoke to the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees, "We have patrolled the earth, and lo, the whole earth remains at peace." 12 Then the angel of the LORD said, "O LORD of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?" 13 Then the LORD replied with gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. 14 So the angel who talked with me said to me, Proclaim this message: Thus says the LORD of hosts; I am very jealous for

Jerusalem and for Zion. 15 And I am extremely angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they made the disaster worse. 16 Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it, says the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. 17 Proclaim further: Thus says the LORD of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity; the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.

DEVOTIONAL

Sarah Knapp '21

After seventy years in exile, the generation of Jewish survivors stolen from Israel had lived out the rest of their days in Babylon, despairing of their plight and of an angry God who had seemingly forsaken them. Those who now remained had little hope to cling to and no memory of what their forefathers and mothers had once called home. Nevertheless, when King Darius decreed that the Jewish people were finally free to return to their motherland, most of the remnant took up the offer and made the long trek back.

At the end of their journey home, in place of where Jerusalem once stood, they instead found an abandoned city in shambles, vulnerable to the surrounding hostile neighbors. Now stranded in an unfamiliar land where they would need to rebuild their lives from the ground up, it would be natural for them to despair. In the face of this great uncertainty, the Lord sent the prophet Zechariah, whose name translates to “The Lord Remembers”. As the Jews returned to Israel and began to rebuild their temple, their walls, and their lives, the prophet called upon the people to return to their God. A series of eight visions and dreams relayed by Zechariah reveal that the LORD of hosts has not rejected her people and has always been for Israel. Despite the trials, adversity, and even discipline they endured, the Jewish people were never forgotten. These visions serve as a powerful reminder of God’s faithfulness to her people, a message of encouragement needed now more than ever.

The first vision takes us to the depths of a dark, abandoned ravine overgrown with myrtle trees (v.8), haunted by an unsettling stillness and a lingering fear of what lurks in the shadows. In a scene reminiscent of what the Jews now faced in Jerusalem, a man is seated on a red horse (v.8) flanked by three more horses and their riders. We are told these three riders are angels patrolling the earth (vv.9-10) who report that the nations are peaceful and quiet, apathetic and complacent. It seems that no one cares about the plight of God’s people as they struggle to survive.

Yet in verse 12, the angel of the LORD—Christ, our High Priest—stands in the gap to offer an intercessory prayer on Israel’s behalf. This prayerful inquiry is met with an intense passion and an infallible promise. God is “exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion” (v.14); she has returned to Jerusalem with compassion and does not rejoice in their suffering. When no other nation will come to Israel’s aid, God will do it herself with the promise to once again make great the nation where her name dwells. The Jews can still trust in their God, who never fails and never forgets.

The Lord Remembers. The Lord Remembers Israel. The Lord remembers her people. Through Zechariah’s visions, the Jewish refugees are reassured in their faith—just as we can be reassured in ours—that the Lord never forgets her children.

PRAYER

Holy Protector and Divine Promise-Keeper, thank you for reminding your children that we are not alone in our suffering, not forsaken in the adversity we face, nor abandoned in the discipline we endure. As we face the inner turmoil of daily anxieties and the crippling fears of uncertain futures, may we know that it is not a solitary struggle. May we find rest in the embrace of the Divine, support in your unfailing arms, and comfort in your steadfast promise. The Lord Remembers. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 3:14-22

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

15 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. 20 Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. 21 To

the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Carolyn Cranston '99

Jesus, “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end,” loves God’s children with the same passion he desires from us in return. It is easy to become complacent and lukewarm, and we may wonder if Jesus will spit us out from his mouth. A personal inventory would help us evaluate our lives as to whether we are rich materially or spiritually. If we have no spiritual depth, Jesus may say to us, as he said to the Laodiceans in John’s vision, “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

What litmus test would demonstrate that our hearts are on fire and have a zeal for Jesus Christ? Passionate Christians invest in God, not the world. We worship God, not because we have to, but because it is our greatest desire. Our esteem does not come through the eyes of others. We stop caring about what other people think of our actions and become concerned with what God thinks of our heart.

Rather than fearing the penalty of sin, we strive to be free from sin. We believe that life in Christ is far better than our old ways of living. It becomes exhilarating to share the knowledge and love of Christ with others.

Most importantly, we give up control of our lives, loving God with our entire being. People who are passionate about God walk in faith, not knowing what lies ahead but trusting God in all things.

Jesus stands at the door and knocks, with the great hope that we will open the door and invite him into our lives. He does not barge in where he is unwanted. Jesus waits expectantly, with great patience. Will we open the door and invite him to enter? It is Christ’s greatest desire and our only hope.

PRAYER

Jesus, we trust that you want the best for us and only discipline us out of your great love. Ignite a fire in us, Lord, that we might live as your faithful disciples. When you knock on the door, Jesus, open our ears that we might hear and invite you into our hearts. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 4:1-8

1 After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” 2 At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! 3 And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. 4 Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. 5 Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; 6 and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Will Scott '12

In Revelation 3, John recounts a promise for repentant people: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (3:20). God promises fellowship—the intimacy of a shared meal.

In chapter 4, we get a startling beginning: now the door is opened (“After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!”) and the view is staggering. God is enthroned in the heavens, surrounded by adoring elders wearing golden crowns. There are signs of created power—thunder and lightning, the celestial sea close at hand. Creatures that defy easy description (“one like...”) embody what is owed to God: worship.

How to account for the dramatic change between chapters 3 and 4? How can the all-powerful, barely-contained in heaven, worthy of all worship, knock on the door and share a simple meal with us? How can this be?

John offers a vision because the door to heaven was opened, and Jesus Christ walked through. As one Christmas hymn implores us, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!” The open door of heaven unveils the presence of God, who comes to us as one of us, enabling something beyond our imagination or understanding to be born, touched, held, killed, and raised. Now the door is wide open for John to behold the mystery behind it—and open for us, too.

PRAYER

Holy God, you are beyond us; yet in Jesus Christ you have become one of us. With all creation we praise and worship you for the mystery of your incarnation—for the unimaginable grace that awaits us in your real presence. As we wait on your promise this season, open the door to your love once again, and sustain us with a vision of hope for all the way ahead. We pray in Jesus Christ. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 4:9-5:5

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”

5:1 Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; 2 and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. 4 And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 Then one of the elders

said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Rebecca L. Dix '15/'17

Things have a way of wedging themselves into our lives. Objects convince us that we could not live without them and that we would not have worth or value to anything or anyone without them. It is not only this stuff that scribes a commentary contrary to the truth of who we are as children of God. There's the diatribe scrolling constantly in our mind, reverberating a cacophony of lies in the aching hollows of our lives. Convincing us that we are not worthy of God's love.

Not enough. Not good enough. Not thin enough. Not strong enough. Not old enough. Not young enough. Having opinions on our cellulite and stretch marks and wrinkles, on our acne, our family, our weight, and smothering us with guilt if we dare to feel otherwise.

Siblings, as we wander toward the manger, I invite you into the wild and untamed holy of the Lamb who is coming to dwell among us. Who unsettles us in Love and reclaims us as God's own.

PRAYER

Holy One, it is you who sees us as worthy of Love, not because of anything we did or could do, but because of your everlasting faithfulness. Unsettle the lies that keep us from seeing the Good News of Great Joy, both as we celebrate the birth and as we await your Kingdom coming. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 5:6-14

6 Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. 8 When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 They sing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by

your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; 10 you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.” 11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” 13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” 14 And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Dr. Mark Whitsel '04/'18

There may be no more worship-filled chapter in all of Scripture than Revelation 5. Here we have a picture of the heavenly throne room, filled with mysterious beings of every kind erupting into a chorus of praise. “They sing a new song,” we’re told, and it is a song of perfection and fulfillment. The Lamb of God is found worthy to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing—a biblically perfect seven. The completeness is striking to us, but not nearly as arresting as it is for those present in this scene. They are compelled to fall down and worship.

In my home, I watch regularly as one member of the family makes a sacrifice for someone else. Often this act is recognized with a great deal of gratitude. However, from time to time someone overlooks the sacrifice that has been made, and the sacrificing party gets “all twisted up.” It is never a pretty scene! Frustration and anger can ensue. Clearly, we recognize that there exists such beauty in a sacrificial gift rightly given and rightly received. They are two sides of the same God-honoring coin.

Jesus—his life, his death, his resurrection—is God’s sacrificial gift to you and me: “for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe.” The question in the prelude to Christmas is, “How do we receive that sacrificial gift?” Do we offer ourselves in praise? Do we attribute to Jesus the power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing he so rightly deserves? Do our daily lives reflect a gospel joy and gratitude? Or do they reflect something else?

Even as we celebrate Christ's entrance into the world, we know where this story leads. The Lamb's death and resurrection has reshaped the eternal order of things. In the presence of that truth, maybe the most honest thing we can do is fall to our knees and sing!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, today we give you thanks for your grace—a grace made so apparent in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We thank you for his conquest of the grave and for the promise of life eternal. Until that day of entering into the heavenly throne room, may we join our voices with all the faithful in praising you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 72

- 1 Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
- 2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
- 3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
- 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
- 5 May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
- 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
- 7 In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
- 8 May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
- 9 May his foes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust.
- 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
- 11 May all kings fall down before him,

- all nations give him service.
- 12 For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
- 13 He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
- 14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.
- 15 Long may he live!
May gold of Sheba be given to him.
May prayer be made for him continually,
and blessings invoked for him all day long.
- 16 May there be abundance of grain in the land;
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;
may its fruit be like Lebanon;
and may people blossom in the cities
like the grass of the field.
- 17 May his name endure forever,
his fame continue as long as the sun.
May all nations be blessed in him;
may they pronounce him happy.
- 18 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
- 19 Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.
- 20 The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Paula Cooper '10/'13

As I write this reflection, there's a heaviness on my heart; perhaps on yours as well. The factors causing this heaviness have tirelessly held residence in my life for so very long. Yet it appears that many people have become anesthetized to them, probably because these things don't affect all of us. I'm puzzled by the way some can just ignore the police killings happening in our society. The racial injustices and systemic structures that are perpetuating violence and brutality against our fellow Christian siblings, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color.

As anesthetized people, are we so possessed with unsympathetic and impenetrable hearts, minds, ears, and eyes that we ignore these issues and

accept the status quo? Is this how we love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength? Is this how we love our neighbors?

Is this “stinking thinking” by some Christians produced by faith, or has it trickled down from those who possess wealth or have powerful leadership positions? I learned in 2014, when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Mo., that one driver of racism is “privilege and power.” Some of us have used our privilege and power to lord it over “the least of these,” marginalized people, to keep them in their less-powerful, less-privileged places. And at the very same time, we demonstrate that we think their lives don’t matter! Shame on us!

All lives matter, true, but the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color matter particularly to God, because they are among “the least of these” who have been oppressed by those with privilege and power. When Jesus comes again, how will he find Christians treating one another? Will he find us acting out of our privilege and power? Will we, especially those in leadership positions, be humbly transformed and possess the justice of God that the psalmist prays for in Psalm 72?

My hope is that all who are in leadership positions will use their privilege and power to humbly observe verses 2-4. As verse 7 says, may peace abound for all under their leadership. May these leaders hear the calls of our needy siblings and respond as specified in verses 12-14. As these transformations and righteous actions are evident in their leadership, may they be blessed according to verses 15-17.

PRAYER

Gracious Lord, with heavy hearts we pray that the season of Advent and Jesus’ return will find leaders who live by the words of Psalm 72. We ask that those in leadership positions, who possess privilege and power, would work for the good of all people. As this happens, help us to remember to give you, Lord God, all of the glory and praise. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Titus 1:1-16

1 Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, 2 in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before

the ages began— 3 in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior,

4 To Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

5 I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: 6 someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. 7 For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; 8 but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. 9 He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.

10 There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; 11 they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. 12 It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said,

“Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”

13 That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, 14 not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth. 15 To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Lee Platt '02

Paul's pastoral letter to Titus doesn't get much attention. Pieces of Chapters 2 and 3 occur only in the Lectionary's Christmas Eve or Christmas Day readings, but never Chapter 1 in any Sunday readings. Verse 15 of Chapter 1 is especially intriguing, especially as we approach Christmas, when purity (like that of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child) is central.

Paul wrote to Titus as some people were attempting to impose additional rules on the new Christian believers. Among the most notable of these rules was the need for Gentile converts to be circumcised. Paul called these instigators “distractors.” Those distractors were trying to exclude the uncircumcised because they were supposedly impure.

I think Paul is telling Titus that in the eyes of Jesus, everything and everyone is pure and not to be excluded. Not only are the accusations of impurity by human rule-makers untrue, but those rule-makers are themselves impure! Purity comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the works of the law (Galatians 2:15-21). When we discard the law and robe ourselves with faith in Jesus, we put on new eyeglasses that enable us to see everyone in purity. Those we might have excluded as impure, through the eyes of Jesus, are pure.

PRAYER

God, you have created all in your image, and despite our frailties, you regard each of us as pure. Clothe us in full faith in your Son Jesus that we might look through his eyes at our neighbors and joyfully include them as those made in your image. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Titus 2:1-10

1 But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine. 2 Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.

3 Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, 4 so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

6 Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. 7 Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, 8 and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.

9 Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, 10 not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.

DEVOTIONAL

Rose Schrott '21

In Titus, Paul (or someone in the tradition of Paul) writes a letter to his church-planting disciple in Crete. Sections like Titus 2:1-10 detail ideal behavior for churchgoers based on Greco-Roman social expectations.

There are different rationales for why Paul upholds Greco-Romans social norms. Perhaps he is presenting the new church as a non-threat. Perhaps he is bringing the gospel into the context of Gentiles. Perhaps he is drawing a dramatic comparison between new Christians and false Christian teachers in the area (Titus 1:9-16).

Whatever the reason, we cannot read these household codes without acknowledging the hurt that comes from labeling and limiting others based on identifiers such as gender or class. Social orders, whether they exist today or in the Greco-Roman time period, create a hierarchy of value—but God calls us to see and value each other for our inherent, rather than socially assigned, worth.

Maybe the Advent invitation of this passage is to lament the ways that the gospel has been contextualized to its detriment. In other words, Titus 2 can invite us to grieve the times when the church in a broken world has labeled others rather than loved them.

If we read through Titus 2:14, we are reminded that faith is not simply about following social norms. It is about matching our professed beliefs with our actions. And we are empowered to do good deeds, to match our words and actions, because of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and promised return.

So, in many ways, Titus 2 encapsulates the circuitous mystery of faith. Despite good intentions, we sometimes follow the rules of society and not God. Yet, somehow, we are also on the miraculous journey to become more like Christ, a journey made possible only because of Christ. And this is the contradiction we sit with in Advent—God came, God is here, God is coming, but we wait in a broken world.

PRAYER

God of grace, forgive us for the ways and times that we reflect the world around us instead of your radical love. Help the church to atone for the ways it has excluded people and perpetuated a hierarchy that goes against your will. Thank you for the gift of your Son, who lives on in us. Continue to create in us new hearts that empower us to match our faith and actions. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2021

SCRIPTURE

2 Samuel 7:1-17

1 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." 3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from

before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. 17 In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Michael J. Wallace '14

When we step into the story of David and learn about his desire to build a house for the Lord, we might nod our heads and think, "Of course! The mighty King David should be the one to build a house for the Lord. This makes sense!" At first, even Nathan the prophet is on board with David's plan. Yet, the word of the Lord comes to Nathan declaring that David is not the one to build God's house.

Eventually, we learn that when David dies, his son shall build a house for God's name. As we meditate upon this passage, we might find ourselves in David's shoes: we seem to be God's appointed person to do some exact thing, but we find out that God has other plans. May this serve as a reminder to us that the work of the church is not squarely on our shoulders, but it is ultimately up to God! Moreover, sometimes our job is to lay the groundwork for someone else's project that we may never see to completion.

In this Advent season, when we talk so much about waiting, we learn that David, too, had to wait. Except that David would not behold God's house during his life. May this passage serve us today so that we might recognize our limitations; God's plans will sometimes be realized through us, but other times apart from us.

Even when the days are short and our hopes are dashed, may we be reminded that God is in control and will bring about this beautiful story of salvation for us and for the whole world. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER

Almighty God, so often we feel the weight of ministry on our shoulders. Help us to recognize that you are in control and that it is not all up to us. In this Advent season, may we rest in the assurance that your plans will ultimately be fulfilled. May we find hope in the end of the story, and may it give meaning to our work today. Through your son Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2021

SCRIPTURE

2 Samuel 7:18-29

18 Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? 19 And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord God; you have spoken also of your servant’s house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord God! 20 And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God! 21 Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. 22 Therefore you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. 23 Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? 24 And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O Lord, became their God. 25 And now, O Lord God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. 26 Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, ‘The Lord of hosts is God over Israel’; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. 27 For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house’; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. 28 And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; 29 now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever.”

DEVOTIONAL

Amanda Horan '20

In a striking plot twist, David—who intended to build a house for God in the form of a temple—learns that God intends to build him a house in the form of a dynasty. In response to God’s gift and promise, David prays. His prayer is a mixture of awe-filled humility and praise mingled with a bit of anxious insistence. Walter Brueggemann concisely characterizes David’s prayer as “a sequence of deference, doxology, and demand.” David’s language in the latter half of his prayer is indeed forceful and assured: “And now, O Lord God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house,

confirm it forever; do as you have promised” (v. 25). Perhaps we can imagine the anxious anticipation in David’s voice as he dwells before the Lord in prayer.

Perhaps the idea of demanding anything from God in prayer makes some of us uncomfortable; it certainly makes me uncomfortable. And yet, David says that he is emboldened to pray as he does because he trusts in God’s own promise. We know from the biblical narrative about David and his descendants that their behavior does not always merit divine favor, and yet God, through the prophet Nathan, declares the covenant promise will not be taken away. God’s promise for David’s house and kingdom “shall be made sure forever” (2 Sam. 7:17).

David brings his insistence, his urgency, and his anxious anticipation before God in prayer. Advent should be a time of anxious anticipation, not just for the delights of holiday celebrations, but for the coming of the One who “descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness...” (Rom. 1:3-4). Perhaps, in these final days of Advent, we may be inspired by David’s courage to trust in the goodness of God’s promise and anxiously anticipate the coming of the Son of God.

PRAYER

O Lord God, as David says, you are God, your words are true, and you promise good things. Give us an eagerness for your gifts, and help us to pray and to live in the courage and boldness of your good promise. May our eagerness and urgency inspire us to worshipful prayer and action guided by your steadfast love and presence with your people. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 1:1-17

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and

Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Gregory Steible '14

So many names! If you were to list out your own family of origin back to so many great-grandparents, you'd have quite a history represented there, too. But this history is more than just family myth and personal origin story. Jesus' genealogy tells us more than how closely related he is to Martha Washington or Kevin Bacon. Jesus' genealogy shares the history of God's people. It starts with God's covenant with Abraham and the promise of a great nation and land, briskly jumps to God's covenant with David and the promise of a united monarchy. It leaps in time to God's fulfilled promise of deliverance from Babylon and finally lands on God's new covenant in Christ.

Jesus' genealogy is one of God's promises fulfilled through moments and methods we would least expect. If you look carefully, you'll see some names associated with stories you know. Some of those stories are wild. And you'll see some broken people—people many of us might feel quite at home with, others

we might feel scared to be around. And you'll also see names you may not recognize outside of their inclusion in this genealogy.

The story of God's covenant fidelity with God's people is a messy one, and yet continually God claims us as God's own. Despite, and often because of, our own faults, failings, and brokenness, God embraces us and pulls us into the bosom of the Lord. The strange and twisted family stories in this genealogy underline a key element of who God is and what makes the next few days so special. The holiday is about God coming to be with us even though, and especially because, we are messy. We are incomplete. But in Christ's coming, just like God's promises, we are made complete.

PRAYER

Eternal God, we thank you for this moment in history, right now, today. We look on former generations and toward future eras, and we know that in all of time you will be glorified. Be glorified, as well, in our own lives through all that we do. In the name of the one who is to come, we pray. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2021

SCRIPTURE

Galatians 3:23-4:7

3:23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

4:1 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; 2 but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. 3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. 4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the

Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

DEVOTIONAL

Will Robbins '21

Resist plucking the low-hanging hermeneutical fruit from this passage. There, in verse 3:28, we eye Paul’s call for unity and quickly run to pulpit, street, or social media to offer peace to intra-Christian conflict. Yet we all know that these appeals for unity, the “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God” clarion calls, strike the same dissonant chord as one saying, “All lives matter.” We know that society doesn’t value all lives, just like we know that Christians aren’t truly one, not in this age of political, racial, and denominational division. The truth is, difference still matters to us, just as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female did for the Galatians.

Don’t get me wrong. The pursuit for unity is an essential one for all followers of Jesus, yet might its achievement be possible through celebrating difference, not sameness? In what ways can we acknowledge, value, and honor differences that lead to unity? To do so seems counterintuitive, self-defeating, sort of like the idea of losing one’s life in order to save it, or becoming great by becoming the least.

I want to suggest that Paul offers a path to such unity in this same letter. We might be tempted to dismiss Paul as pursuing unity through sameness in this passage, but later in this letter he reveals that true unity, the unity born of authentic love, comes only when we bear the unique burdens of another (Gal. 6:2). When we open ourselves to the suffering of another, we “fulfill the law of Christ” and ultimately become “a new creation” (Gal 6:2 and 6:15). That means we change, we become different, capable of loving our neighbor as ourselves (5:9), producing the fruit of the Spirit (5:22), and, this is key, not becoming the same as the one whom we are serving (5:15). Only then can we realize the mystery of becoming one in Christ Jesus (3:28).

The question is: what stories of suffering are you open to hearing?

PRAYER

Dear God, who invites us to bear one another’s burdens, may we come to faith in the example of Jesus Christ and achieve the unity that is possible only through him. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2021

SCRIPTURE

John 3:31-36

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

DEVOTIONAL

The Rev. Dave Dack '11

I've heard it said that cooking is an art and baking is a science—which is probably why I prefer baking. When a baking recipe calls for a cup of flour, it calls for a cup of flour. The precision is comforting. It's a delicious version of paint-by-numbers. Cooking, on the other hand, leaves more room for improvisation. You can add a "splash" of this or a "dash" of that. My brain struggles with such blatant ambiguity. How can you add ingredients without measuring?!

Christmas has been harder for us to measure in the age of COVID-19. Usually we can prepare our gift-giving, family gatherings, and religious rituals with precision, but not during a pandemic. Planning Christmas has been harder, and we may not have the usual indicators by which to measure how "successful" it was.

But perhaps there is some grace in that. Perhaps the absence of a carefully measured Christmas recipe will let us peer more deeply into the holiday's holiness. And who better to help us peer more deeply than John? In our passage, the evangelist carefully invites us into the full meaning of the incarnation: the incarnation is not only the gift of Jesus, but the gift of God's entire triune life. In John 3, Jesus is shown to be the Spirit-giving Son whom the Father loves. The incarnation is thoroughly Trinitarian, which makes possible our adoption into the triune life of God.

No wonder John says that the Son “gives the Spirit without measure.” This gift of grace cannot be quantified. The steadfast love of the triune God cannot be measured, and it is precisely its immeasurability that makes it such good news.

PRAYER

O generous God, you have given us access, by faith in Christ, into your extravagant grace. You have made us one with your beloved Son and heirs of your eternal life. Forgive our efforts to measure your grace, thereby containing it and making it small. By your Spirit, enlarge our hearts and give us the capacity to serve you with joyful obedience for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.

Merry Christmas

