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We are the Body of Christ gifted and called in covenant together as Disciples of Christ
to be centers of transformation on the new mission frontier of our own communities



Advent Devotional Booklet



Sunday, November 29th

First Day of Advent

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Please read Psalm 80:1-7; 17-19

Hello Ohio Region!

Welcome to Advent. It is finally here. For many people, it is our favorite time of the year. For all of us, I imagine, we have been wondering just how Advent will look this year. No matter what exactly our church practices may be, this is sure to be a very different kind of Advent season.

Still, it is a season of rejoicing. That is the theme for the Advent Devotionals we will be seeing and reading in the coming weeks. Rejoice!

And the first week of Advent is when we focus on hope. Rejoice in Hope.

It may seem hard, if not impossible for some of us to feel much like rejoicing this year. It has been, in so many ways, a difficult year, and a year of loss. We may be lending our hearts more towards lament than towards rejoicing. That is okay. That pain is real.

We hear the pain of the Psalmist crying out to God. “You have fed them the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors, our enemies laugh among themselves. The poet speaks of a community who has known loss, and currently suffers greatly.

It is also a psalm of hope. Hope and lament are not opposites, rather they are compliments – sentiments that go together quite well in fact. When we sit in loss and lament as many of us have done this year, we cry out to God for hope –

The psalmist repeats an ever increasingly urgent refrain
Restore us, O God – let your face shine so that we might be saved
Restore us, O God of Hosts – let your face shine so that we might be saved
Restore us, O Lord God of Host – let your face shine so that we might be saved

This Advent, we are invited through these devotionals to hear voices from around our region who will share about this time of rejoicing. Yes, our current situation may not make us feel much like rejoicing. Still, we have a God whose face shines on us. We have a God who hears our lament. Our rejoicing may not be found in every moment, but we rejoice because we have a God who gives the reason for hope, which we come to find in Christ Jesus.

This may be a difficult advent for many of us, but Christ’s presence with us is always reason enough to have hope. And my prayer for you this Advent season is that you may rejoice in wherever you find hope.

Rev. Alan Dicken
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Monday, November 30th

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Lectionary Readings: Psalm 79; Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 15:1-8

It is helpful to remember before reading today's lectionary texts that for much of the church's history Advent was more akin to Lent than our modern-day festive celebrations would suggest. Even today in some religious traditions Advent is a time of sober assessment of who we are as people of faith and where we are in our faith journey, and spiritual disciplines such as confession and repentance are central to the season.

This makes the ominous and almost harrowing tone of the scriptures for today a bit more comprehensible, although no less demanding. In each of the texts, from Psalm 79, Micah 4, and Revelation 15 we begin with the righteousness of God calling into question all of our faithlessness and demanding that if we are to be followers of this divinity, we must acquiesce to the central place God must have in our lives and let go of the power that is not ours to wield. For example, the Psalmist cries out questioning, "How long, O God? Will you be angry forever?"

But rather than to shame us, or demean us, these scriptures and images are meant to, in the very best sense of the phrase, "put us in our place." Is it not true for you as it is for me that when things are going swell and I'm at the top of my game and everything seems to be coming together for me and mine, we begin to get a little arrogant, self-important, overconfident? When this happens the illusion of being the center of the universe is pretty darn compelling. I can't speak for you, but I know when this happens my prayer life begins to wane, my attention to all things spiritual fades, and the best of times don't seem to bring out my very best self.

Now, I don't believe for a minute that God brings tragedy and heartache in order to drag me down or teach me a lesson. But I do believe that when I'm haughty and bigheaded I'm ripe to let the important things slip and am vulnerable to bad things happening. This past year has been full of bad things, with a global pandemic, racism rearing its ugly head, and political tensions at an all-time high. It felt like the angels were walking amongst us with golden bowls of wrath boiling plagues over onto our lands and into our hearts.

But scripture does not leave us bereft, and this is the ultimate purpose and lesson of Advent. While God desires – no, requires – us to an honest assessment about our personal and corporate lives, if we honestly do so God is ready to redeem and renew us. Micah sings of how this redeemed world will manifest itself:

"they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid."

Let us take time in Advent to make an honest assessment of ourselves, both personally and communally, so that we can truly be ready to be filled with the joy of restoration, hope, and possibility that the coming Christ child will bring to us and to the world.

May it be so.

Rev. Allen V. Harris, Cleveland, Ohio
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Tuesday, December 1st

Please read Psalm 79; Micah 4:6-13

The readings for today show a people in chaos and turmoil; a people lost in brokenness and in need of wholeness; a people struggling with the world around them and who are seeking restoration and a light at the end of the tunnel. Sound familiar?

It's hard not to feel like these authors expressing their distress to God in these passages, isn't it? The world around us seems like it's falling apart; stress, pain, brokenness, and anxiety threaten to overwhelm us daily. It can be easy to lose hope in the present and the future.

But we are lucky to serve a God who brings light into the darkest rooms and hope into the most desolate situations. The scriptures for today don't end in a despairing cry for help, but in an answer and a hope from God. Though things are difficult and frightening, there is always hope in God. That's what the Advent season is all about - the hope that God's love as expressed through the birth of Jesus will bring us.

So do not despair, oh child of God - but instead hold onto the hope that Jesus will bring to us and prepare yourself not for darkness but for the warmth and brightness that the only light of God can provide.

Rev. Brian Carr
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Wednesday, December 2nd

Please read [*Psalm 79; Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 21:34-38*](#)

The creators of the lectionary have put these three scriptures together on purpose. We often, especially during advent, assume that the scriptures go together because they are talking about the same thing.

That's not the case.

The Psalms are likely dealing with enemies to the David or his descendants who ruled Israel. The Psalmist longs for God to provide military victories that will continue their very human reign. The desire of the Psalmist is to *maintain* the current ruling class.

Micah is looking for a hero-leader who will *restore* the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel. Micah writes from a position of living with occupying foreign forces. Micah isn't looking for a leader to die on a cross.

Luke is anticipating the second coming of Christ. The author isn't focused on Nativity but on an eschaton, a completion of God's will "on earth as it is in heaven."

This is where people I love often say things like, "Seth, you're making this too complicated." Or "Why do you have to think about things so much?", or even "Stop ruining Christmas. Now. I mean it, Seth. Stop."

I never do though, because for me the point is that we can empathize with the desires of the Psalmist and the authors of Micah and Luke as well as their audiences. We hurt and we fear, and in response to hurt and fear we often wish to take it out on others.

But we know who came to us as a baby. God chose to be embodied through Jesus and refused to segregate Godself from us even though it meant pain, humiliation, and death. God chose to be part of a family of origin and then create a family of choice.

We shouldn't force these other testaments, these prayers for saviors, to conform to the birth of Jesus. They have their own value and wisdom to impart.

But as I approach Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, I re-member that I am part of a body which stretches for millennia into the past and will stretch beyond my imagination into the future. Across that body we share times of despair, pain, and fear. At Christmas we remember that God is always present as hope then, now, and always.

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Thursday, December 3rd



At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" - Luke 1:39-45

This is one of my absolute favorite passages from the birth narrative of Jesus. Perhaps it is because there are so many relatable moments in this joyful scene. As I imagine Mary's eagerness, excitement and healthy dose of fear at her pregnancy, it is not surprising to me that she seeks out her older more experienced cousin for some "sister talk". When I was expecting our first child I couldn't wait to share the exciting news. I called my older sister, who, surprise surprise - ALSO happened to be expecting her first child!

Being able to share this special experience with my sister was an amazing gift. Every step of the journey there were new moments of discovery (so that's what it feels like when the baby kicks!), wonder (I can't believe the image on that ultrasound, it seems unreal to imagine this little person growing inside me!), questions (I wonder what labor and delivery are going to be like?) and joy (I wonder what this little person is going to be like?!). Having someone to share them with increased that sense of joyful anticipation.

When Mary and Elizabeth met that day there was a joyful sharing not only between these two expectant mothers, but between their babies as well. For when Elizabeth heard the voice of Mary calling out in greeting, the baby leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb. The Spirit was already at work moving in the world, preparing John for the joyful declaration of the coming of Jesus the Messiah and promised one.

The Spirit is still moving in the world, looking for expectant hearts ready to receive the joyful news. As members of a church community we know first hand what it feels like to share in one another's sorrows and joys within the body of Christ. But many are still wandering alone with no one to share their lives. So let us all be on the lookout this Advent for opportunities to share Christ's joy with those we meet. To enter into loving relationships of mutual sharing.

Prayer:

Miraculous God, there was no shortage of happy greetings, exclaiming, and leaping for joy when Jesus first arrived on the scene. Fill us with this same joyful exuberance that, led by your Spirit, we might invite others to share together in this expectant journey.

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(Image: Mary and Elizabeth by Lauren Wright Pittman - A Sanctified Art)

Friday, December 4th

Please read Isaiah 43:1-3a

In the age before broken and torn things were so easily and simply discarded, and in the age when wounded things were mended if at all possible, the oval wicker basket was a fixture beside the grandmother's worn, wooden rocking chair with the equally worn sky blue cushion on its seat. Maybe a foot deep, the basket with its woven, narrow wooden strips gave the appearance of small brown building blocks placed one on top of the other in alternating rows. The basket's lid never rested on the top of the basket but always sat underneath the basket's wickered bottom, cradling the work nestled inside with care. That basket was never empty. Clothing items in need of mending were always spilling out and over the grandmother's mending basket. Denim jacket with broken zipper, khaki pants with torn knee, black sock with hole in the toe, plaid skirt needing hemmed, blouse missing two buttons, a narrow waistband awaiting alteration. It was fortunate that the tools to mend the wounded fabrics were all available to the grandmother right there at her mending basket. Needle, thread, darning egg, thimble, scissors, measuring tape, buttons, pins, hooks, snaps, zippers, elastic, pin cushion. All right there ready to be called into service as the mending needs arose.

And so the grandmother would sit for hours at a time, rocking to and fro in her worn rocker with the equally worn cushion. Her mending was in her lap; her mending tools at her side. And little by little repairs would be made, alterations accomplished, socks darned and zippers replaced, mending continuing. The grandmother was always busy mending because there was always mending to do. The overflowing mending basket attested to that fact.

God has a mending basket too. Did you know? All humanity is in it. We humans are torn, broken, in need of repairs and alterations. Each one of us. Yes, each one there in the mending basket waiting to be brought into the lap of our One God, the One God who is the Great Mender. And in those times together with that tender care of the Great Mender, we are made right again, made whole again. Thank God that there is room for all in God's immense mending basket! Rejoice!

Where are you in need of mending? What are the mending needs of family, friends, and acquaintances? What is in need of repair when you look at the world around you both near and far? I say again: Thank God that there is room for all in God's immense mending basket! Rejoice!

Let us pray: Great Mending God, We rejoice that your mending basket is large enough to hold all humanity! And so we pray that you mend any broken heart. Mend the hearts of those who are downtrodden, who feel forgotten, who are broken by the year's events. Mend the hearts of those who think only of themselves when interacting with others or when drafting hurtful policies. Mend the hearts of those who work so hard to make lasting changes in this world, especially when the world seems not to hear or care. Mend the hearts of pastors who seek to minister in these times, and mend the hearts of your children of any age who seek to remain faithful to the Jesus way. Mend the hearts of those who are anxious and see only a cold winter approaching. Mend all hearts. Open all minds. Zipper hateful thoughts and actions. Mend us so that we may turn again to your love as shown in the one who came to show us a better way, the one whose presence we seek anew in this Advent season. Mending God, hear the prayers this day of your tattered and torn people and mend this hurting world we pray. Find us joyful as you bring us into your care and lavish us with your mending ways! Amen.

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Saturday, December 5th

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Hi, my name is Manny Latio. You can call me a young adult leader. No matter where you are in the country, or the world for that matter, no matter what time of day it is, happy December 5th. I will be leading today's devotional for Advent, and today's devotional from Psalm 85:8-13. And...actually, I'll read—yeah, actually I'll read it...a little bit.

It goes with, "I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land."

"Love and faithful—[verse 10]—Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven."

[Verse 12] "The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps."

Now, I don't know if it's the fact I am...a college student, who's basically a semester away now from graduating. I don't know if it's the fact that navigating the world right now is a little precarious. But, when it comes to thinking about the theme of rejoicing, and settling that into the Advent season; for me the notion of a promise of peace, a promise of righteousness, a promise that...one could say "good things" will come at some point—it brings me...it brings some joy, you know? It brings a smile to my face. It's something to look forward to. It's something that, I believe more than ever, we all want.

And so, if there's something that I can impart with you, for today, it would be that. It's the fact that you deserve peace, and you are promised that from the Lord above. And find that in your world as best as you can, however it may be, through friends, prayer, a mix of the two...maybe a little more Christmas music, it's up to you. But meditate upon the peace in your life, during this Advent season, 'cuz I'll be doing my fair share of that...especially once the semester ends. But other than that, have a good rest of your Advent season, and God bless.

Blessings only,

Manny Latio

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Sunday, December 6th

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Please read Colossians 3:15-17 NRSV

Within the hymnody of the church there are at least two familiar songs that liken peace to a river. One is the African American spiritual sung by many Sunday School children and youth at camp—“I’ve Got Peace Like a River.” That one continues the water imagery with subsequent verses affirming “love like an ocean” and “joy like a fountain.” Properly sung, that popular song, entails some hand motions done with a sense of exuberance. If you invite some first graders to sing this song, you are going to end up with some noise. So, if you equate peace with quiet, I would not recommend that you encourage the singing of this song.



The phrase “peace like a river” shows up in another well-known hymn of the church, “It is Well with my Soul.” There are no hand motions to go along with this tune, and its somber tone bespeaks its origins. It was written by Hoartio Spafford in 1873. Mr. Spafford, a successful lawyer in Chicago, had seen his fortune erased by the great Chicago fire in 1871, and then he tragically lost his four daughters in a shipwreck on the Atlantic Ocean. If you know that background the first verse takes on poignant meaning:

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul

Maybe connecting the concept of peace to a flowing body of water is not so far off. Truth be told, just as rivers can be found in a variety of forms, from gently flowing streams to raging rapids, so, too, can we both seek, find, and experience peace in many different places and forms.

We might find peace when we are linked arm in arm marching for justice. We might find peace when we are quietly holding hands or embracing in an act of reconciliation. We might find peace when a nagging challenging experience has come to an end with a sigh. We might find peace when foes claim each other as friends.

Within the Advent cycle the second Sunday is “Peace Sunday.” Peace is something we give thanks for in Advent and also something we seek. As the Apostle Paul is conveying a word of peace to the church in Colossae, he encourages them to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” I suspect he knows that singing gives voice to that which is deepest within us, those things we know to true, and yearn to be so.

In any event I would pay to see the Apostle Paul sing “Peace like a River” with some first graders. Wouldn’t you?

Let us pray:

Let there be peace on earth, O God, and let it begin with me—through my voice, through my song, and through all the actions of my life. Amen.

Rick Spleth, Visiting Regional Minister
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Monday, December 7th

Please read [Psalm 27](#); [Isaiah 26:7-15](#); [Acts 2:37-42](#)

“One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.”

As a night chaplain at a hospital, part of my role is to round to the different nurse's stations taking the emotional temperature of the staff and to hear of patients who may benefit from the presence of a chaplain. Each night I am asked by nurses, “How is the house?” I learned quickly that the question is never about where I go after work - the hospital is the “main house”. The people I talk with are usually seeking a bigger perspective to their night in the hospital.

The “house” this year experienced more unknowns than any other given year. At first, we learned together about the Coronavirus and wondered if it would affect us. I remember in January being told anecdotally that our national medicine system is great and it would surely not decimate our lives like we heard about around the globe. Soon, the “house” was cleared out. There were no elective surgeries, we discharged anyone that we could, and we made a new rule of no visitation. We were made ready for an expected surge as many collectively wondered whether it would come. After awhile, life began to feel “normal” again. We still wore masks and were careful. But elective surgeries were back on and visitation of patients was now available but limited. Then things started to turn.

Conversations shifted to hearing about families of patients as well as staff affected by Coronavirus. There was great stress in the house. The increase in positive cases in patients and nurses has finally answered the question - will we get the surge as predicted.

For us in this season of waiting on the Lord, the Psalmist writes about seeking to live “in the house of the Lord” (Psalm 27:4). I thought of ornate cathedrals when I first read this passage. But on second (and third) readings, I considered the Psalmist's ideas that God's house would also be a place of refuge for all those who are sick. It would be a place of justice and a place where there is peace. In this Advent season of unprecedented times, we wait together for the Lord. We wait for a vaccine, we wait for a chance to see our loved ones in hospitals with increased visitation restriction again, and we wait for collective healing.

But here is the good news: in this waiting, we rejoice for we know that God is with us in the waiting. We know God will set our feet on a rock so that we can stand firm to face whatever is before us. We are the lucky ones with a God - giving us strength, love, and compassion as we wait together for this time of darkness to pass.

God, please be with all those waiting in hospitals, in nursing homes, and in isolation due to the Coronavirus. Remind us that in our waiting, you are here. Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen

Reverend Audrey Connor
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Tuesday, December 8th

Please read Psalm 27 (NLT)

We enter this season of Advent in the midst of a pandemic with 240,000 + lives lost to COVID-19. At the time of this writing, we do not have a clear winner in the US Presidential race, and even if we did, we have an angry nation divided almost equally in half. Churches are struggling, families are separated, holidays will be disrupted. Everything seems challenging, and out of balance. From this chaos, we hear the peaceful words of Psalm 27:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation – so why should I be afraid? The Lord protects me from danger – so why should I tremble?”

In the midst of challenge, God is our light, our salvation. Is there anything else we really need? Throughout this pandemic, for whatever reason, morning have been the most difficult for me. I awaken feeling anxious, my mind going in a hundred different directions. (If you don't believe me, you can ask the elders of Hampton Park CC who have received many 6 am emails, and 8am texts asking their thoughts on something.) Even now, I awaken with this sense of foreboding about Advent planning and virtual Christmas Eve. Again, the peaceful words come:

*“The one thing I ask of the lord – the thing I seek most – is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; delighting in the Lord's perfections and meditating in the temple.
For God will conceal me there when troubles come
God will hide me in the sanctuary
God will place me out of reach, on a high rock.
Then I will hold my head high, above my enemies who surround me.” (4-5)*

We have worked so hard to communicate in this time via ZOOM, Facetime, virtual learning, email, text, through windows– anything that is physically distant from others. The masks we wear prevent clear words, and visible expressions. Communication is more often frustrating than not. In the midst of this challenge, again, the peaceful words come:

*“My heart has heard you say, ‘Come and talk with me,’
and my heart responds, ‘Lord, I am coming.’” (8)*

For me, I want to put an exclamation point after that sentence. “I am coming!!! I am on my way! You don't have to ask twice!”

My prayer for you this Advent is that you sit down and talk with God, your light and your salvation; the One who protects you from danger, who takes away your fear, who lets you live, and hides you in a sanctuary, the one who sets you on a high rock.

“You have always been my helper.” (9)

Rev. Mary Jo Bray
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Wednesday, December 9th

Let us Rejoice!!!

Philippians 4:4

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Think of this: Instead of worrying about problems we cannot solve, you choose to be joyful!

We all have been on a journey in life. Consider the many struggles the Apostle Paul had and how he must have felt as he sat in one imprisonment after another.

Today's Scripture tells us to cheer up when we are heartbroken and going through life's trials.

God's will for us is not only about us – it also fits into His larger plan. If you face a lot of challenges, both physical and emotional, CHOOSE to approach life and all its noise with joy and focus on Christ in every circumstance. Praise God in your situation and watch what happens! In spite of what's going on, you'll experience reassurance, patience, and what you need to live through the situation as God has planned for you.

Prayer

Gracious God, show me how to rejoice in every situation, not just the good ones. 'I Choose Joy' even in heartache or painful situations. Thank you for sending your Son to be a beacon of light to the world. Amen.

Bruce Bowerman-Jett

Chair of the Camp Christian Committee

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Thursday, December 10th

Joy

Joy brings us a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. it is an emotion that we experience When life seems good to us. The times when the sun is shining, the times when our team is victorious, when we feel health and strength. People hardly ever talk about happiness amid heartbreak, or pleasure in the midst of painful sickness, or the exhilaration of losing.

The Apostle Paul uses Greek words for joy and rejoicing 16 times in the book of Philippians in the 104 verses of the book, making it the most joyful book in the Bible. This was a joyous book even though it was written from a dark-dirty-dismal Roman prison. Prison is a place usually associated with misery, anguish, and testing, which for most people would not produce extreme of joy. In prison Paul was engulfed by an atmosphere that would produce every hindrance to joy. Yet we must ask ourselves, why did he seem so happy?



It must have been that Paul held Jesus in his heart. Over 2000 years ago, a child was born in the city of David, and a son was given unto us. And he was Called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and we simply call him Jesus.

Paul commands us to rejoice in the Lord in both Philippians 3:1 and 4:4. What does this really mean? For the Apostle Paul the term Lord references the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus humbled himself even to the death of the cross, the father highly exalted him, and all will come one day to pay homage to his universal reign (Philippians 2:6-11). The cause of rejoicing stems from our realization of these truths concerning Jesus - who he is, what he has done for us, and what he will do for us in the future - these things have a positive and profound impact on us. Rejoicing in the Lord is elicited from knowing Jesus Christ as our Lord, Savior, and Treasure. With this he gives us deeper, sweeter, more genuine, lasting gladness, more so than anything else in the world. "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). Rejoicing in the Lord causes us to have a new song in our hearts - the song of the redeemed - the song of hope - the song of victory - the song of the future glory to be revealed in us - that the distresses and distractions of this life could not muffle, for He shines as the foremost center of our joy. Let us rejoice during this season for our Savior Jesus Christ.

Blessings,
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Friday, December 11th Running in Darkness

Please read Isaiah 9:2-3 and John 1:5

It was just over a year ago, and I was running through a wooded trail in a small-town park in the middle of Tennessee. The temperature was about freezing, and it was about midnight. My headlamp was dim, and the running flashlight I was holding was going out. And I wasn't 100% sure I was even on the right path. Other than the cold and the darkness and the confusion things were going fairly well.

My run was one leg of a 200 mile Ragnar relay race that had started in Chattanooga and would finish in Nashville. Our team - the Disciples International Racing Team - was comprised of twelve runners most of whom were Disciples of Christ and some were clergy. Many on the team had run together before in similar races in Kentucky and Canada. Each of these races had their own unique set of challenges, but one of the issues with the Tennessee race was that various sections of the route were not all that well marked. And that can be a real challenge when it is dark, and you have never been to the place you are running through before. Earlier in the evening we had redirected a runner from another team who was running in the wrong direction. Now it was my turn to be lost or so I thought.

When I had entered the woods I was ahead of one runner who soon passed me after a short time. For awhile I was able to see the light of her headlamp and run in her direction, but as she moved farther ahead of me I lost sight of her light. It was about that time that my own headlamp started to fade, and my flashlight went out. The path was wide enough that I wasn't afraid of hitting a tree. But I was more concerned about missing a turn and headed in the wrong direction altogether. Since I didn't have a whole lot of options I decided to keep moving ahead.

Thankfully after a time in near darkness, I emerged from the woods and could see the headlamp of a runner ahead of me. I decided to follow that light even if I wasn't entirely sure the runner was headed the right way. As it turns out, that runner was correct, and she helped guide me to the end of my leg where I was greeted by teammates.

More than once in 2020 I have felt like my headlamp was growing dim and that I wasn't sure whether or not I was headed in the right direction. Have you felt that way in 2020? I have been encouraged by the knowledge that the darkness of this year will not overcome the light, and that ultimately the journey will end in rejoicing. And our task is to keep moving ahead.

One of my favorite prayers is by Thomas Merton who wrote:

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Rev. Jim Bane

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Saturday, December 12th

Matthew 21.28-32

Wait, is Jesus talking about us?

The Parable of the Two Sons

28 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." 29 He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Situated following the entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the Temple, and the challenge of authority, Jesus offers this parable. It is a scenario that anyone can understand with a very clear choice between righteous and unrighteous action, even if the application has yet to be realized by the audience. The author of the Gospel According to Matthew follows this with another parable - that of the wicked tenants - featuring another vineyard and some very cruel behavior of the tenants towards the servants and son of the vineyard owner. Again, a clear judgment can be made about the action of those entrusted to steward the vineyard. It was soon after Jesus offered the second parable that the religious authorities had the thought...

Wait, is Jesus talking about us?

Are we the second son?

Are we the unrighteous tenants?

Wait a minute!

Along with waiting and anticipation, Advent seems to be a season filled with humility. We have a sense of what God will bring forth into and from the earth, and yet incarnation is ever mysterious - the Kingdom of God is far more generous, inclusive, and present than we can ever imagine. For those of us who are stewards and practitioners of the tradition, it seems prudent to reflect upon our practice and how we serve the other - particularly the vulnerable, the marginalized, and those made poor. Religion always carries a real temptation to generate a community of the favored by means of superiority and exclusion; Advent is as fine a time as any to review the landscape of the ecclesia to look for obstacles and barriers we may have erected to provide us with a sense of security and/or superiority, at the denial of others.

As always, with any judgment from Christ there is invitation. The good news within this particular parable is that the Kingdom of God is here. It awaits... not for some messiah to be born, but for the disciples to open their hearts and their doors. It is already here, just on the other side of the barriers; some folks have already arrived. For disciples who have realized that the faith is about beloved community and are fashioning this in their particular contexts, we rejoice. For disciples who have yet to realize that any and all righteousness are found in communion with all of God's children - there is a sacred invitation to change our minds and discover something holy this season.

May it be so.

Rev. Chris McCreight

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Sunday, December 13th

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Please read Psalm 126:1-6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Leading into this Advent season the world has been in a time of wilderness: so much isolation, such dry spirits. In preparation for this time I couldn't help but reflect on how alone we have each felt, and it made me consider the Nativity story from a deeper and truer place. I considered how alone each one of these characters must have felt in their individual circumstances, decisions, geography, power structures. It reminded me of a wider truth about the Scriptures, that these are a collection of the stories of ordinary people, the ancestors of our faith, teaching how we can better respond to our own experiences of isolation or complication.

In this week we often focus on the story of Mary and her incredible response to God's claim on her life, but the truth is that there were hundreds of others around her whom the Creator had also claimed as their people. Others who felt alone, isolated, longing for a break in the silence, a quenching of the spirit. In this unusual Advent season, we give them voice as they live again in us. We thirst for God's renewal, for the proximity of peace, to once more experience the fullness...of time...of life. Mary was a harbinger of grace who gave birth to God's unbounded love set loose in the world. We also carry the seeds of that love.

Mary's Flower, also called a resurrection plant, is a shrub with great resistance to desiccation, its branches have the property of contracting with dryness, capable of remaining closed and dry for many years without water and then reopening with moisture or contact with water to regain all its freshness and beauty. Within the ball, the fruits remain attached and closed, protecting the seeds and preventing them from being dispersed prematurely. The seeds are very hardy and can remain dormant for years. Moistened again in a later rainy season, the ball uncurls and the plant wakes up from its dormant state, which causes the capsular fruits to open to disperse the seeds. If water is sufficient, the dispersed seeds germinate within hours.

We may feel that we are in a season of drought, but like the Psalmist sings, we can still be a people of dreaming, waiting for God to restore our fortunes like the watercourses the Negeb. May the tears that have been shed nourish the seeds we hold within us, holding fast to what is good, that we may reap joy in the coming days. Even more that we may rejoice in all circumstances, as we pray without ceasing that God's peace may sanctify us. That we may be kept sound in body and mind and spirit, believing that the one who calls us is faithful. Please, pray with me now.

Prayer by Katherine Hawker

*God spoke in the beginning;
out of darkness came night and day,
out of emptiness came creation,
out of loneliness came humankind.
And God said, "This is very good."*

*God spoke when the world was troubled;
giving voice to prophets from the earliest days,
moving through Mary as she gave birth to her child,
crying as a vulnerable baby lying in a manger.
Still God said, "This is very good."*

*God speaks today;
breathing energy into our weary lives,
challenging our celebrations and sharing our pain,
dancing with songs of justice and peace.
Now we know that, "This is very good."*

Rev. Deborah Saxe
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Monday, December 14th

Please read Habakkuk 3:17-19

December 14 is a date etched in my brain and occupies permanent space in my heart. It was on Friday, December 14, 2012 that a lone gunman entered Sandy Hook Elementary School just as classes started and killed 20 first-graders and 6 school staff members. On Saturday morning, I tore the sermon I'd written into shreds and began again. It was the 3rd Sunday in Advent – the morning when we would light the Joy candle.

I was feeling anything but joy and began my newly-written sermon from a tear-stained manuscript using an illustration from the children's book, Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day. A book that tells the story of first grader Alexander and all the things that go wrong with his day – he drops his sweater in the sink, he doesn't get the window seat in carpool, his teacher hates his drawing, no snack in his lunchbox, and more. **This**, I said, *this* is as bad as any first-grader's day should be.



I didn't realize that morning that I was also beginning a new phase of my ministry. One of activism on the issue of gun violence. Soon after, together with my life partner, we founded the organization, God Before Guns. In retirement from active pastoral ministry, we continue that work, believing that we are authentically living out God's call.

But back to Joy Sunday. In 2012 just days after the shooting, the text was from Philippians 4:4-7: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.*

How could we possibly rejoice?

We did because we remembered that Paul was in prison and facing execution when he wrote this letter of extreme encouragement to the church despite his personal circumstances. In that context, we could light that 3rd candle with the confidence that we were not the first to suffer loss nor were we alone in our collective grief. There was comfort in that, and we were grateful for church tradition and rituals that allowed our tears while also giving us the strength to see beyond them.

For this December 14, 2020 as I remember and grieve senseless and tragic loss of life, I chose words from the Prophet Habakkuk. Before he spoke these words, he engages in a very courageous debate with God. He calls God out on God's promise of justice vs God's failure to act. He demands to be heard, and though he's considered a minor prophet, there's not another who is more confrontational with God. He laments, *why do you make me see this, God?*

Did you ever ask a question out loud and as soon as the words have left your lips, you knew the answer? Habakkuk knew *why*. He didn't want to see the injustice. He didn't want to know about the violence around him. None of us want to see or to know. But we have to see. We have to know.

We need to see and to know so we can be angry. Anger might seem counter-intuitive to a season of joy, but it is not. In order for there to be joy in our world, it will take prophetic anger that brings injustice out of the shadows and makes it visible. And so, Habakkuk can rejoice because he trusted that with God's help, we can do better.

We could write our own verses of lament listing our 2020 troubles. There are many. Just remember to follow your lament with the prophet's words: *yet I will rejoice in the Lord*. Because we can rejoice if we stand where God calls us to stand calling for an end to violence and injustice. We can always rejoice because there is nothing more precious to the heart of God than justice and peace for all of God's people.

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Tuesday, December 15th

1 Timothy 4:12, NIV: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity."

Youth are the future of the church. The youth are a symbol of hope. To have youth in our churches makes us happy but to see youth serving, side by side with adults year-round, is something that elevates it to true joy. Youth have so much to give the church and are particularly placed for ministry as they are developing their own skills and figuring out where they can excel. We thank God for the blessing of the youth, and rejoice in the privilege of hearing their important voices.

Dear Lord, we are inspired by our youth. As our world reels from tragedy, global catastrophe, harmful ideologies, and fear, we seek refuge in the hearts and minds of our youth. Through their eyes, what seems broken is an opportunity to build. What seems hopeless is hopeful. Where the rest of the world sees an obstacle, our youth see a challenge and a call to action. Our youth are bringing a new era to faith. Our youth are Bridge Builders and Problem Solvers. Our youth are Dreamers and Philosophers. Our Youth are Imaginative Revolutionaries. Our youth won't back down from demanding a better tomorrow. Our youth will not accept the status quo. Our youth seek justice and peace but won't settle for an empty peace without justice. When we seek you out, dear Lord, we ought to look to our youth. We thank you for our youth, as they are our future, our foundation, and our hope.

PAUL ROBESON

by Gwendolyn Brooks

That time
we all heard it,
cool and clear,
cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice.
The adult Voice
forgoing Rolling River,
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge
and other symptoms of an old despond.
Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other's
harvest:
we are each other's
business:
we are each other's magnitude and bond. Amen

Kevin Poe, Youth and Justice Intern kevin@harmonysprings.org
and Jennifer Berlyoung, Pastor of Community Development jennifer@harmonysprings.org
Harmony Springs Christian Church, Uniontown

Wednesday, December 16th

Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

Every year, no matter your own personal situation, each of us has a store of memories, many delightful and always a few awkward and painful ones, about what Christmas has been before in our lives. We also all know and anticipate how this year’s observance will be different.

“Empty chairs around the table” has usually been just a metaphor, since we rarely leave a chair empty, but in many homes a standard table will simply not have enough people physically present to fill them. So for many of us, for the first time perhaps, we literally will have empty chairs at the table.

The illnesses that are active right now — and there are always people dealing with sickness in this season who find the juxtaposition challenging, even before the virus came into our lives, cancer patients and people recovering from surgery needing special seating and the overall impact of age and infirmity — bring a weight of circumstance into the situation which can threaten to drag the whole celebration right down to the ground. I pray that we don’t let that happen. Again, having a person or two ailing at the holidays isn’t actually unusual, it’s just that we all do, this year. We all have to deal with a different sort of celebration, and that general adjustment is a way of dealing with it, knowing that we are none of us alone in having a strange Advent.

Planning and preparation for Christmas has always been part of the Advent season, however we mark this penitential period. But this year, we all will be feeling the prayerful and preparations part of Advent in a more Lenten fashion than we normally do. We are all giving something up for Advent in 2020, which is in fact not all bad. Just as sacrifice and discipline is a standard part of Lent, it’s supposed to be in part why we have an Advent season, so Christmas like Easter is a joyful feast we prepare our hearts and minds to observe in all the depth and breadth and expansiveness that those joyful culminations deserve.

May our Advent, with what we will lose and leave and set aside, be part of tuning our affections and focusing our love towards the gifts of God meant for our lasting blessing. Not towards the gifts or meals or events, but into relationships and memories that endure, and how our freshly understood valuations in this life turn us towards eternal values that can change what we do next, how we advocate and prioritize and work for the values of Jesus in the community and world around us.

Prayer: God of grace and God of glory, in our humble moments and sorrowful passages, help us to be more understanding of those in pain around us, to appreciate the losses others have known, and to see this world’s tears and mourning with compassion and appreciation. May we learn from our losses, and be empowered in our Christmas understandings to build up and support those who live in loss every day, to care for the abandoned and lost, and to share Good News out of heaven that changes the news people hear in their neighborhood to hope and help. Amen.

Rev. Jeff Gill

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Thursday, December 17th

Read Psalm 119:89-90

"Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures." (NIV)

I've been watching the skies lately. Paying attention to the cloud formations. Searching for breaks of light in the glowering gray. Looking for distant sun rays to make their way my way. Watching angry storm clouds approach, unleash their fury, and travel on, soon enough making ways for calmer days. Enjoying the movements and beauty of puffy, fluffy fly-swiftly-across-the-sky wind driven clouds or flow-lazily-and-gently-overhead soft-as-cotton clouds.

And the colors in those clouds in the skies! Oh my! The medium gray of campfire ashes. The dark gray of bare, wintering trees. The pure white of Clorox-soaked undies and the dirty white of laundry mistakes. The purple-blue of burgeoning bruises. The pink of babies' cheeks. Is it possible that the variety of hues in the sky rivals the choices found on an artist's palette?

Sunrise. Midday. Sunset. Always a changing tableau of sky. And then beyond into the dark night when clouds obscure the moon or when they part to make way for viewing the dimmest of stars.

The sky – ever changing, yet ever the same. After all – the sky is always the sky, isn't it?

I think of my celestial observations and I remember that each Advent season reminds us that our unchanging God continues to come to us in ever changing ways. And I rejoice! I pray that you too will join in with glorious rejoicing! Our unchanging God has come, is come, and will come! Look to the skies and rejoice!

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Friday, December 18th

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Scripture: Psalm 126 (CEB)

A song of ascents.

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of^[a] Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.^[b]

² Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

⁴ Restore our fortunes,^[c] LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

The book of Psalms is all about humanity's relationship with God. In times of trouble, joy, war, exile, and triumph, the people of God express themselves in this book through Poetry. Psalm 126 is both testimony and prayer. It is reassurance that God has done and can still do great things! It reminds us that when things seem like they will never get better, God has the power to use our pain and our tears to yield a bountiful harvest. God can make rivers flow where before there was only waste.

With how 2020 has gone for most of us, it feels like a good time to remember this psalm. We can still feel joy because we know that our God is at work in our lives. We are looking ahead to Christmas with hope. We await the indwelling of God among us. We are looking forward to the celebration of Emmanuel, God with us.

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Saturday, December 19th

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

Matthew 2:10

Advent is a season of joyful anticipation. The Magi entered a season of anticipation when they saw that unique star in the east and discerned that it would lead them to the Christ child. It was not stationary, they had to follow it and when it stopped over the place where the child was, the Magi rejoiced. The season of anticipation had concluded, the place where the Christ child lay had been found. They entered in, worshiped him, and presented him their gifts.

One of my favorite Christmas carols in Joy to the World, it proclaims the message of joy that Christ has come into the world. We rejoice in this fulfillment of the prophecy that tells of the one who comes to fulfill promise of salvation for all who believe.

The corona virus 19 has caused great anxiety in this Advent season but we won't let it steal our joy. Quoting Walter Craddock:

Take a saint, and put him in any condition, and he knows how to rejoice in the Lord.

We may not be able to gather with family and friends as we are accustomed to but we can utilize technology to capture the joy and happiness of their presence.

For many of us, Christmas worship will be a virtual experience. This is something we have developed an appreciation for over the past few months. The presence of the Holy Spirit manifests through our screens and the power of words sung and spoken stirs our hearts. Joy to the world the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King.

May your experience this season be filled with joy and gladness as we give to Christ with the same reverence as did the Magi when they gave their gifts. Wise persons still seek him. Shalom.

Prayer:

Gracious and loving God, you are great and most worthy of praise. We give you special thanks as we celebrate the birth of Christ our Savior, the gift of your love and the hope of Salvation and eternal life for all who believe. May we demonstrate our gratitude by living lives that reflect the grace, love, and mercy you bestow upon us. May our actions be ordered the teaching and admonition of Jesus and in accordance with you will. May we give as generously as you have given to build up your realm here on earth.

All glory and honor we give unto you. In Jesus name, amen.

Rev. Eugene James

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Sunday, December 20th

Gifts That Change Lives

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Please read Luke 1:26-38

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28, NRSV).

I was 12 years old that Christmas. Under the tree, I found an envelope with my name on it. When the time came, I opened the envelope to find only an index card with an instruction on it. Too many years have passed for me to recall the exact instructions or sequence, but they were simple instructions like, "Look under the milk." Under the milk carton, then, was another index card with another instruction.

As best I recall, I followed four or five index cards, leading me around the house until the final card instructed me to look in the closet in mom and dad's bedroom. There I found a guitar case.

That Christmas, the gift from my parents was my own guitar. I had started playing three or four years earlier, borrowing my dad's instrument. Now I had an instrument of my own.

Ever since, I have played. Through all the seasons of my life, my guitar and my voice have been companions on the journey. They have helped me make friends. They have opened doors to relationships. They have dismantled barriers and created trust. They have rekindled precious memories, brought tears and smiles, and eased the burdens of the day. I cannot imagine my life without music and especially without the guitar.

That gift changed my life.

The angel's greeting to Mary, "Greetings, favored one," opens the story of God's grace becoming manifest. While the story relates a conversation between the angel and Mary, God's action sits at the center of the story. God's act of grace, often seen through the lens of the cross, begins at the manger.

We receive that gift of grace. We follow Jesus through the teaching and examples laid out in scripture. We are not led from clue to clue in the hope of discovering some hidden treasure. Rather, we embark on a journey where we discover anew each day God's love for us. We realize our call, our place in God's mission.

God's gift changes our lives.

As people called into the body of Christ's church, we bear witness to that gift. God's gift of grace goes beyond us as individuals. That gift calls us into action. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the ones who are sick or in prison, all the while bearing witness to the greatest gift of God's love. God's gift changes our communities.

At the manger, may you rediscover, even reclaim, God's gift of grace revealed in Jesus. May it continue to change your life and call you into loving action.

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Monday, December 21st

Rejoice

Even though this year has been like one I've never seen, tumultuous, filled with a virus that has taken many lives, made many sick and denied many of us the right to assemble in the Lord's house.

With all of this I am still thankful and have much to rejoice about. Let me share a few of my gratitudes that give me cause to rejoice.

Family and friends who are a constant source of love and support; I live in a free country where I have the freedom to exercise my right to vote and it counts; The brain still works and I'm physically active, even though I have a few ailments and I have skills and knowledge that I'm willing and able to share with others to make a difference in this world.

People who practice gratitude and rejoice regularly are known to be healthier and happier and are better able to deal with change and anxiety.

Let us remember to rejoice in the Lord always.

Prayer:

Lord give me an attitude of thankfulness so that I am rejoicing always. Amen

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Tuesday, December 22nd

Micah 3:1-2, 5; 4:1-2; 5:2; 6:8

Micah is an under-appreciated prophet of Advent.

Isaiah and Amos would have known of Micah's message as contemporaries, and Jeremiah speaks approvingly of him from the generation just after him. One thing we get from Micah's preaching is that there were obviously other prophets speaking in his era, and that they were speaking a word more congenial to what the kings and princes wanted to hear, whose "prophetic" word was comforting to those in power, even in support of those who oppressed the people.

And I said:

Listen, you heads of Jacob

and rulers of the house of Israel!

Should you not know justice?—

you who hate the good and love the evil..

Continued on the next page

A prophet who loves evil is hard to imagine . . . or maybe not. But Micah warned God's people against such speaking. And had harsh words for those who said such preaching was what the Lord Most High had to say to those in lowly estate.

*Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets
who lead my people astray,
who cry "Peace"
when they have something to eat,
but declare war against those
who put nothing into their mouths.*

Yet Micah did offer hope, even if that hope was not in those who had authority and power during that particular period.

*In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

Micah's word on behalf of God's Word was that yes, the land of Judah could be a place where divine favor was found, where heavenly purposes would be fulfilled. But it might not be out of the center, the capital, the palaces of Jerusalem from which such leadership would come:

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

And to live prophetically? Micah may have summed up in one verse better than any other prophet God's intention for us:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

In that three-fold command is a map for Advent, now and always, walking towards hope which endures. "To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

Wednesday, December 23rd

REJOICE!

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Titus 2:11-14

Titus is problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that just before this statement (enshrined in the Christmas Eve lectionary), the author, in the name of Paul, has called on slaves to be submissive and faithful to their masters as an expression of their faith in Jesus.

Personally, every time I read in the scriptures a call to “purity” and “godliness”, my reaction is to be rebellious and resistant. Far too often, these instructions (like the one to be a submissive and faithful slave) are oppressive in nature and in application have NOTHING to do with a life of discipleship under the leadership of Jesus of Nazareth. Instead, they are used by powerful people to oppress, repress, and control marginalized, poor, and otherwise subjugated persons (indeed, entire peoples) in the name of Christian faith. Because of this, God’s people are right to rebel against such instruction.

However, I begin to rejoice upon hearing this paragraph when I reflect on something Dr. Walter Brueggemann has written about and discussed. Dr. Brueggemann has reflected deeply on the tension within the Hebrew Bible between *“the protocols of purity and the protocols of neighborliness.”* I rejoice at his statement (paraphrased by me) that, in the gospel of Jesus, God has firmly come down on the side of neighborliness. Now, we can reflect on, and rejoice in, a new way to hear the words “purity” and “godliness”—God’s people are most pure, and most godly, when out of neighborly love we work for the liberation of all those who have been marginalized and oppressed, because then we are joining with God (and Jesus!) in God’s most holy work. We embrace the very call of Jesus—*“to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release of the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)”*

Christ has come to set all people free—we can rejoice in that!

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Thursday, December 24th Christmas Eve

This devotion is the written accompaniment to a video Advent message that can be viewed on our YouTube Channel by clicking [HERE](#).

Please read Luke 2:1-20

This day is a most holy of days. This night is a most special of nights. This season of Advent is about to climax with an announcement, a birth, and a song for all of creation to hear. This day God and the Church invite us into a renewed participation with the Incarnation. God is with us, and lives with us, and forms us ever new and always.

In this rich Scripture offering we find many names and places lifted up. People are registering and being accounted for in this lesson. Perhaps today we can consider the reality that our names and our places too are registered in the Christmas reality of God's grace filled occupation of God's world and God's people. We are accounted for!

This night we will connect with believers in worship and life from far and wide. Let us welcome each and everyone as if they were the child born in Bethlehem and loving placed in a manger by his mother. Today we must note that all people count, so we register all we meet this day in our hearts, and we join with the hosts of heaven in praising God.

God is with us, and lives with us, and forms us ever new. On this day we find peace, as we live in the very real presence and peace that comes from the one sent for us, Jesus. Tonight we remember that what we find and receive must always be found and received together with all those who have been, are, and ever will be.

Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Us.

Rev. Thad Allen

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Friday, December 25th ~ Christmas Day

The Song That Doesn't End

Psalm 96:1-3 (GW)

- 1 Sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth!
- 2 Sing to the LORD! Praise his name! Day after day announce that the LORD saves his people.
- 3 Tell people about his glory. Tell all the nations about his miracles.

This year the Advent and Christmas season has been a very different one for most of us. Our traditions of preparation and celebration have caused us to be more intentional and creative. For some of us we have experienced a sense of isolation much like Mary and Joseph, with just a few people stopping by to help us celebrate.

To me it seems that Psalm 96 (all of it) is so appropriate for this day of Christmas, because it expresses the need for continual praise to our God, who became one of us on that first Christmas so long ago. Our celebration of the Incarnation, that is, God taking human form, living with us, and dying for all of us, is the revelation that Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love are now extra-ordinary elements of our reality. It causes us to sing a new song, a new song that has no end.

This unending song of praise to God and to all the world is grounded in an understanding that Christmas is not just a one-day event. It's not a finish line we've been racing toward over the last 4 weeks. It's the unending new song of the Spirit of Christmas, the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, which we have been talking and singing about throughout this Advent Season.

In **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**, the Apostle Paul says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Hopefully, you know that singing is a form of praying, so one way of continuing to praise God is by singing a song that doesn't end.

Years ago, ventriloquist Sheri Lewis had a children's show on PBS which closed the program with her puppets, Lamb Chop, Hush Puppy, and Charlie Horse, singing a song, to the delight of children and the annoyance of parents, known as "This Is A Song That Doesn't End."

It goes like this: This is a song that doesn't end.
 Yes, it goes on and on, my friend.
 Some people started singing it
 Not knowing what it was,
 And they'll continue singing it
 Forever, just because...

 This is a song that doesn't end.
 Yes, it goes on and on, my friend.
 Some people started singing it
 Not knowing what it was,
 And they'll continue singing it
 Forever, just because... (again, again, again, and again...)

If you are not familiar with this song, here is a YouTube Link: <https://youtu.be/5iln6fkwJOU>

Some of us are aware that there is a Christian Tradition of celebrating the 12 days of Christmas. However, some mistakenly think those 12 days come before Christmas Day, as part of our preparation leading up to celebrating this glorious event. Actually, it's the 12 days of continued celebration, beginning on Christmas Day, and leading us into the season of Epiphany. And yet, it should be more. How could it not be?

Long after the tree is taken down, our decorations are put away, and the glow of the season dims, a song of praise should still be echoing through our hearts and minds. It may not be the same song for each of us, but it should be a song worth singing over and over again.

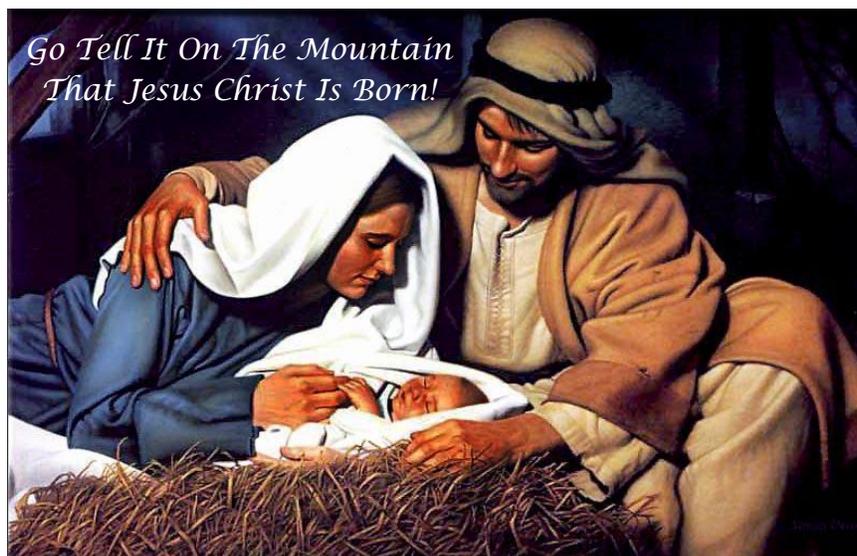
As I read Psalm 96, the song that came to me, loud and clear, was the chorus to "Go Tell It On The Mountain."

Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born...

May this day of Christmas be a new beginning for you, a new or renewed awareness that God so loved the world and each of us. May we make every effort to continue our song of celebration, that song of praise in our hearts that doesn't end.

God bless you this day and every day. Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born. Amen!

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*We hope and pray that this year's Advent Devotionals
have been a blessing to you.*

We extend a heartfelt thanks to all who contributed.

A full playlist of the video devotions can be viewed by clicking [HERE](#).

Please prayerfully consider a gift to the [Christmas Offering](#)

Your gifts support the work of regional ministries this Christmas. Your Ohio Region works to:

- Connect congregations to each other
- Foster faith development
- Gather Disciples in camps, conferences, and assemblies
- Nurture the development of a new generation of pastors
- Assist churches in calling new ministers
- Interpret the global mission of the church
- Represent the church in ecumenical gatherings
- Counsel and pray with those who are troubled of spirit
- Walk with those in conflict
- Lead the church to address racism
- Inspire leaders to experiment and create
- Witness to the power of God to make things new

The [Christmas Special Day offering](#) supports all of these and many other ministries here in Ohio.

2020  Christmas Offering
REJOICE
A special day offering of
Disciples Mission Fund



When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Matthew 2:10

Our finest gifts supporting the Ministries of our Region ~ Received December 13th & 20th in most Congregations