

**River Road Church, Baptist**  
**2021 Advent Devotions**



**Written by River Road Church Members and Friends**  
**Edited by Dr. Tom Graves**  
**Photo by Russell Sumner**

*The Board of Christian Education Adult Sub-Group wishes to thank all contributors of devotional writings. Your personal stories and touch give this booklet greater meaning. Special thanks to Dr. Tom Graves for his selection of scripture passages for each day and gracious willingness to edit. Wishing you a blessed Advent and Christmastide.*

## Jeremiah 33:14-16 | November 28, 2021

### *Wait and Hope*

by Dan Bagby

*Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NEB): “Wait, says the Lord, the days are coming when I will bestow on Israel and Judah all the blessings I have promised them. In those days, at that time, I will make a righteous Branch of David spring up; he shall maintain law and justice in the land. In those days Judah shall be kept safe and Jerusalem shall live undisturbed; and this shall be her name: The Lord is our Righteousness.”*

Don't we all have mixed reactions to hearing certain words, based on our emotional history with them? What is your response to hearing “wait?” Do you have expectations attached to the word “promise?”

Though this specific section of Scripture, a repeat of chapter 23:5-6, was probably not originally in this Jeremiah manuscript, it emerged as a repeated source of expectation and hope for Israelites during their years of slavery and absence from the “promised land.” Who wants to hear “wait” while a prisoner in a dark environment, missing their dreams and plans? Who wants to hear a promise made again—from the same source that made promises before—which had not yet come to pass?

Learning to wait is not easy—and can only be nourished by hope. As we move to another Advent season, it's not easy to “wait with hope”—with so much suspicion and deceit in the air: Can we hope for good—when several who lead us espouse injustice and self-service? Judah and Jerusalem had to refocus while in a dark place, and believe again—as they heard God's promise that life and joy would improve. They were asked to believe that God's presence would erase the bad and the ugly in their lives.

The prophet had asserted earlier that God is as faithful in the darkness as in the light. A hope in our own spiritual journey is that faith again may develop best in the darkness—where more trust in the unseen is required.

So often we confuse faith with provable certainty. If belief is provable certainty, it requires no faith, for it is verifiable by observation and tangible evidence. Waiting in faith is an exercise in walking through the dark—into an expected light. Israel was asked to believe in what it could not see, while waiting in the dark.

So we today are also challenged to believe in a dawn that will diminish injustice, dispel disturbance, and give birth to peace. Can justice still be born when we are often still brother to wrong and prejudice? Can peace preside over disturbance, in a time when even our leaders bless violence, hatred, and disharmony? Can love be birthed over fear, suspicion, and deliberate falsehood?

Only if a Branch of the Original Purpose can quietly sprout and grow in the dark places where we live, and show us the path to hope.

Just you wait. It's going to get better. Do you believe it? The prophet did—during pretty dark days.

Psalm 90:1-2, 14-17 | November 29, 2021

*Who Created God?*  
by Mike Clingenpeel

Not long ago a theological conversation broke out between my five-year-old grandson and me. For a change I was trying to play the role of serious, not silly, Pops, so to each object he named I affirmed that “God created that.” Finally, he posed the ultimate question: “Then who created God?” I had painted myself into a philosophical corner and mumbled something about the mystery and preexistence of the Creator.

Two, maybe three thousand years have passed since the Psalmist announced this mystery as an affirmation of faith: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God (v. 2).”

Now, as then, this should be heard as a source of hope and strength. “Refuge in such a God is not retreat to a makeshift shelter, but habitation in an eternal dwelling place,” wrote Eugene Peterson (*Praying with the Psalms: A Year of Daily Prayers and Reflections on the Words of David*). John said it in fewer words: “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1)

Undergirded by their confidence in the eternity of God, the Psalmist and his people poured out a series of petitions:

- “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (v. 12)
- “Have compassion on your servants” (v. 13)
- “Satisfy us...with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice” (v. 14)
- “Make us glad” (v. 15)
- “Let your work be manifest to your servants” (v. 16)
- “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us” (v. 17)
- “Prosper the work of our hands” (v. 17)

You and I are finite beings in a transitory world, as the long months of pandemic have reminded us. In this season of Advent, and in every season of life, we also reaffirm that God is an eternal refuge, ever open to our prayers, whatever they may be.

**Prayer:** O God, early in the morning I cry to you. Help me to pray and to concentrate my thoughts on you. I cannot do this alone. In me there is darkness, but with you there is light. I am lonely, but you do not leave me. I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help. I am restless, but with you there is peace. In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience. I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me. Restore me to liberty, and enable me so to live now that I may answer before you and before me. Lord, whatever this day may bring, your name be praised. Amen.

(A prayer by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian)

## II Samuel 7:18-29 | November 30, 2021

*Nevertheless*

by Lacey Wondree

I was frequently told that I would know what unconditional love was once I had children. And then I had children. When I held my firstborn and then later my twins, I felt a new kind of love swell up. It was a protective and deep connection. It was something unexplainable. But as much as I love my children, my love for them does not always feel unconditional. There are times when my love for them feels contingent on them sleeping or listening or a slew of things. It is not that I don't love them in those moments, but it feels a lot like "if you would just go to sleep, then we would all be happier right now."

Upon first reading, this passage in 2 Samuel does not seem like an Advent passage. My first memory of this passage is my encounter with it during my Old Testament class in seminary. I took the class with Dr. Tony Cartledge, who happens to be the scholar who wrote the *Smyth and Helwys* commentary on 1-2 Samuel. I glossed over the passage in our preparatory readings, thinking very little of the passage's impact. I quickly was taught otherwise.

We note that David's prayer in this passage moves from humble deference to glad doxology to persistent demand. David wants God to uphold his promise that the house of David is to be blessed forever. According to Dr. Cartledge, this chapter and this text are the foundation of the theological bridge from law to grace. God's faithful relationship with Israel was conditional and dependent on Israel's obedience, which like my toddler, was unpredictable. Being obedient led to blessings. Being rebellious led to an absent God. The relationship between God and his people turned on the word *if*. In this covenant with David, God made a promise that was not dependent on David's obedience or the obedience of his children. Instead, it is an unconditional promise of undeserved grace. The relationship between God and future generations will transition from an *if* to *nevertheless*. God's love, through the grace and gift of Christ, will become unconditional love.

To this end, our relationship with Christ is not conditional, and there's no greater hope than knowing this truth. Christ will love us no matter what. During this Advent and Christmas season, we are reminded of how Christ stepped into a conditional world and offered the unconditional.

In a world with conditional hope, Christ offers it unconditionally.  
In a world with conditional peace, Christ offers it unconditionally.  
In a world with conditional joy, Christ offers it unconditionally.  
In a world with conditional love, Christ offers it unconditionally.

There is no more *if*. Nevertheless, there will be hope, peace, joy, and love.

**Prayer:** God of the unconditional, may we graciously accept the hope, peace, joy, and love that you offer us this season and always. We are ready to receive these gifts and to share them with the world. Amen.

*Handel's Messiah*

by Roy Terry

Handel's *Messiah* is among the most widely beloved of all sacred choral works. German born in 1685, Handel moved to England as an adult, where he became known as a composer of Italian operas. The sacred *Messiah* marked a significant change of direction in his compositional work. Handel's masterwork premiered in Dublin to accolades in 1742, followed by a first London performance in 1743. Legend has it that King George II was so moved by the music that he rose from his seat to stand during the 'Hallelujah' chorus, inspiring us to still do so today. Historians now question whether George II even attended that initial London performance. In this instance, I prefer not to spoil a good legend. Please continue to rise and stand!

Handel composed *Messiah* in three parts. Only Part I addresses the birth of Jesus. Part II, which actually includes the 'Hallelujah' chorus, addresses his death. Part III addresses his Resurrection. The River Road Chancel Choir has the cherished tradition of performing Part I of the *Messiah*, together with the 'Hallelujah' chorus, every other December. Those performances are accompanied by orchestral players in addition to our pipe organ. Bob Gallagher has taken to directing us from the chancel's center while also playing the harpsicord. Christmas decorations always adorn the sanctuary. People come from within and beyond the church to fill the house. It is a magical time for everyone involved that, like so much else in our lives, has been interrupted by the Covid pandemic in 2020, and again now in 2021. Watch out for next year.

Even though River Road's sanctuary will not resonate with our traditional *Messiah* performance this December, many recordings exist which still permit us all to revel in Handel's masterpiece. My favorite recording of *Messiah* is by the London Symphony and Chorus, conducted by Sir Colin Davis. We own versions in both vinyl and CD. They will soon be heard in our house.

Following *Messiah's* famous overture, a tenor soloist (of course) steps forward to sing the opening lines. Today at River Road Church, we can envision the superb Chris Ahart stepping forward. The text which he then sings comes directly from the King James version of today's Advent scripture—Isaiah 40:1-5. The singer initially offers us comfort. A voice next cries in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill laid low. Is Isaiah prophesying about John the Baptist? And in what form will the Lord appear? He will not come in the manner expected. A little later in Part I of *Messiah*, Handel makes clear that the Lord arrives in the form of the Christ child—for unto us a child is born. Amen.

December 2, 2021 | Isaiah 40:6-11

*Behold Your God!*

by Jane Terry

*Isaiah 40:6-11 (KJV): "O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain;*

*O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up be not afraid; Say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!*

*Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold his reward is with him, and his work before him.*

*He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom and shall gently lead those that are with young."*

Yesterday, Roy's reflection was based on texts from Isaiah sung by the tenor soloist in Handel's *Messiah*. Today's reading includes texts for two arias in Part 1 of *Messiah*, both sung by the alto. (For those of you reading who do not know us, Roy is a tenor and I am an alto in the Chancel Choir, each of us advocating for our respective sections.)

When I hear the soloists during a performance of *Messiah*, I hear the voices of angels, voices of annunciation. They call out to us, teach us, encourage us, comfort us. Each time we have had the privilege of singing *Messiah* over the years (for me, beginning in high school!), I have found deeper meaning. Music, among so many other qualities, is contemplative meditation. There is always more to consider, learn and inspire (in the sense of the breath of spirit).

In today's scripture, we are urged to share Good News with strength and without fear. In the aria 'O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion,' Handel leads us and lifts us higher with each phrase, culminating with the message 'Behold your God!' As we have learned since childhood that God is Love, then can we not also use our voices to proclaim with strength 'Behold Love!'?

This Isaiah passage continues to the text of one of the most familiar arias from *Messiah*, 'He Shall Feed His Flock.' Here we are offered the comfort that the Shepherd will gather us to Him and gently lead us.

In our daily lives, in addition to our many gifts and blessings, we also encounter so much noise, so much that would deplete us. During Advent, we have an opportunity to step back from the noise and focus our attention—and intention—on four words: hope, peace, joy and love.

May the beautiful music of the season (with the addition of Lessons and Carols this year) fill you and support you on that journey.

**Prayer:** Help us to feel your comfort, O Shepherd, and extend that comfort to others. May we lift our voices with strength in our world and say: Behold Your God. Behold Love. May we listen for your Word and allow you to gently lead us into greater hope, peace, joy and love during this season and in our lives to come. Amen.

*Finding Rest*

by Meg Rooney

I am tired. I am weary. It's that time of the year where college students are at a breaking point. Final projects, papers, and exams are on the horizon; it is almost the end of the semester. And yet, it isn't quite over. There seems to be so much more to do, and not enough time to do it. The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas feel like months, and all college students want is rest. All college students want is to enjoy the holidays with friends and family instead of wishing for time to pass. Of course, college students are not alone in this feeling.

Often, many of us feel as if we are waiting for rest, renewal, and strength. We are counting down until the weekend, until the break, until the vacation. If we can only push through this hard part a little longer and a little harder, then we can get to the break we "deserve." Of course, this "well-deserved break" is only affirmed when weeks of exhaustion go before it. It reminds me a lot of the 80s song, "Working for the Weekend," by Loverboy. It is absolutely exhausting to live this way.

Now, I am not going to tell you that hope in God will automatically give you energy and renewal right when you ask for it. I am not saying that God hasn't satisfied your need for rest because you haven't asked for it. God is not a wish-granting factory. But God does understand you and what you need. God does not want you working for the weekend. God does not want you to work until you have nothing left. Instead, God wants you to open up the space for yourself to breathe and to let God enter in.

We have a God that is everlasting in energy, in understanding, and in revival. We have a God that will go to the ends of the earth to sustain and renew all of us, not just on the weekends or during winter break. We can find hope in a God who has already given us the grace and peace to rest in the moment we are living in right now. We just have to be brave enough to humbly receive that rest. There is nothing you must do to deserve that rest, either. It is waiting for you whenever you want it.

**Prayer:** God, thank you for being a God of peace, grace, and renewal. I pray that I may lean on you during times of stress and busyness. Remind me that I am not meant to walk this alone. Amen.



Luke 1:5-17 | December 4, 2021

*Expecting a Miracle*

by Dean Miller

Have you ever experienced something absolutely amazing in the midst of your everyday routine? Something happens and it just overwhelms you beyond words? There are times when we “expect” something big to happen and we are thrilled when it does. But when it happens so unexpectedly, we typically find ourselves at a loss for words and much less knowledge of how to respond. We can be so overwhelmed by the surprise that we don’t really believe it when it happens.

Such is the case for Zechariah on this particular day. He was performing his official duties as the chosen priest and not expecting anything out of the ordinary. Not that he didn’t believe something could happen or hope that it might. But it was simply a normal process that he was following. We do this every single day.

Isn’t it fantastic when we are reminded of the wonder of life? When that “something” happens, and we just can’t believe it to be true. Oh, if every day were filled with such events. But wouldn’t it be much better if we didn’t need those reminders? What if, in our daily living, we expected these amazing things? Or what if we found the everyday, mundane routine to be amazing?

How might our outlook for each day change if we approached the day expecting the amazing rather than having it catch us by surprise? It doesn’t need to be earth-shattering news every day. But the small miracles of life, relationships, conversations, and yes, even staff meetings or regular doctor visits.

How would today have been different for you? What about tomorrow? Might I challenge you to keep a small list of the everyday, amazing experiences you encounter for just one week? And then evaluate if maybe, just maybe, a new outlook on life is possible.

**Prayer:** You encounter us every single day O God. Open our eyes to your wonder and amazement. We are grateful that you celebrate with us when those surprises come our way. Help us to expect the amazing things that happen to us each day. Guide us to not only live our lives expecting the miracles but also being that miracle for those around us.

**John 1:1-18 | December 5, 2021**

*The True Light*

by Raj Chatterjea

Being invited to write a devotional is a gift! What a perfect way to prepare for Advent (and my new Deaconship)! Thank you.

When asked to select a scripture reading from the suggested list, I closed my eyes and picked one from about the middle of the list! I often do this because I believe ALL of scripture is worthy of reflection, has a habit of working its wonder into one's faith journey and, not surprisingly, often answers the big questions of the moment.

How do I prepare for Advent during a pandemic and how do I prepare for my new Deaconship in a post-pandemic world? I love it that John talks about LIGHT in the second paragraph, "... the true LIGHT which enlightens everyone, was coming into this world..." (John 1:9). I also love that John talks about WORD and FLESH in the last paragraph, "...and the WORD became FLESH and lived among us..." (John 1:14).

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, the pandemic darkness is an opportunity. An opportunity for us to be true Christians by actually living a Christian life in the FLESH (i.e., one of action) and not just in WORDS and, as a result, LIGHTING up our community.

Perhaps the post-pandemic world is also the right time to begin my Deaconship? After all, such a world needs more, rather than less, church.

I am also reminded that my favorite theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, loved Advent and often preached sermons of waiting and hope, as a metaphor for the entire Christian life. During the Advent of 1942, a few years before he was executed for his opposition to Hitler, he wrote to his students, "...the joy of God goes through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable..." We should all strive to live in the poverty of our OWN mangers and feel the agony of our OWN crosses, if we are to live a truly Christian life.

And again in 1945, the year he was executed, while comforting fellow prisoners, he wrote that Advent reminds us, "...the celebration of Advent is possible only to those troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect and who look forward to something greater to come."

We should all be mindful that humility comes BEFORE we embark on a Christian life because only then can we authentically celebrate the coming of Christ.

Amen.

**Psalm 126 | December 6, 2021**

*Finding Joy in Difficult Times*

by Elizabeth Thorne

Christmas is coming! For me, it is the most exciting part of the year. I have always loved Advent. It meant a time of joy, laughter, thanksgiving, and family. Decorating the tree, singing carols, and lighting candles have, for as long as I can remember, been things I look forward to all year.

The past two years, however, things are different. Last year, we were immersed in COVID and the isolation that came along with it. Now, I find myself in a very cold city ten hours away from my family and Advent has been feeling a little (okay, a lot) lonelier this year. It has been hard for me to find the joy of Christmas when I feel so separate from all the festivities. It seems that a lot of the excitement has vanished for me in the past couple of years.

In our passage today, pilgrims are singing a song about God's works in the past, and the works that they know he will do in the future. It is a psalm about looking both behind in the past and ahead to the future.

These last couple of months, I have felt more like those pilgrims than I ever have in my life. I have felt more alone than I ever have. And somehow, I don't think I'm alone in feeling that way. So, this Advent season, let's look at what the pilgrims did in Psalm 126. They remembered, as we remember, the love that God has for us and has always had for us. They also look ahead to what's coming, which we can also do. Because after all, Christmas is coming. This means that love is coming, hope is coming, and joy is coming. And this year, more than ever, I am ready for that joy.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, help us to remember your good works and all that you have done for us. It can be incredibly easy to forget all the good when we feel lonely and isolated. But help us to remember. Help us to hold onto the hope that you give us and to remember what this time of year brings. We want to find joy in Advent and Christmas, but sometimes holiday anxieties get in the way. Show us what it means to love the way that you love us, and to find you even in desperate circumstances. Amen.

Isaiah 11:1-9 | December 7, 2021

*Wondrous Images*

by Nancy Brown

A wondrous vision of images exists in Isaiah 11:1-9. Picture first a shoot in a stump from which has sprouted a branch from roots representing the genealogy from Jesse, King David's father, to a descendant blessed by the spirit of God. This being will manifest wisdom and have compassion for the poor and meek. He will use powerful words to impact the wicked and wear righteousness as his belt and faithfulness around his loins. Isaiah offers expectation of a worthy leader to what is left of this stump of Judah after the Assyrian assault that spared only Jerusalem. We, however, see a description of Jesus in Isaiah's words.

Images of a "new" world order with righteous reign follow in verses 6-9: the wolf living with the lamb; the leopard next to the kid; the calf and lion together with children and other creatures. The striking line of this idealized scene is "A little child shall lead them" which metaphorically may reflect the hope given at that glorious moment in Bethlehem.

These verses in Isaiah 11 remind me of a scene in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Atticus Finch, a principled father and lawyer, sits unarmed in front of a jail at night risking his life to protect the innocent but imprisoned Tom Robinson. Atticus is "the best shot in town" but seeks to use his wisdom, compassion, and powerful words to fight the wickedness he suspects is near. A wild pack of prejudiced men do arrive expecting to take the law into their own "claws," but suddenly his worried son, daughter Scout, and their friend appear. They are resolute and refuse to go home with one man "growling" that he can make them leave. This is clearly not the benign scene depicted in Isaiah 11:6-9, but something miraculously does occur.

Eight-year-old Scout suddenly recognizes one of the men and calls out, "Hey, Mr. Cunningham." Undaunted, she begins chattering on and on and mentions his son whom she calls "a nice boy." Cunningham eventually squats down and speaks kindly to her before "waving a big paw" and telling the mob "to clear out." "A little child" has temporarily quelled but not fully domesticated this crowd as the novel's poignant yet remarkable ending reveals.

Isaiah's images of a stump sprouting a descendant with the spirit of God and a world where wild and gentle animals coexist with children connected to a scene in *To Kill A Mockingbird* may not be traditional ones related to Christmas, but the words of Isaiah and Harper Lee, many centuries apart, give us hope. If the life of the Christ child as He grew "in wisdom and in stature" were exemplified by more of humanity, "on Earth peace, goodwill to men" could better emerge. Idealism and our faith offer standards we must never abandon in this quest for a righteous world.

**Prayer:** Lord, keep our hearts open to ways that help ensure safety, hope, justice, and love for those in need. Amen

*Three Transformations*

by Martha Lou Green

In the Bible reading from Isaiah today, we hear of three things that experience amazing transformations—‘wow!’ There are three kinds of changes, transformations that show that God is at work. This is what God does.

**Land** that had dried up becomes fertile and fruitful again. Flowers bloom and flowers mean fruit! In wise farming we must use restraint in taking from the earth and care in all our ways of living so the earth may be honored and our bodies kept healthy. Where dry deserts have crept over the land because of overuse or pollution, we hope for rest and restoring of the land.

**People** whose bodies were weak, feeble, or disabled become strong and full of life; and emotions that were worn thin and fearful become courageous again. When God comes to us to save us, he brings healing in his wings and he gives us his Holy Spirit to awaken us spiritually. He gives us eyes to see, ears to hear, and strengthens us to walk in his ways. But at that point, having been healed and awakened, we must get on board with God and travel in his way. Listen to the Messiah alto recitative for this sentiment. None of our bodies are super-powered. We are all human and we need each other. Help us to be aware and attentive to the ways we need assistance and advocacy and to the ways that each of us is a gift to others. May our community be a place of welcome, safety, participation and inclusion for everyone.

**Water** flows again abundantly where it is needed. All kinds of good things happen when there is plenty of fresh water, the life-giving Spirit of God. We know how important water is to us. We hear in your stories that water is often a symbol for you, God. You are essential for our life, just as is water. May we always know our need and thirst for you.

**Prayer:** Loving Creator God, you have filled the earth with amazing living things. We know we are dependent on the earth and its abundance for our life and nourishment. We pray for those whose lands have been overrun with hardship, where enough food cannot be found, especially because of injustice, war, or exploitation. May the transforming way of your kingdom come. We thank you for our lives and bodies. We pray especially now though, for those we know whose bodies are suffering, sick or struggling with pain. May your comfort and healing be close to them. We pray for the waters of our land, that they would be kept healthy and safe in your justice for all. We pray that we would be mindful of the resources of water for us and for others. Remind us of the basic need that unites all people through water and the basic justice that this requires of us all. Keep us safe and healthy. Amen.

Isaiah 12:2-6 | December 9, 2021

*Sing Praises to the Lord*

by Rose Browning

My father loved music, especially songs from his past-favorite gospel hymns sung in his church as a youth and songs from the 1940's, particularly WWII. He was thrilled when I learned to play the piano well enough for us to have informal sing-alongs with his favorites.

While I probably have a broader love of musical genres than my dad, like him, I too love the music of my past, which brings me to Christmas, and particularly Advent. Advent is absolutely my favorite season in the church calendar. I love the sense of expectancy and wonder it brings. I love the contemplative preparation it inspires and the opportunity it brings to quiet my mind and focus my thoughts on the coming of the Christ child. The church of my childhood wasn't known for changing things up much, so the choir sang the exact same call to worship during Advent every Sunday, every year. I think the words of this haunting ancient hymn capture so beautifully the spirit of preparation called for during this season:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, / And with fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing earthly-minded, / For with blessing in his hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth, / Our full homage to demand.

Every year, every first Sunday of Advent, we sang "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" in my church. This verse is a reminder to joyfully await the coming of Christ:

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high, / And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, / And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel / Shall come to thee, O Israel.

I chose to write the devotional for today because I love the sense of joy found in the scripture passage from Isaiah: "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth." (v. 5) Like Isaiah's Jewish audience, we are reminded to joyfully place our hope and faith in God, our creator and sustainer. I love the reminder that God is in control, that when I put my trust in God's strength, I don't need to be afraid.

As Christians we expectantly await God's heavenly kingdom, but we also are reminded in scripture that God's kingdom is now. As I ponder *spirit-minded* things, I think about the love God has shown us in Jesus, sent to exemplify a life of acceptance, compassion and service to all people.

May this song from our childhood be our prayer:

Be near us, Lord Jesus, we ask thee to stay  
Close by us forever, and love us we pray.  
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care  
And fit us for heaven [and Earth]  
To live with thee there.

## Amos 9:9-15 | December 10, 2021

### *Finally, A Word of Hope*

by Tom Graves

The prophet Amos appeared about 760 BC in the northern kingdom of Israel, a proud and prosperous nation whose peace and prosperity were seen as a sign of God's blessing and approval. However, Israel's religion focused on lavish worship with little thought of contrition and little emphasis on moral responsibility.

The ministry of Amos was brief, but his message had an unmistakable emphasis on harsh judgment. Amos pictured himself as compelled by God to speak a divine word to an unrepentant nation: "Since a lion has roared, who will not be afraid." The message of Amos speaks of the sovereignty of God and the special relationship God has with the people of Israel. God's love for Israel is at the center of his thought, yet God's judgment is certain because Israel broke the divine covenant repeatedly. Because of that God will destroy the nation.

Amos prophesies that Israel will be banished from the land because they disregard justice and righteousness in three fundamental ways. First, the rulers are corrupt refusing to act with justice. Second, the wealthy live in extreme luxury while the needs of the poor are ignored. Third, worship is focused on satisfying people rather than worshipping God. Amos preaches: "You only have I known of all the peoples of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities."

In verse ten the people say to themselves, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us." Amos refutes their smug self-righteousness by prophesying destruction: "All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword." God's judgment is pictured as grain being poured through a metal sieve separating the debris from the good grain. For Amos there will be no escape from judgment. Verse 11 proclaims the fall of Jerusalem, David's city, and the destruction of the temple, which actually occurred 200 years later. Amos paints a frightening picture of Israel's future.

Finally, in Amos 9:11-15 we hear a word of hope. Apart from these last verses there is no optimistic prophecy to be found coming from the mouth of Amos. In sharp contrast to the gloomy depiction of judgment elsewhere in Amos, the prophet proclaims in these verses a time of restoration, rebuilding, and joy. "On that day... I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit... I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up."

Joy amid judgment and sorrow. The final word for Amos is not destruction but salvation, not fear but hope, not death but life. That is also the message of Advent: God's promised hope is fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

**Prayer:** Dear God, forgive us of our sins and lead us to a world of hope as we seek justice and commit ourselves to the humble service of others.

Luke 1:57-66 | December 11, 2021

*The Birth of John the Baptist*

by Karen Collier

It's a big decision, choosing a name for a child, isn't it? As friends and family come to celebrate the blessing of the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah, they assume he will be named for his father. Why else would those present for the dedication feel themselves authorized to say what he will be named? Is it because they know Zechariah to be mute, and given the practices and traditions followed in the priest's home, they assume they know what he would say?

We are told those present are astonished when the child's mother objects, calling out, "No! He is to be called John!" When they finally ask the child's father, Zechariah requests a tablet and writes, "His name is John," as was told to him by the angel Gabriel. When he does so, his ability to speak is restored and he praises God. Those who witness this are amazed, as Zechariah has been unable to speak for months. It wasn't long before this story was being shared throughout Judea.

I can't help but empathize with Zechariah. Luke tells us he was a good and upright man, a priest who observed all the commandments and regulations. Yet when the angel appears to him with the good news that he and his wife would have a child and who that child would be, he asks, "How can this be?" He was old as was his wife. They prayed for a child for years, but now? Gabriel tells him he will not be able to speak "until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

In his book *Luke for Everyone*, theologian N.T. Wright tells us "...we shouldn't miss the contrast between muddled, puzzled Zechariah...and the obedient humility of Mary... She too questions Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for information, not proof. Rather, faced with the chance to be the mother of the Messiah, though not yet aware of what this will involve, she says the words which have rung down the years as a model of the human response to God's unexpected vocation: 'Here I am, the Lord's servant-girl; let it be as you have said.'

When Zechariah proclaims the child's name is John, the angel's words come true, and Zechariah uses his voice to prophesize concerning what was to come:

*"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins..."*

Freed from his months of silence and clear in his understanding, he speaks through the generations to share the truth of the angel's words. I expect we would all hope for such forgiveness.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, as we ready our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christ child, we ask your patience with our questions and your forgiveness for our doubts. We admit there are times your words fall on deaf ears and others when our silent tongues should speak out. Teach us to hear your voice through the noise of the world. Show us how to gather your people together and lead us to the manger. Amen.



*What Does Peace Look Like?*

by Beth Rooney

What does peace look like for you? Is it when your to-do list is finished? Is it when you are free from obligations? Or perhaps is it when you feel comforted after a difficult situation? Peace certainly feels that way in my own life sometimes. But peace is more than just our personal, daily comfort.

These verses are called the Benedictus, which is Zechariah's praise to God for God's salvation in the birth of the Messiah and in the birth of his own son, John the Baptist. His praise is more than thankfulness for the birth of John the Baptist. He sings of God's salvation moving through the community, transforming its very being in the world into an expansive safety net of freedom and comfort.

In Zechariah's song, salvation is a personal call to individuals as they are involved in the transformation of God's community. The call is to follow as God "guides our feet into the way of peace," making us vessels of "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (v. 79). This may challenge our understanding of God's salvation for our own lives. God calls us to salvation as we physically, politically, and economically show forth God's justice and love in our relationships with not only friends and family, but also with strangers, society, and the world. God grants us mercy and brings us glimpses of salvation as we pursue the justice that our world requires of us.

Could we all be called to sing songs of praise like Zechariah, once we follow the surprising signs of God's movement in our midst? The miracle here is that God never gives up sending salvation's signs because God never gives up on us. As we live in an ordinary flow of time and events, let us still be called to hear surprising songs of God's transforming work in our lives and in the world.

**Prayer:** God, help us to sing, shout, and whisper prophetically the ways of peace, justice, and love in our world. Grant us the courage to ask ourselves, "Are we still listening?" amidst the veil of personal comforts and convenience. Help us bring light to the darkness in a world that desperately needs it. Let us make way for the Prince of Peace to guide us in our own lives and in bringing love, justice, and peace in the world. Amen.

*The Perfect Gift*  
by Scott Leake

For years my Sunday School class, the Life Class, has reveled in a Christmas party tradition. After the covered dish dinner, the white elephant or Yankee swap begins. We each in turn open a wrapped item of our choice from under the tree, not knowing who brought it much less what's inside. Depending on the luck of the draw, each party goer may swap his "gift" for one already opened or hold on to what he has in hopes no one takes it away. What does that have to do with Zephaniah, you ask? Read on, my friend.

If the best gifts come in small packages, the so-called Minor Prophets must be a rich treasure trove. We call them "minor" because they are brief, not because their messages are insignificant. (Zephaniah barely runs three pages in my Bible.)

Skimming through the book can be confusing trying to figure out who is saying what. It's a dialogue bouncing back and forth between the prophet and the Lord. A few sentences from one then a few from the other is the pattern. Just imagine, we are listening in on a conversation between God and one of His chosen prophets about 2,600 years ago!

God begins by vowing to wipe out everything on earth. The prophet interrupts, telling his contemporaries to shut up and listen. God resumes with a less sweeping intention—to wipe out the ruling class, the merchants, and idolaters. Having heard the vow by God, Zephaniah describes to his listeners what the land will look like on the "Day of the Lord." It's not a pretty picture. Yahweh then interjects briefly to say this distress will come to all nations, but Zephaniah responds that the "humble" may escape. Back and forth the dialogue goes until we reach today's text. Just after God's judgment are God's words of love, mercy, and forgiveness. Zephaniah breaks out into an exhortation for the people to shout aloud, be glad, rejoice. God promises not only to forgive but restore, healing the lame, bringing the exiles home. Don't you just love happy endings?

However, this conclusion to Zephaniah's account is more than "happy." It's more than "merry" as in Merry Christmas. It is profound. God forgave Zion not because of what they did or said but for who and what He is. Let's see if we can draw from the message of Zephaniah three points for Advent.

1. Hope. Regardless of the hopeless situation they had to judge, the Old Testament prophets almost always closed their writings with words of hope. Zephaniah tells the people not to fear; God is in their midst (v. 16). Emmanuel, indeed.
2. Love. He will love us, not rebuke us (v. 17). Similarly, how will we respond to those who displease or offend us—rebuke or love?
3. Gifts. Underneath that tree at the Christmas party is a pile of gifts. Until they are opened we don't know what's inside. Whether they turn out to be a gag gift or a thoughtful present, they all bring happiness and a smile. Consider then what "the giver of every good and perfect gift" has for you and me. All we must do is open it.

## Philippians 1:3-II | December 14, 2021

### *Joy and Hope*

by Vivian Clingenpeel

When I looked at the passages available for writing an advent devotional, I found that these verses gave me a sense of joy and hope, so I eagerly signed up to spend time thinking about Paul's message and what it might mean for us during Advent in 2021.

Indeed, my feeling that this scripture might be particularly meaningful during COVID was borne out when I read that it is believed to have been written when Paul was under house arrest in Rome for two years. I can relate to that!

This letter is so full of thanksgiving and joy that one commentator stated that the whole message of the book is "I rejoice, ye rejoice also!" However, other commentators point out Paul's concern about conflicts in the Philippian church. Paul refers several times here to all the Philippians. He doesn't want to take sides. He prays that they will grow in love. If each one believes that Christ has already made them perfect, there will be conflict.

We are living in a difficult time where each of us believes that we have the truth and know the right way to proceed...if only everyone else would just listen to us! I have been pondering the advice of Thomas à Kempis: "Study always to be patient in bearing other men's defects, for you have many in yourself that others suffer from you, and if you cannot make yourself be as you would, how may you then look to have another regulated in all things to suit your will?...If all men were perfect, what would we then have to put up with in our neighbors, for God's sake?" (*The Imitation of Christ*).

Unfortunately, we have seen, this year in particular, the truth of Thomas Merton's words that "you cannot live for your own pleasure and your own convenience without inevitably hurting and injuring the feelings and the interest of practically everybody you meet. But, as a matter of fact, in the natural order no matter what ideals may be theoretically possible, most people more or less live for themselves and for their own interests and therefore they are constantly interfering with one another's aim, and hurting one another and injuring one another, whether they mean it or not" (*Seven Storey Mountain*).

What to do? We can pray as Paul did: "I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy" (1:3, TEV). And also pray for ourselves that "our love will keep on growing more and more, together with true knowledge and perfect judgment" (1:9, TEV). Thus our "lives will be filled with the truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce" (1:11, TEV).

**Prayer:** Hallowed be Thy name, not mine.

Thy kingdom come, not mine.

Thy will be done, not mine.

Give us peace with Thee, Peace with men, Peace with ourselves

And free us from all fear.

(A prayer by Dag Hammarskjöld)

Philippians 4:4-7 | December 15, 2021

*Rejoice in the Lord Always*

by Bette Schwall

We continue our Advent journey focusing on four verses from the book of Philippians. These are words Paul wrote to his Christian friends. Paul, himself, was in prison at this time. However, he was writing words of encouragement to his friends. We, too, can take encouragement from these words. They tell us to be joyous. They are telling us not to worry. They are telling us to be gentle with others. These verses promise peace in our hearts.

Sometimes it is not easy to be joyous. Sometimes the cares of life seem overwhelming. Elisha Huffman, who lived from 1839 until well into the 1900's obviously found help and wrote these words for a hymn:

“I must tell Jesus all of my trials;  
I cannot bear these burdens alone.  
In my distress He kindly will help me;  
He ever loves and cares for his own.”

The Lord is near Paul tells us. When we pray, give thanks and act with gentle kindness. A peace that passes understanding can be ours.

When my husband, Frank, graduated from the University of Richmond in 1958, his paternal grandmother gave him a gift. It was a book: *Hymnal and Liturgies of the Moravian Church*. In that book there is a hymn by Rev. Philip Doddridge that I feel speaks directly to our verses for today.

The following are some of the verses from that hymn:

“Hark, the glad sound!  
the Saviour comes,  
the Saviour promised long;  
let every heart prepare a throne,  
and every voice a song.

He comes, the broken heart to bind,  
the bleeding soul to cure;  
and with the riches of His grace,  
to bless the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,  
thy welcome, shall proclaim;  
and heaven's eternal arches ring  
with thy beloved name.”

**Prayer:** Please be with the people in our world who find it difficult to rejoice. Please help each of them, and ourselves, to experience the promised peace that passes all understanding through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

## Jeremiah 31:31-34 | December 16, 2021

### *A New Covenant* by David Elliot

One recurring burden of adulthood is the need to enter into contracts. Mortgages, car loans, business agreements—all require each party to concur with the terms of the accord or covenant before attesting with a signature.

Conventional wisdom dictates that the best contracts require compromise, that the goal is a “win-win” scenario where both sides come halfway during negotiations to achieve the important objectives they desire. This usually requires that each side must also sacrifice something substantial as well.

As an army career couple, my wife and I moved ten times in our first thirty years of marriage. We are true veterans of the home-buying contract. Through tough experience, we know when to agree to requests to get a new roof, leave behind our daughter’s favorite outdoor playset, or compromise on a down payment. We also know when to hold firm, such as when a potential buyer wants us to repaint the entire interior in fluorescent turquoise.

Today’s scripture passage, from the 31st chapter of Jeremiah, also describes a contract—the new covenant that he prophesies God will make between himself and his people, stating, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts... I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” This is the same New Covenant referred to by Jesus during the Last Supper in the Gospel of Luke: “In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

However, the difference in this contract is that God doesn’t expect us to come halfway to meet Him; He meets us ALL the way where we reside. He lets us become the clear “winners,” achieving unmerited forgiveness and eternal life. God makes all the sacrifice. In the form of Jesus Christ, God undergoes crucifixion on the cross. Our only requirement in the contract is to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior. Jesus acts as mediator of this covenant, justifying us to the Father through our faith in him, granting the Father’s grace for forgiveness and salvation, sealing the deal with his blood.

**Prayer:** Dear Father, during this Advent season we give you thanks for the arrival of your son, the Great Mediator Jesus Christ, who through your new covenant reconciles us to you by his sacrifice on the cross. We thank you for this supreme act of love that daily bridges the divide created by our own sinful natures. Knowing we are helpless before you, we rely on your grace for our salvation, and dedicate our time and talents in testament of our faith and as gratitude for your love for us.

Psalm 25:1-10 | December 17, 2021

*David's Prayer*

by Bert Browning

This very personal prayer is attributed to David, who seems to be the rock star of Hebrew song writing. In its passionate lyrics David opens his heart and soul to God and, consequently, to those who read his hymn of petition. Throughout the centuries since this Psalm was composed, readers have found in its words themes that resonate with their own thoughts and concerns. Once again in this Advent season, Psalmist David articulates for you and me what we, too, seek from God.

*“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul...”* Where else would we turn? We may experiment with other sources or solutions, but inevitably we turn back to our Creator, our Lord and our Savior.

*“Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths...”* The guidance many of us resist—or even reject—from time to time in our lives proves to be what we have needed all along, much as we may not want to admit it.

*“Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love...”* Who but God can offer us forgiveness and restoration? What other comforter can assure us that we may find a secure relationship with the divine?

*“Good and upright is the Lord...”* Faith in God originates from the mercy God extends to us, and results in our confession of trust in the giver of life, hope and joy.

Advent is a time of expectant waiting for the arrival of the grace of God. What David longed for, prayed about, and wrote a psalm to put into words, was just such a coming of God into his life and into our world to intervene where we most need direction and strength.

For the Christian, the good news is that David's psalm finds the fulfillment of its longings in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. In Christ, God reveals our source, our purpose, our security, and our eternal destiny. Through the lens of history, we now look back on the words of David and in them hear not only his hope in God, but also our own hope in God. David's cry is our cry; David's yearnings are our yearnings. As God answered David's prayer in David's day, God answers our prayer in our own day.

Christ Jesus has come and now we seek and celebrate that coming once again. Come, Lord Jesus!

**Prayer:** O God, although we may lack the eloquence of your servant David, our earnest desire reflects what he has put into words for us: be our source, our leader, our savior, and our hope. In this Advent season, may we once again discover the wonder of your mercy and goodness. Amen.

*Sing to the Lord a New Song!*

by Emily Sumner

Sing to the Lord a new song!

What a refreshing call to action after a difficult almost-two years now for our society and world.

In verses 10-12 of this passage, everyone is called to worship God: “Let the cliff dwellers sing; from the top of the mountains let them shout” (v. 11). The next verses in the passage say that God will “go out like a soldier...over enemies he will prevail” (v. 13) and that God will “make the blind walk a road they don’t know,” and “make darkness before them into light and rough places into level ground” (v. 16).

I find this passage (and most of Isaiah) very comforting. But it’s interesting that the writer calls us to worship, and then explains what God will do. We are called to take action (worship and praise) based on faith, not necessarily in reaction to what God has already done or provided. In fact, God does not promise that the path forward will be comfortable or that we will see exactly what’s coming. A blind person being led down an unfamiliar path would likely be nervous, unsure of their footing, and must fully trust the person leading them. This passage does not assure us the ability to fully see what’s coming, or to navigate the path of life ourselves. Instead, the passage reassures us that if we have faith and trust in God, God will safely lead us and clear obstacles for us. In addition, towards the end of the passage, we are reminded not to worship idols: “Turned backwards, utterly shamed are those who trust in idols” (v. 17). How easy it is to focus our time, energy, and sometimes seemingly even worship on the “idols” of our age—including but not limited to busyness, productivity, pursuit of wealth for the sake of wealth, etc.

As we continue this Advent journey, and the journey into the new year, let us remember to worship and praise God for all that God has done, but also for all that God will do through us and for us, as we act in faith.

*Bethlehem*

by Bill Tuck

Micah's promise of a new ruler coming from the town of Bethlehem is a familiar theme to Christians in the Advent season. Bethlehem was the hometown of King David and was predicted to be the birthplace of the promised Messiah. The Wise Men even quoted Micah 5:2 in response to Herod's question about the location of the birthplace of the new king as Bethlehem. In this time of their captivity in Babylonia, these words offered reassurance to the captives that a son of David would arise to restore their kingdom and their return to Israel. These words came as a source of hope to a people in their time of distress. Christians see this reference as a prophecy of the birthplace of the Messiah, who would be a shepherd to lead his flock with the strength of the Lord. This passage draws on the image of David as a shepherd as it points to the Good Shepherd to come in Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we love to sing one of the favorite Christmas carols, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," by Phillips Brooks, as we anticipate the coming of Christmas. It resounds with the reminder of the birthplace of Jesus and its summons to celebrate the arrival of God's Son. We reflect how "silently" or obscurely the Promised One of God came into our world, born in a small village in a cattle stall not a palace or a home of wealth and fame. We long to hear the Christmas angels sing their great, glad tidings that invite the Lord Immanuel to come and abide with us in this joyous season. We long in a time of injustice, violence, wars, and sin to receive the Prince of Peace and let his Spirit reign in our hearts as we long for him to abide in us.

**Prayer:** O Loving God, we open our hearts to the wonder of the birth of Your Son. Help us to prepare room for His joyous presence and not to crowd Him out with distractions that focus only on merriment and gift giving. Cast out our sin and enter our hearts with forgiveness and love. Like a small child may the wonder and mystery of Christ's birth astound us. May the gift of His peace strengthen us to be peace makers and messengers of love for the Immanuel. May the wonder of Your love guide us in living out the message of the great glad tidings. Amen.



Psalm 80:1-3, 14-19 | December 20, 2021

*A Sorrowful Prayer*

by Emily Tuck

Psalm 80 begins by addressing God as the shepherd of Israel. It reminds us of our beloved Psalm 23 that affirms that the Lord is our shepherd. We are comfortable with this image of God as the caring shepherd who tends his flock.

At the writing of this Psalm, Israel had been through a difficult time in her history. This Psalm, often called a sorrowful prayer, offered urgent pleas to God to hear their prayers. Phrases like “give ear,” “shine forth,” “stir up,” and “restore us” tell us they had been through a time when they felt God was absent, inattentive. They were longing for restoration.

We, too, understand the pleas of a sorrowful prayer. In the years of a global pandemic, we have witnessed illness and death in a greater proportion than we ever imagined. The alienation and isolation needed for our protection and safety have rendered us at times hopelessly adrift and sometimes numb. We, too, long for restoration.

As we make our way through this Advent season, we look forward to reading again the birth narrative that reminds us of the shepherds who visited Jesus and the holy family in Bethlehem. How poignant that these caretakers of simple animals are featured in the birth of our Savior. But then it is the Savior himself who defines himself by saying, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” We recognize this image and are comforted by it. At last, we know the source of our restoration—the one whose birth we celebrate.

Advent gives us reason to pray with hope.

**Prayer:** Tender shepherd, help us each to keep our gaze on you and to follow as you lead us through all our life’s journeys.

*The Fullness of God*

by Judy Morris

The incarnation of God is beyond our complete understanding. Sometimes when we see a son or daughter who looks like a parent or grandparent, we might say he or she is the “spitting-image” of that one. If Paul were speaking colloquial American English, he might use this term familiar to us. Paul did say, “...God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” (Col. 1:19) What a powerful statement for us to ponder as we try to understand God and Jesus!

Jesus came as a baby who was born and raised in human love. When a newborn baby is born, the potential of that life swells in a feeling of “fullness” in family and friends who welcome that baby. Surely Mary and Joseph felt that fullness, as did his friends and followers. Jesus walked the earth teaching ways of loving and caring for all—the despised, the neglected, the rejected. How better to teach us than to show us as he lived the fullness of God.

God wishes us to love and care for each other. As we read of the people of the Old Testament trying to understand God and His expectations of them, we see many failing repeatedly to follow the ways God wished them to live. Despite God’s many attempts to speak to Noah’s people, saving them from the flood in the Ark, immediately afterwards they went back to their evil ways. The people just didn’t get it. They needed a Master Teacher who would walk and talk with them, showing them the way as one of them.

In past weeks of pandemic self-quarantining, we have felt the “loss of presence” of those we admire, those who inspire, those who encourage, those who show love and concern, those so good to be with and to have fun with. Presence matters. God understands that. The fullness of God and the ways He expects us to relate and care for each other came in Jesus. We are thankful for His life and the fullness of His Spirit ever present to guide us.

“The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus” (John 1:17). The way became real as Jesus lived it, as a human brother, friend, and teacher for us all, a presence who is with us, befriending us, forgiving us, encouraging us, guiding us, as we invite Him into our lives.

**Prayer:** Father, in times of emptiness, loneliness, uncertainty, and darkness, remind us of the light, the fullness you sent in Jesus. In the busyness of days with tasks that seem to be unending, give us an awareness of your presence that strengthens. Call us again and again to reach out to others in need of love and care, even as Jesus, in his humanity, showed us to do. In days of separation, remind us of your Spirit drawing us together. Lead us in all we do this day. Amen.

## Psalm 113 | December 22, 2021

### *Continuous Praise*

by Shawn Ryan

My great aunt, Sister Mary Michael Ryan, OSU, passed away in 1997 at one of her order's convents and schools in Wilmington, Delaware. My father and I took the road trip to the memorial service and burial together. This special father-son experience was punctuated by unique lodging—we were invited to stay in the guest apartment attached to the convent chapel and residence.

Arriving at our destination in the early afternoon, we passed through the dimly lit chapel on our way to the office to meet Mother Superior and be shown to our rooms. In the chapel that afternoon were several nuns, spaced throughout, kneeling in silent and individual prayer. I recalled this moment as I read Psalm 113, Verse 3, "From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised." Among the gifts our hosts shared with us that visit was a life dedicated to Christ and a devotion to continuous praise.

This memory led me to Google it—the Ursuline order she belonged to, which led to more memories and recollections and stories of my aunt's life. I learned anew about their willingness to pray for you, or me, or any or all of us. Their website has a form. I imagine the nuns being assigned a handful of petitions as they begin their daily shift in that continuous ritual. I recall their passion and belief and feel comfort.

I recalled my aunt's spiritual vocation, high school math teacher at the Ursuline Academy—in both Washington, DC and Delaware. I know she taught senators' children and scholarship students. I know, though she and all her sisters considered themselves to be married to Christ Jesus, through her teaching, prayer, and support for the needy she was the "joyous mother of [many] children."

I think of her life and the life of so many of the faithful as a living statement, "Praise the Lord!"

**Prayer:** LORD hear me sing your praises in my thoughts, words, and actions. LORD hear me sing your praises above all earthly things. Help me care for the poor and the needy in your name, help me include everyone at your banquet, help me fill the empty spaces in my heart and the heart of others. Amen.

*Magnificat*

by Ron Crawford

Illiterate commoners shouted, “Magnificat, Magnificat;” thus encouraging the priest to read aloud what we know as Luke 1:46-55, The Song of Mary. This text was a favorite of peasants in the Middle Ages. It was known as Magnificat to the masses because the first word of the passage in the Latin Bible was “Magnificat”—translated, “My soul magnifies.”

The poor and oppressed identified with this text for two reasons. First, the text spoke of an active God, “the Mighty One has done great things...” Key verbs in the poem speak to the work of God: scattered, brought down, lifted up, filled, sent, and helped. During the Middle Ages the poor, politically oppressed and hemmed-in by systemic social systems could not but wonder if God existed. Literally, they could not see where God was helping them. Magnificat helped them water the tiny seed of faith.

The second theme of the text focused sharply on the experience of the underprivileged: “looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,” “lifted up the lowly,” “filled the hungry.” Apparently, Mary belonged to the lowest social strata of her day. She knew poverty and its companion despair.

Today, we are separated from the historic context of the text by two thousand years and a significant level of disposable income. Even so, Magnificat reminds us that God is active even when we cannot outwardly see God’s work. Magnificat also reminds us that with the help of God we can rise above despair and hopelessness.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, we give thanks for the help you give us every day of our lives, even when we cannot see it. Help us face our challenges and disappointments believing that you are working through us making the world a better place. Amen.

## Philippians 2:5-11 | December 24, 2021

### *The Form of a Servant*

by Rob & Bettina Sandford

“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ...” (v. 5-7b).

Paul writes that we should seek to have the mind of Christ among ourselves. He says this is identified by humility, unselfishness, and obedience to the will of God. Paul is speaking about the need for unity and harmony in the divided Philippian fellowship, but we also need to hear these words today.

This passage of scripture disturbs us, because most of our time is not spent thinking about God and wondering how we can be of service to our neighbors. Our time is mostly spent thinking about our lives, our personal interests, and the problems of our day.

When Paul says, “Let this mind be in you,” he means that we can if we choose to, but how do we do this? Paul is talking about the inner changes which develop over a lifetime of obedience. This is not about a quick ticket punch to heaven. This is a way of living that is the opposite of the world’s values, and it requires a daily choice to obey His call.

The season of Advent gives an opportunity to reflect on whether we are living as though we have the mind of Christ. How can our living and our giving bless the poor, the hurting, the downtrodden? How can we become ambassadors of hope and grace? How can we move out of our comfort zone and help someone in need?

One Sunday years ago, I (Rob) asked our Training Union class what they would do if they saw a man and woman walking down the interstate. Would they stop and offer them a ride? No one said they would, so I told them this story:

That very afternoon, I was taking our older daughter back to the University of Richmond, and my car broke down several miles from Williamsburg. This was before the proliferation of cell phones, so we left the car and started walking. Before long, an older couple stopped and asked if we needed a ride. They agreed to take me to the Baptist Student Center at William & Mary where the campus minister, a colleague and friend, could take me back to Norfolk. Then, they would take our daughter to UR, since their route was through Richmond anyway. Our daughter called a few hours later, not only to say she had arrived safely, but that these wonderful people had treated her to dinner! Two people, who chose the mind of Christ, brought a moment of grace into our lives.

Luke 2:1-20 | December 25, 2021

*The Meaning of Christmas for Me*  
by Ed Pruden

Merry Christmas! The magic never fades!

This is my 71st Christmas. I have memories of the previous 69! My earliest Christmas memory is as a two-year-old, sitting in a little red rocking chair in my grandparents' home in Chase City, Virginia, eating the cheese sandwich I had asked Santa Claus to bring. Subsequent Christmases have occurred in many places: usually wherever home was at that time of life or in the home of a dear relative. The place hasn't been constant, and neither have been the people. Along the way I've lost grandparents, my brother, both parents, and other persons near and dear who were typically part of our celebration. And I've added new loved ones: my wife, our three children, two spouses, three grandchildren, extended family... Surely your experience is similar to mine.

Even so, the magic of Christmas abides across the generations regardless of place or family! It is the Hope that only Christmas can bring! The Hope for a world at peace, a world in which justice rolls down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream (Amos 5:24), in which hunger and poverty and strife are no more; a world in which all the people live in freedom, and care for each other and the earth. Such a vision seems impossible, naïve. The bubble bursts almost as soon as we pick up the daily paper. Even so, if we look closely for them, signs of The Kingdom can be seen! We are surrounded by Kingdom Moments when people behave in Christ-like ways! On our best days, even we create a Kingdom Moment or two!

My favorite description of a world at peace is found in Isaiah 11:6-9:

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

Only through Christ can such a world come to be!

Jesus is born in Bethlehem!

Merry Christmas!

# Merry Christmas, Church!



Photo by Warren F. Johnson



RIVER ROAD CHURCH  
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