

**ADVENT
2020**



An Advent Devotional

Rejoice, Rejoice
Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!
Merry Christmas, PCM+ Family!



DUKE PCM+
(+) means open to all
Presbyterian Church (USA),
United Church of Christ,
and you!



By Members and Friends of Duke Presbyterian Campus Ministry+

SPACE FOR NOTES/REFLECTION

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LUKE 2:1-20

Advent season is a time of waiting for the best news – the birth of Jesus. However, sometimes the best news leaves us terrified. Think about a time when something so great happened, you knew your life would be changed forever. You were probably scared of what that meant for the future, but you did it anyway. I think a moment like this is exactly what the shepherds experienced. They were just going about their normal, mundane routines of watching their sheep and suddenly they see an angel of the Lord. Imagine this blinding radiance of light paired with a booming voice telling these lowly shepherds that their life would never be the same because the Messiah, the Lord, has been born. Then this message is followed by a choir of angels singing about how great God is. Can you really blame them for being terrified? In that moment, they could have done anything: run away, hide, or just continued to tend to their flocks, but they didn't. They were terrified, but they went to see what had happened anyway.

When they arrived, they were met by Mary and Joseph – two new parents who just gave birth to the son of God in a stable. Now, they have this group of strange men coming to see their son. They must have been confused, scared, and overwhelmed. They could have turned them away and prevented them from seeing Jesus, but Mary invited these men into the stable and listened to their story anyway. In fact, she listened so intently that she pondered their words and treasured them in her heart. Because the shepherds had the courage to go despite their fears, and Mary invited them to witness the miracle that had just occurred, despite her reservations, they both left that night changed forever and praising God.

I challenge you this Advent season to do it anyway, despite your fears. Sometimes the best news leaves us terrified, but if we accept it anyway, I believe God's glory will shine through and leave us changed forever.

MARK 13:24-37

This year has been unique in so many respects. I would say it's not an uncommon sentiment that at times, it has felt like the bottom has collapsed out from under old rhythms. We have increasingly found new ways to divide ourselves, and at Duke, online, it felt like apathy and exhaustion were bigger players than the communal zeal for learning I felt last year.

For the first time I felt truly bare. Stripped from so much of what I loved, emotionally exhausted, constantly anxious. There were times when I felt like I was experiencing the great crash, and wondered if I was the foolish man who built his house on sand. What did it mean that I was so disenchanted by being online, or felt crushing loneliness without being able to see my friends? If my house was built on the rock, my worth based in God, shouldn't that not be happening? It's hard to remember, when I feel contrite and broken, that God accepts contrite and broken hearts. Feeling crushed or shaken doesn't mean I have failed to build my house on the rock, but if you've ever watched House Hunters, you'd know that building the home isn't the end of the road. Houses require maintenance and can always be improved. This year has helped me find the cracks in the plaster and uneven foundation and I find myself more firmly on the rock than ever before. Advent is a season for preparation and reflection. Reflecting on the year, we have faced the rain coming down, the stream rising, and the winds blowing and beating as an entire community, and individuals far more within that. Are you like me, has your house felt barely held together this year? Where do the cracks give you insight into building a better one? Take this season of wonder and joy to rest, at least for a moment. Spend at least a little time each day reminding yourself of the hope in Jesus' coming, and faith in the rock you're built on.

*Heavenly Father,
Help us take this season to delight in the coming of Christ. Remind us not to waste our concessions and vulnerabilities, but present them to you, unashamed. Lord, restore those who are grieving, ill, or despairing. Help us remember that Christ has come. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again.
Amen*

ISAIAH 64:1-9

Some scholars would suggest that this chapter takes place after some of the people of God had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. The people of God were back in their holy city, but life was still not perfect. Verse 5 resonates with that, “Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?” (64:5 ESV). The people of God had been in exile as a consequence for the kingdom of Judah’s disobedience to God. However, the passage perhaps probes deeper than just the sin that led to the exile. That question evokes a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness. The passage continues, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (64:6). The repetition of the word “all” and later the phrase “no one” sticks out to me. Being righteous seems unachievable. Earlier, the prophet had stated, “You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways” (64:5). There seems to be a disconnect between those two verses.

The *Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones addresses a similar disconnect in its retelling of when God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. “God knew [his children] couldn’t [keep his rules all the time]. And he wanted them to know it, too. Only one Person could keep all the rules. And many years later God would send him — to stand in their place and be perfect for them.” Like the Ten Commandments, this passage in Isaiah also recognizes humanity’s need for God.

The image from verse 8 reflects on the relationship between God and his people. “But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” It echoes the story from the beginning of Genesis where God created Adam from the dirt and Eve from Adam’s rib. That verse also looks forward to the New Testament. In the incarnation, God became a human, literally touching people and being a part of their lives, e.g., in John 9 when Jesus puts mud on a blind man’s eyes and heals him. And, after he ascended into heaven again, he sent his Holy Spirit to live in us.

In this season, we can remember that God created us and remains with us.

ISAIAH 9:2-7

I have always been drawn to passages that use imagery of light to describe God. Maybe that’s because I can never seem to put what I believe into words, and the sight of lit candles on Christmas Eve *feels* the closest to the image I don’t quite have in my head, or maybe it has something to do with contrast – light doesn’t exist alone, it exists alongside, and because of, the darkness. That dichotomy is comforting in the best of times, but I suspect for most of us, this is not the best of times.

This year more than ever, I feel as though we’re living in a land of deep darkness. There have been moments where it felt like there was nothing redeeming about the world we are living in – COVID raged, politics were as nasty as they could be, people lost jobs, homes, and loved ones. Even on this Christmas Eve there are reminders of the things we lost this year – families apart, masks, churches filled with light as “Silent Night” fills the air. Where was God in all that? Isaiah tells us that he was still there. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

Maybe this year we don’t have the candles lit at midnight in the sanctuary, but if we look, the light will still be there, in the stars of the night sky, in the comforting glow of a warm fire, or the glow of a computer screen as we videocall the people we can’t see in person. That’s part of the beauty of light, I think. In our darkest nights, it’s still there, and it is made all the more beautiful, all the more important, by that darkness.

This year might have been one of our darkest, but I challenge you all to remember to look for the light of God in all that you do this holiday season, and to see if the darkness helps you to better appreciate the light.

LUKE 1:26-38

For nothing will be impossible with God"--these are the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:37, proclaiming that she, despite being a virgin, would bear a son named Jesus Christ. Of Jesus Christ, this verse states, "He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob, and of his kingdom there will be no end. "

As we enter the Advent season and prepare for Christmas, it is important that we reflect on the meaning of Christ's birth in our faith, of the promise that the Angel made to Mary that through the Holy Spirit she would conceive a son even despite the seeming impossibility of such an event. It is of course important that we reflect on who Christ is, and what his life, death on the cross, and his resurrection means for us as people of faith, and what the work of atonement which his sacrifice accomplished for us means.

But of equal importance to this, as presented in this passage, is another central question: Do we genuinely trust that through God all things are possible? Perhaps, when we pray, we pray that God will guide us in the right direction, that the Holy Spirit will bring us comfort, but I think it is much rarer for us to pray for complete surrender to God, to truly entrust to God all our hopes, wants, and needs. I certainly know that in my life, trusting God has been a much easier thing to say than it has been to put into practice. Yet, when we look at the example of Mary, without her trust in God, and willingness to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to carry through in conceiving the son which was promised to her, our entire Christian faith and the salvation assured to us through Christ would not exist.

As we prepare for the celebration of the Birth of Our Lord, let us pray that the Holy Spirit would grant us a spirit to trust in God's promises, of his everlasting love, his mercy, his grace, and the pardon for sin which he provided through Jesus Christ, our eternal Messiah, our Prince of Peace. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19

Some years, Christmas feels weird. Unsettling, really. The promise of hope and the gift of a Savior are real and yet, it doesn't feel quite right to sing about silent nights on chaotic ones, about new life when you're grieving death, or about angelic announcements and stellar symbols when God seems farther away than ever.

I daresay, for some (if not many), this Christmas might be one of those years. Graciously, texts like today's show us that we aren't the first generation of Christians to be slow to joy. Psalm 80 calls us to come together in song, as communities have for millennia, complete with director, tune, and chorus. But this is a song that we in modernity tend to forget the rhythm of: lament. Restore us, God almighty. Make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

The authors and singers and shouters and whisperers of Psalm 80 prayed together holy music: They sang with anguish-stained cheeks and in the darkness of waiting. They sang in a land ravaged by societal schisms, physical illness, and emotional pain. They sang to a God who felt Not Here, yet they sang with faith that that God must somehow surely be listening. They sang in the hope of a promised Savior. They sang in a long advent.

Together, they sang words that we, too, can sing, articulating and insisting on a hope that we, too, can join ancestors and siblings across time and space in leaning on this long advent.

Restore us, God almighty. Make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

2 SAMUEL 7:18-22

Grace and Peace to you indeed! During this season of advent, the practice of “eagerly waiting” for the Christ child is far from abstract. Indeed, the Greek word for “revelation” in verse 7 is *apokalypsis*. Have we not waited for the apocalypse this year? From an endless quarantine to uprisings for justice to a tense election, I have spent the year waiting, anxiously and nervously, for the apocalypse.

But the revelation of Christ is not the end times as imagined in a YA dystopian novel — I am also waiting for the fruits of the kingdom. I am waiting to hug my friends again, I am waiting to worship together in fellowship, I am waiting for a peaceful transition of power, and I am waiting for a long overdue racial reckoning in this country.

But if this year has taught me anything, waiting is not a passive state. Even as we waited at home in quarantine, we organized mutual aid efforts to feed our neighbors and support our local businesses, because we know hunger does not wait. Even as a pandemic raged, we armed ourselves with masks and hand sanitizer and marched in the streets, because we know justice can not wait. Even in the face of historic voter suppression, we registered voters and ensured ballots were counted, because the will of the people will not wait.

During advent, as I wait metaphorically for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, my thoughts have turned to a favorite PCM hymn, the Canticle of the Turning:

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws nears
And the world is about to turn*

Though the revelation of Christ may feel like *apokalypsis*, though the fires of justice will burn hot, I find deep and abiding comfort in the promise that the world is about to turn.

*What are you waiting for right now? How are you waiting actively?
Where do you see the world about to turn?*

ROMANS 16:25-27

Romans has quickly become one of the most comforting books of the Bible to me. The descriptions of the Lord as such a steadfast and present God have really touched me in my life, and I believe this message is extremely evident in Romans 16:25-27. Often, I think we categorize Jesus into a time period of his life and death. However, this passage pushes back against this, declaring that Jesus and the message of Jesus have been present and active since the beginning of time and that they will persist forever. I don't know about you, but I get an extreme sense of solace from this knowing that I'll never be truly alone. Not only that, but I also feel extremely lucky receiving the opportunity to read this, knowing that I live in a time where I can study the word of the Lord. The passage goes on to announce that the message of Jesus was a “mystery hidden for long ages past, but [is] now revealed ... so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith.” With Jesus, we find a breaking down of barriers, no longer are we Jew or Gentile, instead we all belong to the family of God, under Jesus Christ our savior.

I'm often struck that despite all my flaws Jesus never gives up on me, how he declares that even those who hate him are his brothers and sisters. Jesus truly is the vehicle of my faith, the one who brings me to the Lord. I'm blessed to worship and know him always.

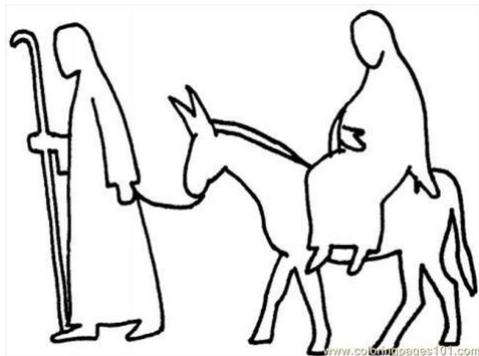
“To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen”

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16

These verses remind me of excerpts from a poem entitled *For an Exile* by John O'Donohue:

“When you dream, it is always home.
 You are there among your own,
 The rhythm of their voices rising like song
 Your blood would sing through any dark.
 Then you awake to find yourself listening
 To the sounds of traffic in another land.
 For a moment your whole body recoils
 At the strange emptiness of where you are.
 Now is the time to hold faithful
 To your dream, to understand
 That this is an interim time
 Full of awkward disconnection.
 Slowly, a new world will open for you.
 The eyes of your heart, refined
 By this desert time, will be free
 To see and celebrate the new life
 For which you sacrificed everything.”

Lord, help us to remember your sacrifice and keep the hope of that gift alive even when it is hard.



OLIVIA SMITH '21

ISAIAH 43:16-21

For me, reading the Bible is often a time of looking back. Reading the Psalms or the Histories or even the Gospels, I often lose myself in the world as it was two or three thousand years ago—drawing comfort from how God was there for Israel. But Isaiah 43 provides a helpful wake-up call. “Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old.” Too often when I read the Bible, my focus on how God *was* there *then* leads me to forget how God *is* here *now*: God’s working in the world becomes something mostly historical. But God is much more than that. Even now, as verses 16 and 17 remind us, God watches over us through the hard things, God makes us a path through even the greatest of storms. God’s work is never past: ever and always in our lives, God is bringing on new things that we have not seen or even thought of before.

The “new thing” that Isaiah was referring to in particular was probably the coming of Christ. Christ’s coming, too, can seem like one of the “things of old” nowadays—after all, it happened more than two thousand years ago. But I think that Advent reminds us that Christ’s coming is always a “new thing” to us. I think we all know what it is like to be in a “wilderness” or a “desert” in our lives; I think we all need a path, or a river, sometimes, and perhaps even all the time. Christ’s coming, which we anticipate every year during Advent and celebrate every year at Christmas, is that path and that river: a place, and a fact, to which we can turn for comfort and hope that comes in *our* lives, not just historically.

Isaiah closes this passage by reminding us that God has formed us for himself. That is something continually easy to forget in our lives, which are often filled with activities much less uplifting than showing forth God’s praise.

But the fact that we are made in the image of God is one of the great comforts that Christmas, God’s “new thing,” can remind us of. Christmas offers us all a time to remember that, despite the desert around us, God has planted a river in that desert for us, God’s beloved children.

DANNY CORDRAY '21

MATTHEW 3:3-12

My grandfather's favorite holiday was Christmas. Having grown up as an outgoing only child, he loved gathering his large family of four children and ten grandchildren together for good food and raucous caroling. We would gather around his organ, one of the many hobbies he picked up in retirement, and flip through well-worn copies of the Presbyterian hymnal, racing to find our favorite hymns before a sibling or cousin beat us to it. He died last Christmas Eve, hours after a carol-sing with my grandmother and aunt Kathy. In his memory I tried to think of a carol he would have liked that follows today's reading, 'A Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness,' Matthew 3:3-12, but none came to mind. After some quick research I found just one oldie goldie, "Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People." In hindsight, it shouldn't have surprised me. Who really wants to focus on John the Baptist's inflammatory rhetoric in a time of hopeful anticipation? "Therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hew down, and cast into the fire" (verse 10, KJV). Chipper stuff. Not the kind of Bible verse that you can easily set to music. Maybe that's okay though. Maybe Advent is not just about singing light-hearted Christmas carols around an organ but also about feeling the discomfort of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the hypocritical holy men John the Baptist denounced. Maybe it's not just about welcoming new life but also about remembering all the lives lost due to covid and natural disasters in 2020.

This Advent I will be excitedly awaiting celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, all the hope and love he represents, while mourning the loss of my grandfather and the fallen state of the world we live in. Everything is not alright now. Not everyone is singing a happy tune. But one day, we will be baptized not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire.

I challenge you all to find the space to grapple with the harder parts of the season and realize that they can and do exist with the bright parts we all love.

PSALM 89:1-4, 19-26

There are many times where it seems easier to just fall into the background and not share the love of God with others. Whether it is because of the people surrounding us, or the place we are in, sometimes our faith and love for God get put on the back burner.

In reality, it is always possible to share God's love because it is steadfast and forever. Anyone who is able to share this love through their life is strengthened, sustained, and protected by God. This does not mean that we have to tell every single person about God and His love in every situation in our lives, but rather, when we think someone should show His love, we can step up and be that person. He has given us all that we need, He will protect us from anyone against us, but we must take that small step.

Next time it seems impossible to share God's love in a situation, be it in a disagreement with a friend, a difficult time at work or school, or even events in society, I challenge you to think about these verses. Think about God's will for us to share His love for us and for everyone around us. Think about the ways he hopes we will live. Think about the ways you can show that love and hope with the current situation. And then act on it. Because that is all God ever wants, is for His love to be known.



December 19th

JOHN 3:16-17

I didn't know much about Christianity until a few years ago (thanks to PCM+!). Still, I knew this verse by heart. It was typed out on billboards, scribbled inside of "Thank You" cards, instilled into everyone I knew from a young age. Even though it was always visible, I never considered what it really meant until recently.

I cannot begin to imagine the adoration it would take to sacrifice a son. I can't imagine how much love God would have to feel, for the world and for us, to give up God's perfect son. It is radical, it is sublime, to know that someone died for you. It is even more glorious, even more awe-inspiring, to know that because Jesus atoned for our sins, we were given eternal life.

So often, I feel bogged down by the day-to-day tasks ahead of me. There are times in the semester that I can't even imagine life a week ahead. To be promised an eternal life is beyond comprehension. Everything in our earthly lives are temporary: our careers, our relationships, our plans, all eventually come to an end. It is terrifying to imagine how fragile we are without God's grace. A love with God is forever, unchanged by the tides, comforting through the storm. God's love will prevail forever regardless of circumstances. No matter who you are, or who I am, we will be united together by Christ's love and we will spend forever together rejoicing in God's glory.

Today, try to imagine the freedom that comes with letting go. Tense the muscles in your body beginning from your head going down to your toes and notice how each of them feels. Then, let yourself go limp, and enjoy your moment of calmness and stillness.

HANNA TAWASHA '23

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

December 5th

MALACHI 3:1-6

In some ways, this is a typical Old Testament prophecy to read during Advent. But Malachi 3 is also a warning. Messiah—God with us—is coming, Malachi tells us, and God is not going to be happy with us.

Indeed, different translations of verse 5 all contain at least one reference to a legal proceeding: God will bear "witness" (NRSV, KJV), God will "testify against" us (NIV), and God will put us "on trial" (NIV). Yikes.

So what are the charges? Here's where it gets interesting. According to Malachi, God's people have: (1) Committed adultery, (2) lied under oath, (3) defrauded laborers of their wages, (4) oppressed widows and orphans, and (5) mistreated immigrants. And God isn't happy.

For those of us who live in North Carolina, this verse should hit close to home. Approximately 150,000 migrant farmworkers live in North Carolina (NC Council of Churches, 2011). These workers, the majority of whom are immigrants, often live in isolated labor camps in rural parts of the state. They experience health problems, poverty, child labor, human trafficking, and wage theft at staggering rates. And, as we've seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, the agricultural supply chain is fragile: we all depend on these workers' exposure to the virus to put food on our tables.

I find the God-as-prosecutor implication of Malachi 3 distasteful. I don't believe in a God who is literally going to put anyone on trial. God is our advocate, our counselor, and our defender. Still, the message is important: God doesn't like when people take advantage of others, and we (humankind) had better knock it off ASAP.

We can start by reflecting on how our consumption—of food and other consumer goods—inadvertently exploits laborers, widows, orphans, and immigrants.

KATIE BECKER '17, PCM+ BOARD

Advent 2020

2 PETER 3:8-15a

“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” 2 Peter 3:8

The first sentence of this passage speaks a lot to what I and many others are feeling during this seemingly endless global pandemic. Sometimes, each monotonous day blends into the next, making the months between March and December go by in a blink, but also like an eternity. It can be so easy to slip into those thoughts that our situation is hopeless, that there will never come an end to this pandemic. But that’s where God’s timeline comes in. God’s promise and love stand for us across eternity, not just the year 2020. The next verses of the passage read, “the Lord is not slow to fulfill Their promise... the day of the Lord will come like a thief.” God is not absent in the suffering going on in the world now. While we may not understand God’s timeline, we can trust God is listening and present with us now.

As we enter another season of waiting for the birth of Jesus, I hope we can remember that God is alive and present with us, on the days that feel like one second, and the days that drag on forever.

**ISAIAH 35:1-10**

As I read Isaiah 35:1-10 and think about advent, I remember how strange it is that Christmas falls during the summer for everyone who lives in the southern hemisphere. In some ways, that is a much more apt time of year to celebrate the birth of Jesus. For, as Isaiah reminds us, plants and wilderness love and rejoice in God so it would be fitting were Jesus’ birth to coincide with great blossom and ample water. But instead, we in the northern hemisphere celebrate Christmas in winter—bereft of blossoms. While it is important to remember that God loves nature and nature loves God, I do also appreciate the peculiarity of celebrating Jesus’ birth in winter. In particular, it strikes me how Isaiah 35 presents the return of the ransomed to Zion as a communal undertaking—the path is a shared highway, not a personal untrodden path, and it is distinctly a “they” that comes to Zion, singing in joy.

We can’t safely have massive gatherings during COVID, but I think we can still blossom and watch others blossom as we rejoice in Christ with our families or other Christmas companions. When Christmas is in winter, we have to look elsewhere than the natural world for a sign of God’s coming, and I think one key site is in the joy of being with loved ones during the holiday season, walking together along the highway to December 25th, feeling the weather colden but the birth of our Lord only draw nearer and nearer.

This Advent let us all try and look for the blossoms and beauty in the world around us.

LUKE 1:46-56

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming,
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flow'ret bright,
Amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.*

“Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming” is an Advent hymn that focuses on Mary, comparing her to the rose praised in Song of Solomon 2:1: “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.”

I assumed that this famous hymn spoke of Christ as the rose that blooms forth from the line of Jesse. I didn't listen closely beyond the beautiful melody, but the first verse is about the mother of God. The lyrics act as a perfect accompaniment to the Scripture for today because in the hymn, we are introduced to Mary as a tender and delicate flower who blossoms during a cold night. In the passage from Luke, Mary reminds us that she is lowly and lacks power.

I often forget the fragility of the coming of Christ. Mary's mere existence was tenuous: she was a girl and held no social standing. As a rose who is struggling to survive the winter, Mary is certainly not the most stable or obvious vessel for the Son of God. And yet, she is seen and chosen by God to bring salvation. She is a “flow'ret bright,” who “magnifies the Lord.”

What an encouragement that God can move through even the most overlooked and fragile among us to bring about beauty and to overturn the powers of the world. If Mary can be blessed by God for all generations, so too can we exemplify the love of God in small ways that might be as delicate as a flower during winter.

God of all creation, we are grateful today that you use us, fragile human beings, to do your work in the world. Help us to join with you to bring about redemption as we go about our ordinary lives. May we bring your kingdom ever closer this Advent season. Through the Holy Spirit, Amen.

REV. LIBBY BOEHNE, CAMPUS MINISTER

ISAIAH 40:1-11

Verse 6 stands out to me: “A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’” (ESV). I am not sure what exactly is going on here; the book of Isaiah can be a bit vague. I interpret the “I” as being a prophet sent by God to the people of Israel. Perhaps the voice saying “Cry” is an angel or God, similar to the mysterious guests who visited Abraham and Sarah in the desert so many years before.

There are so many things that could have followed that question. God's people were in exile in Babylon, because they had turned away from God. The prophet had just delivered a message of comfort and the promise that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (40:5).

Anyway, the passage reads, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (40:6-8). The verses use the metaphors of flowers and grass. It reminds me of the community garden I started to volunteer in this summer during the pandemic. Overtime, the garden's appearance changed, as we pulled up certain plants. This passage implies that in a way I am like the okra plants which are here one week and gone the next. The prophet reminded the Israelites in exile and us today of our own finiteness in the grand scheme of things.

Those verses also hold hope, because “the word of God stands forever.” It echoes the words of the psalmist, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children...” (103:15-17). God's love lasts in the face of human beings' frailty and mortality.

In this time of Advent, we remember that Christ came once, and he will come again. We remember the story of God, and our story as God's people. That story reminds us that we do not save ourselves. But, God has come to us in Jesus, the Word, with grace and truth (John 1:1-17).

December 8th

PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13

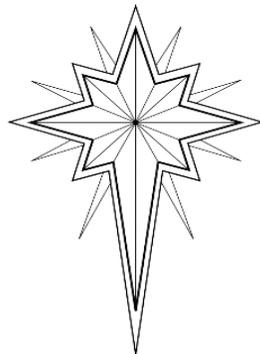
History tends to repeat itself. 'Make Israel prosperous again' sounds like a familiar mantra to our 2020 ears, sore from an exhausting presidential campaign. But the parallels should end there. God is not—and should not—be our lackey to depend on to always swoop in during times of trouble and rescue us. Unlike our country's leaders, he is not a public servant. He is not a servant at all. In Psalm 85, we see the importance of respecting God's autonomy as a benevolent emperor. Can we request of him? Of course. But will he grant our prayers? At his discretion. We should be wary not to wear his patience thin.

How do we serve God? We serve God by preparing for him a path of righteousness on which he can tread. Just as palms were laid below Jesus on Palm Sunday, so must we lay righteousness before God's feet.

Dear God,

As we move forward toward the birth of your Son, please help us honor You with our words and deeds. While we are simply servants doing our best to live our lives in accordance to your teachings, your attention means the world to us. Please give us the wisdom to act in a way that honors you, and the reflection to work towards becoming a better version of ourselves every day. We lift up righteousness and loyalty as you ask of us, and we humbly ask for an audience to our prayers. Yet you're always there for us. So please, help us try to always be there for you.

*In your name we pray,
Amen*



ALEX BURGIN '23

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

December 16th

PSALM 126

In reading Psalm 126, I am reminded that we are so often caught up in the worry and stress of our everyday lives that we forget to be joyful. And certainly, it can be very difficult to find any sort of joy, especially these days. But at the same time, I believe that it can be the simplest thing in the world to just allow oneself to be joyful, to remember that life is so beautiful even at its most challenging moments, and especially to remember that we are loved – I had a religion teacher in high school who told us this just about every day, and it made all the difference in the world to me. Even now, as I think back on the semester, I am overwhelmed by all the love and friendship that I have found after only a few short months in this new community, and it brings me such joy to remember that.

The Lord is with each one of us, and the Lord wants us to rejoice, because indeed we have every reason to rejoice. So, let us rejoice in the Lord! Let us remember the beauty of our lives and the love that surrounds us.

Dear Lord, in the midst of these difficult days, please help us to find joy in you this Advent season; give us the strength to forget our worries and help us to remember that every day on this Earth is a beautiful gift and that we are loved. Amen



SANTINO PANZICA '24

Advent 2020

December 15th

THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

Honestly, this passage sets the bar ridiculously high. It doesn't say to rejoice when it makes sense - it says to rejoice always. It doesn't say pray before you go to bed at night and before meals - it says pray continuously. It doesn't say be thankful for your blessings - it says be thankful in all circumstances. And, I've yet to meet someone who by their own effort and inherent goodness alone was just "blameless" and ready to rock and roll for the coming of Jesus. When things are stressful, confusing, tempting, and bad, it can be difficult to think of how a call like this might have space in our lives. And even when things are good, how do we begin to measure up.

Although I reflected on this verse so much, I was late getting the devotional in, and I still don't have the answer. But the piece I have come away with is an emphasis and grounding in the last line which highlights Jesus's faithfulness and that "he will do it." Perhaps someone with more knowledge of the Greek could give insight to what "it" is, but for the time being I'm taking the "it" as all those seemingly impossible tasks to get us up to that incredibly high bar. Because on our own, those seem like too high an ask in the best of circumstances, let alone the worst. But, with Jesus? If we set our hearts in a posture of humility, knowing that we cannot achieve it, but receive it? If we throw in the towel, take our hands off the wheel, pass the baton, or whatever metaphor you're most comfortable with for passing off control to Jesus instead of keeping it in our pasty, clutched, tired hands, then maybe this starts to make more sense. Maybe rejoicing always, praying continually, giving thanks in all circumstances, not quenching the Spirit, testing prophecies, being sanctified, and keeping blameless make so much more sense as a gift wrapped up in the wrapping paper of forgiveness and grace from Jesus. What we get excited about this time of year is that gift. That relationship with Jesus that makes all of this possible through grace. Because that's the punchline, right? We don't meet the high bar. We don't measure up. But He does. And He came, suffered, died, and came again so that we don't have to fumble to meet that bar ourselves. We just have to lean on Him with all that we have and receive.

So, my challenge for you, (especially the control freaks like me) is to pick one thing you really, really like control over. That if it went "wrong", whatever that means for the thing, you'd have trouble rejoicing and giving thanks. And, give it up, out loud and in prayer, to the One who's much better in the driver's seat than any of us.

EMILY BARRE '21

Presbyterian Campus Ministry, Duke University

December 9th

MARK 1:1-18

As we enter this holiday season, we may find ourselves feeling the way John the Baptist is described in this passage, but instead of appearing out of the wilderness, we are appearing out of quarantine. Our clothes aren't made of camel's hair with a leather belt at the waist. We're arriving in a stained pajama t-shirt and sweatpants tucked into our rain boots. We dine not on locusts and wild honey, but on pop tarts and yesterday's coffee.

In the best of times, preparing our hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus can be difficult and stressful, but this year? This year, the circumstances of our lives have made it feel like we are the ones appearing out of the wilderness. Bedraggled, unkempt, overwhelmed and exhausted, we seem unlikely candidates for the preparation of the Messiah. But when have we ever needed Him more?

As you stare down the barrel of the holiday season, amidst the disruption of tradition, the loss of loved ones and the many miles of distance that goes untraveled, try to breathe. Try to smile under your mask. Try to remember that the retail or grocery clerk is just as tired and overwhelmed as you are. Try to offer grace. In doing so, you prepare not only your own heart, but you help to prepare the hearts of those around you. And as unusual of a Christmas season as this is, not even 2020 could separate us from the love of Jesus Christ and the joy of His birth.

Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel and ransom our hearts from the captivity of this year. We are preparing the way..

DELANEY THOMPSON '18

Advent 2020

ISAIAH 11:1-9

The vision of wolf dwelling with lamb and child playing with snake sound more like a fantasy than a promise. It's difficult to imagine such visceral harmony in our present world. We live in a time of immense discord and division. Justice and righteousness often feel absent and it's more challenging than ever to connect with our loved ones and neighbors. We live in a world that plunders and extracts from God's creation, rather than one that acknowledges interdependence and seeks protection. Isaiah describes a kingdom in which all of creation lives in harmony and the wicked are destroyed. A kingdom where peace is achieved through justice, and priorities are reordered to uplift the disenfranchised.

While we cannot safely come together in community (at least physically) this holiday season, let us avoid the temptation of despair. Use this time to reflect on Isaiah's promise of a restored kingdom, and how we may manifest this vision in the coming rebirth.

**ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11**

When I opened up today's passage, I was taken aback at how timely it sounded. Surely this must have been written this year, not thousands of years ago – how else could it so perfectly capture the weariness of 2020? Surely the oppressed and brokenhearted who mourn with faint spirits is referring to us as we find ourselves sick, reeling from loss, and trying to find the will to fight against injustice that seems to only be getting stronger. But Isaiah says that the spirit of the Lord God is working to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to comfort all who mourn, to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. And with this renewal, those who mourn shall raise up the former devastations, the devastations of many generations. If you are like me, your spirit feels much too faint right now to repair a single devastation, much less those of many generations. But I pray that this renewal will find us as it found those who mourn in the time of Isaiah, and that we too will soon be able to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

God, let this coming year indeed be the year of your favor. Bind up us brokenhearted people, comfort us who mourn, bring good news to the oppressed, and let us repair the devastations of many generations.

JOHN 1:6-18

Christmas is approaching, and though it might look a bit different this year, I'm sure that it will still have the love and the solemnity and the holiness that Christmas somehow always does. One thing about Christmas this year, however, is that it will almost certainly be quieter—and though that quietness will be sad in many ways, it may give us all the opportunity to remember and live into the *mystery* of Christmas a little more. I usually drown out that mystery in the bustle of opening presents and eating good food, but Christmas can—and sometimes has—offered me a time to contemplate who God is and what God is doing. Christmas, after all, isn't just the time when we celebrate the nativity and the coming of Jesus to save the world: it's also a time when we celebrate the central mystery that made that all possible, the fact that God took on flesh and walked among God's own Creation. The passage today reminds us of that mystery. It reminds us that Jesus wasn't just another prophet or apostle like John the Baptist: Jesus was God, the true Light which enlightens everyone.

The passage also reminds us of a few central points about that mystery, points which it's useful to keep in mind as we approach Christmas. The first is that the world, and even God's own people, didn't recognize Christ when he came. I suspect that I, too, often fail to recognize God in the right places. People failed to recognize Christ because Christ turned the world on its head—he preferred the poor to the rich, the despised to the holy, and meekness to power. Christmas is a good time to remember *that* part of Christ's mission: to make sure that I, and we all, recognize what Christ did and what Christ's coming means even now for our values and our lives. The passage also reminds us that Christ provides the way in which we can approach and understand God. I don't fully understand what it means that the Word became flesh, but that's because I don't fully understand God, and probably never will. Jesus provides a place where we can look and a voice that we can listen to so that we can understand what God means *for us*: Jesus is the human face of God.

Christmas is a time to remember that, by believing what that human face of God revealed to us, we can fully become the children of God.

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20

“Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,”

Zephaniah 3:14-20 is a beautiful passage of joy and restoration. There is a promise that the Lord will take away all of our sins and all of our troubles. He will take away any judgements against us and turn away our enemies. This is a sharp contrast from Zephaniah chapter 1 where the day of the Lord is promised to be dark, gloomy, and devastating.

I think that this serves as a reminder that God's grace goes above and beyond what we deserve. Much like the relationship between a parent and a child, God provides us with everything that we truly need in life, unconditionally. Despite this, the pressures of the world sometimes cause us to become discontent with our lives and complacent in our faith. Personally, I sometimes feel like I'm just going through the motions. I forget the power that God has in my life. It is in those moments that thinking about God's unconditional love can feel so overwhelming yet comforting. Luckily for all, God lives in us and among us. He is always present despite how present we may be. He rejoices over us with gladness and renews us in his love. For this, I will be glad and rejoice with all my heart!

This Advent season, try and find time to turn to God and truly rejoice in the promise of the coming Lord.



December 12th

SPACE FOR NOTES/REFLECTION

ISAIAH 52:7-9

These verses remind me of a poem entitled *For Beauty* by John O'Donohue:

“As stillness in stone to silence is wed,
May solitude foster your trust in word.
As a river flows in ideal sequence,
May your soul reveal where time is presence.
As the moon absolves the dark of distance,
May your style of thought bridge the difference.
As the breath of light awakens color,
May the dawn anoint your eyes with wonder.
As spring rain softens the earth with surprise,
May your winter places be kissed by light.
As the ocean dreams to the joy of dance,
May your winter places be kissed by light.
As the ocean dreams to the joy of dance,
May the grace of change bring you elegance.
As clay anchors a tree in light and wind,
May your outer life grow from peace within.
As twilight pervades the belief of night,
May beauty sleep lightly within your heart.”

Lord, help us to find beauty in all your Creation this Advent season.



OLIVIA SMITH '21