

Advent Reflections



Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee

Daily Office Year 1

Dedication

These Advent Reflections are dedicated to The Right Reverend Steven A. Miller, Eleventh Bishop of the Diocese of Milwaukee, whose dedication to building a cooperative and collegial culture in the diocese during his tenure made this resource possible.

And

In loving memory of The Very Reverend Doctor Steven A. Peay.

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First Sunday of Advent - November 29, 2020

<i>Sunday</i>	Psalms 146, 147 ❖ 111, 112, 113
	Isa. 1:1-9 2 Pet. 3:1-10 Matt. 25:1-13

One of the readings from today's Daily Office lectionary is Isaiah 1:1-9. At the very beginning of his oracle, Isaiah hears the God of Israel offering a lament for the people of promise, "Children I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me." Now, the last thing I suppose any of us would want to read after the last nine months of "CoronaTide" is anything even hinting at a word of judgment. We're looking for a word of comfort, a word of encouragement, or a word of hopefulness, aren't we?

To be sure, we'll get to hopefulness in due (liturgical) time, but the church always begins the season of Advent by pausing to look honestly into the depths of the human condition. And reading Isaiah, we discover that, for all of our alleged progress, our spiritual condition hasn't changed very much. The prophet hears God plaintively ask, "Why do you continue to rebel?" And then the prophet hears God's own answer, "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint." In the midst of the stresses and strains of navigating our way through these past months of the unrelenting news of pandemic, protests, and politics, maybe we've found our thoughts infected with distress, misery, or hatred. Maybe our usual reservoirs of empathy, compassion, and understanding have evaporated. I've certainly had days when I wished my heart could have a good, long rest and my head would think some healthier thoughts. The opportunity before us in the days ahead is to give ourselves the gift of a few minutes of reflection. Advent gives us the opportunity to reopen our hearts to God's healing presence, and reopen our minds to the Good News that the God-Who-Came-Among-Us at Christmas will remain with us until past the end of time.

Even though Advent 2020 will be much different than Advents we've observed in the past, the season has nevertheless arrived right on time for souls in need of the sustenance of God's grace. Today, the Church prays that God will, "give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." May this Advent season be an opportunity for us to honestly confront the rebellion that keeps us in the darkness of sin. May our hearts be open to the work of grace within us -- for the love of God, for Christ's sake (and for our own).

The Rev. Gary Manning
Trinity Episcopal Church, Wauwatosa

First Monday of Advent - November 30, 2020

<i>Monday</i>	Psalms 1, 2, 3 ❖ 4, 7
	Isa. 1:10-20 1 Thess. 1:1-10 Luke 20:1-8

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I read through the scripture for today in order to prepare this reflection it was this piece of 1 Thessalonians that stuck out to me. I continued to read everything, but it was these few lines that I kept coming back to. It was that idea of giving thanks to God that really resonated with me. I am a person who loves Thanksgiving because it is a time to focus on our many blessings (and tasty food). I love that Thanksgiving doesn't require gifts or elaborate decorations. No one expects you to have a special Thanksgiving outfit. In a normal year you get to hang out with family and friends, enjoy food and likely some football and give thanks for all that you have.

Too often I find myself trapped in the business of December. Did I finish the gift list, the decorations, the cookies? Did I get all the parties and concerts and school events on the calendar? What about all of the events at church – have I fit those in as well? Sadly, that rushing around has left me feeling not so thankful and forgetting the real joy that can be found during the season of Advent. This year will look different of course. My father has decided not to have all of us kids over out of caution for his health. Our friend group is staying low key as well because of the nature of our jobs. This left me feeling even more

disappointed about facing December and then this snippet of scripture had me reconsidering. What if I use this as a time to be thankful? What if I take December to prepare? What if I take time to get closer to God? Maybe we can spend time as a family preparing for Christmas instead of running all around?

The idea of a “labor of love” spoke to me as well. What are those things I do because I LOVE them, not because I feel I MUST do them? Christmas treats are a labor of love for me, but in the busyness I have pushed that tradition aside. My daughter, a teenager, has found helping the altar guild as her labor of love. I know as I sit and think more I will add to the list the things that we have forgotten in the busyness. I will aim to spend more time on labors of love and less on busyness.

I look forward to the challenge of changing up traditions and finding new ways to celebrate all of our blessings even when things are looking so different this year.

As this season of Advent begins consider how will you give thanks for the blessings God has given you. Is there anything you need to adjust in your daily practice to come closer to God? What new traditions might you forge during this unusual time? What labors of love will you spend time with?

Margaret Done

St. Thomas of Canterbury Episcopal Church, Greendale

The Feast of St. Andrew - November 30

	Morning Prayer	Evening Prayer
St. Andrew <i>November 30</i>	Psalm 34 Isaiah 49:1-6 1 Corinthians 4:1-16	Psalms 96,100 Isaiah 55:1-5 John 1:35-42

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Matthew 4:18-22

I’ve often wondered at the speed with which these two sets of brothers abandoned everything to follow a passing stranger. How compelling must Jesus’ mere presence have been to inspire this kind of instantaneous devotion? What would be so impelling that Peter and Andrew would leave their nets and simply walk away. Who can say what family and possibly extended family Peter and Andrew worked to feed and to support. Yet with only few words these brothers joined Jesus, abandoned everything they held dear to follow Jesus.

And what about James and John? In an age when duty to family was everything, these men walked away from everything, literally clambering out of their boat and swimming or wading to shore to follow Jesus. Did they have any second thoughts, or gaze back to wonder if their father would be okay on his own?

Matthew tells us that along with their father, James and John owned a fishing boat. This implies a degree of wealth and possibly with that wealth came a certain amount of prestige. In a time when most were peasants who bare scraped by, owning something as large and useful as a fishing boat would probably be rare. And yet, James and John seemingly gave no hesitation in leaving duty, obligation, wealth, and prestige behind to follow a plainly dressed teacher.

Have you ever wondered about Zebedee? I know I have; I’ve pictured him gaping blankly as his boys climb out of their boat and trudged after a stranger. As far as I know, his reaction isn’t written anywhere in the bible, but if he’s like most of the parents I’ve known, Zebedee was sure to have been alarmed and more than a little annoyed. “Um, excuse me? Where do you think you’re going? Hey! Hey, I’m talking to you! Kids!” And still, his boys continued away from him and toward Jesus.

All of this has always been difficult to wrap my mind around. Would I drop everything to follow Jesus as these brothers did? Could I do it? What would it take for me to abandon my husband, friends, home and comfortable life to take to the road after a passing stranger?

Not too many years ago I was much like Peter and Andrew, James and John, living my day-to-day life oblivious of God's love for me. Until the morning of December 24, 2011, that is. That morning I became very ill and was subsequently hospitalized. Once settled in my room a nurse came in and perching on the edge of my bed and she began asking me questions, jotting my responses down on the admission forms in her lap. At one point, eyes focused on the form, pen held at the ready she asked me if I would be interested in a chaplain visit. I surprised myself with a quick, decisive and resounding 'yes, yes I would like that.' That was all it took, that simple affirmative response began a cascade of events that would bring me to church, to knowing Jesus, believing in the words of our Lord and would ultimately result in my baptism four months later.

Like Peter and Andrew, I had no experience with Jesus, I had no real desire to know Him, and yet when he called my name, I did not hesitate to follow Him. And what did I give up? I gave up being alone. I gave up wondering what my life was about and for. I gave up wanting to be liked and loved by others. Jesus filled all of those needs and desires. He always had, but now I can see that He did and does and always will.

Shelly Frey

St. Francis Episcopal Church, Menomonee Falls

First Tuesday of Advent - December 1, 2020

<i>Tuesday</i>	Psalms 5, 6 ❖ 10,11
	Isa. 1:21-31 1 Thess. 2:1-12 Luke 20:9-18

Here's the thing: it's all too easy to identify the tenants in Jesus' parable with the people I dislike the most in real life. By "people I dislike the most" I mean those who stand on the other side of the political line that has been feverishly drawn in the sand, or the folks who still cling to that outdated flavor of Christian fundamentalism which I feel compelled to heartily reject because I am an enlightened Episcopalian.

It is also all too tempting to see myself as one of the vineyard owner's noble servants, as a prophetic figure who attempted to set all of these narrow-minded people straight but to no avail. And perhaps I wouldn't be completely unjustified in reading Jesus' parable in this way. After all, verse 19 tells us that the chief priests and the religious teachers knew that Jesus was teaching this parable "against them." The religious teachers of Jesus' time seemed to be far more obsessed with law keeping than with love, and just as it is in our day (in certain Christian circles, at least) some laws were highlighted to the detriment of others.

These teachers clearly handpicked and sometimes made up the laws that best suited their own agendas, and they judged and rejected those who did not measure up to their fabricated ideals of holiness. These teachers were more adamant about their own traditions than they were with human flourishing, but their traditions were clearly an innovation in Israel's religious life. There is a reason why we don't read about the Pharisees, for example, in the Old Testament. These new traditions were mostly reactionary stances to the political situation of the day. If these teachers would have had a motto it would have been "Make Israel Great Again." There is nothing new under the sun, so it seems.

The chief priests of Jesus' time were no better, being people who directly colluded with the Roman government. They partnered with Rome in oppressing the Hebrew people, especially those who made up the peasant class. The chief priests of Israel used to bear the image of God to the people, but in Jesus' time they were seen as nothing more than the demonic incarnations of the "imperial domination system," to borrow a line from Marcus Borg. Yet, if I were to read the parable in this way, the way that flatters my side of things, I would fail to see its wisdom.

If I were to read the parable in this way, I too will prove to be someone that Jesus is telling this parable "against." If I were to read this parable in such a way where I am oblivious to the fact that I am also the type of person that this parable can be told "against," I would reveal that I have less self-awareness than even the chief priests and religious teachers. At least they knew this parable was being told "against them." To use Jesus' words to condemn others as I seek to justify my own agendas

(political, denominational, or otherwise), is precisely the type of thing that Jesus is seeking to condemn. The whole point of Jesus' parable is to condemn condemnation.

As John says, "God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." To use this parable as means to condemn all the condemners only perpetuates the problem. Furthermore, I imagine that the tenants all thought they could do a much better job running the show if only that pesky vineyard owner, and his servants, and his son were out of the picture.

Just because the tenants felt this way, though, it did not give them the right to act upon the impulse. I do not have the right to think and act in such ways either. If the only way I can envision a better world—a "Thy Kingdom come" sort of situation for this world—is by imagining that all the people I deem as "troublesome" are no longer in it, I will have failed to grasp the scope of God's dream and the breadth of God's love.

My friends, as we continue into this season of Advent we must consider how we have played a part in keeping the wheels of condemnation turning, how we are more like the vicious tenants than we would like to admit. How have we wished away the presence of others? How have we deafened our ears to a prophetic word simply because that word was uttered from the mouth of someone we didn't care to listen to? How have we been oblivious to the image of God in those who don't see the world quite like we do? How can we break the cycle of condemnation in our own lives?

The Rev. TJ Humphrey
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Beloit

First Wednesday of Advent - December 2, 2020

<i>Wednesday</i>	Psalms 119:1-24 ❖ 12, 13, 14
	Isa. 2:1-11 1 Thess. 2:13-20 Luke 20:19-26

Several years ago I attended a business conference in Washington D.C. It was my first trip to D.C. and I looked forward to the opportunity to do some exploring. One of my journeys took me to Korean War Memorial.

I marveled at the life size statues of soldiers walking through rice paddies, while ghostly images of men, women, and children watched on as depicted in incredible etchings in the marble wall surrounding the statues. But, it was the wall that I encountered, as I turned a corner, that took my breath away. There, simply etched in the wall were the words, "Freedom is not free."

For me, this phrase echoed Jesus' words that we find in today's gospel, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Luke 20:25) As followers of God, we have obligations to both God and the government and we are expected to take these responsibilities seriously.

We are blessed to live in a "free country", but as we all know, that freedom comes with cost. There are financial costs just like the taxes mentioned in today's gospel. There are laws and rules that are meant to be followed.

God gives us "free will." But, that does not mean that we should do whatever we want. Throughout Scripture, we are given guidelines for living as God's children. Perhaps, most famous of these words are the Ten Commandments and The Beatitudes. (When I worked with children, I referred to these as the "Thou shalt nots and the thou shalls.")

As you reflect upon today's Gospel, it might be helpful to ask yourself these questions: What does living in a free country cost me? How willing am I to fulfill these obligations? How might I grow in my commitment to my country? Likewise, What does free will cost me? How willing am I to follow God? How might I grow in my relationship with God?

Here is one more question to ponder. What do I do when my duties to God and country conflict? Scripture and tradition teach us that God should always come first. What will you choose?

Kathie Beuscher
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First Thursday of Advent - December 3, 2020

<i>Thursday</i>	Psalms 18:1-20 ❖ 18:21-50
	Isa. 2:12-22 1 Thess. 3:1-13 Luke 20:27-40

Most of the time, I see the structure of the liturgical year and its various observances as a wonderful gift of our tradition. Waiting. Expectation. Preparation. Hope. These words are closely tied to our understanding of Advent, and they point to the joy, gratitude, and excitement that we feel during the Christmas season. The seasonal bustle of gifts, decorations, and gatherings, along with our anticipation of celebrating the birth of Jesus in community—we anticipate these things, and hold them in memory; they reflect the richness and love in our lives. But this year, familiar customs and simple nostalgia just won't do.

I am writing this before the results of the 2020 election, and before the availability of a Covid-19 vaccine. In a few days Americans will know what the voters' decisions have been, and start to discern a probable trajectory forward in our national life. I know what I'm hoping to see, and the suspense is killing me. And in the next several months, hopefully I'll be rolling up my sleeve and getting a shot that will enable me to break my isolation and engage more fully with others, in person. But for the moment, I am stuck in worry, and located in Ordinary time, in a bad, sad, strange and difficult Ordinary time. How do we step across this threshold of the liturgical year into the beauty of Advent, when it might feel like we are standing in glue?

What has been some kind of a saving grace is the commitment of groups of people to continue to connect—online, by phone, or email, or card. At St. Dunstan's All Saints service this year, I got choked up seeing the faces on Zoom, including visual tributes to those who are now in the communion of saints. I wasn't alone in that—many messages were exchanged that weekend expressing how grateful we are for one another, and how much we care and are cared for.

Today's passage from 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 touches us with the emotions that are so similar to what many of us feel—especially Paul's words in verses 9-12.

"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."

Paul has been worried. He has decided to stay in Athens—this letter, among his others, reflects a time when he has left the fledgling communities to undergo his own challenges and persecutions, and leaving them to undergo theirs. He has built close relationships with them, he has taught and supported and delighted in what they have been able to build together. It is not an easy or secure time for any of them. What is touching is the affection and yearning Paul expresses. We can relate to Paul, our honored ancestor in faith—even though sometimes he's curmudgeonly, judgy and harsh—because he cares so deeply about the community of faith moving forward, about who they were and what they would become. What a beautiful and hopeful thing to see such an outpouring of love from Paul! And in our times, we know that our emotions are very similar, and that we light up inside with happiness and gratitude to God when a well-loved face and voice we're seeing and hearing at a distance assures us cheerfully, "I'm doing fine!"

The spiritual meaning of Advent includes anticipation, hope, gratitude, and a feeling of being open to blessing. This year will feel very different. We will see and hear one another over phones and screens. There will be illness, financial stress, frustrations and disappointments of all kinds. We will need to make an extra effort to be kind, to reach out, to find those in need of generosity. Maybe we will set ourselves, alone or with others, to consciously "vigil", an ancient practice of reflective waiting that has much to offer us. We will step into the hopeful time, embracing this space in our liturgical year knowing that it has always been there to offer us a chance for deeper communion, and also knowing that the One for whom we wait is the inspiration and model for our real-time, real-life love and care for one another.

Gloria Alt

St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Madison

First Friday of Advent - December 4, 2020

<i>Friday</i>	Psalms 16, 17 ❖ 22
	Isa. 3:8-15 1 Thess. 4:1-12 Luke 20:41--21:4

'How can they say that the Christ is David's son?' Luke 20:41

The Steward of Gondor, Denethor, is a hopeless figure in J.R. Tolkien's classic *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Denethor's job was to defend the kingdom as steward until the king returned. Through the use of a seeing stone called a palantir, Denethor became depressed at the strength of the evil Sauron's forces. All he could see was death and destruction all around him when war came and his first-born son, Boromir, was killed. He then ordered his only living son, Faramir, on a doomed mission to defend the White City's outer defenses. After Faramir returned mortally wounded, Denethor tried to burn both his half-dead son and himself on a funeral pyre, like the kings of old. Denethor lost all hope in the return of the king, so he disregarded the king's instruction, and did not live as a steward of the king.

This is how we, as Christians, may sometimes feel when awaiting the return of our King. Advent rolls into Christmas, Christmas to Epiphany, Epiphany to Lent, Lent to Easter, Easter to Pentecost, and Pentecost to Advent again. Still, the King has not returned. We run the risk of the ruin of despair too, if we are not careful.

Despair in Latin—*acedia*—means sloth or discouragement. It is a deadly sin because it lacks the hope that faith provides. Yet hope is not had by having faith in faith. There is a sham version of hope, a hope in hope—hope in a brighter future, hope in more money, hope in a better you. Christian hope is different. Christian hope is found in seeking the King and doing His will in the midst of the joys and sorrows, trials and triumphs of this life. We are told in Scripture that 'hope does not disappoint' (Rom 5:5), because of who it is, in whom we believe.

Jesus turns to the crowds, and asks about the Sadducees who were questioning him, 'How can they say that the Christ is David's son?' He then cites Psalm 110:1 where King David wrote:

'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand,
till I make your enemies your footstool."'

The promise from old was that the Messiah would come from David's line. He would be David's 'Lord' because he would be greater than King David himself. How these words of Jesus must have burned in the ears of the Sadducees who did not believe in the coming of the Messiah.

Yet, if we are not careful, we can fall into a similar hopelessness by despairing about the return of Jesus Christ our King. As Christ came once, he will come again 'to judge the living and the dead' as 1 Pet 4:5 and the Creed remind us. When Jesus comes again, he will come as the long-awaited King: 'On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords"' (Rev 19:16).

Let us not be like the Steward of Gondor, who despaired and lost faith in the return of the King. The King is coming. Are you, steward of the Lord, prepared for the Advent our King?

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First Saturday of Advent - December 5, 2020

<i>Saturday</i>	Psalms 20, 21:1-7(8-14) ❖ 110:1-5(6-7), 116, 117
	Isa. 4:2-6 1 Thess. 4:13-18 Luke 21:5-19

In this first week of Advent – the beginning of a new Christian year – we look to the first Christian writing, Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, for the culmination of that which we prepare to celebrate in the reality of God’s incarnation. For the second time in that writing, Paul proclaims to us the foundation of our faith and the source which is our hope: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose (4:14).” Only verses before is the earliest reference in the New Testament to the resurrection: “and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath (1:10).” It is the bookends of those points – our foundational Easter faith and a new Advent – that create an upward spiral of orientation and journey that guide our hope and that which Paul exhorted his first Christian community to live in.

Christian hope is not for that which we already know or possess. It differs radically from optimism which seeks to create the same – to return to a known place of safety. Rather, hope seeks to change the underlying structures and realities that held the past, however pleasing, in search for a more just and righteous experience of the fullness God offers all. RORÁTE CAÉLI DÉSUPER, ET NÚBES PLÚANT JÚSTUM. (Drop down ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness.) This chant gives expression to the longings of Patriarchs and Prophets, and symbolically, of the Church for the coming of the Messiah which we await during Advent. Each time I have heard it sung in one of its many settings, it always produces in me a physical longing – a very deep experience of waiting and almost tasting the desire that saturates my spiritual being. And it awakens me to my restless nature and the paradox of my human activity which I feel must always be directed at a definite goal and product. It is during Advent when I become most keenly aware of my deepest longing for calm and rest and yet am caught-up in the culture that says I cannot wait or I’ll miss it.

As I write this, we are living in a western culture where Advent has not begun, but “Christmas” is already weeks old as artificial decorations have been dusted off and rehung (some only in hibernation since July). I am deeply aware of how much people, even and especially the non-religious, love and need Christmas. In our Christian tradition, we “need and love” Christmas by our very identity, yet we hold that we will not fully enter into that Incarnational moment unless we have waited in our own incarnation and experienced the deepest sense of longing that there must be more than this. To live apart from the anxiety of the world and know that there will be enough and more than the present moment offers is the core of our Judeo-Christian experience. It is the deepest experience of what sabbath means and the Incarnation expresses. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. (Ps. 145:15-16) Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann explains “the world is an anxiety-free one of well-being because the creator is anxiety-free and publicly exhibits that freedom from anxiety by not checking things out. God is not a workaholic. God is not a Pharaoh. God does not keep jacking up production schedules. To the contrary, God rests, confident, serene, at peace. God’s rest, moreover, bestows on creatureliness a restfulness that contradicts the “drivenness” of the system of Pharaoh.” (Sabbath as Resistance, pp. 29-30)

As you wait through this coming month, I hope that you will entertain the possibility of saying “wait, wait, don’t tell me” and practice a sort of spiritual hibernation that those Christmas decorations were not afforded. It may be as simple as lighting a candle to dine by rather than illuminating a chandelier decked with holly and garland; it might be as intentional as not lighting the house until the twelve days of Christmas; it might be as dangerous as waiting until next week to buy your wreath and greens and risking that they may be sold out. I trust they will still be out there, though it may take a journey through deep woods to find them. I hope you will.

The Rev. Brad Toebben
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Milwaukee

Second Sunday in Advent - December 6, 2020

<i>Sunday</i>	Psalms 148, 149, 150 ❖ 114, 115
	Isa. 5:1-7 2 Pet. 3:11-18 Luke 7:28-35

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your Name give glory; because of your love and because of your faithfulness.

– Psalm 115:1

December and Advent can seem more like a “pre-Christmas” season, than an intentional and separate time, full of prayer and expectant waiting. Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the week that the lone candle is joined by a second, increasing the light they shed in the church and on the kitchen table. The rhythm of lighting the candles, one week at a time, can aid us as we slow down, and redirect our focus from our own efforts to God’s.

Today’s psalm addresses God, and asks that God ensure that the praise goes towards God, rather than towards God’s created beings. Though the psalm addresses God, I think the reminder is geared more towards humans and less towards the God whose love and faithfulness inspire such praise. It’s tempting to see our achievements and accomplishments and ticking-off-our-to-do-lists as reasons to praise ourselves and discount the Lord who made us and walks faithfully by our side. Indeed, three times the psalmist asks the people to trust in God, for “he is their help and their shield.”

The Way of Love Advent Calendar poses the question this day: “What part of gathering for worship fills your heart with hope?” While this might seem an ironic question this year (we are, after all, not physically gathering at this time), my hope comes from the fact that despite the challenges, we are continuing to gather. We continue to trust in the God who is worthy of glory, who is our help and our shield. We remain the church, following Jesus, loving God and one another, and serving as Christ’s hands in the world. After all, as Psalm 115 says: “The heaven of heavens is the Lord’s, but he entrusted the earth to its peoples.”

In our rush of shopping, cleaning, organizing and restructuring this year, let’s take comfort in the Good News that Christ is coming. The God who made us and entrusted the earth to us is getting ready to be incarnate among us. So set your plans aside for a day (or even just fifteen minutes). It won’t be perfect because of all your planning and rushing and hurrying. The day that God made and gifts to you will be an opportunity for blessings – both given and received. It will offer us chances to spread God’s love. The day is a gift, entrusted to us by God who is glorified because of God’s love and faithfulness.

Today is also the feast day of Nicholas of Myra, commonly called Santa Claus. We do not know many facts about this 3rd Century Bishop, though there are certainly a plethora of stories and legends associated with this beloved saint. One tradition is of St. Nicholas providing dowries for three young ladies who would have been otherwise unable to marry. Since the gifts were given anonymously, St. Nicholas was given credit for later gifts, given anonymously in love, simply to help care for one another. In the words of James Kiefer, St. Nicholas is the name we give to the giver of an “anonymous gift given to someone whom we do not know, but whom we love anyway because God does.”

We love because God loves us. And God does love us. So as you light your second candle this evening and watch the room grow brighter and warmer in its light, remember to trust in God who is our help and our shield. Our God who is praiseworthy for God’s love and faithfulness. A God who entrusts us with such gifts and delights when we share those gifts in love.

The Rev. Pippa Lindwright
St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, Dousman

Second Monday of Advent - December 7, 2020

<i>Monday</i>	Psalms 25 ❖ 9, 15
	Isa. 5:8-12, 18-23 1 Thess. 5:1-11 Luke 21:20-28

“For God did not destine us for wrath, but for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or sleep we may live together with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up...” 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11

There is a photo on my desk of my grandmother and I. It was taken when I was three or four years old. In the picture, we are laying together on her living room floor in Sheboygan and we are covered up with a blanket. In my small hands I am holding a book that is open, and Grandma is in the process of turning a page. She is reading to me. This photo speaks to me of love, acceptance, warmth and a sense of home. My childhood years were pretty tumultuous at times, and Grandma was a constant, a ‘rock’ who was always there for me.



The photo that sits upon Fr. Scott's desk, as referenced above.

As I got older, I learned more about who she was, what mattered to her, and the role that faith played in her life. In her own steady, quiet way she was one who, in the words of today's reading from 1 Thessalonians, built others up, offering support, assurance, prayers and friendship. She believed in a God of love, forgiveness and mercy, who indeed destined us for salvation in and through Jesus Christ. When I felt called to the priesthood she could not have been more supportive or excited. On the road to ordination, however, there were several rocky moments including but not limited to: admitting an addiction to alcohol and drugs (and seeking help); doing poorly in school; leaving the seminary, and other rough spots as well. Through it all, I was blessed by the love of my primary encourager. In fact, after she left this life and went to be with our heavenly Father, people who attended daily Eucharist with my Grandma back in Sheboygan told me that they knew what was happening in my life

based on my Grandma's petitions during the Prayers of the People! I often think it was partly through her prayers that I have the amazing life I have today. I am both grateful and blessed.

I try to carry some of that encouraging spirit she so abundantly showered upon me. It is one of the ways I try to live my faith in Jesus Christ.

As we continue our Advent journey, I invite you to spend some time today reflecting on the encouragers in your own life. Who are they? Thank God for them, and thank them as well! Also, I invite you to ask God to help you see how God may be wanting to use you as an encourager. How can your loving encouragement of another be a sign to them of God's grace and love in their lives?

The Rev. Scott Leanna
St. Thomas of Canterbury Episcopal Church, Greendale

Second Tuesday of Advent - December 8, 2020

<i>Tuesday</i>	Psalms 26, 28 ❖ 36, 39
	Isa. 5:13-17, 24-25 1 Thess. 5:12-28 Luke 21:29-38

Growing up, my family didn't observe Advent, even though we were Roman Catholic and went to church every Sunday and on the major feast days. We did give up something for Lent, and didn't eat meat during that time. For Christmas, we put up a nativity set, decorated the house, and went to Christmas services. My brother and I each got a calendar with 24 little slots with a chocolate behind each slot in celebration of the birth of Jesus, but I don't recall any discussion of Advent during my childhood. As we stopped going to church regularly when I was 14, I was never exposed to Advent as a teenager or adult.

When I was 37, I was feeling lost and, at the suggestion of a friend, I read the Gospels. Much to my surprise, I felt at peace and not alone. I heard the voice of God and felt the Holy Spirit move within me. After visiting a few different churches on Sundays, I eventually joined the Episcopal Church. As December approached during the first year of my attending an Episcopal Church, I learned about the season of Advent. I learned how the weeks before Christmas are meant to be a season of preparation and reflection on the upcoming celebration of the birth of Jesus. This was totally new to me! I remembered the basics of the Nativity Story from my childhood and from the annual viewing of the Peanuts' Christmas TV program, but I remembered nothing about Advent.

Even after I learned about Advent, I found it very hard to observe the season. I would get a new Advent book each year and start out reading it every day. But inevitably, I would get busy and skip a day, and then another, and I would just give up. Between work, home, Christmas shopping, and holiday parties, Advent would fall by the wayside for another year.

So Jesus' teaching in the gospel for today speaks to me in a very direct way. Jesus says, "But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it's going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don't go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:34-36, The Message Translation).

While in this passage Jesus is teaching about the need to be prepared for when He will return, His words are very appropriate for the Advent Season and the anniversary of His birth. We are told to not be distracted by "parties and drinking and shopping," or the Day will take us by surprise. In the past, I would be so busy with holiday parties, shopping, and the business of everyday life that I would lose sight of the entire point of celebrating Christmas. But now I try to observe Advent by reading an Advent devotional each day before the busy day starts, and by reading from the nativity stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Of course, there will be days when I fail to do so. In these cases, I remember Jesus' words to "Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that's coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man". Then I follow Jesus' advice and pray, and start my Advent journey anew.

So we can still attend holiday parties (although this year they may be virtual ones) and shop for gifts, but we need to remember what we are celebrating when we do so. We are celebrating the birth of Jesus, God in human form. We are celebrating the fact that God loved us so much that, in spite of our sinful ways, God came to us in human form to redeem us.

I pray you have a blessed Advent season and that God will keep you safe.

The Rev. Bramwell Richards
Zion Episcopal Church, Oconomowoc

Second Wednesday of Advent - December 9, 2020

Wednesday	Psalms 38 ❖ 119:25-48
	Isa. 6:1-13 2 Thess. 1:1-12 John 7:53--8:11

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

In reading this passage from Isaiah during our season of pandemic and political turmoil, I'm struck by the conviction -- enthusiasm, even (note that exclamation point!) -- in the prophet's response of "Here am I; send me!" to the Lord's query. He accepts the call with no hesitation, no caveats or hedging, but merely a simple statement: "Here am I; send me!" In contrast, these days I frequently find myself dragging my feet, exhausted by even the idea of taking on one more responsibility, of leading one more virtual meeting, of masking up for one more stressful trip to the grocery store. I fear there are few exclamation points in my responses these days; certainly far fewer than I'd like.

In contrasting my own feelings of fatigue and reluctance with Isaiah's enthusiastic declaration, I'm reminded of the story of another call, one that was received with hesitation, and even fear. In chapter four of the book of Esther, Jewish leader Mordecai begs his niece Esther, married to King, to plead for the lives of their people. But Esther hesitates; she is afraid to approach the King without a summons, knowing that it can mean death. It is then that Mordecai speaks these words, words that I have returned to over and over again during this pandemic: "Perhaps you were born for such a time as this." Those words echo in my head when I wake up and struggle to get out of bed. When my to-do list feels overwhelming and never seems to get any shorter. When I fall into a spiral of self-pity, asking "Why me? Why us? Why now?" "Perhaps you were born for such a time as this."

Perhaps we were all born for an Advent such as this. We are living through a season of pandemic and turmoil, but it is also the season of watching, of preparing, and of waiting in hope for the light that shines in the darkness. For that is what we are called to do as Christians, and whether we accept that call with the enthusiasm of Isaiah or the hesitation of Esther, it is our call nonetheless. God sees us in our struggles and our fears, and he is with us even -- and perhaps especially -- when we hesitate and doubt, calling "Whom shall I send" while reminding us, like Mordecai: "Perhaps you were born for such a time as this."

Isaiah accepted God's call, and ultimately Esther did too, saving the lives of the Jewish people with her courage and her strength. May God grant us all the courage of Esther and the enthusiasm of Isaiah, as we continue to live through these dark and uncertain days. May we all have the strength to respond to God's call with "Here am I; send me!" and even when we cannot, may we know that we are still God's beloved children, "born for such a time as this."

Cindy Wilmeth
St. Boniface Episcopal Church, Mequon

Second Thursday of Advent - December 10, 2020

<i>Thursday</i>	Psalms 37:1-18 ❖ 37:19-42
	Isa. 7:1-9 2 Thess. 2:1-12 Luke 22:1-13

Three of the lessons designated for this day include a common theme: references to living in an anxious time, awaiting a better future—surely a condition we know all too well, in our here and now.

In Isaiah, we read about an alliance between two kingdoms, an alliance which causes the House of David and its leader to shake with fear, “as the trees in the forest shake before the wind.” But the Lord instructs Isaiah to say to them: “ ‘It shall not stand,/and it shall not come to pass.’” But in order for the House of David to be maintained, the people must have faith. “ ‘If you will not believe,/surely you shall not be established.’”

In Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, he reminds the brethren to whom he is writing that before the returning of the Lord Jesus, they must anticipate and endure a time of tribulation: “that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition.”

In both cases, we read of people who can look forward to a day of deliverance, but who must first endure hardships.

Psalm 37 develops this idea fully. The Oxford Annotated Bible provides a note which identifies the Psalm’s theme: “The certainty of retribution for the wicked. . . The argument is directed to those discouraged by the injustices which apparently dominate the world.”

How apt that seems to us, today. How is it possible to see the injustices of our own time and in our own place, and not be discouraged. We live in an age of bitter political and cultural division. We live in a society in which wealth is unevenly distributed. We see that racial discrimination seems to be inextricably wound into our social and political fabric. We live in a season of pandemic, a time in which we all have fears for our health, and the health and well-being of those we love. But we see also that even this illness seems unjustly to target the most vulnerable and disproportionately to infect communities of color. Like the audience of the Psalm, we seem to live in a world dominated by negative and malicious powers beyond our control.

The wicked who seem to dominate in the Psalm carry out “evil devices,” they use violence against the “poor and needy,” they seek to slay the righteous. But the Psalmist looks to a future in which the power of the wicked will be overcome, when they will “fade like the grass.” Their own violence will be turned against them. They will cease to exist, and their “posterity . . . shall be cut off.”

But in the meantime, the Psalmist’s words of encouragement provide encouragement that we also can turn to in these days. The righteous are told not to fret, not to worry, to avoid anger and wrath, to do good and turn away from evil. To be still. To wait patiently. To wait for the Lord and keep his way.

This patient, faithful waiting, accompanied by actions of goodness will lead, the Psalmist says, to the promised deliverance. That deliverance is not simply retribution toward the wicked, but a fulfillment which the righteous can now anticipate, and, in the future, enjoy. Again and again, it is promised that the righteous will “possess the land.” Along with that, the righteous will “receive the desires of your hearts,” they will “delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” They will gain “salvation” and deliverance from the Lord. And the fulfillment is not theirs alone; rather, they are assured that “their heritage will abide forever” and, for the man of peace, “there is posterity.”

The idea of a future fulfillment is a link that ties these three readings to the reading from Luke’s gospel. In this reading, the narrative sets forth the instructions Jesus give his disciples for the preparation of the Passover meal. Inserted in between the reference to the upcoming Passover and the instructions is the information that “Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot” and a description of the plot he arranges with the chief priests and scribes to betray Jesus. We know that the lawless man, the wicked enemy will in a few hours triumph, and, over the next days, will seemingly overwhelm the righteous. But with the promise inherent within the Passover meal, we also know that the righteous one will prevail at last, and that, in the memorial

of the Eucharist, we as members of Christ's heritage and posterity will in the fullness of time live abundantly in the land that has been given us.

Mabel DuPriest
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Racine

Second Friday of December - December 11, 2020

<i>Friday</i>	Psalms 31 ❖ 35
	Isa. 7:10-25 2 Thess. 2:13--3:5 Luke 22:14-30

When I am expecting a special guest, I clean house. I make sure that the bathrooms and floors are clean, that the house is dusted, and that the pet hair is vacuumed from the furniture. When my guest arrives, they have no idea if I am a good housekeeper or if I made a special effort for them... and I do not want them to know! They do not need to know about the dust, dirt, pet hair, or grime that was there and in what measure it was there before. All they need to know is that my house is clean now.

I don't think we talk enough about purgation in the church. Purgation is the purifying or cleansing of something. During this time of Advent, we are called to prepare for the coming of not just a special guest, but the most special guest, for Christ our Lord and King. If Christ were to come to your actual home, wouldn't you want to clean ahead of time? Wouldn't you want to purge out that which is making your home dirty? That is our opportunity in Advent. We need to purge out that which is making our spiritual houses, our bodies and souls, unclean. I could go through the seven deadly sins, but the one I'm most concerned about lately is wrath. Everyone seems so angry now days. For instance, some are angry that people want them to wear masks; some are angry that people won't wear masks; some are angry that people are wearing masks, but their nose is out. If we want to be angry, all we have to do is turn on the news or look at our social media platforms.

If anyone had a reason to be angry, it was Jesus. Jesus knew that he was going to be betrayed by one of the twelve. We know from scriptures that more than the twelve followed Jesus. From the very beginning, from the Baptism of John, Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas followed Jesus (Acts 1:21-23). Matthew and Luke both talk about the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and provided for him (the women bankrolled his ministry). From this crowd of followers, Jesus had just 12 men in his inner circle, and it was one of these closest and most trusted that betrayed him.

Betrayal is probably the greatest reason to be angry, and yet...

Jesus knew Judas was going to betray him and he ate with him anyway.

Jesus knew Judas was going to betray him and he washed his feet along with the other disciples' feet anyway.

Jesus knew Judas was betraying him, and he prayed for deliverance in the garden anyway.

Jesus knew full well what was happening, but received the kiss of betrayal from Judas anyway.

Jesus must have been at least partially in the mindset of the psalmist: "Even my best friend, whom I trusted, who broke bread with me, has lifted up his heel and turned against me." Jesus had every right to be hurt and angry. Judas' betrayal led to the cross, but despite that betrayal, Jesus healed the soldier's ear, surrendered peacefully, and asked forgiveness for those who mocked, scourged, and crucified him, for they knew not what they had done.

I think we need to be like Jesus in dealing with anger. I think we need to be in community with those who anger us. We need to serve those who anger us. We need to pray for those who anger us and pray they do not live up to our worst expectations. We need to allow those who anger us to approach us. In our baptismal promises we profess that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, which includes those who anger us. By communing with, serving, praying for, and allowing familiarity, we will likely not change them, but we may just change ourselves.

Ready yourself for the Advent coming of Christ. Prepare your spiritual houses by purging the sin that makes us all unclean. When we repent, confess our sins, and ask forgiveness, God forgives and forgets. When Jesus arrives, he won't remember how

much dirt and grime were there before you cleaned your spiritual house because the sin has already been purged. While you are cleaning house, maybe start by purging the anger, that wrath that is all around us and is mucking up our lives.

The Rev. Mindy Valentine Davis
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Fort Atkinson

Second Saturday of Advent - December 12, 2020

<i>Saturday</i>	Psalms 30, 32 ❖ 42, 43
	Isa. 8:1-15 2 Thess. 3:6-18 Luke 22:31-38

Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. – 2Thessalonians 3:13

As Paul brings his second Thessalonian letter to a close, he offers prayer that their hearts be directed to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. He also delivers a none-to-subtle exhortation that they remain active in doing their part. It serves as a reminder to Christians in all times and places that, even as we pray for God to direct our hearts, we have a vital and active role to play in that direction.

2020 is certainly fertile ground for striving such important balance. It has been a year of unexpected and unwelcome conditions to be sure. The profound challenges have compelled us to hold one another close in prayer, even while resisting weariness in doing what is right. With innumerable sufferings resulting from coronavirus, civil unrest, wildfires, hurricanes, and political hostility, pursuing what is right can be downright exhausting.

In late summer a Facebook post illustrated a person trying to remain strong, when really, she just wanted to throw up her hands and put up the Christmas tree. It is a fairly safe bet that all of us have endured moments like that during this crazy year. It can be mighty tempting to simply park on the couch in pajamas and watch reruns of old sitcoms until this whole thing blows over. Still, that is not who we really are.

We have had to reinvent ourselves multiple times amidst coronavirus restriction. It certainly doesn't seem right that Christians are unable to gather for in-person worship. As wrong as it feels not to gather around the Lord's table, it has been the right thing to do nonetheless. We have had to choose loving and protecting our neighbor from disease, over the norms of liturgical practice.

And so, for many months now we have lamented not being able to go to church at our beloved place of worship. Yet, in Paul's exhortation to the faithful of Thessalonica one might hear an echo of resolve for the present age - that our inability to 'go to church' must not prevent us from 'being church'. After all, we are the church.

My wife and I recently moved into a community that features a nature walk with two beautiful pollinator gardens. Not only are they brilliant with color from the tremendous variety of flowers, but they are buzzing throughout the season with worker bees. Seemingly void of distraction, the bees are absolutely determined to discharge their duty and vital importance to the ecosystem.

In so many ways that is us. The Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement, as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry often describes us, is compelled to be church differently than we are accustomed to. Rather than idly shrinking from the present challenges, we are called to be buzzing with determination to build community even as we await gathering – counterintuitive perhaps, but quite real.

It seems clear that the right thing to do is to remain resolute in doing what we can with what we have, and being grateful for it. A true sense of gratitude seems a paramount ingredient in being church differently in a challenging time such as this. It reminds me of a quote from Lutheran Pastor and Nazi Concentration Camp captive Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more assuredly and consistently will community increase and grow from day to day as God pleases"

Let us resolve to be thankful that our community continues its increase through faithful support of one another. Even as we

pray that our loving and gracious God sustain us and direct our hearts to the steadfastness of Christ, may we also be resolute in actively fulfilling that direction; lifting one another up and intentionally being the beloved faith community that we are.

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:16

The Rev. Geoff Ward
St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, River Hills

Third Sunday of Advent - December 13, 2020

<i>Sunday</i>	Psalms 63:1-8(9-11), 98 ❖ 103
	Isa. 13:6-13 Heb. 12:18-29 John 3:22-30

We move ever closer to the Glorious Impossible, the Incarnation, the interruption of time and space, by God, who enters our world as one of us, fully human, Jesus. In the gospel of John, John who is the baptizer, but who does not actually baptize Jesus, points the way. One of the things that John the gospel writer is interested in is John the baptizer’s witness, or testimony, as well as your testimony, your witness to this inconceivable incarnation, this glorious impossible. John the Baptist is the witness to Jesus, Messiah. John has been sent ahead of Jesus and testifies to Jesus. We hear John’s story so that we may believe, so that we may also be a witness to this relationship of God and God’s incarnation, God in the flesh. John testifies to the light that shines in the darkness, the light that is the creative activity of Jesus. This is the light that is new creation, new birth. The light that exposes and reveals God in our midst.

The glorious impossible is God, creator of all that is seen and unseen, in the flesh, dwelling in this relationship with us, you, me, all of creation. In John’s gospel, believing means relationship. John’s gospel was written so that you might believe, or come to believe, or continue to believe, that you say yes to the relationship that is offered, and that you witness to God among us, Jesus. Being the witness is not to be an uninvolved spectator watching from afar, but to be full in the relationship that is offered by the God who dwells in creation.

This is the joy of incarnation, and this is the fear of incarnation. To be known so completely, to dwell so thoroughly in Jesus, to have our hearts claimed by God, is to be changed, transformed, made new. As John the baptizer bore witness, John the gospel writer asks each of us to testify, to bear witness to God’s transforming love.

To love, as God first loved us, is our witness. To love, as God so loves the world that God breaks into time and space to accompany us on this journey of life and love, wholeness and healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, is our witness. To love, as Jesus on the cross loves us, is our witness.

Immediately in front of this story of John the Baptist in John’s gospel is the story about Nicodemus, who came to Jesus in the dark of night. The darkness points us to Nicodemus’s inability to hear Jesus witness of God’s incarnation. For God so loves the world, we hear, that God breaks into the darkness with the light who is Jesus. After this story of John the Baptist, is the Samaritan woman at the well, who goes into the city and says to the people, Come, see a man who told me the truth about myself, who knows me and yet loves me. At the end of John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene meets the Risen Christ and says, “I have seen the Lord.” This is the articulation of witness. How will you witness to this glorious impossible this Christmas? How will you witness to this inconceivable incarnation this Christmas? How will you witness to this Love this Christmas? In this Covidtide, this time of disconnection, unrest, mistrust, how will you witness to the Love that wins?

The Rev. Kathy Munson-Lutes
Trinity Episcopal Church, Janesville

Third Monday of Advent - December 14, 2020

<i>Monday</i>	Psalms 41, 52 ❖ 44
	Isa. 8:16--9:1 2 Pet. 1:1-11 Luke 22:39-53

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. - Revelations of Divine Love, Julian of Norwich

The gospel reading for today both comforts and disquiets me at the same time. Jesus, knowing he is being betrayed, starts to pray fervently and asks for the cup to be taken from him, sparing him from the death that is to come. What comforts me is the solidarity I feel with Christ in his humanity throughout these verses. As Christ knew betrayal, so have I. As Christ has prayed to stave off impending calamity, so have I. As Christ felt great sorrow and a troubled Spirit, I have as well (and as one who manages clinical depression, I *really* get this one!) Christ in his humanity has been there, done that, and knows the depth and intricacies of human emotion. My Savior has had the human experience and understands what that means for all of us. I find that comforting.

What I find disquieting is that even though Jesus prayed for deliverance, he did not receive it. Jesus was betrayed, beaten, spit upon, condemned, mocked, jeered, and crucified. Jesus went through all those things, which eventually led to the cross, and to his death. When I pray for deliverance, I want the deliverance to happen. I don't want to think that the worst could happen to me or those that I love. I know through experience that I can pray that I may not enter trial, just as Jesus admonished the disciples to pray, and yet the trial still may come. The trial too often does come. I did not want my father's cancer diagnosis; I prayed for him to be cured, and yet he died anyway. I do not want to be living in a global pandemic, I fear the uncontrolled spread, and yet it's here. I can pray that my family be spared, but there is no guarantee that will happen.

Everything that Jesus went through might have led to his death, but it also led to his resurrection and the salvation of the world. The best thing, the thing that some theologians call "the culmination of all human history," Jesus' resurrection, came out of the worst thing, his death on the cross. My father may have died from his cancer, but I know that he is now fully healed and I am excited that someday I will see him in that heavenly kingdom in which there is no sorrow, only joy. I do not know how my family will weather the pandemic, but I can tell you that I am much less likely to take any of them for granted. In order for there to be resurrection, there has to be a cross. There is always a cross before resurrection.

Advent means coming, and our salvation is possible because Christ was incarnated. Christ's advent to Earth in human form made possible our salvation. The promise that we proclaim during the Eucharist, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again," is the promise of Christ's second coming, his next Advent, when He will come again will create a new Jerusalem. In that new city, all will be healed, all will be just, all will be made right.

The difficult parts of the human condition are not and never will be the end of the story. The end of the story is filled with joy, peace and, praise the Lord, there will be no suffering. Humanity will see an end to violence, and justice will flow down like a fountain. Our new home will be where there is neither sighing or weeping, but life everlasting.

As you continue along your Advent journey, please know whether you are filled with joy, or have trepidation and sorrow, you have the promise of salvation because Christ's first coming in incarnation led to His resurrection. In the promise that Christ will return again, you have the assurance that the brokenness of the world will be healed in God's own time. There is hope because there is promise. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Look for his coming, pray for it, for he will make all things well.

The Rev. Mindy Valentine Davis
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Fort Atkinson

Third Tuesday of Advent - December 15, 2020

<i>Tuesday</i>	Psalms 45 ❖ 47, 48
	Isa. 9:8-17 2 Pet. 1:12-21 Luke 22:54-69

It seems as though the psalms for today are full of praise and glory to God

Your throne, O God is forever and ever;
Oh, Clap your hands, all you peoples
Shout to God with the voice of triumph!
For the Lord Most High is awesome
God has gone up with a shout
The Lord with the sound of a trumpet
Sing praises to God, sing praises!

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised
In His holy mountain,
Beautiful in elevation,
The joy of the whole earth.

Yet in the gospel for today there is Peter's denial 3 times. Also, Jesus was being mocked and beaten by the guards. Jesus is then brought before Pilate and Herod and asked if he is the Messiah. Jesus answers, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the Mighty God."

Is not our life like this? At times we are singing hymns and praising God and given him all the glory. At other times especially, in these times of fear, disease and unrest, we wonder, are you really there God?

I have a feeling this is what Peter may have thought, besides being afraid for his life. I am sure this is what the apostles thought after the death of Jesus. Where is God? What will we do without Jesus? Has all our following him gone down the drain? Then Peter says, "I'm going fishing."

Reminds me of the part of the song, The Four Winds by Neil Young:

Four strong winds that blow lonely
Seven seas that run high
All those things that don't change, come what may
The good times are all gone
So I'm bound for moving on

Peter and the apostles and others did move on to do great things and spread the good word. As Peter says, "We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

So maybe we will emerge from this dark time that we are experiencing. The day will dawn and the morning star will rise in our hearts. And maybe we will some how prophet from the doom that seems to hover over us and see good times again with new eyes.

I read the comics in the newspaper every day. Sometimes there is an inspirational message in them or I get a better understanding about life and I can relate. (Besides, I know from experience that God has a sense of humor). One of my favorites is Mutts by Patrick Mc McDonnell. This particular day the first frame of his comic read, "No matter what yesterday was like, birds always start the new day with a song."

Yes, a new day is coming, the Winter of our lives will turn into a Spring of new life. God will be there; He was always there in all the seasons of our lives, in the bad and sad and scary times and in the joyous happy times.

The Rev. Karen Buker
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, West Allis

Third Wednesday of Advent - December 16, 2020

<i>Wednesday</i>	Psalms 119:49-72 ❖ 49, [53]
	Isa. 9:8-17 2 Pet. 2:1-10a Mark 1:1-8

I learned to pray the Daily Office while a peer minister for the University of Colorado's Canterbury campus ministry. One of the peer minister's duties was to share leadership of daily 8am Morning Prayer. These services were sometimes attended by two or three people, and never more than five. Not only did I learn the rhythm of prayer that shapes my life as a person of faith, I was also exposed repeatedly to great swaths of the psalter.

One morning we read a portion of Psalm 119, the longest of the psalms. After finishing Morning Prayer, the priest of the parish turned to me and declared, "I can't stand that psalm! He's such a suck up and brown-noser, and he just goes on and on!" Her words have stuck with me ever since, and I can't read the psalm without noticing how full of himself the psalmist seems to be in this moment. "Their heart is gross and fat, but my delight is in your law" (Psalm 119:70). Ugh.

Fortunately, the other thing I learned about the psalms during this time was about balance. For every imprecatory psalm there is a psalm of praise; for every Psalm 119 there is a Psalm 53 to balance it out. "Every one has proved faithless; all alike have turned bad; there is none who do good; no, not one" (Psalm 53:3). It might not be uplifting, but at least it's honest.

When I read these portions of the psalter together I see a reflection of myself. There are moments when I delight in the law of the Lord, when I "hasten and do not tarry to keep [the Lord's] commandments" (Psalm 119:60) and there are moments when my confidence is so shaken by the lack of my own faithfulness that I condemn not only myself but all around me, sure that all people will be found faithless by God. What I look at myself in these psalms I see a way to increase compassion toward myself and those I greet each day at the Hospitality Center. None of us can be expected to live like Psalm 119 at all times. We have experienced too much brokenness and sin is rooted deep within. And yet, we are also not all condemned as Psalm 53 might lead us to believe.

Instead, the truth is found in yet another portion of the psalter we read today: "God will ransom my life; he will snatch me from the grasp of death" (Psalm 49:15). This verse is an important corrective, reminding me that the primary actor in the drama of the life of faith is not me or my neighbors. The primary actor in the drama is God. It is God who meets me in my pride and in my faithlessness; it is God who saves. As the darkness continues to deepen around us and our waiting for the coming of Jesus continues, let us find rest in the good news of God, the hope of our salvation.

The Rev. Seth Raymond
The Hospitality Center, Racine

Third Thursday in Advent - December 17, 2020

<i>Thursday</i>	Psalms 50 ❖ [59, 60] or 33
	Isa. 9:18--10:4 2 Pet. 2:10b-16 Matt. 3:1-12

As you would expect, we needed to write these reflections back in November to get them together in order to publish for Advent. So while it's December 17th for you, it's November 6th for me! Can you remember that? It is in the days after the presidential election when all the votes are still being counted. Can you remember the stress, the vitriol, and the uncertainty? I hope that December 17th finds us all in more certain times, but perhaps they aren't.

For most of us during our living memories, Advent has been a time of preparation for Christmas. We clergy attempt to tell our parishioners to slow down and find quiet, even as our lives generally go crazy. This year is different. There has been so much pain and loss in so many areas of our lives. For many people, this year has already been way too slow and quiet. Despite the loud anger in public discourse, this year has been one of isolation and loss of loving voices for far too many.

I often tell parishioners that if anyone tells you they have a perfect understanding of why suffering exists, you should swiftly turn around and walk the other way. The answer we draw from our scriptures around suffering does not answer why it exists but reminds us that God deigns to suffer with us. Jesus often didn't answer his disciples directly — instead telling parables. Likewise, we are not given pat answers about suffering. Still, God points to Jesus in the manger, preaching the Sermon on the Mount, hanging on the Cross, and showing his resurrected body to his disciples. God is with us in our trials and travails, and this is why we can affirm with Julian of Norwich that "All shall be well" in the end.

In our Gospel reading for today, we are given the opportunity to remember that the birth and ministry of Jesus was not during a happy time. Judea suffered under a mad tyrant propped up by an occupying empire that ruled through terror and brutal, sudden violence. The people flock to the wilderness to see John the Baptist, who is preaching repentance. The ax is lying at the tree's root; the winnowing fork is in God's hand. Things are about to change. As Mary sang in the Magnificat, the one who is to cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly is about to begin his public ministry after receiving baptism at the hand of John. The wheel of history is turning, and humanity will never be the same. Caesar and Herod are gone, but Jesus remains.

If we are in a different place this Advent, perhaps we are in a place more akin to the place where Jesus, John, Mary, Elizabeth, and Joseph were. All of them made it through the Gospel story with the support of their communities even when they were separated from them. Perhaps this Advent, instead of looking for more quiet and solitude, we should be intentionally seeking out more community. This is true even if that needs to be online or socially-distanced in order to protect those we love. God does not promise us peaceful and quiet lives, but that Jesus will be with us in the struggle, pain and anguish. The communities that support us help embody that presence of God-With-Us, Emmanuel.

While we yearn for the certainty of previous Advents, there is much we can learn by living into our current uncertainty, knowing that Jesus is the Lord of history and will never leave us.

The Rev. David Simmons
St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Waukesha

Third Friday in Advent - December 18, 2020

<i>Friday</i>	Psalms 40, 54 ❖ 51
	Isa. 10:5-19 2 Pet. 2:17-22 Matt. 11:2-15

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Psalm 51:10

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation. We are waiting and preparing for the birth of our Savior. Waiting can be difficult at times. We want things or events to happen NOW. The anticipation is like a five year old waiting for Christmas morning to run down the stairs to open the wonderfully wrapped gifts under the sparkling Christmas tree.

Waiting can also be a gift--a gift in which we can grow and learn so much about ourselves as an individual person and also as a child of God. We can take the time to slow our walk of faith with Jesus and use that time of waiting to strengthen our personal relationship with our creator and to grow spiritually as a Christian.

I suggest that during this period of waiting each of us take the time for self examination. Take this time to prepare yourself for the birth of our Savior. Examine your heart and ask for God to create in you a clean heart and steadfast spirit. We are all sinners; none of us is perfect. Each one of us has made mistakes or choices that were not the best for ourselves or those that we love. That can be hard to swallow at times. No one likes to accept or be accountable for bad choices for ourselves or others, but here again is the gift! We have a God who loves us unconditionally. We have a God who wants a personal and

loving relationship with each and every one of us. We have a God who grants us forgiveness and mercy simply because we ask for it. That means it is a given. What a gift!!

Living for Christ does not mean that as a follower we will not sin or screw up, but as followers or disciples, we ask for forgiveness, get up and move forward, knowing that we are forgiven. In John 14:2 we are told that God's house has many rooms and that God has prepared a room for each of God's children. There is a place, a room waiting for you in God's house which is another gift to be grateful for and to acknowledge as we wait. Knowing that God has room prepared for you, take the time to prepare room in your heart and home for the coming of Jesus. Take some time to be still and know God as it says in Psalm 46:10. Take some time to declutter the space in your heart or home to create that space for your savior.

Finally as we prepare to receive and celebrate the greatest gift reflect on Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Reflection: What does it mean for you during Advent for God to create in you a new heart and a right spirit? How can that change your approach to life and relationships?

Lisa Chmielewski
St. Thomas of Canterbury Episcopal Church, Greendale

Third Saturday in Advent - December 19, 2020

<i>Saturday</i>	Psalms 55 ❖ 138, 139:1-17(18-23)
	Isa. 10:20-27 Jude 17-25 Luke 3:1-9

Is your life made easier when you get into your car and tell your car/GPS where you want to go, and it provides a map with directions and traffic info for you? I enjoy using this technology, but sometimes we need to recognize that it is not perfect, and if we depend on it too much and not double check it from time to time it can cost us a lot of time and distance. As an example, if I tell it I want to go to Jackson, Michigan, and it interprets that as Jackson, Mississippi, I will be OK when I travel I-94 on cruise control from Milwaukee to Chicago, but then the route will diverge significantly. If I am not paying much attention (and it is so easy to get distracted by companionship or use of other technologies in the car) then I may end up going quite a distance before needing to make a course correction.

This can happen in many aspects of life, particularly as we attempt to follow the Way of Jesus. We set a course, and it may go well for quite some time. But we get comfortable with our life's cruise control, or we may get distracted by any/all of the things that make up the "busy-ness" of our lives. So we may not notice when we start to diverge. And then...

We learn today from the selection of Luke appointed (Luke 3:1-9) that God's word came to a man named John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. He responded by proclaiming a baptism of repentance. In other words, the Israelites have gone off course – they needed a correction in following God. People come to him because they have heard he is a prophet, and John is not exactly kind to them.

We may enjoy Advent because it brings to us themes of hope. Of light in the darkness. And, of course, we are preparing for Christmass – however that might come to us this year. Especially this year we need light and hope, and Christ.

Advent also brings us the encouragement to examine ourself and check the course we are actually on, and if it is the best course for us to follow Christ. (For those of you who participate in a 12-Step program, this might sound familiar – particularly to Steps 4, 5 and 10.) Search your heart. Where and how in your life have you not loved God, your neighbor, yourself, to the best that you are able? Admit it. Own it. Then turn around (repent) to correct to a more true course in following Jesus.

Take advantage of this opportunity that Advent encourages. When we do we find that we experience a deeper, fuller journey with Christ. Our hope of the season expands. Our light in the darkness burns brighter. Our Christmass celebration becomes

more joyful. Because it is our role, our call, our mission as a member of the body of Christ to bring the hope of Christ and the light of Christ and the joy of Christ into this world.

The Rev. Terry Garner
St. Boniface Episcopal Church, Mequon

Fourth Sunday of Advent - December 20, 2020

<i>Sunday</i>	Psalms 24, 29 ❖ 8, 84
	Isa. 42:1-12 Eph. 6:10-20 John 3:16-21

Most years besides this, we host some kind of evening “Advent reception” in our home for vestry members and others. It is what you would expect, with a bit of a mid-century twist: fire in the fireplace, aluminum Christmas tree and color wheel in the corner, Bing Crosby crooning in the background, cocktail weenies in the crockpot, and cocktails to hand. In preparation one year, I changed out the lightbulbs in the foyer fixtures in order to create a warm, inviting atmosphere for guests upon entrance. Truth be told, though, dimly lit rooms are also excellent for concealing the less-festive ornaments of dust, wall scuffs, and the fact that we have dogs. At the end of the day, we are *not* a mid-century family and Alice Nelson does not live with us. Our house, just like our lives, looks different in the light. Our carpets are stained both night and day; it is just that during the day they are seen as such. The light is not the stain. The light is the judgment.

In today’s reading from John’s gospel, it says that “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” Evil is strong word—one we do not much like applying to people, especially ourselves. We think of folks instead as “not so bad” or “could be worse” or perhaps even “better than her or him”. That is, however, the moral equivalent of lurking in dimly lit foyers. Greed, gluttony, pride, in all of their many manifestations, separate us from God. They separate us one from another and from those referenced by John only by degree, not substance; and because they are such a part of our nature, we cannot always see them in ourselves. As Dr. King wrote years ago, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that”. We need the light.

Perhaps the best gift I was ever given was being encouraged by my earliest Sunday School teachers to memorize John 3:16. For as long as I can remember, in my heart if not in heaven, God has been nothing *but* love, generosity, truth, and salvation. In other words, Jesus is the light. And if that was not good enough, I was later pleased to discover in verse 17 that Jesus came into the world not to make me feel bad about myself, not to condemn, but to reveal and to save. “Those who do what is true come to the light,” John wrote a couple verses later, “so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” When we *invite* the light in, we see ourselves more clearly. When we *live* in the light, we are given the power to change and are set free to serve. And in so doing, we *reflect* the light to a world yet in love with darkness. Festive foyers are probably good enough (with no offense intended!) for unsuspecting vestry members. Fresh carpet, painted walls, and dustless shelves, seen in the light of the glorious day, is the proper reception for the return of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

What is it the song says? *Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let every heart prepare him room.*

The Rev. Scott Seefeldt
Zion Episcopal Church, Oconomowoc

Fourth Monday of Advent - December 21, 2020

<i>Monday</i>	Psalms 61, 62 ❖ 112, 115
	Isa. 11:1-9 Rev. 20:1-10 John:5:30-47

What amazing Hebrew poetry! What an incredible picture Isaiah paints of an Eden like kingdom! It almost seems like heaven on earth doesn’t it? In these times, I find myself reading this passage as it can be related to our present world. Our world is full

of hurt, fear and injury which we have allowed to develop and govern us. It is something like the times of Isaiah. I view our world as the stump of Jesse and God's people as a synonym for the branch which will shoot forth to bear the fruits of new beginning for healing, peace, and justice. All this is only through the grace and wisdom of God.

We live in a time where divisiveness is so rampant; it takes a passage such as this to encourage us to pause and reimagine what we want, even more importantly, need our world to become. If we consider the animals, side by side, living without fear, we can easily replace those images with our hope for people. People who have learned behaviors to be fearful of one another, those which they know little about, and general differences which many prefer not to try and understand or embrace. Imagine what it would be like for harmony, tolerance, and tranquility to be the norm. Like the animals in this passage, all people are created and loved by God. God's wish for humanity is freedom, equity, and security. God wants all of us to not be afraid and care for those in need. God wants the marginalized to be lifted. God desires us to rely on holy wisdom and make our decisions with righteousness, confident in this guidance.

How do we bring this idyllic kingdom to full and glorious fruition? We cannot. We are human and fallible. What we can do is try. It will be hard work. We will need to admit our wrongs, acknowledge that which has been intensely hidden, and erase the deeply ingrained. It will take a lot of reflection, soul searching, and listening. We put our trust in God, as God tells us what to let go of and what to hold sacred. We must let God fill us with peace, as we fill others with peace and erase fears. We must fully embrace God's presence and guidance- even when it seems like it is too hard for us.

We will need to become leaders like the little child turning our eyes to all creation with wonder and excitement about possibilities. We will need to let go of fear and learn to trust more. We can lay aside our self-interest and begin to fearlessly champion the needy. We can stop judging and start laying groundwork for understanding. We do all of this and more with the abiding Holy Spirit; our advocate which never rests.

God created us to love and be loved. The apathy, disdain, and fear of each other are what we have learned. In the words of Rogers and Hammerstein (from South Pacific). "You've got to be Carefully Taught." God invites into love. God invites us to walk with Jesus. God wants us to listen, and we need to listen.

If we do this, we can unlearn what displeases God that we may be mindful of God's counsel and treat each other with righteousness. There are many references in the Bible to Jesus' teachings. Let God be our teacher. Only through this can we heal our world with hope and move a step closer to Isaiah's prophetic kingdom.

Lisa-Marie Bartlett
Trinity Episcopal Church, Janesville

Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle - December 21

	Morning Prayer	Evening Prayer
St. Thomas <i>December 21</i>	Psalms 23,121 Job 42:1-6 1 Peter 1:3-9	Psalm 27 Isaiah 43:8-13 John 14:1-7

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death. -O Antiphon (December 21)

St. Thomas was a Jew and probably a Galilean of humble birth, but we are not told that he was a fisherman or the circumstances in which our Lord made him an apostle. His name is Syriac, and means the 'twin;' Didymus, as we know he was also called, is the Greek equivalent. This apostle is especially remembered for his incredulity after our Lord suffered, had risen from the dead, and on the same day appeared to His disciples to convince them of the truth of His resurrection. This is the story we hear in today's Gospel passage.

St. Thomas, like many of us, had doubts. In the Gospel passage he struggled to see the Lord in his presence and needed proof that it was him. Thomas believed because he saw the Lord and was able to put his finger in his side and his wounds, but Jesus said, “blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have learned to believe.” There is probably a little bit of Thomas in each one of us, but we must “walk by faith and not by sight.”

During this season of Advent, we have been called to open our hearts in joyful expectation. First, for the second time Christ will come into our lives, when He will return in all his glory. Like the servants of the Gospel on the first Sunday of Advent, we “must keep awake – for we do not know when the master of the house will come.” Thomas did not seem to heed this warning. Even when his fellow disciples said that they had seen the Lord, he doubted! It was not until Christ spoke to him and showed him his wounds, that he believed.

Second, nearing the end of this season of Advent we turn our attention to the first time he came into our lives, specifically in the incarnation. Yesterday, we heard the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and she too had doubts and was perplexed by his words. After Gabriel explained that she had been found in favor and that “nothing will be impossible with God,” Mary released those doubts and let all things happen to her according to his words.

As we remember St. Thomas and celebrate these final days of Advent, let us let the splendor of eternal light come and shine on us who dwell in the darkness of doubt and in the shadow of death. Christ may not be physically present to us, but God sends others into our daily lives to help alleviate doubts as we journey in faith.

We may struggle with a pandemic, cancer, unemployment, troubles within our families, a co-worker, a breakdown with a significant other or just plain doubt. But “nothing will be impossible with God.”

So, Everliving God, who strengthened your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in your Son’s resurrection: Grant us so perfectly and without doubt to believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that our faith may never be found wanting in your sight; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Scott W. Eakins, MA
St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church, Hartford

Fourth Tuesday of Advent - December 22, 2020

<i>Tuesday</i>	Psalms 66, 67 ❖ 116, 117
	Isa 11:10-16 Rev. 20:11--21:8 Luke 1:5-25

“I love that the LORD hears my voice, my plea for mercy” (Ps. 116, v. 1, A New Psalm).

“The LORD protects the simplehearted;/when I was in great need, he saved me” (Ps. 116, v. 6, NIV).

The second verse of Psalm 116 leapt out at me when I was meditating on the readings for this day. The word that struck me was “simplehearted.” All of the other translations in my house use the word “simple,” including the Book of Common Prayer. “Simplehearted” is so fresh, so winsome; yet, how seldom I am simplehearted! I approach the world with doubt, questions—to be truthful, often with cynicism. I work very hard at protecting myself from...from what? From disappointment? From having my hopes crushed, my fears realized? What a burden to bear! What would it feel like to simpleheartedly let go of that burden, to trust God to be the strength that I’ll need? I can hardly imagine it; the self-protection that I viewed as safety has restricted my soul’s ability to relax, to laugh, to be free.

All through Advent, we have been looking forward to the coming of a child, an infant completely dependent on the adults in his life to protect him. Those adults were in difficult straits, roughing it in a stable/cave because even money couldn’t buy them shelter in an inn. There was NO room. The perception of scarcity makes us human creatures grasp even more tightly the little we have, feeling we must do “whatever” to protect what is ours. In Bethlehem that night, there was so little room that no one felt they could give up their space, not even for a man with a very pregnant wife. Only a simpleton would do that because anyone could see that the donor would now be the one without a room. Besides, what difference would one night’s lodging make in the life of that couple? The man was sturdy and the girl was young; surely, they would be okay.

How far we have come from “simplehearted!” Wretched human that I am, who can free me from the restraining bonds of my own self-protection? Thanks be to God, the infant who was born in the cave that night has shown the way. “Become like little children,” he said. “Blessed are the meek,” he taught. “Be like the Samaritan,” he illustrated, featuring a social pariah who saw another’s need and responded with compassion before his “better mind” could enumerate the risks. (I’ve often wished I could hear what his wife said when he got home with less money than she was expecting. For her sake, I hope she rolled her eyes and said, “You’re such a simpleton—and that’s why I love you so!”)

My digression has brought me back to Psalm 116 and its opening words: “I love.” What a wonderful way to open a statement! Imagine how much better our lives would be if we could begin our interior monologues as well as our public speech with those words. My Christian and Jewish commentaries note that the phrase, “I love,” is left without a noun object. Normally, we say “I love X,” like “I love apple pie,” or “I love you.” But the writer of this psalm began simply with “I love.” To help contemporary readers with this object-less opening, my modern Jewish translation (which I love) writes “I love that the Lord hears my voice.” One little word, “that,” provides a delightful space for other constructions to rush in. My love is no longer tied to a bare noun; instead, it’s freed to embrace clauses. I can say to my two-year-old, “I love that you are so curious about every single pot and pan in our cupboards.” I do, and I did! I remember my children’s terrible twos and in spite of it all, I loved each two-year-old, even with pots and pans all over the floor.

For me, the objectless beginning of the Psalm gives space for the simplehearted. It allows me to open my arms wide and dance in the snow instead of only grumbling while I scrape the car windows. It reminds me that, while I dance, I have a spotter, Someone who will catch me when (not if) I fall. I can almost feel restraints slipping from my wrists as I reach out to embrace God’s amazing, surprising, confounding creation. This coming Christmas season, I want to live into the “that space,” beginning my sentences with a simplehearted “I love” and discovering what or Who will enter the new place in my soul.

Sheryl Slocum

St. Thomas of Canterbury Episcopal Church, Greendale

Fourth Wednesday of Advent - December 23, 2020

<i>Wednesday</i>	Psalms 72 ❖ 111, 113
	Isa. 28:9-22 Rev. 21:9-21 Luke 1:26-38

It is that time of year once again when we are reminded of Mary’s great faith when the angel Gabriel revealed God’s plan for her. I always read this passage with a hesitant yet fond familiarity. I know the story. And I know I need work in the faith department. Yet as I progressed through the verses, I found myself troubled just as Mary was troubled. For I realized that her concern came before she learned about her pending pregnancy.

I guess I always jumped to the conclusion that the thought of being with child before her marriage to Joseph was formalized, was the reason for her concern. Knowing what the community would think of her, knowing what Joseph would think and have every right to do in that culture, and knowing that she could possibly even be stoned to death would give anyone a good reason to be troubled.

But as I looked again at verses 28 and 29, I found that she was troubled before she heard any details of her call. She was troubled because of Gabriel’s salutation, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” It even says that she wondered what kind of a greeting that was. I then began to think about how I would react to those words without knowing the rest of the story.

I’m sorry to say that the cynical and sarcastic tendencies of my character would probably emerge front and center. Highly favored? Really? Ya, right! And yes, God is with me. But I just wish He would make His presence a bit more obvious.

Looking once again at what her pregnancy would mean for her, I realized just how much she needed that greeting. She truly had to take it seriously in order to stand strong through all that she would face. She had to believe that she was favored and that God was with her before she could choose to accept the impossible into her life. She had to believe it with all her heart.

How many times are we faced with the same situation when God tells us we are His and He is with us? Only when we can accept that truth, can we then go on to accept the impossible promises in His Word. We are forgiven (Psalm 103:3). There is now no condemnation (Romans 8:1). God causes all things to work together for good (Romans 8:28). He will give us rest (Matthew 11:28). He will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5). Greater is He that is in us than he who is in this world (1 John 4:4). Ask and we shall receive (John 16:24)! These are just a few of His promises and all seem rather impossible most of the time. But when even one of those promises becomes real in our lives, our lives become more and more a beacon of light in a dark world.

So it is still about Mary's great faith. Only after she put her faith in God could she respond, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Just when I felt I knew this story, God took me back to the beginning. As Isaiah said, the Word IS precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little there a little. That's how our faith grows... by small determined baby steps while standing on top of a solid foundation.

Jesus is the Word. And every one of us is called to accept the Word that the Spirit of God places in our hearts, so that we can give His truth birth into this world.

Terrie Knox
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Fort Atkinson

Christmas Eve - December 24, 2020

<i>Dec 24 - Morning</i>	Psalms 45, 46
	Isa. 35:1-10 Rev. 22:12-17, 21 Luke 1:67-80
<i>Christmas Eve</i>	Psalms 89:1-29
	Isa. 59:15b-21 Phil. 2:5-11

To express our deepest pain and longing, we often leave behind measured sentences of prose and turn to the verses of poetry and song. In the midst of the political, economic and global-health chaos of this last year, many have been quoting the famous poem by W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming:"

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

Yeats wrote his poem shortly after the end of World War I, when so many were grieving their dead, grieving the loss of order and the notion of humanity's steady upward progress. If war had laid bare humanity's darkest impulses, what could be coming next?

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

Two thousand years before Yeats, the gospel writer Luke sets out to tell the story of the One born in Bethlehem. The vast majority of the time he tells this story in prose, but in the very first chapter, the main characters break into poetic song, unspooling verses which have formed the church for centuries. Told that she carries the Messiah, Mary offers the poetry of the Magnificat. And just after her song, Luke records the song of Zechariah. Zechariah had been told that he would be a father late in life and that his child would one day help turn the hearts of people back to the Lord. Disbelieving this was possible, the Lord struck Zechariah dumb. And when his tongue is finally loosened poetry spills from his mouth.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; *
he has come to his people and set them free.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers *
and to remember his holy covenant.

Zechariah is familiar with ache and longing. He knew the excruciating pain of not being able to father a child, month after month, year after year. He knew political and economic pain and longing. Israel had been ransacked by one Middle Eastern power after another, and Zechariah came of age with the boot of the Rome Empire pressed on the neck of the people. But God would remember. God would not give up on them. God would come to save.

We have come to a Christmas Eve, where normally there might be great celebration. This evening we should be watching sheep and costumed shepherds shuffle towards Bethlehem. We should be singing carols in candlelight and drinking from the heaviest chalice. We should be basking in the light and warmth of human fellowship. Many of us will do our best to have small celebrations, but this day will no doubt be full of longing. Our church building will spend much of this Christmas Eve in darkness.

The Song of Zechariah is written not only for those of us who wonder when we will return to church, but those who have known all kinds of darkness. Those who felt the center of our souls would not hold, forces of anxiety or addiction pulling us apart. Those who have recently buried loved ones with just the barest of liturgies. Those who now look for work. The darkness and uncertainty of deepening political division.

But Bethlehem is close. Into our longing, we have the promise that the center will hold, that God will not forsake us.

In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

I love the poetic contrast of God's tender compassion breaking upon us, a wave of loving kindness crashing over us. I love the image of the Lord sending One who will guide our feet in the way of peace.

When so much feels so out of control, each of us can choose the song we sing. Will we add to the cries of fear and anxiety that the center will not hold? Or will we with our lips and with our lives sing into the darkness a song of God's tender compassion breaking in around us? What will you sing this day?

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
Christ Episcopal Church, Whitefish Bay

Christmas Day - December 25, 2020

<i>Christmas Day</i>	Psalms 2, 85 ❖ 110:1-5(6-7), 132
	Zech. 2:10-13 1 John 4:7-16 John 3:31-36

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:7

Long ago – more years than I care to count – I was working my way through a graduate degree in Nursing School. One of my teachers was a bright woman named Libby Dayani. One time we were talking, and she recounted a difficult time in her marriage. Not just a “rough patch.” She and her husband had separated, she was determined to divorce.

As usually happens, they met with lawyers. She was ready to hear his list of demands. Only... he didn't have any. Why not? - she blurted out. Because I love you. And he wouldn't budge. In fact he wanted for her to have everything. The house, the car, the money. Everything. No matter how hard she pressed him, he made no demands, only told her that God had shown him a way to love and he was dedicated to that way.

Now, Libby was a Christian, but was not so generous as her husband. He was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. He came to the US for college, where a friend had given him a copy of the New Testament. He read through it until he got to the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. He read through that chapter once, then twice. Then again and again, and as so often happens, the Holy Spirit struck and he vowed to follow this Jesus... He was converted by love. Pure, vulnerable love.

Libby's husband's vulnerability chipped away at her anger and softened the hardness of heart that hurt had caused. She gave up. His vulnerability, his love, and restored their relationship.

What does it mean to be vulnerable to another person? It is to relinquish any power you have over that person, giving it to them so that they have the power to love or to hate you, to treat you horribly or well. Please let me be clear – this is not an argument that people should remain in abusive relationships! It is, however, a call to forgiveness, to the healing of one's own heart.

It is exactly this vulnerable love that we celebrate today as we remember the birth of a tiny baby, long, long ago. Jesus, so weak, vulnerable, and new, laid in a manger on a bed of hay, teaches us what it means to love. That vulnerability will continue to be his constant companion throughout life, even until he is mocked by those who would send him to his death, death on a cross.

We are called to imitate God's vulnerability. When we are vulnerable, we know a love that is palpable, that nourishes us, that slakes our thirst, that shows us, in turn, how to love one another. It mocks all pride. It tenderly lifts up those whom we look down upon while assuring us that we are not made any less by bowing down, by loving generously. You will have known about this sort of vulnerability any time you have been thrust into a situation of conflict. Whether it be your family, church, work, friendships. Perhaps you can think of a place where vulnerability would be a healing balm? The greatest of gifts.

Remember these words as we move together from Christ's birth onward: Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

- 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8a

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