

# ADVENT

DEVOTIONAL



# ADVENT 2021

I am excited to present the sixth annual Advent Guide for the Friends University community. Fredrick Buechner so eloquently introduces us to the season as “The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”

This season on the Church calendar is one ripe with expectation. It invites us to an expectant waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ. My hope is that as you journey through these pages with our community, you will encounter Christ.

Each devotional contains a daily reading of the scriptures as well as reflections from a staff member, faculty or student. Some days simply invite you to read scripture and provide a guide for a spiritual practice.

I am grateful for all the staff, faculty and students who shared their thoughts and reflections for us to consider this season. I am thankful for our Ministry Assistants for Media, Joel Gaddie and Alaina Madden who have taken this on as a “special project.” None of this would be possible without these contributions.

I pray these reflections on Scripture will guide you on your journey to encounter Christ in the manger on Christmas day.

Grace and Peace,

Haley Blackwell  
Associate Campus Pastor of Formation

# A GUIDE FOR DAILY DEVOTION

## **Quiet Your Heart**

As we seek the Lord, it is important that we slow our pace, our mind and our body, so we might better “see” and “hear” what the Lord might have for us. A major part of preparing a place for God to speak involves turning down the volume of the noisy world we have become so accustomed to living in. Take a few minutes to focus your mind’s attention, and heart’s affection, on the ever-presence of Jesus.

## **Opening Prayer**

Comfort, comfort your people, O God!  
Speak peace to your people.  
Comfort those who sit in darkness and mourn,  
Forgive us our sins and end the conflict in our lives.

## **The Reading of Scripture**

Take time to slowly, and prayerfully, read the Scripture passages assigned for the day. Pay special attention to words or phrases that might stand out to you.

## **The Devotional Reflection**

Read the devotional reflection for the day. Look and listen for how the Lord might be speaking through the thoughts and reflections of another.

## **Listen for God**

Before you rush on to the next part of your day, take a few moments to sit with the things you have read, and ask God if there is something specific for you to take away for today. If you sense a leading, be willing to follow it. Maybe write it down somewhere where you will be reminded of it. Allow this to orient you and the work, relationships and experiences you have throughout your day.

## **Prayers**

The following is a suggested guide for prayer during Advent:

- Pray for all Christians around the world and especially for those who endure persecution for their faith.
- Pray for our nation and all those in authority.
- Pray that Christ’s peace may cover the world. Pray for the end of conflict and war and the triumph of truth and justice.
- Pray for those who suffer and grieve.
- Pray for all those who engage in the educational ministry of the Church and especially for Friends University.

# SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28

Jeremiah 33:14-16 | Psalm 25:1-10 | 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 | Luke 21:25-36

Think about the different things that we put our trust in each day. When we sit down we are putting our trust in the fact that the chair will not break or when we drive we put trust in the abilities of other drivers. Every day we are placing our trust in things, whether we realize it or not but when we stop to think about it, how many times have those things let you down? Even the closest people in our lives, there are still areas where they have let us down.

Psalms 25:1-10 offers us something better to put our trust in. In verses 1-3, David explains where he allows his trust to fall: God. He is the only thing that we can put our trust in that will not let us down. David explains that none who wait for the Lord and trust in him will be put to shame. As this section of scripture begins to wrap up, we gain a glimpse of the true character of God.

Verse 10 is an exciting promise that all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and testimonies. This is what we have the opportunity to place our trust in. For those who are faithful to God, He will be faithful in return. God's actions toward us come out of love and faithfulness. This is a very different view from a judgmental God that many still hold. God is not out to get us but rather he desires a relationship with us and this is the good news.

Keaton Mannebach



## WEEK ONE

## MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29

Psalms 90 | Numbers 17:1-11 | 1 Peter 3:1-18

To understand these verses, like any other verse in the Bible, we have to look at the full context. Looking back to 1 Peter 2:21-25 we see an explanation of Christ's suffering and a call for us to follow in His steps. We are called to submit to Christ. In reading 1 Peter 3:1 for the first time, I found myself being angry. Angry that by reading this verse at face value our society has misconstrued the meaning of these verses. Society has changed these verses to mean wives should blindly follow their husbands. I am reminded of Ephesians 5:22-23, "Wives be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church. He Himself being the Savior of the body."

These two verses both refer to the wife's and husband's role in marriage. In order to fully understand this, we must look to the verses before. In 1 Peter 2:21-25 and in Ephesians 5:21, these verses talk about submitting to Christ first, about learning to love your husband or wife as Christ first loved us. That is what submitting to your husband means. Husbands are first called to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

Now I don't have much experience in marriage, but every romance novel or movie I have ever encountered presents marriage as teamwork. Both partners must submit to Christ first and then each other. This advent season we need to focus on listening to God, following His plan for our lives, and then apply that to every relationship, romantic or not, in our lives.

Rose Nicole

## TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30

Psalms 21 | Isaiah 41:14-20 | Romans 15:14-21

The season of Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time set apart in the church calendar to remember that we are waiting for the coming Christ. We enter into a time where we remember the ancient Jews who long awaited their Messiah, and likewise, we contemplate and await the return of Christ, with whom comes the restoration of the world and the New Jerusalem. In Advent, we are waiting for the fulfillment of Christ's promise of a renewed world. Isaiah 41:17-18 reads: When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them. I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare height and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water.

What are we to do in this waiting? We live in a parched and thirsty world. Brokenness surrounds us, and we feel that brokenness in our own lives. God promises restoration and water to quench our thirst. As the body of Christ, we seek for this water each day, and by extension we become the quenching water for the world. The water we receive is but a foretaste of the ultimate restoration which we await. In this time of Advent, let us each seek formation into deeper Christ-likeness. In our waiting, let us each meditate more deeply on our calling as the body of Christ.

God quenches our thirst through our worship and prayer, through our community and through our solitude, and through the many practices that the Christian life has to offer. As the Holy Spirit continually forms us, we each become, as with Paul in Romans 15, "a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God." During this Advent, meditate on what it means to be in the body of Christ. We have a hope that we are now awaiting. May we each rediscover that hope in this season and may God continually quench our thirst for restoration.

Devin Withrow

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1

Psalm 90 | Isaiah 1:24-31 | Luke 11:29-32

The kingdom of God has come. That is Jesus' message. The kingdom of God is here, and we are invited to be a part of its work on this earth. As we walk through this Advent season, preparing our hearts and celebrating the coming of our Messiah, let us not forget that we live on this side of Jesus. He changed this world when he declared His message about the kingdom of God, and His entire ministry on this earth was changing lives because of that. It may not seem like it, but we live in that same era of God's kingdom here on earth. Jesus' work changed this world for good and He is still changing lives among us every day. Being a part of that kingdom we have the opportunity to partner with God in His work of changing lives—bringing life. Only if you choose to.

As the Psalms passage reminds us, our lives on this earth are short. Compared to God's span across this universe, our lives are a vapor. Isaiah 1:29 is a message, directed toward the historical kings of Judah, as well as a challenge to 21st-century followers of Christ. God is doing work, changing lives in the new kingdom which He has brought to this earth, and what a blessing it is that we have the opportunity to be a part of it if we choose. As you celebrate the coming of Jesus' birth this Advent season, examine Jesus Himself. Take a walk through the gospels, see how Jesus spent his time, and let the Spirit challenge you with the way you spend your time. Be encouraged knowing that you live on this side of Jesus' life on earth. Take heart that Jesus' work continues every day and you have a chance to be a part of it firsthand.

Emma Willhour

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2

Malachi 3:5-12 | Luke 1:68-79 | Philippians 1:12-18

God is sometimes opposite from what we all think. In these passages, God breaks many expectations. In Malachi 5:8, He talks about how he wants to destroy the people who have robbed him, and He rejects the sacrifices they are bringing Him. God sounds vengeful. Yet, He ends His speech with how this nation will be called "blessed." In Luke, the prophet Zechariah is saying that God would come among His people and would, "bring light to those who sit in darkness". Zechariah came 500 years before Jesus was born and 400 of those years were silent. God did not speak to His people. It makes you wonder what is God thinking here? Finally, in Philippians, we get a little more context because we see Jesus walk and talk as God among His people. However, Paul is imprisoned. He's sitting there writing a letter to a church and explaining how prison is a good thing. It makes you wonder what God is up to.

Thankfully, He is up to something, even if it's confusing. If we dig into His word, we will find Him there. We can notice all of the little details and realize why He's doing what He's doing. In Malachi, God was devastated that His people were striving so hard to sacrifice to Him, and yet their hearts were still wandering. His punishment was actually a blessing that would teach them about His love. Our God is not one to look at outward appearances. He looks at the heart. It's weird to us, because no human can gaze into someone else's heart, but God can. Regarding the 400 years of silence, we observe in Luke that God was preparing. Rome was being built, with roads that would stretch throughout Europe. With that, the word of Christ could spread tremendously far. Finally, Paul writes from prison about the opportunity to share Jesus with the prison guards. Even if these are people lowly in station, God cares about these people. Going into this Advent season let's keep in mind that our God is a God of surprises. If we look into them, we find they are great surprises.

Faith Cox

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3

Luke 1:68-79 | Malachi 3:13-18 | Philippians 1:18b-26

As you go throughout this Advent season, it is easy to get caught up in the business of finals and the noise around you. You may drive past a nativity scene and reflect for a moment, but how often are you pointing your mind back to Christ? This passage not only says to merely reflect on the facts of the gospel, but to act. In Philippians, it says, "If I am in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me."

What are you doing every day that is pointing others to Christ? Are you worried and making up missed assignments as you excitedly await presents and shopping for a Christmas tree? Is this causing you to be preoccupied, missing the people around you? Or when you wake up are you telling yourself, "To live is Christ." 2 Corinthians 5: 14-15 says, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

We are called to live each day with our eyes fixed on Jesus. Let me ask this question, are you so worried about gifts and a holiday feeling that you are forgetting the most important gift of all? The second part of Philippians 1: 21 says, "and to die is gain." These might be puzzling words to a lot of us. What this is saying is that the greatest gift of all is eternal life through Christ. There is a gift offered to us each day, whether that be Christmas day or a random day in June. As we remember the reason for the season, I challenge you to remember the reason behind every day, Jesus Christ.

Caroline Giles

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 | Isaiah 4:2-6 | Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

### Examen Prayer for Reflection:

#### 1. Awaken yourself to God's Presence

Look over the past day and take note of the moments when you felt God's presence. When did you feel Him with you, helping you or looking over you? Focus on God's presence with you right here in this moment. Ask God to make you more aware of Him. Repeat phrases such as, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me" (from Psalm 23) or "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46). These may be beneficial for connecting to God.

Any phrase or prayer that nurtures a connection with God is a good approach to awakening yourself to God's presence.

#### 2. Count your blessings/gifts

Think back over your day and make note of what you are thankful for. What made you feel blessed? Nothing is too small to be considered. Did someone hold the door for you? Did you sleep well? It may be difficult at first, but once you start your list, you will find it hard to stop. While thinking over these blessings and gifts from God, make sure to express your thanks to Him.

#### 3. Reflect on what today held for you

Consider the last 24 hours and think over everything that happened. Good or bad- don't leave anything out. We tend to rush through our day and spend little time taking an honest look at what happened. Reflection is how we learn from our experiences.

#### 4. Choose a moment from the day to pray over

While looking back over your day, you may find a situation, a relationship, an attitude or a behavior that God is calling you to realign with His teachings.

Pick a specific moment to pray over and offer it to God. Do not be afraid to ask for His help in your endeavor.

#### 5. Pray for the following day

This is the time to look to tomorrow. Ask God for His guidance and presence in the coming day. Ask Him to show you his plan for you. Know that God has seen tomorrow and has blessed you already. Breathe. Be still and know.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5

Malachi 3:1-4 | Luke 1:68-79 | Philippians 1:3-11 | Luke 3:1-6



**WEEK TWO**

In Philippians 1:3-11 Paul is praying for the Philippians. He exclaims, “I thank my God every time I remember you...I always pray with joy.” These verses solidify that deep gratitude of appreciation for select people in my life. There are many days where the time goes by and I am not aware of half the blessings that come my way. This was a great reminder to remember to pray for those who have impacted you in any way, good or bad. One thing I am learning to do is be more positive in my prayer! A lot of the time we go to God with our problems and ask for peace and guidance but in reality, we just need to take a step back and PRAY WITH JOY knowing our God is going to bless us no matter the circumstance.

Paul goes on to say, “I have you in my heart whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me.” We need to defend God and his word under all circumstances. We can never be ashamed of the gospel. This verse is just a reminder that we have God’s grace no matter who we are, what we’ve done, what we’ve said, God forgives. This brings me to the point that we need to repent daily. Repentance is a large part of walking with Christ, He has given us the gift of grace so we must ask for forgiveness and change the things in our lives that pull us away from Christ. It is more than just being apologetic, it is keeping your word with the Lord knowing it will benefit you in the long run. Ultimately, these verses just breathe light into the point that we should be thankful and remain in the Lord’s presence no matter the circumstance, knowing when we fall, God is going to be there.

Summer of 2020, I was lost. God has been my savior and He revealed things to me that I needed to know, one being who I am through Christ. Because of him, I am “able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless” (Philippians 1:10). This is essential because temptations are everywhere. I want to be forever “filled with the fruit of righteousness” (Philippians 1:10).

Moriah Shaw

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 6

Psalms 126 | Isaiah 40:1-11 | Romans 8:22-25

Psalms 126 is separated into two stanzas, verses 1-3 and 4-6. In verses 1-3, the writer is addressing acts of God in the past that brought restoration to God's people. Something that caught my eye was that verse 2 states, "we were like those who dreamed."

Looking into this, those who were dreaming in Psalms were people that had visions given to them by God. This suggests that they were like those who were in close communication and relationship with God. No wonder they described experiencing so much joy that they were full of singing and laughter. On top of feeling this joy themselves, it states that the nations that did not follow God could not help but acknowledge the great things that the Lord has done for His people.

At this point in the past, it was evident to everyone that restoration was washing over God's people. In verses 4-6, the writer is asking for this previous restoration to be given to them once again. In doing this, the writer is painting a picture of this rich joy that comes from the restoration that only God can give. Looking at this passage through the lens of Advent, we can be bubbling up with joy and excitement as we wait to celebrate the day that Jesus came into our world to restore His relationship with all of us, no matter where we are from or what we have done. How have you been sewing with tears this season, and how can you overflow with joy in the harvest?

Nicole Vick

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7

Psalms 126 | Isaiah 19:18-25 | 2 Peter 1:2-15

Oftentimes in our life, we place our identity and trust into everyday activities, athletics, relationships, jobs, school, social media and much more. These things will never satisfy us but leave us feeling empty and wanting more of what won't fill us up. Throughout our lives, we will face trials and need something to heal the pain. Oftentimes we don't understand the need for our faith until it is tested through our trials. In Isaiah 19:22, we read, "The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the Lord, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them."

When everything we put our trust into fails and we hit rock bottom then we realize how in need of God we are. He is waiting to respond to our pleas and heal us day by day. Throughout these scriptures, we see how the Lord longs to be our redeemer. He seeks to restore us and fill us with joy found only through him. God redeems, but also gives us a practical way to live by, and a way to grow stronger in our faith while also growing in the way we treat people around us.

In 2 Peter 1:5-8 we read, "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Choosing today, and each day going forward to be conscious of these qualities and working our way towards these only will strengthen the way in which we encounter others and God.

Application:

What in your life do you need to give to the Lord in order to focus on the joy we find in Christ alone? Joy and happiness are two different things. Happiness is considered to be an outward expression based on circumstances, while biblical joy is considered an inner feeling that isn't dependent on circumstances. How will you prioritize keeping joy even through the trials that you may face?

Logan Anglemeyer

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8

Psalms 126 | Isaiah 35:3-7 | Luke 7:18-30

This past August I walked into Hobby Lobby to pick up some supplies I needed and found the staff prepping the seasonal section with the plethora of trees, ornaments, stockings, and lights. While some people may be upset by the early festivities, it shows that our society continues to anticipate the arrival of Christmas day earlier and earlier every year. Even in our daily walks through life, one can find themselves in a season of waiting. Whether it be waiting on news to arrive of a loved one's sickness, waiting on a job after a term of unemployment or even waiting in line at the supermarket, our lives are marked in waiting.

Often the season can be a period of long and painful anticipation. As we continue to wait in anticipation of the coming of Christ, we must remember what scripture tells us. There must always be a season of scattering the seeds before we can celebrate the harvest. Growing up in a small town, I know about the seasons. Harvest is a painstaking goal of planting, fertilizing, and waiting. Watching a storm destroy part of your work and then more waiting. Preparing the tools of harvest and then more waiting. And after waiting, we arrive at the point of harvest. The coming of Christ was anticipated over half a millennia before His birth with the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus knew the power of waiting when he exalted the prophet John the Baptist in Luke 7 and offers the truth that we can be among those Christ if only we wait.

The truth is this: if God is not done working, we must continue to wait. Waiting is one of the toughest actions to master (especially in the realm of waiting for Christmas Day) but also the most rewarding task we can undertake. Whatever season you find yourself in this Christmas, remember the God who sent His son to save us always has our best interest in mind. His plan outweighs our momentary afflictions. Know that the harvest cannot be gathered without a season of waiting. May the peace of God be with you as we wait for the coming of Christ this season.

Josiah Bolton

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9

Isaiah 12:2-6 | Amos 6:1-8 | 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Joyously, the prophet Isaiah compels the people of God to look forward to a time when they will proclaim and rejoice in all of the good things that God has done for them. Isaiah looks forward to a time when God will become the people's salvation, and, with joy, they will draw forth from the wells of salvation. Even though Isaiah knows that the people are about to endure tremendous struggle in Exile, he reminds them that it won't always be so. They won't always live under the oppressive rule of a foreign power. God will save them; God will redeem them, and they'll have joy because God is with them.

Centuries later, the apostle Paul reminds the church of Corinth that they can endure struggles and trials because of their joy in what Jesus has done and will do for them. He tells them of the Macedonian churches who, even though they lived through severe trials, were able to experience overflowing joy and generosity, giving to a collection for Christians undergoing trials in Jerusalem. As we've all endured seasons of trial, both because of the global pandemic and ongoing racial injustice and racially motivated violence, how can we live into a radical spirit of generosity for the people around us, especially those within the family of faith?

The Macedonian churches didn't use their own suffering as an excuse to turn inwardly and hoard their resources. Instead, because of the joy they'd experienced at the wells of God's salvation, they were able to give in ways that surpassed their own generosity. How do we live into joy in times of hardship and suffering? Joy is an inherently relational experience. In *The Other Half of Church*, we learn that "Joy helps us to regulate our emotions and endure suffering. Jesus refused to relinquish joy in the midst of His suffering on the cross. When we are able to stay relationally connected to others and God, we experience joy while we suffer.

Joy does not remove our pain, but it gives us strength to endure ... 'Joy in suffering' means that God and our community are glad to be with us in our distress. They do not allow us to suffer alone." As you strive to cultivate joy in this season, invest in relational connection with others and with God, and remember that God is delighted to be with you in suffering.

Luke Stehr

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10

Isaiah 12:2-6 | Amos 8:4-12 | 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). It is with true joy that I draw that water. When I consider the famine of words from the Lord that Amos writes about, it is hard to hold that in tension with the “surpassing grace of God” that is upon me. We don’t live in that famine anymore. The Holy One of Israel is in our midst. I think I’ve been learning to celebrate that presence even outside of the ecstatic moments of feeling God’s grace. I’m grateful for the moments that sit outside of that space.

God, thank you for the words that teach me to sing and shout for joy. Teach me to give abundantly. I like to think that God sowed bountifully in us and so the harvest will be and is bountiful, too. What do you suppose it means to give abundantly? What I hadn’t noticed before is that giving abundantly “is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.”

Abundantly giving thanks is ministry. I am thankful that God helps me remember to sing his praises. I am thankful for you. I am thankful for the impacts my friends have on my life. What are you thankful for? Sing and shout for joy!

Jolene Jensen

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11

Isaiah 12:2-6 | Amos 9:8-15 | Luke 1:57-66

These passages all share a common theme: God’s redemption. From a historical perspective, the people of Israel had experienced great injustices lasting generations. First, the Israelites were exiled from their country and were lost in the desert for forty years. Later, when they were given land and started to form a country, they were overtaken by the Assyrians and led out of their homes once again. When the Israelites returned, their temple was destroyed. As you can see, the story of God’s people was one of loss and strife.

The people longed for a God that would restore their lives and right the country’s wrongs. Amos 9:8-9 reads, “Surely the eyes of the Sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth. For I will shake the people of Israel among all the nations, as grain is shaken in a sieve, and not a pebble will reach the ground.” While God can work his way by bringing justice to turbulent countries, God decided to bring His redemption in a different way to the people of Israel. God decided not just to offer liberation to the Israelites, but to everyone in the personhood of Jesus.

Jesus came to redeem the earth by first, his work teaching about the kingdom of God and how people could find the radical love and grace of God right now, on earth. Secondly, Jesus satisfied the burden of humanity’s sin when he was executed on the cross. The kingship of Jesus was not what the Israelites expected. Tradition prepared Israel to expect a fierce warmonger as their savior; that is what they believed was necessary for the people’s redemption. What came was the opposite, a humble man would rather have dinner with society’s outcasts than with high society. The fact that we have Jesus, a redeemer who sets all people free, is a reason to celebrate!

Lacey Morris



## MONDAY, DECEMBER 13

Isaiah 11:1-9 | Numbers 16:1-19 | Hebrews 13:7-17

I will confess, the past few years the holiday season has lacked its usual feeling for me. In 2019, during Christmas vacation, I lost someone close to me in an unfortunate accident. In 2020, much of my family couldn't meet or be near each other because of the pandemic. I felt lost and empty, far away from the feeling of peace on earth. I missed moments that felt like Christmas. I could've used a visit from the ghost of Christmas future. My little sisters have been watching post-apocalyptic action movies recently and I've noticed something that we seem to think about the future now, is that it's broken.

The future a lot of people envision is doom. Doom doesn't exactly scream "Christmas Spirit" now does it? What if the future is the "Peace on Earth" we all sing about this time of year? These verses are a prophecy about Jesus. It explains a lot about his life and ministry and then talks about the future. The future in these verses is one with complete and total peace, no danger or conflict. When the Bible talks about peace, it is synonymous with perfection, the idea that everything is exactly as it should be and in its place. A future where there is peace on earth means a future where everything and everyone is exactly as they should be and doing exactly what they're made for. So what does that mean for us now?

If Jesus is coming to bring peace in the future, why does it matter to us at this moment? Jesus said that the kingdom is here and now and all around us. The peace he talks about is available to us, even if it's not in its entirety yet. Christmas is a time when it feels like the kingdom surrounds us more, when people are more peaceful and generous and joyful. However, we leave peace at the door when Christmas is over. What if the spirit of peace wasn't just a Christmas activity but a year-round gig? Maybe then we would be closer to perfect peace on earth. I challenge you this Christmas to bring a spirit of perfect peace to your holiday celebration, to carry it with you all year round, and someday the world will be as it should be.

Rachel Harvey

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14

Isaiah 11:1-9 | Numbers 16:20-35 | Acts 28:23-31

For today's Advent reading, we will reflect on Isaiah 11:1-9. While reading this passage with the season of advent in mind, I saw the scripture divide into 3 different sections. The hope of Jesus, Jesus as He was incarnate, and Jesus' restoration of creation. I invite you to read this passage along with me.

The Hope of Jesus (Verses 1-2). In this section when reading with advent in mind, my emotions immerse me into the ancient world, and I place myself into Jewish culture before the time of Jesus. My emotional state causes me to long for the hope of the Messiah to arrive. Verse 1 is a prophetic metaphor, explaining that the Messiah will arrive through the royal line of King David (Jesse is David's father). Verse 2 describes the fruit that this Messianic king will have. Jesus as He was incarnate (Verses 3-5). In this section, I see clear and vivid descriptions of Jesus, the Messiah, as he was when he was here with us on Earth. It is clearly an expansion on the thoughts from verses 1 and 2, but when reading this through the lens of advent, I get a sense that verses 1-2 are in a sort of past-tense, and this section is more in the present.

Jesus' restoration of creation (Verse 6-9). In the final section of this passage, we see what will happen because of this Messianic king and His just rule. We see various members of the animal kingdom living in harmony together, instead of in conflict as we see in our world. Their predator/prey relationship becomes irrelevant. We see the dangers of wild animals removed under the rule of the Messiah that even a small child could lead dangerous predators as if they were peacefully domesticated creatures. When I read with the filter of advent, I sense that this is in a sort of future tense, that this is a description of what the second coming of Jesus will look like. My emotions then greatly long for renewed creation back to its original glory, and I am thankful for the hope I have in Jesus.

Zane Graham

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15

Isaiah 11:1-9 | Micah 4:8-13 | Luke 7:31-35

When I read this passage, I start to picture a ruler in my head who has all the characteristics that are being described. The only one that could possibly match all the things described here is Jesus. Comparing the king in Isaiah 11 to Jesus' ministry is hard, because who can be like Jesus? Who can truly rule like Him? Despite what Jesus has done, evil is still roaming the earth. There is still violence on the holy mountain and this world is so far from being full of the knowledge of the Lord. Despite all of that though in the last few verses a beautiful picture is painted of animals living together in harmony that you wouldn't normally think to pair.

With all the evil in our world today it's crazy to think about everyone living together peacefully but shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't it be that it would be crazy to not live that way? In the world we live in it sounds like that's so far away because we shouldn't spend so much time worrying about others' decisions.

What if we lived for the righteous Ruler in heaven? Advent season has a way of making us think about how we're living our lives, for good reason. I challenge you to look at the way you're living your life through a new lens. Instead of only considering the things you've done in the last year, think about if doing those things were for the glory of God. No one is perfect, we're all sinners and I definitely can't tell you what to do, but God is the only one who can "not judge by what His eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness..." (Isaiah 11: 3-4). So I ask again, what if we lived for the righteous Ruler in heaven?

Syndee Smith

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16

Psalms 80:1-7 | Jeremiah 31:31-34 | Hebrews 10:10-18

Advent is an apocalyptic event. In this season, we wait for God to make himself known to us. In Scripture Advent leads us to the Incarnation of Jesus. God made flesh come to earth to dwell among us. To walk with us, to show us what a perfect life looks like, to not only model for us a perfect relationship with God but to make way for us to enter into a relationship with God. Jeremiah writes,

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel  
after that time," declares the Lord.

"I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.

34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,  
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,"  
declares the Lord.

Jesus' coming makes it possible for us to "know the Lord." Jesus shows us exactly who God is and what his love for us looks like.

Not only does Advent celebrate the Incarnation it also reminds us that God will soon return. We are currently awaiting the return of Jesus. We wait for God to make all things new. We sit in the tension of the already and the not yet. Advent reminds us that Jesus has come to show us what life with God looks like. It also reminds us that the world is still being reconciled to God and one day all will be made new and we will dwell in the presence of God forever.

Haley Blackwell

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17

Psalm 80:1-7 | Isaiah 42:10-18 | Hebrews 10:32-39

This passage begins with the mention of suffering in persecution. This is difficult because most of us have not experienced true persecution for our faith in Christ. Sure, maybe some of us have experienced rejection or even slander when people discovered our faith, but I have never been beaten, tortured, or thrown into prison for my faith. That is probably true for most of you too. Another difficult aspect to this passage is that for most Christians living in America, we have been living by the false narrative that emphasizes the benefits of faith in this life. We are offered the concept that, if we follow Jesus, life will be full of constant abundance.

However, that concept does not quite line up with persecution and losing all material possessions like mentioned in verse thirty-four. Most of us signed up for the prosperity plan, not for the persecution plan! We might not be persecuted in our faith but we will encounter hardships in this life. In the midst of trials, it is easy to turn away from God when living in this false narrative. The abundant life that Jesus promised has nothing to do with a trouble-free life, but rather with having His joy in the midst of tribulation. This passage from Hebrews is an encouragement to persevere in whatever hardships you may face for God has promised He will come again.

Living in enduring faith requires knowing what God has done for you, is doing for you, and will do for you and living in that thankfulness and hope. God will not always provide answers, but he will always provide hope. When I was in third grade, I went to church camp for the first time. This experience was influential on my faith in many ways but something that has weaved its way into my daily life is how I pray. Prayer is how God reaches us and our telephone line to Him. The preacher at camp that year ended every prayer like this: I thank you, God, for everything you have done, are doing, and will do. I have implemented this small practice in my life to help change my own false narrative and I encourage you to do the same.

Alaina Madden

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18

Psalm 80:1-7 | Isaiah 66:7-11 | Luke 13:31-35

Lament Psalms have a special place in my heart. Most people believe we are not allowed to question God, that in doing so we will bring upon us His wrath. This is simply not what I have found to be true. When God came to earth, he was not only a carpenter but also the greatest teacher to grace the world for all time. A good teacher listens to the questions of their students and uses their confusion as an opportunity to guide them. The psalmist is crying out to God to be saved and restored. The trouble surrounding this person is so suffocating, just reading it makes the breath catch in your chest.

Advent is a time of anticipation. As we near the end of this season, the anticipation builds exponentially. I can always feel it in a physical sense. When it's too great, I feel as if I am suffocating. It seems nearly impossible to wait for the end, almost like if I don't take a breath now, I'll never make it. The breath of family, food, fun and gifts are promised at the end of this Advent journey. It would be so easy to shove past this suffocating and not experience its fullness. We could numb ourselves for just a short time to the crushing beauty of waiting. What could we gain greater than the anticipation of our Lord?

Some time ago in a place very different from here people were waiting for what felt like eons for God to come and save them. They waited for God to come restore the world and fix all humankind had let fall to ruin. Could you imagine the suffocating atmosphere of this prolonged anticipation of the Messiah? No one breathed as they waited for God to fulfill His promise. They wanted restoration and salvation now, and they were getting tired of breathlessness.

To know the crushing beauty of waiting is to hold out. It won't be easy. It is not going to be a comfortable ride; it will hurt; it will feel as if you are being pressed beyond belief to just steal a small breath. Regardless of the wait, everything falls short of the glory of our Lord. He comes in His time and fulfills His promises in His time. Until then I'll hold the anticipation and calm the burning in my chest when the time is right. For great will be the answer to my cries of pain, great will be the answer to my waiting. It's the least I can do, all things considered.

Sarah Lazar

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19

Micah 5:2-5a | Psalm 80:1-7 | Luke 1:46b-55 | Luke 1:39-45, (46-55) | Hebrews 10:5-10



**WEEK FOUR**

The coming of the Messiah, the Shepherd of Israel, happened in an unexpected way. Christ wasn't born to powerful people in palaces, but to a young couple, Mary and Joseph, from Nazareth, of all places! Mary, after being visited by the angel Gabriel who told her she was going to give birth to Jesus, went to visit her relative, Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary, Elizabeth's baby jumped for joy, and Elizabeth declared Mary to be blessed because Mary believed the Lord would fulfill His promises. Mary responded with deep praise, wonder, and worship of God! In Luke 1:46-49 Mary said, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, holy is His name."

Mary didn't take the credit for what happened or worry about how it was all going to play out. Instead, she put the emphasis on God and trusted in Him with obedience to what He was calling her to do. Mary fixed her gaze on God, thanking Him from the depth of her being for who He was and what He had done. God continues to work in our lives in unexpected ways! May the announcement of Christ's arrival and how He is working in our lives cause us to turn toward Him in wonder and jubilant worship! In this advent season, how can you fix your gaze on the Mighty One in awe and wonder for who He is and what He has done?

Vivian Titus

## MONDAY, DECEMBER 20

Psalm 113 | Genesis 25:19-28 | Colossians 1:15-20

I grew up Presbyterian at a Church that held traditional worship through Hymns as a big part of who we were. The age-old songs are still engraved on my heart and among them, there is one I look forward to listening to every Christmas season, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. The power of the organ rattling the building as the congregation sings the glorification of God, "Joyful all ye nations rise! Join the triumph of the skies, with Angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem!" These words only resonate one thought in my mind; the triumphant power of the arrival of our Lord.

Today we focus on the glory of our God as we have less than a week till Christmas day. I believe there is a lack in knowing our God's magnitude as we grow numb due to the repetition of how He is presented in our daily walk. Our God is the creator of the Heavens and Earth! He is the beginning and end, the alpha and omega! The same God we read about in the Bible, the God of healing, peace, and justice exists today in your life! God's power must not be understated because of how awesome He is. The Psalms passage we read today sums the thought up in a swift motion. Psalms 113:2 says, "Praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord now and forever!" Yet with all the magnificence of the triune Father, He has given us the ability to be called His children.

Not because we deserve it, but because He truly loves us enough to send His son to be among us, live a life of perfection, and ultimately die as a living sacrifice suited that we may enter His holy presence. As we near the end of our Advent season, remember the Glory of God. To close, reflect on the final verse of this age-old tune:

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!      born that we no more may die,  
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!              born to raise us from the earth,  
Light and life to all He brings,              born to give us a second birth.  
risen with healing in His wings.              Hark! The herald Angels sing,  
Mild He lays his glory by,                      "Glory to the newborn King!"*

Peace be with you in the final days of this season.

Josiah Bolton

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21

Psalm 113 | Genesis 30:1-24 |; Romans 8:18-30

As we take time to celebrate the arrival of Jesus, let us set aside a moment to reflect on His word. Throughout all of scripture we are promised of a Savior to come. Even though our world is full of pain and destruction, God has promised to shine a light in this darkness through his son! We are shown in Romans 8:18-30 that we are able to prevail in these troubling times because we are not to let the sufferings of this present time blind us of the glory that is to come.

Christ Jesus came into this world in order to offer us a beautifully different kind of life. It is because He came that we are able to preach the good news. The good news of a new Kingdom Jesus Christ is Lord and has come to invite us into an eternal, interactive relationship at this present moment through the love that He is, at no cost to us, except transformation. It is because of everything He did in His earthly life that we might have the hope we have in Him.

In this advent season, let us reflect on the significance of His coming. Let us be able to see that the world changed when Jesus entered it. It was no small event Jesus being born of the flesh into this world but the gateway to experience our faith in a real interactive way.

Tucker Trevett

# WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22

Luke 1:46b-55 | Micah 4:1-5 | Ephesians 2:11-22

Lectio Divina is a way to interact with God's word on multiple levels. It consists of reading, meditating, prayer, contemplation and action. Today, we will use this practice to encounter Galatians 4:1-7 with a fresh heart.

## 1. Read

It is important to read through the scripture carefully. Try not to rush the practice; let the words wash over you and hold them close. This first reading is a chance to look at the passage as it applies to everyone reading it. Try to understand what is being said to the Body of Christ as a whole. Once you finish reading the text once through, go back and read it a second time through.

## 2. Read

While reading the passage for the third time, bring the passage to your heart as it applies to your life. Allow God to bring forward memories, thoughts, ideas or emotions. Take note of words and phrases that stick out to you as you read through the text. This is the inspired Word of God, so read with the intent to hear God speaking to you directly. Really let your mind soak up the words.

## 3. Pray

Our meditation over the passage has invited us into the intimate embrace of our Father. Our natural inclination is to respond to Him in prayer. Now is the time to have a conversation with the Father. You can ask him for something or offer thanks to Him. You may feel called to lift praise to him, or perhaps you are unsure and need to ask for direction. There is no wrong way to talk

to God about what you have experienced in meditation. God is speaking to you through His word; let Him know what you have heard.

## 4. Contemplate

When God speaks into us, we experience the transformative light of His nearness. Contemplate what you have read, meditated and prayed. If God has shown you blessings, contemplate what it means for the Heavenly Father to bless you—His treasure. If God has shown you an aspect of your life He wishes you to realign to His purpose, take a moment and contemplate what your life would look like with that change. Now is a time for you to look at yourself in relation to what God has said to you. To end your time of contemplation, read the passage again one last time.

## 4. Act

When we read the Word of God and experience an intimate encounter within His presence, the effect is our soul's hunger for action. Do what God has asked of you with no fear, because He will provide for you (Matthew 6:33). Praise God accordingly, and let these Words soak into every inch of your being. Live them out with the grace of God.

# THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23

Luke 1:46-55 | Micah 4:6-8 | 2 Peter 1:16-21

As we come to a close on this season of advent, we wait upon the Lord with great anticipation. We can take a sigh of relief in knowing that the Lord will continuously set straight all that has been left undone. Has there ever been a time in your life where you felt like the odd man out? Like your circumstances are that of a lost cause? Maybe you feel like you will be weighed down by these feelings of despair or oppression indefinitely.

Luckily, that is simply not the truth. As we reflect on the Lord's arrival we can take joy in knowing that our God is a just God. He comes to right the wrongs and make examples of our seemingly mundane lives. He takes those of difficult situations and exalts them. His only request being that we must strive to lead holy lives, as He did. Christ was not the image of perfection because of his status, money, or power. Christ is perfect because of His honest and just way of living. The Lord is a man of His word and so must you be also. Throughout the generations, he has never gone back on His promise for the children of Israel.

Long before the world began, the Lord chose Christ to die for the sins of others. Just as He chose Mary to be His mother, Moses to lead the Jews out of Egypt, and Abraham to father our faith. These people were seemingly ordinary to others but through God they were made extraordinary. Do you truly think He does not have a plan for you? Trust and believe that the Lord will restore you as long as you follow His word. Keep in mind His love for those with little power but strong faith. The Father has no favorites, He only judges by the character of a person. So take courage, my friends and live holy lives. You just might be the very person God has in mind for his next miracle!

Sierra Penny

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24

Isaiah 9:2-7 | Psalm 96 | Luke 2:1-14 | Titus 2:11-14

The wait is nearly over! Or is it? Christmas Eve in the Chmielecki home has long described a moment bursting with expectation. With five growing children, this day and night has been marked by feelings of great excitement and anticipation for what was to come, after a good night's slumber. Was that so on that first Christmas Eve? How could it have been? The prophecies had been pointing towards some future time. A moment when "the people walking in darkness [would see] a great light" (Ps. 96:2).

There was no date set for that prophetic promise to be fulfilled, just the hope that it represented a brighter future. A future worth holding out hope for. Yet, that night. That specific night over 2,000 years ago. That night when God took on flesh and made His strategic and intentional entry into the world He created. No one could have known how that night would change, well, everything, but God! The passage in Luke 2 sets the scene for this momentous move of God towards His creation. The announcement proclaimed by the Angel of the Lord, and immediately celebrated by a great company of heavenly hosts, was that "today in the town of David a Savior has been born!" (Luke 2:11). It happened! Could it really have happened? It really did!

Quickly word spread throughout the land! Hope swelled within the people of God. Many believed. Others wondered, questioned, and waited to see. No, everything did not change in the world at that moment. However, the change that Jesus represents is both now and not yet, which can make it hard at times to fully believe. Jesus has the power to change lives in an instant. I know it, because He did it in my own life! He is also in the process of making all things new and this represents the "not yet." He invites us to join Him in this process of making all things new. In this present moment of waiting for eve to become day, I am once again reminded of the fact that God is always at work, making things new, especially in those dark and hopeless times and places. He invites us to join Him there. "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

Guy Chmielecki

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25

Isaiah 9:2-7 | Psalm 96 | Titus 2:11-14 | Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition of Christianity, Christmas marks the high point of the Christian calendar. For our brothers and sisters within that tradition, Christmas marks a singularly important event in salvation history: the Incarnation. In the midst of our celebrations around trees and presents (and in my family blueberry muffins for no clear reason), Incarnation is what Christmas is truly about.

This day is a celebration of a great mystery: that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. St. Athanasius of Alexandria says: For the Word, realizing that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except, simply, by dying, yet being immortal and the Son of the Father of the Word was not able to die, for this reason he takes to himself a body capable of death, in order that it, participating in the Word who is above all, might be sufficient for death on behalf of all, and through the indwelling Word would remain incorruptible, and so corruption might henceforth cease from all by the grace of the resurrection.

In the Incarnation, in the Word became flesh, we celebrate the undoing of death and our freedom from sin and evil. In the person of Jesus, fully God and fully human, we see the fullness of our salvation and the way forward into true humanity. The Incarnation heals and restores our human nature, which was tarnished by the Fall. Through Christ's incorruptibility, we are no longer corrupted. Through Christ's victory over death, we will be resurrected.

And to think, all of this out of a manger in Bethlehem.

Today, as you feast, take some time to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation. Think about how through this mystical event, the seeds of your restored humanity were sown. Celebrate and live in joy that through Christ taking on humanity, humanity could be restored. As you give and receive, think about how you receive Christ's gift of Incarnation, and how you can give out of the love you have received from God.

Luke Stehr



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