

Holy Darkness.
Holy Light.

REFLECTIONS FOR THE SEASON OF ADVENT 2023
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INTRODUCTION

“O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.” –Ecclesiasticus 24.3; Wisdom 8.1

PREPARATION. EXPECTATION. ANTICIPATION.

The Season of Advent calls the church to a time of intentional hope and longing as we await the incarnation of Jesus at Christmas. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* which means, “coming,” “arrival,” or “visit”. Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. For Christians Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year. During Advent, we prepare for and anticipate the coming of Christ. We remember the longing of our Jewish ancestors for a Messiah and our own longing for, and need of, forgiveness, salvation, and a new beginning.

The focus of the season is the spiritual and practical anticipation and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. This season, with its long nights and short days, holds the desires and yearnings for deliverance from the evils of the world, first expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt as they cried out from their bitter oppression. It is the cry of those who have experienced the tyranny of injustice in a world under the curse of sin, and yet who have hope of deliverance by a God who has heard the cries of oppressed and brought deliverance!

It is a seeking after hope, however faint at times, that accompanies us through the Season of Advent. Our joyful anticipation of the coming of the Christ Child who will bring a reign of truth, justice, and righteousness is the focus of this season.





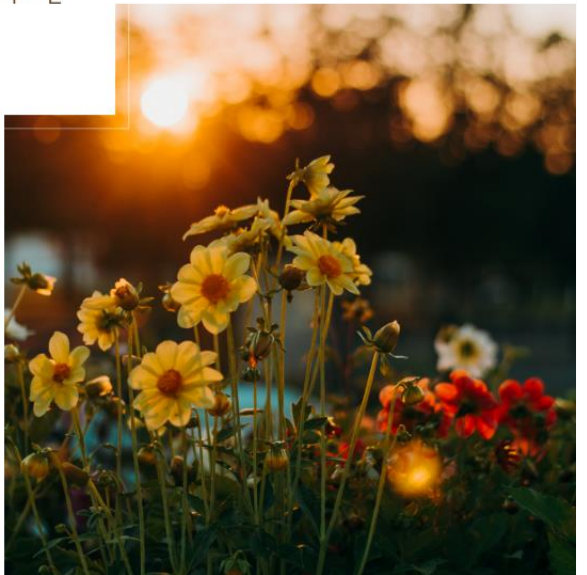
ADVENT WEEK ONE

The candle of this first week of Advent is a candle of **HOPE**. Today the flame of this candle reminds us of the hope that came to this world when Jesus was born. Jesus said, "I came so that everyone would have life, life in all its fullness."

- L.* You called the patriarchs and matriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfillment.
- R.* **May we be obedient to your call and be ready and watchful to receive your Christ, a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Amen.**



H O P E



THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

"Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

-Psalm 80:19

PRAYER

Holy God, Holy and Mighty,
give us hearts to perceive the hope
of your reign breaking into our world once more;
that we who are weary, and waiting and watchful,
may welcome once more the Child of Bethlehem,
Jesus, your son into our hearts and homes. Amen.



REFLECTION: HOPE

Following the aftermath of the 2015 mass shooting in Paris, France, a man named Angel Le visited the site of the shooting with his young son. The son was worried that his family may have to leave because of the "baddies" who had done this horrendous act. The son saw the flowers and the candles that had been laid by countless people to memorialize those who had been lost.

The little boy with tears in his eyes said,
"They've got guns. They can shoot us because they're very, very bad, Daddy."
"They've got guns but we have flowers," replied the dad.
"Flowers don't do anything papa," cried the son.
"They have fight guns. They're so we don't forget the people who have gone. As long as there are people with flowers we know that people with guns won't win."

Advent is about hope. It is about flowers and candles against guns and hate. It is about the smallest light surrounded by a storm of gloom. Hope is a paper boat floating on a restless sea. As we go about our daily lives it can be easy to lose sight of hope. There is so much in our world to fear, but there is also abundant hope that goes unnoticed and unseen.

In the small acts of kindness offered to a stranger, in the act of giving and receiving love, in a smile of encouragement freely given, we see the seeds of hope being planted.

Hope is a radical act of defiance in the face of the impossible. Hope is a frail yet fierce force. Hope is a single drop of water seeking to move a mountain, or flowers and candles standing against “baddies” with guns.

God breaks into our world, not with strength or might or power, but with hope. Of all the things in the cosmos that God could have used, of all the magnificent power that God could have employed to get our attention, why would God choose something as fragile as hope? Why not overwhelm humanity with displays of power and awe? History tells us that strength and power are fleeting vanities. History is littered with the ruins of authority defeated by the radical notion of hope because hope pitted against power always endures. The journey of hope may be long and winding but it endures to the end.

Hope comes to us in a manger and not in a mansion. God comes to us in the frailty and helplessness of a child, because when hope spreads, when hope is shared, hope grows, and hope has the power to radically overwhelm the world.

As we begin this Advent journey, may we be peddlers of a holy hope, and may we look to the day of hope.

*There's a day of hope, may I live to see,
When our hearts are happy, and our souls are free.
Let the new day dawn, oh, Lord, I pray.
We'll never get to heaven, till we reach that day. –The Musical Ragtime.*

ACTION

Be a hope detective. Seek out the places and people who convey hope in your world. Write down those encounters with divine hope and allow them to carry you when things feel hopeless.



MONDAY THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Peace be within your walls and security within your towers. For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” –Psalm 122:7-8

PRAYER

Unexpected God,
Your presence in our world
surprises and shocks us.
You come to us in the cries of a child
and the emptiness of a tomb.
Wake us from the slumber of comfort
and move us to the urgency of peace;
through Christ the long awaited one. Amen.

REFLECTION: QUIET

I love the quiet of the morning. There is something mystical and magical about listening to the world stir to life. The symphony of birds singing, the gentle rustling of leaves, the creak of a floorboard, they all are portends of the dawning day.

As the day begins, that quiet almost feels like a deep breath before a plunge into depthless water ripe with possibilities. I imagine God dwells in the quiet of that deep breath and in the depth of fathomless water. Advent calls us to spend some time in the quiet space before everything begins anew. Perhaps the intention of Advent is rest in the quiet and listen for God.

ACTION

Dwell in Quiet. Spend some intentional time in meditation and quiet as you begin a new day. Capture the moment in poetry, photography, drawing, journaling or something that stirs your imagination.

TUESDAY THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.”
–Psalm 72:3

PRAYER

Awaken us now to your coming, O God,
that we may shake off the sleep that neglects love
and wake from the drowsiness that abandons justice.
Bend our wills to the audacity of hopefulness;
that we may with joy and wonder
welcome the Christ Child into our midst. Amen.

REFLECTION: LOOK AGAIN.

One of the habits I have taken on this year is to go walking at least three times a week. I have to be intentional about taking a walk because the demands of life always try to get in the way along with my many excuses why today is not a good day to walk. But I have found that I need to walk. I need to place one foot in front of the other and to move. Purposeful walking is good for me. It allows me moments of mindlessness, but above all, it allows me to see.

Discarded sweaters, lost shoes, forgotten water bottles, stuffed animals, and much more have all been companions on my walks. Each item tells a story I imagine. Each story held by God, each person carried by the Holy One.

Advent invites us to look again around us for signs of God’s in-breaking. God is always trying to get our attention. Perhaps this Advent season we may try to look again at the familiar places and see God’s unfolding story all around us.

ACTION

Look again and again. Take some time to really look at the familiar things around you. Offer a prayer for people and stories that those things conjure.

WEDNESDAY THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” –Psalm 23:4

PRAYER

Raise our heads and hearts
in expectation, that we may yearn for the day
of the coming of Christ O Holy One of Truth.
Rain down hope in the midst of our despair
and guide into the ways of your justice and peace. Amen.

REFLECTION: LISTEN

I usually end most of my days sitting outside on the deck enjoying the darkness. In the summer the crickets come out and the fireflies dance on the air. In the winter I often hear the song of our resident barn owl out on the prowl. The darkness sharpens my ears to hear the transition of the world around me. As one thing takes its rest, another begins its work.

Advent is a time of listening in the dark and in the light because God dwells at the heart of both. In our often busy lives we seldom have the time to truly listen to the sounds of God’s voice speaking softly about us. In the concerto of the crickets and the opus of the owl, in the symphony of silence and the hymn of hope, God calls to us. Perhaps we may want to find the time to stop and listen. Perhaps we may need to sharpen our ears and tune our hearts to the voice of the still-speaking God whose child we await.

ACTION

Stop and listen. This week find the time to sit in a quiet place, either at night or during the day, and listen for a symphony of sound around you.

THURSDAY THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”
–Psalm 80:19

PRAYER

O Holy Wisdom,
stir our hearts to recognize your presence unfolding about us.
Help us who seek after the vanities of this world to fix our hearts securely on you,
that in wisdom and strength we may await the day of your coming reign in Jesus Christ,
the long expected. Amen.

REFLECTION: WAITING

How many of us really like to wait? We live in a culture of instant gratification. Waiting is passé. We spend hours on hold trying to talk to a real living, breathing human being when we call a utility company. We get frustrated when there is traffic on our commute. We get annoyed when our food is late. We don't like to wait. And yet as we travel through this season of Advent, this season of slowing down, of waiting, of hoping, God invites us to that place of waiting.

Jesus' incarnation into our world is hope and encouragement as we long and look for the presence of God. Keep awake, stay alert, get busy because ready or not, here God comes once again to disrupt our well-ordered lives and dwell once more with us.

Advent is the radical reorienting of our lives and our world towards a God who took flesh, bone, and blood and chose to be with us in the world. A God who chose the way of loss, grief, and pain to remind us that there is no part of the human condition that is not sacred and precious to God.

And it all begins with waiting.

ACTION

Practice Gratitude. In the times that you have to wait for something this week, stop and make a list of all the things you're grateful for in your life.

FRIDAY THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” –Psalm 118:22-23

PRAYER

God of the rejected, God of the neglected,
You center those who have been named “less than” and elevate those called outcasts.
Empower us to draw the circle of love wide enough that all may come within your
tender embrace; through Jesus the rejected we pray. Amen.

REFLECTION: AWE

This past summer I made a visit to the Grand Canyon. It was one of the many things on my bucket list. As a child growing up in the Caribbean, I had heard about the Grand Canyon and had even seen pictures, but I could never really fathom the grandeur and the scope of the canyon. There is a wild beauty in the desert as you approach the canyon. In the sand and the dust is the beauty of awe.

Like so many others before, I stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon and felt dwarfed by the sheer size of the canyon. It is awe inspiring to think that for thousands of years, drop by slow drop, water carved and sculpted the magnificent living artwork that is the Grand Canyon.

Author and poet Marianne Williamson said that prayer comes in three forms; help, thanks, and awe. The Grand Canyon, holding a new born baby, seeing a spectacular sunset, a candlelit church, and so much more convey the awe of God’s grace and beauty.

What we long for, what we seek this Season of Advent is the awe of God displayed not only in the grand and majestic, but also in the simple and sublime. May our prayer this season be always help when we need it, thank you when we offer it, and awe when we encounter it.

ACTION

Everyday awe. Take some time today to see the details. No matter what it may be, take some time to look closely at the intricacy and discover the awe of God in the ordinary.

SATURDAY THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” –Psalm 27:1

PRAYER

O God, our light and our salvation,
teach us to resist the temptation of fear
and lure of complacency, that in keeping awake and alert
we may watch for the coming of Christ. Amen.

REFLECTION: TOGETHER

There is an old Kenyan proverb that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” There is sage wisdom in those words. They are a good reminder that we need each other, that we are made for companionship and togetherness. We sometimes forget that we are made to go far together. We can easily succumb to the myth that we are self-made and self-reliant. Our society seems to value and even glorify the “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” attitude. We honor those who made it on their own, blazed their own trail, and found their own path. But we know, in truth, they were supported and encouraged by others along the way.

As people of faith we are called in to community. We who follow Jesus find deep connectivity in the messiness of walking together. Yet even with the messiness of being in community, and the sometimes difficulty of walking together in faith, we know that God goes with us through every trial and triumph.

Advent is a good reminder that God is with us, here and now, revealed in the fellowship of broken people we call church, made manifest in the ordinary elements of bread and wine, and available to us in the seemingly small gestures of mercy we offer and are offered each and every day. It may not be where we expect God to show up, but it is just where we need God to be. Together in the presence of God and each other we will go far.

ACTION

Gifts of gratitude. Take the time this week to thank someone who helped you along the way to where you are today.



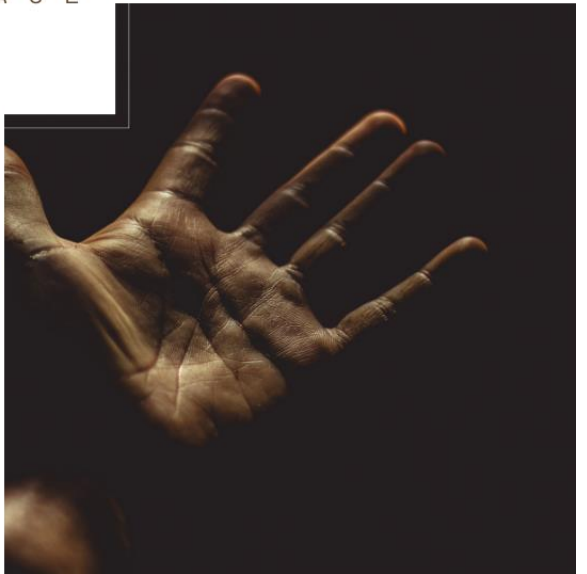
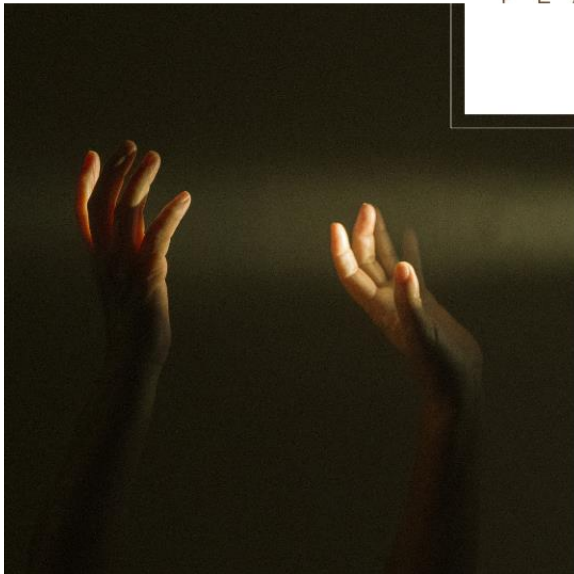
ADVENT WEEK TWO

The candle of this second week of Advent is a candle of **PEACE**. Today the flame of this candle reminds us of the peace that Jesus brings into this world. Jesus said, "I give you peace, the kind of peace that only I can give. It isn't like the peace that this world can give. So don't be worried or afraid."

- L.** Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things.
- R.** **Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgment. Amen.**



P E A C E



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.” –Psalm 80:18

PRAYER

God of extraordinary surprises,
you call the broken and the bent
to be agents of healing and hope,
you claim the ordinary to accomplish
the impossible in every generation.
Surprise us once more with your very self,
made incarnate in the extraordinarily ordinary
Child of Mary, Jesus our Savior. Amen.

REFLECTION: HANDS

One of my very first memories of my maternal grandmother was her hands. She had worked most of her life in the fields, toiling to help support her family. Her hands had tilled the soil and tended children. They had held tightly to my grandfather in times of trouble and caressed her grandchildren in times of joy. I remember how soft and gentle her hands were despite years of manual labor.

My grandmother’s hands were powerful. They were loving hands, warm hands, whose weight on my chest had the power to calm and soothe when I was anxious or upset. Those hands were healing as they lay on my forehead when I was sick or in pain. I imagine that God’s hands must be like my grandmother’s. Those ordinary hands offered comfort and peace, loving service to others, and welcome to friend and stranger. God used those hands to inspire faith out of their ordinariness.

As we continue the journey through Advent and give thanks for the blessing of peace, God seeks to use our hands to accomplish the mighty and the mundane. We are called to point to a God of extraordinary surprises! A God who routinely calls the unqualified, the unknown, the underdog to be God’s messengers.

Have you ever noticed that God rarely calls those with power and prestige? Have you noticed that God does not often use those who have authority and earthly power to accomplish great things? Think of almost every great movement in history and it is often the regular, run-of-the-mill, ordinary people that best hear and respond to God’s call to service.

God needs you! I believe that the prophet's voice for change in our world is you. I believe that the hands God will use to inspire faith and spread peace are yours. You are called to be the one who points to the kingdom of heaven. You are the nobody that God is able to use to accomplish God's mission and work in our world. Yours are the hands, the voice, the feet that God uses to point toward Jesus, the salvation of the world.

For too long I think we as people of faith have sat on the sidelines and let our voices be muted. For too long we have sat in the dust and said, "There is nothing I can do to change how our world behaves." But we serve a God who is able to raise John the Baptist, a nobody, to be the forerunner of the One who is able to save us.

If this God is able in the time of power, privilege, and prestige to call a nobody, how much more is God able to call us?

Do not for one hot second think that you cannot make a difference. Do not for one moment think that you cannot change the world. Do not ever think that God can't use you to accomplish great things. Sometimes the best thing we can do is get out of God's way and say yes!

My prayer this Advent season is that we will all be the ordinary hands of God in the world. That we may embrace our call to be prophets of a world turned upside down. That you will be prophets of hope and love and forgiveness and joy for a world in need. That you, in the words of the Spiritual may boldly proclaim, "I'm gonna live so God can use me, any time Lord, anywhere!"

ACTION

Tell the story. Spend some time telling the story of the hands that have held you and helped you along the way. How are your hands holding and helping today?



MONDAY THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

"I will listen to what you, Lord God, are saying, for you are speaking peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you." –Psalm 85:8

PRAYER

Faithful God,
you prepare a place
where hurt and fear have no sway,
where faith and love lead the way.
Guide us we pray to seek the One
whose perfect love casts out fear,
Jesus Christ the Anointed One. Amen.

REFLECTION: FINDING FAITH

Growing up, the neighborhood kids and I would play outside until the street lights came on and then we made our way home. One of our favorite games was Red Light, Green Light, a game where you had to stay as still as possible to avoid being called out. There was something fun about holding pose and remaining still. I was always afraid of getting caught as I tried to catch the leader unaware. Fear was my motivation.

In our walk of faith we can succumb to the Red Light, Green Light Game. Staying behind closed doors, focusing on ourselves and not others out of fear. But ours is not a faith that is rooted in fear. Jesus, whose coming we await, calls us back to that place of peace and stillness. Telling us, calling us, and reminding us that in the midst of fear we find faith.

Theologian Karl Barth was once asked what was the most significant theological insight of his life. He responded, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That is what it comes down to. We must learn to love each other, to see each one another as sharing the same hopes and dreams, the same aspirations and longings so that together we can transform nightmares into dreams and move from fear to faith.

"Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so..."

ACTION

Share a fear. Ask a friend to listen to one of your fears. Pray together.

TUESDAY THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

"I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will tell of all your marvelous works." –Psalm 9:1

PRAYER

Divine Physician,
your will for all is healing and wholeness.
Clear our lives of hatred and despair.
Plant in our hearts seeds of joy and peace,
that sprouts of hope may spring forth
with the coming of the Child of Bethlehem. Amen.

REFLECTION: GRATITUDE

For a period of time I worked as a chaplain in a hospital. I met people at the most joyous and most distressing times in their lives. From the birth of new babies and the expansion of families to the last rites for someone moving to the next life. Hospital chaplaincy is not for the fainthearted, but I loved it. It was a privilege to come alongside God's people for a time.

I often found myself wishing I could deepen the relationships with some of the many patients I encountered. One of the most memorable was an 87-year-old lady who was recovering from bypass surgery. She had come pretty close to death and had been attached to every medical device possible. When I walked into her room she had the broadest smile and a deep sense of joy and peace. I asked her how she could be so happy and joyful considering all that she had been through. She said, "God has blessed me to open my eyes and see a new day. How can I not be thankful?"

I long for that type of faith and for a life like hers, filled with gratitude. Advent invites us to spend some time in the place of hopefulness and gratitude. Jesus coming into the world is a reminder that each day we are blessed with an opportunity to share and savor God's love once more. How can we not be thankful?

ACTION

Discover joy. Start a joy box. Collect cards, notes, and pictures that bring you joy or that were gifts from others. When things are tough spend time going through the box.

WEDNESDAY SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“Let your loving-kindness come to me, O Lord, and your salvation, according to your promise.” –Psalm 119:41

PRAYER

O God, You dwell in the darkness and the light,
You go with us in the trial and the triumph.
Journey with us who often wonder from your ways,
Reorient us to see and know that you are always with us,
in the person of Jesus, the Awaited One. Amen.

REFLECTION: WITH US

Many of us grew up being told either consciously or unconsciously that if something bad happened to someone it was because they did something wrong. It was God punishing that person for what they did...that is until something bad happened to you.

I have to admit every once in a while that voice creeps into the back of my head when something goes wrong that says, “You must have done something wrong to deserve this.”

Sadly, there will always be those voices who try to make God into the cause of all suffering, to make God a God of vengeance because we know what to expect from a God of vengeance. A God of love, a God of mercy scares us. A God who forgives, who is merciful, who is loving, who is willing to get down into the gutter with us, and for us is a God we don't know what to do with.

Bad things happen. But the thing is, God has been there and in Jesus Emmanuel we know that God is with us come what may. The cross is God's love letter reminding us that God has been there.

So what can we say in the face of suffering and loss? That God understands what our suffering is like. That God has promised to redeem all things, including our suffering. That suffering and injustice do not have the last word in our lives and world.

ACTION

Light a candle. Spend some time in meditation with a candle to remind you of God's presence.

THURSDAY THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for the Holy One.”—Psalm 31:7

PRAYER

God of Life,
in the coming of your Son into the world,
You call us to hope and remind us of the shortness of life.
Move us to remember to redeem the time you have given us,
and send as herald of your reign, through Jesus Emmanuel. Amen.

REFLECTION: LIFE IS SHORT

One of my favorite blessings is an adaptation of the Swiss philosopher Henri Frédéric Amiel. It begins with the admonition, “Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.” I have always loved that quote and the blessing adapted from it. It is an apt reminder to us to keep our hearts fixed securely on the things in our lives that matter most. In the season of lengthening nights and shortening days it is good to be reminded that life is short.

Life is short, so tell those you love how much they mean.
Life is short, be courageously generous in forgiving and letting go.
Life is short, recognize that each day is a gift to be used wisely.
Life is short, sing with a heart full of joy even if you sing off key.
Life is short, don't just say, “Thank you,” but live a life of deep gratitude.
Life is short, eat dessert first, read a good book, let go of things that don't matter include past slights and hurts.
Life is short, go to church, say your prayers, fall in love with Jesus again and again.
Life is short, so live every day as though it is your last, because someday it will be.
Life is short, so wake up, stay alert, be prepared, light the lamps, get ready. Listen for the knock, answer the call, serve where you're sent.
Life is short, so dream, but don't just dream, follow your dreams.
Life is short, make a list and then check things off.
Life is short, dance. Life is short.

ACTION

Life list. Make a list of the things you'd like to accomplish in life. Begin to check things off the list.

FRIDAY THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

"Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag and my stronghold; for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me." –Psalm 31:3

PRAYER

Loving God,
we who are anxious about many things
look for the coming of your Son into the world once more;
help us in our waiting and watching to pray in our actions, "Come Lord Jesus." Amen.

REFLECTION: LOVE FIRST.

Loving is hard! Love means that we have to be vulnerable, we have to take risks, we have to step outside of what makes us comfortable and safe, love means that we have to take chances, love means that we will fail and we will fall, but love also means that we will get up again.

And in addition to loving God, we are to love what God loves. And what does God love? The best-known verse in the New Testament, John 3:16, provides the answer. "For God so loved the world...." God loves the world, not just me, not just you and me, not just Christians, not even just human beings, but the whole cosmos.

We look in expectation to Jesus coming into the world where he doesn't just talk about loving God and loving his neighbor, he showed us how to love God by loving our neighbor. He didn't tell those who were blind that they had to believe in him for him to cure their blindness. He didn't convert the lame and diseased before he cured them. Jesus showed them what it meant to be loved first and then pointed towards God.

Jesus always acts and then explains. That is what we who wait for the Prince of Peace are called to do as people who claim to follow Jesus. We must show others what it means be people who love. Love is a verb, and it requires action.

ACTION

Give Love. Gather clothing, toys, and other items that can be donated as a gift of love to another person or family.

SATURDAY THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

“Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.” –Psalm 32:12

PRAYER

Vigilant God,
you watch over your people with the eyes of love
and you hide your children in the shadow of your wings.
Give us the courage to bear witness to your eternal love
as we await your in-breaking presence in the world. Amen.

REFLECTION: WITNESS

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. -Isaiah 9:2

The Prophet Isaiah found himself among a people who had lost hope and were sinking into despair. Their leaders were corrupt and self-serving, the people were divided one from another. The nation of Israel found itself terrorized by a small group of people, and fear roamed the land like a lion devouring its prey. Hope was far off and fear and division had taken root in the hearts of the people. To this people, God sends the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah bore witness to God’s light breaking into the world.

Fast forward a few millennia. In a backwater town a promised child is born to a teenaged Mary. Jesus’ birth among us was and is a reminder of our worth. That God was not content simply seeking us from afar but entered into our world, our lives to point us towards a different way, a different path, a different reality.

Being a witness to the light that is Jesus and foretold by Isaiah means that our lives, our experiences, and our very selves, become a reflection of the Good News we find in Jesus Emmanuel. Bearing witness to the light is not always comfortable, is not always easy, and it is certainly not without a cost. Bearing witness to the light means being vulnerable. This season we would do well to remember that we point to the One who is coming into our world and will change it forever!

ACTION

Share the story. Share with a friend the story of where God has been present in your life this week. Listen to their story.



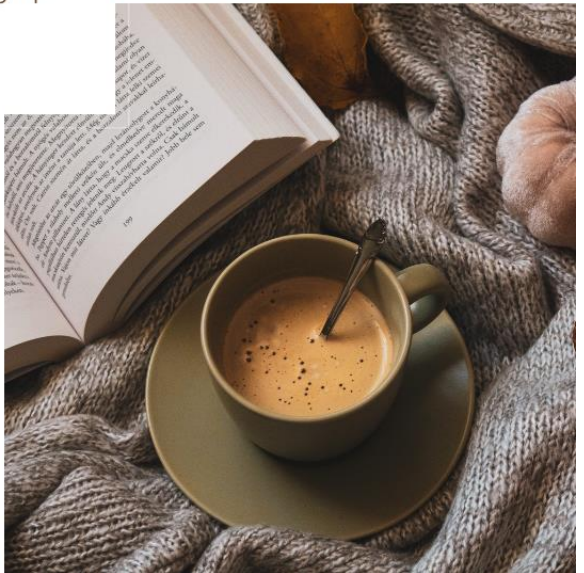
ADVENT WEEK THREE

The candle of this third week of Advent is a candle of **JOY**. Today the flame of this candle reminds us of the joy that Jesus brings into this world. Jesus said, "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete."

- L.** Your prophet John the Baptist was witness to the truth as a burning and shining light.
- R.** **May we your servants rejoice in his light, and so be led to witness to him who is the Lord of our coming kingdom, Jesus our Savior and Sovereign of the ages. Amen.**



J O Y



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.” –Psalm 30:12

PRAYER

God of hope,
who brought hope into the world,
dwell in the hopeless spaces between us.

God of love,
who came as love in our world,
dwell in the loveless place around us.

God of peace,
who’s will for all is peace within and without,
dwell in the peace-starved spaces about us.

God of hope, love, and peace,
come among us once more. Amen.

REFLECTION: JOY TO THE WORLD

In 1719, during a time of upheaval, division, and fear, poet and theologian Isaac Watts penned the words of the now famous hymn *Joy to the World*. The hymn was originally not written for Christmas but rather as a reminder that at Jesus’ second coming the world would be united as one. His hymn was a reminder to the people around him that even in the face of division, uncertainty, and fear, God was still in charge.

Right now our nation, our neighborhoods, and the church are filled with fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the future. But Jesus’ advent reminds us that we are not called to succumb to fear, we are called to live the Good News. We are called to do something with our piece of Christ.

Following Jesus means that we go out into the world. Following Jesus means that we take our light of faith into the places of greatest need. It means that there is no place, no person, no cause, no community so downtrodden, forgotten, deprived, or rejected by this world that we cannot seek and serve Christ in them. Following Jesus means that we must be willing to discover Christ already at work and present in the places of greatest need.



We are called to be peddlers of hope, ambassadors of love, and carriers of joy. In our work of following Jesus, we are called to not say so much about Jesus as to show Jesus.

The work that we had to do yesterday: to minister to the hurting, hungry, marginalized, broken, terrified, and disenfranchised, along with the healed, hopeful, joyful, and loved; and to share the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus, is still the work we have to do today and tomorrow. The work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and burying the dead has been and still must be our calling and our cause.

We gather together each Sunday to give thanks for God’s love for the world – the whole world – Republicans, Democrats, rich, poor, women, men, young, old, gay, straight, bi, trans, queer, persons of all races, cultures, and ethnicities. God loves us all. And we are united not by gender or race, orientation or economic status, political affiliation or cultural expression, but rather by faith – faith that God created all things and people, sustains all things and people, and will redeem all things and people, because of God’s overwhelming love.

Jesus coming into our world to redeem and release us all from the many prisons of our own creating is a cause for joy; joy that simply shines in the knowledge of being deeply and truly loved. We have work to do and little time to do it.

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing.” –Sir Isaac Watts

ACTION

Write a joy note. Take some time to write a note to someone who brought you joy. Give thanks for the way they were a messenger of God’s presence.



MONDAY THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever.” –Psalm 52:8

PRAYER

God of the journey,
you are present at our beginnings and our endings,
enfold us with your sheltering arms that we may dispel
the fear that infects the world with the love of your presence
in Christ the awaited one. Amen.

REFLECTION: DREAM

Listen. Can you hear it? Do you feel it? Do you perceive it? The world is shifting, moving, and changing. Right beneath our feet. God’s dream is breaking, birthing, beginning anew right before our eyes. Look around you, look within you, the old way, the old you, the old things that have divided and disregarded and destroyed are falling away. The thin veneers that were held together with glue and a whole lot of duct tape are peeling away.

In this era of oppression and animosity, God dreams. God dreams of a time when all God’s beloved children are seen, heard, and loved equally. God dreams of a time when divisions of race, class, and culture unite us as one. God dreams of a time when love is love is love! God dreams of a time when ALL God’s children are simply beloved children of God. God invites us into that dream; God invites us to imagine a different world.

We need to be prophets, storytellers, and sages because our world needs us. We are called for this time to be co-dreamers with God, to follow Jesus in building a more just society. Advent is about joining God in dreaming. The question we must ask ourselves is are we willing to stand up for God’s dream? Are we willing to be prophets and preachers for God’s dream? Are we willing to come out and step out for God’s dream?

Dream and then dare to do.

ACTION

Invest in a dream. Encourage a friend or loved one to risk following a dream that has been differed. Find out how you could support that dream.

TUESDAY THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

"I will make your name to be remembered from one generation to another; therefore nations will praise you for ever and ever." –Psalm 45:18

PRAYER

God of the dawn, God of the day,
God of the dusk, God of the dark,
your presence is balm along every journey.
Go with us, we pray, to the manger and beyond,
so that with hearts fixed securely on you, we may welcome Emmanuel. Amen.

REFLECTION: A NEW DAWN

There's an often-told Jewish tale about a rabbi asking his students how they can tell a new day has dawned upon the earth. One crafty student said, "Well, you can tell it is a new day when there is enough light to see the difference between an apple tree and a pear tree." It was a good answer but not the right answer. Another student said, "Rabbi, you can tell it's a new day when you can look down the road and tell whether or not the animal up ahead is a fox or a dog."

Again, a good answer but not the right answer. The rabbi then looked at his students, paused for a long time, and finally he said: "It's a new day when there is enough light that allows you to see the face of another human being, and looking upon that face, you see your brother or sister. Until that happens...it is still night."

We are each one of us seeking the dawning of a new day. We are sitting with the prophets and poets, with sages and soothsayers, waiting expectantly for glimmers of a new dawn. But for a new dawn to break we must be willing to seek and show the One whose coming we look for, long for, and ultimately live for. For a new dawn to break we must learn to heal like Jesus, we must lean into compassion, hope, courage, and boldness like Jesus. A new dawn is breaking.

ACTION

Kind time. Set an alarm on your phone to go off at three different times during the day. In those moments, do something kind for someone else.

WEDNESDAY THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“Remember your word to your servant, because you have given me hope. This is my comfort in my trouble, that your promise gives me life.” –Psalm 119:49-50

PRAYER

Eternal One, you hold the present and the past, help us to remember in the busy seasons of our lives, to be still and know that you are God. Help us to remember that in Jesus we are born anew in love and sent in faith for the life of the world. Amen.

REFLECTION: REMEMBER

The prophets of old and the prophets of our own time remind us that when there is a disconnect between what we say and what we do, a disconnect between what we proclaim and what we practice, a disconnect between what we preach and what we prioritize, that we have neglected the God who calls us to life, forgiveness, and justice. The problem, the prophets remind us, isn't that we need more sacrifices, more beautiful chant, more beautiful liturgy (and don't get me wrong I love good liturgy), the problem is that we suffer from forgetfulness. Jesus' incarnation reminded us of this.

We too easily forget that we are called follow Jesus!
We forget that we have been blessed in order to be a blessing.
We forget that we have been loved so that we can be loving.
We forget that we have been given hope so that we can be the world's hope.
We forget that we have been forgiven so that we can forgive ourselves and others.
We forget that what we say and do on Sunday must translate in to transformed lives on Monday.

The prophetic proclamation and promise is that we remember: remember who we are, remember whose we are, remember we serve a God who doesn't require sacrifice but transformed hearts; remember that we are people of resurrection, of forgiveness, of hope and most importantly of love. In Mary's child, God calls us once again to remember. Remember who we are. Remember whose we are. Remember.

ACTION

Paper hearts. Put 50 paper hearts in a box. On each cutout write something that is special about a loved one or a friend. Give them the box and tell them to pull out a heart anytime they need a pick-me-up.

THURSDAY THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and make good your vows to the Most High. Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall honor me.” –Psalm 50:14-15

PRAYER

Joy shattered the night of gloom
and pieced the shadow of despair
in the first Advent of Christ.
Empower us out of joy, to be seekers of the light,
as we are fomented in the darkness,
and wait patiently the second coming of Jesus Messiah. Amen.

REFLECTION: SING

My grandmother loved to sing. She sang beautifully. She stopped going to school when she was about 14 and went to work to help support her family. She was a pretty ordinary woman, the granddaughter of enslaved persons, who knew hardship and pain, but also knew celebration and joy. She would sing when things were good and she would sing when things were bad. My grandmother patterned her life in taking care of others, always with a song on her lips. There were two things you could always expect from her: she knew her bible and she knew the songs of her soul.

Singing for my grandmother and for so many others was liberation for the soul. When we sing, we join God in the divine song of creation. When we sing we become a part of the hopes and fears of all the years.

As we turn our gaze eastward towards the coming Messiah, we join in singing the songs of freedom, liberation, and expectation. We join God in singing a new song into the world and calling others to join us in the singing.

Mary sang. Elizabeth sang. Simeon Sang. My grandmother sang. God sang and sings again and again. This Advent may we join in lending our voice to the harmony.

ACTION

Play the music. Find a piece of music that lifts your spirit and makes you smile. Play the music, turn up the volume, and imagine the lyrics as God’s love washing over you.

FRIDAY THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“Save me, O God, by your Name; in your might, defend my cause. Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.” –Psalm 54:1-2

PRAYER

Perfect Love,
you cast out the fear that infects our hearts
and in Christ’s coming to vanquish the powers of division.
Help us who walk by fear to walk by faith,
that we may welcome friend and stranger in the love of your Son. Amen.

REFLECTION: MANURE

Do not be alarmed. Do not be afraid. Do not fear. Do not worry. These are all easy sentiments to hear, yet harder sentiments to live.

There is so much for us to be worried about in the world. We see the images of destruction, despair, and desolation caused by war, famine, and human greed. We live with the political division and desperation in our communities and our nation. We have every right to be alarmed and afraid. But God calls us, even in the midst of things passing away, to hold tightly to hope.

There is a fun story of an overly optimistic young boy, who on his birthday wakes up to find a giant pile of manure outside his bedroom window. He promptly runs downstairs with a huge smile on his face, grabs a shovel, and starts whistling and digging. One of his friends came by and asked, “What are you doing?” The boy looks up and says “I’m sure there’s a pony in here somewhere!”

Sometimes underneath the manure is just more manure and sometimes there is a pony. But what Jesus’ incarnation reminds us to do is to not worry, not be alarmed. There will always be wars, and rumors of wars, and tremors that will shake the foundations of the world and your faith in humanity. There will be death. There will be disaster. There will be all manner of things in this life to rattle your soul. There will be worry, anxiety, fear, hatred, racism, injustice, and terrorism. In Jesus there will always be hope, no matter how faint, no matter how fleeting.

ACTION

Feed others. Purchase extra canned good. Donate them to a pantry.

SATURDAY THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

“Hear my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my petition. Listen to me and answer me; I have no peace, because of my cares.” –Psalm 55:1-2

PRAYER

Hold close dear God,
those who are wearied, worried, and worn.
Renew the restless, reassure the reluctant,
revive the ravaged, restore the restive;
all for the sake of your Love. Amen.

REFLECTION: ORDINARY

We don't want an ordinary God. We don't want a God who comes into our everyday lives and interferes with our well-ordered and familiar messiness. We don't want a God who gets dirty in the ditches of life. We would rather a cleaned up God. We would rather a God who is pristine and distant. We prefer a God that is worshiped and adored from a distance, because a God like that would make no demands on our lives.

Scripture reminds us that we get a God who comes to be a part of our lives both when things are going well and when things fall apart. We get in Jesus Christ, God made flesh, who endures the same hardships and pains, the same yearnings and longings that we too experience. We want an extraordinary God and instead we get a God who calls the ordinary to do the extraordinary.

As we turn our gaze towards Bethlehem once more, we are reminded that God is not distant or far removed but that God is born into the messiness of our world precisely because we need a God who carries us through life rather than fishing us out of it.

God meets us in the chaos and the calm and carries us when we are weary, soothes us when we are worried, challenge us when we are comfortable, and uses us in our ordinariness to accomplish far more than we can imagine. May God who dwells in the ordinary transform you to bear witness to the extraordinary power of love.

ACTION

Refocus. Find something in your home that is seems ordinary. Spend some time carefully looking at that object for the extraordinary hiding in plain sight.



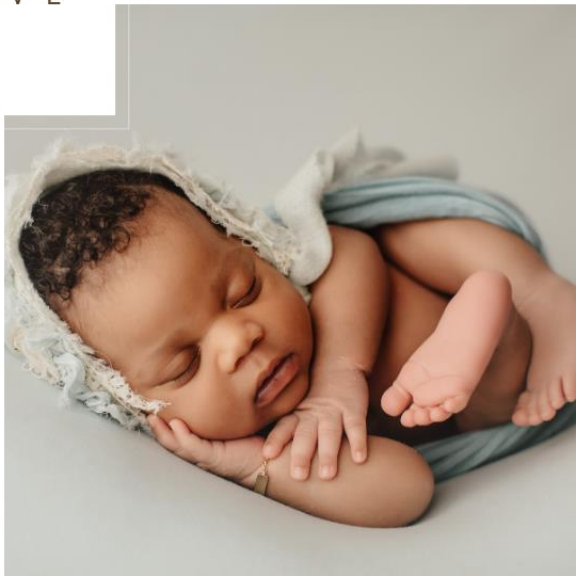
ADVENT WEEK FOUR

The candle of this fourth week of Advent is a candle of **LOVE**. Today the flame of this candle reminds us of the love that came to this world when Jesus was born. Jesus said, "As God has loved me, so I have loved you; remain in my love."

- L.** Your light has shone in our shadowed world through the child-bearing of blessed Mary;
- R.** **Grant that we who have seen your glory may daily be renewed in your image and prepared like her for the coming of your Son, who is the Lord and Savior of all. Amen.**



L O V E



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.” –Psalm 80:18

PRAYER

God of unbound joy,
you blessed your servants Mary and Elizabeth
with the gift of new life. Make our hearts leap for joy,
and fill our mouths with shouts of praise;
that we may be heralds of glad tidings
and messengers of peace, to welcome Christ
whose coming draws near. Amen.



REFLECTION: SING

The year was 1989. Communism was the rule of law in the small German town of Leipzig. The people had clashed for months with the government forces about their harsh treatment of the people. Many had been injured, hurt, or lost their lives in protest. Finally, a pregnant mother organized the women in her town to protest against the government. She wanted a better future for her child so she gathered the women to march through the street of the town to St. Nicolai Church.

As this handful of women made their way to the church the police arrived. Tear gas, gas cannons, guns at the ready. The square in front of the church was surrounded by rifle-carrying government agents. In silent protest, the women just marched, right up to the police in the square. It was a tense moment as the women and the police stood there inches apart, eye to eye.

And then the unthinkable happened. Face to face with the commander of the communist forces, the pregnant organizer of the march raised her voice and began to sing. It was quiet at first then louder and louder, until the whole square was filled with the sounds of hundreds of voices in song.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. The commander of the forces, when asked why they didn't crush the marchers as they had in the past protests replied, "We didn't have a plan for singing."

Today we hear the magnificent song of Mary as she sings the praises of her God. But what does Mary have to sing about? Singing isn't exactly life-changing, or world-

ending, yet as she meets with her cousin, Elizabeth, she sings of the wonders that God has done.

She sings of hope for the future,
She sings of a world changed
She sings of a time when justice and equity will be real and present in the world.
She sings a song of protest and defiance in the midst of chaos and darkness.
She sings of a world put right but a God who calls the low and not the proud.
And we are called to join in the singing!

No wonder Jesus spent most of his ministry hanging out with the unknowns and the untouchables. I suspect that he really was Mary's child to turn out the way that he did. He had Mary as a mother.

Mary's song is a song of the future she wishes for her child.

Singing is an act of resistance. Sometimes it is an act of joy and sometimes of camaraderie, but it is also an act of resistance.

The enslaved knew this. When they sang spirituals, they were both praising God and protesting the masters who locked them out of worship but couldn't keep them out of the promise of deliverance. And the civil rights leaders knew this, too, singing songs like "We Shall Overcome," when so many in the society didn't give them a chance to advance their cause of justice, let alone triumph.

Mary's song is our triumph song. How can we keep from singing?

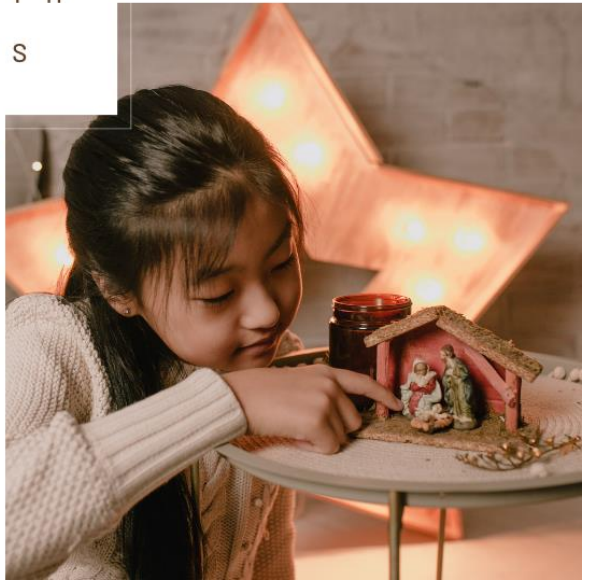
ACTION

Do something today that scares you!





G O D
W I T H
U S



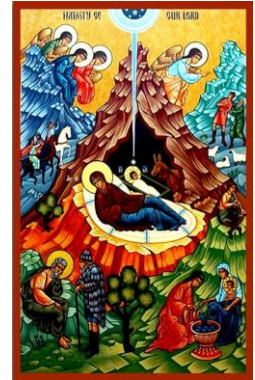
CHRISTMAS DAY

CHRISTMAS DAY

“While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” –Luke 2:6-7

PRAYER

God of Promise,
you fill the world with the love of Mary,
the peace of Joseph, the wonder of the shepherds,
the praise of the angels, and the delight of the Magi.
Give us grace, as we celebrate Emmanuel’s birth,
to answer yes to your extraordinary love breaking into the
ordinariness of our world; we ask this through Christ our incarnate
Savior. Amen.



REFLECTION: YES

Yes! One word. Three letters. One syllable. A world transformed. Mary said yes to God. Mary said yes to the dream of what God could do when love is the way. Mary said yes to the possibilities of what could be, she said yes to the injustices being made right, she said yes to the poor and the outcast being brought to the center. She said yes to a dream, a pipe dream that God can and will transform our world with a simple yes.

Nine months earlier an angel had suddenly shown up on her doorstep asking her to do the impossible. Nine months earlier Mary had been living a rather plain ho-hum life in Nazareth and now she was giving birth to God-made flesh.

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son.” That’s it! That is all that Luke gives us. Before the angels, before the wandering shepherds, before the arrival of the Magi with three very impractical gifts. Luke gives us a simple picture of a family giving birth. I imagine that Mary was in labor for 15 hours and reminded Jesus of that when he started to get on her last nerve.

We often make this into a Hallmark scene replete with cute fluffy sheep and angels singing heavenly above. But I think that misses the point. God comes into our world in the midst of messiness, in the middle of too much to do and too little time. God comes into our world when we have miles to go before we sleep and no time to stop.

God continues to care for the world through the small, easily overlooked gestures of love and fidelity, whether the helping hand of a neighbor, a meal offered with love, the

sacrifice of a congregation's traditions for public safety, or the meager words of the preacher. In all these ways, God is at work, still changing, loving, and blessing the world. And at a time when it feels like so many of the grand gestures of Christmas have been taken away, perhaps we might find both comfort and courage that God is at work in the many, many small gestures we offer.

Love lives here when we answer God's call with a simple yes. We are continually saying yes to God. We say yes to hope when the world around us seems to be spinning out of control. We say yes to wonder when everyone seems to have complete certainty. We say yes to justice when our siblings are accorded as nothing. We say yes to love when the world seems bent on division and hate.

When was the last time you said, yes? Seems like an odd question to be asking on Christmas Day but Christmas Day is an odd sort of celebration. In the Child of Bethlehem, we hear and see and experience God's own yes to us in love. The thing is that we are continually invited by God, over and over and over again, to change and transform this world in love and it all began with a peasant girl in a backwater town, three doors down from Nowhereville.

May we continue in our own time to say yes to God. Yes to hope, yes to justice, yes to love lives here. And may we join with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and angels and all the people of God and joyfully proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace to those whom God favors." Merry Christmas! Amen.

ACTION: The work of Christmas by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music from the heart.

