

PAUSE

PONDER

PREPARE



**ADVENT
DEVOTIONS
FOR 2023**

**GRACE
LUTHERAN
CHURCH
& SCHOOL**

PAUSE, PREPARE, PONDER

Welcome to our Advent devotion series for 2023. We hope these pages are useful for you as you prepare your heart for the coming infant King and as you pause and ponder the mysteries of God and God's work in the world.

During the first week, you are invited to explore spiritual introspection and prayerful waiting, especially in contrast to the constant busyness that afflicts so many of us.

The second week invites you to reflect upon Advent's call to wake up and get ready, to prepare the way of the Lord, and to join in God's creative works of justice and peace.

The final week of Advent invites you to ponder the mysteries of God's work as we marvel that the Word spoken at the beginning of creation is also a baby formed in a mother's womb. Jesus is vulnerable and fragile yet also the One through whom the new creation will emerge.

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All readings are taken from the NRSV unless noted otherwise.

Grace Lutheran Church and School
7300 Division St | River Forest, IL | 60305
www.graceriverforest.org
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SILENCE

December 3

Mark 13:35-37

Darlene Miskovic

“Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Our Advent journey starts with this passage that is often considered in the context of the Second Coming of Christ. Given the uncertainty of when that will occur, it admonishes us to keep awake so we are ready whenever he comes again.

What can this passage mean for us as we prepare to celebrate Christ’s first coming as an infant in Bethlehem? The date we celebrate isn’t in question – December 25. Our activities in preparation can be overwhelming. We may find ourselves concerned not so much about keeping awake but wondering when there may be time to sleep (especially if on Christmas Eve the toys have yet to be assembled after the kids are in bed).

Looking at other translations provides insight. The last phrase – “keep awake” in the NRSV – often is translated as “watch” (King James Version, English Standard Version, New Living Translation, American Standard Version). Others translate the closing phrase as “be alert” (Christian Standard Bible) or “be ready” (New Century Version). The Message admonishes: “Stay at your post. Keep watch.”

It strikes me that across these translations the focus is not on keeping busy or accomplishments. It’s not about external preparations. Instead, the imperative is stillness – internal preparations and readiness to receive Christ.

This reminds me of Mary and Martha of Bethany. Christ is coming to visit their home. They each respond to that visit in a different way. Martha is all busy-ness, concerned for the details and perfection with no time to spare. Mary is focusing on Jesus, sitting at his feet, and delighting in that relationship. When Martha complains, Jesus responds, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41-42)

Lord, throughout this Advent season, help us to choose the better part – to remember to pause from our busyness and distractions to focus on You and our internal preparations for Your coming. Amen.

PATIENCE
December 4

Isaiah 64:9
Dan Lehmann

*Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

The verses preceding this one in Isaiah 64 are all about waiting. Waiting for God to do something for the people of Israel. They remember God's action on their behalf in the past and seek help again despite what they've done to displease God.

They are anxious, worrying about when God will help them. It's not that God has moved on from them, but rather they are impatiently awaiting a divine solution. And for their own self-satisfaction, they remind God that they are God's people.

Aren't we all like that? When confronted by something unsettling, such as a troubled child or close friend, we want immediate correction. That doesn't always happen as fast as we might wish if it happens at all. What can we do? We can take it to the Lord in prayer. The Bible is replete with instances where individuals don't know what to do and instead of acting out or falling into despair they patiently pray.

The best example is Mary, the mother of Jesus after the annunciation, who contemplated and prayed. "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). She didn't rush around seeking the advice of friends and relatives, demanding a right-now explanation. She patiently prayed and waited.

So it should be with us during Advent. Our culture focuses on consumerism this season and the rush to get things bought, parties celebrated, and dinners made better than ever. We can lower those stressors with a rereading of the Nativity story and how it speaks to us – God's greatest gift to all of humanity in God's Son.

*O God, grant us your peace in the coming weeks as we pray for the coming of our Lord.
Amen.*

FORGIVEN AND WHOLE

December 5

I Corinthians 1:8-9

John Bouman

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We were on the eve of a big trial, the biggest I had ever been involved in. At stake in the case were the accessibility and quality of health care for hundreds of thousands of children living in poverty in Cook County. I did not have a lot of big case federal court trial experience. Fortunately, we were partnering with a top-notch trial attorney, who was preparing the crucial opening statement to be made when the trial began three days later.

That day we learned for the first time that this lawyer, also a dear friend, had been suffering for years from a rare cancer, that it had flared up, and that he needed to consult doctors in another city. He would not be able to deliver the opening statement, and it was likely that he would not be able to participate at all. This was stunning news on a personal level, and in my role as the lead lawyer on the case, I would need to take over the opening statement and many additional examinations of witnesses. A lot of work, an unexpected role in which I did not have enough experience, and very little time.

I am grateful as I think back on that time that I had the gift of a peaceful core – the peace we celebrate arriving at Christmas time. I took time before jumping into the dozens of tasks to stop, reflect, and let the dust settle. The reflection, captured in the verses from Corinthians in today's reading, was that by faith I was forgiven and whole, that this was a gift beyond measure – the core of peace in the midst of a swirling world. This gift meant I could be confident, and that this confidence would breed courage to meet challenges. Maybe this is called "centering" these days. But it is powerful and real.

I did go to work and prepared a good opening statement. At the last minute, our colleague changed his plans, having decided that the case was his top priority for how to spend his precious time, and he delivered the statement I had written. In the end, we won a landmark case (and my friend lived a number of additional productive years).

Dear Lord, when faced with many challenges, help us to make time and space to reflect and remember your gift of peace, to be grateful for it, and to allow that peace to make us confident in taking action. Amen.

THE ROCKING CHAIR

December 6

Matthew 6:33-34

Rev. David Kluge

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

It’s true, the holiday season is loaded with anxiety and worry for many people; more than usual. But whether we are talking about the holidays or life in general the question is, where does worrying get us?

Just prior to our text Jesus said that life is more than food, drink, or clothing. These words are a cautionary note. When we are consumed by our worries it’s easy to lose focus on what really matters: God’s grace and steadfast love. Therefore, Jesus tells us to “seek first (God’s) kingdom and (God’s) righteousness” (v. 33) and assures us that what we need for our daily life will be provided by our Lord.

Secondly, Jesus points out that nothing we can do changes our tomorrows. He doesn’t gloss over the fact that every day has troubles of its own, but he assures us that God will provide and see us through our tomorrows; regardless of what they bring.

Worry does nothing to remove or help us deal with our problems. I once heard someone describe worry as comparable to sitting in a rocking chair. We can rock as fast and as long as we want but it gets us nowhere.

We would do well to also heed the words of St. Paul:

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:5-7)

Gracious Lord, give us the faith and strength we need to deal with the tests and challenges of everyday life, especially during the approaching holiday season. Comfort us with your abiding love and the assurance that you will provide all that we need for our daily lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

PATIENCE?
December 7

James 5:7
Sabrina Maggio

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

Patience – not a value that 2023 really embodies. Everything is hurry up and check it off. My weekends that are supposed to be “restful” are cluttered with play dates, soccer games, groceries, church, church brunches, cleaning house, grading or planning, repeat! And don’t get me started on binge-watching Netflix at 10:30 on a Tuesday night because I cannot wait to see how a season turns out. To be clear, I thank God every day for this “clutter” and fully recognize the privileged life I live, particularly given the atrocities that plague our world. But patience and waiting and “letting life happen,” trusting God’s plan...those are not my strengths.

I feel like if I trust God’s plan, am I *doing* enough? American society gives accolades for how busy people are, people post on social media about it and get lots of “likes,” and teachers get shout-outs at staff meetings for taking on extra stuff, without pay I might add (insert eye-roll and sigh here). We value *doing*.

Ironically, I just completed a whole summer program on wellness and the importance of taking a beat, expressing gratitude, and being present in the moment. I promised myself that I would not get to November and feel emotionally and physically drained. Yet here I find myself in November typing super-fast so I can finish this devotional during my 30-minute lunch period while I grade, think about my next class coming up, the behavior referrals I need to write, and whether or not I’m going to use the restroom between now and my next class.

This doesn’t feel like *patience*. I mean there is legit scientific data that says if we slow down, and take a breath, we will be more appreciative of the “here and now.” So why can’t we be? Why is our world so in contrast with what James says and how do we remedy this? And how do we help people whose lives are shattered by tragedies like homelessness, senseless violence, and illness...how do we help them to be patient because the Lord is coming?

God grant us the patience to trust YOU and your plan. Give us the discipline to slow down, take a breath, and appreciate what is now, and like the farmer...wait for the rain. Allow us to truly see and embrace what is in front of us, our health, our families, our friends, and our communities. Help us to check our privilege and give what we can to those in need. Help us to peacefully wait and have faith in your coming. And please, grant me the ability to prioritize using the restroom above anything else during my lunch. Amen.

BE STILL
December 8

Psalm 46:10-11
Lance Wilkening

*"Be still and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

It's hard to be still. It's hard to be still when I see all the items on my to-do list, all the things that "have" to be done before Christmas. All the end-of-year activities, for church and for work and for home, the plans to be made, the events to attend, the tree to be bought, the relentless piling up of obligations, and the pressure I put on myself to get it all done in this short period of time. The rush that comes every year but always seems to sneak up and surprise.

And this year it is even harder to be still, with the world in disarray, literal wars raging abroad and cultural wars continuing at home, injustice ever-present and seemingly unceasing. What can I do? What actions can I take? Where can I go for comfort and respite and relief?

But God says, "Be still." Wait. You can do something, but you can't do everything. You're not God. I am God. Earlier in the chapter, the psalmist acknowledges that "the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter," but then promises that "he makes wars cease to the end of the earth." We don't know when and we don't know how that will happen, but we have the promise that the Lord is with us, that God is our refuge.

We also have the promise of salvation that God fulfilled with the birth of Jesus, the event that often gets lost among all the expectations we put on this season. The one event above all the others, the one that truly matters.

So, this Advent season, just wait. Be still. God is. We know it.

Comforting God, still our minds and fill our hearts with your presence. Help us remember that you are our refuge in times of trouble, that your promises are steadfast, and your boundless love is with us always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD IS IN CONTROL

December 9

Psalm 80:7
Rev. Frank Senn

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

If we truly engage in spiritual introspection, we will find that world events contribute greatly to our personal anxieties, fears, and sense of loss of control over our lives. There's much happening in the world that impacts us. We've come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the virus still lurks around. Global warming is intensifying rather than diminishing, as is evident in severe weather systems, heat waves, droughts, storms, floods, and massive wildfires. The Russian invasion of Ukraine rattled us, but the Israeli-Hamas conflict is more existential. Our politics are dysfunctional, and the government is incapable of doing its job. Our country is so polarized on every issue that we can't come to a meeting of minds on just about anything. We are each other's existential threat.

The northern kingdom of Israel was facing an existential threat from the invading forces of the Assyrian Empire. The community of faith in the God of the covenant has gathered in the sanctuary to implore the God of hosts (*sabbaoth* means the heavenly armies) to show his face (be present) and save God's people. We too gather as a community of faith to seek God's presence in God's word, the sacraments of Christ, and in one another. By these tokens, we are assured of God's presence with us in the face (presence) of these world-shattering threats. We don't forget these threats when we come into the sanctuary; we lament them before God. They are not issues that we can solve alone. But fortified with the faith that God does not abandon us, we go back into the world to become engaged in actions and events in which we might make a difference.

Stir up your power, O God, and come among us. Save us from our worst fears and give us faith to trust in your presence in the face of all that threatens our well-being; for the sake of your Son, our Savior, who came once into our fragile world and will come again as to redeem us. Amen.

PREPARING OTHERS

December 10

Mark 1:1-3.

Al Swanson

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”*

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

These familiar words that begin Mark’s Gospel describe John’s task as God’s messenger to prepare the way for Jesus. Two questions come to mind: Who did God send to prepare the way for me? Has God sent me to prepare the way for someone?

Jesus could have pointed to John the Baptist as the person God sent to prepare his way. But there are so many people who prepared the way for me to succeed – personally, professionally, or as a disciple. There are many categories of people who helped prepare the way for me – my parents, my sister, my wife, teachers, colleagues, friends, pastors. I cannot begin to name all of them. If I tried to list them individually, I would fail and likely leave someone or many someones out. Each of these people helped prepare the way for me – helped make me become the person that I am or opened doors for me to explore options in my education, careers, and, most importantly, to grow as a person. If I think about it, each of those people played a key role in my life.

The second question is on one hand more difficult to answer; at the same time the answer seems rather simple. John likely knew that his assignment from God was to prepare the way for Jesus. My “assignment” is not so clear, not defined, without a job description. I think of the many law student externs who worked with me, the newer attorneys whose questions I answered and for whom I tried to provide some guidance, my children, and grandchildren for whom I have tried to provide some insights. All I have is faith and hope that by the things I have done, and words spoken I may be playing some small part in preparing the way for others.

*Lord, thank you for placing people into my life to prepare me for what I have accomplished.
And guide me to be a person who helps prepare the way for others. Amen.*

VDMA

December 11

Isaiah 40:7-8

Rev. David Lyle

*The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Bockman Hall, on the campus of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, was my home for three years. This time was incredibly formative for me. In Bockman and throughout the campus, my vocation developed, my faith deepened, and my gratitude for God's grace freely given took its place at the center of my heart. All of this happened under the watch of the cross.

To be sure, my time at seminary occurred at the foot of Jesus' cross, but I think especially of a large stone cross that welcomed people as they walked up the hill toward Bockman. A number of Christian symbols were carved into the stone of the cross. Only one was unfamiliar to me, mostly because my Latin was not up to snuff: VDMA. *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum* – the Word of the Lord remains forever.

VDMA is used by Peter in his first epistle, but he's quoting our passage from Isaiah. In this time of Advent preparation, how do Isaiah's words help us prepare? The people are grass and like grass we will wither? What, one wonders, is the point? Are we just here today and gone tomorrow?

Left on our own, yes. We are mortal and we will die. There is no use pretending otherwise and there are any number of things we can do to be prepared for this, from making plans for our financial legacy to leaving detailed instructions for our loved ones. But Isaiah is up to something else here. Recognizing that we will wither and fade prepares us to see the one thing that will last: the Word of the Lord.

We prepare once more to welcome this Word into our world, Jesus who is born that we may be born into eternal life. In the shadow of the cross, the Son lights our way through death to life.

Gracious God, you alone endure forever. Give us hearts prepared to behold your coming, that we, too, might live forever in you. Amen.

AN INTENTIONAL WAITING

December 12

2 Peter 3:8-9
Rev. F. Dean Lueking

*Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness,
but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish.*

We live in a culture that seems to prefer whatever is quick and ready-made. Think only of grocery store shelves. Or the speed with which our computer screens boot up.

The theme passage quoted from 2 Peter is strongly counter-cultural. Please read it once again and let its truth take firmer hold.

Not speed but deliberateness. Patience is called for. That comes about not through hustle. The Holy Spirit's way with us is slow – but sure. A lifetime is his workspace. In this my 95th year I have good reason to appreciate that truth.

An example comes to mind from a half-century ago at Grace. Our denominational home was the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. The election of new synodical leadership, through unconscionable electioneering by a so-called orthodox group, led to heresy trials and expulsion of faculty members including Grace members then teaching at Concordia University.

It also led to the contesting of our ownership of our own church and school. We had to take our cause to the secular court which led to a decade of wearisome, expensive litigation. It was finally settled in the United States Supreme Court which ruled on our behalf.

I say all this with penitence. All of us fell short of the Divine love and patience we all should have put to use.

But we did learn to appreciate the truth of 2 Peter 3, the truth about the Lord's patience as he nurtures the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace . . . and patience. . . in us.

Here we are, heirs of faithful folks who have passed down to us a magnificent sanctuary and school building. All this did not come about in haste. It took time. Our Advent discipleship also offers us time as we gather on Sundays to worship and live out the Word during the week.

Lord God, help us embrace your gift of patience and accept that you work in our hearts persistently, changing us to be the people you need us to be in the world. Amen.

THE GARDEN
December 13

John 15:5
Bill Pullin

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing."

I can't speak for the original disciples, but personally, I find the record of what Jesus said at the Last Supper excruciating. So many warnings for what the disciples will experience when Jesus is gone from the earth! For me, John 15:5 stands out with its promise and peacefulness. We hear that all we have to do is abide in Jesus, and we will bear much fruit.

While "abide" ordinarily has a rather passive meaning, surely that was not what Jesus had in mind when he said that. He foretold a very *active* ministry for his original disciples, and for us. For example, we hear that we must keep his commandments, and love one another. What we must do to accomplish these things is described from the pulpit every Sunday and is well-documented throughout our readings in the Bible.

And if we do those things – if as branches we stay connected to Jesus and what he has told us to do – just what kind of fruit do we bear? What is the outcome, the beautiful, delicious, and invigorating result of our Christian life?

The gardeners among us know full well that the experience of growing fruit can be frustrating as well as delicious. Deer, squirrels, rabbits, weeds, bad weather ... so much works against our success at gardening. But for all these difficulties, we keep going. In my garden, we can't grow and enjoy tomatoes, peppers, berries, and so many other crops because our local predators eat them right before they are ripe enough to harvest. Therefore, we grow only the rhubarb and the gooseberries that they all find unpalatable. These goodies are much, much more fun than growing nothing at all.

Let us all commit to the foundation of our being in Jesus, and as branches of his vine grow what we can with creativity and persistence.

Heavenly Father, we truly feel the strength and the nourishment that we receive as human beings connected to you. With that uplifting and sustaining experience, we commit ourselves to your will and your example of love. Continue to tell us what we must do to demonstrate that we abide in you. Amen

YOUR CALL

December 14

Ephesians 4:4

Sandy Lentz

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.

“Time to get up!” How many of us heard that call every school morning? Out of the warm nests of our beds, into the busy, chilly world of breakfast and school bus and friends and the smells of floor wax and chalk dust.

This time of year, we hear so many more calls. Our “to-do” lists have sprouted their own “to-do” lists. Regardless of how we celebrate Christmas, so many more lists – gift lists, grocery lists, guest lists – are calling, demanding our attention.

Oops. The Guest. Stop.

We are “called to the one hope” by that Guest, the One whose arrival into our world all this furious activity is supposed to celebrate. Listen to this call. Find a quiet space. Open our hearts to God, and God’s call. Amid everything, it is necessary to remind ourselves of this fundamental call. The call to the hope of salvation that frees us then to be God’s gift in our world.

We are called, summoned, to the hope of salvation freely given to us, by Christ, God’s Gift. That is the one hope. Amid all the furious, joyous preparations, listen to that call. We are called, then, knowing that we have received God’s free gift of grace, the Gift above all gifts that Christmas heralds.

Now, how do we respond to this call? With gifts of our own, ribbon-tied gifts for the ones we love. Gifts of shelter, clothing, meals, and hope, for those we may never have met and for those newly here. Gifts through our philanthropy – in large or small donations, toward the work of those who labor for causes we support, gifts of care for our planet, supporting cures for diseases, providing concerts of music. We work for justice, speaking out when we see our sisters and brothers oppressed. We act and demand that our elected leaders do so as well. Amidst everything, may we be centered in our call.

Holy God, help us in all our joyous preparations this season to be reminded of the call to us that underlies it all and to respond with our own gifts for his work, done with our hands.

Amen.

IN THE MORNING

December 15

Psalm 5:3

Julie Hinz

*O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you and watch.*

Take a moment and think about your morning; the patterns and habits, and what needs to happen for a good start to the day. Every so often I have a day when my morning routine gets out of order. When that happens, I most often forget something completely. If I don't brush my teeth at the same time in my morning routine, I can forget and am often almost out the door before I remember! On those days, I have discovered I feel slightly "off" all day.

It is in the morning that we work to get ourselves ready for the day. It can be precious time with our children or a first conversation with a significant other that sets the tone for the rest of our day. For some (like me), that first cup of coffee gets me focused and ready for whatever is to come. There are those who read the paper or catch up on the news in other ways as part of their morning routine. Many of us love long-leisurely mornings for reading, enjoying that coffee with others, or just stretching our routines a bit.

Mornings always begin with our own individual preparation for whatever the day entails. How much of that precious morning time do we spend asking God to accompany us into whatever is to come? The psalmist urges us to raise our voices in prayer each morning; to "plead our case" to God. Yes, God wants to hear our needs, our struggles, and our challenges. God wants us to feel free to ask for blessings, for miracles, for help.

Once we have prepared ourselves and entrusted our cares and concerns to God, we trust that God has heard and will answer them. Then, the psalmist says, we watch. This watching is not inactive. We go about our days. We do the work of living but with open eyes, watching and waiting to see what God will do in answer to our prayers. We ponder how God might answer as we prepare for God's guidance and direction, ready to move forward as God shows us God's will for our lives.

Lord God, you have given us the morning as a new beginning for each day. May we learn how to raise our voices in praise and supplication in the morning, prayerfully and patiently wait for your response, and in the evening, close our day with you in thankfulness for another day to live as your chosen people. Amen.

IT'S ABOUT US

December 16

Psalm 85:10-13

Craig Mindrum

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

Sometimes verb tenses matter when reading scripture. I have been looking at various translations of Psalm 85 from the Hebrew sources. The differences turn out to be a big deal, theologically speaking. Consider the translation above from the New Revised Standard Version. Everything's happening in the future, isn't it? "Steadfast love and faithfulness *will* meet. Faithfulness *will* spring up from the ground." It hasn't happened yet, though the psalmist assures us that it *will*.

But now consider a different translation highlighting the fact that ancient Hebrew does not clearly specify verb tenses:

*Mercy and truth are met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth is springing out of the earth,
and righteousness has looked down from heaven."*

So which is it? Has truth already sprung out of the earth? Have mercy and truth already met? Have righteousness and peace already kissed? Or will these things only happen sometime in the future?

I think the answer has to do with us, not just God. A key to understanding here comes a couple of verses later, in verse 13: "Righteousness shall go before God, and shall make a way for God's footsteps." Here we're in the future tense again. But now it's a challenge: Whose job is it to create the righteousness that goes before God? To live with mercy and truth? It's ours. Who is making a way for God? It's us.

This is much like John's cry in the wilderness to prepare a way for the Lord. He's not talking to God; he's talking to us. It's not God's job to prepare the way. It's ours. It's up to us to forge peace, to sow love, and to seek justice and mercy. To make a way for God's footsteps, knowing that righteousness has already looked down from heaven. That is our burden and our hope.

Lord, give us the courage to prepare the way. Let us work together in the knowledge that truth has sprung from the earth, and that mercy and truth have already met. Amen.

SEEN BUT UNSEEN

December 17

John 1:26-27

Ed Mason

John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

Have you ever missed seeing someone in plain view? I certainly have, especially when my own preoccupations and predilections get in the way, keeping me from really seeing the person there in front of me.

In today's reading, John the Baptist responds to the challenge of the religious authorities as to John's ministry of baptism and call to repentance. Quickly shifting attention from himself, John informs those listening that "among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me," someone whose sandal thong John is not worthy to untie.

John, I think, is not casting blame at that moment on those listening for not knowing the one standing among them, the one coming after John. John, himself, said that he had not known the one coming after him until it was revealed to him. (See John 1:33.) However, while not blaming those listening for not yet knowing, John is sternly warning them to keep their eyes open and their hearts and minds receptive to recognize one among them, the Messiah, who is soon to be revealed.

How often I have failed to see Jesus in our midst, working sometimes in unexpected ways and places, often in the commonplace and ordinary, and through people I may not expect. But that is how Jesus often comes to us! During this Advent Season, may we listen to the words of John the Baptist, that, by God's grace, we keep our eyes open and our hearts and minds receptive to recognize the Lord Jesus in our midst as the Incarnate God comes into this world.

Dear God, help us to overcome our own preoccupations and predilections, which so often prevent us from seeing clearly. In this season of Advent, may we see Jesus coming to live among us. And, in our seeing, may we recognize Jesus as our Savior. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PRAISE

December 18

Isaiah 61:11

Laura Becker

*For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness
and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

When I was 11, I had the opportunity to portray Mary and sing the Magnificat in my school choir concert. I remember the pure joy of singing those beautiful words, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47).

In those beautiful moments, righteousness and praise sprang up!

All was not right with the world then; the hostage crisis in Iran was going on and the cold war was raging. I felt sadness about things in the world, but my childlike faith allowed me to honor God's righteousness and praise God for giving us Jesus.

All is definitely not right with the world now either. There is war in the Middle East and Ukraine, daily violence in the Chicago area, and migrants without homes. Sometimes my prayers are simply "sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26). In these challenging times, righteousness and praise spring up!

All was not right with the world when Jesus was born. Herod wanted him dead from the moment he was born. Jesus was born and lived, though. Righteousness and praise sprang up!

All will never be right with this world, but God still causes righteousness and praise to spring up!

When we can find the childlike faith that Mary had, we see righteousness and praise springing up everywhere! Hallelujah!

This Advent, observe the childlike faith of your children or grandchildren or children at Grace. Really see how they praise God and celebrate God's righteousness in their smiles, laughter, and play. Ponder the wonder of God bringing Jesus into the world as a baby. Maybe say or sing the Magnificat together as a family.

God's righteousness is not bound to the problems of this world, and neither is our praise of God. God's righteousness and our praise of God continue despite what the world attempts to destroy.

Dear God, thank you for giving us Jesus. We praise your holy name and honor you as righteous. Help us see you with a childlike faith, no matter what the circumstances are in the world. Amen.

RELATIONSHIP

December 19

1 Thessalonians 5:16-19

Dick Martens

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

I recently attended "Grace Gathers" on a Sunday morning at 8:45. I was going to Adult Education and figured I would go a few minutes early and check it out. Pastor Lyle was at the Bonnie Brae entrance greeting folks in that enthusiastic way of his, telling us to gather in Fellowship Hall.

I sat down with some of my cronies but soon found myself engaged in calisthenics. You see, Pastor Lyle had half the room singing "Allelu, Allelu, Allelu, Alleluia," followed by the other half singing "Praise Ye the Lord," alternating sides. The problem was, you had to stand every time it was your side's turn to sing - and ol' creaky knees (that's me), found himself halfway up when it was already time to sit down. And the pace kept getting faster and faster! Oh well, it was great fun with lots of laughter and creaky knees.

Next Pastor Lyle asked us to break out into small groups for a few minutes to talk about how music affects our faith. He encouraged us to seek out new faces. I ended up conversing with some of our younger members. Ellie volunteered that her parents often sang "Jesus loves me" when she went to bed. Naomi and Greta offered that Christmas carols were especially powerful in their faith.

Then the light in my head went on. These songs are about our relationship with God. In one way or another, so many Christian songs are about the love Jesus has for us and the love we have for Jesus.

In today's devotion, Paul reminds us to rejoice always and give thanks for the love which God gives us through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In a few short days, we celebrate new life – both the birth of Jesus and the birth of our loving relationship with him. "Joy to the world!" Can't you just hear the singing and feel the joy!

Gracious God, our hearts are brimming with joy as we wait expectantly for the celebration of Jesus' birth and our new life together. Amen

ACCEPTING THE UNEXPECTED

December 20

Matthew 1:18-21

Larry Garber

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

After reading verses 18 and 19 and pondering their significance, it is certainly understandable why Joseph desired to end his relationship with his future wife, Mary. He knew he was not responsible for her pregnancy. Yet Mary was pregnant. Joseph certainly could suspect her of adultery. Even now most men finding themselves in a similar situation would wish to end an engagement. Surprisingly to many of us, he wanted, I assume, to show his respect and love for Mary by not publicly embarrassing her. Many in current times want revenge of some type. Today, postings on social media? Or maybe public condemnation before elders of the temple or church. But no such action by Joseph was taken.

In verse 20 we learn why. We read that an angel informed Joseph that Mary was pregnant because of a miraculous event, because of the power of the Holy Spirit, and not through intercourse. Joseph realized that Jesus was of divine origin. Joseph listened without questioning the validity of his dream. He accepted the idea that Mary's child was going to be not only a boy and a son to be raised by his parents but also the son of God. Because of Joseph's actions, Jesus, the son of God, was born in a relatively peaceful environment. Are we willing to listen to God when the unexpected is presented to us?

Our statement of faith indicates that we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We know we are granted forgiveness for our trespasses and sins. It is reassuring to know that Jesus was born to save us from our sins. It is reassuring to know that Joseph accepted the fact that Mary was not trying to embarrass him when God chose her to bear his son. (As we read elsewhere in Luke, Mary was also surprised about being pregnant).

We, as Christians, must be willing to listen to God's bidding. Joseph did! Can we graciously accept unpleasant or surprising news? Joseph did!

Dear Lord, may we continue to recognize that your birth allows for continual forgiveness of our sins. May we continue to accept willingly unexpected and possibly unpleasant bidding from you. Amen.

ALL THE PEOPLES

December 21

Revelation 21:3

Paulette Reddel

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their
God, they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."*

Recently I listened to a Korean American film actor being interviewed on a podcast. She discussed her current project and shared the story of being born in America to two Korean-born parents. She often struggled to navigate the divide she felt between life at home with immigrant parents and life in the outside community.

She spoke of the challenges of attending American schools. She often felt "in-between." But in high school one day, she signed up for the school's theatre program. "Finally," she told the interviewer, "I found my people, I belonged! I didn't have to explain myself. The other kids accepted me for who I was."

For generations, despite years of captivity and destruction of their land, the Jewish people held fast to the ancient promise of their forefathers: "You are God's chosen people and God will not forsake you! God will deliver you!" The promised Messiah would be "one of their own," born from Abraham's long line of descendants.

In our Revelation text for today, John wants to send a clear message: God sent Jesus into the world to live among all *peoples* — yes, an 's' at the end of that word. God had not gone back on the promise to rescue the Jewish people, but the birth of that child, Jesus, into the world that quiet night was God's promise to care for God's own creation, all of it. God came to redeem each and every person!

The angels' glorious announcement to lowly shepherds of the birth of the Christ child brought wonder and gratitude to their hearts. A bright-shining star in the heavens discovered by wise scholars signaled an earth-shattering event that would change their lives forever. Yes, they all understood. God's gift of life eternal was offered to all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Today as we look around the world, we see darkness and despair. People against people, too much death and destruction. But, lost in this world of sin, God finds each and every one of us, every single day! God promises to "dwell among us" now and forever.

A child, God's Son, brings hope. God's arms reach out to cross geographical boundaries and political agendas to offer a better way. No one is left out.

"You are mine and I will dwell among you. You are my peoples!"

Gracious God, you shelter us in your love and forgiveness. Help us to join with others in welcoming new folks into our midst. May we provide safety and lodging to those in need as they too seek shelter in your loving arms. Amen.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

December 22

Psalm 111:1-2
Rev. Bruce Modahl

*Praise the LORD!
I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.*

Robert Hodgell taught art for many years at Florida Presbyterian College. His woodcuts appeared in a book of contemporary parables that played a part in forming my teenage faith. Some of his art was satirical. One piece depicts a preacher behind the pulpit with his hand on the Bible. Out of his mouth flow words, words, words. They swirl around his head and drift off into thin air. His words amounted to nothing.

God's Word, on the other hand, has substance to it. Psalm 111 calls us to give praise for God's wonderful works. God's Word accomplishes God's work. It was by the Word that God spoke the creation into being. God said, "Let there be," and there was.

It was by the same Word that God spoke our redemption into being. God spoke and the Spirit of God carried the Word to the Virgin's womb. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

God's embodied Word, Jesus Christ, bore our sins on the cross. By Jesus' resurrection, God promises us eternal life in a new creation. The new creation will be manifest when Christ comes again. We have God's Word on it, a Word that always fulfills God's purposes.

Heavenly Father, for the sake of your dear Son and our Lord Jesus, we ask that by your Spirit's power, we may praise you with the words of our lips and the works of our lives for your wonderful works of creation and redemption. Amen.

REMAKING THE MAP

December 23

Luke 1:52-53

Mark Bouman

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

A sad reality roars off the page of a new map of the Chicago region: the widest possible gulf in the U.S. for what the Environmental Defense Fund calls “climate vulnerability” is right here. Gary, South Chicago, and Riverdale occupy the 99th percentile on the index that combines a variety of pollution exposure and socioeconomic factors. Not so far away lie a number of communities in the 1st percentile. Maps like this of our life in Chicagoland are all too common. And I can only imagine the rifts – social, political, religious – that tore across the land of Jesus’s birth when Mary lifted up her voice.

Mary’s song sprang from her humble heart to express not just joy and hope, but reportorial certainty in the verbs used in these verses, that the Lord will – and has – upset the order of things. Jesus would be incarnate, rolling up his sleeves, getting into “good trouble,” right here, on the map. This is thrilling. (My favorite musical setting of the Magnificat catches this thrill with three upward octave leaps in the first line.)

I see something of Mary and her son in the work of three mothers from those 99th percentile communities who have worked on a new map. Marian Byrnes, Hazel Johnson, and Olga Bautista organized their neighbors, called out the powerful, worked to build from within their community for the sake of the next generation, and won hard-fought battles to fill their communities’ hunger for “good things” – clean air, clean water, clean land. In so doing, a region painted on one map as hopelessly vulnerable has become a beacon of hope for environmental justice on another.

Both maps are in the atlas of the world we inhabit, each depicting a facet of our human nature, but only one stirs us to sing with ever-magnifying hope.

God of hope, our spirit rejoices in you, and we yearn for your presence, for when you walk with us in the streets of our city, we see landscapes that can be re-made. Amen.

THE GREAT MYSTERY

December 24

Luke 2:19-20

Kate Hogenson

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

For much of my childhood and teen years, I was a Christian Scientist. In my memory – and to be fair I have not revisited the teachings in over 40 years – it was an optimistic faith, focused on 7 synonyms for God that were always capitalized: Mind, Spirit, Soul, Principle, Life, Truth, and Love. Death, disease, and evil are Error – specifically an error in understanding the nature of God’s Kingdom. The material world and our bodies are an illusion because God created us in God’s image. The story of Mary was one of conceiving the truth of God’s incorporeality. Not necessarily a mystery.

And then my sister, a mother of sons, took her own life. I asked a Christian Science practitioner – a healer in a church that eschews the medical profession – what happened? The answer was unsatisfying: “An error in her thinking.” I left religious practice for several years.

I became a Lutheran when I married and found acceptance in the idea that we are “in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” God came among us to live with us in a body like our own. The story of Mary is a mystery – “*O Magnum Mysterium!*”

The word ponder means to think about something deeply, and some definitions add “before making a decision to act.” Mary had already acted – she’d brought forth God’s son. She didn’t need to ponder who her son would become – she knew his mission. She would be with him for his first miracle in Cana...and at the cross. If she was pondering how the world would receive him, the evangelist doesn’t leave us in mystery long as to what our response should be, even if it is not always what happens – the shepherds returned to their flocks, glorifying, and praising God. The first Christ Mass.

Dear Lord, like Mary, we continue to ponder the mystery of your work in our world—sending a Messiah to us as a child in a stable. We ponder what it must have been like to be a shepherd hearing angel choirs accompanied by sheep. Help our unbelief. May we glorify and praise you for all that we have heard and seen. Amen.

THE ETERNAL LIGHT

December 25

John 1:5

Krista Schoenheider Kaplan

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

When I was about fifteen years old, my church's high school youth group went on an overnight camping trip to Starved Rock State Park, located about 75 miles downstate. I knew the other kids well – we were friends both at church and in school – and we had a great time together. We hiked in the canyons and admired the strange rock formations. We swam and splashed each other at a nearby lake. We played softball. As evening fell, we cooked and ate dinner around our campfire, roasted marshmallows for s'mores, and relaxed.

Later that night, under the cloudless, moonless sky, the stars and planets emerged in a silent display of majestic beauty. Even the Milky Way's hazy band of light was visible. Sitting on the ground together outside our tents, we gazed up and named the constellations and planets that we recognized. And then the meteor shower began. Over and over, small streaks of light raced across the sky, disappearing within a second or less. Each one brought delight and wonder. Suddenly, an enormous fireball zoomed above us. For several seconds it cut an enormous swath through the darkness before it finally vanished. We gasped in astonishment. Although the fireball's light was ephemeral, it seemed to last forever. At once I felt very small yet thrilled to be part of our vast universe.

For me, John's words evoke the eternity of that magical moment. For all of us, they offer two powerful lessons about the eternal nature of Jesus. First, "the light shines in the darkness." The light is Jesus, who has co-existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit since before creation. Through that light, God brings healing and hope to our fallen, sinful world. Second, "the darkness did not overcome it." This phrase, written in the past tense, foretells the outcome of the story: Jesus is victorious. In the end, darkness – sin, evil, death, despair – has no chance.

I admit that my faith in this message is being tested right now. Violence, age-old hatred, and anxiety seem to permeate our world, with no certain outcome. I often struggle to sleep at night, and I fear for the safety of those dear to me. Maybe you feel the same. But especially on this day, as we celebrate the birth of the infant Jesus, we must remember that John's words offer the true path out of the brokenness of our world. God will never abandon us. God's eternal light – love, hope, and healing – will always lead us out of the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

Jesus, light of the world, we rejoice in your birth. Fill us with your love and strength, so that your light may shine through us to others. Amen.

Join us for what comes next!

- Sunday Worship, December 31 @10:00 AM
- New Year's Eve Worship, December 31@ 7:00 PM
- New Year's Day Worship, Monday, January 1, @ 10:00 AM

- Saturday, January 6, Epiphany Worship, 7:00 PM
- Sunday Worship, January 7, 10:00 AM

Sunday, January 7

11:15 AM/after worship

Epiphany Brunch.