

2018

# ADVENT MEDITATIONS



Nicolaes Berchem (c.1620-1683)  
The Annunciation to the Shepherds, 1649  
Oil Painting 216 x 314 cm  
The State Hermitage Museum St. Petersburg Russia

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Every year, the church sets aside a few weeks to help us all prepare for the miracle of God's breaking through in the person of Jesus Christ. At Christmas, God broke through the veil that divided heaven and earth, and his incarnation connects us to the eternal life of God.

For many of us, preparation is a luxury of time we simply don't have. Sure we might make hurried to-do lists, perhaps we even take time to do a little research, but most of us rarely prepare for big moments with thoughtfulness and patience. I hope this Advent season can be different.

This Advent, you are invited to spend a little time each day in thoughtfulness and prayer. Each day, a member of our Saint Michael family will guide us toward that beautiful celebration of Christmas in unique ways. As you read these meditations, some may make you laugh, and some may make you cry. But with each meditation, your heart and mind will be molded just a little more toward the moment when we celebrate Christ in the world once again.

I give thanks to God for this time, to be able to walk with each of you toward Christmas, and to be renewed in the hopefulness of God's love for every person. May this season bless you and your family in surprising ways, and may you become more of the blessing God calls each of us to be in the world He loves so dearly.

In peace,

*Christopher Girata +*

The Rev. Dr. Christopher D. Girata  
Rector

Slow down. Quiet. It's Advent. For years I have started my Advent with these words. They came to me through the wonderful illustrations of the Rev. Jay Sidebotham in his annual Advent calendar. These words invite us to not get caught up in the storm of the holidays, but to relax and enjoy the time we share with one another.

In this harried, stressful world in which we live, rarely are we given the gift of quiet. There is work and family. There is shopping and parties. There is worrying and the unknown. All of which is part of who we are these days, but we have this gift of Advent; a time for preparation, not of décor and gifts, but for ourselves. It is a chance for us to work on who we are so that we are ready for the birth of our Lord.

In the Gospel reading for this First Sunday of Advent, we begin with the parable of the ten bridesmaids. It is not an easy lesson for them or us. And as a matter of fact it really puts us in a place that most of us are rather uncomfortable with, a place that has to bear witness to what is unfair or unjust. You see, in our world, as Christians today, trying to live into the Great Commandment and loving our neighbors as ourselves, what happens in this parable just doesn't fly. We would always share our oil. And we would never allow friends and family, let alone guests, to be left on the curb when they are to be in the party with us. It would be easy to flip this Gospel around and say that the five bridesmaids that were prepared were thoughtless and cruel and that the bridegroom wasn't living into his patriarchal duties, but that is not what this Gospel is about.

So what is this Gospel about? It is about waiting. You see the custom of the day was for the groom to take the bride from her family's home and return to his for the wedding party. The bride and her attendants would wait until the groom would arrive, but there was never a set time for any of this to take place, so not only did the bride and bridesmaids have to wait, so did all the guests back at the groom's family house. So you see, this waiting was equal for all involved.

As we enter into Advent we too are waiting. Yes, we are waiting for the birth of Jesus and all that comes with the Christmas celebration. But I think we are also waiting for our hearts to be broken open in such a way that we can be prepared to receive God at all times.

May your waiting this Advent offer a time of holy reflection and searching for light in the darkness.

## Psalm 3: "Trust in God under Adversity"

When I saw the readings to consider for today's meditation, my eyes were instantly drawn to Psalm 3. Twenty years ago I was going through a very difficult time in my business career, when some people I was doing business with turned out to not be good people. When they didn't hold up their end of our agreement, I terminated my work with them they attacked me. One day as I struggled to get through this terrible time, I was praying for God to help me and suddenly felt called to take out my Bible, open to a random place and start reading. Hoping for some comforting words divinely inspired by scripture, I opened to Psalm 3: "Trust in God under Adversity". I remember tears running down my face as I read this Psalm.

The Psalmist David writes about many enemies rising up against him, how the Lord is a shield around him and the one who lifts up his head when he is down, and how God hears his cries for help and sustains him through these tough times. He says he is not afraid of tens of thousands of people who have set themselves against him. This is because he trusts in God. He calls upon the Lord to rise up and deliver him from his wicked enemies and God does this. As I called upon God in my tough situation, He sustained and shielded me, lifted my head up when I was down, and ultimately delivered me from my enemies. One very important thing about how this Psalm ends is that David gives all of the glory of this to God. Sometimes it's easier to give the glory to Him when we defeat an army of tens of thousands than when we overcome far smaller challenges, but it is always important to give Him thanks and remember these things come to us by the grace of God.

An interesting anecdote to this story: I was driving to church for a meeting the morning after I read today's assigned readings, and was thinking about Psalm 3. A new Christian song by Hillsong Young and Free called Every Little Thing was playing on the radio, and as I pulled into the church parking lot I searched for the song on Apple Music to download. When the album song list loaded, I noticed the word "Selah" appeared 3 times in the list of songs. I remembered seeing Selah appear 3 times in Psalm 3. I did a little research online and the word Selah appears 72 times in the Psalms, and the first occurrence of Selah in the Psalms is in Psalm 3. It means to "lift up, to weigh or measure" or to "pause, and think of that." So when we encounter it, we should pause and lift up the truth of the Word that has been given for meditation, reflection, and application.

Here are a few lines of the song Every Little Thing:  
*Why should I worry 'bout tomorrow when I know  
That all I gotta do is trust you, Lord  
Every little thing is gonna be alright  
Every little thing is gonna be just fine  
Whether I can see it now, I know you will work it out for good  
Every little thing, everything will be alright . . .*

Vineyards often stir romantic images of Napa Valley, Tuscany and France where meticulous rows of vines undulate over hills and valleys. Well, save that vision for your next dream vacation because that is not the picture Luke delivers today. Instead, Luke uses an allegorical parable to show us some self-centered tenant farmers (people of Israel) who murder the owner's servants (prophets) when sent to check on the fruit crop of the owner (God). The tenants chose to live the life as they wanted, rather than show honor and obedience to the owner. Seems like we have heard this story over and over again in the Old Testament, when covenants were continually broken. In this story Luke adds another key player, the Beloved Son as Jesus. The son went to the tenant farmers only to be killed because he would be the rightful heir to the property they wanted to take over. Luke foretells the murder of Jesus in this parable.

We could translate this parable to our modern times. The vineyard might represent the schools, businesses, churches or medical facilities where we invest our time and talents. Will we gift the energy in our work or study to God's honor, or will we use it as a means to grow idols of money, intelligence or material things?

When the "servant" comes to check on the fruit, which might come in the form of a Bible Study, prayer, sermon, friend, spouse or relative, will we see this potential message as an interruption? Might this be a time to redirect our talents and gifts to God? Or will we "kill the messenger?"

Imagine further that Jesus, God's Beloved Son, pays us a visit. Will we share abundance, love and honor, or look the other way?

In this Advent season, perhaps we can open our hearts to accept the dreamy vision of the vineyard, not in some far off place but deep within our souls. We can choose to share God's abundant love, grace and mercy with those in our community where His fruit can multiply through spreading the Good News. No sweeter wine than His could ever touch our palettes or those for whom we "pour" a glass.

I write this Advent Meditation during the October weekend when 11 persons of Jewish faith were murdered by a hate-filled gunman in a Pittsburgh synagogue. We prayed in church for the victims and their families. This type of violence leaves us numb.

The Old Testament passage for today speaks about Judaism and its role in the world. The reading from Isaiah prophesies about the nations of the world streaming to the mountain of the Lord and the House of Jacob; to be taught the ways of the Lord and to walk in His ways. So instructed, nations will beat swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. These thoughts of Judean origin are so profound for humanity that they are engraved in stone at the United Nations Plaza in New York City.

Today's New Testament reading strikes a darker note, with Paul suggesting to his followers in Thessalonica that their persecutors are akin to the Jews in Judea who persecuted the early church and murdered Christ. While this passage only speaks to a small group of Jewish leaders in Jesus' time, for centuries it has been evoked by some as an underpinning for hatred and violence against all Jews. But recall that Paul was a Jew, with a great affinity for the Jewish people, and Paul expressed with love his hope that Jewish people will find God through faith and Jesus Christ. See Romans 9-11. It is a perversion of God's commandments to love our neighbor and worship Him to suggest there is a scriptural justification for anti-Semitism.

Without Judaism, there is no Christianity. Judeo-Christian values provide the foundation of our nation's constitutional democracy. The love and friendship, and for some of us the familial relationships we share with persons of Jewish faith, enrich our lives and give them meaning.

This Advent season, let us pause and reflect on the blessings God has given us through the Jewish people. His chosen people. And may we give thanks to God - the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob - for the birth of a Jewish baby in ancient Bethlehem, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 2:12 - 21 | Psalm 18 | 1 Thessalonians 3:1 - 13 | Luke 20:27 - 40

It has only been four days since the first Advent candle flickered into light to begin a new season in our Christian year, but my guess is that many of us are already well into our preparations for Christmas celebrations. The four weeks that mark Advent sit before me as a lovely chance to experience contemplative anticipation, but somehow that opportunity never becomes my practice. The joy of the season becomes the noise of the season, and I am taken away within it.

Today's readings remind me about a few things. Isaiah, as usual, doesn't equivocate in his warning that man's arrogance and pride, and idols of silver and gold, will bring down God's wrath. In Psalm 18, a hymn of thanksgiving, David offers exuberant gratitude to God for rescue from his enemies, and credits his faithfulness to God as the reason for God's protection. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, asks for prayers of protection against evil at the hands of the faithless, while telling the Thessalonians that God will be faithful to them, bringing strength and protection as they experience their own persecution. And in Luke, when the Sadducees ask Jesus a question about who is married to whom after resurrection when family deaths have, by law, required inter-marriages on earth, Jesus responds that earthly logic isn't applicable in the resurrected life: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive." [Luke 20:38]

These writers from the past speak to issues that resonate in our time too: pride, arrogance, idols of gold and silver, faithlessness, God's faithfulness, and the difficulty we have in unleashing our bounded thoughts into space where earthly understanding doesn't hold sway.

With the season's busy-ness underway, I am reminded of the old cliché that the gift of "presence" is of greater value than "presents". As I allow myself to be distracted by things that would likely earn Isaiah's scorn, I know that I lose track of Presence (with a capital "P"), and need Paul's reminder that God is here, with us now, in the midst of all our challenges.

The good news of the resurrected life is available and accessible to me in every breath I take, beyond my understanding; no waiting required. I simply need to put aside my lists, breathe deeply, follow in David's steps with thanksgiving, and sit still in the peace of Presence. Thanks be to God.

The writer of Luke speaks to a problem in his world that goes to the heart of a dilemma in our own. What to say to a culture obsessed with status, appearance and wealth? Let's consider the scribes to be the "one percenters" of the calcified theocracy that Palestine had become by Jesus's time. Jesus forthrightly condemns the practices of that elite group of literate people. This is a picture of Jesus as courageous in the face of social inequity and hypocrisy. He speaks so that all can hear, although the direction is to his disciples. "Beware" is a strong admonition not only to avoid emulating the behavior but to be wary of the people themselves and their teaching. "Yes," Jesus says, "they put on a show and curry favor and respect. They desire and obtain the best seats in the synagogue." However, while they are doing this, they build their status and advantages on the backs of the most disenfranchised in the society ("devouring widows' houses"). Furthermore, their hypocrisy is heightened by the saying of long prayers while they leach from the downtrodden. Think about how we see this in contemporary terms--Who are today's scribes and what would Jesus have to say about them? If I intend to follow Jesus, what should my own thought and action be in the face of profound social inequity? Am I an abettor of today's scribes? What part of me and my own lifestyle is a 21st century picture of what Jesus is criticizing, and what should I do about it?

As so often happens in the Bible, Jesus contrasts two vignettes to make his point. He follows his condemnation of the scribes with the story of the widows' mite. Again, the rich give, but it's not a sacrificial gift. They give a pittance out of their plenty, almost as though it were an insurance premium for right treatment from God. The widow, who has little or nothing, gives until it hurts. Notice the mention of widows in both discourses. The rich are lumped in with the scribes at the top of the heap, while the widows are a totem for all of the dispossessed, who are taken advantage of and yet act with faith in God and God's grace. And as Jesus says, the widow's gift is the most meaningful because of the sacrifice it represents and by extension the faith it proclaims. Where do I see contrasts like these and what do they mean to me? Am I blind to these situations and acts? And having cognizance of them, what am I compelled to do if I listen to Christ?

Before I was assigned these verses, I assumed my Advent Meditation would be about joy and anticipation. Yet, the readings were more about Judgment Day, the "beautiful and glorious" life those who follow God have, and the perishing of those who choose to live otherwise. And then, I received a surprise from the past.

When reading and contemplating how I would address my own readiness for judgment, I noticed faint underlining in pencil on the page. It must be my grandmother's markings! I use her Bible, though I never knew her. She died seven months before my parents were married. I am her namesake and I have heard that she was kind and fun, and a wonderful sister, wife and mother.

In the front of her Bible, my grandfather had written that it was "presented to herself shortly before her death on November 7, 1965."

My grandmother underlined three words in Thessalonians 4:

*"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."*

I wonder if she was contemplating her life, cut short by Lupus, and the afterlife. Or, was she looking for words to comfort those she was leaving behind? My grandfather, and my father and aunt, surely took solace knowing they would meet her again. And she had loved ones go before her that perhaps she looked forward to seeing.

She underscored one verse in Luke 21, where Jesus responds to those who ask when Judgment Day would be and how they would know:

*"And ye shall be betrayed both by parents and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls."*

This seems to tell us if we stand firm in our beliefs when challenged by non-believers, we will gain our souls. She was a steadfast Christian and hopefully this gave passage her strength.

I can't find any other underlined sections except for within Thessalonians and Luke. The fact I was assigned these passages and found her pencil markings is serendipitous. It reaffirms for me the importance of passing the Story through generations and of discussing the mystery of faith with family members, and has reawakened my curiosity to explore these concepts further.

The remarkable discovery that my grandmother was considering these ideas encourages me to keep learning the Story and trying harder to live in Christ's image.

Isaiah 5:1 - 7 | Psalms 114 - 115, 148 - 150 | 2 Peter 3:11 - 18 | Luke 7:28 - 35

The Psalms are much more than just a collection of ancient and beautiful songs. Through the composition of many authors, they are the oldest collected expressions of joy, hatred, jealousy, thanksgiving and every other emotion to be found in the life of a faithful person.

Everyone has a favorite and because we hear the 23rd Psalm so often in our Episcopal Burial liturgies, many come to love that one because, through sheer repetition, its truth and comfort has worked its way into their heart. This very fact shows the far-reaching power of these words in our lives today.

There are four out of the 150 that I can say are my favorites: 139, 61, 42, and the one assigned for today, Psalm 115. All are wonderful and I recommend taking some time and meditating through them, even the later portion of 139. But it is 115 that lifts my soul.

The whole of it is a simple meditation on the One God of the universe and how only God reigns supreme. I love these words, especially when I am in one of those darker portions of the spiritual life we all experience from time to time. When I feel like the slings and arrows of the day to day are conspiring against me, there is an inexplicable peace that arises as I make my way to that second verse, "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'"

These verses and especially these words are so consonant with my faith journey: when friends from school made fun of my beliefs, when I lost someone important in my life, when businesses crashed or relationships go sideways – in short, when everything turns to ash and it feels as if no help is coming. Surely this must have been the precise context in which 115 was written. The nations around Israel would mock the former slaves for putting their faith in some unseen personage who would apparently stand idly by while the people would suffer hardship.

This Psalm is still relevant because it reminds us to continue to lift our eyes to the heavens, even in the face of great adversity. Psalm 115 gives us words to raise our spirits as we acknowledge the mighty hand of God in our lives. And finally, this psalm provides us with words to bless ourselves, our families, and the world.

Take some time today and read through my favorite Psalms (13a, 61, 42) and save 115 for last. Whatever sort of day you are having, there is something here for you. Read these ancient words and draw strength for your life and a blessing for the lives of those who cross your path today.

Only 15 more days until Christmas.

I don't know about you but I have to admit that I am just beginning to think about starting my Christmas shopping. I am not the one who has their gifts wrapped and under the tree a week early. As long as they are there Christmas morning, I'm good. I need that sense of being up against a hard deadline to motivate me. So it seems ironic/appropriate that I have been asked to reflect on this reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

Right off the top, Paul reminds his fledgling church that, *"You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."* Wow, strong stuff, and I knew I had heard that simile before but I wasn't sure where so I went looking and, after some reading, I found it in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25. Here Jesus teaches; *"If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming he would have stayed awake... Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."* A few lines above that I read *"As for those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage... and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man."* And the next chapter was the parable of the ten bridesmaids with its final admonition *"Truly I tell you, I do not know you. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."*

*"Like a thief in the night," "swept away as by a flood," "keep awake," "at an unexpected hour,"* dire warnings all. You will never know when. No deadline in there anywhere. My default mode isn't spiritually effective and my season of preparation is turning into a season of panic!

Paul started me down this rabbit hole so let me go back and continue reading his letter. *"...sudden destruction ...labor pains ...no escape"* (still not helping) but wait! *"But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are children of the light..."* and as children of the light we have been promised the hope of salvation. I've had it backwards! I realize that Paul's letter is not a warning but, instead, a promise. Yes Christ's return will be unexpected but that's a good thing. I don't need to know when and rather than worrying about it (while perhaps living in a way that should cause me to worry) I need to live a life that celebrates the fact that He will return. That Christ will come again. Then I will be ready.

*"For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ..."*

As I received the scriptures for meditation for this Advent I opened my Bible and read Isaiah. I thought, "Oh no, a reading about the anger of God." I first thought that I would ignore it but pondered on God's relationship with humanity. God created us in God's image and wants to have a relationship with us. As I look through the Old Testament there are many stories of how we don't act in a way that is celebrating God and other humanity. There are also images of God protecting us when we are really in trouble. When Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden clothed in fig leaves, God intervened. Fig leaves are poisonous and it would be like dressing in poison ivy. God made new clothes out of skins to protect the couple going out into the world. As Noah left in the ark with the animals, God's hand reached out to make certain that the door was closed to protect those within.

It is my belief that God wants us to act in love and charity with God and with all of humanity. I believe that God loves us, forgives us and never turns a back to us. I believe that Jesus came to earth at Christmas time to renew and honor that commitment. I am reminded of this with two stories. In a Bible study with Dr. Bill Power we were discussing forgiveness and the afterlife. One woman stated that if Hitler were in heaven when she got there, she wouldn't go in. Dr. Power responded that he was only able to be concerned with his own behavior and his own relationship with God's forgiveness and grace. The other noted theologian I would like to mention and quote is my mother. We were always told, "I love you always and no matter what you ever do, I will love you." and "Tell the truth always and you won't get into trouble, we can work it out." My mother was an image of God in the world. I believe that God knows what is in our hearts and lives. I believe that we can go to God with good news and troubling news about ourselves. God is love and God is grace.

The psalms for today speak of trusting Yahweh, reaching out to God, trying to live an upright life. "Yahweh, you support both man and beast, how precious, God is your faithful love. So the children of Adam take refuge in the shadow of your wings."

1 Thessalonians speaks to us of living a life of grace given by God to all our fellow beings. Be considerate, respectful and affectionate. Be peaceful, encouraging and supportive. "Make sure that people do not try to repay evil for evil; always aim at what is best for each other and for everyone. Always be joyful, pray constantly and for all things give thanks."

Finally, Luke speaks of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Time flies by and so often I think fondly of my family and our stories. Be alert, Luke says, as we don't know what will happen. I celebrate every funny moment with friends, every laughing time with family, every tear shed over those whom I hold dear. This Advent let us all step out into the world in peace, love and joy. Let us honor God's grace and share it with every person.

Our reading from the Gospel of John today is the story of Jesus and the woman who committed adultery. This lesson reads almost like a modern day tale ripped from the headlines. Caught in the act of adultery, dragged into a public gathering place, humiliated by her sin, separated from anyone who could protect her, judged and then sentenced to death without trial.

In this text, John identifies two different voices that speak to the situation. That of the critics and that of Christ. The voice of the critics condemn, criticize, mock, and humiliate this woman. They caught her in the act in order to see what Jesus's response would be. They were testing him by creating a situation where he would have to choose between his message of forgiveness and love and obeying the Old Testament laws handed down by Moses.

Nevertheless, we listen in this story to Jesus' voice. He did not excuse the woman for her sins, after all, he says, "stop sinning and walk in his light." However, he also tells the crowd and critics that if they are free from sin then they may choose to throw the first stone and lead this woman to her death. Of course, no one is free of sin and, thus, the men turn away and leave the woman to be.

We all know that none of us are perfect and we all sin. With one devastating statement, Jesus demonstrated that the law was not wrong, but if everyone saw the law for what it was, we would understand that we are all guilty in some way or another. God does not categorize our sin and we are no better than anyone else is. We, oftentimes, spend our days judging the hearts of others. Looking to those on the streets and in our daily encounters and thinking, "At least I am better than them." Nevertheless, it is not our place to judge. By looking to God, we can truly live a life not of judging others or being marred by sin, but baptized by his grace just like the woman caught in act of adultery.

This passage is chilling. It rapidly moves to “the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.” Notice that the villains here are top-ranking clergy and lay teachers – the religious and intellectual leaders. These are the people responsible for handing down and interpreting the religious tradition. If we cannot trust them, whom can we rely on to maintain and spread the faith?

The next one acting against Jesus is Judas “one of the twelve.” One of the twelve indicates one of us, one of the intimate followers of Jesus; today this would be a dedicated member of the church. This member of the inner circle is the one who plotted with the chief priests and officers of the temple police to betray Jesus. Crucial to their scheme is secrecy. The people must not know. This is not a diabolical scheme hatched and brought to fruition by the Jewish people.

Betrayal is the theme. Natural evils – damages done by accidents, diseases, or hurricanes – cause suffering and death, but there is no sense of evil intent or treachery. Deceit by respected leaders of the faith is more painful than a natural disaster. Consider the outrage accompanying knowledge of abuse by Roman Catholic clergy and the cover up by bishops. Betrayal is personal. My memory of being mocked and undermined by a trusted colleague still rankles, but incisions from surgery healed long ago.

I can understand the fear motivating the scholarly and spiritual leaders. Jesus had carried out a prophetic threat against the temple and had criticized those who interpreted the law. At the very least, these leaders feared that Jesus might provoke the Romans to violence. Judas, however, remains a mystery. The priests offered him money, but they did so after Judas proposed to hand over Jesus. Modern commentators suggest that Judas was disappointed that Jesus was not the right kind of messiah. Alternatively, they speculate that he hoped to force Jesus' hand so that Jesus would rebel and triumph against the Roman oppressors and their collaborators. Luke tells us only that Satan entered into Judas. This explanation leaves me wondering how the force of evil penetrated Judas. What desire, what weak spot did the power of evil use for its purpose? There is a dark mystery to evil that my study of history and theology does not solve. Nonetheless, each of us needs to be aware so that this power does not take advantage of us.

There is, of course, another Power of Love and Truth that overcomes evil. But redemption can be costly. Therefore, this Advent let us remain alert and hopeful.

Gracious Redeemer, who has overcome the power of evil and death, give us that hope which empowers us to face and resist evil so that your loving purpose will be fulfilled. Amen.

*"The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."*

Immanuel in Hebrew. Emmanuel in Greek. God with us. A sign of God's own presence with God's own people. Advent is our yearly season of preparation for the Incarnation, God coming to be with and among us in the person of Jesus Christ. What kinds of preparations are needed for God's own self to more fully come into your life?

I am nowhere close to an expert at rock climbing. I have done some bouldering, some repelling, and just a bit of free climbing. What I know from these experiences and conversations with friends who are active climbers, is that preparation is absolutely essential. In fact, many rock climbers when not actively climbing, go over routes in their heads to make sure they know when and how to move to safely achieve success.

Psalms 31 is the one I affectionately call the "Rock Climber's Psalm." Our BCP version of Psalm 31:1-3 reads, *In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame: deliver me in your righteousness. Incline your ear to me; make haste to deliver me. 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."*

God is all about preparing space for us before we even get there. God wants to lead and guide us to that place. Advent is a time when we prepare to encounter God more fully, and it is also a time when God is preparing a sacred and holy place for us to encounter God.

The reading from Luke today reminds us that God continues to be present to us, incarnate in our Eucharistic celebration. Our clergy take, bless, break, and distribute bread, Christ's body to us, so that we in turn can be taken, blessed, broken, and distributed to the world as God's own gift to our family, friends, neighbors, and even to strangers. How can we prepare ourselves to be the God is giving to world?

Are we on the right path? Are we heading in the right direction? Where are we going? Do we know? Each of us should ask these questions of ourselves periodically and attempt to answer them truthfully, if only to ourselves.

The readings for today invite us to look at the circumstances of our lives as they truly are with a realistic appraisal of where we are at this time in relation to God and our fellow men and women.

As human beings we are attracted to the ways of the world - the easy way, the pleasant path, the lucrative decision and/or the self-centered actions. The ways of the world produce the rewards of the world which may also include conflict, isolation from community and from God.

Today, the psalmist celebrates the way of the Lord. The Lord listens to our supplications. He provides protection and healing. He forgives and there is restoration to a new life. Where would you like to be? What would you like for your life to be? Consider these questions and give thanks to the Lord.

*"Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning"*

*"Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! ...Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts on the day of his fierce anger." - Isaiah 13:6,13*

*"For if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ...for indeed our God is a consuming fire." - Hebrews 12:25,29*

During the season of Advent we not only await the birth of the Christ child but we also prepare for Jesus' second coming when he will consummate all things. Our readings for today, with their destructive and consuming imagery, are definitely focused on the latter.

It might come as a surprise to you that Jesus' incarnation and birth was not a part of the focus of Advent until the middle ages. Prior to that the sole focus of Advent was Jesus' second coming. In fact it was quite common for the sermons on the four Sundays in Advent to address the 'last things' topics of death, judgment, heaven and hell. Wow...add some wassail and gingerbread men and you've got yourself a party!

So count me as part of the contingent that is happy we now use the season of Advent to address both the Incarnation and the second coming. But focusing on both creates a pretty odd juxtaposition. It's like pairing a sweet, pastel baby shower with a terrible storm where you hide in a windowless room in the middle of the house in a curled up ball with your eyes shut. It's a cradle versus a gravestone.

But what these two events have in common is the call the preparation. During Advent we are called to prepare our hearts for the arrival of the Christ child. We are to slow down and make space and focus on that which is of ultimate meaning. We are to reflect on God's great love for us, such that he would become one of us and experience all that we experience. We are also called to prepare our lives for that time when we will stand before Jesus and share our story. And so this Advent let us ask, how are we preparing our hearts so that Jesus is invited to work in us such that we become more and more the people he has created us to be? And then how is that work reflected in the encounters and priorities we live out as we make our way in the world? Preparing for both is our call for the season.

On the sixteenth day of the season of Advent 2018, we come face to face with Jesus' visit to the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper and the betrayal by Judas. It is here that Jesus knows clearly what is ahead of Him in the next two days. It is a dark moment for Jesus as He suffers through a most difficult decision. He asks the Father to remove Him from these events, but knowing what is at stake, He yields to the Father's will at the end.

We too find ourselves in dark times and places in our lives. Decisions we have made or failed to make, words spoken in haste, actions that have hurt ourselves or others, to mention a few. We all have been there.

In this season of preparation to receive the Christ Child, let us look at those patterns of behaviors and thoughts that separate us from our families and friends. Ways in which we have built barriers and walls which keep us away from the love of God and others around us.

As Jesus did in the garden, let us submit to the love that will never let us go.

Isaiah 9:1 - 7 | Psalms 45, 47, 48 | 2 Peter 1:12 - 21 | Luke 22:54 - 69

*"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." - Isaiah 9:2, 6*

*"So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. . . . We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." - 2 Peter 1:12, 19*

I struggled a bit with these passages. Trying to make sense of them as I was inundated with unsettling news of mail bombs and shootings. After re-centering myself and reading the passages aloud from Isaiah and from 2 Peter for the um-teenth time I was suddenly struck by a couple of realizations:

Every generation looks for a "light bearer," someone to lead them out of darkness, whatever that darkness may be.

Isaiah gives four names to the new king. These names express the essential character of the new King: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. As modern Christians we interpret this new king to be Jesus.

Like a great mother, Peter knows that a little nagging can be a good thing. We need to be reminded, frequently, that God's "divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life" and that we should make every effort to add to our faith: goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and most of all love.

Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. In this time of preparation, can I start each day with these commitments?

Today I will be a light bearer and commit to at least try lead someone out of their current darkness.

Today I will embody the names given to the new king, striving to be a wise counselor, peaceful and filled with Godly power.

Today I will make every effort to incorporate all these into my faith: goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and love.

If we all do these three things each day, we will change the world!

## The Lowly Manger

In Isaiah 9 the Lord was upset with the Northern Kingdom of Israel and their pride. *"...but in pride and arrogance of heart they [the Israelites] said, The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place."* (New Revised Standard Version, Isaiah 9:9-10). At the time, bricks and sycamores were common building materials, and despite the Lord's prior displeasure with the Samaritans' pride, they insisted on building with dressed stones and cedars, which were expensive building materials used in palaces. The Lord was beyond upset with their "pride and arrogance of heart".

*"So, the Lord raised adversaries against them, and stirred up their enemies, the Arameans on the east and Philistines on the west, and they devoured Israel with open mouths."* (Isaiah 9:11-12). Wow! God was so angry with his own people's pride and arrogance that he fired up their enemies on both sides, and Israel's enemies devoured it. "Devoured" is a powerful word. God was trying to once again let his people (and us) know that pride and arrogance are bad. Really bad. So bad, in fact that he again wiped out his people.

This particular reading struck me in the context of Advent, because when I think of the coming of Christ, I am immediately presented with the most humble image of a helpless, newborn infant lying in a manger. A manger by the way is a feeding trough for animals. The contrast to the pride and arrogance of the Isaiah passage is remarkable!

*"Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 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 2:4-7).

The birth of Jesus is the exact opposite of the pride and arrogance of heart displayed by the Israelites in the book of Isaiah. Instead, Jesus's beginning as a feeble, helpless infant in an animal's feeding trough tells us what our Christianity needs to look like. Not prideful and arrogant, but humble and modest. Not flashy like the dressed stones and the cedars of the Israelites, but simple like the animal trough. During Advent as I prepare for Christmas, I will think of the trough, and about avoiding pride and arrogance of heart and doing a better job of humbly and modestly serving others.

For a selection of readings in Advent's season of light, today's choices feel closer to the shadowy call to repentance of Lent. From Isaiah's description of wickedness burning, gorging and devouring everyone in sight, to John the Baptist calling the religious elite a brood of vipers, these scripture readings remind us that people can be destructive, greedy, and not keen on remorse. They are, to quote 2 Peter 2:15, in love with the wages of wickedness. It's no wonder the Psalms here call out to God for help and deliverance. The world is a mess.

We don't have to look far to find those who utter curses and lies with their lips, or who write oppressive laws and rob the poor. We could make a lengthy list of those who are madly in love with the wages of wickedness. It bears remembering that this messy world, this world filled with vipers as well as saints, is the very world God chose to enter. The fullness of time for the Messiah to arrive was not dependent on humans getting their acts together, but on God revealing that even in a world with a wicked, paranoid, narcissistic King Herod, religious hypocrisy, and injustice on all sides, there is still space for love to flourish.

Psalms 33 offers us steady ground in this collection of honest readings. And that's because it's not a psalm based on what humans are doing, but what God is doing, and who God is. The word of the Lord is right and true. God is faithful in all God does. God loves righteousness and justice. And then there's this defiantly prophetic declaration: *The earth is filled with God's unfailing love. This earth.* This messy, violent, confused, endangered earth. It is filled - *filled* - with God's unfailing love. We forget this when we look first to the world around us and not to the God who has created it. If Psalm 33 reminds us of anything, it's to shift our perspective back to love. And not just any love, but the unfailing love of God which is the hope and heart of creation. This hope is in the heart of each and every one of us. Here again is that old story: we fail God, we fail each other. But the love of God does not fail us. The love of God comes to us, again and again, through patriarchs and matriarchs, judges and prophets, sages and saints and sinners. The love of God comes into this messy world as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, the hope and heart of salvation.

When we lose sight of God's unfailing love, we're prone to wander. We tend to get off track, careening toward empty promises and shallow desires. We forget the goodness of our own humanity, which Jesus has come to illuminate. Advent reminds us to return home. To return to God's unfailing love, which is always available to us, always present, perhaps especially in times of turmoil. As we prepare ourselves for the Feast of Christmas, may we turn our gaze toward the unfailing love of God which resides not only in the world around us, but the soul within us. May we rest there, where trust and hope flourish, where justice and peace are reestablished, where love prevails, that we may welcome the Christ child and follow his Light into this messy world God has come to save. Amen.

*2:19 ...a person is a slave of whatever overcomes him.*

*2:21 ...it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than...[to have turned back from it].*

*2:22 ...The dog returns to its own vomit...[and]...A bathed sow returns to wallowing in the mire.*

I have a dangerous relationship with words. When I was a small child, sick with the flu, my mother asked, "Do you think you might vomit?" I had not considered vomiting, but the word itself brought on nausea. I nodded yes, and she brought a bucket to my bedside. The word with the bucket aroused me to vomit, again and again, until I was sure I would rather die.

I'm a dog. A spiritual dog. I am rebellious and willful. I do not have a servant's heart. I dream a twisted story, and awaken in the night. I lie in the dark and think the things I do not want to think. I want my name to be Solomon, to mean peaceful friend of God, but my barking thoughts rile me to a torturous insomnia. I do not suffer wisely.

Peter had denial problems. Solomon had hoarding problems. I have word problems. I sink my teeth into stories I tell myself of my trivial or imagined persecution. I lock my jaws and refuse to let go. I return to my own vomit. Like Paul, I do the things I hate. It is dangerous territory. Perseverance is required to slog through the mire of ambivalences and long nights.

I would give up if our heroes had been perfect from start to finish. I count on their sins, not on their successes. I count on God to love me as he loved them, even if I build one temple to God and another to myself, if I collect too many horses or wives or useless words, if I turn my back on the way of compassion and drive myself mad for a time. If I had never known the way of righteousness I might be blameless, but I would still be broken. I'd rather know the true story. I'd rather suffer and strive to be whole, since anything is possible once we hear the Word that makes us weep.

I am counting on a merciful God to deliver a True Story, with a cup of wisdom poetry, and a consecrated bucket, to my bedside.

Isaiah 10:20 - 27 | Psalms 55, 138, 139 | Jude 17-25 | Luke 3:1 - 9

Tell your story as part of "God's Story" she said. Read the scriptures and see how they fit with your story.

I have decided that God's story is messy. Even the Advent story with John the Baptist wandering in the wilderness and the birth story with the Christ child being born in a stable. It is not a clean and simple story and mine isn't either. I suspect neither is yours. I see that today's scriptures speak loudly to my life. They give me a guide for living, help for living in and cleaning up the mess!

*Isaiah 10:20 - "In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel."* I think of how often I have tried to pull myself up by my own bootstraps, relied on self-reliance, only to find it doesn't work. So, I turn to the Lord in prayer. My story is about learning to surrender.

*Psalms 55, - "God, listen to my prayer. Pay attention to my cry for help. Hear me and answer me..."* reflects the passionate prayer that is a part of my family story. Historically our answer has been to turn to prayer. My mother and my grandmother were huge prayer warriors. They would say that they prayed my father back home from WWII, his surrender to the Japanese, the Death March, prison camps, three Hell Ships, basically back to living. Prayer over family and friends is a part of God's story and my story.

I find prayer is best started with praise and Psalm 138 is a great place to start. *"Lord, I will praise you with all my heart. In front of those who think they are gods I will sing praise to you."* Praising God puts me in a positive frame of mind, shapes my emotions for prayer and sets the tone for my day. I have often thought that in the next life I would love to be a praising cherub!

*Psalms 139* teaches me that the Lord knows all my comings and goings, all that is in my heart and in that I realize that I am secure in His love. While that is a little sobering it gives me comfort in knowing he knows me better than anyone.

*Jude 17-25* encourages me to live my story in God's presence, to live in His love and to cling to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Then it leads me full circle back to praise.

Today's instruction from John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-9 comes with warning sealed with assurance:

*Isaiah 40:3-5, - "Every valley will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be made level. The crooked roads will become straight. The rough ways will become smooth. And all people will see God's salvation."*

I find comfort in seeing how my story fits with God's Story. I hope you do too. I await the celebration of the birth in a messy stable and rest in the assurance that He will help me tidy my life.

### “Love and Light”

We are at the end of Advent. We have been through most of this season that calls us to reflect on and anticipate the coming of our Lord into the world at the first Christmas and in the fullness of time. As the Advent wreath nearly reaches full brightness, we are reminded of the images of light and dark wrapped up in the season, and we wait with anticipation for the light of the world.

As we wait so close to Christmas, it seems a good time to consider fresh the why of it all. Why does God come?

At the highest level, the answer is because of love. The Rite II, Prayer A, Eucharist Prayer reminds us that in God's infinite love he made us for himself. Scripture tells us that God loved us first (1 John 4:19). Today's gospel reading says that it was because of love that God the Father gave his only son. Love is behind it all. God does it because of love and he does it to save us. (John 3:16). It is not, however, some distant otherworldly conception of love, but one that takes on flesh—the miracle of the Incarnation. It is a love that calls us to approach a farmyard and peer into a feeding trough to see love in the messy broken world.

Yet, love does not stop there. That same love, we are reminded in our first reading from Isaiah, is not a mere spiritual conception but one that engages the material world and order. That passage from Isaiah references the servant who will bring justice to the nations. The passage, you may have noticed, mentions justice three times in the opening verses. Justice is tied to God's love for all humanity. Part of our longing and anticipation for God's coming in the fullness of time is a longing for complete justice—a time when things will be made right.

Pursuing justice is an aspect of our coming to the light. Yet it is not always easy. The second part of our gospel lesson says that some would not receive the light that came into the world because they loved darkness. They are pursuing their own ways. Something we all struggle with at times. Our reading from Ephesians may help us understand why it can be such a challenge.

The reading from Ephesians invites us to think about spiritual warfare—the battle between light and dark in this place. We struggle against the cosmic powers of this present darkness says Paul (Ephesians 6:12). To face it, Paul invites the Ephesians to put on the armor of God, to pray in the spirit, and be strong in the strength of his power. While not labeled as such, this seems to be another way of coming to the light and working for God's kingdom.

As Advent ends, let us reflect on the love that is behind God's coming at the first Christmas and in the fullness of time. Let us reflect on the light and what it means to push back the darkness of injustice in this present world. May God fill us with new hope and strength as we come to Christmas.

The waiting time of Advent is nearly over, it is finally Christmas Eve, the anticipation builds, and our hearts start to beat a little quicker. The lights of the church dim to complete darkness as midnight approaches, and as we join our voices in reverence singing "Silent Night", the tiny spark of light from one candle grows and spreads throughout the church as neighbors lean towards one another and share the wonder of the light of Christ coming into our lives.

Isaiah 35 is a joyful and encouraging message of hope for God's people - assuring them they will return to Jerusalem, predicting the coming of the Messiah, and reminding us and them that the way to follow God will not be difficult nor dangerous, *"A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way."* Too often we forget that it's not difficult to follow God. Our 21st century lives, with our many conveniences and amenities, can keep us from opening our hearts, listening to God, and hearing what He is trying to tell us. It can be especially hard to hear during this busy time of year with the many distractions of the season.

In a song of comfort in the midst of crises, Psalm 46 reminds us to trust in God and to find solace in Him during difficult times, praising Him and believing that He is with us regardless of whatever personal challenges we face. Sometimes we have to humble ourselves and remember that we actually face the world stronger when we rely on God rather than muddling through by ourselves. This psalm is the inspiration for Martin Luther's hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, a hymn that inspires even those who are shy about singing to raise their voices in praise.

In Luke, we find Zechariah, whose doubts about God had struck him unable to speak for many months. Upon the birth of his son, John the Baptist, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and he suddenly speaks, shocking the people gathered in the temple and bursting forth in this song of praise and promise for he announces the coming of Jesus and the fulfillment of the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants. He ends his song with a tribute to his son, *"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways."* When I read this passage, I try to imagine what Zechariah must be feeling. Can you sense his excitement and anticipation? And what must the people be thinking? Zechariah proclaims that important prophecies are about to be fulfilled; the people can only wonder at what is to come, but we know what happens next and we know how the world changes with the arrival of Jesus.

As I read from Revelation, I am moved by the overwhelmingly profound and simple message it offers: Come to Christ. All are welcome, and all will find comfort, refuge, salvation, peace. I encourage you to return to Revelation, read the complete chapter and contemplate its message to the world that is so simple yet so fundamentally powerful and full of the unconditional love that God has for us.

The readings for today are filled with music and song, with joyous praise, delight in prophecies and covenants fulfilled, and anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah. Music is a powerful medium and in church has the power to move us to tears of joy or sorrow; how many have been so overcome by a particular hymn or musical piece that we cannot continue singing? Let your heart be filled with the music of the season and come to Christ, where all are welcome.

*The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard... that God is true.*

We've made it! We've finally made it to the great celebration of Christmas Day! This wonderful day, full of rich traditions and beautiful sights, remind us of the wonder and truth of God's love.

Truth is a peculiar thing. In our world, truth has become malleable, with each person seemingly comfortable claiming their own truth. Although I believe each person sees the world in a unique way, I also believe there is a universal truth, the highest and most profound truth that we celebrate today.

We all know the Christmas story. We have walked with Joseph and Mary, heard the words of the angels, and we will soon celebrate with the shepherds. We know that Jesus was born humbly and without regal fanfare. We believe that his birth marked a shift in the history of the world, in the history of God's relationship with the world. Yet even with all those details, all those truths, there is one universal truth: that we receive in the gift of Jesus. God loves us more than anything else, period.

Love is a profound idea and an even more profound experience. We may not be able to completely define love, although poets and philosophers have certainly tried! But we all know love when we see it and feel it. God's story throughout history is one that goes beyond our human love to something deeper and more profound. God's story is true love.

The moment of incarnation in which God becomes flesh and blood in the person of Jesus shows us that God's love is of the truest kind. God's love for us is given freely, passionately, and sacrificially, so that we have every reason to return that love with our own freedom, passion, and sacrifice. For God, the Incarnation is not about earthly power or triumph, but about the truth of love that passes all understanding, the truth of love that is shared with amazing grace, and the truth of love that overcomes even death itself.

Today, we are reminded that God's love is true, and that God's love is for you, for me, and for all. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ, so that we know once and for all that His love is true.