



SAINT MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

# ADVENT MEDITATIONS

— 2022 —

William Brassey Hole, (c. 1846-1917)  
*Annunciation*  
Oil on Canvas



Welcome to the holy season of Advent. Over the next few weeks, we will all be pulled in countless directions, with demands put on our time and energy. Although we can't ignore many of those demands, I invite you to make an intentional choice to find a moment of quiet each day. I want you to carve out time every day to stop, to listen, and to reflect on what God is doing in your life and the life of our church.

Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation, and the true joy of Advent comes in the anticipation of a moment, an event, a miracle that changed the world forever. This is the season when we remember that Jesus came into the world to show us, tangibly, how much God loves us. And when we truly know we are loved, we can begin to reflect that love to ourselves and to others.

The book you hold in your hands is a gift to you. Receive this gift with the love and hope for which it was made and use it to find moments of peace every day. You are loved, and love is the greatest gift.

With great hope,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Girata". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rev. Dr. Christopher Girata  
*Rector*

Psalm 146, 147 | Isaiah 1:1-9 | **2 Peter 3:1-10** | Matthew 25:1-13

In the Nicene Creed, we find these lines at the end of the section about Jesus Christ: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Do we really believe that Jesus Christ will come again in glory?

I do. Ever since I was a little child, I have firmly believed that Christ's return is not just a metaphor of hope, or a symbol of completion, but a true and future reality. If God, who created the heavens and the earth, sent Jesus to reconcile the world to himself, raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and sent the Holy Spirit to be our counselor and advocate, I have no problem believing that the exalted Christ will come again with cleansing fire to separate the wheat from the chaff and establish a community of justice and peace that will endure.

The season of Advent helps us get ready in two ways. We get ready for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. But we also get ready for the coming of Christ in the fullness of time to usher in a new creation. It's this ambivalent reality of Advent—the "already" and the "not yet"—which grounds us in what is past and prepares us for what is coming, a divine future that is more glorious than we can ask or imagine.

We need not fear God's future. God has given us everything we need to trust him now. The second verse of the burial anthem puts it best:

As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives  
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
After my awaking, he will raise me up;  
and in my body I shall see God.  
I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him  
who is my friend and not a stranger (BCP, 491).

Why wait to experience friendship with God? It is available now: in the beauty of the earth...in relationships with family, friends, and strangers...in the consolation of our prayers. We may only see it in flashes and fragments now, but the promise of the Church's faith is sure: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

The first thing that struck me as I began to view the readings for today was in Psalm 1:3. "They are like the trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither". My mind takes me to a welcoming, quiet place with the trees providing shade, the water slightly moving and the caress of a breeze. I would enjoy that place. Someone long before me planted the trees knowing if nourished, they would provide food, shelter from the sun and a place for other things to grow. Have you ever read "The Hidden Life of Trees"? The author makes the case that trees are like human families—they communicate with each other, share nutrients with those who are sick or struggling, even warn of dangers. Trees have an entire social network! Of course, in the Psalm the "trees" are humans. Humans who love God as He Loves them. And with his love and guidance, they live a healthy, productive life.

Isaiah 1:13 reads "Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them". From this, two words took hold of me—"my soul". My soul is a Hebrew idiom meaning "I". In a dictionary I found several definitions, but my favorites were—spirit, heart, essence, core.

So, this brings me to heartwood. What? Heartwood is a composite of hollow needle-like cellulose fibers bound together by a chemical glue called lignin. It is in many ways as strong as steel. It is the heart or core of a tree. But today, for me, it is the "my soul" of a tree.

In Isaiah 1:17 we are also told to "cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow". This is not the only time in the bible you will see words like this—it's all about helping others. But those others can be different from us. Different skin color, different beliefs, different way of praying, different culture, customs, etc. Or, perhaps, an elm and I'm an oak.

The trees stand together as a family and help each other out. Why? Yes, it's the right thing to do but more importantly, their sense of neighbor is part of their soul. We should stand together as the human family. Let your sense of neighbor be in your heart, your core, your soul. And may your soul grow rich with the waters of love that flow from God.

Advent is a time of preparation, but preparation for what? Is it just “pre-Christmas” time?

The church defines Advent as the annual period of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ...and preparation for the Second Coming of Christ, His “final coming in power and glory.” I don’t know about you, but Advent for me has always been about preparing for baby Jesus, not necessarily His coming again. Lighting Advent candles, putting up decorations, hearing the wonderful stories of angel Gabriel, Mary and Joseph—it’s joyful to prepare for and wait for the arrival of the baby in the manger.

But what else do we do to prepare, for both the celebration of the holy birth and for the risen Christ to return? Paul suggests that one practice is to be more Christ-like in how we live our daily lives.

Paul authored the two Thessalonians epistles for new believers in the capital of Macedonia for several reasons, one of which was to defend his teachings against charges other Jews had brought against him. As he defends his character and teachings, he also gives us reminders of how to live as Christians in the here and now.

In I Thessalonians 2:4 he states, “...we are not trying to please people, but God...” and in 2:6, “We were not looking for praise from people...” as they discipled and worked among the Thessalonians. In 2:12 he writes of how they interacted with the Thessalonians, “...encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God...”.

Trying to please God, not looking for praise for our actions, encouraging and comforting others, trying our best to live lives worthy of God. Those sound to me like great preparatory and Christ-like acts for all seasons.

## God and Government

In Luke 20:19-26, the Jewish chief priests and scribes were out to get Jesus because he was seen as a threat to their power. They were looking for a way to arrest him immediately. He had previously been welcomed in Jerusalem as a king, and they were fearful of him, but they were also fearful of the people. The chief priests and scribes kept a close watch on Jesus and sent spies who pretended to be honest and sincere. They hoped to gather incriminating evidence against Jesus in something he said so that they would have a justification for handing him over to the power and authority of the governor. So, they questioned Jesus: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus saw through their duplicity and said to them: "Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?" They answered and said, "Caesar's." Jesus then said, "Therefore, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things which are God's."

The interchange between Jesus and his questioners relates specifically to the payment of taxes, but more generally to the relationship between God and government. The Israelites wanted freedom, but they thought of freedom mainly in political and governmental terms, while Jesus thought of freedom in redemptive terms, as freedom from the bondage of sin.

Some Christians may take an extreme view of government, causing them to oppose government on biblical grounds. The political world and the spiritual world coexist, but whatever belongs to Caesar—the world of taxes, government, material goods, work, and productivity, is also the world of God. Christians are called to engage with the world but look to God for spiritual guidance which has priority over laws that do not comply with Jesus' teachings. Other Christians may view government too highly, looking to government as the solution to all our earthly and spiritual problems. Many professing Christians resort primarily to political means and the power of government because of their misunderstanding of the power and grace of God through Jesus Christ. When we turn from dependence on God and instead look to government, we return to human means without the redemptive power of Christ. In our lives, let us pray that we will always look to God, and not humans nor governments, for our spiritual guidance and our redemption. This season, may we give to God the things that are God's: our hearts and our minds, our hopes and dreams, and all of our lives.

Have you ever had a moment take your breath away? Mike Hermanstorfer was clutching his pregnant wife's hand in a Colorado hospital on Christmas Eve one year when she stopped breathing. Mike's wife, Tracy, went into cardiac arrest during labor. Doctors told him, "We're going to take your son out now. We have been unable to revive her, so we have to do this now to save the baby." After the C section, some of the team rushed his wife to the operating room while the others handed him his son. He cradled his newborn, but his body was absolutely lifeless. The doctors feverishly worked to revive the baby as Mike held him. Soon he began to breath, and not long after, his wife inexplicably started breathing again. Mike said, "My legs went out from underneath me. I had everything in the world taken from me, and in an hour and a half, I had everything given to me." Mike credits "the hand of God." Tracy calls it her miracle birth.

Moments that take our breath away. We see it in many of the Christmas commercials that air this time of year: a son who was not expected home suddenly surprises his mother in the kitchen or a father comes home early from his military leave and surprises his son or daughter at school. There's something about the holidays that brings with it a longing to be together and a desire to connect with those most important to us.

That's what Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is all about. He's aching to return and be with them. And when he can't, he sends Timothy to check on them amidst of all their trials and suffering. Timothy returns and reports great news of the Thessalonian's faith and love. In the midst of Paul's own difficulties and persecution, this news literally takes his breath away. He now has the strength to carry on. After receiving this incredible gift, he writes them asking: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" And then he closes Chapter 3 with words of blessing.

This Advent season, what if you stopped in the midst of all of the hurried decorating, shopping and Christmas parties, and recalled one, two or even three people who have made a significant impact on your life this year? Make a phone call, send a card or take them to lunch to speak from the bottom of your heart words of affirmation, thanksgiving and praise. Amidst all of the stress, worry and bad news, it might just take their breath away, but it will definitely change their day, week or even their holiday season. And it'll change yours as well... So just go ahead and bless someone today, and then continue to look for even more opportunities throughout this season. Amen.

## Giving Your All

<sup>1</sup>As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. <sup>2</sup>He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. <sup>3</sup>"Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. <sup>4</sup>All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

-Luke 21:1-4

Just as the poor widow gave all she had to God, study after study reveal that in the US, the poor give more (as a percentage of their wealth). Is it because we feel more connected when we have less? More in debt to our neighbors, our church and our God?

As we move up the income ladder, we're able to be more self-sufficient and to buy the support and comfort that we need. Professor and social psychologist Paul Piff suggests that with less reliance on neighbors, those with higher incomes may develop a "compassion deficit" where we show empathy less often than those who rely on each other to get through their days. He also found, however, that "if higher-income people were instructed to imagine themselves as lower class, they became more charitable" (and the opposite was true as well—those with less income imagining themselves wealthy became less charitable.)

In this Advent season, as we prepare for the birth of Christ, put yourself in the shoes of Mary and Joseph, having nothing and needing a place to stay for the night. Or ponder the plight of baby Jesus who relies on his parents for everything—food, warmth, shelter, love. If you were stripped of your possessions and had to rely on your neighbors for all you had, would you feel more or less compelled to give as others had given to you?

*Dear Heavenly Father: Help us to glorify you in all we do. Help us to remember that nothing we have is truly ours—our homes, our jobs, our health, our friends, our family. We are merely caretakers of your blessings for the small amount of time we are on this earth. Help us release our grip and hold fast to our faith, ever more praising your name, Lord God. Amen.*

## Jesus is Coming—Again!

True confession; I am an annoying Advent purist because this short four week season is not about building excitement for the arrival of the baby Jesus. Careful attention to the appointed readings and hymns for Advent point rather to the more terrifying aspect of the end times and Second Coming of Christ. The three synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) all contain a passage similar to this one.

Wars, tumults, earthquakes, famine, pestilence, terrors, persecution, betrayal by family—yikes!

All these events had already taken place by the time the disciples are described as asking Jesus, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign?" Luke's gospel dates from the last third of the first century C.E. The Romans had completely razed the Temple in the year 70, leaving not one stone undisturbed, and persecutions of the early Christians had begun, so Jesus prepares them to make their testimonies. "Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict."

In the face of all of the above, Jesus consoles his followers then and now with these assurances: "Do not be terrified; not a hair of your head will perish and by your endurance you will gain your lives." The late Verna Dozier said, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but rather fear." We are reminded in Advent of the promise that we are ever walking in God's sight, no matter the circumstance. After all, the name Emmanuel means "God with us" and that is the promise of Advent.

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art:  
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king,  
born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.

*-Hymn 66, text by Charles Wesley (1707-1788)*

<sup>11</sup>Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup>waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and destroyed and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup>But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

-2 Peter 3:11-13

I began coming to the Episcopal Church in 2000, and that fall I started to hear about the church's plans for Advent. I thought I knew what Advent was, and I was ready. After all, for the first 14 years of my life I was Roman Catholic, and although I had switched to the Methodist Church, I kept up the ritual of my Advent Calendar (the one with the chocolate behind each little door). And since I was joining a church that apparently takes Advent very seriously, I purchased a beautiful pewter Advent wreath at the Episcopal Bookstore along with the requisite candles. I was ready to roll—Christmas music and all.

Then came the first Sunday in Advent, with a reading like the lesson for today—the Apocalypse. The music was strange too. Everything seemed to be in minor key. It felt like we were singing dirges and funeral songs. Where was “Joy to the World” or at least “O Little Town of Bethlehem”? There was no mention of Mary, Bethlehem or Baby Jesus! The world was busy coating itself with Christmas decor, but not in our church. We were sitting in darkness, waiting for the light. And so I learned about some of the quiriness of the Episcopal Church—its penitential observance of Advent. We do not hop from Thanksgiving to the Bethlehem. We leap all the way to the end of the story. The Apocalypse. The end of the world. The beginning of heaven. So what is this about?

When we celebrate Advent, we look not only for the first coming of Christ, but perhaps even more so for the second. The apostles and the Early Christians were all apocalyptic. They believed the end times were near, so they felt an absolute urgency to spread the gospel. They realized the end times is exactly why the good news of the gospel is so very important. The first coming of Jesus began the era of grace, and his second coming is the fulfillment of that grace. The first coming, his birth in the manger, heralds the second coming, the end of the age. The cradle leads to the cross which leads to the crown. The end of the story leads us to the beginning and then the middle and then back to the end.

So welcome my friends to the season of the Apocalypse! Jesus is coming, *just not yet*.

The time during which David was being pursued by King Saul offers an appropriate background for what is essentially a song of lament and a song of trust. Throughout David's life, and particularly within the psalms that he wrote, he repeatedly expressed both his anguish over his present circumstances and his complete dependence upon God.

Within the ancient Near East, it was a common belief that suffering was a form of divine punishment brought upon by a person's sin. (Jesus' own disciples expressed this belief when they encountered a man born blind in John 9.) David knew he had not done anything deserving of King Saul's murderous attempts on his life, but he recognized that others in his community might misinterpret the reason for his troubles and give him further grief for it. Psalm 25 begins with David's prayer that God would vindicate him and prove his innocence by delivering him from all his misfortune (*Psalm 25:1-3*).

Much of the rest of the psalm displays David's unfailing confidence that God will indeed show up and save him. David demonstrates the kind of "childlike faith" that Jesus spoke about when he told his disciples that "unless [they] changed and became like little children, [they] would never enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 18:3*). Jesus was not telling his disciples that they had to start acting like children, nor was he implying that they would not be welcome in heaven if they refused to change. What he meant was that, because we have a God who can do even the impossible (*Matthew 19:26*), we should strive to have the kind of trust and reliance upon the Lord that young children have with their own parents—fully dependent and fully confident that all their needs will be met.

This may sound simple, but to seriously practice this level of faith requires an acceptance that one is not as in control of their own life as they might prefer, and an extreme amount of vulnerability, increasingly so during a time of crisis (David most certainly was in duress during his time running from King Saul). However, being this vulnerable before God need not be something scary. Remember, as God's beloved children, our Lord is a loving Father who seeks to take care of us. The words of Psalm 45 display David's deep trust in God to act as his protector and savior. Nothing could convince him that the Lord would not hear him and come to his aid. May we all strive to be as faithful to God as David was, and as God always is to us.

Isaiah, the prophet from pre-exile Jerusalem, cautioned his community to stay close to God and warned of the judgment of God if they strayed. "Woe to those who...have no regard for the deeds of the Lord, no respect for the work of his hands...My people will go into exile for lack of understanding."

*-Isaiah, 5:12-14*

Seven hundred years later, Jesus had similar advice as he preached. "Be careful or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap." (*Luke 21:34*). And Paul writing to the Thessalonians repeated the urgency and consistency: "Rejoice always, pray continuously, give thanks in all the circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Jesus Christ." (*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*).

Curiously, a direct line can be traced through the selected readings—Isaiah, Luke, Thessalonians—to our congregation today. All four of our communities share a propensity toward distraction, separation, and temptations. I am struck by the breadth of the phrase, "the anxieties of life." How much of my conscious mind is consumed by "the anxieties of life"? And the advice is consistent: be alert, be vigilant, and be close to God.

Our modern world is filled with opportunities to lose our focus, to wander off the path away from God. Intellectualism, individualism, personal accomplishments, even cynicism are valued in our community and our world. And the drumbeat is constant.

But it is not new, and we are not forewarned. We know how we need to respond.

Rejoice always, pray continuously, and give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God's will.

The passage of scripture I am writing about is from John 8 which illustrates the character of Jesus. He was in the temple teaching to a crowd of people. The religious leaders who opposed him chose this time to set a trap for him to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people. They brought before Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses commanded to stone such women. Should Jesus agree she should be stoned and not show mercy, or should he pardon her and be accused of breaking the law? Jesus, sitting on the ground, began to write with his finger in the dirt. When he replied "The one who is without sin let him be the first to throw a stone at her", the religious leaders left one by one. The woman was left with Jesus who said "I do not condemn you, go and leave your life of sin."

These words made me examine my life before God. How many people known, and unknown do I judge on a daily basis? What are the distractions that keep me from a daily quiet time? Newspaper? My cell phone messages? Am I in such a hurry to get "my list" done that I do not take time to listen to others? Smile at the grocery store employees? Basically, do my thoughts and habits conflict with God's character of love, patience, forgiveness, and kindness just to name a few? I pray that when God calls as he did Isaiah in chapter 6 that I will say "here I am, send me!"

Upon its face, our reading is a heartfelt response to suffering. It is impossible to date this particular psalm, but the mention of bows and swords might indicate an experience of tribal warfare or perhaps even firsthand knowledge of Jerusalem's siege by the Babylonians or the Assyrians. Whatever its age, the psalm rehearses the timeless spiritual practice of holy waiting—a supplicant begging the Lord to appear, to help his people, and to set the wrongs of the world to right.

The difference between the aftermath of an ancient battle and the 21st century pursuit of a Holy Advent should be as far as the east is from the west. And yet, the psalmist's words hint that the two may be closer than we might care to admit. In both instances we easily find people mishandled, insulted, wounded, and crushed by life itself; so much so that with nowhere to turn, all that remains is to cry out for God's comfort.

This psalm offers a vision of what it is like to thirst for God's presence and a well-used practice to wait for the Lord's appearance. The psalmist takes us on his journey by first reminding us to replace worry with trust that God will reach all who call upon his name.

In good times and not so good, we read that when seeking God, it is advantageous to focus our attention outside of ourselves. For the writer, that is the vantage point where one can most easily apprehend the Lord already at work in us and the world. The stillness we desire is surely from the evidence seen; that even in our darkest moments, God is already laboring, far ahead of our prayers.

In a very few lines, the writer recalls us to an ancient path of spiritual discovery. Wisely, the psalmist warns us to keep away from comparing ourselves to others and to release any anger from our lives. Anger and revenge, in all their forms, are to be found when our focus begins to spiral inward.

When we read this psalm, it can seem like a complicated recipe, but what we are experiencing is the offering of a spiritual master. Devotion to a spiritual discipline takes time and persistence and this is what is laid before us. At some point, many who pursue the Lord realize that discipleship cannot easily be slipped into a busy schedule. Much the opposite, discipleship matures when a life of faith and action becomes the center of our lives while all else waits. This Advent, I pray we all are reminded that when God is first in our lives, all else will fall into order. May God's peace be with you on your journey of discovery.

I want to scream.

The followers did what He instructed: got the place, came up with a table, somewhere found the meal.

But of course, someone has to bake bread, someone has to clean it all up after dinner and someone has to sweep up the crumbs under the table they will inevitably scatter.

So here we are, the women who follow Him, our eyes cast down, waiting to be called upon, listening.

And I want to scream: LISTEN. He is asking—is He begging?—for our presence with Him in these final minutes as the world clamors outside with their violence and their rules. Why can't those followers give Him that attention. I simply don't understand why He offers this mysterious kingdom of His over and over and over...to deaf ears. No one will love any of us—or all of us—like He does. Even now, in the middle of this nightmare, is this paradoxical mess: His suffering alongside His kingdom, our cosmic stupidity.

Don't those following men hear Him? Hear his anticipation, the dread of pain, the emptiness of not being heard, understood? 'Before I suffer, 'I will not eat again,' 'I will not drink again,' 'body given,' 'blood poured,' 'betrayed.'

They can only compare their secret predispositions. 'Is it I?' is all they can say. All about *them*, the part *they* will play. At least they know themselves.

Still, I long to scream: How can He be left so alone, even in this communal meal?

Yet, I too—I cast my eyes down, waiting to scrub, waiting to sweep. I wipe the drops of wet on the floor with my toe.

Will there be bread and wine left over?

A hunk of bread lies in front of His place at the table, some drops of wine in His cup.

Our eyes meet.

My portion.

Four years ago, Karen Wiley and I were giving a tour of our church artwork to a busload of people who came from the Umlauf Sculpture Garden in Austin. None of the visitors had ever seen our church before. They were amazed at the reredos with the four angels (sculpted by Charles Umlauf) and said we were so blessed to be able to look at them every Sunday. When we were through with the tour, I had a call on my phone telling me that I needed to return for another mammogram. So my breast cancer journey began in the church.

*I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths. . .  
O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.*

Four months later, my daughter Catherine was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer, rare and aggressive. She was 40, married a little less than 2 years and had a 2-month-old. I came up to the Bishop Moore Chapel often, crying and reading the prayer book, asking God "Why?" This was not the mother-daughter experience I would have chosen, though I realized this journey brought us closer together. Several of our priests prayed with me. God said, "Why not you?"

*Sing to the LORD, you saints of his, praise his holy name. . .weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

Four years later, we both have received great reports. Going through this journey together has certainly been a help. Her husband Scott, who had said "in sickness and in health" at their wedding, had no idea it would come so soon and he has been an incredible support to all of us. Catherine has been able to mentor quite a few young women who have gone through or are going through breast cancers, especially those with her type of cancer. We each have prayer shawls knitted by our parish. I have been covered up with love from all of you and am so grateful to have a body of believers who lift us up. What a joyful Christmas season we will have.

*You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent, O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever.*

The season of Advent, of course, is all about anticipation; it's about learning to live with the same sense of expectation that first emerged amongst the people of God as a result of the ministry of the prophets of Israel. This expectation was sustained throughout the years leading up to the birth of Jesus. Advent is thus about learning to live with the keen sense that God will fulfill the promises made to his people and that God is always ready to break into our lives in new and unforeseen ways to bring about his good purpose in the world.

In order for us to be able to live with this sort of anticipation, we need to ensure our expectations are aligned with what it is God has promised to do; when we harbor expectations that are not aligned with God's purposes we will only be disappointed. In the epistle to the Hebrews, we see this concern that we ensure our expectations are aligned with the promises of God: one of the recurrent themes of this book has to do with awakening our sense of the greatness of God's promises and helping us sustain our expectations in light of these promises.

Towards the end of the epistle, the author contrasts two forms our sense of anticipation might take regarding the work God is doing. On the one hand, we might be inclined to fear what God is doing (*Hebrews 12:18-21*). But on the other, the fulfillment of God's promises through Jesus should give us such a sense of assurance and hopefulness that our fears are replaced by a sense of thanksgiving and praise (*Hebrews 12:22-24*). We can be assured, too, that the promise God gives to us in Jesus is irrevocable and will never be lost or rendered ineffectual (*Hebrews 12:26-29*).

What is it you may be hoping God would do in your life? How would you like to see God's presence manifest in your life and in the world? Our prayer need not be that God would reveal himself to us: through Christ and the Holy Spirit, God has done that. Rather, our prayer can now be one of thanksgiving for what God has done and is doing through Jesus, that the eyes of our hearts and minds would be open to see him at work in the world bringing about the fulfillment of his good purpose, and that our expectations would be aligned with his.

History began in a garden. Human history began in a garden. Human sin began in a garden. According to the last chapters of the Bible, human history will culminate in a gardenesque city.

Between these two gardens is an in-between garden, and in this in-between garden, a battle was fought for you and me—a battle decided upon and won by Jesus Christ.

Human life began in the Garden of Eden. New life began in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Garden of Eden, the first Adam failed in his sin. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the second Adam, Jesus Christ, succeeded in His atonement. In the first garden, Adam hid and fled; in the second garden, Jesus presented Himself to the will of the Father—"not my will but yours be done."

How was this battle won in the Garden of Gethsemane? Not by swords, smarts, or surprise attacks, but through prayerful alignment with His Father—complete submission and utter dependence on God's loving righteousness. The Episcopal theologian William Porcher DuBose suggests that atonement is humanity's fulfillment in union (at-one-ness) with God. It is a participatory process of making right what is wrong, reuniting that which was lost to being found. Aligning our will to God's will.

Therefore, when Jesus beseeches, pray my dear disciples, pray. He is not encouraging them to pray so that they won't be tempted. They are tempted! Temptation is a certainty that neither the disciples nor Jesus could escape. Temptation was a fact of life then as it is now. What Jesus implores of God in prayer is, help me and help my friends not to "give into" temptation.

No doubt this passage is challenging. Free will is both paradoxical and manifest. Moreover, how do we comprehend Jesus' agony? Who is Satan? Where do we see ourselves in the disciples' vulnerability to temptation? Why is this the Father's will? I do not have all the answers.

What I do know is that Satan was tempting Jesus with a way to bypass the cross, betrayal, and the horror of his crucifixion. The temptation to avoid this "cup" is extreme, and Jesus is human! This battle-winning prayer for strength and alignment is critical to our understanding of Jesus' dependence on God because our Savior was not emotionless. Jesus had the pull of the flesh! Yet, Jesus won the battle through at-one-ness.

*Almighty God, in your tender love toward humanity you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ to take on himself our flesh and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility, seeking at-one-ness with you and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through you Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

Why did Peter deny Jesus in Luke 22:54-69? He was one of the first to follow Jesus, leaving so much behind to walk the road of discipleship. He had seen mighty wonders as Christ healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. Peter had witnessed the miracle of the transfiguration. So why did Peter, deny Jesus?

*Because he was afraid.*

Fear can paralyze and can cause us to do and act in ways that we might not predict. Fear can startle us in the middle of the night and keep us awake for hours. It can prevent us from reaching for our dreams or reaching out to others in love. Fear cripples our souls and binds our hearts. When we're afraid, we can forget our commitments, our values, our loves. In fearful moments, all we think of is how to protect ourselves, perhaps at any cost.

What is the antidote to such fear? It's trusting God. It's believing the Word of Christ. It's experiencing the perfect love of God that casts out fear (*1 John 4:18*). We overcome fear by leaning more fully into the strong arms of God and knowing that he will never let us go.

Here is a short prayer that I have said when needing some help during times of fear.

Forgive me, dear Lord, when I let fear get in the way of my relationship with you. Forgive me for all the times I've fallen short because I've been afraid. Forgive me for failing to trust you when you've proven to be so worthy of trust. When hard times come, help me to trust you more. When my adrenaline starts to pound, clouding my mind and suffocating my heart, help me to receive your peace. When I'm tempted to deny you, either in words or deeds, or by failing to speak or act, help me to trust. Amen.

Mark's gospel, written at an energetic pace, jumps right to the baptism of Jesus. No Bethlehem or birth story, but Mark's opening scene is the wilderness. He uses words from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to remind us of Isaiah's prophecy:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way" (*Malachi 3:1*)  
"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'" (*Isaiah 40:3*)

-*Mark 1:3*

John the Baptist, the messenger and voice in the wilderness, baptizes people in the Jordan river to repent and "prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him." We are those people who too must figuratively walk into the Jordan, for cleansing and repentance.

The wilderness is an apt setting for us to envision and understand how we can follow John the Baptist's call. The desert is an austere place where the lack of water and extreme heat can be dangerous. It is in such a place that the Israelites learned to turn to God. So too in our modern-day desert, which could be financial turmoil, family upheaval, illness, loneliness, or trauma, we clamor for relief from our circumstances.

How do we make a straight path for Jesus? Turn our attention to Him, engage in His word and honor His presence in our lives through the love of those around us. For Jesus to have a path to us, we must align ourselves with Him. It is in doing so that we will be prepared to find the way out of our wilderness and rejoice in the good news.

For me, the Liturgy sometimes snaps together two or three of the four readings,  
but often I'm either put off or mystified by the leftovers  
so I ignore the parts that don't fit. I got lucky today.  
All four fell into place like a Rube Goldberg.

All in all, the people I know or recognize in daily travels do office work.  
We may scroll and tap for a living, we may grow herbs in pots in kitchen windows,  
we may divide and burn the past, get new software, but we are not  
up at dawn feeding chickens. We are not organic, hands in the dirt, workers.

In ancient times, I expect ordinary people had their hands in the dirt.  
The winnowing fan as a metaphor must have knocked on the minds of the people.  
I expect it got to the heart of the back breaking life sustaining bread making  
calloused handed workers. I expect the doors to their hearts opened right away.

Me, I work in an office, two thousand years since. I think of winnowing as an end,  
as a metaphor for not making the cut to heaven. I think of it as me coming up short,  
as no good, and so I am afraid to be one part of the wheat. I am afraid to be cast away.  
I am afraid of the unquenchable fire. I am afraid, it seems, of my own longing, of my desire.

Me, a modern day Christian, am called to be like Christ. I expect this  
puts the winnowing fan in my hands. It also makes me the wheat.  
Modern day Christians like me do not snap this together right away.  
Perhaps it's esoteric, or hard to come by, or I am slow to look back.

I see the winnowing fan had been in my hands the whole time.  
I spent decades worrying if I would be chaff or wheat on winnowing day  
even while I was, and always will be, both. Looking back,  
I became this dangerous thing, this All in All.

Advent is a time of waiting. The important drama we are waiting to unfold is not the shiny wrapping paper holding our gifts of the season but rather the long awaited and anticipated Messiah. In Matthew the anticipated Savior is being heralded by John the Baptist drawing people to his message of the one who is to come. John sent word through his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one who is to come. I love Jesus' answer to send back to John because it encapsulates everything of the kingdom Jesus was bringing: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Blindness can be experienced on many levels as can hearing. Where we walk and what we may be following may show us to be lame. All have sinned, so being cleansed is not just about disease. The raising of the dead is a foretelling of miracles while Jesus is on earth and for the eternal life we all anticipate. Good news to the poor points us still to live with care for all among us and to recognize that even the most prosperous can be poor in spirit. Jesus' mission statement was sent back to John the Baptist. We are called to listen to the one crying in the wilderness as I often ponder how badly we need to relive these reasons why God sent his Son as our Savior. But we are a distracted bunch of people, so it is important to be called back each year to wait for all the messages that we will hear once again and hopefully every year be able to take them in more deeply.

While the words from Matthew are aimed at a large group, the Psalmist gives each of us personal words to proclaim the outcome from waiting on the Lord reassuring us we are heard and set upon a rock to make our steps secure. Knowing God, we are called further to not hide it in our hearts but to speak of God's steadfast love and faithfulness the way we would want to share any good news. Verse 13 I particularly love, and we hear it in our Morning and Evening Prayers, "Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me." We don't wait for annual reminders to listen more closely to God but call ourselves back into God's presence daily, for daily we need deliverance and help like that which comes from God alone. When the time does arrive to celebrate our Savior's birth, the sixteenth verse of Psalm 40 says it for us very well—"May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, 'Great is the Lord!'"

*Let us pray.*

Gracious God, hear us who have difficulty waiting in the gaps. Make us more comfortable in silent times spent with you. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear and voices to proclaim and give thanks for the gift of your Son to show us how to live and how to love unconditionally. Lead us this Advent to daily spend time in your Holy Scriptures and form us into the disciples you desire us to be. In your most holy Name we pray. Amen.

Merriam-Webster defines perseverance as the “*continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition.*” When you hear the word “perseverance,” what comes to your mind? Do you immediately recall a personal challenge you endured to accomplish a hard to achieve but worthwhile goal? Do you think of movies where the underdog had to train day after day to win the big fight? I’m sure it’s thrilling to watch someone go from zero to hero in a 2.5-hour span, but real life takes a lot longer, doesn’t it? One of my favorite zero to hero movies is the original Karate Kid from 1984. I’ll never forget the scene where Daniel LaRusso, exhausted and frustrated after mentor & teacher Mr. Miyagi prescribed an endless number of tasks to be executed a very particular way, wondered what it all had to do with karate. Daniel was downright angry. Do you remember what happened after Miyagi told Daniel to show him “sand the floor”, “paint the fence”, “wax on, wax off”? Stupefied is an accurate description of the look on Daniel’s face after he realized all those seemingly unrelated chores were preparing him all along for the big karate tournament in which he—spoiler alert—won, of course. Sure, he was battered and bruised, but he was a champion, with his integrity intact and a mentor beaming with pride.

What does an almost 40-year-old movie have to do with our faith right now? As Mr. Miyagi prepared his student for what was to come, God, too, is preparing us for our coming hardships. We know there will be battles to fight—if not physical, then mental, emotional, and spiritual. But how do we prepare for such battles? By **pouring** into the word of God, by **praying** without ceasing, and by **practicing** our faith day in and day out. It’s by showing compassion and having mercy on those who are struggling. Yes, even the haters. Jesus is the ultimate champion and victor over opposition. He is the very definition of one who persevered under great adversity. And He’s calling us to fight even when the road is hard.

Dear friends, I pray this season, you can take stock on the battles you’ve already won and are encouraged that the Lord who was defeated death & the devil is in your corner and rooting for you as you battle on. Oh, and He’s beaming, too.

<sup>17</sup>“But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>18</sup>that they were saying to you, “In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.” <sup>19</sup>These are the ones who cause divisions, <sup>[a]</sup>worldly-minded, <sup>[b]</sup>devoid of the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup>keep yourselves in the love of God, looking forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. <sup>22</sup>And have mercy on some, who are doubting; <sup>23</sup>save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. <sup>24</sup>Now to Him who is able to protect you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless with great joy, <sup>25</sup>to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and <sup>[c]</sup>forever. Amen.”

In this passage from Isaiah we receive this beautiful message about one of God's servants. This is one of the four "servant songs" found in the Book of Isaiah and it is unclear exactly who this servant is supposed to be—it could have been any number of historical characters, or the nation of Israel itself, and as Christians, we often look back on this text and hear within it a prophecy about Jesus Christ. I want you to resist that temptation today.

If any of you have spent time in public service, you know that it is difficult work. Sometimes hours are longer than you expect, often there is more to do in one day than you have time. And you may not see the fruit of your service. And yet this is the work of servanthood, to continue serving until those who are farthest away, or as Isaiah describes as far off on the "coastlands," receive the rippling effect of the light you bring to others.

It's easy to see why we see Christ as the servant in this passage - he is the ultimate, final one who fully embodies all it means to be a servant—but we ought to remember that it doesn't mean the work of servanthood is over. Perhaps in this advent season, we can ask what our role is now? We also are servants and participate in God's Kingdom. How is it that we hope to embody the work of the servant, individually and communally, so that others may see the light in the darkness that has also been shown to us through Christ?

### **A Prayer for Faithful Living**

In the hours of high privilege and opportunity;  
In moments when the trust and confidence of our fellows  
have bestowed upon us positions of privilege and power  
affecting the welfare of countless lives;

Enable us in all such moments to administer honestly and  
with efficient discretion the opportunities and power thus  
entrusted to us as the servants of all our people.

So indeed let it be, O Lord. Amen

-Donald H. Stewart, 1978

Psalm 61, 62 | Isaiah 11:1-9 | Rev. 20:1-10 | John 5:30-47

On December 19, 1843, Charles Dickens published *A Christmas Carol*. Many academics see it as a Christian allegory due to the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge at the end of the story.

The two Psalms assigned for today, Psalms 61 and 62, also reflect a transformation of sorts for King David. David begins by lamenting all his despair and struggles. Laments direct our hearts to make a choice to trust God's purpose behind the pain.

Towards the end of Psalm 61, David acknowledges that rescue and hope can only come from God. He cries out to the saving presence of the Lord. Moving into Psalm 62, there is no prayer or praise, simply David proclaiming that we only need God and all other needs are irrelevant. David expresses confidence in God's power to care for us and shelter us.

This brings to mind my favorite Psalm 94, verse 4:

He shall cover you with  
His feathers, and under  
His wings you shall take refuge,  
His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart

Like Scrooge we often have difficulty seeing the positive aspects of our lives; by focusing on God we can be assured that we can trust Him to always be with us, providing rest, comfort and leading us to stable ground.

Let us keep in our minds and hearts God's grace and the final words of *A Christmas Carol*, "God bless us, every one!"

Psalm 66, 67 | Isa. 11:10-16 | Rev. 20:11-21:8 | Luke 1:5-25

By the time you are reading this meditation, there will be just *five days* left until Christmas Day! As a little girl, I can recall so vividly how the anticipation for Christmas Day increased with each (very slow) passing day. The joy! The excitement! The wonder!

For weeks now, twinkling lights have adorned trees in shopping centers, yards and our homes. We have unpacked all the decorations—some perhaps made by our children, others perhaps old and lovingly tattered. We intentionally display all of these items to envelop ourselves with the memories of Christmases past, as we await the new Christmas of this year. We are surrounded by so much in this season that is intended to create an atmosphere of joy and hope. As adults, do we still feel the joy, excitement and wonder of Christmas? Does it sometimes feel a little overwhelming? A little too “much”? A little too noisy?

Sit quietly and read Psalms 66 and 67. The beautiful poetry in these psalms are hymns of profound gratitude to God, even in times of distress. They express joy and marvel for all God has given His people.

“Shout with joy to God, all the earth!  
Sing the glory of his name;  
Make his praise glorious!  
Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds!’ (Psalm 66)  
“May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine upon us  
...and God, our God will bless us.  
God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth  
Will fear him.”  
-Psalm 66-67

Could the author of these songs of gratitude have ever imagined the blessing from God yet to come? Of the newborn’s face in a manger that would shine upon *us*? That miracle is described by the poet, W.B. Yeats, as “the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.”

Every Christmas, we have these ancient Psalms as well as our modern hymns (*O Come All Ye Faithful!* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*) to inspire and renew our awe, and our joy, and our gratitude for that gift of all gifts, Jesus Christ.

In the midst of the busyness that consumes much of our attention during Advent, let us be intentional each day to express our gratitude to God, and as Tennyson beautifully said, let us ring in

“the larger heart, the kindlier hand  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.”

I believe that King David's prayer in Psalm 72 came from a deep understanding as a young boy, that God loved him, gave him special gifts, and had great plans for his life. In the Bible I have read time and time again how God blessed David with gifts of faith, courage, humility, and strength. David lived a bold and fearless life because he invested daily in his relationship with God through worship, prayer and giving God credit for his successes while humbly asking God's forgiveness for his failures. David had a great excitement about who God was and what he could do, mixed with great reverence for who God was and what he could do that motivated him to live a bold life for and through God. He knew God would never leave or forsake him. David knew this when he was praying for his son Solomon, and I believe he also knew something greater was yet to come...

As early as age five, I can remember the palpable excitement traveling "over the river and through the woods" to my grandmother's house on the eve of Christmas. The mystery of Santa and his flying reindeer up in the sky, mixed with my simple understanding of a bright star leading ancient wise men to God's greatest gift, His son, Jesus Christ, and my childish anticipation of what might be waiting for me under the Christmas tree on Christmas morning, were almost too much for me to hold in and not explode with excitement.

"Oh, the places I have gone," (thanks, Dr. Seuss) as I have been able to live my life with great excitement for who God is and what he could do, mixed with a great reverence for who God is and what he could do that motivates me to live a bold life, knowing that God will never leave or forsake me. Now that I am a lot older than that five-year-old boy, the smells and tastes of Christmas, the lights and anticipation of presents under the tree have grown into a deeper sense of awe and anticipation of the season of Advent where God's people celebrate together the hope, faith, joy, peace, and light of Christ our Savior.

As a father of four sons, I relate to David's desire for all the good that may come from his time on earth to be passed along to his son, along with his bold and hopeful prayer for his son to live under God's blessing, mercy, and grace to accomplish even greater things.

Yet... all the goodness and greatness man can achieve, combined with all the blessings God can bestow this side of heaven, will never be enough... There must be something more...

That something more is Jesus Christ, the greatest gift God has ever given, our Savior, Redeemer and friend, the King of kings who was, is and always will be. Today you can accept the gift of salvation and experience the excitement of knowing God, through His son Jesus Christ and live a bold life knowing that God will never leave you or forsake you.

"Restore us, O God:  
Let your face shine, that we may be saved."

-*Psalms 80:3*

This Psalm was written after the time of the Assyrian invasion and destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel. You can feel the despair of the Psalmist and you can relate. Haven't we all felt this communal desperation and fear? Pick your example: September 11, 2001, COVID, or the invasion of Ukraine. The list goes on and on, and we are left asking, "Why would God let this happen?" or "Where is God?" or "How can a loving God allow this?"

I recently read an essay by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, describing his experience in Lower Manhattan on September 11 and the days after. A young man, seeing his clerical collar, approached him amidst the wreckage and asked what was God doing when the planes crashed into the Twin Towers. Williams himself was at a loss for words—he is human after all. Can you blame it on divine retribution for our own sinfulness? The result of failed American foreign policy? A God who, in allowing us free will, simply can't intervene? The choices are not comforting, especially if you are a person of faith. According to Williams, we often look to God to explain, to meet the needs of our own personal agenda, but the answer is unknown to us.

Reading this Psalm, you can share the Psalmist's pain, and you can feel the sensory power of the imagery from the words:

*"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!..."*

*"You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth..."*

*"You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure."*

When reading the Psalms, I like to remember that they were composed to be sung or chanted. Once a trip to the Holy Land, I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and heard two Coptic priests chanting responsively in the Copt language what might have been a Psalm. In the midst of the chaos and flurry of a multitude of tourists, the rhythm, sound and cadence of their chanting provided an island of peaceful, reassuring refuge without understanding a word they said. It reminded me of studying a work of abstract art in which I immerse myself. The flood of imagery can be transportive and healing, even while I'm not sure what the meaning is. Reading this Psalm, feeling the pain of the long-ago writer, and sensing the images of the words provide me with feelings of connection, compassion, and transcendence. And there, I find the healing my soul desires.

As it says in Ecclesiastes 1:9: "There is nothing new under the sun." Pain and suffering are part of the human experience, but there is also much beauty, joy and goodness that remind me of God's presence after all. Immersing myself in the Psalms reminds me of this.

I was almost out of breath because I had been hurrying, traveling up into the Judean hill country to visit Elizabeth—the wife of Zechariah. Since I, Mary, am young, I needed to discover what my trustworthy elder relative thought about my extraordinary experience. I had been visited by a messenger from God who promised that I would bear His Son. I asked only one question before saying, “Yes. Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Now I was wondering what all this meant. When I assented, I felt a wonderful exhilaration and a calm peace. But now I kept questioning whether what seemed so real was real. Besides, how could I explain this to Joseph? Would people despise me as an unwed mother? Who was I to be chosen? Was I deluded? Nonetheless, my sense that the Holy Spirit called me seemed more real than my practical concerns. I needed to find out what Elizabeth thought because I knew that she is spiritually mature.

When I arrived at Elizabeth's home and greeted her, she cried out, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” Her face was alight with joy, and she confided that the child in her womb leaped with joy when he heard my greeting. I felt so blessed—blessed that I trusted God, blessed to be a partner in His plan of salvation, blessed that I was the one to carry His Child. Elizabeth and I embraced and laughed together. A wonderful glow surrounded us filled the entire room. I sung out,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior,  
For He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."

*-Isaiah 35:4*

We've made it to Christmas, the day when we celebrate God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. This is an incredible moment and one that is celebrated around the world. For us, the beauty of the experience is deepened in worship, in time spent with our loved ones, and in the hope of a world reborn.

A world reborn would be nice, wouldn't it? Our world needs a rebirth and a realignment towards what is good and right and true. Before you jump to conclusions, the good and right and true that I'm talking about is most certainly not what any political pundit would agree to, on either side of the aisle. The good and right and true I'm talking about is an identity firmly rooted in the amazing love of Christ.

Jesus shows us just how profound God's love truly is. So profound, in fact, that God's love calls us into a life that is radically different from what the world says we should be. Through Christ, we are made fully aware of our messiness and of all the ways in which we do not live the life God created us to live. And what is amazing, is that God loves us completely anyway.

I believe, deep in my soul, that each one of us yearns to be connected to the goodness, rightness, and truth of God in Christ, but we fall short of that hope every single day. It would be easy for us to just throw our hands in the air and give up—give up on being the people God created us to be. We can find ourselves in a place of fear that grips us so tightly we feel as though we can't escape. That is, until we are reminded of God's greatest gift once again.

God's greatest gift comes in His willingness to live like us. God was willing to experience our human ups and downs, wins and losses, pain and healing. Through Christ, God came to share our lives and to walk with us every moment of every day.

So when it feels like the world is dark and hope is gone, remember God's amazing promise through the birth of His Son, and "Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'"

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