



*Journey
through Advent
2021*



A Disciples Seminary Foundation Devotional



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An Invitation:

Together, we are on a journey. Yes, we are waiting in anticipation of Christmas and the coming new year, but let us not forget the importance of today and this moment right here. Let us not get so caught up in the busyness and stress of this season that we forget about the importance of the here and now. Let us not become so focused on the destination that we miss the beauty of the journey. After all, tomorrow is never really guaranteed.

Each day during Advent, we invite you to take a little bit of time in your day to join us in reading and reflecting on the devotions in this book. Each devotion represents the beautiful diversity of the DSF Family. There are devotions from DSF staff, students, graduates, friends, and board members sharing with us from their various theological, cultural, and social perspectives.

Thank you for journeying with us!

Schedule		Page
Sun., Nov. 28	Rev. Belva Brown Jordan	3
Mon., Nov. 29	Eunice Villaneda	4
Tues., Nov. 30	Rev. Yvonne T. Gilmore	5
Wed., Dec. 1	Rev. Rosario Ibarra	6-7
Thurs., Dec. 2	Rev. Dr. Christy Newton	8
Fri., Dec. 3	Rev. Dr. David Vásquez-Levy	9
Sat., Dec. 4	Safue Ulufaleilupe	10
Sun., Dec. 5	Rev. Bernard "Chris" Dorsey	11
Mon., Dec. 6	Rev. Kaitlin Koeller	12
Tues., Dec. 7	Rev. Virzola Law	13
Wed., Dec. 8	Rev. Mary Jo Bradshaw	14
Thurs., Dec. 9	Rev. Dr. Caleb J. Lines	15
Fri., Dec. 10	Rev. Jeff Utter	16
Sat., Dec. 11	Rev. Dr. Ruth Fletcher	17
Sun., Dec. 12	Christiane Swartz	18
Mon., Dec. 13	Rev. Dr. Norman L. Williams	19
Tues., Dec. 14	Rev. Jeanette Larson	20
Wed., Dec. 15	Grace Kim	21
Thurs., Dec. 16	Rev. Neil Virginia R. Greeley	22
Fri., Dec. 17	Rev. Dr. Jon Lacey	23
Sat., Dec. 18	Rev. Dr. James Brooks	24
Sun., Dec. 19	Rev. Mary Jacobs	25
Mon., Dec. 20	Rev. Jay R. Hartley	26
Tues., Dec. 21	Taulau Tupua	27
Wed., Dec. 22	Rev. Nathan Hill	28
Thurs., Dec. 23	Rev. Jerri Handy	29
Fri., Dec. 24	Rev. Robert Allan Blair, Jr.	30
Sat., Dec. 25	Rev. Dr. LaTaunya M. Bynum	31

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷ **At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.** ²⁸ **When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**” ²⁹ He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

With the beginning of the first season of the Christian church year leading up to Christmas, Luke 21:25-36 provides some guidance for Advent as we prepare to tell the sacred story of Jesus’ birth. In the words of Ferris Bueller (from the 1986 movie “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off”), “If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” There are so many distractions – hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, suicide bombings, endless territorial wars, political discord, domestic violence, road rage, school shootings, and the death grip of the coronavirus pandemic on human life and sanity. It is too easy to keep our eyes on these things. When all of creation trembles and shakes; when there are signs in the sun, moon, and stars, when the seas roar and the waves swell, it is so easy to fixate on the destruction.

This season of Advent breaks into our current realities of disruption and urges us to look around, to look up, so that we don’t miss what is coming. Luke 21:27 in the “First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament” uses these words, “Then they will look up and see the True Human Being coming with power, riding on the clouds, showing his shining-greatness.” This is the promise that Jesus leaves with the people who follow him. To emphasize the promise, Jesus offers a wisdom-story using the life cycle of a fig tree. “When the branches of a tree grow soft and buds appear, you know that it is nearly summer. In the same way when you see these things happening, you will know that Creator’s good road is about to come into full bloom” (Luke 21:30-31 FNV).

In this season of Advent, may we find ways to see beyond the daily disruptions. Maybe this book of Advent devotions will capture your attention and keep you looking up, so that you do not miss “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27).

Prayer: *Creator of all that is, may we prayerfully be on guard, looking up and seeking a path that prepares us to see the “True Human Being” (Son of Man) who we will celebrate in the days ahead. Amen.*



Rev. Belva Brown Jordan, 35 years ordained Disciples of Christ clergy, serves as Interim President for Disciples Seminary Foundation and as Moderator of the General Board of the Christian Church in the United States and Canada.

☞ **Monday, November 29, 2021** ☞
Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴ *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

¹⁵ *In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*

¹⁶ *In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."*

The prophet Jeremiah declared these words as the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem drew near, which eventually resulted in the complete destruction of the city, the Temple of Solomon, and the exile of the Jews to foreign lands. This was total devastation for Jews, not only because their religious identity was intrinsically tied to their homeland but also because countless parents, children, friends, and neighbors died.

Such devastation resonates deeply today. Like many, I have lost to COVID and the grief, at times, leads to despair. I see the face of my father, which has permanently changed after the loss of his best friend. I see my friend who lost her mother and has struggled to cope with her earth-shattering loss. I see others trying to reconcile with their losses with little success. We are currently living in a time of devastation that has affected millions of people around the world, and the heaviness of this devastation is, at times, unbearable. Like those who were exiled from Israel, our lives have been overturned, and our sense of security has been violated.

Jeremiah spoke to a people devastated by loss, and he speaks to us now. As members of the house of Israel, we know that even amidst this despair, we know the promise is yet to arrive. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (v.14). All seems lost, but we must remember that God is still faithful. He "will cause a righteous Branch to spring up" (v.15), which will not only bring salvation but a persistent hope that will spring to counteract this despair for the whole world. God has fulfilled this promise with the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. As members of the house of Israel, we are called to speak this word of hope and promise to all who despair. In this time of Advent, let's answer the call and spread the good news that the promise of God has been fulfilled!

Prayer: *Father, while times may be bleak, and our hearts may fill with despair, heal our despair with your unfailing grace so that we may rejoice in the promise that you have fulfilled through your son, Jesus Christ.*



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🌀 Tuesday, November 30, 2021 🌀
Psalm 25:1-10 – Claiming the Poetry of Advent

- ¹ To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- ² O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
- ³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
- ⁴ Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
- ⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.
- ⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
- ⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
- ⁸ Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
- ⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.
- ¹⁰ All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Where do you place your trust? What does hope focus on when it's on a quest for guidance? The writer of Psalm 25 claims the poetry, the path for meaning making, paved by God, and the poetry passed on to the community. Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem in Hebrew with minor deviations. The verses begin with each letter of the alphabet and follow this order except in a few cases. The past year has been an epic poem with a flood of minor deviations, a year full of hints, multiple versions of meaning and feeling, and wide-eyed waiting. Images of trust, memory, vulnerability, mortality, and hope on a quest for wisdom and guidance have framed the invitations we have given and received throughout the liminal spaces we've inhabited.

This poem is a prayer for guidance on the covenant course of justice and love. As an acrostic poem with functional capacity, it is not solely intended for personal use or literary enjoyment but as a learning tool within the community. The poet is invested in the ways and paths to the future on their quest for truth rooted in covenant relation. The season of Advent invites people of faith to stay tuned to the poetry that makes space for the future.

Renowned poet and scholar Audre Lorde asserted that poetry is not a luxury. It is an essential work, not merely a matter of wordplay. It's a practice of imagination with memory, wisdom, and insight. This season invites us to claim what is ancient and hidden, and the poems that are coming as meanings of mercy, multiple paths to the divine, and new stories to tell. Poems help us read the lived poetry that is holy and hidden among and between us and to locate and claim the investments of love and learning that call the community forward.

Prayer: *God of everlasting love, master poet who speaks into the void of every new beginning, speak again with and through our poems this Advent season. Guide us from hiddenness to hope as we wait together.*



Rev. Yvonne T. Gilmore currently serves as the Interim Administrative Secretary of the National Convocation and Associate General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada; Core Trainer with Reconciliation Ministries; and Co-Director of Living Justice: An Anti-Racist Practicum at the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago.

⁹ Pues ¿Qué acción de gracias podemos dar a Dios por vosotros, por todo el gozo con que nos regocijamos delante de nuestro Dios a causa de vosotros, ¹⁰según oramos intensamente de noche y de día que podamos ver su rostro y completemos lo que falta a vuestra fe?

¹¹ Ahora, pues, que el mismo Dios y Padre, y Jesús nuestro Señor, dirijan nuestro camino a vosotros; ¹² y que el Señor os haga crecer y abundar en amor unos para con otros, y para con todos, como también nosotros lo hacemos para con vosotros; ¹³ a fin de que Él afirme vuestros corazones irrepreensibles en santidad delante de nuestro Dios y Padre, en la venida de nuestro Señor Jesús con todos sus santos.

Robert Emmons en su libro "Thanks!: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happy" define la gratitud en dos etapas: "Primero, es el reconocimiento de la bondad en nuestra vida. En segundo lugar, es reconocer que la fuente (s) de esta bondad se encuentra al menos parcialmente fuera de una misma. Podemos ser agradecidas con otras personas, con Dios, los animales, pero nunca con una misma." También agrega que "Gratitud implica humildad – el reconocimiento de que no podríamos ser quienes somos o dónde estamos en la vida sin la contribución de los demás." Pablo estaba lleno de gratitud y gozo porque a pesar de la persecución, las pruebas y el aislamiento que los tesalonicenses soportaron cuando se convirtieron en seguidores de Jesús, ellos mantuvieron su fe. Mas aún, ellos se convirtieron en ejemplo para los demás.

Igualmente, cuando los templos estuvieron cerrados y la gente se estresaba porque no podían reunirse para adorar, la tecnología y la creatividad llevaron a las congregaciones a desarrollar una nueva forma de "ser iglesia" para seguir cuidándose unos a otros y a los demás. Ahora es común tener servicios de adoración, café, estudios bíblicos o reuniones de la Junta a través de Zoom, así como repartir alimentos afuera del templo o entregar comida a domicilio.

También, el nivel de ansiedad y depresión ha aumentado en la población debido al aislamiento, la pérdida de empleos y la incertidumbre de cuándo terminará la pandemia o si realmente terminará.

Para enfrentar esta situación, el apóstol Pablo ora y nos compele a "aumentar nuestro amor los unos a los otros y hacia todos los demás." ¿Cómo podemos abundar en amor hacia los demás? Cuando nos esforzamos por escuchar, respetar y valorar a todos, independientemente de quiénes sean o cuán diferentes sean de nosotros, cuando impartimos justicia, cuando somos generosas para compartir con los necesitados, y cuando reconocemos que nos necesitamos unos a otros para avanzar como sociedad.

Oración: *Querido Dios, ayúdanos a amar a los demás como tú nos amas para preparar nuestros corazones para celebrar la venida de Jesús, el "Verbo (quien) se hizo carne y habitó entre nosotros."*



Rev. Rosario Ibarra sirve como Building and Capital Services en Disciples Church Extension Fund. Ella vive en el área de Los Ángeles en California, sirviendo a congregaciones tanto en inglés como en español al oeste de los Estados Unidos (incluyendo Hawai y Alaska). También se desempeña como miembro de la Junta de DSF.

⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Robert Emmons in his book “Thanks!: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happy” defines gratitude in terms of two stages: “First, it is the acknowledgment of goodness in one’s life. Second, it is recognizing that the source(s) of this goodness lies at least partially outside the self. One can be grateful to other people, to God, to animals, but never to oneself.” He also adds, “Gratitude implies humility – a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contribution of others.”

Paul was full of gratitude and joy because despite the persecution, trials, and isolation that the Thessalonians endured when they became followers of Jesus, they kept their faith. Furthermore, they became an example to others.

In the same way, when the church buildings were closed, and the people experienced distress because they could not gather for worship, technology and creativity prompted congregations to develop a new way “to do church,” to continue caring for each other and the community. Now it is common to have worship services, coffee, Bible studies, or board meetings via Zoom as well as having food pantries outside the church buildings or delivering meals.

However, the level of anxiety and depression has increased in the general population due to isolation, the loss of lives and jobs, and uncertainty of when the pandemic will be over, or will it be over?

During this challenging time, the apostle Paul prays and compels us “to increase our love for each other and everyone else.” How can we love everyone else? When we strive to listen, respect, and value everybody regardless of who they are or how different they are from us, when we do justice, when we are generous to share what we have with those who are in need, and when we acknowledge that we need each other to move forward as a society.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us love others as you love us and prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the “Word (who) became flesh and dwelt among us.”*



Rev. Rosario Ibarra serves as Building and Capital Services Advisor for Disciples Church Extension Fund. She lives in the Los Angeles area, serving congregations both in English and Spanish in the western United States (including Hawaii and Alaska). She also serves as a DSF board member.

¹ O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. ² Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. ³ Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. ⁴ For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. ⁶ Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. ⁷ Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. ⁸ Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. ⁹ Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. ¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

“O sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 96:1). This enthusiastic invitation extends to “all the earth.” It seeks partnership among *all* the families of *all* the peoples. It includes not only humans and the heavens but also earth’s soil and seas, fields and trees, and *all* that inhabit them. This invitation acknowledges that *all* our lives and livelihoods are inseparable, interconnected, indivisible. We are bound together.

And the cosmic and everlasting purpose that binds us together and invites us to sing is God’s justice — the promise of dignity, inclusivity, equity, possibility, a transformed reality — for *all* the earth, *all* peoples, and *all* aspects of creation.

God’s justice longs to shower us *all* with goodness and grace, strength and beauty, and it makes its way here among us even though we currently experience brokenness and injustice that leave destruction and despair in their wake. God’s justice calls for a new song — not only for what God has done in the past and what God is doing now but also for *all* God will do — as God forever casts lures for us to follow toward greater expressions of justice. How might we rework the cultural, racial, economic supremacy we’ve internalized and create new ways to be in relationship? How might we put our deepest beliefs into practice in the global marketplace to create human and environmental dignity for all, not just for some?

To whatever extent we are able to grasp and follow God’s life-giving lures, we become vital contributors to God’s in-breaking of justice — just as we become vital contributors to the birth, once again, of good news into the world.

Prayer: *We pray for courage, O God, to sing a new song — a song of justice and hope not just for ourselves but for all your beloved children and all your beloved creation. We want to be agents of your goodness and grace, your strength and beauty. Open our hearts, minds, and hands — ready to welcome whatever you have in store! Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Christy Newton received her M.Div. from Pacific School of Religion and her Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union with the generous help of Disciples Seminary Foundation. She currently pastors the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Vallejo, CA and teaches Social Ethics for Lexington Theological Seminary.

¹ Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. ⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? ⁶ And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." ⁷ Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." ⁸ But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom." ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." ¹⁰ And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; ¹¹ they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; ¹² like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end."

On Wednesday, September 9, 2020, I woke up to what some referred to as a "nuclear winter." Due to an unprecedented number of wildfires, the skies were a foreboding red throughout the day. On that same day when extreme dry weather was causing devastation and a blood red-sky around my home in California, I spoke with my mother about the contrasting reality she was waking up to in Guatemala, where I am originally from. Guatemala was facing the worst Atlantic hurricane season on record. "La pita siempre se rompe donde esta más delgada," my mom said on the phone. Loosely translated as "the thread breaks at its most vulnerable spot," she used this proverb to lament the way that the communities most disenfranchised by economic and racial inequality are bearing the brunt of an environmental crisis – compounded by the impact of a global pandemic and the growing polarization of our politics. This time has felt apocalyptic. As he begins his letter to the Hebrews, the author of the book seeks to give courage to a people living through their own uncertainty by saying, "but now in these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son." In these days of pandemic, protest, and polarization, we do well to pay attention to the root word behind apocalyptic, which means "revelation" (from the Greek root *apokaluptein*, "to uncover"). This time of pandemic, protest, and polarization has revealed much about our brokenness and the legacies and realities of inequality. But the letter of Hebrews encourages us to pay attention to what is revealed to us by God's Son – that through his teaching we can re-evaluate what is "essential;" that we are deeply connected to one another as Martin Luther King Jr. said, we "are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny;" and that even as things we hold to be permanent are changed, our God is "the same, and your years will never end."

Prayer: *Gracious God, may this time of Advent – of expectation – open us to what you are up to in the world, calling us to justice, to love, and trust. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. David Vásquez-Levy serves as President of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA – a progressive, multid denominational seminary and center for social justice that prepares a diverse cadre of spiritually rooted leaders to work for the well-being of all. A committed pastor and a nationally recognized higher education and immigration leader, he leads at the intersection of faith, higher education, and social change.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

In my own personal experiences in life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to the author of the Book of John, has taught me many valuable lessons on spirituality. In John chapter 1, the author gives us a sense of who is in control. God, who was in the beginning, through God we have been nourished through this journey of life. God has helped overcome many obstacles in our own personal experiences. The light at the end of the tunnel, the light that gives us the vision to see clearly, the One who is depended on through rough times.

He sent His one and only Son, during a context where many were confused and distraught because of the teachings of the past. Jesus brought a new vision about accepting and believing in God. He spoke about the grace and the love that is with us.

It is no secret that in today's context, we all are going through different situations. We have our own struggles that we deal with. One struggle that we all are facing together is the struggle of living through COVID-19. This pandemic has taken many lives, loved ones, family members, and so many countless names.

John 1 tells me that the One who is from the beginning will also be here to the end. God will guide us through difficult times. We just have to trust, believe, and have faith in Christ. Amen.

Prayer: *Loving God of all creation, rejuvenate us with your presence, love, and joy. Give us the courage and strength to preach the Word so that we can make a difference. May your grace continue to lead us in the right directions of life. Amen.*



Safue Ulufaleilupe is a DSF/PSR (D.Min.) student.

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

In the prophetic tradition of Isaiah, John has been teaching and preaching throughout the region. He has been proclaiming the need for repentance but also declaring a hopeful future. In Isaiah’s time, God’s people struggled with injustice and inequity; and dealt with ongoing political and societal turmoil and conflicts. During the time of John the Baptist, God’s people also struggled with injustice and inequity; and dealt with ongoing political and societal turmoil and conflicts. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

One of the challenges human society always faces is that injustice, inequity, political strife, and conflicts are all too common. They are a product of people’s failure to remember key commandments for how we are to live as people of God. Love God. Love others. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. And when society is out of balance and people are not honoring the basic commandments and admonitions from God, the prophets call us to repent. They also tell us that we can still experience a hopeful future.

What is most significant about the words in this verse is that they remind us of an important role that the people of God have to play in building and strengthening communities and societies. The prophetic declaration begins with “Prepare the way of the Lord.” That suggests that it is our responsibility to address the injustices and inequities of society. We must work to do this *in advance* of the Lord coming into our midst. That’s an important part of the message of Advent. We anticipate a hopeful future by doing the work that is necessary to bring it into fruition.

Liberate the oppressed, tear down structures of oppression.
End inequality and ensure a smooth and fulfilling life for all.

Prayer: *Creator God, in this season of Advent, we repent and we hope. We repent of our failure to ensure justice and mercy for all. We commit ourselves to being a part of your hopeful future, be caring for the least of these, and by working toward a more just and equitable society. This is our prayer. Amen.*



The Rev. Bernard "Chris" Dorsey serves as President of Higher Education & Leadership Ministries (HELM) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and teaches. Courses he has taught in the past include: Theology and Social Movements; Theologizing Violence; and the Theologies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹ See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

There is hope alive within each of us as we wonder and ponder. We hear the promises that God has made. We are looking for guidance and greater insight. We cry out as we join in awaiting the return of the messenger and prepare to fulfill our God-called roles. Sometimes we get caught in impatience. Many times, we need to reset and be renewed. We are called to redirect our attention to God and our faith.

I reflect on how quickly life can change, whether for better or for worse. In a moment, we are changed by choosing to follow Jesus, becoming parents, adopting a pet, losing a loved one, etc. In that moment, there is an element of being transformed in order to fully live into our calling. We read this in scripture as God makes the promise to fully cleanse the Levite priests to perform their priestly tasks in righteousness. God is cleansing us, too.

Here in the Book of Malachi, God is reminding us of the opportunities for repentance of wrongdoings, redemption through grace, and restoration of relationships. This requires honest reflection and admitting how our God refines and purifies our spirits with justice and love. This may be uncomfortable, yet this is the space in which we grow. Here is a space for letting go of things that hinder us and keep us stuck. We need help to clear the path before us. Here is a place where we are prepared for a life of faith. I wonder how we might in turn also prepare the way for others. Being present with others will open the way for blessings to flow.

How is God speaking in your life? What do you need to adjust in your life to give more attention to the Lord?

Prayer: *God of love and grace, may we find peace in the waiting and grace in the forgiving. The offerings that we have, we give in righteousness. May we be refined, purified, and cleansed to follow you. Amen.*



Rev. Kaitlin Koeller is a DSF/CST graduate (M.Div./2017) and serves as Associate Minister of Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Camdenton, MO. Kaitlin also serves as an institutional hospital chaplain with the Disciples Chaplains Association.

⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David
⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

When is the last time you used the word “bless”? Was it when someone sneezed and you said, “Bless you”? Was it when someone was acting some kind of way and you said, “Bless your heart”? With these phrases, and countless others we throw around “blessings,” I so often find myself wondering if we are missing something. The season of Advent is a season of waiting for the blessing of the birth of Jesus, waiting Jesus’ return, and it is a season when we honor the blessings that are always around us.

Zechariah blesses the Lord, the God of Israel, in his old age because he knows that it is by God’s mercy that we will be led in the way of peace.

What words or gestures might you share in the way of blessing in this season? This is an invitation to challenge yourself to be more intentional in looking for a blessing and to share a blessing. What if the very blessing you offer is God’s instrument of peace the world needs?

So much is opening up around us, and yet there is still a longing for a world that flows with more hope, peace, and joy for all. All, meaning everybody. As we wait, may the blessings spring up all the more even in the grey of winter!

Prayer: *God of infinite peace, hope, joy, and love, we come to you this season humbled by the blessings you have already shown us through your Son, our Savior. Help us in this season to honor all of your creation. May we notice the blessings around us and share the blessings on the journey.*



Rev. Virzola Law received her Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics from Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, TX and her Master of Divinity degree from Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, OK. She also studied at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth and is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a service sorority founded in 1913. Throughout her 23 years in ministry, Rev. Law has been involved in interfaith groups and organizations that serve the homeless and disadvantaged, as well as camps and conferences for children and teenagers. She acts as a mission specialist consultant for the National Benevolent Association and is actively involved at the national, regional, and area levels of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

🌀 Wednesday, December 8, 2021 🌀
Philippians 1:3-11

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

This is exactly the kind of letter I would want to receive from a mentor or someone I admired. It's full of encouragement and affirmation – the kind of positive message that would lift anyone's spirits. Each of us, after all, is a work in progress, and what a gift to know that someone is paying attention and noting our growth! God is watching, of course, but sometimes we need to hear that encouraging word from God expressed through the voice and heart of a sibling in Christ. This excerpt from Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi is a good example. He describes the joy he feels when he thinks of them. How often do we neglect to share with people the joy they bring us, the hope, the respect we hold for them? And what a beautiful and concise prayer: "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best..." not only so that they may be "pure and blameless" but so that they might "produce the harvest of righteousness." In modern Greek, the word frequently translated as "righteousness" means "justice." Justice! Our righteousness, our purity and blamelessness, are bound up in what we do for others. While we may not have mentors who, like Paul, are imprisoned, we can still share grace with those who are captive – those who need encouragement – regardless of whether the prison is literal, or an addiction, or a mental illness, or something else that leaves them feeling trapped. We can work to ensure that all of God's people can live in peace, have their basic needs met, and enjoy the same freedom we all long for. Our sharing in the gospel isn't only a gift for us; it's a gift we offer to the world.

Prayer: *My prayer for you is that the day will come when everyone who knows you will be able to say, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you."*



Rev. Mary Jo Bradshaw is a 2003 graduate of the Claremont School of Theology. She and her spouse, Charlie, moved to Lompoc, CA in 2020 so that she could serve as Pastor of First Christian Church, Lompoc. She is dedicated to what she believes are the fundamental values of Christianity: love God and love your neighbor.

- ⁷ *How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”*
- ⁸ *Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.*
- ⁹ *Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*
- ¹⁰ *The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

The feeling of exile is horrible. Abandoned. Hopeless. Uncertain about the future. And most of all, separated. Stories of exile, both literal and figurative, are central to the biblical story. Often, they serve as a reminder of God’s presence with us, even (or especially) under terrible circumstances.

We have just experienced over a year of exile ourselves, as so many of us were forced to remain physically separate from our loved ones. As the pandemic dragged on, I found myself feeling more disconnected and ungrounded than I have ever felt before, even what defined me as a person was shifting. Exile does that. We are communal people and when we are ripped away from our community, it shakes our sense of self and alters our view of the world. It makes us feel like we are simply existing, but not truly living.

In the biblical Exile, leaders were forced to leave their home country and live in Babylon where they experienced decades of separation, uncertainty, and loss. It was a time of immense suffering. In today’s reading, though, those in exile get a message of hope: that their lives will be restored. And, of course, they are encouraged to burst into singing because restoration is cause for rejoicing!

There are many reasons that we might continue to feel exile in our lives this Advent. Broken relationships. Loss during the pandemic. Addiction. Separation from loved ones. Dreams not coming to fruition. Whatever it is that makes us feel exiled, we should hear hope in the reminder that “God reigns.” When we proclaim that “God reigns,” we declare that this world belongs to God. In this world, which God so loves, we are not supposed to simply survive but thrive. I pray that as you journey toward Christmas, you find a spirit of connection and hope.

Prayer: *God of the Exiled, you never promised us that life would be easy. You have, however, abundantly affirmed that you will be with us at all times and through all things. May we find deep comfort in your abiding presence. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Caleb J. Lines serves as the Senior Minister for University Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)/United Church of Christ in San Diego, CA and as the Co-Executive Director of ProgressiveChristianity.org. He is the author of *The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation* (Cascade Books, 2021).

- ¹ *The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!*
² *Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
 righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.*
³ *Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side.*
⁴ *His lightnings light up the world;
 the earth sees and trembles.*
⁵ *The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
 before the Lord of all the earth.*
⁶ *The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
 and all the peoples behold his glory.*
⁷ *All worshipers of images are put to shame,
 those who make their boast in worthless idols;
 all gods bow down before him.*
⁸ *Zion hears and is glad,
 and the towns of Judah rejoice,
 because of your judgments, O God.*
⁹ *For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
 you are exalted far above all gods.*
¹⁰ *The Lord loves those who hate evil;
 he guards the lives of his faithful;
 he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.*
¹¹ *Light dawns for the righteous,
 and joy for the upright in heart.*
¹² *Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
 and give thanks to his holy name!*

The 97th Psalm is not squeamish about stressing what all of us repeat every time we recite the Lord's Prayer: we say to God that He — She — possesses all the "kingdom" and "power" and "glory" forever. God's got it all! That's an awesome truth — so much so that hearing it, the earth trembles, the mountains melt, etc. Yet we human beings keep acting as if we've got a big problem with this. It's so hard for us to admit that we're God's creatures, maybe partly because we are scared that we are so very, very little compared to God's bigness. But our great church father John Calvin put it this way: "The chief end of humanity is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever." Calvin understood that our human happiness and joy, the very meaning of our human lives, consists precisely in our acknowledging that God has all the power. Why? Because God is love. God is *love*! And that means that whatever God has to deal with among us down here on earth, however much God has to do to keep us rightly oriented, it is all, for the sake of loving us, building us up, fulfilling us, and giving us joy, endless joy. So sisters and brothers: let us enjoy God! Shall we thank God, shall we praise God, shall we glorify God so that we can enjoy God, or what?

Prayer: *Dear, dear God: teach us, ingrain in us that what You want is for us to enjoy You forever. You, who are love, light, beauty, and life that goes on forever. We ask You in the name of Jesus, Amen.*



Rev. Jeff Utter is a retired minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. He has done ministry in Germany, Brazil, and Argentina. He also worked for years as a prison chaplain and as a Veterans Administration chaplain, focusing on homeless veterans. He is married and has four children.

⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

⁶ This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

My muscles grabbed and seized. My motions slowed. My body tried to relax but to no avail. I was in pain. I could feel my back was out of alignment. But with a few quick chiropractic adjustments, I breathed a sigh of relief. “Wow!” I thought. “This is what grace feels like — free and light and flexible.”

The people of Crete had a reputation for being scoundrels. They were known as liars, lazy gluttons, and brutes. Their very minds and consciences were corrupt. They professed to know God, but their actions didn’t demonstrate their alliance to God’s purposes. They were “detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work” (Titus 1:16). They were bound up by their own sinfulness.

By their own force of will, the Cretans could do nothing to change. They could not free themselves. They could not will themselves to be better people. They could not exonerate themselves from their slavery to quarreling, malice, envy, and hatred.

But God saved them. Not by any works of righteousness that they had done, but according to God’s mercy. Through God’s goodness and loving kindness, two gifts were made available to them. The first was the water of rebirth they received in their baptism. It cleansed them and set them on a life-path of following God’s ways. The second was the Holy Spirit that served as a companion along the way — guiding them when they got lost, teaching them when they strayed, renewing them again and again.

Prayer: *Holy God, we know we can do nothing apart from your love. We give you thanks for the gift of baptism, which initiates us into a life of goodness and righteousness with Christ and allows us to commit ourselves to God’s will and desire. We give you thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which does not leave us desolate but gives us a way to be redeemed again and again, to live according to our created nature, and to free us when we are bound up by our own selfish ways. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Ruth Fletcher graduated from CST with a D.Min. She has served on the board of DSF. She is a retired Regional Minister and makes her home in Davenport, WA.

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” ¹⁰ “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” ¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. ¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” ¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

In the nineties, there was a popular essay by Robert Fullghum titled “All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” The path to world peace and inner happiness was apparently paved with little life rules. “Share everything”; “play fair”; “don’t take things that aren’t yours”; etc. What I loved about it was that it gave concrete advice on what to do when I feel powerless and helped me understand that no matter who caused the big problems in the world, we are always either part of the solution or part of the problem, not in between. The simple things we seem to most easily forget when we tackle big problems.

And really, isn’t that what is going on in this scene with John and the crowds turning out to be baptized? The problems of the time were so big, and they didn’t know how to fix them, but they wanted to be seen as part of the solution. And so, they were startled when John called them out as a “brood of vipers,” and let them know just being baptized and proclaiming faith or being related to the right people was not going to make a difference. They responded with confusion. “What should we do then?”

All the simple things they’ve forgotten. Share everything. Play fair. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. John is not asking them to transform the world, but he is asking them to change themselves, to not just wait, but to be the good news.

There is still hope in these rules. The world is apparently not becoming any less confusing or overwhelming. We head into this Christmas season, weary of fear and isolation, the endless pandemic, political dodgeball, and climate disasters. We don’t know what to do, and we are so ready for good news, for a miracle! But I believe that many times when we pray, God sends us people. John challenges us to be that people.

Prayer: *Holy and Loving God, please walk with me during this time of waiting and uncertainty. Help me to be the change for which I pray.*



Christiane Swartz is a seminarian in the M.Div. program at Pacific School of Religion. She lives with her husband, two teenage daughters, and two cats in Cloverdale, CA. Christiane is a social worker at the VA and currently serves Geyserville Christian Church as Minister of Care, an Elder, and a musician.

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸ as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

When I received our Scripture text for today, I was sure that there was mistake. After all, wasn't yesterday the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as "Gaudete (Joy) Sunday?"

I do not associate the Prophet Zephaniah with joy and jubilation. This book begins with the threat to wipe away everything from the face of the earth, wreaking of havoc, punishing foreign governments, and reproving Jerusalem for failing to heed the lessons of history.

I was disappointed to learn this was not a mistake. I have a confession to make: I struggle with celebrating Christmas. I like getting presents but have a very hard time finding the right gifts for those I love. But shouldn't Christmas be more than giving gifts to those I love? What about those God loves?

So to answer these deep and disturbing questions, I went to the internet and found a commentary by Anne Steward on this text. She asks some interesting questions, "What would happen if God interrupted us... barged into our midst to make God's presence known? How would we respond? What changes would God's presence bring?"

Judgement is such a harsh word. But I know that daily my actions, words, and thoughts are put in the context "What would Jesus do?" Recognizing my guilt, my mantra is the simple words of the song "Come into My Heart." These moments judge me, and I am guilty, but they "interrupt" me and call for acts of compassion, words that heal and holy thoughts.

Zephaniah calls on Zion to sing because now God is "in charge at the center." Sometimes it is hard to sing because we do not know what we should be singing. But if God is really in charge at the center, and we are really open to being interrupted, maybe there is still hope. Maybe there is still time to affirm the humanity of the poor, to welcome the refugees, to affirm that BLM and LGBTQ are my siblings.

Prayer: *Come into our hearts Lord Jesus, come in today, come in to stay, come into our hearts Lord Jesus. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Norman L. Williams is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (DOC) and the Moderator of the Pacific Southwest Region of the Christian Church (DOC). Norm is married to Linda Hernandez Williams.

- ² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might,
he has become my salvation.
- ³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
- ⁴ And you will say in that day:
Give thanks to the LORD,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.
- ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
- ⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

I felt afraid in the pandemic in 2020, especially when waiting for COVID test results. I remember praying while quarantined. In faith, I waited on God's healing. Thankfully I did not contract COVID. I thought by 2021, we would be post-pandemic. I feel frustrated that we are still waiting for people to be vaccinated. Our country needs healing and salvation to be in unity, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

The people in Isaiah's time also waited for salvation. They longed for a Messiah to save them from oppression. They longed to experience God's Realm on Earth. In chapter 11, Isaiah envisions a world of peace. This chapter 12 praise hymn invites all, including Jerusalem, to sing for joy to the Holy One.

In Advent, we wait. We wait and prepare for the celebration of the Christ-child renewed in our hearts once more. We pray salvation and healing for all people to bring God's shalom-wholeness in our lives. We sing God's praises for the continued healing acts of grace, which God gives us daily.

Prayer: *Divine Healer, open our hearts with compassion for those who wait for healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We remember our healthcare workers asking that You sustain them daily as You heal people through their work. Grant us patience as we wait for the pandemic to end. Help us to continue in hope for Your kin-dom now and yet to be. Amen*



Pastor Jeanette Larson serves with the people at First Christian Church in Princeton, IL. She serves as co-facilitator of the PRAR team in IL/WI and works ecumenically with the Diversity Committee in the Sauk Valley. With the financial help of DSF, she attended Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry, graduating with an M.Div. in 2016.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I will write this devotion concentrating in three areas: pastoral care, theological background, and spirituality.

From a pastoral care perspective, there are words in these verses that are not appropriate for care. Because it limits and compels emotions such as rejoice, don't worry, and be thankful.

Also, from a theological background, Philippians is a letter of joy. However, given the circumstances of the time, the author's position cannot be joyful. While in prison, he wrote a letter to the Philippian church to thank them for their material help and encourage current conflicts and difficulties.

What are the worries and anxieties Paul was referring to here? And what should we be grateful for and rejoice in? While I meditated on these questions, another question came to mind: What is the true meaning of joy and thanks?

For this devotion, I searched for theological commentary, thought about my pastoral care and counseling studying, and meditated on these questions. I could hear my inner voice and felt that it was all about my relationship with God. There was an unknown joy and gratitude. In the system and structure of economic, polity, society, and environment, we live in struggle and worry. But the author exhorts us to ask in prayer and to God; it means a relationship with God.

We are Christians with the privilege of a relationship with God. We are spiritual beings who can feel joy and gratitude in our relationship with God. What is your relationship with God this Advent season? May you find time for a deep, profound, and authentic relationship with God.

Prayer: *Loving God, thank you for giving us the gift of a relationship with you and making us feel joy and gratitude for this relationship. Please let us live in relationship with you, God, emotionally and spiritually, moment by moment, in this season of Advent.*



Grace HyeRyung Kim is a DSF/SFTS graduate (M.Div./2020). She serves at Lafayette Christian Church and is a candidate of ordination in the CCNC-N region. She is also a D.Min. student in pastoral care and counseling.

⁶ Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest, ⁷ and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. ⁸ The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored; ⁹ but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts. ¹⁰ Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. ¹¹ The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." ¹² They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

We watch as people struggle to rebuild their homes and lives in our modern times from hurricanes like Katrina and Maria; or greater than 7.0 earthquakes like the ones in Haiti and Mexico. But natural disasters like these are very different from the devastation that humans cause other humans by hatred and warfare. Do we watch with different eyes as people try to rebuild their lives from these terrible losses?

Our scripture from Isaiah comes from the time of the later Persian period. Some of the exiles had returned to their homeland, others had not. There was economic hardship and political corruption. The return of G-D's presence with the people was long overdue.¹

How hard it is for us to squish our minds back to the first century of the common era! We have so many modern conveniences of construction, transportation, and communication. We truly can't imagine how hard it was for those ancient people to truly believe that G-D could still come and make a difference in their lives. Isaiah believed it. Isaiah tried to show that believing in human ability alone was so much hot air. Trust should be put in G-D at all times. Strength was G-D's to give. Then in the end, as verse 12 says, it is the humans who are truly changed.

Prayer: *As the ancient Israelites learned to wait for your Advent so that they might be changed, dear G-D, help us wait. May we be changed by your Advent this year to see all humans as our brothers and sisters.*

¹ Von Rad, Gerhard. The Message of the Prophets. New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p.247. Bibliography:

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Rev. Neil Virginia R. Greeley worked as a Hospice Chaplain and pastored Wilshire Christian Church in Los Angeles until the congregation closed. After a lifetime of struggle, Virginia decided to honor his inner being and began transitioning. Neil is learning to be transmasculine in a world that does not understand. He hopes to bring G-D's love to people who might not otherwise hear it.

¹ O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. ² The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. ³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. ⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. ⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. ⁸ Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy ⁹ at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Approaching the Christian celebration of hope and joy, we are fingers-crossed in an era of disbelief, denial, and search. We sing, "Come Lord Jesus, Come" and with Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," we plead, "wouldn't now be a good time to come?" Haven't we had enough and waited long enough for the long-awaited Saving One who comes to us wrapped in hope?

With the old adage of reading Scripture in one hand and the newspaper in the other to comprehend God's message for us – updated to CNN and the internet – and weather report and forecast. I reflect on the messages of Advent – Coming – using an old friend to speak to me some understanding for these days of reflection and preparation (Psalm 98, paraphrased in an Australian-referenced citation of Laughingbird.net). What makes now a good time for renewal and restoration? "We sing like we have never sung before, Lord."

"With all the world, Lord, we raise a noisy celebration, singing our lungs out and shouting your praise."

As we recover from pandemic, famine, war, and conflict, along with the striking weather events of 2021, isn't it hard to sing these words with the Psalmist by way of Nathan Nettleton:

"The whole creation joins in the celebration:
The ocean and its creatures roar their approval;
The land its animals, cheer and stomp;
Rivers and lakes give a standing ovation,
Mountains and hills erupt in applause."

Our hope, our prayers: restore our hope, restore our lands.

Prayer: *We put the whole show of your presence, Lord, celebrating your arrival as you finally bring justice. With you in charge we know things will be put right; now everyone on earth will get a fair go.*



Rev. Dr. Jon Lacey is a DSF/CST graduate (Rel.D./1971) and served in a patchwork of ministry: campus ministry, HIV/AIDS and medical school/ international education, before retiring as Michigan's regional minister in 2010.

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹² training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

There is a look in a person's eyes when they experience sacred moments and spaces. In today's scripture we read, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." Scott had that twinkle in his eyes as he stood in line with the other two magi waiting to walk up during Christmas Eve worship.

When I asked Scott to be one of the magi, he had a different look. His eyes flared with the shock he was being asked. He was a regular in worship, helped with service projects, etc. Like many of us, Scott was haunted by that question, "Am I good enough?" Then he was asked to wear a crown and a cape and act like a wise traveler come to see baby Jesus. Scott said yes but had his doubts.

Then Christmas Eve worship arrived, and I checked on those who would be our nativity. Scott was smiling from ear to ear. His eyes gleamed as I can only imagine did those of the shepherds and magi so many years ago.

Today's scripture describes "lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly." In the face of grace appearing and salvation arriving, to be self-controlled is to be open to God's incarnation. Sacred spaces are filled less by self and more by the incarnation of God. Always and especially in this season, we anticipate what the author of Titus describes as "the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus." Setting aside brokenness, we step toward the birth of God by which we will experience a grace filled community of God.

Scott ascended the steps to the chancel and took his place at the nativity, with crown and cape. His joyful gaze displayed that in the sacred space he was good just as created. So are you, my friend.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, train us to be self-controlled so that our anticipation of your birth is overflowing with hope and joy. Amen.*



Dr. James R. Brooks is a preacher and pilgrim who finds a fit in postmodern perspectives. From founding a new church to leading established congregations, from community leadership to serving the larger church, James has been blessed in ministry. He is Senior Minister at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Salem, OR.

³⁹ Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. ⁴⁰ She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and God has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³ Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises made to her."

This young woman from Nazareth is more than a two-dimensional, serene advertisement for "God's willing chosen one." She is flesh and blood. She attempts to make sense of "what this all means." Her stomach churns. Her heart races. Her nights become sleepless and the certainty of why she said yes drifts into doubt. She feels the loneliness of living with her decision. Somewhere in the midst of this silent struggle, she remembers something the messenger said: "Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a child. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant."

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands.

And Elizabeth opened the door. Mary falls into her arms, and Elizabeth embraces this worried teenager from Nazareth. She embodies holy hospitality with her bare-hearted welcome. She calms Mary's fear with "God has blessed you."

We yearn for the non-judging presence of another who opens the way to God's Spirit. We need more Elizabeth's in our lives.

Elizabeth accompanies Mary from fearful silence to a full-throated, hope-filled courage and prophetic proclamation. They provide shelter for each other. They become companions for their journeys into the God mysteries before them.

We need more Elizabeth's in our lives. As the church, we are called to be an *Elizabeth community* for those who arrive at our doors. Elizabeth shows us the way: embrace those pushed beyond their community of family and friends; confirm the Spirit of God within them; and accompany them through the night of fear and uncertainty until they find their way again to confidence and celebration.

Who is an Elizabeth for you? Who comes alongside you and accompanies you through the night of questions and fears? Who guides you to joy by recognizing God's Spirit within you?

Prayer: *Holy One, we come as we are, bringing whatever feelings rumble in our spirits. May we stay with you awhile? We seek reassurance that there is a place of welcome for us, a place of understanding within your loving embrace. Amen.*



Rev. Mary Jacobs is serving as Co-Interim Pastor with her husband, Bill, at Church of the Foothills (UCC/DOC) in Santa Ana, CA. When she "grows up," she wants to be like her daughters, Lindsey and Erin. Mary has served in a variety of capacities within the CC(DOC), including DSF board member, First Vice-Moderator of the CC(DOC), and International Disciples Women's Ministries (IDWM) President.

- ² *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*
- ³ *Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*
- ⁴ *And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;*
- ⁵ *and he shall be the one of peace.*

If Advent is about waiting, what are we waiting for? If Advent is about hope, what are we hoping for? Too often, it seems, we are waiting for someone to solve our problems for us, someone to rescue us, someone to do the hard work for us. Too often, it seems, we are waiting for that kind of “savior.”

I’ll admit, we can read Micah that way. Things may be tough now, Micah says, but God is about to raise up a new ruler who will fix everything and make everything great again. It’s even an underdog story, as this new ruler will come from a little clan – kind of like drafting a quarterback from a small school in the sixth round and having him turn out to be a star. It’s so tempting to believe that someone is going to come and fix everything for us. And throughout the course of Christian history, it’s been so tempting for people to believe that was the role of Jesus.

But I find myself dwelling in the last phrase of this scripture passage: “and he shall be the one of peace.” Because when you think about it, someone can’t really do peace for us. Peace cannot be imposed. Peace cannot be forced. Jesus may be the Prince of Peace, but he can’t *make* the rest of us be peaceful. He can’t do the work for us. Jesus lived peace. He embodied peace. He taught peace and preached peace and blessed the peacemakers. And I pray he inspires us to embody peace as well – peace with ourselves, peace with our neighbors, and peace with all of Creation.

Prayer: *Holy One, Prince of Peace, God of all Creation: We come in adoration, giving thanks for your steadfast love and celebrating the birth of the one who so fully embodied your love for us all. We pray for a new incarnation, O God. We pray that your grace-filled Spirit will become flesh in us, that we may be vessels of your love, makers of peace, and true disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen*



Rev. Jay Hartley serves as Regional Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arizona. He is a graduate of Vanderbilt Divinity School, the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, and Williams College. In addition to ministry, he enjoys coaching baseball, playing bagpipes, and listening to all kinds of wonderful music.

- ¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
- ² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
- ³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
- ⁴ O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
- ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
- ⁶ You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
- ⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

The Psalm petitions God to restore and save us twice throughout the text. One would think that the act of restoration is synonymous with saving, but the text has it where one follows the other. I don't think "restore" is referring to a previous condition or way of being. God would not bring us this far just to take us back. Restore amidst the pandemic petitions God for something new. Something vaguely familiar yet refreshing to our souls. Something powerful yet humbling. Something whole. God restores us beyond our brokenness into a miraculous new being.

After we are restored, the text petitions God's face to shine so that we may be saved. In the Maori tradition, there is a greeting called the *Hongi*. This is a sacred greeting where two people gently press their foreheads and noses together at the same time. The *ha*, breath of life, is exchanged in this symbolic gesture of unity. Through this greeting, the indigenous spirit continues to flow with each connection. Now translate this to the face of God. Imagine, not just seeing the brilliant face of the creator but entering a deeply intimate connection with God. Drawing close to God's face. Exchanging the breath of life that exists between creature and creator. This is what it means to face God.

As we continue to experience the myriad of emotions as a result of the pandemic, let us pray and work toward restoration and a *Hongi* with God.

Prayer: *Gracious God, we come before you seeking restoration and salvation. Restore us that we may become whole and new. Fill the emptiness in our spirits with your love that we might have enough to fill the cup of our neighbors and beloved communities. Show us your face amidst the chaos of our lives that we might draw closer to you. Breathe in us and revive our commitment to you. For you are the way, the truth, and the life. Guide our steps, God of love. In Jesus name, Amen.*



Taulau Tupua is a third-year student at Claremont School of Theology pursuing a Master of Divinity. He is happily married to his loving wife LooLoo, and they reside in Long Beach, CA. He is currently serving as the Director of Family Ministries at First United Methodist Church of Redondo Beach. He also continues to be an active member in the PSWR and wider Disciples conference.

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;

⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”

⁸ When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

As we prepare for the coming of the Christ child, let’s celebrate that Advent and Christmas affirm time and time again in the sacredness of our bodies. Not just in perfect bodies or those who make it to church every Sunday bodies. Or bodies that are healthy or normal looking. Our bodies. *All of our bodies.*

Scriptures describe God as holy and awe-inducing beyond comprehension and earnestly committed to be with us, walk with us, nourish us with bread in our deserts, weep alongside us at our sealed tombs, and ultimately heal us. Jesus spent time with such a diverse array of people, especially those who might have been considered to have defective or sinful bodies. He blessed them in order for them to be, like his ancestor Abraham, a blessing to others.

The epistle of Hebrews challenges us to understand that one of the greatest tools we have to dismantle sin – whether those are broken relationships between individuals or systemic injustices like racism and homophobia – is our bodies, because it is in our bodies where God’s will becomes flesh in our daily lives.

And it is in a body that God comes to us, vulnerable and willing to be loved, who would grow up to teach those who followed him to “go and do likewise” and in his act of liberating love on the cross empowered us to transform our world.

Advent is a time to remember that our sacrifices and offerings do not win God’s favor. God asks that we experience the affirmation of our bodies and open ourselves as instruments of peace and wholeness, joining with the Psalmist by saying, “See, God, I have come to do your will.”

How is God calling you to use your sacred instrument, your body, to make Jesus’ love manifest in this world during this Advent season? May it be so.

Oración: *One Who Is On the Way, You desire that we are sanctified – that we are made whole in You. As we think about the gift of love in the flesh, may our bodies reflect Your beauty and point others in anticipation to Your arrival. May Your will be done in us. Amen.*



Rev. Nathan Hill is the Senior Minister of University Christian Church in Hyattsville, MD and a Doctor of Ministry student at Phillips Theological Seminary. He is married to Yunkyong, and they celebrate two children – Emily and Joseph.

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

If "Jesus" was a musical, this text would be the lyrics to the opening song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." Can you see it? On her knees in shock, Mary rises to her feet and begins swirling around the room. Fear, at hearing the news she is pregnant with God's son, melts away as she gives herself to praise. Oh, the wonder of it all.

As I meditated on this text, I found myself wondering if "Jerri" was a musical, where would my character break out in praise? Where are my moments of great rejoicing? Truth be told, there have been moments when fear, anger, resentment about things in my life were consuming me. It is precisely these moments that led me through lament to the other side where praise and song can emerge. Living in the midst of the COVID pandemic has exacerbated my fear and the isolation I feel is life draining. And yet, I can feel in my bones that this time has been a strange lament.

Can my life break through to songs of rejoicing? Can our churches emerge with songs of "We have feed the hungry, shown mercy, been faithful"? Could it be that this Christmas season we can move to safely gather singing the familiar carols together? Sing people of God. Sing Church, sing. Sing your/our way through the darkness into the light. Let our hearts rejoice in the faithfulness of God, Jesus, Spirit to see us through the isolation of fear and despair into community. Sing into acts of mercy and justice. Sing your songs of praise.

Prayer: *Oh Holy One, thank you for bringing us yet another day closer to the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Spirit, bring about moments of awareness, even in our difficulties that you are there for the journey. Listen to our lament of fear, pain, sorrow, loss and, like Mary, help us to rise into songs of praise. Even in difficult times, you have brought forth light that dispels darkness. Amen.*



Rev. Jerri Handy is a witness of God at work in the world through Global Ministries partners, in local congregations, and in relationships. Jerri is the sharer of the good news of God's transforming love and a student of lifelong learning: Christian Theological Seminary (1991-16), Pacific School of Religion/Disciples Seminary Foundation (2007-11), various congregations, and with many of God's wonderful people.

² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined... ⁶ For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isa. 9:2, 6-7)

Oh what dark nights they faced: the oppressed, the marginalized, the forgotten, and the stigmatized. The darker the night, the brighter the star, and Jesus was that Polar Star, sent to bring heaven to earth. The Prince of Peace became the One who would speak truth to the poor and challenge the powerful. On this Christmas Eve, we anticipate Jesus' birth while remembering why he came and who he served. This baby was born with a crown, but this crown was heavy. The authority was not one of this world but of God, and this authority was dangerous to those with earthly power! Look at the words in Isaiah 9:7: justice, righteousness, and zeal. This "sweet baby's" strength was to be taken seriously. Isaiah 9:2-7 is not only prophetic but is also an expectation of us. "He will establish and uphold it... onward and forevermore." But how does this baby do this "onward and forever more"? Jesus does this through us. We are called to complete these difficult tasks, not to just be Jesus followers, but to be Christ incarnate. This child had a relatively short life, but he gave us clear instructions: to bring heaven on earth, not to the rich and not to the powerful. They already have that. We are commanded to walk in the footsteps of this infant who cannot yet walk. He will heal the sick, raise the dead, and give resurrection faith to the hopeless, hungry, and helpless. This celebration of his birth is filled with pageantry more than 2,000 years later but let us remember that this is not a Jesus that we put under the Christmas tree. His story begins tomorrow in a barn, and his earthly life ends nailed to two pieces of wood. Let us look at these words from Isaiah, not only as the prediction of Christ's birth, but also as an invitation for us to put ourselves in scripture, and to put ourselves in Jesus' footsteps. How do we bring multitudes of joy to the suffering? How do we feed the hungry from our harvest? How do we take the burdens off the shoulders of the oppressed? How do we bring peace and righteousness in our government? This little baby's burden is heavy. Our burden is a heavy one as well. Being "Jesus" is not easy, far from it. While Christmas celebrations are wonderful, let us understand the gravity and responsibility in the journey ahead of us. For tomorrow, the story does not begin with lights, trees, and gifts. It starts with a call from the greatest Love of all to embark on a difficult journey that starts so humbly, in a rundown shack. Heaven arrived with him. It is our responsibility to continue to deliver that perfect love on earth as it is in heaven.

Prayer: *Creator of love, the One who is Love, as we celebrate the birth of your son, let us be born anew with a heightened awareness of how we are called, not only to be Jesus' disciples, but to become the hands and feet of Christ. May his story, his humble beginnings, his radical love, and his resurrection faith fuel us to reflect his love, not only giving everyone a place at the table, but giving a louder voice to those oppressed, marginalized, despised, and forgotten. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen*



Rev. Robert Allan Blair, Jr. is a CST/DSF graduate (M.Div./2017) and is Senior Minister at All Peoples Christian Church in Los Angeles. Rev. Blair teaches Journalism and Marketing at California School of the Arts – San Gabriel Valley and serves as advisor to The Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) on campus.

¹ End it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. ² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, **Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.** ¹¹ **For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.** ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.**

When I was in elementary school, I was a member of the school's voice choir – formed of 5th and 6th graders to perform at the Annual Christmas program. These were the days before we realized and respected that other religions also have December celebrations. Our contribution to the festivities was to recite from memory several of the verses from the second verse of Luke, using the King James Version. Parents helped us rehearse our lines and encouraged us not to laugh when we said the words, “sore afraid.” When the night of the program came, we were ready. Proudly, we spoke the poetry of the birth of Jesus, filled with shepherds and angels, and holy pronouncements of peace on earth and good will toward all people.

I still hear this part of the Christmas story in the poetry of the KJV, but now years later I hear it not only as words for us to memorize and recite, but as an invitation to live fully into the good news of the birth of Jesus and to live fully into the life and ministry he will offer to the world.

Today we celebrate that Jesus has come into the world as a baby, helpless and needing to be cared for as he grew into maturity. We receive him the same way; helpless over parts of our lives and needing care until we can grow into the maturity of our faith.

This is the day we celebrate the good news of Jesus birth. The journey with him has begun. Dawn breaks, angels sing, shepherds face their fears, and the earth rejoices.

Prayer: *O God, for the joy and hope of this Christmas day, we give you thanks. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. LaTaunya M Bynum received support by DSF as a student at Claremont School of Theology where she received her M.Div. and D.Min. She is the Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Northern California-Nevada and the current Chair of the DSF board.