

Advent at EHS



What's different about the season of Advent?

Advent is the season of the Church year for getting ready. Beginning on the 4th Sunday before Christmas day, 'advent' literally means 'coming toward.' We set apart these weeks to be the season of preparation as we are 'coming toward' the great celebration of Christmas. In Advent, we're invited to slow down, quiet down, and focus on listening, watching, and waiting for God.



What's different in chapel?

We'll be incorporating silence into our service, after each reading and after the homily, giving us time to reflect on what we've heard.

In Chapel, you will see the color blue. Blue is the color associated with Mary, and it represents a tone of expectant anticipation. You will also notice the addition of an Advent wreath. The wreath, with its four candles for the four Sundays of Advent, helps us to count the weeks as we come towards Christmas, lighting one new candle each Sunday. Its circular shape reminds us of the eternal nature of our God who comes to be with us. The greens on the wreath traditionally come from evergreen trees, symbolizing the eternal life we have through Christ.



What's different around campus?

December is incredibly busy and stressful for us at school, as we're getting in final papers and projects, taking tests, and preparing for final exams. In the midst of it all, keep your eyes peeled for signs of Advent, reminders to slow down, breathe deeply, and turn down the volume in your life.



What's different at home?

Our diverse community celebrates the season in a variety of ways in our homes. What is it that your family celebrates at this time of the year, and how do you celebrate it? Pay attention and appreciate your unique traditions. Watch your email each week for a brief flier, with daily scripture readings, prayers, and suggested activities.

May the peace of Christ take root in your life, and may you know God's abiding presence with you, this season and always.



The First Week of Advent

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

*This is a devotional guide for the first week of Advent,
which will be followed by similar guides over the next three weeks.*



God of power, as this season of Advent dawns, shatter the places of darkness in our lives with the light of your promised coming. Show your power to all the world, overwhelming us with your goodness, strengthening our faith, forgiving our sin. By your holiness make us holy, ready to receive the promise of your salvation. By your mercy, make us merciful, ready to share your light with the world. Amen.

From New Song Episcopal Church, Iowa

Daily Scripture Readings

November 29	Sunday	<u>Isaiah 7:14-15</u>
November 30	Monday	<u>Isaiah 9:2-7</u>
December 1	Tuesday	<u>Isaiah 11:1-5</u>
December 2	Wednesday	<u>Isaiah 11:6-10</u>
December 3	Thursday	<u>Isaiah 40:1-5</u>
December 4	Friday	<u>Isaiah 40:9-11</u>
December 5	Saturday	<u>Isaiah 42:1-4</u>

Simple Things to Enrich Your Advent This Week

- ❖ Make an Advent wreath for your house. Traditionally, an Advent wreath is a circle of greens with four blue candles (or 3 purple candles and 1 pink candle). In the first week of Advent, only one blue (or purple) candle is lit.
- ❖ Take the 2-minute Advent challenge: before going to sleep every night, think about things in life you've had to wait for. What makes something worth waiting for? How do you spend your time when you're waiting?
- ❖ Clean your room. Organize your desk. Straighten up the untidy areas of your life.
- ❖ Breathe deeply. Slow down. Listen for God.

Sunday, November 29

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

Isaiah 7:14-15

Ours is a world of signs. It seems that no matter where one goes these days, we are inundated with them. Signs tell us where to go and where to shop., Signs tell us where to stand and where to sit. Signs tell us to wear masks and vote for candidates and wash and hands. So many signs! Each one with its attendant action.

The sign that we read about in the seventh chapter of Isaiah is, in many ways, different than the signs we encounter every day. Not only is it given by God (you can't say that of your average traffic sign), but it also demands something different from us. Rather than encouraging or instructing us to do something, the sign that God gives Ahaz invites him to do nothing. The "sign of Immanuel" is something that God is about to do. All Ahaz needs to do is sit back and watch.

Similarly, the sign of the Virgin Birth, interpreted by the church as pointing to Jesus, didn't require anything, either. In Jesus, God was about to come and live with humankind. There was nothing that anyone needed to do or even could do about it. It was God's desire to heal his beloved creation, just as it had been God's design to deliver Jerusalem in the time of the prophets.

God's desire in every age is to be with people and to love them. The Good News of the faith is that there is nothing anyone has to do to earn that love or request that present. Like Ahaz, all we have to do is wait for it: to rest in faith when we see the signs.

Monday, November 30

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.*

³ *You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

⁴ *For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

⁵ *For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶ *For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, 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 onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Isaiah 9:2-7

Millions of people sick and dying? No more fun social things ever for the foreseeable future? Grandparents forcibly medicated? Furloughed and now can't pay rent? Cousin died of COVID-19? Dog got a parasite and died? Country ripped in half?

IT'S 2020, Y'ALL! This is the pits. Every day, it seems there is a new, alarming piece of information to reinforce that...stuff is messed up. Like, everything is messed up, and every day I hear about more messed up stuff, and I know you all do, too. So the journey of humankind continues (though in our defense, stuff is more messed up now than ever before in my 36 years on earth—not a giant interval, but there it is).

Now it's taken me months to get to this place, and Advent is helping me along, but I now think of this time period as an opportunity. (I understand my privilege allows this approach and am accounting for that in as many ways in my life as best I can.) I am taking time to inhabit and feel the darkness right now like the people of Israel were feeling back when the prophet delivered this message. Like the people of Israel, I also have tried finding comfort and peace in all the wrong places the last 8 months. But I am working on it. Because guess what? SPOILER ALERT: JESUS IS COMING! Wahoo! What a joy to celebrate (or prayerfully plan to celebrate) something good and positive. Not to mention the precise medium through whom God delivers us from sin: the birth of Jesus Christ, His Son. Love the dichotomy of dear 8-pound, 6-ounce, newborn infant Baby Jesus also being my dad, by the way.

Along with so many other prophecies, the ninth chapter of Isaiah paves the way for the greatest gift from the Alpha and Omega hundreds of years later. And God had you and me in mind for all eternity. The prophecy in Isaiah gave context and helped the people understand, and now us understand, that God came down to earth! He will come down (don't worry, God's feeling some 'zeal' about it, most definitely it will happen). Also, I cheated and looked up the translation on that: the zeal includes not only the invisible victory over Satan but apparently the one that will come the world's way when Christ comes back to end it all. Wars will cease! Not even by force! Literally all the weapons and blood and heartache will actually turn into something beautiful! PEACE! Imagine--the hate and division and death and destruction simply turning to the exact opposite. It already happened, y'all. 2020 was over more than two thousand years ago because Jesus is King. I am humbled, grateful, and rejoicing-- Will you join me?

Ms. Lopez

Tuesday, December 1

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

² *The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

³ *His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*

⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

Isaiah 11:1-5

Today's passage starts off with an image we generally wouldn't associate with a hopeful time—a stump, torn out of the ground with the roots exposed. Where once we might've found a healthy, thriving tree, we only see the remnants, and without any possibility for future growth since the roots themselves have been torn from the ground. When I imagine the scene, I'm reminded of the farms north of Atlanta where I grew up where clearing land meant clearing away old stumps. Farmers would pile them to be ground down into mulch or burned in bonfires, never to see new growth again.

As you think back over the last year, does anything about that image resonate with you? Does it ever feel like whatever life you had before 2020 has been cut down and dragged out of the soil and headed for a wood-chipper?

If so, then the passage might offer some hope. Out of all that organic wreckage, a new "shoot" or stem emerges. Amid the pale, dried up roots, a new branch grows covered with green leaves and bearing fruit. And as we find in verses two, three and four, what inexplicably grows there is unlike anything else. The ruler described by the growth metaphor judges not by appearances but rather by the heart. Instead of ruling in favor of the wealthy and powerful, that person delivers true justice, even for the poor of the earth.

So as you remember all the things that happened—and maybe more importantly, all the things that didn't happen—throughout 2020, when you're tempted to see nothing but a pile of dead stumps, keep looking for the green of new growth. Once you find it, you'll be taking the first step towards something wonderful and unexpected.

Mr. Mitchell

Wednesday, December 2

⁶ *The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

⁷ *The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

⁸ *The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

⁹ *They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

¹⁰ *On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire
of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

Isaiah 11:6-10

It was a cold and dark evening in the fall of 2015. We were sitting in the pews of the church for Lessons and Carols. A woman approached the podium to read.

I have heard it said that everything sounds smarter or funnier in a British accent. This British accent made the words sound sadder. Older. The reading was like an echo of some deep yearning that has existed for as long as human beings could yearn. “The wolf shall live with the lamb...” She stopped, choking on her words.

The November Paris attacks had taken place just a couple of weeks ago. I remember knowing in my gut that the lector was thinking of them when she read. The attacks were all people could talk about, because we just couldn’t understand *why*. Why?

Five years later, and the Paris attacks seem like ancient history. So much has happened since, and 2020 has felt like a decade in itself. Still, we continue to ask — why? Why the violence? Hate? Division? Injustice?

There are some reasons, perhaps. It can’t be the lamb’s fault that the wolf wants to kill him, right? And surely an unwitting infant can’t be blamed for a snake’s aggression. This text has victimizers and victims, oppressors and oppressed, predators and prey.

But hold on — a wolf has to eat *something*. And the snake was just protecting his home. So maybe it’s not so black and white? Or maybe it is, and we just refuse to see it.

Whatever the level of ambiguity, this passage offers an alternative vision of a world in which enemies are *tired* of having enemies. Their fear evaporates because they are *tired* of causing fear

and being afraid. They collapse of exhaustion and “lie down together” once and for all (Isaiah 11:7). They rest, and they rest for good.

Conflict is exhausting. But lying down? *That* sounds nice. And *that* is what God wills for this world — yesterday, today, and tomorrow. No matter what, we should never stop yearning for the wolf to live with the lamb. The day will come. And the people of God are called to pine for, pray for, wait for, and work for a world in which we “will not hurt or destroy” (11:9). A world without fear. And a world of rest.

Mr. Clack

Thursday, December 3

*⁴⁰Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

*² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

*³ A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'*

Isaiah 40:1-5

I look into the bewildered eyes of my beloved mother-in-law and see fear and defeat. Her cancer has spread beyond medicine's ability to heal, and she has just been told that her remaining days will be shockingly short.

This second mother to me has been through the wringer. Her body is wasted and wracked with pain. For months, her focus has been on her husband's own fight with cancer, not even realizing that the same battle was raging in her own body. They had eloped when she was 18 years old and been married 60 years. Peas in a pod. Two halves of a whole. She would be leaving him, leaving her six children and 12 grandchildren. Stepping into the nearer presence of God but without the people she loved with every fiber of her broken being. She is stunned. Devasted. Afraid.

"Comfort, O comfort my people." Isaiah's words were for another broken and bewildered people. Their backs had been broken by Babylon, their Temple destroyed, and Jerusalem left in ruins. After decades in exile, torn away from the land promised by God to their ancestors, the prophet cries words of hope into their wilderness of despair. They are to be comforted... strengthened... because God is coming to be with them. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." God is at work. Earthshaking things are happening. A new creation is on its way.

It has been quite a year for us. When you look deep into your eyes in the mirror, do you see at least some measure of bewilderment and brokenness, reflections of your own wilderness? Let the prophet's words speak comfort to you, too, this Advent. God is at work. Earthshaking things are happening. A new creation is on its way. Immanuel, God-with-us, is coming. Lift up your eyes and have hope.

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Friday, December 4

⁹ *Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'*

¹⁰ *See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*

¹¹ *He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Isaiah 40:9-11

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but . . ." Sentences that begin like this never end well. I always want to interrupt the speaker mid-way through and shout, "DON'T! If you hate it so much, then don't do it. It sounds like we'd both be happier if you didn't."

If bearing bad news is so difficult, imagine how wonderful and easy it must be to be the bearer of Good News. Instead of skulking around and apologizing for yourself, you might run to the Mountains, *Sound of Music* style and shout at the top of your lungs. Or you might tell ALL the cities in your region. At least this is what the prophet Isaiah thinks would be appropriate for the people of Jerusalem.

Have you ever been the one to deliver good news? It's great, isn't it? Especially if the people who you're sharing with weren't expecting it, or were expecting bad news instead. I always want to say something like, "I love to be the bearer of Good News, and . . ." But, it never happens that way. Usually I just blurt it out. It's genuinely difficult for me to contain stuff like that.

The funny thing about Advent in the church is that we spend the month "preparing" for an event that already happened. Christmas happened two thousand years ago. We already know the Good News that Isaiah is asking his audience to share. So, let's share it, already. And trust me, it's fun!

Saturday, December 5

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

Isaiah 42:1-4

Have you ever seen an oil lamp? I bet you have, and you probably didn't even notice. All of the candles in the chapel here at Episcopal High School are actually little oil-burning lamps in the shape of candles. Lots of churches use them these days because they are easier to maintain and never burn down unevenly. Here at school, Ms. Michael lovingly tends our little lamps by filling them, weekly with oil.

As lamps use up their fuel, the flame at the top of the wick burns lower and lower until a very strange thing happens. Right before they burn out, the flame burns very brightly. Not simply a flash, the renewed light can last for several minutes. It is as if the dimly burning lamp takes one final stand against the darkness that surrounds it.

Most folks don't notice. Even if they do, they usually mistake the extra glow for a sign that the lamp is new and full. One has to watch a lot of lamps burn out to notice pattern. And even then, we usually don't wait to see this final glow. We usually choose to snuff the lamp at the first sign of dimming so that we can refill it and get it back to normal.

The prophet Isaiah may not fully agree with my interpretation of his statement about the servant of God not quenching "the dimly burning wick." I'm pretty sure that he had something more along the line of "faithfully bring[ing] forth justice," in mind. I can't deny though, that the image of the lamp giving one last gift of light between the dimming and being extinguished feels like an important one for me this Advent.

As we head into the end of what has been, for most, a most difficult and even painful year. Can we sit patiently in the dimming light of December and wait with hope for the rebirth of God's glory that is right around the corner?



The 2nd Week of Advent

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.



merciful God, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to listen to their words and examine our own lives, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Savior, Redeemer, and Light in the Darkness. Amen.

Adapted from the Collect for the 2nd Sunday in Advent, BCP

Daily Scripture Readings

December 6	Sunday	Isaiah 42:6-7
December 7	Monday	Isaiah 49:8-13
December 8	Tuesday	Isaiah 53:4-9
December 9	Wednesday	Isaiah 53:10-12
December 10	Thursday	Isaiah 60:1-3
December 11	Friday	Isaiah 60:4-7
December 12	Saturday	Jeremiah 23:5-6

Simple Things To Enrich Your Advent This Week

- ❖ Light two blue (or purple) candles on your Advent wreath.
- ❖ Read ["Gift of the Magi"](#) by O. Henry, and think about what you would like to give to those you love most.
- ❖ Take the 2-minute Advent challenge before getting out of bed every morning: think about something you can do each day this week for someone else.
- ❖ Sort through your clothes and donate what you don't need to charity.
- ❖ Watch. Wait. Turn down your volume.

Sunday, December 6 - St. Nicholas

*I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

Isaiah 42:6-7

I'm driving home in the dark. It's raining a slow, constant, drenching cold blech. The roads are slick, the headlights in the traffic reflect blindingly off the ubiquitous wetness, and my windshield wipers groan in their futile efforts to rub the rain away. Everyone is in a rush to get home at the end of their day. Tempers are short. An idiot driving too fast almost hits me. I grit my teeth and take a deep breath. I, too, am ready to be home for the night.

"I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations."

In Advent, we hear a lot about God giving us hope, God sending us hope personified in a child, but here, the prophet Isaiah tells the people that they themselves are to be the bearers of light and hope. "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations."

You.

How do I do that? How do I serve as a light in the world on this miserable night, surrounded by tired people anxious to get home, isolated within the armor of their vehicles?

On another deep breath, I begin to pray. I give thanks for my life, my health. I smile and lift up my daughter, who has cooked the hot meal waiting for me at home... my son, who sent me a funny text earlier... my husband, who had unwisely trusted me to cut his hair last weekend. I think of all the people who serve as lights in my world and am deeply grateful. Feeling a growing peace within, I pray for the guy in the car that had almost hit me. I pray for light and hope in his life.

It's a start.

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Monday, December 7

Thus says the Lord:

*In a time of favor I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners, 'Come out',
to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'
They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.*

*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones*

Isaiah 49:8-13

It's hard for me to wrap my head around the sheer authority of God.

Sure, I get it that God is GOD. Creator of the universe. Able to clear a path right through the sea. Pull off some pretty impressive miracles.

But this idea of *authority*, of commanding something to happen and simply expecting it to happen because God said so, has caught my attention. God says it, and it happens. No muss, no fuss.

Jesus stood at his deceased friend's tomb and shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did, freed from the binding of death itself.

In the text from Isaiah, God says to the prisoners, “Come out,” and to those who are in darkness “Show yourselves.” The imperative is to step free from what holds them... holds US... captive and in the dark.

This isn’t about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Not at all. This is about God making it happen, making it so. This is about the *authority* of God being so powerful, commanding, and definitive, that the things that ensnare and oppress us melt away. This is about God’s great desire for his beloved children to be free.

What has you tangled up, imprisoned, locked up in the dark this Advent? Our God has a Word for you: “Come out!”

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Tuesday, December 8

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
⁹ They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb* with the rich,*
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Isaiah 53:4-9

Surely, he has born our disease.

When my kids get sick. I often try to comfort them by saying, "You know, I'd take this from you if I could." No matter how hard we try, though, and no matter how often they succeed in sharing their sniffles and sore thoughts with me, the transfer never quite works in the way that either of us wants it to. At least not completely. I'm assuming that there is some kind of biological constraint against such things.

This is what makes Isaiah's prophecy about the 'suffering servant' so powerful. The notion that someone both could and would take our diseases from us, thus allowing us to be made well is just far enough outside the bounds of reality so as to be miraculous. Particularly in a world so

much defined, recently, by biological and cultural sickness, such caring wouldn't just be Good News. It would be the Best News.

As far as I know, there is still no way for us to fully take sickness from one another. What we can do, during this Advent Season and beyond, is share the words of Isaiah with people who need to hear it. In Jesus, God took on every aspect of human existence: the good and the bad. And, he bore them, through his life, through his death and even to the throne of Godhead.

Wednesday, December 9

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,*
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;*
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one,* my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

Isaiah 53:10-12

The NRSV, the Bible translation we use at EHS and in chapel starts by saying:

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.

This describes a god who is willing to make someone suffer unjustly, to punish some because of the sins of others. This describes the violence that has continued to happen in the history of our country—the suffering of the indigenous people, the enslaving of African people, the incarceration of Asian American peoples, and the list goes on, even today.

Instead, the Septuagint (LXX) or the Greek translation of Isaiah 53:10 reads:

And the LORD desired to purify/cleanse him from his wound

This translation is perhaps the oldest translation, older than Hebrew texts that are in existence. In other words, Gospel of Matthew and the Apostle Paul used the Septuagint translation and not the texts I studied when first learning to read Hebrew. Those who wrote the New Testament interpreted this passage in a very different way than the later Hebrew interpreters. The reason might be a reflection of the Babylon captivity of the Israelites given the guilt and anxiety they faced. In other words, for them the Suffering Servant represented Israel and questions were asked about this suffering: “How could God do this to us? How could we suffer the destruction of our temple and the taking of our lands? It must have been God’s will.”

However, the Christian interpretation found in the New Testament tended to see God as not the cause of the suffering, but rather the source of the healing. This pivot was made mainly

because of the revelation of God in Jesus. How could God punish God's own self if the Suffering Servant of Isaiah was Jesus? Furthermore, Jesus spent his ministry in healing of the hurting and correcting the belief that God was the cause of any of this suffering.

During our times of hurt and pain, of suffering and heartache, the good news is that God is one who does not look upon our suffering in spiteful judgment. Rather, God sees God's own son who is also suffering with us and seeks to heal the wounds that have been inflicted. This is the incarnate message of Advent and the hope that should carry us through painful times.

The Rev. Dr. Luu

Thursday, December 10

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Isaiah 60:1-3

“Arise, shine; for your light has come.” The world all around us might be shadowed in darkness, but the prophet Isaiah proclaims that “the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” It’s a done deal. Your light has come!

Then, in the very next verse, Isaiah casts the idea in the future tense: “Darkness shall cover the earth... but the Lord will arise upon you.” So... has it already happened, or are we still waiting for it to happen?

The Church does a funny dance when it comes to the celebration of Christ’s birth. We celebrate the incarnation of God in the form of the babe in the manger 2000 years ago, but in Advent, we also wait with baited breath for the day when he will come again. The coming of Christ: has it already happened, or are we still waiting?

The answer is simply, “yes.” The Light has come to show us the way. One day, the Light will come again and everything will be changed.

I planted an amaryllis bulb a few weeks ago in a pot I placed near a window in my breakfast room. A great stalk has grown from the bulb, with a bud at its tip that will soon burst open with a riotously gorgeous red blossom. Every day for the past few weeks, as that stalk has grown towards the light, I’ve given the pot a half turn, so it will bend towards the light in the other direction, thus straightening up. I feel like that bud, seeking the Light as I grow. And when I get turned around, I simply seek the Light again as it helps me to grow and straighten up, as it helps something riotously beautiful grow within me. I need that Light like nothing else.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come.”

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Friday, December 11

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,*
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.
All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
they shall be acceptable on my altar,
and I will glorify my glorious house.*

Isaiah 60:4-7

"Eyes up! Head on a swivel" these mantras from my days as a player and coach may lack the poetry of Isaiah's prophecy, but I think they capture the same sentiment. One must be aware of what's going on if one is to fully engage the game. Getting lost in the details of what's right in front of you can keep you from fully understanding and even enjoying the larger reality.

I've always found December to be a little tricky in this regard. In my years as a teacher and student, December always brought exams and final projects and the like, a myriad of details demanding my attention. Likewise, during my sojourn in parish ministry, all of the things that were necessary to pull off a wonderful Christmas eve service always seemed to keep me with my nose to the grindstone for the largest portion of the month.

Though I frequently did well on exams and never failed to celebrate Christmas eve in fine style, I all too often missed the joy in the community around me. Everything just feels a little lighter during the holiday season. And all it takes to notice it is for us to take a break from our details and "Lift up [our] eyes."

So, let's make a deal, you and I. Let's commit to one another to spend a few minutes each day with our "eyes up," with our, "head on a swivel," taking in as much of the joy and wonder in the world around us as we can. Our work and our concentration will be there when we get back. I promise. But, at least for a moment, we will "see and be radiant."

Saturday, December 12

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'"

Jeremiah 23:5-6

Today's passage from Jeremiah is full of promise – specifically, God's promise to the Israelites to send a king, a righteous king who will deal wisely, and execute justice and righteousness. Traditionally, Christians have understood this passage as Jeremiah, using his future-seeing powers of prophecy, to refer to Christ, whose birth we are liturgically awaiting today, in this season of Advent. But I think there's more here than just that.

Jeremiah foresees a day when God's anointed king – the messiah – will reign in the land, and justice and righteousness will be the guiding principles of his kingdom. And it's okay if you look around at the world and wonder – hey, Jeremiah, where IS this guy? Where IS this wonderful king? We could all probably point to a few leaders since Jeremiah's time who have been good (or at least less bad than most), but they've all been somewhat less than perfectly just and righteous. They've all missed the mark.

We've just been through – and in some ways continue to go through – a wretched election season in this country. I know that everyone likes to think that their preferred leader is on the side of justice and righteousness, and it's not my intention to suggest which major candidates (if any) actually **are** on the side of God. Rather, I'd like to suggest, with Jeremiah, that the only true justice, the only true righteousness, will come at God's own pace, in God's own time, at the hands of God's own chosen one.

For those of us who are Christians, we recognize this king as Jesus, who arrived an infant, lived a servant, died a criminal, and rose again victorious, and who will – someday - come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, to make the matter complete. So we wait. We wait because human leaders fail. We wait because we have no choice. We wait for God to fulfill the promise made through the prophets, because that day is surely coming.

Mr. Binder



The 3rd Week of Advent

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Re our light in the darkness, O Lord, and show us the way home to you, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Based on Evening Prayers in the BCP

Daily Scripture Readings

December 13	Sunday	Micah 5:2-4
December 14	Monday	Luke 1:5-25
December 15	Tuesday	Luke 1:26-38
December 16	Wednesday	Matthew 1:18-25
December 17	Thursday	Luke 1:39-45
December 18	Friday	Luke 1:46-56
December 19	Saturday	Luke 1:57-66

Simple Things To Enrich Your Advent This Week

- ❖ Light three blue (or two purple and the pink) candles on your Advent wreath.
- ❖ Go outside for a walk. Make a mental list of the blessings God has given you.
- ❖ Take the 2-minute Advent challenge: read the daily scripture passage, and give yourself a moment to think about what you read.
- ❖ It's a stressful time, so say a silent prayer for everyone around you when you're waiting – in your exams, stuck in traffic, or waiting for a ride.
- ❖ Breathe deeply. Look around you for signs of God's grace. Remember that nothing is impossible with God.

Sunday, December 13

**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.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
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;*

Micah 5:2-4

Since at least the time of the Gospel writers, the notion of Bethlehem as something of a navel for the cosmos has been an important concept for Christians. The place where God literally first placed his foot on the world that he had made has been the subject of scripture and song, particularly during those seasons of the year when we turn our minds to the birth of Jesus the Christ.

The fame of Bethlehem is exactly the opposite of what the Prophet Micah has in mind when he writes, "O, Bethlehem of Ephrathah." It is, rather, the smallness, the obscurity and the very lack of importance that he seeks to highlight. Though it had been the birthplace of the great King David, it's fortunes had not kept pace with those of its most famous scion. Jerusalem had become "The City of David." Bethlehem remained simply the "house of bread."

But this is the way of God, isn't it? Time and time again in the Bible and just as often in the life of the Church, the Almighty chooses the small, the lowly, the out-of-the-way and the unexpected as the vessels of Divine Grace.

We're now at the half-way point of our Advent journey. Today might be a good day to consider those areas of your life that have largely gone unnoticed by you. (It's harder than you think. The whole reason that these areas are 'unnoticed' is the fact that you don't think about them often.) Is it possible that God is already working in these places? God might just be doing big things.

Monday, December 14

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

The story about the parents of John the Baptist isn't well-known. Zechariah and Elizabeth were an older couple, exemplary in their faith, but childless. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah when he was serving in the temple sanctuary and announced that he and his wife would have a son named John, who "will be great in the sight of the Lord." What extraordinary news!

Zechariah wasn't so sure. He was skeptical: "How will I know? I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." In response to this lack of faith, Gabriel struck Zechariah mute, unable to speak until the day his son was born.

I'm curious, though -- was Zechariah's muteness a punishment or a gift? It may have felt like punishment, lacking the ability to speak especially when he had such great news to share. On the other hand...

Perhaps being unable to speak would have made Zechariah more appreciative of what a gift it is to be able to share good news. If your teacher told you that everyone in your class was going to get an automatic 'A', wouldn't you be eager to share that news? Sharing good news is awesome!

The silence itself may have also been a gift to Zechariah. If he couldn't fill silence with his own words, he may have learned to listen more closely to others. He may have learned to listen more closely to God. In the musical *Hamilton*, Aaron Burr says to an overly talkative young Alexander Hamilton, "Talk less. Smile more." We learn a lot when we stop talking and listen.

Advent invites us to talk less and listen more, to get comfortable with silence, and to ponder Good News in our hearts.

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Tuesday, December 15

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'** The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born* will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-38

The finale of the recent Amazon Prime original movie, *Troop Zero*, includes a scene of the eponymous group of misfit girls and boys yelling at the sky. "We are here!" they shout over and over again, each child testifying to her/his growing sense of identity. Their chorus, they believe, will be eventually heard by aliens, an invitation into deeper conversation. Aliens or no, they are taking to the world around them, claiming the fullness of humanity that they have too often been denied.

Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel's message is in some ways exactly what it should be and in others is most unexpected. "Here I am," (gk. *idou* = hb *hinneni*) is the response that prophets give when called on by God. "Behold" is another good translation of either word. There is no shrinking back. Mary is more than "just a girl" in this moment. She is more than "just" a woman, or "just" anything. Mary is claiming the fullness of her humanity in the face of her creator. And, from this Mary's humanity, God is about to fashion the fullness of Jesus' humanity.

Like Mary, we, too are fully human. Sadly, from time immemorial, we have used the benefits of this humanity to develop ways to dehumanize ourselves and others. As we read the story of Mary's bold response, though, maybe we can begin to consider ways to stop this destructive cycle. This healing will naturally begin with a bold statement: "Here I am." And while God may not be fashioning the incarnate body of God within us, and though we may not be heard by aliens, we will have taken the first steps toward embracing, then spreading, the Good News of God's grace and favor.

Wednesday, December 16

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

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;* and he named him Jesus.*

Matthew 1:18-25

*Post tenbras lux...*after the darkness, light. I first encountered this Latin phrase while studying the European Reformations in grad school. It was inscribed on coinage in Geneva, the city where the famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask) John Calvin helped implement religious reform.

This little phrase, probably more than any other, encapsulates the promise of the Christian gospel for me.

Darkness is a seemingly universal human metaphor for anger, sadness, brokenness, alienation, despair. Throughout the Bible, separation from God is imagined as darkness. In Deuteronomy 28, Yahweh warns that if the Israelites are disobedient, they shall “grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness” (Deut. 28:29, ESV; see also Job 5:14). In Genesis 1, darkness and chaos govern the world before Yahweh brings order and separation.

And, as I like to tell students in Old Testament, darkness “back in Bible times” was *dark*. There was no instant access to electricity, bright city skylines, or flashlights in phones. You could only use another natural element – fire – to counter darkness, and even that was very limited in its effectiveness.

Darkness, however, is also frequently contrasted with light to depict salvation. In Isaiah, the LORD promises to give his chosen people “as a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those that sit in darkness” (Is. 42:6, ESV). Matthew drew from Isaiah to describe Jesus’ arrival in the following terms: “the

people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned" (Matt. 4:16, ESV; see Is. 9:1-2). St. Paul exhorted the church in Ephesus, "at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8, ESV). 1 Peter 2:9 encourages Christians to "proclaim the excellencies" of "him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Today's reading is a neat summation of the *adventus* of Jesus Christ: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). This little baby, born in a state unbefitting any human, was to bring light to a world wandering in darkness. As John described it, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5, ESV).

If ever there was a year in my lifetime when this message was needed, it's 2020. But we can hold to the promise that after the darkness will come light. Amen.

Dr. Ayris

Thursday, December 17

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, '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? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Luke 1:39-45

Imagine that you created a scrapbook of your best joyful moments. What moments from your life would be captured there?

Mine would include moments like our wedding day, when my husband Sam and I turned to face the beaming congregation. The organ music swelled into the closing hymn, *Joyful, joyful, we adore thee*, but we simply stood there for a moment, struck motionless, overwhelmed as we looked into the faces of our family and friends and were wholly inundated by the wave of their love and support.

My scrapbook of joyful moments would include the instants when our two beautiful newborn children were first laid in my arms. I counted their fingers, their toes... looked with wonder and awe into their eyes... pondered what amazing things their lives would hold for them... and I was utterly overcome with joy.

My scrapbook would also include silly snippets, like a moment when all four of us donned Batman capes and ran through the house singing the old Batman TV show theme song at the tops of our lungs while the dog leapt for joy.

Elizabeth said that the child in her womb leapt for joy when the pregnant Mary came into her home. Elizabeth herself, shouted out, "Blessed are you among women!" Surely that moment would go in both women's scrapbooks of best joyful moments.

Moments of intense, overwhelming joy don't last forever. Our lives are punctuated by those great moments as well as moments of intense sorrow and the gentle swells of highs, lows, and "regular time." But even if we don't have *actual* scrapbooks of best joyful moments, it's pretty wonderful to be able to pull out those shining memories and hear the echoes of God's delighted laughter as an angelic chorus sang "Hallelujah!"

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Friday, December 18

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

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Luke 1:46-56

One of my mentors, Fr. Patrick, once describe the role of Jesus in Christian Theology as, “a magnifying glass in front to the compassionate heart of God.” Yoda-like, Fr. Patrick never quite got around to explaining exactly what he meant by this metaphor. But, as I’ve sat with it over the years, several of which I spent teaching Newtonian Optics to high school students, I’ve come to a couple of distinct theological ideas.

Like a physical magnifying glass, the metaphor works in two ways. First, the life, ministry and legacy of Jesus allows us to see the compassion of God more clearly and with greater detail. God’s love for us is “magnified” for us in Jesus, who the author of Hebrews says is “the exact imprint of [God’s] nature.” (Hebrews 1:3). Second, Jesus focuses the love of God and brings it to bear on the lives of individual people. Like a magnifier that is used to create a pinpoint of light and , say, start a fire, Jesus’ work in the life of individuals, including you and me, brings the entire immense power of the God of the Universe into contact with us.

In the opening phrase of her song, which will later be called The *Magnificat*, Mary the mother of Jesus proclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” I’m left to wonder, in light of Fr. Patrick’s metaphor, just what kind of magnification Mary is talking about. We will certainly see, in the biblical description of Mary’s own life, both the clarifying and focusing properties.

The beauty of Mary’s song for the church in every generation has been in the way that it draws contemporary people into the grand narrative of the Bible. When we recite the *Magnificat*, Mary’s words become ours. We praise God, reciting the mighty deeds of divine power and, in an important way, our souls, “magnify the Lord.”

As we close out this last full week of our Advent journey, let us consider how we can magnify the Lord in our lives. Are there ways that we can help others to see God and the divine compassion more clearly? Are there ways that we can focus the Love of God and help bring it to bear on the challenges of the world?

Saturday, December 19

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Luke 1:57-66

There are many weird things about this story of the birth of John the Baptist.

First, there's the business about Elizabeth being barren – like so many of the matriarchs of the Old Testament – until having a child in her old age.

Then there's the father, Zechariah, who couldn't utter a word for the duration of his wife's pregnancy.

There's the awkward oddness about the neighbors and relatives apparently taking it upon themselves to name the child, regardless of what Elizabeth said. They utterly disregarded her voice when she protested that his name was to be John, but turned to her voiceless husband for confirmation of the child's name. What was THAT all about?

Then, there's the total change in tone, from the beginning of the passage when everyone was rejoicing together over John's birth, to the end of the passage, when "fear came over all their neighbors" when they heard about the angel's appearance to Zechariah, and they ominously pondered, "What will this child become?"

The uncomfortable story ends with foreshadowing words, "For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him."

That doesn't sound like a good thing.

There are plenty of other places in the Bible when God's presence with someone was a wonderful thing, but here, it sounds like God was up to something that was going to cause trouble.

God was.

John grew up and rattled cages. He ranted at people, telling them to repent, and he paved the way for his cousin Jesus, who rattled more cages when he challenged both the political and religious establishments of his day and proclaimed "The kingdom of God is at hand."

Sometimes, discomfort and total upheaval are signs that God is at work, bringing about something far better than we could ask for or imagine. May Advent make us all squirm a bit!

The Rev. Mrs. Holden



The 4th Week of Advent

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

A Prayer attributed to St. Francis

Daily Scripture Readings

December 20 Sunday Luke 1:67-79

December 21 Monday Luke 2:1-7

December 22 Tuesday Luke 2:8-14

December 23 Wednesday [Luke 2:15-20](#)

December 24 Thursday [John 1:1-5](#)

Simple Things To Enrich Your Advent This Week

- ❖ Light all four candles on your Advent wreath.
- ❖ When you're wrapping gifts or writing cards, be intentional about saying a prayer or blessing for the recipient.
- ❖ Take the 2-minute Advent challenge: sit in a quiet place and spend your 2 minutes thinking about where God is moving in your life.
- ❖ Focus on God's peace: within you, around you, and in everything you say to others. Be a peacemaker.

Sunday, December 20

*Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour* for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon* us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

Luke 1:67-79

This portion of the beginning of Luke's Gospel, where angels are constantly showing up and everyone is singing, is one of my favorites in the whole Bible. Though it may tend to get glossed over as simply the over-the-top "Show Open" for the drama of Jesus' life, it is filled with some theological gems that bid our reflection in a way that only poetry can.

Such is the case with this snippet from the Song of Zechariah:

*"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins."*

Lots of super-important theological words here: prophet, Most High, Lord, salvation, sins. Tomes have been written about each of these, but I want to look closely at just the last two and the way that the author has situated them in the end of this snippet.

"... knowledge of salvation ... by the forgiveness of sins."

The exact meaning of salvation is way beyond a simple Advent devotional. But let's simply agree that it has something to with health and flourishing (either of the body or the soul, it doesn't really matter here). Likewise, "sin" has many interpretations even among people of shared faith. But, what I really want to focus on is the notion of sins (whatever they are) being forgiven. Using these two simplifications, the statement, above, can be restated as,

"Let people know that they are healed (safe, flourishing) by forgiving them."

If you know anything about John the Baptist and his ministry (John is the "child" about whom his father, Zechariah, is signing), you can see that this message suits him to a T. Could this also be an instruction to us, too? As we mark this last Sunday of Advent, can we think of anyone that we could forgive who might receive such news as a message of healing, or hope? Perhaps more importantly, is there anyone who we could ask forgiveness from and, upon receiving their pardon, appreciate as a prophet of our own flourishing.

Prepare the Way of the Lord!

Monday, December 21

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:1-7

I read my daughter a Christmas tale* that makes me tear up every single time, no matter how many times I read it to her. The final line chokes me up so that I have to whisper it. It's a simple story about animals, the lead role belonging to Kind Ox, a wise, old animal who welcomes other animals into his stable on a cold winter's night. A tired donkey appears carrying a pregnant Mary with Joseph by her side. Kind Ox invites them into the stable, and Jesus is born with the animals all around him.

The story ends, "That cold winter's night, beneath the star's light, a Little One came for the world." I like to think Kind Ox knew this was momentous and had been preparing for this night his whole life. I picture the other animals following Ox's lead, huddling around the manger to keep the baby warm. I see a great star, amidst millions of other stars, shining as a spotlight onto the grandest stage of all time.

My favorite Christmas song declares, "O holy night, the stars are brightly shining..." The stars. There they are again, a simple image. But I believe they were bowing down in this holy moment, huddling around the stable, guiding the whole world to the Savior because the second he was born and his cries rang out, Jesus suddenly and irreversibly became the brightest star of all.

Ms. Owens

**Room for a Little One* by Martin Waddell and Jason Cockcroft

Tuesday, December 22

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, * the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, * praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

Luke 2:8-14

"Good News . . . Great Joy . . . All people." If the church were an apparel company, I think this would be its slogan. If not, then it should be. In this, the very first proclamation of what would later be understood to be "the Gospel", the angel really captures the essence of the thing in an elegantly short sentence. Maybe we could put it on a t-shirt ourselves.

Though we are not ancient Judean shepherds, we might be equally surprised (afraid?) if we saw an angel step out of the darkness in the middle of the night. What might be more alarming, though, is the content of this Angel's message. As catchy as the notion of "Good News, Great Joy, All People," is, it presents three shocking images that would at least be disorienting if not down right frightening. Life is hard. The News is often bad. Most days, feeling just "OK" is the best we're going to do. These days, you've got to take care of yourself first. Thinking about the welfare of others is a luxury that most of us just can't afford.

How upsetting would it be to hear that life was actually the opposite of what we have so long believed? Though the elements of the angels' message, "Good News . . . Great Joy . . . All people," are undeniably positive, to the extent that they precisely contradict what so many experience as normal, we might just shy away from them.

But, as Coach Leisz says, "Don't be scared!" The reality of which the angels speak is not simply a coming change to our status quo. "Good News" and "Great Joy" are already available to "All People." As we prepared to celebrate Christmas later this week, let's focus on seeing the world for what it really is (Good, Joyful, Inclusive) and then sharing that image with everyone we encounter.

Wednesday, December 23

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:15-20

I imagine Mary as a bead-stringer. Each strange and mysterious event that happens to her is a bead that she holds up to the light, marvels at, rolls around a bit in the palm of her hand, and then quietly adds to her string. We're told of at least three times in Luke's gospel when she "treasured words" or "pondered them in her heart."

In today's text, she "treasured" the shepherds' tale about the epiphanic appearance of angels out in the fields that night. It was a tale full of wonder, fear, and a proclamation of the savior's birth... which turned out to be her own child's birth.

That mysterious tale would have been a bead to hold up to the light and consider well before adding it to her string, where it would have bumped up against the bead that evoked a memory of another angelic appearance, months ago, when an angel had first announced to her that she would bear a son, the holy Son of God.

As the mother of Christ, Mary assuredly had many beads to add to her string over the years, including the day she and Joseph would lose and then find their son at age twelve, sitting in the Temple. When confronted over the scare he had given them, he would say quite simply, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Again, Luke tells us, "Mary treasured all these things in her heart."

To *ponder* something is to weigh it carefully. To *treasure* it is to value it highly and keep it carefully. Mary was careful, mindful, a quiet observer and thinker, adding her beads to her string and wearing them close to her heart.

What are the beads you marvel at, string with others, and keep close to your heart as we draw near to the celebration of our Lord's birth?

The Rev. Mrs. Holden

Thursday, December 24

Christmas Eve

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was The Light of all mankind. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

John 1: 1-5

John begins his description of Jesus coming into the world as He was The Light that was coming to drive out the darkness. What a simple way to remind us that this is the message of Christmas. Hope has come. Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus, The Light of the world coming to save us. What better message of hope could there ever be?

As I meditated on these scriptures, it made me think on how we can keep the hope that the birth of Christ gives us in our everyday life. How can we shine His Light in us to banish the darkness in our world? I say a simple prayer with my children each day as we drive to school. One of the lines in the prayer is "Lord shine through us in all we do and say." My hope is that they will befriend the child who is left out at recess, be the one who lends a helping hand and has a positive attitude. When I pray with my teams at school we say, "Lord let us be a light in our community." I prayed our teams would be a joy to see, that they would make the best of this difficult year and bring a smile to those around them. It goes without saying that we have seen the darkness of our world every day of this year. My hope and challenge for all of us is, although we walk in a dark world, how can we shine The Light of The Lord?

Let's not let this Holy Season pass without holding on to the hope and bringing it into the new year, so that The Light, Jesus, shines in the darkness, and overcomes the darkness. When we do that, guess who wins? We all do. The smallest flicker from a candle can light up a dark room. May God Bless you all this most Holy Season and in the new year. God is with us.

Ms. Raymond