Advent

Raising our Voices in Song: Songs, Hymns and Carols for the Cosmic Christ.

2017
Hymns, carols, and songs - as a non-musician, I have asked, “what’s the difference?” As a pastor choosing music for worship, I learned that hymns represent an ancient form of prayer written to be sung by the congregation in worship. Hymns are composed to reflect the love and adoration of God and may be set to different tunes, like the metrical psalms were. Carols are festive compositions that originally involved singing and dancing. Carols became popular during the Reformation when there was a desire to enhance congregational singing. At that time, they were written for all seasons of the church year. Today, we most often identify carols with Christmas as few carols from other seasons have survived the test of time. Finally, songs are generally composed with rhyming words that are set to music. With songs, words cannot be separated from the music with which the lyrics were written. Their use in worship is relatively new.

Hymns and carols were vehicles used to teach the faith to mostly pre-literate congregations. Sometimes drawing on words from scripture, hymns also drew on the theological themes of the seasons of the church year. Christmas carols taught the Christmas story in the vernacular, as the Bible was gradually being made available in the language of the people. Songs also find inspiration in biblical texts and theological themes. Understanding this, one can see how different hymns, carols, and songs communicate different things about God, God’s activity, and God’s world as we sing them in worship. The music that we hear and sing in worship and in our devotional life can help reinforce a narrow or a broad understanding of God and of God’s activity in the world. They help us express what we believe.

When we speak of the seasons of the church year, we are referencing the Christian calendar. The Christian calendar is organized around the events of Jesus’ life. Divided into liturgical time and ordinary time, its organization reminds us of the intersection of time and eternity, of the intersection of what is and what will be as it emphasizes the continuity between the past and the future.

In seeing time as a continuum between past and present, we are reminded that we live in the gap between what God has accomplished and what God will accomplish. We are reminded that we still live in a time when the reality of our world is incongruent with God’s ordering of life. Advent provides us with a space to consider what it meant, what it means, and what it will mean for Emmanuel to come into our lives and into the world. Scriptures that are read in worship during the Advent season have a dual focus of commemorating the first coming of Christ and anticipating the second coming of Christ. Advent provides us the opportunity to consider what is incongruent in the world as we experience it and the world that God intends as revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It reminds us that hope is possible as we live in the between time trusting that the kingdom will come.

When we ignore most Advent music and limit our musical selections in December exclusively to Christmas carols, the message of Advent is truncated. We risk forgetting, Advent is more than just preparing to remember the birth of a baby, albeit a very special baby! Advent calls us to look toward the future when the promises of the coming of Emmanuel will be fulfilled. It focuses our attention on the day when Christ will put an end to all evil and reaffirms our understanding that human history is headed in a direction where God’s purposes and plans will be fulfilled. Advent is the time of year when we not only prepare to celebrate the coming of the baby Jesus but also anticipate with hope and joy the coming of the Cosmic Christ who will reign over God’s kingdom of peace and wholeness.

The Advent season begins four Sundays before December 25. As Christmas occurs on Monday this year, the 2017 Advent season is twenty-two days beginning on December 3 and concluding on December 24. Traditional Advent practices include lighting candles on an Advent wreath and Hanging of the Greens liturgies. Praying a daily devotion is one of the common spiritual disciplines associated with Advent. During the twenty-two days of the 2017 Advent season, this devotional will consider some of the songs of Advent as we wait with expectation, preparing our hearts for the celebration of Christ’s coming in all manifestations. During the first week of Advent, we will focus on songs and words of longing as we reflect on places in 2017 where our reality has been incongruent with God’s purposes and God’s ordering of creation. During the next two weeks, we will consider songs and words of hope and promise as we look forward to the coming of the Cosmic Christ. The last week, which will only be one day, we will consider the word of love that was and is and will be spoken in the coming of Jesus Christ.

In using this devotional, it is suggested that you read the scripture first in the translation of the Bible that you prefer. When texts are provided, they come from the New Revised Standard Version. After reading the scripture, turn your attention to the song or hymn. Read or listen to the day’s selection. Many of the songs are available to be heard on YouTube or maybe found on other sources of digital music. If you choose to listen to the selection, go ahead and read the stanzas that have been included in the day’s devotional reading. The hymns and songs that have been selected may or may not be familiar. While Advent songs can date back to the third century CE, they can be some of the least known Christian music. After you have read the daily reading, close with prayer.
About the Author

Beth A. Rupe has served congregations in Kentucky while attending Lexington Theological Seminary and in Illinois. Prior to going to seminary, Beth was an Outpatient Therapist at a community mental health center. She received a BS with honors in Psychology from Western Illinois University (1988) and a MS in Clinical/Community Mental Health Psychology from Western Illinois University (1990). Beth received her M.Div. from Lexington Theological Seminary (2002). She was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) by the Christian Church in Illinois/Wisconsin (2002). She received her DMin from Lexington Theological Seminary (2014).

Beth is the Interim Minister of Women's Ministries for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Illinois/Wisconsin (CCIW). She is Regional Elder for the McLean Livingston congregations of CCIW. She is a member of the CCIW Ethic's Investigation Team and the CCIW Pro-Reconciliation Anti-Racism Committee/Team. She served as the Worship Coordinator for the 2010 International Disciples Women's Ministries (IDWM) Quadrennial that was held in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has written Advent, Easter, and Week of the Laity Resources for the Office of Christian Education of the Disciples Home Missions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Special Offering Resources for the Reconciliation Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and has published book reviews in The Lexington Theological Seminary Quarterly. Beth has published a bible study on I Corinthians 11 in (2016), provides quarterly study guides for (2012 – present), and is the author of the column Prayer Stations (2016 – present) in Just Women a publication of the International Disciples Women's Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She is a member of the Not in Our Town Faith and Outreach Committee of Bloomington/Normal.

Beth is married to Mark. They have two children, Sarah (Aaron) and Benjamin, and two granddaughters Chloe and Emilia. She enjoys reading and learning new things especially computer skills. Her other hobbies include knitting, quilting and listening to all genres of music. She enjoys cooking, especially for her family and friends. Beth and Mark love to travel. She finds strength in contemplative prayer and studying scripture. She feels called by God to work for justice.
Daily Advent Readings 2017
Year (NRSV Bible)

First Sunday of Advent (December 3)

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<th>Sunday Dec. 3</th>
<th>Monday Dec. 4</th>
<th>Tuesday Dec. 5</th>
<th>Wednesday Dec. 6</th>
<th>Thursday Dec. 7</th>
<th>Friday Dec. 8</th>
<th>Saturday Dec. 9</th>
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Mark 13:24-37

Second Sunday of Advent (December 10)

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Mark 1:1-8

Third Sunday of Advent (December 17)

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John 1:6-8, 19-28

Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 24)

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<tr>
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<th>Sunday Christmas Eve</th>
<th>Monday Christmas</th>
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<tr>
<td>2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16</td>
<td>Isaiah 62:6–12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26</td>
<td>Psalm 97</td>
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<td>Romans 16:25-27</td>
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Introduction
Advent provides us with the space and invites us to slow down and reflect on what it means to commemorate the birth of Jesus the Christ and to look forward to his coming as the Cosmic Christ to rule over the kingdom of God. In his first coming, we remember not only his birth but also that he grew to declare that the kingdom of God is at hand. We hear this in the opening proclamation of his earthly ministry when in Nazareth he states:

18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4: 18 – 21

We catch glimpses of the kingdom in all that he does as he moves about Galilee, the Decapolis, and eventually Jerusalem teaching, healing, and giving testimony to the truth of that kingdom.

And yet, while we are aware that coming of Emmanuel ushers in the kingdom of God and as we believe in its fulfillment, events of 2017 remind us of the harsh reality that we still live in a time when there is brokenness and where much is not in keeping with God’s ordering of the world. We have experienced this in our own and our friend’s illnesses, struggles, and personal tragedies. We have felt this in the cries of millions as lives have been devastated by war, acts of terror, and natural disasters. We have heard this in the very cries of creation as the earth has shook with earthquakes and the ice shelves have caved sending ice walls crashing into the Antarctic Sea. We have seen the best in people and the worst in people. 2017 has reminded us over and over that we live in the in-between time when the kingdom of God is here but not fulfilled.

Advent provides us with the space and invites us to consider what it means to live in that in-between time and to reflect on the truth that Christ is coming. Advent invites us to speak words of longing as we declare that the kingdom of God is upon us and yet it has not been fulfilled. During this first week of Advent, we will consider signs of the in-between time. We will speak words of longing and we will sing with hope, “Come, Thou long expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free; From our fears and sins release us”1 and to continue to plead, “O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer, Our spirits by Thine advent here, Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death’s dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel, shall come to thee, O Israel.” 2

1 O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath.
2 For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.
3 There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.
4 For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.
5 My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness;
6 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all day long I go around mourning.
7 For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.
I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you.

My heart throbs, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.

My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off.

Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all day long.

But I am like the deaf, I do not hear; like the mute, who cannot speak.

Truly, I am like one who does not hear, and in whose mouth is no retort.

But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

For I pray, "Only do not let them rejoice over me, those who boast against me when my foot slips."

For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever with me.

I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.

Those who are my foes without cause are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.

Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good.

Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me;

make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation.

Psalm 38

The people of ancient Israel were familiar with personal loss and tragedy; they knew what it meant to be afraid and vulnerable. As a nation, they knew what it meant to live under military and economic control of larger and more powerful nations; they knew what it meant to be terrorized and oppressed. In the midst of individual and communal pain, anger, anguish and despair, the people of Israel prayed.

In their laments, they learned to call out directly to God and to complain with great specificity about the problems and concerns in their lives. They prayed with courage and boldness because they never stopped trusting that God cared and never stopped hoping that God would triumph over the current circumstances.

In praying in this way, the people were drawn into the very heart of God where they were shaped and formed in the image of a loving and just God. Near the heart of God, the people heard that God intimately cared for and was involved with God’s people. They saw God’s grief and anger as humanity failed to love God with heart and soul and mind, and love neighbor as self. Near the heart of God, the people learned how to be available and vulnerable just as God is fully available and vulnerable. They learn how to partner with God in glad obedience to God’s purposes in hope that God’s will might be fulfilled. They reconnected to the image of God in ways that allowed them to see the discrepancy between the pain and suffering that was part of the reality of the situation that they experienced and the world as God intends. Near the heart of God, the people were drawn into a more faithful and honest relationship with God, as their prayers of lament allowed for full emotional honesty and expression. And when we pray in this way, we can experience this too.

Psalm 38 is the prayer of an individual and a specialized form of lament, penitential, in which the psalmist asks for healing and forgiveness. Repeatedly the psalmist identifies the great level of pain and distress, verses 3 - 8, and 17. The pain is heightened by the psalmist’s sense of isolation from the community. Verse 15, "But it is for you, O LORD, that I wait; it is for you, O LORD my God, who will answer" is
a particularly strong statement in which the psalmist declares that God is the sole source of hope, of healing, of forgiveness. The psalmist knows that God is aware of his deepest fears and longings (verse 9). He ends his prayer with a plea for God to be near (verse 21) and to hasten to help (verse 21) declaring God as “my salvation.”

Centuries after the psalmist prayed this prayer, in 1745 Charles Wesley wrote:

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free; From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee.

His words echo the desire for God to draw near releasing us from fear and forgiving our sins. It echoes the understanding that our only hope is God.

While we understand that sin is not the cause of illness, like the psalmist we know that the consequence of sin is brokenness in our lives and in our world. Like the psalmist, we know illnesses cause us to suffer. Like the psalmist, we know the pain that comes from isolation from the community and from God. Like the psalmist, we know the longing to be free from fear and forgiven of our wrong-doings. And, like the psalmist, and Wesley, we can be assured that God knows the secrets of our heart, our deepest fears and longings. We too can be assured that God is the source of our hope and our wholeness.

Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time when we look for God to draw near bringing forgiveness of sins and freedom from fears. Today, as we consider these songs may we be drawn to the very heart of God and shaped in the hope that God is our salvation.

Let us pray,

God, like the psalmist we confess that we have not always loved you with heart and soul and mind and that we have not always loved neighbor as ourselves. We confess that our sins have added to the brokenness of the world. Like the psalmist we believe that you are the source of our forgiveness and the hope of wholeness in our lives and in the world. Draw near to us and shape us according to your way so that we may walk in righteousness and order our lives according to your purposes.

Amen

Monday - December 4, 2017

1 Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my sighing.

2 Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray.

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

4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you.

5 The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

6 You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

7 But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house, I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you.

8 Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.

9 For there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues.

10 Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of their many transgressions

Chaplains minister in the name of our Lord and our church outside the church walls. www.discipleshomemissions.org/clergy/chaplains-specialized-ministries/
When I consider my life as a whole, I have much for which I am grateful. I have been married to my best friend for nearly forty years. We have a daughter and son, a son-in-law and two beautiful granddaughters who we love dearly. I have had the opportunity to get a good education and have had career opportunities that have been meaningful and brought purpose to my life. My family has shelter, food, and healthcare. Having said that, like most I have struggled with certain events in my life.

Even in the midst of a satisfying life, challenges, difficulties, and even tragedies happen. The promise of a baby is crushed by a miscarriage and one is left with a longing heart. The security of a career crumples as jobs become obsolete and one is left with uncertainty and fear. The choice of a loved one sets off a cascade of undesired consequences with its accompanied torrent of pain and one is left pleading for just a little more time please.

Yes, bad things can happen in a life that is satisfying and even more challenges, difficulties, and tragedies can happen in a life that is already hard. Higher education seems out of reach for many whose families live day to day in poverty, who struggle to meet even basic needs. Shelter is sporadic and undependable for the homeless as shelters fill and empty on a daily basis or are unavailable to those with mental illnesses or criminal records. Prison bars frame the landscape and cast shadows on the future where opportunities are often limited.

No one is immune to the possibility of personal struggle and tragedy. It is a part of life, as we know it. Psalm 5 is a prayer by someone who understands this reality. While the psalmist does not give specifics of the struggle or tragedy that is being experienced, the prayer is identified as a morning prayer for help, a request for God’s deliverance (verses 3). The psalmist identifies God as one who hears, one who is worthy of praise, and one who does not delight in wickedness but who offers deliverance. The psalmist is identified as one sustained by God’s steadfast love (verse 7). The psalmist asks God to guide him in the righteousness of God (verse 12). Whatever the trouble may be the psalmist is confident that God cares and God will protect God’s people. Because of this hope the psalmist declares that the righteous shall rejoice; they will sing for joy (verse 11).

Similarly, Charles Wesley ends the first verse of Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus with the words:

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

Yes, difficulty, struggle, tragedy, and worse is a part of the world in which we live. Advent asks us to consider this reality of the in-between time. In the midst of this reality, we are invited to rejoice in the promise that Emmanuel, “God with us” has entered our world.
in the person of Jesus the Christ. We are not alone in our struggles and difficulties. We can rejoice knowing that God continues to draw near and to work to bring forth good from the pain of brokenness. We can rejoice as we find our place as cocreator of a world in which God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Advent holds forth the promise that the reality that includes brokenness does not have the final word. Advent orients us to the time when God’s wholeness, God’s shalom will be spoken ordering the world for all time and in all places.

Today, let us pause and consider what it means to be in relationship with the one who is the “hope of all the earth,” and “the joy of every longing heart.” Take a moment and name your concerns in prayer asking God for what you need in every situation of your life.

Let us pray,

Lord, you are steadfast in your love and abundant in your mercy. I know that you will listen to my cries and be mindful of my concerns. You are my hope and my refuge; in you I can find rest. I ask, O Lord, for your guidance throughout this day so that I may faithfully walk in your way. Protect me from evil and lead me not in the way of temptation. I rejoice in your presence.

Amen

Tuesday – December 5, 2017

Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind.

They utter lies to each other; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.

May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts,

those who say, “With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own—who is our master?”

“Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the Lord; “I will place them in the safety for which they long.”

The promises of the Lord are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.

You, O Lord, will protect us; you will guard us from this generation forever.

On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among humankind.

Psalm 12

On August 11, 2017, white nationalists, Neo-Nazis, and members of the Ku Klux Klan marched in Charlottesville, Va. They carried tiki torches and shouted vile racist slogans and taunts. They boasted of white supremacy and spoke other lies. With their tongues they sought to breed malice and hate. They spoke evil; one woman was left dead and nineteen were injured in the wake of their malicious words.

On August 16, 2017, the tongue was used to spread an invitation of hope and to speak a word of love, as students and others gathered on the campus of the University of Virginia. Following the path that was taken five nights earlier, counter-protestors said they marched to take back their city and reclaim their University. Holding candles, thousands sang We Shall Overcome, This Little Light of Mine and other gospel songs and Civil Rights
anthems. The group chanted of love’s victory and sang of Amazing Grace. Psalm 12 is a prayer for help. It speaks of pervasive wickedness. Speaking is a major metaphor of the psalm—lying, boasting, flattering are characteristics of the wicked. God’s words in contrast are pure, in fact perfectly pure as God’s promises have been refined seven times (verse 6). The psalmist asks God to rise up and is confident that God will protect and guard this generation (verse 7 – 8).

Psalm 12 tells us that the words of the wicked reveal how they speak with a “double heart” (verse 2). Dating to the twelfth century the Latin hymn, O Come, O Come Emmanuel invites the King of Peace to bind the hearts of all humanity in unity stating, O come, O King of nations, bind in one the hearts of mankind. Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace. Rejoice! Rejoice Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

Ancient Israel understood that the words we speak help to create the world in which we live. And, James in the third chapter of his letter also speaks of the incredible power of the tongue. He states, “From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so” (James 3: 10). The words we speak reveal a “double heart” or one that has been bound by the King of Peace.

The words that were spoken in Charlottesville, Va., revealed the state of the heart of those that were speaking. The words spoken in Charlottesville had the power to lead to death or the power to bind people together in unity and love. Today, let us consider what our words say about the state of our heart. May they be words that “bid all our sad divisions cease.”

Let us pray,

Loving God, you spoke a word and brought all of creation into being. You have given us the power and freedom to speak words that unite and bind or that divide and segregate. Soften our hearts, so that we may care for your children as you do. Help us to invite rather than to exclude, to appreciate differences rather than view them with suspicion. Help us to love so that the words that we speak may help create a world in which our divisions cease and the King of Peace is seen. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen

The second verse of Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus begins with the words, “Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King.” As we read these words, let us remember how Luke tells that this baby-king was carried by Mary and Joseph as the family fled for safety after being warned by an angel that the baby-king’s life was at risk. We are told how the family became refugees in the land of Egypt seeking to escape the potential of...
Refugee & Immigration Ministries with other faith partners have been advocating for the DACA youth and young adults. Visit the Disciples Home Missions website for resources at: www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/refugee-immigration-ministries/immigrants

It is estimated that 800,000 youth and young adults, who are now between the ages of 12 and 35, were carried by their parents as they fled across the borders fleeing violence and poverty and seeking safety and a better life. Most of the individuals have little or no memory of that flight. All they know is growing up in the United States, a country they call home. These individuals found a sense of security in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program as it provided a legal way for them to go to school and to be employed. Today, these youth and young adults live under the shadow of uncertainty and the fear of having stable lives ripped away from them with the elimination of DACA.

General Minister and President Terri Hord Owens states: “DACA recipients are our neighbors in nearly every community. They are our classmates in nearly every college, university and seminary. They are our friends in our workplaces – sometimes whether we know it or not. And they are key leaders in our churches; brave and faithful and full of determination to contribute consistently to build up the strength of their families and neighborhoods and congregations. Our relationships with these fine young people and their families help us to fulfill our call to welcome the sojourner and experience unity among the diverse tapestry of communities in our church and nation.”

Psalm 26 is a cry for deliverance by someone that feels judged and rejected by the community. The psalmist asserts his integrity and avoidance of evildoers. He asks God to vindicate him (verse 1) and to examine his heart (verse 2) as he protests his innocence. The psalmist demonstrates a posture of innocence declaring that he, “walk[s] in faithfulness,” “do[es] not sit with the worthless,” “wash[es] my hands in innocence,” and “love[s] the house in which [God] dwells.” The psalmist asks God to redeem him and be gracious to him so that he may “bless the LORD” (verse 12).

Psalm 26 is the cry of the DACA recipients, individuals who have been our neighbors and our friends who are not at risk of being rejected by the community. They are asking for their hearts to be examined and they are declaring their innocence before God. They are asking us to see their accomplishments and contributions, to consider their potential. They assert their integrity, in the words of Terri Hord Owens, “they are key leaders in our churches; brave and faithful and full of determination to contribute consistently to build up the strength of their families and neighborhoods and congregations.”

Today, stop and consider the voices of over three-quarters of a million youth and young adults. Hear their words of longing and pleas for vindication. Our General Minister and President stated that “we mourn” with them and we “grieve” actions that undermine their well-being. Listen for what these voices are asking of you.
Let us pray,

God, you heard the cries of your children from the slave huts of Egypt and the riverbanks of Babylon when they wanted to go home. We ask that you hear the cries of the DACA recipients as they cry out to stay in their home. Draw near and assure them of your presence as they live with the fear of deportation and an uncertain future. Protect them as they wait for the decisions that will impact and shape their future. Assist us as we seek to stand beside them and to walk with them as they navigate through this dangerous time. Help us to know what to do and to have the courage to do it. Give wisdom and knowledge to our leaders; may they may craft and implement just immigration policies. We pray all these things in the name of the baby-King who is the Cosmic King of all.

Amen.

Thursday – December 7, 2017

1 To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us.
3 Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.
4 Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

Psalm 123

The Latin hymn, O Come, Emmanuel begins with the words, O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel. These words reference the seventy years that the Israelites lived in exile in Babylon. This exile was preceded by a long and cruel war. In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah describes the horrors that the people experienced as he speaks of the people living among the corpses lying in garbage strewn streets and of mothers watching their infants starve to death as some of the people in desperation turned to cannibalism. Following a long siege of Jerusalem, the fall of the city resulted in the forced deportation of the Jews. In Babylon, the people suffered greatly as they sought to maintain their cultural and religious identity.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, today sixty-five million refugees understand the horror of war and the terror of violence. Palestinians dwell in refugee camps that were constructed in 1948. Syrians flee across borders as bombs ravage their cities and hunger becomes the norm. Close to a million Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children, brave open seas on the Bay of Bengal to escape ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. Families carry and send their children north to avoid the violence and recruitment into gangs in Central America. In 1949, Refugee and Immigration Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began resettling refugees and assisting individuals and families with immigration problems. Since that time, more than 37,500 refugees have been resettled and countless people facing immigration problems have been assisted.

Psalm 123 is one of the ascent psalms (120 – 134) that scholars believe were sung by pilgrims as they journeyed into Jerusalem for one of the three pilgrimage festivals, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles/Booths. Psalm 123 is a call for
mercy from the community to God who is enthroned in the heavens (verse 1). This is a humble community who comes before God as a servant comes before his master or a maid comes before her mistress (verses 2). The community pleads for God to work on the behalf of the lowly bringing about a reversal of fortune where they are lifted up (verses 3–4).

During Advent, we are called to pause and to reflect on today’s cries of people who are asking God for a reversal of fortune and for an opportunity for life. The voices of the Syrians, the Palestinians, the Rohingya, of millions including many, many children from around the world seeking relief. They are today’s diaspora, scattered from their homelands, seeking relief, and pleading for mercy.

4 To learn more about immigration and refugee issues and how to stand with these communities, visit and subscribe for the latest action alerts and news from Refugee and Immigration Ministries at https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/refugee-immigration-ministries.

Let us pray,

God, many of us are the descendants of immigrants and refugees who came to the United States to find a better life and a safe place. Help us, O Lord to banish our fear of newcomers. Help us to recognize that you are a God of abundance who is sufficient for all; help us to invite others to the banquet table as we have been invited by you. Help us to celebrate the gifts of newcomers rather than envy or deny what they offer. Give us the courage and the heart to speak for the helpless and to care for the persecuted. Give us the wisdom to act with hospitality and not with hostility. Lead us to know what we can do. We pray in Jesus name.

Psalm 42

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!

For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?

O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain and to your dwelling place.

Friday – December 8, 2017

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Real Faith Christian Church celebrated their grand opening – thanks to partnership volunteers. Learn how you can help through Disciples’ Volunteering at: www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/disciples-volunteering
The United States is number one among the world’s nations in the number of men, women, and children who are housed in our nations jails and prisons. In 2015, the total number of persons incarcerated was 2,173,800 with a disproportionate number of those individuals being persons of color. The war on drugs and zero tolerance policies that feed the school-to-prison pipeline has contributed to steadily growing numbers of incarcerated juveniles and adults. This has resulted in us living in an age of mass incarceration.

One of the many flaws of the incarceration system is the denial of mental health services and treatment programs for those who are addicted to drugs and alcohol. In 2010, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) reports that 1.5 million of the 2.3 million inmates in our nation’s prisons and jails meet the medical criteria for substance abuse (65%). Another 458,000 meet the medical criteria for having a history of substance abuse. Combined these two groups constitute 85% of the prison population.

Alcohol is implicated in ½ of the incarceration of all those in jails and prisons and illicit drugs are implicated in ¾ of all the incarcerations. Only 11% of these individuals receive treatment of any kind. CASA further finds that if all inmates receive treatment and 10% of those individuals remained substance, crime free and employed, the program would pay for itself.

Disciples Women focused on mass incarceration and what the church is doing about it in Just Women Magazine.

www.discipleswomehn.org

Psalm 43

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Society’s attitudes and stereotypes about individuals who are incarcerated can contribute to a sense of worthlessness and isolation from the community. Mental illness and addiction can intensify feelings of low self-worth and guilt that make it difficult for individuals who are incarcerated to believe they are worthy of God’s love and recipients of God’s forgiveness. And still, like all human beings, these individuals long for the unconditional love of and closeness with God.

Psalms 42 and 43 are considered by many scholars to be a single poem that expresses the psalmist longing for God and plea for help in a time of distress. Repeatedly in both psalms, the psalmist states that his soul has been cast down and is disquieted (42: 5 – 6; 42: 11; and 43:5). In part, this state may have been made worse as the psalmist is taunted by enemies questioning, “where is your God?” (42: 3, 10). While the psalmist feels separated from God and longs to feel close, he trusts that one day he will experience that closeness once again as he sings God praises (42:11 and 43: 11). The prayers of the psalmist that speak of isolation and a disquieted soul can express the longings of many men, women, and children who are housed in our nations jails and prisons. They can provide the words of comfort that God does hear, God does care, and God does restore.

The fourth verse of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel states, “O come, O Bright and Morning Star, and bring us comfort from afar! Dispel the shadows of night and turn our darkness into light. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall...
Let us pray,

God, we confess that while you asked that we visit those in prison, we find it easy to turn away. We seek the easier path of law and order and forgo the road of reconciliation and restorative justice. Give us eyes, O Lord, and ears, O God, so that we might see the humanity of those who sit in our nation’s jails and prisons and hear their stories so that we might come to know them and understand. Fill us with your compassion and guide us with your mercy so that we may shine your light into dark places. Watch over the men, women, and children who are in prison and be with those whom they have injured so that all may be restored through your grace and in your love. We pray these things in the name of the Bright and Morning Star.

Amen.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Saturday – December 9, 2017

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty,
2 wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
3 you set the beams of your[a] chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your[b] chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,
4 you make the winds your[c] messengers, fire and flame your[d] ministers.
5 You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.
6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them.
9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.
10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,
11 giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.
12 By the streams[e] the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.
13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use,[f] to bring forth food from the earth,
15 and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.
16 The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
17 In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.
18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the conies.
19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting.
20 You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
21 The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.
22 When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.

Psalm 104: 1 – 22

In 2017, we have experienced natural disasters on a global level. In the United States, wildfires have burnt uncontrollably in the west and northwest. Smoke tinted the skies as far east as Chicago, Illinois and whole communities have been destroyed in California. An unprecedented number of category four hurricanes have left swaths of devastation and destruction in Texas, Florida, New CASA Report finds 65% of All U.S. Inmates Meet Medical Criteria for Substance Abuse Addiction, Only 11% Receive Any Treatment. New York, NY, February 26, 2010. https://www.centeronaddiction.org/newsroom/press-releases/2010-behind-bars-II (website August 23, 2017).

To find out more on the issue of mass incarceration read the Fall Issue of Just Women published by International Disciples Women’s Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/congregations/disciples-women/just-women-magazine-general.
When natural tragedies strike, Disciples’ Week of Compassion and Disciples Volunteering are there to assist. Photo above is Rock River flooding in Illinois. Photo by Beth Rupe. Learn how you can help through Week of Compassion at: www.weekofcompassion.org and Disciples’ Volunteering at: www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/disciples-volunteering

Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Outside of the United States and our territories, these same hurricanes have left other Caribbean nations uninhabitable and needing years to normalize and reconstruct lives. Mudslides and floods have taken the lives of millions in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Earthquakes have shook the ground and swept the ocean waters up in tsunamis. In Mexico, families have been robbed of their children as a grade school collapsed as the ground shook. Drought and the subsequent famine has left 38 million at risk for malnutrition and death in seventeen African nations including: Angola, Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

In God’s Earth is Sacred: Essays on Eco-Justice Willis Jenkins states

The National Council of Churches statement on the environment, God’s Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to the Church and Society, opens by laying out evidence of a theological failure. Ocean health declines, habitats shrink, forests are lost and yet despite a generation of eco-theology and the energy of some committed faith groups, “we have clearly failed to communicate the full measure and magnitude of Earth’s environmental crisis – religiously, morally, or politically.” Christianity’s public witness [has] been inadequate and most Christians blithely participate in destructive social ecologies’.

Psalm 104 is a prayer of praise that describes the glory of God’s creation. The psalmist speaks of creation as both the one-time and ongoing activity of God. This prayer reminds us that shalom and wholeness results when creation is ordered by God’s presence and order. Scientists warn us that human beings can and do have an impact on this order. We have the power to destabilize ecosystems and threaten the biodiversity that is a part of God’s design for God’s good creation.

The Alverna Covenant invites us to consider our call to be stewards of God’s one-time act of creation and correctors in the ongoing activity of creation that the psalmist speaks of in Psalm 104. The Alverna Covenant states:

Whereas:
God has created the world with finite resources;
God has given to us the stewardship of the earth;
God has established order through many natural cycles;
And it is evident that:
We are consuming resources at a rate that cannot be maintained;
We are interrupting many natural cycles;
We are irresponsibly modifying the environment through consumption and pollution;
We are populating the earth at a rate that cannot be maintained;
A member of the human family and a follower of Jesus Christ, I hereby covenant that:
I will change my lifestyle to reduce my contribution to pollution;
I will support recycling efforts;
I will search for sustainable lifestyles;
I will work for public policies which lead to a just and sustainable society;
I will share these concerns with others and urge them to make this covenant.

In Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus, we pray in song these
words, ‘born to reign in us forever, now they gracious kingdom bring.’ Advent invites us to remember that when we prepare for Christmas, we are preparing for more than just the coming of a baby. We are preparing to welcome one who is the source of all creation. We are preparing for the coming of a Cosmic King who will restore and renew all of creation. May our actions and our care of the earth reflect our understanding of this sovereignty.


We ask that they may be comforted as aid is given and as we walk alongside them in the journey of restoration. We pray, O God, for our leaders, who will make decision and craft policies that guide our care of your earth. Give them the wisdom and knowledge that is needed so that these decision and policies demonstrate a commitment to stewardship and care. Help each of us in our daily lives to celebrate your creation and to value its diversity through the choices we make and the actions we take.

Amen.

Hope, Promise and Love

One of the reoccurring themes of the Bible is that of reversals. Sarah’s fate was reversed and she gave birth to Isaac. Joseph’s fate was reversed as he was taken from an Egyptian prison and elevated to the right-hand man of Pharaoh. Hannah’s fate is reversed and she gives birth to Samuel. Mary’s songs of the reversal of fate in response to Gabriel’s message that she will give birth to a son. We see the reversal of the fate of the people in the story of the Exodus. We hear the promise in the words of the prophets as they declare that Israel will be reconciled with God and the land will be restored. Jesus begins his ministry by quoting Isaiah and declaring a reversal of fortunes for the people and lifts up this theme of reversals in the Sermon of the Plains (Luke 6: 20 – 26) where he declares:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.
But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Wo to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Wo to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
Wo to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

In the early church, the alienation of Gentiles from the God of Israel is reversed as the gospel is taken to Samaria, Galilee and the ends of the earth. And finally, the last book of the Bible Revelation focuses...
on the reversal that will bring about the end of persecution and the establishment of the New Jerusalem where God makes God’s home among the mortals and mourning and crying and pain will pass away (Rev 21: 3 – 4).

During the first week of Advent, we have thought about how things in our current reality are incongruent with God’s purposes and God’s ordering of creation. We heard words of longing that cry out for the fullness of the kingdom of God while all along trusting that its day will come. Advent invites us to sing songs of reversal and speak words of hope and promise. It provides us a space to draw near to God so that we can experience more deeply the character of God who is slow to anger, steadfast in love and faithful in his justice. It invites hope in the presence of the Holy God. The next three weeks, we will focus the songs of hope, promise and love as that we sing in preparation for the coming of Prince of Peace and the reign of his kingdom.

Week Two: Words of Hope
December 10-16, 2017

“Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head
‘To be as it pleaseth God,’ she said,
‘My soul shall laud and magnify His holy name.’
Most highly favored lady, Gloria, Gloria”

Gabriel’s Message

Sunday – December 10, 2017

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;

Luke 1: 46b – 48a

Luke shapes his gospel for a community that is primarily composed of Gentiles and shows how the good news of Jesus Christ opens the door for former pagans to have a relationship with the God of Israel. Restoration comes as cultural norms are subverted and cultural expectations are reversed. The beginning of this social revolution comes in the surprising identity of the one God chooses to bring his Son into the world.

Mary is a young obscure peasant girl who lives in a small village in a small vassal state of the huge and powerful Roman Empire. A messenger, the angel Gabriel brings Mary the surprising news that she is going to have a son. Mary responds by praising God for what is about to happen and the new social order that will establish the kingdom of God. It is notable that Mary does not wait to sing her celebratory song. She does not demonstrate a wait and see attitude but rather commits fully to whatever God has in store for her.

“Be the change you wish to see in the world, “ is often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. While the sentiment is true, Gandhi did not actually say these words. What he did say was:

We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.

The attributed quote is powerful. The actual quote may be even more powerful. It reminds us that while there is much we cannot control, we can control our actions and
responses. It reminds us that how we act can ultimately alter our perceptions and attitudes of the world as well as the world’s perceptions and attitudes of us. It reminds us that we don’t have to live in an eye for an eye world where everyone ends up blind (based on another Gandhi quote). We can refuse to respond to anger with anger but demonstrate the power of love. We can refuse to live by a scarcity theory but live trusting in the abundance and sufficiency of God. We can wait for others to change or like Mary we can praise God for the great things he will do with us and through us.

Consider for a moment what communities of people today are being identified as outside of the realm of God’s love. Consider who and what communities of people are thought unworthy of being included in the church. Luke’s gospel reminds us that God’s love is available to all. The new covenant through Jesus Christ opens the door for all to be in relationship with the God of Israel. Luke’s gospel reminds us that God chooses to act in unexpected ways and with those who society may least expect.

Today, may we seek to live with radical hospitality and unconditional love.

Let us pray,

God of Israel and of the Gentiles, you enter into relationship with us forming a covenant of love and compassion. Forgive us O Lord when we judge others unworthy of that same love and undeserving of that same compassion. Fill us with your Spirit so that we may bear witness to your grace as we welcome others and seek to love as we have been loved. Help us to be the change we want to see in the world.

Amen.

Monday – December 11, 2017

2 [a] 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 Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9: 2 – 6

Isaiah speaks to the people of the kingdom of Judah during the eighth century BCE in the midst of the reign of Ahaz. Coming to the throne at age 20, the sixteen-year reign of Ahaz was marked by revolt and war, idolatry and unfaithfulness. Politically and religiously, Ahaz was attracted to the Assyrians, one of the strongest economic and military powers of the time. His fascination led him to introduce the worship of Moloch, a Canaanite deity associated with child sacrifice, into Judah. After going to Damascus to meet Tiglathpileser, the Assyrian king, Ahaz desecrated the temple by building an altar.
modeled after one he saw in the Assyrian capital. Further, Ahaz “made his son pass through fire” as an offering to Moloch (see, 2 Kings 16: 3).

The prophet Isaiah knows that the people of Judah are facing some very dark times. Led by a wicked king, the people are living in a time when there is great evil and the judgment of God is at hand. It is a time when the people are spiritually malnourished and the physical needs of the most vulnerable are ignored. Isaiah concludes that YHWH is the only hope that the people have. He calls for the people to repent and for faith in YHWH to be restored. He says that if they do not there will be a great tragedy.

Twenty-nine centuries later and living in the United States, these words may seem very strange and distant from us. But consider our own century. We have seen children sacrificed to the god of death as children were massacred at Sandy Hook. We have seen black and brown children sacrificed to the god of death as they were pushed into the school to prison pipeline and shot down in the streets. We have seen children sacrificed to the god of death as we have refused to provide a haven and sanctuary for children fleeing gang violence and abject poverty in Central America, the horror of war in Syria, and the genocide in Myanmar. We have seen children sacrificed to the god of death as we have cut health and nutrition programs. Often, we have failed to faithfully follow YHWH’s instruction to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the alien. There is a deep spiritual hunger among the people even as they walk away from organized religion. Yes, it seems that Isaiah’s warnings are applicable today. And, yes so are his words that call for the transformation of the heart and an illumination of the soul.

The good news for those hearing Isaiah in the eighth century BCE and for us listening to these words in the twenty-first century CE is that Isaiah’s prophecy does not end with tragedy. As quickly as words of calamity are spoken, Isaiah speaks the word of hope from chapter 9. Isaiah speaks of the restoration of Ephraim and then broadens the focus to include the kingdom of Judah. Isaiah speaks a word of hope from the Lord that assures the people that the dark times will end and their joy will be renewed. There will be a new king. This king will deliver the people and restore their fortunes.

During Advent, we are called to consider how the former times of failure and death give way to the latter time of hope, where all experience the abundance of life and violence and the way of war gives way to peace. John Morrison points us to the day when the new King will reign and his kingdom will be established in righteousness forevermore. We point to this day when we live as agents of the light co-partnering with God to lift the yoke of burden from the oppressed, to share the joy of the harvest with the vulnerable.

Today, consider how you can be an agent of life and hope in the life of those you meet. Consider how you can be an agent of life and hope for children in your community, nation, and the world.

Let us pray,

God, we acknowledge that our hope is in you. We ask, O Lord, that darkness may not overwhelm us but that we are led in the way of your light and your love. We seek our future in your hands, O Lord, where all may rejoice in the abundance of life.

Amen.
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 favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior[a] 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

In the gospel of Luke, we are introduced to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth is descendant of one of the most prestigious families in ancient Israel; she is descended from Aaron, priest and brother of Moses. Zechariah has an equally prestigious pedigree, he belongs to the priestly division of Abijah, one of the priests who returned with the governor Zerubbabel to Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile (Num 12: 17). Both are said to be righteous and blameless before God. We are also told that Elizabeth is barren.

We are told that by casting lots, Zechariah is chosen to enter the Holy of Holies to offer incense. In the sanctuary, the angel of Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a son named John and Zechariah questions the veracity of the message. From that moment until after the birth of the infant, Zechariah is unable to speak.

Luke 1: 57 – 79 gives us the account of John’s birth and the day of his circumcision. We are told that on that day, Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit gives the prophecy that is today’s scripture reading. In the opening of the prophecy, Zechariah gives thanks to God for the coming Messiah. In the second half of the prophecy, Zechariah speaks of the role of John the Baptist in God’s plan of salvation.

In the hymn, *Blest be the God of Israel*, Carl P. Daw draws inspiration from this passage as he speaks of the hope of the Messiah who will bring freedom, liberation. Daw reminds us how the Messiah will fulfill prophecies of God’s mercy, rescue and release. The Messiah will usher in an age of peace. As the sun rises

**Blest be the God of Israel**, Carl P. Daw (1989)
ushering in a new day, the coming Messiah will bring light to those who have lived in the brokenness and sin. Today, consider how you have been set free and from what you have been liberated by Jesus Christ coming into your life. Give thanks to God for the gifts you have received. Consider how Jesus Christ offers wholeness to a broken world. Where do you still see the need for freedom and liberation? Where do you still see brokenness around you? Give thanks for what God is doing and for what God will do as the Messianic Age is fulfilled.

Let us pray,
Blest be the God of Israel, through Christ Jesus you have brought us into a new covenant of love and mercy. Through grace we have been set free from the bondage of sin so that we might serve you in holiness and righteousness. Set us on the path of justice and light our ways with your presence. We pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday – December 13, 2017

1 And the people of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord, and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. They consecrated his son, Eleazar, to have charge of the ark of the Lord.

2 From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented[a] after the Lord.

3 Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes and serve the Lord only.

4 So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the Lord only.

5 Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.”

6 So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord. They fasted that day, and said, “We have sinned against the Lord.” And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

7 When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines.

8 The people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.”

9 So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord; Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him.

10 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the Lord thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel.

11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car.

12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah,[b] and named it Ebenezer;[c] for he said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

1 Samuel 7: 1 – 12

Here I raise to thee an altar (Ebenezer); hither by thy help I’ll come
And I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God,
He to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.
Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing
verse 2
Robert Robinson (1758)

For many years during the month of December, I have watched the movie A Christmas Carol. First filmed in 1910, there are many renditions and spinoffs of the film. Influenced by my mother-in-law, my favorite is the 1951 version starring Alastair Sim. The main character is a grouchy, miserly man named Ebenezer Scrooge who is transformed after the nighttime visitation of three spirits of Christmas.

For many years, this movie was my only awareness of the name Ebenezer. Imagine my surprise when I found that the original text of the hymn, Come
Let us pray,
Fount of every blessing, we bring you honor and praise. When we wander you come and find us. You are our salvation and our hope. You shelter us all the days of our lives. We look to the day when you will bring us safely home.

Amen.

Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Thou Fount of Every Blessing contained the lines, “Here to thee I raise an Ebenezer, Here there by Thy great help, I’ve come.” Curious, I learned that the meaning of the name was, “stone of help” and that this line in the hymn referenced a verse in I Samuel.

In I Samuel 6: 1 – 7:1, the Philistines are returning the Ark to stem a plague that had fallen upon the nation following their capture of the Ark of the Covenant. When the Ark is returned, Samuel intercedes for the people leading them in a rededication ceremony that includes offerings, a time of fasting, confession, and prayer. Samuel ends the ceremony by taking a stone, naming it Ebenezer, and instructing the people, “Thus far the LORD has helped us.”

The music of Robert Robinson stands as an Ebenezer to God’s faithfulness in his life. Sent to London to begin an apprenticeship as a barber, Robinson became involved with a gang of hoodlums. Living the life of the prodigal, he came under the influence of George Whitefield, an Anglican cleric who was one of the founders of Methodism. In 1752, Robinson was briefly converted to Methodism. He would go on to become a pastor and an influential Baptist scholar. Echoes of his early life experiences come through in the line, “Jesus sought me when

Creator of the stars of night,
thy people’s everlasting light,
O Christ, thou Savior of us all,
we pray thee, hear us when we call.

Thou, grieving that the ancient curse
Should doom to death a universe,
Hast found the medicine, full of grace,
To save and heal a ruined race.

Creator of the Stars of Night,
Verses 1 & 2
Unknown Author (7th Century)

While I do enjoy sitting on my patio sipping tea, smelling the flowers that are growing in neglected flower beds, and watching the night sky, I am not what most people would consider an outdoor person. So imagine my friends’ and family’s surprise when I agreed to go on an eleven day camping and white water rafting trip through the Grand Canyon. There at the bottom of the Canyon, I experienced

Philippians 2: 10 – 11

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Thursday – December 14, 2017

10
11
the night sky in a totally new and amazing way. Away from the lights of towns and even rural areas, the stars took on a new brilliance. Looking up the expanse of the sky was broader and deeper than I had ever experienced up to that time. New constellations graced the skies of Northern Arizona that I had not seen from my home in Illinois. The sight was breath-taking. The psalmist writes, “The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 1: 1).

While the identity of the author of Creator of the Stars of Night is unknown, we do know that this hymn comes to us from sometime in the seventh century CE. As you consider the opening words, can you imagine this anonymous person looking up to the twinkling stars which tell of the glory of the One who set them in the heavens? Can you imagine these words being sung over the centuries by monastics gathered together for evensong as the winter nights grew longer and as they looked up to the stars to see the promise of light and all that that meant?

In the first verse of the hymn, the light of the stars is associated with the Creator, the everlasting light who overcomes the emptiness, the fear, and the evil. It goes on to appeal to Christ, the one who restores all of creation including us. In our scripture passage today, the apostle Paul also sings of that hope and of the promise of the Christ who redeems, renews and rules over all. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is filled with hope, joy, and thanksgiving. Our passage today is part of a joy filled and powerful hymn that exalts Christ Jesus. Just as the light of the stars penetrate and travel through light years of dark space, Paul’s words are beacons of light that penetrate and travel through the circumstance in which he finds himself. For you see, Paul writes the Philippians while he was imprisoned by Rome. Paul writes to the congregation that he had established from the confines of Roman imprisonment and sees the light of One who is worthy of worship (Isaiah 45: 23 – 35).

Today, take time to look to nature around you and see how it gives testimony to the glory of God. Whether it is the power of crashing waves of the ocean, the uniqueness of a snowflake as it falls quietly to the ground, the majesty of mountains, or the clarity of a night sky lit with the stars that extend to the end of the universe. Give thanks for all that you see. Consider how the Creator of this universe is also the one we anticipate this Advent season. Consider what it means for Emmanuel, God with us to save and heal the human race, to renew and restore the whole of creation which God spoke into being.

**Let us pray,**

Creator God, I look around and the whole of creation testifies to the wonder of your holy name. The earth travels in its appointed course and the seas rise and fall according to your plan. I give thanks for all creation. I stand in wonder that you who cast the stars in the skies and called the mountains into being are mindful of me. I bless your holy name and praise the wonders of your love. I long for the day when all knees shall bow before Christ the King and all is ordered according to your perfect will.

Amen.

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1 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold[a] of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.

3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

4 One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter in
Time flies! It’s high time! Making up for lost time! Just in the nick of time! Time dragging on! Out of time! These expressions all speak to the nature of time. Sometimes we wonder how time can go so quickly and sometimes we wonder how time can go so slowly.

Some of the longest days of the year are those that lead up to Christmas. Sometimes this is because of our eagerness, as we anticipate time with friends and family or as children wait for that anticipated gift. Sometimes it is because of our grief and sadness, as we go through that first holiday season without someone we love.

At the same time some of the shortest days of the year are those leading up to Christmas. Sometimes this is because of our eagerness, as we anticipate time with friends and family or as children wait for that anticipated gift. Sometimes it is because of our grief and sadness, as we go through that first holiday season without someone we love.

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The Advent season is all about time. It speaks to how we order our time in relationship to our understanding of who Jesus the Christ is. It calls us to countercultural understanding of time, as we resist the urge to be swept up in the activities of Christmas with little or no preparation of our hearts. It cultivates patience as we wait with anticipation, as we reflect on the wonderful acts of God. It helps to teach us the spiritual discipline of waiting and watching for the Lord.

For many of us waiting is difficult. We tap our fingers as microwaves tick off the seconds required to heat our food. We use the remote control to move rapidly through television stations so we don’t have to watch commercials; or even better, we watch on demand where we can simply fast forward through the commercials and the boring parts. We become bored or frustrated as events don’t move as quickly as we think they should.

Still, we know that waiting is a part of life. Some things just take time and we can not hurry them along. The discipline of waiting helps to develop patience, endurance,
persistence, and a quietness of spirit. Psalm 27 begins with an expression of trust of the community and ends with a prayer for help in the midst of false accusations and betrayal. The prayer establishes the steadfast nature of God in whom the community can trust and on whom the community can depend. It then moves seamlessly to use this understanding of God’s nature to bring its current concerns to God in prayer. In this prayer we see how trust and longing is intimately interwoven in the prayer life of ancient Israel. It urges us to “Wait for the Lord, his day is near, Wait for the Lord, be strong take heart.”

Today, make time to wait. Linger over your cup of coffee. Sit with your family and engage in a conversation about the day as you eat your meal. Look out the window and daydream. Practice breathing slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth. Look, really look, at the beauty of creation either through your window or out in nature itself. Slowly read the psalm and spend some time listening for what God is saying to you through scripture.

In Luke 1: 35 – 38, we hear the angel Gabriel’s dual announcement to Mary of the coming of the Son of God and the prophet, John the Baptist, who will be his harbinger. Mary responds by saying “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Her words echo those of eighth century prophets Isaiah (Is 6:8) and Jeremiah (1: 17 – 19). Her words echo the sentiments of all the prophets whose missions were undergirded by their openness to being God’s channel. Like the prophets before her, Mary said, “Yes,” and made herself available to be cocreator in God’s plan for salvation.

While the eighth century prophets responded, “Here I am Lord, send me,” their messages were generally not well received, as they were words of judgment and calls to change. The scriptures reveal that the prophets often question their qualifications and credentials to be a prophet. While Mary quickly responds yes following the angel’s announcement, we can only imagine that she also had some concerns. Imagine, being a young girl in ancient Judea, unmarried and pregnant. Imagine facing your family! your betrothed! your community! Yes, we can assume
Mary had a few concerns, a few fears. Scripture reveals Mary’s willingness and the song *Breath of Heaven* allows us to consider the emotions and thoughts that might have been behind her words of assent. In *Breath of Heaven*, we hear Mary sing, “I am frightened by the load I bear in a world as cold as stone.” And in a later verse she states, “Do you wonder as you watch my face, If a wiser one should have had my place, But I offer all I am, For the mercy of your plan. Help me be strong.”

How will the world respond? Who will understand? Am I qualified, capable of doing what is being asked of me? Am I strong enough to do what needs to be done? These are a few of the questions that might have entered Mary’s mind as the frightening figure of Gabriel stood before her informing her of her pregnancy.

While we may never receive a call as radical as Mary’s, each of us do receive the call to be “God-bearer” with our families, our friends, our communities, and beyond. Filled with the Spirit of God, hosting Christ in our hearts, we hear the call inviting us to be co-creators with God in the ongoing plan.

Like Mary, we may question our qualifications and our capabilities. Like Mary, we may experience the world as cold as stone as we participate in God’s renewal and transformation of lives and creation. Like Mary, we might wonder if we are qualified? if we are wise enough? if we are old enough? if we are young enough? if we will have the support of others?

Whatever our concerns, Mary provides us a model of discipleship when the call of God comes to us. Today, may we say, “Here I am Lord,” in our words and in our deeds. Let us remember that we too are “God-bearer” filled with the Holy Spirit. May we seek to be co-creators with Emmanuel as we are transformed by that very presence and as we seek to be agents of transformation in God’s world.

Let us pray,

*Holy God, here I am. I offer myself this day for your service and your plan. Show me your way lighting my path with your presence.*

*Amen.*

Like Mary, we may question our qualifications and our capabilities. Like Mary, we may experience the world as cold as stone as we participate in God’s renewal and transformation of lives and creation. Like Mary, we might wonder if we are qualified? if we are wise enough? if we are old enough? if we are young enough? if we will have the support of others?

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The hyperbole of “walking up hill to school both ways” is hard to miss. When it is said there is often laughter as the absurdity of this situation is evident to all. Everyone knows that it is impossible to walk up hill both ways.

Well, I thought that until I took a trip to Palestine and experienced the terrain of the West Bank. It seemed to me that on many occasions, we could not traverse any road in any direction without going uphill both ways. The country seemed filled with roads that cut back on themselves and seemingly endless landscapes of sandy and rocky ground with little vegetation to be seen. Now, each time I hear George Handel’s aria *Every Valley Shall be Exalted* this terrain comes to mind. And I think, “Wow! What a task it would be to level out the mountains and the hills that surround Jerusalem!”

I can only imagine the power that Isaiah’s words of level ground and straightened paths had with the people. In the first thirty-nine chapters the prophet Isaiah has issued strong warnings and spoken of the dire consequences and punishment that would befall the people of Israel if they did not change. Isaiah urges the people to change their ways, so they can avoid trouble. He repeatedly lets them know that God’s preference is to extend grace and to forgive. And yet, the people do not listen. As the Northern Kingdom was swept away by the Assyrians led by Sargon II in 772 BCE, the Southern Kingdom of Judah would meet a similar fate as the Babylonians overran the city of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The end of a merciless siege led to the forced deportation of the Jews to Babylon. It was a brutal time and treacherous journey as the population of the city fell by tens of thousands of people who were forced to leave their homes and march to Babylon.

The memory of that journey would haunt the people throughout their seventy years in exile. Chapter 39 of Isaiah speaks of the tragedy that will be experienced in the Babylonian exile. After the long silence in exile, God again sends a word to the people. In Chapter 40, there is a dramatic shift and suddenly the dire words fall way and the prophet speaks a message of comfort and hope to the people. God declares that enough is enough. Comfort will replace alienation and the journey home will replace displacement.

Isaiah tells the people that God will forgive and God will re-establish the relationship with them. He promises that God is coming back with the people and they will see the glory of the LORD as they make the journey together.

Powerful words of promise are spoken, as the prophet tells the people that God is going to bring them home. The shadow of the arduous journey to Babylon is swept away as the prophet speaks of valleys being lifted up and mountains being made so as the path becomes level and the way is made easy.

These powerful words of promise find their way into all four gospels as John the Baptist takes them to speak of the impending ministry of Jesus the Christ. The message of homecoming that was spoken as words of comfort to those returning from exile becomes good news for all who feel alienated and dislocated.

Frederick Buechner states, “I believe, that no matter how much the world shatter us to pieces, we carry inside a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons us.”

Today, consider what home means for you. Has there been a time when you have felt alienated and displaced, shattered by the world longing...
Monday – December 18, 2016

2 [a] 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 the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil,[b] we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

Micah 5: 2  -  5

Throughout their history, many of the people of Israel longed for the return of a king like David. David, the man after God’s own heart was legendary in the hearts of the people. During his reign, the kingdom expanded to cover the most territory that it would ever hold. During his reign the impossible was accomplished. Jerusalem was conquered. Triumphantly, David entered the city leaping and dancing to the sound of lyres, tambourines, and harps as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the city establishing Jerusalem as the center of political and religious power.

Frederick Buechner defines king as follows:

Passionate loyalty, adoration, terror, awe – no words are perhaps too strong to describe the feelings evoked in his subjects by the mere sight of him, and it’s no wonder. He held the power of life and death over them. Their destiny was in his keeping. He defended the kingdom against all enemies both from within and without.¹⁰

David was such a king. And, the people longed for the return of such a king as the prophet Micah spoke to the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the eighth century BCE. Externally, the Syro-Ephraimitic War with Assyria was underway. Internally, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Religious and political leaders were more interested in what was good for them rather than what was good for the people.

Let us pray,

God of comfort, like a trumpet blast you say enough! and express your promise of accompanying your people on the journey home to wholeness and well-being. We praise you for goodness even as we wait for the journey to the New Jerusalem to be completed. Help us find the words and actions that comfort rather than shatter the lives of others. We prayer these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Micah speaks a word from the Lord into this political, religious and social climate. He proclaims God’s judgment on those who oppress the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. The passage that we read today, speaks to the longing of the people as it looks to the day when there will be a new Messianic king. In his own words, Micah declares, “Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king.”

Advent is the time when we are reminded, “Soon and very soon we are going to see the king.” As we count down the days to Christmas, soon and very soon we celebrate the King who comes first as the baby who was welcomed by both shepherds and foreign kings. As we count down the days to Christmas, soon and very soon we rejoice in the presence of King Jesus who comes to us in the midst of the ordinary and extraordinary events of our lives, standing alongside us in the good and the bad times. As we count down the days to Christmas, soon and very soon we celebrate the victory of the Cosmic King who will reign on earth as in heaven.

Israel longed for a conquering king like David one who would consolidate religious and political power. They were disappointed. They were still looking for that king, the one who would come from Bethlehem of Ephrathah, when Magi traveled from the east following a star. They were still looking for that king, when Jesus entered Jerusalem to the cries of “Hosanna,” which means save us. They wanted a hero, a political powerhouse, one who would provide the fiscal prosperity of their dreams. They were disappointed.

This Advent season, do we still look for a king such as this? We must ask ourselves this question. And we must do so remembering that we celebrate the birth of the king who became a refugee as he threatened the power structure from the moment he was born. We celebrate the birth of a king who spoke with women, dined with sinners, and used Samaritans, the enemy, as an example of how to live. We celebrate the birth of the king who found power in service and vulnerability as he washed the feet of his followers. We celebrate the birth of the king whose proclamation is we will be judged on how we treat the least of these.

This Advent season let us remember that “soon and very soon we are going to see the king” And, like the king whom Micah prophesied in verse five, this king will usher in peace. Like the king whom Micah prophesied, this king will usher in a new day when the true king of glory will reign and the people will be transformed.

Let us pray,
O Lord, we pray soon and very soon. For we long for the day when your peace is the norm. Help us, O Lord, to be filled with your peace so that we may live as instruments of peace in our families, our schools, our workplaces, and our communities. We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace.

Amen.

Tuesday – December 19 2017

1 And again I looked up and saw four chariots coming out from between two mountains—mountains of bronze.
2 The first chariot had red horses, the second chariot black horses,
3 the third chariot white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled gray[a] horses.
4 Then I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?”
5 The angel answered me, “These are
the four winds[b] of heaven going out, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth.

6 The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go toward the west country,[c] and the dappled ones go toward the south country.”

7 When the steeds came out, they were impatient to get off and patrol the earth. And he said, “Go, patrol the earth.” So they patrolled the earth.

8 Then he cried out to me, “Lo, those who go toward the north country have set my spirit at rest in the north country.”

9 The word of the Lord came to me:

10 Collect silver and gold[d] from the exiles—from Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah—who have arrived from Babylon; and go the same day to the house of Josiah son of Zephaniah.

11 Take the silver and gold and make a crown,[e] and set it on the head of the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak;

12 say to him: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.

13 It is he that shall build the temple of the Lord; he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit upon his throne and rule. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding between the two of them.

14 And the crown[f] shall be in the care of Heldai,[g] Tobijah, Jedaiah, and Josiah[h] son of Zephaniah, as a memorial in the temple of the Lord.

15 Those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple of the Lord; and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. This will happen if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God.

Zechariah 6: 1 – 15

After horrendous wars and the seventy years that followed where some struggled in exile and those who remained struggled to survive in a land laid waste, the people were returning from Babylon. In Jerusalem, the two groups sought to reestablish the equilibrium of their lives. The question being what would the new social order be in this city of those who had returned and those who had never left?

In light of their history of wars and siege, it might not seem unusual that foremost in the minds of the people was rebuilding their homes and fortifying the city with a new wall for protection. While this seems a natural priority, Zechariah, a sixth century BCE prophet, urges the newly returning exiles and other inhabitants of Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, to purify the community, and to wait for the kingdom of God.

He reminds the people that Judah’s exile was the result of Judah’s failure to maintain the covenant with YHWH, their failure to trust in the Lord. Zechariah urges the people not to make the same mistake. While the people focus on safety and security by the standards of the world around them, Zechariah’s message is God’s sufficiency in protecting and caring for the people. His primary message to those returning to Judea, as well as those who had been left behind, is that God cares and that God desires restoration of the city and renewal of the people.

The book of Zechariah is composed of a series of visions. Our passage today is the last

In glory from his throne
Again will Christ descend,
And summon all that are his own
To joys that never end.
Let deeds of darkness fly
Before the approaching morn,
For onto sin ’tis ours to die,
And serve the Virgin-horn.
Our joyful praises sing
To Christ, that set us free;
Like tribute to the Father bring,
And, Holy Ghost, to thee. Amen.

Instantis Adventum Dei
Charles Coffin (1736)

The Coming of Our God
Verses 4, 5, and 6
Translated Robert Campbell
of Zechariah’s visions. Here the earth is at rest and the Spirit of God has covered the earth as God’s purposes are accomplished.11 The message to the people, you can trust in God who fulfills God’s promised and who cares for God’s people. Zechariah’s message is important for us today less we be tempted to only look out for number one – whether that be our own personal self-interests or the self-interests of our nation even at the cost of isolating ourselves from others. Today, just as in Judah in the sixth century BCE, we are asked to prioritize our relationship with God. We are asked to trust God with our whole heart and to commit to his purposes with all our might. Today, just as in Judah in the sixth century BCE we are invited into a relationship with God that opens us to new possibilities and to new ways of living with others in the world.

Let us pray,

Give me eyes, Lord Jesus, to see you in those I meet today. Help me to be open to the new thing that you are doing in the world around me. Help me to love others as I am loved by you.

Amen.

Wednesday – December 20, 2017

1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.


All the mountains clap their hands, And the distant lands rejoice. No the earth behind to dance, Swaying to the tune, Caught up in the praise All creation moves as one, For the Lord our God has come! See creation all made new In the light of perfect peace. See His people all His own, Holy in His love, Glowing as a bride. Now the feast of life begins. For the Lord Our God has come!

From Advent Joy Ken Bible (2005)
One of the tasks of raising children is helping them learn how to make good decisions. My husband Mark and I have the privilege several days each week of caring for our five-year old and twenty-two month old granddaughters, Chloe and Emi. Each time they are with us, it seems like we have the opportunity to create choices to help them learn this skill. With Emi, it is simply giving her the choice between two good options, “do you want green beans or do you want carrots for lunch.” Either way she chooses good choice. With Chloe it becomes a bit more complicated. First, there are more choices to be made. Second at five Chloe has a more active role in creating the options from which she must choose. In other words, her actions now dictate some of the choices that she must make. As with our own children, and now with our grandchildren, encouraging them to make their own decisions is not just leaving them on their own to do whatever they like. Instead it is giving over decision-making incrementally based on their ages and their maturity. The number of options increases over time. The complexity of the decision increases over time. Good decision making takes years as experience is gained and perspective is developed. The goal is to help our children recognize good decisions and bad decisions and become aware that they are responsible for the consequences of the decision, good or bad.

Today’s scripture is about making choices and the consequences of those decisions and those choices. Speaking a word from the Lord, Isaiah presents the choice of abundant life in the city of God or life under the domination system of Babylon where there is scarcity and where the necessities of life are expensive and given grudgingly. Isaiah asks the people to choose between the fidelity to God that leads to life with dignity, freedom and security or submission to the status quo of Babylon that leads to exploitation, coercion and oppression. To choose the former is to repent and move into the new future where YHWH will lead them home.

Now this may seem like an easy choice until we consider who is being asked to choose. Isaiah’s call for repentance and renewal of worship is issued to those who are settled and comfortable with their way of life in Babylon. It is issued to people who have acclimated to the imperial ways of doing things, to people who are not sure they want or need to change. It is a call to choose between the familiar and a radical promise and summons to a new social order and alternative life.

This summons is backed by the promise that God is going to do something new, something tangible that will impact all of creation. This promise from God is compared to the rain and snow, the forceful powers by which the earth is nourished and creation is sustained. The promises of God lead to the thorn giving way to the Cyprus and the brier giving way to the myrtle. The prickly evidence of negativity is gone as the earth is healed; it blooms and flourishes, as all of creation is made whole.

Advent Joy draws on these images from Isaiah 55 asking us to consider this impact on creation as the mountains and lands witness the homecoming of the people who choose covenant life with God. Today, we also must choose between fidelity to God that leads to dignity, freedom and security or submission to a status quo that exploits and oppresses the vulnerable and marginalized among us. Today, we must choose between faith in the abundance of God or submission to the shortage and scarcity associated with the powers and principalities. May we choose wisely.
Let us pray,

God of plenty, may we be ready
to join the dance of creation
trusting your promises of
abundant life. Teach us, O Lord,
to discern your ways and to
choose life according to your
will. May our ways and our
words testify to your goodness
and your presence in our lives. In
Christ name we pray,

Amen.

Thursday – December 21, 2017

1 The wilderness and the dry land
shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice
and blossom; like the crocus
2 it shall blossom abundantly, and
rejoice with joy and singing. The glory
of Lebanon shall be given to it, the
majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They
shall see the glory of the Lord, the
majesty of our God.
3 Strengthen the weak hands, and
make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful
heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here
is your God. He will come with
vengeance, with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall
be opened, and the ears of the deaf
unstopped;
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing
for joy. For waters shall break forth
in the wilderness, and streams in the
desert;
7 the burning sand shall become a
pool, and the thirsty ground springs
of water; the haunt of jackals shall
become a swamp,[a] the grass shall
become reeds and rushes.
8 A highway shall be there, and it shall
be called the Holy Way; the unclean
shall not travel on it,[b] but it shall be
for God’s people;c no traveler, not
even fools, shall go astray.
9 No lion shall be there, nor shall
any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the
redeemed shall walk there.
10 And the ransomed of the Lord
shall return, and come to Zion with
singing; everlasting joy shall be upon
their heads; they shall obtain joy and
 gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall
flee away.

Isaiah 35: 1 – 10

We wait for Thee; sure Thou
will come; The time is swiftly
nearing; In this we also now
rejoice, And long for Thine
appearing. Oh, bliss ’twill be when
Thee we see, Homeward Thy people
bringing, With transport and with
singing!
O Son of God, We Wait for Thee, vs 4.
Phillip Frederick Hiller (17th
century)

For most individuals, home
is more than just shelter from
the elements. Our homes have
a deep and unique emotional
meaning that enfolds our
sense of well-being and safety,
our sense of community and
belonging. Our homes are
the places of our childhood
memories and of our adult
aspirations. In his book, The
Longing for Home, Frederick
Buechner suggests that the
meaning of home is twofold; it
is a place of remembering and
a place of dreams. Referring
to the home he and his wife
created for their family,
Buechner writes:

Like everyone else, what
we furnished home with was
ourselves, in other words. We
furnished it with the best that
we knew and the best that
we were, and we furnished it
with everything that we were
not wise enough to know and
the shadow side of who we
were as well as the best side,
because we were not self-
aware enough to recognize
those shadows and somehow
both to learn from them and
to disempower them.

It became home for us in
a very full sense.
This understanding of home
is ancient, deeply engrained in
our psyches. It is the stuff of
promise tied to the covenant where God promises Israel a home. For Christians it is also the stuff of promise expressed when we speak of abiding in Christ or of a deceased love one “going home.”

Our scripture this morning, taps into this deep, primal longing for home when Isaiah speaks of the restoration of Judah. After the horror of war and the desolation of exile, the people are going home. The chapter moves through four stages of transformation. First the wilderness will be transformed into a lush forest and pasture land (35: 1 – 2). Second, the people will be delivered from exile in Babylon (35: 3 – 4). Third, the people will recognize the greatness of God’s acts. No longer blind they will rejoice and be moved to praise God (35: 5 – 7). And, fourth, the people who have been cut off from Jerusalem will return home in joy (35: 8 – 10).

The joy that is expressed by Isaiah in these passages is echoed in the fourth verse of the hymn, O Son of God, We Wait for Thee, that is inspired by verses 8 – 10 of Isaiah 35. The words of this hymn remind us that the homecoming that we look forward to during the Advent season is one in which “Home is wherever Christ is with you.”

Today, in New York City more than sixty-two thousand men, women, and children are sleeping in homeless shelters. Today, there are over four hundred thousand children in the United States in foster care. Today, thousands of families in the western states are homeless due to wildfires. Today, millions in Puerto Rico, Texas and Florida seek to rebuild their homes that were damaged and many destroyed due to an extremely severe hurricane season. Today, millions more seek to rebuild their homes in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal that were destroyed by devastating floods. Today, thousands in Mexico seek to rebuild their homes destroyed by earthquake. Today, there are over sixty-five million refugees worldwide. Today, innumerable people feel isolated and alone. Today, untold numbers of individuals feel that they are strangers, unwelcomed and unloved. Today, many live in fear and with apprehension about what the future will hold. For each one of these individuals, “home” is a powerful word.

Today, consider what you can do to make your dwelling place a home for your family and your friends. Today, consider what you can do to make your neighborhood and your community a home for those who dwell within it boundaries.

Palestinian landscape south of Jerusalem. - Photo by Beth Rupe.

Let us pray,

O Lord, you have heard the longing of your people for home from the slave huts of Egypt and the riverbanks of Babylon. You have answered their calls and brought them home. Today, O Lord, we long for home desiring nothing more than to dwell in the shelter of your love. As the bride works with her husband to create a welcoming home, a place of security and nurture, we commit to work beside you creating places of hospitality and welcome, inclusion and care. As the tenant cares for the gardens and the vineyards, we commit to work for the renewal and restoration of creation.

Amen.

Friday – December 22, 2017

1 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright.
2 Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
3 Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
4 For the word of the Lord is
“There is nothing certain in this world except death and taxes.” This quote has been attributed to Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), Daniel Defoe and others. The veracity of the statement being upheld in the controversy over attribution. Yes, uncertainty and change are an inevitable part of life. We experience it everyday.

While change has always been a part of human life, today, it is happening at an unprecedented rate. It is happening differently as many of the changes we experience are related to technological advances that have happened in the last ten to twenty years. So what changes are occurring? The pace of life is speeding up. As hurry becomes the norm, we are also getting busier. Multitasking is the norm and leisure is something that we track and monitor to see if we are meeting our daily goals. Our smart watches will remind us to stand, to breathe, and let you know how you are doing. We put signs in our homes and offices reminding us to “Simplify,” as life becomes more complicated and complex. While we appreciate options in stores and online outlets, at time the sheer number of choices that we must make in a day exhausts us. While our option and choices expand, our sense of community and belonging seems to shrink. Extended family is replaced by nuclear family. A sense of tribalism and nationalism is increasing. Our rapidly changing world seems to be a major source of stress in the lives of many who are left feeling overworked, overwhelmed and left behind.

Your presence in me
Jesus light the way
By the power of Your word
I am restored
I am redeemed
By Your spirit I am free
And I will fall at Your feet
I will fall at Your feet
And I will worship You here

From This Is Our God
Hillsong Worship, 2008
in a world they no longer understand. Social scientists including futurists suggest that today we experience an unprecedented rate of change and that we should expect this rate of change to continue to accelerate.

This is true even in the church. In her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle suggests that periods of great change and redefinition have occurred throughout the history of the church. Today, we live in one of those times. It has left some feeling anxious and concerned. They don’t understand what is happening, as they seem to be losing the church that they have known and loved. They don’t know why people want to change. Others see problems in the current form and the structure of the church. They want change. They are eager and hopeful for what might be. They don’t know why people want the same old, same old. Like all periods of great change and redefinition, all are moving into a future that is not clearly defined. It is a time of anxiety and loss for some and of uncertainty and possibility for all.

So where is the good news in all of this? In his 1970 book, futurist Alvin Toffler recommended that in times of rapid change people need islands of security. These islands of security were the solid ground on which to lean and stand in the midst of shifting sands. Psalm 33 reminds us that God is our true source of stability. The psalmist speaks of God ordering creation with God’s word. It reassures that life exists because of the very activity of God who continues to bring forth order from chaos. The psalm ends on a high note of trust and hope stating:

20 *Our soul waits for the LORD, He is our help and our shield.*
21 *For our heart shall rejoice in Him, Because we have trusted in His holy name.*
22 *Let Your mercy, O LORD, be upon us, Just as we hope in You.*

Psalm 33: 20 – 22

As the psalmist ends with these words of deep trust, our song for the day expresses the same deep trust in the power of Christ’s word in our life stating:

*By the power of Your word I am restored*
*I am redeemed*
*By Your spirit I am free*

Advent invites us to pause and reflect on the nearness of our one source of stability.

Christ came. Christ comes. Christ will come. In this we can trust. And in doing so we can believe that life continues to exist because of the activity of God who continues to bring forth order from chaos. We can believe that God continues to speak and therefore we can continue to sing a new song.

Let us pray,

*Today, O Lord, I will stop and breathe. I will take time to be amazed at all the blessings of my life. I will declare that your word is true and right. I will rejoice in the reality that you see me. Really see me and that you love me and hold my future in your hand working for what is good and whole for my life. Today, O Lord, I will stop and I will wait. I will wait and be still. I will give thanks that you are my God.*

Amen.
Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

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

he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Revelation 21: 1 – 6

The hymn that we read today comes to us from a time when the self-understanding of the church is being redefined. The century began with the cruelest persecution in the history of the church under the Emperor Diocletian. Christians were encouraged to abandon their faith. Then Diocletian had Christians arrested and eventually tortured and killed after he became convinced that they were conspiring against them. After Diocletian fell ill in 304 CE, he abdicated his throne to Galerius and Constantius Chlorus. Both were viewed by the legions as inept and unpopular. When Constantius died, the legions refused to follow Galerius and named Constantine, the son of Constantius, as their Augustus (emperor). Galerius refused to abdicate. As political chaos ensued, Galerius continued to persecute Christians, having those who refused to abandon their faith maimed and put to work in stone quarries. Many more were martyred that there did not seem to be an end in sight. Unexpectedly, Galerius became ill. Convinced that his illness was punishment from the Christian God, in 311 CE Galerius issued an edict of tolerance for the Christians.

As time moved on, Constantine proceeded to consolidate his power. It is reported that in a dream Constantine had a vision that he would win a significant victory at the Milvian bridge under the banner of the labarum, a Christian symbol. This is considered a significant moment in Christian history. Persecutions ended and Christianity gained favor. By the end of the century, the church was becoming associated with the power of the state.

During this time of change and reordering of the social order, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born in 348 CE on the edge of the Roman Empire in the province that is now known as Spain. Very little is known of the author of this hymn except that he was a highly educated prolific poet born to a good family in Northern Spain. Coming to faith late in life, his religious poetry was deeply personal as he wrote to give glory to God and to atone for his sins. His poetry was written to be sung.

Of the Father’s Love Begotten is one of the oldest hymns known. In the stanza that we read...
today, we are reminded that the one for whom we prepare and wait has always been, is always, and will always be with God. The one for whom we prepare and wait is the source of all things and the end where all things are made complete. These words echo those of the one who sits on the throne in Revelation and declares:

“See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

The passage we have read today, looks to that day when God’s way will be the way of the world. God is proclaimed the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. God’s shalom will be the order as all are invited to drink from the spring of the water of life (Rev 21: 5 – 6). These are words of promise and hope for a community that is suffering greatly and who look to that day when that suffering will end. Here, one who sits on the throne is proclaimed the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Those who have suffered are invited to drink from the spring of the water of life.

\[\text{Let us pray,}\
\text{Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lamb of God who sits upon the throne. Along with the apostles, the martyrs, and the saints of all ages we proclaim that you are the Alpha and the Omega, the source of all blessings and the culmination of all hope. To you, we look for the promise of renewal and restoration of all of creation. We praise you and we bless your holy name.}\
\text{Amen.}\]

\[\text{Amen.}\]

\[\text{Week Four: Words of Love}\]

\[\text{Sunday – December 24, 2017}\]

\[\text{Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.}\]

\[\text{And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.}\]

\[\text{And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home[a] of God is among mortals. He will dwell[b] with them; they will be his peoples,[c] and God himself will be with them[d]}\]

\[\text{he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”}\]

\[\text{And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”}\]

\[\text{Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.}\]

\[\text{Revelation 21: 1 – 6}\]
For many, The Revelation to John is a confusing book. Its genre, apocalyptic, is unfamiliar. It utilizes symbols and metaphors that come from another time and culture. It was written in code so that it could not be easily understood and thereby add to the persecution of an already suffering community. All this makes Revelation a difficult book to interpret. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that Revelation was written to provide hope for a suffering community. It is sufficient to say Revelation reveals that Jesus the Christ is greater than the suffering the community was experiencing. It is the promise that God wins in the end - that love wins in the end.

Today we again focus on Revelation 21: 1 – 6. Yesterday we have heard the promise that God is the beginning and end of all things. God spoke a word of love and all of creation came into being. God spoke and initiated a relationship of love with humanity that is maintained throughout history and beyond. In the end, all of creation will find its fulfillment in the love of God.

As the New Jerusalem comes down from the heavens, the new social order is fully established. God will dwell with the people forever. All that are broken will be made whole, all pain and sadness will pause away and the people will be filled with joy. There will be no separation from the love of God.

On this last day of Advent, we turn our attention to a hymn of Charles Wesley. Wesley was a prolific hymn writer composing 6,000 hymns. Many of these were finished as he was riding his horse to evangelical meetings. In Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, Wesley combines the twin themes of Advent. In the first, our attention is focused on the coming of love from heaven and in the fourth verse our attention is focused on the completion of the new creation and what that means for us.

As Wesley speaks of love that descends from heaven and fills every trembling heart, he provides us with a description of our relationship with God. Our God is a God of nearness and intimacy. In Genesis, we read that God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In Revelation, we read how God will dwell in the midst of the people in the New Jerusalem. In between, we are reminded over and over of the pure unbounded love of God as God draws near and refuses to let God’s people go. As Wesley speaks of the completion of the new creation, he reminds us that we prepare for the coming
Let us pray,

God the time of preparation is drawing to an end. May the seed of this season continue to grow in our lives as we remember your life, your death, your resurrection and your coming. May the seeds of this time manifest themselves in word and deed as we seek to see you and follow you each day. May the seed of this time mature in faith and hope and love as we look to the day when lost in wonder, love and praise we kneel before your throne.

Amen.
Disciples Home Missions, a General Ministry of The Christian Church (Disciples Of Christ), is focused on empowering vital Hands-On ministry within congregations of our church. DHM is committed to equipping disciples for Christ and connecting people to the life-changing love of God. This mission is accomplished through programs, missions, and resources focusing on leader development, congregational transformation, faith formation, Christian vocations and Pro-reconciliation/Anti-racism.

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