



Advent Devotional

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2017

Written by the Rev. Dieuner Joseph, Associate Pastor, Pleasant Grove Church / Cary, N.C. / Doctor of Ministry Christian Spirituality Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 150

- 1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
- 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
- 3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
- 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
- 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
- 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

As Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ during the Advent season, we should be intentional about giving extravagant praise to the Christ who became flesh to dwell among us. Christ should be the object of our praise and the subject of our exaltation. Psalm 150 provides a model for the best way we should praise the incarnate Christ.

Psalm 150 is a song of praise designed to shine light on the majesty of the God of Israel. The psalmist uses the word "praise" 13 times. This word as used in the Psalm comes from the Hebrew *halal*, which can be translated "to shine," "to be boastful," and "to be made praiseworthy."

During the Advent season, followers of Jesus Christ should let the light of Christ in their heart shine so the world can be captivated by his majesty. Let the light of our hope and faith in our risen Savior shine in our social networks and in our circles of influence. We should boast about the love of Jesus, our redeemer, who died so we can live.

The praises of God should be all encompassing and comprehensive. The psalmist entreats the people of God to praise him everywhere and with everything. When believers give Christ extravagant praise, he will draw the world to himself and the lost will be saved. Then everything that has breath will praise the Lord!

PRAYER

Holy Father, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your son, may we endeavor to give you extravagant praise through our testimony and our service to your kingdom.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2017

Written by the Rev. Oghene'tega Swann, Pastor, Refreshing Springs Ministry / Aliquippa and Ambridge, Pa. / Doctor of Ministry Missional Leadership Focus

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:1-11

1 Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

DEVOTIONAL

The apostle here reminds us of the tension of the "already, but not yet" of our salvation story. Even while celebrating the indescribable gift of salvation, he reminds us that we currently experience only a foretaste of what is to come, and that we also have an active responsibility in working toward what is "to come."

Peter reminds us that although God, according to His faithful character of holy love, initiated salvation and entrance into His kingdom through Jesus Christ, those saved by His grace

must bear witness to their citizenship with visible qualities and characteristics of a personal and corporate nature. And as long as these virtues are present in us, we declare our positive “Yes, I will attend” RSVP to participate fully in what is yet to come.

Peter’s charge discourages us as Christians from developing a sense of complacency born from the fact that salvation is solely effected by God in Jesus Christ and apart from our works. Instead, Peter reminds us that once we have said “yes” to God’s salvation in Christ, we must maintain that “yes” with a visible commitment to the pursuit of goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love in our personal and corporate lives. May we add to our prayers this Advent season not only the petition, “Come, Lord Jesus come,” but also the determination to maintain our response to his invitation with good works born out of commitment to the Kingdom that is to come.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, help us to remember that your invitation is one that requires a constant, living response from us. Grant us daily grace and power to say “yes” to You by our willingness to press into more of Your life, as we see it revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2017

Written by the Rev. Father Archimandrite Nnachette Maximos, Cathedral of the Resurrection, Orthodox Archdiocese / Lagos, Nigeria / Doctor of Ministry Eastern Christian Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 146

- 1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
- 2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
- 3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
- 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
- 5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
- 6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
- 7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

- The LORD sets the prisoners free;
- 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
- 9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
- 10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

“Praise the LORD, O my soul!” Unfortunately, the word “praise” seems nonexistent in the lives of many people today. Our lives have become tainted with complaints and supplications that betray an all-about-what-I-want attitude. But the psalmist calls our minds back to the need to be grateful regardless of our circumstances. After all, Christ’s love for us never wavered, despite what He endured—and not for His own sake but for our good.

The psalmist also encourages us to lift our eyes above our day-to-day troubles, difficulties, and challenges and up to the infinite realm of God. Of course, troubles will always remain, but God’s people will be better equipped to move forward in the midst of this chaos when we gather as a community to sing praises to God, for doing so leads us to strength and sustenance. Thus the psalmist issues a definite call to return to the early Christian practice of *koinonia*—fellowship.

Further, the psalmist admonishes us not to “trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” We moderns continue to rely on ourselves. We put much of our confidence in science and technology, despite their constantly failing and disappointing us, instead of putting our trust in God, who never has and will never fail us regardless of our betrayals. “But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Let us followers of Christ remember this amazing, wonderful truth in our daily lives during Advent and beyond. Praise the LORD!

PRAYER

Heavenly and almighty God, give us the grace to be thankful every day of our lives, regardless of the difficult challenges facing us each day—the gratitude to appreciate your infinite mercy and love, despite our betrayal and disappointment of you. Let your Holy Spirit enlighten our hearts so that we constantly put our trust in you in the knowledge that you will never fail us, even if we do fail you. May the words of praise never depart from our lips, and may the thoughts of our hearts be pure and spotless in thanksgiving to you unto the ages of ages. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2017

Written by the Rev. Katie Crowe, Senior Pastor, Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church / Durham, N.C. / Doctor of Ministry Christian Spirituality Focus

SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 3:1-10

1 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you 2 that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. 3 First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts 4 and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" 5 They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, 6 through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. 8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

DEVOTIONAL

There are two ways in which we often speak about time. *Chronos* references linear, chronological time—human time as it were, marked by hours and minutes, days, weeks and years. *Kairos*, however, references the fullness of time. It is God's time, in a sense, whose accounting exists in the realm of the eternal.

Grounding the reader in the ancient landscape of creation and the promise of Christ's future return, the author of 2 Peter calls us to *kairos* living in a *chronos*-obsessed world. We are charged to set aside our impatience for the unfolding of all that is to come and instead be fully present, with "sincere intention," to the gifts of today.

As we dip below the surface of the bustle of these days, we find all creation waiting with baited breath for the coming of the Lord. As we surrender the need to control where we are going in our lives and the speed with which we get there, we awaken to the art of living with sincere intention

for Christ today. We become conditioned to the ambiguities of the *kairos* in a way that suspends us in a state of Advent expectancy, and we are baptized into a resistance movement against the tyranny of the *chronos* in our overbooked lives in a way that serves God's redemptive purposes in the world in real time.

May God bless us with sincere intention each day of this Advent season as we wait with baited breath for Emmanuel.

PRAYER

In the fullness of time, Lord Jesus, you became flesh and lived among us that we might be free from the fears of our timeworn lives. Grow our trust in you sufficient to stage a rebellion against hurry, that we might be fully present to the gift of these days. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2017

Written by the Rev. Graeme R. Wilson, Minister, Bearsden Cross Church of Scotland / Bearsden, Scotland / Doctor of Ministry Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 62

- 1 For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.
- 2 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.
- 3 How long will you assail a person,
will you batter your victim, all of you,
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?
- 4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.
They take pleasure in falsehood;
they bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse. *Selah*
- 5 For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
- 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
- 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
- 8 Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. *Selah*
- 9 Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.
- 10 Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

11 Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.
For you repay to all
according to their work.

DEVOTIONAL

The all-consuming bustle and noise of the Christmas season jostles our senses at this time of year. Presents to buy, cards to write, parties and functions to attend, Christmas holiday plans to be made.

In this season of frenetic clamor, what does it mean for our souls to wait in silence? In whom, or in what, should we trust?

So often, too often, we place our trust in something less than God. We place our trust in busyness, in things, in politicians, in institutions, and in ourselves. We do so time after time, year upon year, and we wonder why it never satisfies. The Psalmist rests content in God alone. The material things and the preoccupations of this age are “lighter than a breath”—of no consequence—compared to the unshakeable strength of God, the rock and fortress of our salvation.

In this Advent season of waiting and preparing we once again place our trust in the God who came among us, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. God is the dependable presence in whom we can trust, the source of our hope and our salvation.

For God alone our souls wait in silence.

We wait and we pray, “Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus come.”

PRAYER

Gracious and eternal God, whenever the busyness and clamor of this season take us over, remind us once again to place our trust in you. For you alone are our rock and our fortress, our hope and our salvation. We wait in silent expectation for the light in the darkness, the hope of the world, the Word made flesh. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2017

Written by the Rev. Rebecca Kahnt, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Youngstown / Youngstown, Ohio / Doctor of Ministry Christian Spirituality Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 16

1 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
2 I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you.”
3 As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.
4 Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.
5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.
7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
8 I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
10 For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
11 You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

DEVOTIONAL

I think I underestimated the importance of presence in life until I became a mom. When I became a mom, I quickly learned that every activity I did in the house became a “team sport.” And if I would dare to go into another room by myself and have enough nerve to close the door behind me, it would mean the end of the world had arrived, with screams and gnashing of teeth coming from the other side of the door until I would open it again and I would be reunited with my family.

In many ways, I treasure that my children find my mere presence a place of rest and security. I also hope and pray it can point the way to the One who is the place in this crazy world where “my heart is glad, my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure” (Psalm 16:9).

In this season of Advent, as we remember the birth of Jesus to bring hope and light to a world filled with hopelessness and darkness, and in this season of Advent as we look forward to the day when we are all brought together in the heavenly kingdom, when death is gone and pain has ceased, may we heed these words from Psalm 16 as we “keep the Lord always before (us).” May the awareness of the presence of the Lord with us through this Advent season bring us a daily source of abiding hope, joy, peace, and love.

PRAYER

Gracious God whose presence shows us the path to life, fill us with your Spirit so we may feel your real presence with us always as you love us into being this Advent season. In your holy, precious and powerful name we pray. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2017

Written by the Rev. Derek S. Marotta, Pastor, Plains Presbyterian Church / Cranberry Township, Pa. / Doctor of Ministry Missional Leadership Focus

SCRIPTURE

Jude 17-25

17 But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; 18 for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts." 19 It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. 20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL

Few days exist in the church when the reality and presence of division and strife are not present and noticed. It was true in Jesus' day as it is true in our day now. The "ungodly" actions we witness each day on the part of co-workers and family members can, and often do, harm our willingness to share the good news of Christ's soon-to-be-celebrated birth with those who need to hear God's story. We know that we participate in an active faith, a living faith that leads to the production of fruit but also requires a strong posture of discipleship which combats the divisions and strife we witness in our culture.

This text from Jude contains strong, affirmative words designed to encourage and inspire the church to live out our faith actively before the world and our communities. Followers of Christ are told to "build themselves up" and to "pray in the Spirit" because choosing to enact these practices helps unify Christ's body, the church—us. Because we understand the importance of making those choices, we are told to look forward to "the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ."

With that in mind, I wonder: Right now, in what places is God showing you to display mercy on those who are wavering in their faith? In what places is God showing you people you can help "snatch ... out of the fire" by living out this passage?

If we are going to continue to live and work as the church that is called and sustained by God, then even as we wait for the coming Messiah, we do so in a posture of active ministry. It is our calling—and our joy to participate in.

PRAYER

Most Holy God, as we continue our Advent journey, we are aware of our role in your evangelizing of the world as we are aware of the places and people you are sending us to—places where there are people who need your grace and mercy. Give us strength to work energetically as we actively share your message. In Christ's name, Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2017

Written by the Rev. Tim Dooner, Pastor, Valley Forge Presbyterian Church / King of Prussia, Pa. / Doctor of Ministry Missional Leadership Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 25

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

10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

11 For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.

12 Who are they that fear the LORD?
He will teach them the way that they should choose.

13 They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.

14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.

15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.

17 Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.

18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.

19 Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.

20 O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.

22 Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all its troubles.

DEVOTIONAL

In the 25th Psalm, the psalmist affirms that living within the streams of God's loving intentions for us always leads to good and true life. Living within the rhythms of God's good and eternal will for humanity safeguards us from shame, relieves the troubles and fears of our hearts, and rescues us from the trappings and troubles that result from our imperfection and our propensity to live according to our own will and desires. We join the psalmist in longing for God's guidance for the sake of life that is good and true, and we cry out, "Make us to know your ways, O Lord! Teach us your paths! Lead us in your truth!" God's guidance is always lovingly offered to us, and if we discern and implement it, we are carried forward in the stream of life to places of goodness and integrity. But how do we truly know what that guidance is?

As we journey together through this season of Advent, we consider that God has answered the prayers of the Psalmist most powerfully and clearly in the Christmas incarnation. We are imperfect people who long to be shown the way. We long to live with integrity in ways that are truly prosperous, upright, and powerful for God's sake. In the incarnation of

God in Christ, our longings are met. God's love, instruction, guidance, and redemption are ours in Christ. God help us to accept this long-awaited gift that comes to us freely by God's grace!

PRAYER

Eternal God and creator of all life, when we find ourselves waiting and longing for your guidance, protection, rescue, and healing, point our focus to Jesus. Reveal your grace and intentions through his witness, and bring us redemption that is manifested in our Christlike attitudes and actions. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2017

*Written by the Rev. Connie S. Weaver, Associate Pastor, First Presbyterian Church / Asheboro, N.C. / Doctor of Ministry
Missional Leadership Focus*

SCRIPTURE

Amos 7:1-9

1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). 2 When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,

"O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!"

3 The LORD relented concerning this;
"It shall not be," said the LORD.

4 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. 5 Then I said,

"O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!"

6 The LORD relented concerning this;
"This also shall not be," said the Lord GOD.

7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

"See, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;

9 the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the
sword.”

DEVOTIONAL

One of the very first sermons I ever wrote and preached was from the Old Testament prophecy of Amos. It came at a time when I was extremely busy, and as occasionally happens despite the best of intentions, I found myself wrestling with Amos in the wee hours of the morning. It was less than ideal, to be sure, but the fatigue I felt in those moments opened me to the intensity of the prophet’s words.

Drawn from his life as “a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees,” Amos was called to the most difficult task of delivering bad news in good times. Never had Israel been more prosperous or safe than under the long reign of Jeroboam II in the 8th century BCE. Yet in the midst of their military might and economic prosperity, there was great social injustice and immorality. In a theme echoed throughout the words of the Old Testament prophets, God tires of such injustice and declares that it will no longer be tolerated. God uses the image of a plumb line, an old-fashioned tool that showed when the lines of a building or wall were straight and true, and when they were crooked, or “off.”

As we look anew to the coming of our Lord into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, where do you think a “plumb line” needs to be dropped in your own life, or in the life of your community of faith, to show what is “off” and what is “true?”

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of this day, for its blessings and its challenges. As we navigate this life that you have granted to us, help us to see its beauty and to feel its goodness. Show us where we stray from your “plumb line” of perfect love and justice. In Christ’s name, Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2017

Written by Fr. Mark Basily, Parish Priest, St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church / Sydney, Australia / Doctor of Ministry Eastern Christian Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 33

- 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 upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
- 5 He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

- 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
- 7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.

- 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.
- 9 For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

- 10 The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
- 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
- 12 Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

- 13 The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
- 14 From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth —
- 15 he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.
- 16 A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
- 17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.

- 18 Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
- 19 to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.

- 20 Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.
- 21 Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
- 22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

DEVOTIONAL

One of the most painful feelings in life is the feeling of loneliness—the feeling that no one is there, no one is interested in my life, and no one even cares. The solution offered to us in Psalm 33 is simple—look up, because there is One who looks down! In fact, the psalm repeats this truth three times: “The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind”; “From where he sits enthroned he watches all

the inhabitants of the earth"; and "Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him."

God looks down at us because He loves us, because He is interested in us, and because He wants to protect us. Knowing that our heavenly Father is watching us gives us the comforting feeling that we are not alone, and it inspires us to live a godly and pure life. So throughout your busy day, take a moment to stop and look up at the compassionate eyes that are gazing down upon you.

PRAYER

Thank You Heavenly Father for Your love and protection. It gives me tremendous joy to know You are watching me and encouraging me through my life's journey. I confess that all too often I am occupied with the affairs of this world. Never turn Your eye away from me, but rather, remind me to turn my eyes up to You, my Savior and my God.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2017

Written by Rev. Philomena Ofori-Nipaah, Pastor / Fairgrove, Mich. / Doctor of Ministry Christian Spirituality Focus

SCRIPTURE

Amos 8:1-14

1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me a basket of summer fruit. 2 He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. 3 The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!" 4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, 5 saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, 6 buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." 7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. 8 Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

9 On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. 10 I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

11 The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. 13 In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst. 14 Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, "As your god lives, O Dan," and, "As the way of Beer-sheba lives" they shall fall, and never rise again.

DEVOTIONAL

"Stop, look, and listen!" Amos's message addresses a complex issue faced by a people whose harvest is plentiful and business is booming, yet the poor are neglected. As the prophet delivers a message warning of the need for change—for the coming of the Lord—so it is for us today.

Upon hearing Christmas whistles and bells, we busy ourselves with looking for the best gifts to give. Amos's message sounds like a train approaching with a full head of steam, its whistles and bells making us pause to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN. As a warning sign from a train causes us to pay attention, so are we to pay attention to Amos during the season of Advent. The words of warning are spoken about the coming of Christ the Lord and the need to be transformed. "The days are coming ... not a famine of food ... but hearing the words of the Lord" (verse 11).

Amos blows the whistle to get us to stop and be refreshed in God's grace while looking at our surroundings to help the poor and the needy around us, to take time to look for guidance and comfort, to ask forgiveness from God, and to share the joy of Christ's love with each other as we search for joy in the material gifts we give and receive. Advent is a time to listen for the mercy of God in meditation.

Christ whistles grace and love to us in the season of Advent. Let us prepare to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN, as we examine ourselves.

PRAYER

Almighty God, help us to look and find your peace in all our Advent busyness. Make us people of truth, obedience, and sharers of your love so that, through our lives, you may be revealed to others. Lord, may we learn to listen more and speak less as you give us courage to trust in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2017

Written by Fr. Paul Fanous, Parish Priest, St. Abraam Coptic Orthodox Church, Long Point / Sydney, Australia / Doctor of Ministry Eastern Christian Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 18: 1-20

1 I love you, O LORD, my strength.
2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
so I shall be saved from my enemies.
4 The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of perdition assailed me;
5 the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me.
6 In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.
7 Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from
his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
9 He bowed the heavens, and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
10 He rode on a cherub, and flew;
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
11 He made darkness his covering around him,
his canopy thick clouds dark with water.
12 Out of the brightness before him
there broke through his clouds
hailstones and coals of fire.
13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice.
14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.

15 Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.
16 He reached down from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of mighty waters.
17 He delivered me from my strong enemy,
and from those who hated me;
for they were too mighty for me.
18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity;
but the LORD was my support.
19 He brought me out into a broad place;
he delivered me, because he delighted in me.
20 The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.

DEVOTIONAL

We live in a world where power is given to those who are strong, rich, influential, or charismatic. But there is a power that has long been forgotten. And that is the power of God working with humanity, or with each of us specifically.

David the Psalmist in Psalm 18 sings of the power of God, His power over death and Sheol, His power over nature, and His power over our circumstances. But by far the most important aspect of God's power is that He has made it accessible to "me." He has given us the power, that our prayers would be heard and answered by Him: "In my distress I called upon the Lord, And cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, And my cry came before Him, even to His ears" (Ps 18:6). This is real power—that the Hand which can make the "earth (shake) and tremble," and the One who can make the "foundations of the world ... uncovered" by his "rebuke," would bend down his ear, hear my voice, and allow Himself to be moved by my prayers.

When we feel weak, and powerless in this world, let us try to remember the true power that is made available to us.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, it is a wonderful gift that you would hear my voice from your dwelling place, that you would regard my prayers. Thank you for this tremendous power you have bestowed on me. I ask that you would never let me stray far from this strength that you have shared with us, your children. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2017

Written by the Rev. Lezley J. Stewart, Vocations and Support Secretary, Ministries Council, Church of Scotland / Edinburgh, Scotland / Doctor of Ministry Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 102

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.
2 Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call.
3 For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
5 Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.
6 I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
7 I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.
8 All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
9 For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,
10 because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
11 My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.
12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.
14 For your servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust.
15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
16 For the LORD will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.
17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their prayer.
18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:
19 that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;
21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,

22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.

23 He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.

24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away
at the mid-point of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations."

25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

26 They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.

You change them like clothing, and they pass away;

27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.

28 The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

DEVOTIONAL

In the dark days of winter and in the midst of everyday life there can be difficult and brooding days—days when one might feel like a lonely bird on a housetop. In the midst of the Psalmist's longing and despair, there is also a glimmer of hope as he calls to mind the faithfulness of God from generation to generation.

Sometimes in darkness it is hard to discern the light, but gradually and slowly the merest glimmer can spread warmth and hope, pointing to a new beginning. It is often in calling to mind the past that we find the strength to live in the present and future.

The season of Advent takes us on that journey from past to future, darkness to light, and along the way we begin to see the transforming light of Christ reshaping our future and direction. We become part of what he the Psalmist described as the generation to come—a people yet unborn who praise the Lord.

PRAYER

Open our eyes to your wonder,
Open our hearts to your warmth,
Open our lives to your embrace,
As we hope in the Eternal One. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2017

Written by LaNita D. Butler, Minister, Ivy Baptist Church / Newport News, Va. / Doctor of Ministry Urban Change Focus

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 24:1-14

1 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

9 "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10 Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come."

DEVOTIONAL

At first glance, this pericope previews an end-times, apocalyptic world ripe for judgment. Similarly, our world today appears to be plagued with moral degradation, injustice, and waning reverence for God and neighbor. Yet there is "hope." Hope happens when believers stand amid chaos and insert God's possibility. Here in Matthew, Jesus makes the remedy to desolation available to us:

Beware, don't fear, don't waver ...

"And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a 'testimony' to all the nations; and then the end will come" (v. 14).

A testimony is a firsthand authentication of a fact—the evidence, the outward sign, the witness of what the "power of God" can do and has done to transform our lives and circumstances.

It is God who heals, delivers, transforms, restores, and makes free. He is The Way, The Truth and The Life! He gives wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and direction. "Anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord – will be saved" (Acts 2:21). "So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Hope in chaos – The Good News!

PRAYER

God of all nations, you overflow with love, mercy, and grace. You are the source of life, light, and all that is good and true. You have already told us what is good in your sight: To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Lord, recapture our hearts, indulge yourself in our lives, and by your Holy Spirit help us put into action all that you have instructed. Amen.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 17, 2017

Written by the Rev. Jennifer Young-Thompson, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church / Port St. Lucie, Fla. / Doctor of Ministry Parish Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 24

1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
2 for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
5 They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*

7 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.

8 Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.
9 Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
10 Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory. *Selah*

DEVOTIONAL

Since the Industrial revolution humankind has sought to “subdue” the earth. Driven by greed, we have allowed the destruction of the planet in the name of progress and material gain. We have forgotten that all of God’s Creation is the Lord’s, and it is held in our keeping until the next generation becomes its caretakers. In our desire to master the physical realm we have, perhaps purposely, misunderstood our true calling.

Psalm 24 reminds us that the real work in our lives is the growth of our souls by the subjugation of our ego, our pride, and our selfishness. It is our choice, once we have given our hearts to our Lord Jesus Christ, whether we will allow the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us, thus enabling us to live out the grace of God gifted to us—to live it out humbly, with clean hands, pure hearts, and unsoiled tongues.

Those who live their lives striving to subdue their inner world by following in the footsteps of Jesus are the “generation that seek God.” It is only after this godly work that the gates and doors which stop the Holy Spirit from entering our souls can be lifted up and the King of Glory come in. Just as the Temple attendants physically labored to lift up the everlasting doors so the faithful might come to worship the Lord, so also let us be about our work to subdue our world within and welcome God into our hearts and our lives once again!

PRAYER

Glorious Lord, we live in this material world and often don’t see the wonder of its beauty. We stress over our bills and our health, we worry about our family and our friends. In a world filled with noise it is hard, so hard, to be quiet and know—no matter the misfortune or catastrophe—that You are God. Help us in the varied distractions and disasters of our lives to seek Your face—to find our strength, our peace, and our place within Your loving, faithful, heart. In Jesus’ Holy Name we pray. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2017

Written by the Rev. Lou Nyiri, Associate Pastor, Gettysburg Presbyterian Church / Gettysburg, Pa. / Doctor of Ministry Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 122

- 1 I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
- 2 Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.
- 3 Jerusalem — built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
- 4 To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
- 5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.
- 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
- 7 Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”
- 8 For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
- 9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

DEVOTIONAL

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’”

These words resonate within me, for they are the words my Presbyterian pastor father-in-law often used as he began worship when our family would visit on vacation. Hearing these words signaled it was time to calm our inner conversations that we might be open to an encounter with God’s gracious and gratitude-inducing presence in our midst. It was a signal to be open to God’s peace.

Psalm 122 was originally sung by pilgrims on the way to celebrate one of Jerusalem’s major festivals. Thereafter, it was used as a song of praise for the city and a prayer for the city’s well-being. We could use a song like this one today...

As I write these devotional words, the news of late has been riddled with bad events. Shootings, hurricanes, nefarious behaviors by power players, racism, and sexism are often the lead stories on our news outlets. We could use a song of peace like Psalm 122 today ...

Peace of the city ...,

Peace within your walls ...,

Peace within [us].

What a blessing to remember during the Advent season that the one whom we prepare to meet is also the one in whom we rejoice, for this One is the very One who will "fill the whole world with heaven's peace." O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

PRAYER

Ever-loving and ever-giving God, we thank you for your peace, which broke into this world in the cry of a tiny babe. We pray that your peace will be known once again, and as the song goes, "may it begin with us." In the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2017

Written by the Rev. Andrew Pomerville, Senior Pastor, The Peoples Church / East Lansing, Mich. / Doctor of Ministry Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:1-25

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be

afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

DEVOTIONAL

"... so that you may know the truth ..."

As a father to pre-teens, I find myself explaining things more than I would like. I used to get away with guiding the children to do or say certain things or to be a certain way, and they trusted my motivation, expertise, and general parental vibe to put them on the right path. Somewhere along the way, my son and daughter lost that naïve ability to accept and now need an explanation.

I can't really blame them. This is what their mother and I have wanted all along. We hope and pray our children will grow into thoughtful, considerate, compassionate individuals who will ask questions as they strive to become the adults God has called them to be. The problem is knowing how to share all that they might need to understand, believe, and become. How do I impart a lifetime of experiences that have influenced my faith, hope, and love? The task is daunting but it is oh so rewarding.

The author of Luke/Acts sets out on a similar journey—one of wanting the reader to believe in the truth of Jesus. And so, in a decent and orderly way, the author puts pen to paper and

creates an account of Jesus that is meant to help the reader grow in faith, just as he/she experiences God anew and afresh each morning.

Let us think this Advent about how we share what we know about Jesus Christ. What stories, experiences, and moments are necessary for another to hear so that they might have a similar theophany with our Lord? Share your worries, wonder, and doubts as much as you offer your trust, hope, and faith. And in sharing the message, see the story unfold anew.

PRAYER

Gracious and ever creating God, help us partner with you in the creative storytelling that helps us grow, learn, and love through your Holy Spirit. Open our minds to find new ways to live in the narrative of your life, death, resurrection and ascension as we further become the members of your Kingdom that you have created us to be. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2017

Written by the Rev. Kimberly Greway, Chief Operating Officer, Foundation of HOPE, and Director of Chaplaincy Services, Allegheny County Jail / Pittsburgh, Pa. / Doctor of Ministry Parish Focus

SCRIPTURE

1 Samuel 2:1b-10

1b “My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

2 “There is no Holy One like the LORD,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

3 Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

4 The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

6 The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.

8 He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and on them he has set the world.

9 “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed.”

DEVOTIONAL

“My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.” The Song of Hannah is Hannah's song of praise to God for her good fortune. After a long and difficult time of waiting, she will finally be a mother and will give birth to Samuel. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Song of Hannah sets the stage for a major theme of the Book of Samuel: the “power and willingness of Yahweh to intrude, intervene, and invert.”

Many have noticed the numerous parallels between the Song of Hannah and the Magnificat of Mary. Some posit that Luke used the Song of Hannah as a framework for the Magnificat: the themes and wording are very similar. The songs of both women rejoice in God's greatness and in God's reversing the fortunes of various groups—the proud and arrogant are humbled, the mighty are knocked off their thrones, the hungry eat their fill, the barren bear children.

In praying and singing with Hannah and Mary, who are anticipating the birth of their children, we join in the waiting that infuses Advent. Each soon-to-be mother praises God not only for her coming child, but also for the radical ways God breaks into the world and overturns our human systems. In this Advent season, let us break forth into song and prayer not only for the good gifts given to us by God, but also for the shocking ways in which God radically transforms the world.

PRAYER

Inbreaking God,
Who overturns expectations,
Makes the barren fertile,
Raises up the poor from the dust,
Guards the feet of the faithful;
Intrude in our lives,
Intervene in our hearts,
Invert our expectations,
All to lead us into your kingdom;
Through your son, Jesus the Christ, for whom we anxiously wait,
Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2017

Written by the Rev. Wayland Coe, Assistant Dean, Cranmer Theological House / Houston, Texas / Doctor of Ministry Eastern Christian Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 126

- 1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
- 3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

- 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
- 5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

DEVOTIONAL

Think of a time when an enormous burden was lifted from you. Call to mind the feelings of relief, joy, and rest. Now think about the Israelites being delivered from bondage in Babylon. Having spent decades under the oppressive rule of Nebuchadnezzar, they were finally freed by the decree of King Cyrus.

Psalm 126, a song of ascent, describes that joy of the dream come true. Mouths filled with laughter and tongues with joy as they rejoiced in the great things God had done for them. With the incarnation of the second person of the blessed Trinity, Jesus, God has done even greater things for us. In and through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God has delivered us from bondage to sin and delivered us from the powers of death.

Like Israel, our mouths are filled with joy as we rejoice in the great works Jesus has done for us in his incarnation. The promise of God's long-awaited Messiah has come to pass, and we are the recipients of his great mercy and love. In his commentary on Psalm 126, St. Augustine wrote, "They have done ill with themselves, for they have sold themselves under sin [as we also have done]. The Redeemer came, and did good things for them." And also for us.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you have done great things for us in sending your Son, our Lord, to redeem us from the bondage of sin and death. Fill our mouths with praises of joy and thanksgiving for the wonderful incarnation of your Son, and grant that we might tell abroad the wonderful works of God. These things we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2017

Written by The Rev. James W. Kirk, Pastor, Valencia Presbyterian Church / Valencia, Pa. / Doctor of Ministry Parish Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
2 Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
- 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
- 4 But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

- 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
- 6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

- 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
- 8 It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

DEVOTIONAL

Most of us who read the Psalms recognize that these words written by David touch and connect to whatever emotions we experience daily or seasonally. It seems that every Advent season is a time of waiting and a time of hope, as these two themes surround us. I have always had more trouble with the waiting than with the hope!

As children, I think most of us had trouble waiting for things: the end of the school year, the summer vacation trip, birthday parties, or the end of this season, Christmas. As adults, I think most of us still have trouble waiting, even though we have improved that skill. The fact that we have lived in an instant-

reward, fast-food, IM world for some time hasn't helped! In fact, this impatience has filtered into our faith lives so much that somehow, someday, we might realize we are missing God's purpose for the wait.

In Psalm 130, David reminds us of the wait, the hope, and why we should be patient. The truth is that we wait for the divine redemption from the only One who can provide it. What if that redemption is already beginning during the wait? I discovered this quote:

"The secret of patience is to do something else in the meantime." -Anonymous

"Meantime" during this Advent season, take your mind off the wait and do those other things that David refers to: the crying out to the Lord and the dwelling in His word.

PRAYER

Lord God, waiting for you can be so difficult for us. We have waited and are waiting to be prepared to receive you in your Word. Help us to cry out to you, out of whatever depths we find ourselves, as we wait. Every day, even now, remind us of your hope in Jesus Christ. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2017

Written by the Rev. C. Mark Scott, retired pastor and hospice chaplain, having served in Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee / Inverness, Fla. / Doctor of Ministry Parish Focus

SCRIPTURE

Galatians 3:15-22

15 Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, "And to offsprings," as of many; but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. 17 My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

21 Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then

righteousness would indeed come through the law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

DEVOTIONAL

The right word often escapes me! I can think of a similar word, but it is not the word I really want to say because it is not precise. I stir around in my mental files and I ask my wife. The exact word comes to my rescue!

We are having a fence installed around our backyard so we won't have to worry about Rio, our dog, wandering loose. We told the fence-installer that we had ordered "quikrete" online and asked him if we should do the same with the fencing. But he felt better about going to the store personally and picking it out so that if any mistake was made, it would be his.

Specificity is so important. With the Galatians Paul gets specific. A will says exactly what it means, he reminds them. The inheritance is to Abraham and to his "descendant" (not descendants). The Law was added "430 years" after the Promise of inheritance, so the Promise holds precedence over the Law.

Advent is a time, I think, to be specific about our faith: Who exactly is this One to Whom Mary gives birth? Why is He born in such a way? Why to these parents? Why was Jesus born when He was? This Advent season, make specificity your spiritual discipline.

PRAYER

Lord of Advent, Your coming into the world changed everything! Help us to focus on what the Scriptures tell us about who You are. Help us to continue to learn about our salvation and grow in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. To You be all Glory!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2017

Written by the Rev. John Pickles, Minister, St. Andrew's Annan and Brydekirk Parish Churches / Anandale and Eskdale, Scotland / Doctor of Ministry Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 60:1-6

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;

but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

DEVOTIONAL

In these deepest nights of the year, it is marvelous to consider God's hallowing of darkness. God does not destroy darkness. Instead it becomes the canvas upon which God's illumination is made brilliant. The light of light, the Christ-child, arrives in darkness to bring enlightenment to the world. Yet God resides in darkness, and we see as in a mirror dimly. We cannot comprehend the light.

Only at the end of days will we truly see face to face, when the dawn of Christ returns in glory. No more hidden motives, fear, secrets, or grudges, all will be drawn into the light. We will be seen, as Oliver Cromwell once boldly asked to be painted, "warts and all!"

Darkness is God's gift to us. It hides our shame and covers our nakedness. But for God the night is as bright as day. God sees our totality, loves us, and by grace covers us so we may prepare to receive the light.

God comes to us in Jesus so as not to put us to shame like a faint candle in the night, which is easily snuffed out. But one day he will come in full radiance as the King of kings ushering an untameable blaze of joy.

PRAYER

O Light Eternal, to whose dawning humanity lifts its darkened face, shine on us gathered who wait for you. Pierce the shadows that hide us from you and illumine our gloom of unbelief. May everyone who watches with us see the Son of Righteousness arise, with healing in his wings.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2017

Written by the Rev. Graham McWilliams, Minister, Comrie and Dundurn Parish Churches / Comrie, Perthshire, Scotland / Doctor of Ministry Reformed Focus

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 96

1 O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
6 Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.

10 Say among the nations, "The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity."
11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
12 let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
13 before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

DEVOTIONAL

Having come to this glorious day of Christmas, I'm sure that many of us have, through the time of Advent, sung our hearts out in praise celebrating the promise of God in Jesus, our Lord. And it is right that we have done so, for, as the psalmist affirms, God has accomplished "marvelous works among all the people" and our response must be to share this good news with those in whom we come into contact. We need to remember, however, that God's actions are worldwide as God brings forward His great plan for all creation, because most of what God is achieving we don't hear about.

Bad news sells newspapers, Good News doesn't. So let us not be dismayed by the reports of terror, violence, and crime—the

rise in what we may consider ungodliness. These incidents are the local signs of our troubled times and the opportunities that lie at the heart of Christ's mission for us, today. Only when we are confident in proclaiming that "The Lord is King" will those who are caught up in these acts of aggression come to realize that there is more to life than personal gain—and turn to God for life's fulfillment.

Celebrating the birth of Christ gives humanity a new beginning, a renewed hope for the future. Today we may faithfully encounter many challenges, but at His return the bounties of our faith will overflow and the glory of the Lord will lift us up beyond our understanding. Rejoice. Amen.

PRAYER

Faithful God, fulfiller of promises, open our eyes to Your goodness and lift our hearts beyond the immediate that we may experience a taste of Your eternal Kingdom. May our voices continue to sing of Your greatness and our lives reflect Your love of us today and in the year to come. Amen.

The scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

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