

# ADVENT DEVOTIONALS



*waiting for the light ....*

Daily scripture readings for Advent 2020

Huntingdon Presbytery

## ADVENT....

Advent is taken from the Latin word meaning, “coming”. Christians use the time of Advent to remember the coming birth of Jesus as a babe in a manger in Bethlehem. It is a time of preparation and waiting for the birth. These daily scripture readings can prepare our hearts to receive Christ, read them with your family to celebrate! As you do, remember an Advent yet to come that we await with hope.

Committee on Presbytery Life  
Huntingdon Presbytery  
Pennsylvania

## Acknowledgement

This year again COPL has asked pastors and elders to ponder and write, and they have not disappointed. It is a delight to read the different perspectives. Thank you for your contributions!

Thanks also go to those who helped with compilation: Carl Campbell, Susan Ferguson, and Pat Roller. God bless you all.

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<sup>9</sup> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” <sup>10</sup> See, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. <sup>11</sup> He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

In this year of uncertainty, fear, and disillusionment, what more do we need to hear than “Here is your God!” This is especially true when it is accompanied with the picture of the Lord as the Good Shepherd who holds tight to his people and leads them gently. This is of great comfort to those who are struggling to make sense of what is happening in our nation and world today.

This passage goes beyond this picture of protection and care to remind us, who are God’s people, to go high on the mountain to proclaim the Good News. This is not some wishy-washy type of telling of a cute, soft story. It is to be shouted from the mountaintops with strength and without fear! “Here is your God!”

**Prayer:** O Lord our Shepherd, hear us when we are fearful and frightened. Hold us tight. Then, give us the power to shout the Good News of Your arrival from every platform, podium, and mountaintop available to us with winsome grace. Amen.

This passage, probably written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., speaks to a people whose capital has been laid in ruins (think one of the west coast wildfires or Gulf Coast hurricanes) and who have been taken captive and carried off by Cyrus's armies to Babylon or even Persia. Yet, Yahweh says, a messenger ("how beautiful...the feet of him who brings good news...") comes announcing peace and salvation. They are at hand, not coming a decade from now. The Israelites and we are (will be, yes, but ARE now) Yahweh's chosen servants. God has not abandoned us to COVID-19 or the flu or homelessness. God has redeemed us. Let us open our eyes and turn our ears to our communities. Our God reigns over heaven and earth. Right now! Take the time to read this short passage out loud, to yourself, and see the power it can make in your spirit for hope and joy. "Break forth into joy...you waste places..."

O God! Break through the shells we have erected against our neighbors and against You. Let us regain our voices to sing for joy and our eyes to see that You have redeemed us. Yahweh is the Almighty God of heaven and earth and our lives. Let us rejoice!

Amen.

Today's Scripture tells of God's encounter with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they ate the forbidden fruit. Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. It was the first instance in the Bible, but certainly not the last, of people playing the blame game.

I like baseball stories, so here is one from decades ago that may or may not have actually happened: A newly hired Major League manager finds two envelopes left for him by his fired predecessor. One is marked, "Open first if things aren't going well." The other is marked, "Open second, but only if things are really bad." Sure enough, the team begins losing games it should have won, so the manager opens the first envelope. In it is a piece of paper on which is written, "Blame your predecessor." So, the manager does just that, and buys some time. But the team continues to lose, and the players start complaining publicly, putting intense pressure on the manager. Then he remembers the second envelope. He opens it up. In it is a piece of paper on which is written, "Prepare two envelopes."

Even when initially successful, shifting the blame rarely works for long. That is because the problem isn't solved, it is merely passed along to someone else. In the case of the baseball manager, maybe he needed to use his bullpen better or shake up his lineup. Adam and Eve's problem, however, is more basic and fundamental, something theologians call the human condition. We all are prone to messing up – doing what we ought not to do and not doing what we ought to do – and then we make matters worse when we blame somebody else for our failures.

We are not perfect, but it turns out that we do not have to be. This Advent season we are awaiting the birth of the Christ, the one who not only is blameless but who willingly accepts the blame that is rightly ours. In doing so, Jesus provides God's answer to the problem of our human condition. We are freed to be the people that God intends us to be. We do not have to play the blame game anymore.

PRAYER: Thanks be to the God who comes into the world not to blame, but to save. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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

<sup>5</sup>And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The year 2020 has been a difficult year for many people. You get up in the morning and turn on the TV or radio for the news. The longer you listen, the more afraid you get. It has been stay home, wear masks, this many people have gotten positive COVID-19 test results, more people have died. You feel like life is like taking a ride on a rough, back road.

As the months go on, you are still told to stay home, not getting together with anyone. No, you cannot go play with your grandchildren. No, you cannot continue the weekly knitting group gatherings. No, no, no. This time it feels like you are on the top of a mountain alone.

You think it cannot get worse, and someone you care about gets admitted to the hospital. Once again, you hear no, you cannot visit them. This feels like a very deep valley that you cannot climb out of.

These verses from Isaiah sound like they are talking about life in 2020. Thankfully, the first verse is talking about comfort for God's people. Verse four talks about lifting the valleys, making the mountains low and the rough places plain. God wants us to know that if you are one of His people, life will get better. We should take comfort that He is with us no matter what difficult place we are in. We are not alone. Take comfort.

When I read Genesis 15: 1-6, the account of God's promise to Abram of having unlimited descendants, my mind immediately goes to the story of Jesus' birth in Matthew 1: 18-25. Why? There are several similarities in the stories. God came to Abram in a vision. God promised Abram descendants greater in number than the grains of sand. Since Abram and Sarai had been trying unsuccessfully for years to have a child, it seemed not just unlikely, but also impossible for that to literally happen. Abram could only think that his servant Eliezer would inherit from him. However, when God assured him, Abram believed the impossible at once and followed God's directions. God credited it to him as righteousness; Abram was blessed among men. Nothing is impossible with God!

Likewise, when we read of Jesus' birth in Matthew, we are told that Joseph was engaged to Mary, but they had not been intimate. When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he decided to break off the relationship. But an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, another kind of vision, telling him the impossible – Mary had been visited by the Holy spirit, not a man. Joseph believed and took Mary as his wife. Nothing is impossible with God!

We see that God can do anything. God came to us in human form, Jesus. Just as Abram, Joseph, and Mary heard God's word and acted on it, we, too, are to hear the familiar story with freshness this year. We can follow our belief in the truth we celebrate with action. We can tell others the Good News every chance we get. Remind loved ones that we give gifts because God gave us the first gift of Christmas, Jesus. Reach out, even during this unusual time of Covid-19, to the homebound, sick, or lonely. A card or call can mean so much. Faith is not real until it is acted upon. Have a blessed holiday season. Merry Christmas!



One of the great joys of newlyweds is moving into their own home. It may be an apartment, or a new house. Or even a single room in someone's house.

But it is their own place. It is, at first, a place of emptiness. It may be a dusty place and have the paint of the prior resident. However, as they paint, make minor repairs and other changes, the home is reborn into something very meaningful to the new couple. It is a safe haven from the weather, a place of comfort after a long, hard day. It begins to fill with love as their relationship grows.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, God speaks to His people as they prosper, grow, and seek new adventures in their lives. He promises them that Moses is not to be the last prophet; others will be sent for the benefit of the people. God's prophets deliver messages when the people have strayed. They show them the way back to the path of God.

Our lives are often like that of the young newlyweds; we start with minimal assets. Our rooms and cabinets – minds and our thoughts – are empty. As we add clutter to our lives, we sometimes miss the underlying joy of a simpler life.

The prophets remind us of the joys we had in our simple, uncluttered room; when there was room for God. Before we pushed Him out with distractions. As the prophet Isaiah would later tell us: therefore, the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him.

God does not seek to add guilt to our lives, condemning us for our failures. Instead, He seeks to lift us up from our frustrations, seeing His way for us through the words of the prophets.

May we make room for God in our lives today. There is plenty of space available, right in the middle of our room where He will illuminate us.

**89** <sup>1-4</sup> Your love, God, is my song, and I'll sing it!  
I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are.  
I'll never quit telling the story of your love—  
how you built the cosmos  
and guaranteed everything in it.  
Your love has always been our lives' foundation,  
your fidelity has been the roof over our world.  
You once said, "I joined forces with my chosen leader,  
I pledged my word to my servant, David, saying,  
'Everyone descending from you is guaranteed life;  
I'll make your rule as solid and lasting as rock.'"

### *The Message*

This passage speaks of God's covenant with David and us. As we begin this new year, may we remember God's covenant with David. No matter what joys or sorrows we encounter God is still God.

### ***"Selah"***

In other versions of the Bible this passage ends with the word Selah. Some scholars suggest it is a musical direction. Others say it may mean Amen, showing the importance of the previous passages. Still others suggest it is a time to pause and reflect.

### **Prayer**

Dear God,

Today and throughout this Advent remind us to stop and reflect on your many promises throughout scripture. Remind us of the greatest promise provided by your son Jesus.

*Amen*

Day 8

Isaiah 11: 1-10

“Then a shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse...the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him...He will gladly bear the fear of the Lord...He will judge the poor justly...Calves, young lions, and year-old lambs will be together, and little children will lead them...the world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord...At that time the root of Jesse will stand as a banner...”

When I read this passage, I long for the time when “the root of Jesse will stand as a banner”, when justice and peace will reign among men and beasts. This is a promise from God and so, it WILL happen. Reading this passage provides me with a beacon of light shining in times of darkness.

Do you not look for the time when “the world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord”? It is coming.

Jesus came as a baby and lived 33 years on earth. We remember this Advent as we approach the Christmas season, but there is another Advent, the second coming of Jesus.

Let us all prepare and be ready for the second coming. Be kind, do good, love your fellow man, proclaim the Good News by word and deed so that truly the world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

It was a Sunday in December when a young farm boy came home from Sunday school. He opened his Bible and he reread the story of Jesus being born in a manger. That farm boy helped his dad tend to the dairy cows. He fed hay to the cows; and as he distributed the hay, his thoughts were of the baby Jesus born in a manger.

He thought, "If the baby Jesus could be born in a manger in Bethlehem, could a baby Jesus also be born in the manger where I feed cows?" The thought lodged in his mind.

Fast forward twenty years, to when that same boy, now grown, sat quietly contemplating in a seminary classroom. He had just learned to reinterpret the manger story to understand that the baby Jesus born in the manger can be born in one's heart. As Zechariah notes, "He will rebuild the Lord's temple". Jesus came so that each of us could be reborn. Your heart becomes a throne where He can rule so that there will eventually be a peaceful understanding among us all.

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the world's most famous telegram agency, Western Union, announced that it was discontinuing services. Over 150 years of hand delivered messages in distinctive yellow envelopes and written in distinctive brief prose were a fast and reliable means of sending important messages. At times a telegram brought news of the death of a loved one. This was especially true during wartime and the arrival of a telegram was met with a sense of dread. At other times a telegram brought joyous news of a marriage or the birth of a child.

In the Old Testament, God used the prophets to bring important messages of hope and judgment. In the third chapter of the Book of Malachi, the prophet tells of God's promise to send a messenger to the people of Israel who would come to prepare the way for the Lord. This prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist who announced one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11) In Malachi, the prophet also says that the coming Lord will be like a "refiner's fire." This wording can lead us to think in terms of the final judgment. However, when we take a second look at the passage, we can catch a glimpse of hope in what seems at first to be a message of despair. When Malachi speaks of a refiners fire, he is describing the process where a *silversmith would a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up in order to remove any impurities. The silversmith had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined for if the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. Therefore when Malachi and John speak of the fire, they are telling us that God does not seek to destroy us, but to prepare us so that we are pure in heart and to remind us we are of great value in God's sight.*

When we begin looking toward the coming of the Son of God each year at Advent we have all the stories of Jesus birth and the events surrounding it. They are mostly wonderful stories of human warmth and tell us of the human side of who Jesus is. John does not have any of those stories in his Gospel. Instead he begins with who Jesus is on the divine side of his nature.

In the beginning was the Word, John begins. This Jesus, who we worship and claim as savior, is the Son of God who has been since the beginning of all things. Jesus, the Son of God was with God and was God. John claims that the one born in the manger in Bethlehem was, and is, God who came to be with us and show us God's love and forgiveness. Jesus was always there and all came into existence through him and in him all things exist. The one who grew and discussed theology at 12 years of age in the temple, the one who worked as a carpenter in Joseph's shop, the one who taught and healed was the very one who was there at the creation of all things.

In this Word, in this man, God came to the world to bring us life, to bring the light of God to our darkness of our sin and rebellion against God. The Light of God, Jesus Christ, came to bring the light to the whole world, to all people! That light is shining in the world through the creation that came into being through Him, through the lives of all the people who have come to accept Him as Savior and Lord, and through the Scriptures that point to Him through power of the Holy Spirit.

That light of God reaches into the darkness of our world, of our lives and illuminates our world so we can see God's love and turn to God for forgiveness and salvation. No darkness can overcome this light. He is the Light of the world and we find who we are meant to be as we come into relationship with Jesus.

This is the One that John the Baptist proclaimed. He came to prepare the way for Jesus. As we go through this season of Advent we should be remembering who Jesus is. He the Son of Mary and Joseph, born in Bethlehem, and the Son of God, the Word of God made flesh.

We are preparing for the arrival of the Son of God again during this season of Advent. The world we live in today has so much darkness in it. People are struggling with so much: the need for a safe place to live, lack of healthy food, inability to receive adequate (if any) health care, suffering from loneliness, feelings of poor self-worth, and so many more things. While it is easy for us to see on television and on the computer about the struggles of other people around the world, it is important for us to realize that there are people in our own communities who are struggling as well.

In today's scripture reading, John tells us that the "true light" is coming into the world. You and I know that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the "true light". When I read these verses, I hear them as a call to evangelism. I do not mean the "door-knocking" type of evangelism, but the life-living type of evangelism. We have seen the "true light" and are called to let the people know about it. For those who struggle during this season we, followers of Christ, can show them the light that Jesus brought to this world. We should become a torch that can lead someone to that "true light". You and I have been adopted into God's family. Let us live our lives in ways that will lead others into the same family.

Mark, student and friend of both Peter and Paul, writes directly and boldly. The beginning of the message of Good News, for Mark, goes back to the Old Testament prophets. Mark shows that Jesus is not here to replace the Old Testament, but that he is here as fulfillment of prophecy. It is plain to see, in Mark's eyes, that the prophets and all the other Old Testament writings showed God's love and promises. This love, these promises, are evident in the life and person of Jesus the Christ.

Have you been out on one of the mountain hiking trails in central Pennsylvania? It is easy to breathe hard having to climb up some of them, and it is not always easy going down. The topography of Israel is somewhat like our area, a lot of ups and downs. The only things Israel is missing are the trees and water. What would it be like to climb up and down our hills daily to work, as the brick makers from Mount Union did on the Thousand Steps?

Unlike 2000 years ago, now we depend on engineers to make our paths straight and driving easy. Back then, if Isaiah is shouting, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness", who is supposed to be doing the leveling? Malachi says we do not need to struggle climbing up and down and clearing the bush; God's messenger will prepare the way for us to meet Jesus face to face!



This is how Luke's story begins.

They were good folks. They lived responsible lives and worked hard to do the right thing. Their families had been well known and respected for generations, and they themselves were faithful, upstanding citizens. He was committed to his work and diligent, she was a pious and astute partner. And yet there was a sharp longing within them, often suppressed - a tug, a hope, a dream, a scab - never quite soothed by the routine of their ordinary, beautiful, well-lived lives.

Our longings are sharper and closer to the surface than ever in this year of disaster and dissension, fires and fury, pandemic and panic. We go about our lives as best we can, trying to do the right thing, and yet still yearn for healing and wholeness in the broken places and empty bits of our own lives, and for the world. We long for the fulfillment of our unique dreams, and for the salvation of the world. Like Zechariah and Elizabeth our longings are both personal and universal. Their hope was for a baby, *their* baby, but also for *the* baby, the one who was to come and set things right.

This is the beginning of our story too, in this Advent 2020. Good folks going about our regular lives, trying to do the right thing, and yet yearning, longing, aching more than ever for God to come and save us, and set things right.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Scripture is like a beautiful tapestry woven with many different threads, some gray, others brilliant and filled with light. In these few verses, Luke begins to relate the first quiet tremors of a colossal event which would fulfill the prophecy of Joel. Through Christ, the Spirit of God would be poured out upon all flesh.

The scene opens when Zechariah, priest and descendant of Aaron, is selected to offer the yearly sacrifice in the Holy of Holies. In the middle of this holy event, an angel appears before Zechariah saying, "You and Elizabeth will have a child. 'You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.'" Stunned, disbelieving for a moment, Zechariah becomes mute until his son is born.

The role this child is called to fulfill is briefly described: "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." Suddenly, in the immensity of a call dealing with the world, we are dealing with family relationships.

Today, living in the midst of a pandemic, parents and children are living and working in close quarters, thrust together in new and demanding ways that are often strange to this generation. Children can be very observant, noting their parent's strengths and weaknesses, testing limits and their ability to love. In turn, parents must see that this child, so demanding of time and energy, has been created in the image of God with a gift or gifts to be developed and offered for the healing of God's world. Too often parents try to create their child in their own image and what the world deems "successful." Childhood should be a time for children to discover the wonders of nature, to learn to solve problems, to use their imaginations and discover the gifts God has given them to further God's kingdom here on earth.

For a moment, think of the relationship between John and his father Zechariah. As priest, Zechariah was schooled in all the laws and details of Temple worship. Robed, orderly, organized, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. His son, filled with the Holy Spirit lived in the wilderness near the Jordan River with long hair and a hairy tunic gathered by a leather thong, living on honey and locusts, baptizing and preaching repentance to thousands.

Family dynamics! Could father and son be any different? God must smile at times. Yet, together they, filled with the Holy Spirit, prepared the way for Christ and his gift of the Holy Spirit as each in his own way worked "To turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous."

Called together as the family of God, Jesus said we are to love God with our minds, our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves. Bound together through the Holy Spirit, Zechariah represents the work of the mind, and John the passion of the heart, both united in bringing people to a living relationship with God.

It is an unfortunate reality of our human condition that when faced with God's doing a new thing in our lives – even if it is something we've yearned for God to do – we often respond with skepticism and doubt. Instead of enthusiastically embracing the new possibilities God sets before us, our response is often like Zechariah's in Luke, "Really? How do I know?"

Zechariah, a learned man, a priest in the Temple, an elder of the people is visited by the angel Gabriel and told that after years of waiting and yearning, he and his wife Elizabeth were to have a son. The angel's words are full of promise, full of hope. And Zechariah's response is, "How will I know that this is so?" As a result of his skepticism, of his doubt, Zechariah becomes unable to speak. He can't tell those gathered outside the Temple that he has been visited by an angel, he can't share with them his joy, he can't tell them – or presumably his wife – what God has in store for their son and the role their child will play in preparing the people for the work of the Lord. It probably would have been better if Zechariah had checked his attitude at the door of the Temple.

But God's promises do not depend on our response to them. God's work in John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the Savior happened despite the doubt of Zechariah. How much more joyous would *our* lives be if we responded to God's new possibilities in our lives and in our congregations with open arms and hearts instead of skepticism?

Gracious and surprising God, open our eyes and our hearts to the possibilities you have in store for us, that we may find our voices and proclaim the new thing you are doing in this world through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent is a time of faith and eager anticipation. Luke also tells the story birth that is, in some ways, a prequel to the nativity of Christ. This child is also foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and so John the Baptist is called the forerunner (Mark 1: 2-3, John 1: 19-28). His story is told, in part, in the other gospels, but only Luke describes his birth. Luke is said to have been a doctor, so he would have been acquainted with anxious parents and challenging births. Parents Elizabeth and Zechariah were childless, and Elizabeth is said to have been now too old to have children (Lk 1:6). When the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah the news and declares that the baby should be named John, the father-to-be questions the news and is compelled to be silent Lk 1: 13, 29).

Our reading today recounts the celebration after the baby's birth and preparation for naming the new child. Zechariah is still not speaking, so when assembled friends and family assume that the baby would have a family name, it is Elizabeth, unusual for the time, who speaks up and announces that he shall be named John.

Zechariah confirms the name, first in writing and then, now able to speak, aloud. His next words are a song of praise to God. The word spreads widely and people wondered "What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him" (Lk1: 66). The narrative of John's birth and naming is a chronicle of doubt, prayers answered and hopes fulfilled, and new life and new names.

Dear God, give us the grace to hear You with faith, to follow Your will and speak Your praise. Give us new names and new lives in this Advent season.

One day when Zechariah was in the temple, he was visited by the angel Gabriel. The angel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have a son who was to be named John. Zechariah also would be unable to speak until after the birth. Our scripture takes us to the eighth day after the birth, and Zechariah and Elizabeth are taking their baby to the temple for his naming. The priests on duty that day assumed the child would be named Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth remembered the words of the angel and said, *No; he is to be called John*. The priests looked to Zechariah. Still unable to speak, he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, *His name is John*, and immediately, Zechariah was able to speak.

Zechariah then recalls years of God's sovereign work in history, including the promise of a Savior Who would redeem His people. The Messiah would come in Zechariah's lifetime, and his son John was chosen to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. John paved the way, and Jesus' ministry began and changed the world. The Good News would be spread – through so many people, individual to individual, paving the way for others to believe. We would not be believers today if someone had not paved the way for us to believe! This Advent, may we pay this forward, and may we – and all who hear- be truly transformed to serve the Lord in all we do!

<sup>10</sup>Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, <sup>11</sup>“Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” <sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test.” <sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.

How many times have we tried someone's patience? I did it as a child, now as a parent and grandparent, as a co-worker, as a boss; how has that worked out for me? It usually has not. We end up in a struggle or situation that hurts others' feelings. It doesn't allow us to get the things done we need, and want, to get done. Despite our shortcomings and impatience, God is there to answer our prayers, give us guidance and continues to lead us to salvation through the birth, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We have that assurance because of the sign given in Isaiah.

Lord, we thank You for Your patience and grace. We ask that in this advent season, we have the patience to wait for Your guidance and the vision to share the gift of the birth of Your Son, our Savior, Immanuel. Amen

The angel Gabriel had visited both Zechariah to tell him of his barren wife, Elizabeth's ensuing pregnancy, and young Mary to see if she were willing to play her part in the Holy Spirit's conception of the Messiah. It is no coincidence that Gabriel five hundred years before gave Daniel account of the time of the Messiah's coming. I love the sequence of Gabriel's visits because they point to the over-arching plans of God. Our Lord has always had a plan for the redemption of the world. God's plan included Daniel, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary and Joseph.

As Christians we may never be visited by Gabriel or any other angel. But like those that were, we are in line to be used by God for the completion of his love narrative for the world. Mary could have said, "No!" that day. It was obviously a choice. Just as many say no to the call and nudging of the Holy Spirit today. But think of how incredible it is when God uses us for good. It can be messy, like being a virgin, suddenly pregnant, with questioning fiancé. But with any obstacle also comes so many blessings and glimpses of glory as God's story unfolds before us.

The challenge this Advent, during a pandemic and an uncertain political environment, is not so different from Nazareth years ago. It is to remain open to those Spirit nudges, and be willing to be used for good.

Mary visits Elizabeth. As she enters and greets her cousin, Elizabeth feels her baby kick and she is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Blessed is Mary! Blessed is Mary's baby! Blessed is Elizabeth because Mary is visiting! Blessed is Mary for believing the Lord's promise!

Amazing! Do you feel blessed? In the midst of today's chaos, do you look at your blessings? You are alive another day. You are healthy. As a friend of mine says each day, I am vertical! God blesses us in many ways each day, but do we see it? Do we look at the surrounding circumstances and take our cues from what we see? We should look up and remember we are children of the King!

Mary and Elizabeth were both anomalies, both pregnant by the touch of God, but both were having sons who would change the world and lose their lives. The Holy Spirit prompted Elizabeth to speak of being blessed.

We are blessed this Advent as we look forward to Christmas even in the time of uncertainty. God has sustained us. God has given us His Son and promised us eternal life. We who are blessed should share with others about our blessings. Because we are children of God, we can help to bring calm in a storm and a path in the wilderness. Be a listening ear to the distressed or a helping hand to the needy, share your blessings.

Lord, help us to realize we are blessed so that we can be blessings to others.



In the silence of an empty auditorium, a young girl stands in a circle of light upon a darkened stage. She opens her mouth and begins to sing. This is no pop ballad or saccharine love song. Hers is a song of praise and vindication. She sings of the proud being scattered, the powerful being humbled. The lowly being lifted, and the hungry being filled. She sings of justice.

The clarity of her voice and the power of her words belie her size and youth. She sings with her head held high, as defiant lyrics pour from her heart. The young girl's spirit and wisdom come from someplace outside of her, someplace deep and mysterious. She sings alone. Or so it seems.

On the edge of the circle of light, another figure appears. She is older, and looks at the singer with familial affection. She is glowing, even as an apparent jolt in her abdomen causes her to grasp her belly and release a joyfully surprised laugh that surprisingly harmonizes with the girl's song.

That harmony intensifies as the circle of light grows wider, revealing more women, many of them older, clutching children like treasures, delightfully joining their voices in backing up the young girl's song. You recognize them – Sarah holds Isaac, Rebecca holds Jacob, Rachel holds Joseph, Hannah holds Samuel.

Suddenly you realize that you are on the stage with these women and children. You are singing harmony behind the young girl. And there are many others, too. Men, women, and children unencumbered by the boundaries of time or distance. You all blend your voices behind the young girl. She is the lead singer in a chorus of all those whose dreams and yearnings are given voice in her words. She is singing your song. She is singing our song.

Saving God, whose Spirit in the blessed Mary evoked her song of praise, enable us to join her in glad celebration of joy and anticipation, that we, like her in humility and devotion, may also sing of Your justice and Your divine will. Amen.

This well-known passage predicts the coming of the Christ Child, a beacon on a hill. The Israelites interpreted this to mean many different things, from Messiah to warrior king. It begins by telling that all who walk in darkness will be brought into the light. Those in darkness means sinners, the poor, those living with illness and hardship ... In other words everyone! What a wonderful thing to be told! Our suffering, no matter the cause, will be brought to an end by the birth of the Messiah!

Next Isaiah compares the greatness of this event to God vanquishing the Midianites, former long-time enemies of Israel. Midian's army was large and well-armed, but God gave the Israelites victory despite their small number and few, simple weapons. It was an important event in the long history of the Israelite people. The burning of the warriors' boots and garments signifies an end of war and the beginning of eternal peace. Eternal peace. Don't we all still pray for that every day? Peace for all God's creatures.

Finally, Isaiah prophesies the coming of the Baby, the Son of God, a descendant of King David, who will reign with Divine authority. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. What a joyful prophesy to people who felt downtrodden and hopeless, and what joy to all of us.

Only the power of God could bring this about. The Peace of Christ be with you in the Advent season and always,

Joseph does not get enough credit. While Mary is a superstar in the Christmas story, we often treat Joseph as a secondary character. After all, Mary had the dramatic encounter with the angel Gabriel, gave us the Magnificat, and carried our Lord in her womb for nine months, while Joseph is “just the stepdad.”

But Joseph is so much more. Verse 19 tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. When he discovered that Mary was pregnant, he planned to break the engagement quietly so Mary would not be disgraced publicly. When the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and filled him in on what was happening, he listened to God, took Mary as his wife, and ultimately named the baby Jesus. This was no small task. Think of all the gossip that must have been swirling around Joseph. Imagine Joseph being laughed at when he tried to explain his fiancé’s pregnancy to his family and friends. Joseph trusted God.

Joseph was a carpenter, a common man, but God used him in an extraordinary way. He can do the same with us if we, like Joseph, say yes to God and welcome the Messiah into our lives.

Prayer: God of wonderful surprises, during this season of Advent, help us to bravely follow you like Joseph did and welcome the Messiah into the world and into our lives. To you be all honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

These words are so familiar that many of us can recite the first few verses by heart (usually in the King James English!) *“In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their cities to be enrolled. Joseph also went from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, called Bethlehem, for he was of the house and lineage of David. He went with Mary, his betrothed, and she was great with child. While they were there, the time came for her to be delivered of her child.”*

The great story of salvation shared throughout the Bible comes to its culmination with the simple words, “the time came for her to be delivered of her child.” What a strange way to bring about salvation! God, coming to earth as one of us, and not just any one of us – a baby, totally helpful and dependent upon his parents for nurture, food, warmth and life itself. That baby would come to know all that we know – challenges, joys, struggles and triumphs, before entering into a ministry of teaching, preaching and healing, then, ultimately, going to the cross and Resurrection. Think of that; the God who creates and sustains the universes came to earth as a baby, comprehending the human condition. That is awesome!

We might expect the Good News would come to those who could broadcast it from the rooftops. But no, it came to a group of shepherds who remain nameless to us to this day. Shepherds, while essential in that culture and many cultures today, were not among the rich, famous or even literate of their day. No one would listen to shepherds except maybe their family members. Yet God Almighty chose them for the first announcement of the Messiah’s birth. “Why?” you might ask.

Was God pointing to a special love for ordinary people, working poor people, even those whose work caused them to smell of sheep? Think on that too. Who would God choose today if Jesus were to be born in 2020? God chose the lowly, the hard working, not quite outcast but almost, for the very first message about Jesus’ birth. Who would God choose now?

Who announced this amazing story of salvation? God’s heavenly angels. We don’t know what angels looked like (all paintings to the contrary), but we know they

were awe-inspiring, even fearsome. They were and are messengers from God to earth. They provide a bridge between what is too holy for our eyes to behold and our mundane perspective. What would it be like to see not just one angel, but a whole multitude of the heavenly host? That too would have been awesome!

The shepherds reacted to the angelic message. “Let’s go see what they told us about!”, and they ran into Bethlehem, which, by the way, means “house of bread” – the place of nourishment. The angels glorified God, and caused those who received their message to want to give God glory too. The shepherds found Mary, Joseph and the baby, and shared the message of God’s glory with them – there is an irony there, since Jesus *was/is* God’s glory! Then they left, still praising and glorifying God. Are there moments in your life when you just can’t help but praise and glorify God?

Finally, the quiet moment: it says, “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” May you ponder this Scripture anew, and treasure what God has done for us in your heart.