



# EMMANUEL

< GOD WITH US >

// Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit //

2016 Advent Devotional



## PREFACE

For Advent

**Come, O come Emmanuel, you are the way, the truth and the life; you are the true vine and the bread of life. Come, living Saviour, come to your world which waits for you.**

A Collect for the First Sunday in Advent

**God of Israel old and new, write in our hearts the lessons of your law; prepare our minds to receive the gospel made visible in your Son Jesus Christ.**

A Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent

**Almighty God, you sent your servant John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of your Son; grant that those who proclaim your word may so guide our feet into the way of peace, that we may stand with confidence before him when he comes in his glorious kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Judge and our Redeemer.**

A Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent

**God of all hope and joy, open our hearts in welcome, that your Son Jesus Christ at his coming may find in us a dwelling prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.**

A Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Collects are from *A New Zealand Prayer Book*

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Readings are from the Revised Common Lectionary (Year A) for Sundays and from the Daily Office Lectionary (Year 1) for Monday through Saturday.

## Sunday, November 27

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

**Romans 13:11-14**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

*“Instead, put on the Lord Jesus...”* Romans 13:14a

I am writing this meditation in October, a few weeks before our national elections and six weeks before the beginning of Advent. I am not sure how the elections will turn out. I do not know how the public will have reacted to the results. I am sure some will be ecstatic and some will be outraged. Many will feel the ambivalence that has become part of our civic life. That is sad and a loss for our nation.

For many of us it is easy to think “These days we live in are worse than all others.” A quick survey of history proves that is not true—the Black Plague, the Battle of Stalingrad, and the partition of India after World War II, to name just a few. Today is much better than those horrific times in human history, but we are still far from that peaceable kingdom that Isaiah described. Yet as people of faith we have hope.

So what is our hope? We hope in God who loves us. Period. God’s love does not prevent sorrow and even horror. God’s love does provide rescue and friendship and a way forward in which we can repent from our own wrongdoing, care for one another, and challenge those who continue to harm others (sometimes using God’s name to do it).

Paul described this as putting on the “armour of light” (Romans 13:12b) or putting on “the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14a). In other words, suit up for the challenges of this life. The life of faith is not for the fainthearted. As Christians, we are to stand up for the love of God as the governing force in the universe—not fear, not hatred, and definitely not using religion as a justification for either. That will mean forgiving people who harm us and praying for people that we do not understand. It will also mean working for justice and seeking to protect people that others might disparage or demonize.

This Advent season is a good time for us to remember these important values of our faith. However the election turned out, the Lord is still our Governor. Our job as American citizens and as Christians is to participate in public life by working for love and justice in God’s world. Let us pray:

*Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect, First Sunday of Advent, BCP p. 211)*

## Monday, November 28

**Isaiah 1:10-20**

**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

**Luke 20:1-8**

*In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. As a result, you yourselves became an example to all Christians in Greece.... For wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God... for they themselves keep talking about the wonderful welcome you gave us and how you turned away from idols to serve the true and living God. 1 Thessalonians 1:6-9*

By our deeds we are known and judged. To me this message is repeated in one way or another in all three readings and is kind of scary. In Isaiah, God is really angry at Israel for their transgressions—by their actions or inaction they are being judged. Yet, he says return and I will make your sins like snow. Return to me. In Thessalonians there is praise for the wonderful witness of these people to their God and his son Jesus. They are known for their example of love in action. In Luke, Jesus refuses to have his authority be judged by the leading priests and teachers of the law by questioning them on their opinion of the authority of John's baptism. So what does all of this have to do with me?

These readings tell me that my actions matter, and that I have a choice on how I will be known and how I should live. By my actions, I am known and judged. I may not really like this, but in my heart I know that this is true. My peers will know me by my actions, and so will God. Thank heavens for Grace. While it is not my style to save the world, it is my style to be friendly, to be grateful, to attempt to love my neighbor (as difficult as this sometimes is), and to love my God and his son. I am working on the “not being judgmental” part every day. But, by my actions, I am known—for good or for bad.

These readings tell our church the same thing as well. What is it that we as a church can do to show others God's love for each and every one of his people? What do we as a church have that we can give, share, and do for his people that will show his love? We are being judged by our actions or inaction. So as we look at ourselves and our pledge to “Build to Serve,” let us open our hearts and serve with action and purpose, so that we can be known as a giving hand of our Lord. So that others will say, *“For wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God...”* (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

*Grant us a spirit of love that shines to all of your goodness and mercy. Embody us with a spirit of giving, and enable us to serve you in all that we do. In Christ's name we pray. Amen*

**Tuesday, November 29**

**Isaiah 1:21-31**

**1 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

**Luke 20: 9-18**

*Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV)*

Get proximate. I recently attended a talk by Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, at St. Luke's. One of Bryan's calls to action for the group that was there was to get proximate. He talked about how we need to move beyond our own circle and our comfort zone, and get close to those who are different from us to help us gain a greater understanding and love for others. This is hard for me.

Bishop Wright called those who heard Bryan's talk to take action, just like Paul, Silas and Timothy did during their time in Thessalonica. In order to share God's love and message with others, they got up close and personal. They were proximate even though it wasn't easy. They were driven out by opposition but continued to share the good news.

I'm working on different ways to take the action that Bryan and Bishop Wright asked of us. One way that the church has helped me with this action is through our children's center ministry at Arrendale State Prison. Sharing our lives and learning from the women and children who are in this program is pretty far outside my comfort zone and my normal day-to-day life. But it's so wonderful too. To see these families reunited, to hold onto each other, to play together, and to serve them, even for just a few hours. That's what it's all about. This is one way that I can show my love for my neighbor, by serving them and sharing our lives together. To be right next to each other.

*O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Wednesday, November 30

**Isaiah 2:1-11**

**1 Thessalonians 2:13-20**

**Luke 20:19-26**

Advent is calling us to newness, to notice, to see something we don't always see, and to rejoice. "Always we begin again" (Benedict wrote before he was a saint). I love beginnings: First grade with new shoes AND a new lunch box, graduations, marriages, all family births, and any story that begins "Once upon a time...." The waiting of Advent was an extra special time for our family in 1957 because we were waiting for the third of our four children, and he was born on Christmas Day! He used to think the Christmas lights were just for him!

Isaiah, who saw the Lord high and lifted up, is sharing his vision and issuing a call. Like Martin Luther King Jr., "I have a dream that one day ...." Isaiah calls us to become a peaceful nation, "beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks," and walk in the Light of God's provision. Moses said, "Here I am." Let us shout, "Here we are," and begin with peace of mind and join others to form communities of peace.

In the Thessalonians passage, Paul is assuring his new converts that God is real and the message they received is from God, not from man. Don't listen to the detractors, believe your transformative experience, and claim the Glory that is the essence of God revealed in you. I hear LIVE YOUR LIFE!

Luke portrays Jesus as discerning the evil intention of the pious question of the spies, who had been assigned by the Chief Priests to trap Jesus, so that they could bring him before the governor's authority. They asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus answered with two questions: "Why do you tempt me? Whose image is on the coin?" The spies answered "Caesar." Jesus calmly replied, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The spies were silenced and defeated. The peace of God, which Luke emphasizes in the heart of Jesus from the very beginning, is always in the questions Jesus asks and the answers he gives.

We always sing "Peace On Earth, Good Will Toward Men" at the end of Advent on Christmas Day.

**Thursday, December 1**

**Isaiah 2:12-22**

**1 Thessalonians 3:1-13**

**Luke 20:27-40**

*For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty. Isaiah 2:12 (NSRV)*

Confession time—I had to read all three of these passages multiple times before I heard the message I was meant to find in them. If I am being truly honest, I can say that the Isaiah passage meant little to me the first couple of times I read it. In fact, I had dismissed it and was well into writing an entirely different devotional about the Luke verse when something told me to read all the verses again to be sure I had found the message God wanted me to hear and share with you this day. I began with a fresh reading of Isaiah 2:12-22 and immediately knew with the very first line in the reading. I wasn't meant to be writing about Luke. I was to be prayerfully reflecting on my own pride and loftiness. I am now absolutely sure that I approached this devotional all wrong. I tried to find the message that would enable me to write something truly inspirational. If I am completely honest with myself, a bit of me wanted everyone to eagerly turn to the index to discover "who wrote these words of wisdom." But upon reading Isaiah again and after having written my first devotional, it hit me. Reading the Bible with the idea of looking for something that might inspire someone else can actually be dangerous. It can easily turn into using the Bible for one's own devices instead of God's. I was using the Bible to find what might impress someone, and we all know how Jesus felt about those that tried to impress people. Whenever we read the Bible with the attitude of "let **me** teach **you** how to be a better person," we run the risk of preaching in the most negative sense of the word. Ironically, this "I have the answers" way of thinking always turned me away from religion. It is only when we read God's word with an attitude of humility that we can hope to find the specific message that God is sending to us personally. In conclusion, I note that I only know my message to be true for me alone, but I am sharing it with you in the hope it speaks to one or more of you as well. A message that says the Bible is subtle, its lessons do not always jump out at us immediately. On this day, I understand why it is important to read and reread scripture in a way that I had never before truly and fully appreciated. In a way, that allows me to hear what the Spirit is saying to me.

## Friday, December 2

**Isaiah 3:8-15**

**1 Thessalonians 4:1-12**

**Luke 20:41—21:4**

*He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on." Luke 21:1-4 (NRSV)*

Of all the nameless women in the Bible, this most sacrificial widow is one whose name and background we would dearly love to know. As we read the gospels her devotion always touches our hearts, and we are grateful that Jesus noticed her sacrifice and has preserved her story in the safekeeping of His praise and Word.

Imagine Jesus looking over the crowd of people flinging their offering into the baskets, intent on announcing to the crowd their generosity. Then a poor widow approaches the basket with an attitude of complete surrender and offers her two coins. How refreshing it must have been for Jesus to see someone so recklessly generous!

When I read this I am reminded of how God loves us, recklessly, wastefully with abandon! The ultimate gift from God, the birth of Jesus shows the magnificent love God has for his people. God sent his Son into the world with the full knowledge that he would be crucified on a cross for the sins of the world. Despite the hurt of knowing his Son would die, he gave graciously and abundantly, so that we may have eternal life with him.

As people of God we are called to give abundantly of our time, our money and our talents. Do we? Do we put our whole heart into the task to which we have been called? Are we putting in the time necessary to carry forward his message of time and life? Do we give abundantly of our money just as the poor widow did? We are challenged to give all that we have with reckless abandonment just as God loves us with reckless abandonment!

God has given us all we need. We only need to give back all we have.

*O Gracious God, you have blessed us beyond our imagination through the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ. In this season of giving, we pray that you would ignite our hearts to surrender our financial anxiety and embrace a life of reckless generosity. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we ask that you would mold us into people who act more like the faithful widow. We seek to return all that is yours, trusting that in our reckless abandonment, you will meet our every need. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 3**

**Isaiah 4:2-6**

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

**Luke 21:5-19**

*Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all of Glory there will be a canopy. Isaiah 4:5 (NRSV)*

Our oldest son was born with a cleft palate and was in the hospital for seven weeks. It took the doctors three weeks before they discovered that he would be able to drink using a duck nipple. It took three hours for him to drink one ounce of formula, but finally he was gaining weight. It was the most frightening time of my life. Every day I would walk in the hospital anxious to hold him and love him, but I was also scared to death that I was not “qualified” to be this beautiful baby’s Mom!!

One day as I was walking down the hall to the preemie nursery, I could hear people singing “Happy Birthday.” When I walked in the nursery all the nurses were singing to our son, who was one month old that day. I just cried!! I felt so much love and God’s presence in that room. From that day on I knew all I had to do was relax and love our son and everything else would work out.

*Heavenly Father, I pray that I may always feel your loving presence. In Jesus name we pray. Amen*

## Sunday, December 4

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

**Romans 15:4-13**

**Matthew 3:1-12**

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. Romans 15:4 (NIV)*

When I read this passage, I thought back to all the mistakes of our ancestors. All the wars, crimes, and acts of terrorism immediately flashed through my mind like a slideshow – except I simply couldn't hit pause. In the Bible, mistakes were made, such as when Jesus was crucified, when Absalom killed Amnon, and when David had Uriah the Hittite killed all so he could sleep with Uriah's wife. But there were also victories that inspired others, such as when Jesus cured the incurable, when Moses and the Israelites escaped from the Egyptians, and most famously, when David killed Goliath. All these were written, not only so that we may learn from our ancestors, but that as we learn, we may have hope for the future.

*O Lord, grant us the strength and courage to look towards the future, so that we may be able to change the world for the better and give hope to others. Amen*

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?...I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Matthew 3:7, 11 (NIV)*

When I read this passage, I imagined that the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to criticize John on him baptizing those who came to repent. However, John calls them out on thinking that they are safe from the wrath of God. That's like saying you're safe from a sandstorm when you're in the middle of the desert. No one can escape God's wrath, because God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. John later admits that Jesus is coming and that he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. For me, Jesus is the symbol of repentance. He baptizes those who want to be baptized and forgives those who wish to repent. John is merely a messenger for Jesus, and he knows this. We are all messengers of Jesus, and we must spread the news of the coming of Jesus to all who are willing to listen.

*God, grant us the wisdom to proclaim your message to the willing, and grant us patience to withstand those who are hard of heart. Amen*

## Monday, December 5

**Isaiah 5:8-12, 18-23**

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

**Luke 21:20-28**

*But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light...* 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5a (NRSV)

The world is crying out to us on all sides! “See the violence in the streets! You are not safe! The world is going to hell in a hand basket.” We are surrounded with these voices that make us anxious and fearful.

Anxiety and fear are not new to God’s people. Isaiah saw in his world greed, drunkenness, injustice, and those who would turn morality upside down. Jesus could see a time when the temple would be destroyed and the people would flee from Jerusalem. Many in the early church feared that The Day of the Lord would be a time of great distress.

Advent is the time when we look for light in the darkness of our lives. In the longest, darkest nights of the year, we are reminded that God is with us in all his power and glory, bringing light and hope into our world. We remind ourselves of the light of Christ by sprinkling our dark world with Christmas lights, with candles in our windows and lighted trees in our homes. As you look at all the Christmas lights around you, remind yourself that God sends us the light of Christ to shine in our dark world. Even the tackiest ones can point to that ultimate reality. Because of God’s coming into our world to be with us, we can walk as children of light.

*God of light, shine into the darkness of our world, filling even the shadows with your love. May this be for us a time of seeking your presence in our lives and sharing that presence with a broken world. Amen*

**Tuesday, December 6**

**Isaiah 5:13-17, 24-25**

**1 Thessalonians 5:12-28**

**Luke 21:29-38**

*So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” Luke 21:31 (NRSV Bible)*

This verse from Luke is part of the parable of “the budding fig tree.” I believe that Jesus was teaching his followers, and us today, to be ready. After all, isn’t that what Advent is also teaching us?

Advent, as you may know, is the season of the church year leading to Christmas. For the secular world, it’s the “Christmas season” leading to Christmas Day. Stores, radio stations, houses, and billboards are all “advertising” Christmas. However, Advent is not an “advertisement” for the birth of Christ, but a time of preparation for the birth.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Maybe these are suggestions from God as to how we can prepare and be ready for the Christmas birth.

Simply stated, “Be ready.”

***Signs of endings all around us***

*Speak, O God, your Word among us.  
Barren lives your presence fill.  
Swell our hearts with songs of gladness,  
terrors calm forebodings still.  
Let your promised realm of justice  
blossom now throughout the earth;  
your dominion bring now near us;  
we await the saving birth.*

Hymn # 721, St. 3 – Wonder, Love, and Praise  
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## Wednesday, December 7

**Isaiah 6:1-13**  
**7:53—8:11**

**2 Thessalonians 1:1-12**

**John**

*Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. John 8:7*  
(NIV)

Judgment is everywhere. We all do it, and we are all judged. As a parent, I don't think a day goes by where I am not offered a suggestion, or a criticism, or a look. I'm not sure anyone judges me as harshly as I judge myself, spending sleepless moments reviewing how I could have been better, or what I could have done differently. I am not innocent, myself. I judge people, other parents, or members of society. In some ways, it is a useful tool for monitoring your own methods – if I do this, this is a likely outcome. I will be sure not to do that. Learning from another's example is a form of judgment. I know that I am not unique. We all want to be and do our best. We all want to present our best selves to others and feel beyond reproach. This is an unrealistic goal. No two people have the same ideals or priorities, and so everyone is subject to differences and judgment. We all live in fear of the persecution that accompanies the judgment of others, some more or less, depending on how much you value the opinions of others.

The punishment of the adulterous woman was a political trap set for Jesus. She was put forward as an example, and people were willing to execute her for political motives. Jesus, certainly wiser than us, sidestepped the trap by turning the responsibility to those around him. He acknowledged that, according to the law, stoning was in order. Then he challenged everyone to imagine himself in her situation. It proved uncomfortably easy for them to do. We are all sinners. We are all in need of mercy. We are all deserving of compassion and capable of giving it.

*Lord, help me to spend this season of quiet reflection in confident faith of your grace and mercy. Help me to provide and accept compassion as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**Thursday, December 8**

**Isaiah 7:1-9**

**2 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

**Luke 22:1-13**

*Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. Luke 22:3-6 (NRSV)*

When I read this passage from Luke, I thought of the Lord's Prayer. Deliver us from evil.

*Dear Heavenly Father, deliver us from evil and teach us not to hate because we are all God's children. These things I ask in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen*

**Friday, December 9**

**Isaiah 7:10-25**

**2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5**

**Luke 22:14-30**

*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. 2 Thessalonians 2:16–3:1*

As I read the scripture from 2 Thessalonians, I couldn't help but think of the phrase "it begins with me." Yes, I have great faith that God will encourage my heart and strengthen every good deed and word I say. But that the message of the Lord spreads rapidly and is honored? Well, that begins with me.

While the message can be spread rapidly and be honored through our words, I feel as though it is our actions that will have the greatest impact. We've all heard the phrase, "actions speak louder than words," and I believe that this rings true in the scripture as well.

Through our actions of forgiveness, of finding grace in moments where our patience has been tried, helping those in need, and in accepting and loving those that are different than ourselves, we spread the message of God. Our actions become the memories long after the words have been forgotten. They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel. God can be found in those moments.

But we cannot wait for someone else to come along to do this work for us. As members of the body of Christ, it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to spread the message. It is up to us to forgive, to love, and to find grace. Because as members of the body of Christ, we pray that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it is with you.

*Heavenly Father, grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know Christ and make him known; that we may be the beacon of light in moments of darkness; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 10**

**Isaiah 8:1-15**

**2 Thessalonians 3:6-18**

**Luke 22:31-38**

*Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. . . . Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.*

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 15 (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV*)

I was taught at a very early age by my father that I should work hard and do my very best at whatever I chose to be when I grew up. In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, verse 6, he is talking directly to those that should be working hard to support themselves and the poor in the Christian community, but instead are being lazy. These individuals are routinely hanging around other believers hoping to be invited in for dinner and a place to stay. Paul sternly warns to keep away from them; however, we are not to consider them as enemies, but warn them as believers....

As I read this verse, I thought of the idleness referring to a normal day's work and that I personally work very hard in whatever I do every day, so I was pretty sure I was not the intended target of Paul's message. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that by not doing enough to help the poor, by not going out to do the work He has given me to do, to love and serve Him as faithful witness of Christ our Lord, that I, too, would be and am living in idleness, so the message is in fact for me (and maybe you, too!). I ask that we pray for each other for direction and guidance to help keep each other accountable to work hard to support not only ourselves, but also to help the poor and less fortunate and marginalized.

*Dear God, maker of all that is, you ask that we love you with our whole heart and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. We pray that you will give us the courage to not only work hard to support ourselves, but to help those that are poor and less fortunate than we are as well, so that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life. Amen*

## Sunday, December 11

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

**James 5:7-10**

**Matthew 11:2-11**

*What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? Look, those who wear fine clothing are found in kings' palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. Matthew 11:8-9*

In Honduras, very few people are finely dressed. But many of these people are prophets even though they can't be seen by many as one. These prophets are the boys playing soccer on the dirt patch, stopping to wave at our van with smiles on their faces. They are the small children in Salacuna who push at the gate on their patio to be closer to you, because you will play with and love them. They are the oldest children, who during Sunday services put all their heart and soul into their faith. A prophet is even the chapel where you feel the presence as you climb the few steps into a room filled with quotes from the Bible in Spanish. You cannot understand them. However, you know what they mean. They mean God is here, that God is now. The clothes are rough and so are the people, and they may not belong in a king's palace. But they *are* God's palace, his court, and his angels. You go out to see them acting as prophets by living the word of God, and not only preaching it. They are more than prophets and the Hondurans showed us that. They are the living God of peace and goodwill.

*Let God help us to grow in faith and draw our circle ever wider in his world by preaching acceptance and peace to all who love and serve him. Amen.*

## Monday, December 12

**Isaiah 8:16—9:1**

**2 Peter 1:1-11**

**Luke 22:39-53**

*“I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.”* Isaiah 8:17 (NRSV)

When I began my reading and reflection on the passages above, I kept trying to find a common thread. Surely there was a way to come up with a meditation that could draw all the selections together into a somewhat cohesive piece. I read them over and over, but the only words that kept coming back to me were from Isaiah, “spirits that chirp and mutter,” certainly not words that led me to any sort of uplifting thoughts. Then I realized that there were spirits that had been chirping and muttering in my life and that this was where my reflection must begin.

On August 19, 2016 my younger daughter’s husband committed suicide, and life for her, her children, and our family changed. Here’s where the chirping and muttering started. Susan wondered if she could have done more. I worried about my grandchildren who had lost a father they loved. Everyone in the extended family rallied around, but each person had a different take on what could/should/might be done. I found myself unsure how many times I had repeated the story and to whom. Emotions were all over the place. Plans had to be made; forms had to be filled out; friends had to be notified. Yes, chirping and muttering was everywhere.

Since Brian’s death, however, I have also seen the power of love and community in action. Susan’s longtime friend took a red-eye flight from California to be with her the day of the memorial service. He never left her side. Her church family organized meals, lawn care, transportation, prayers, and visits. ECOHS has sustained Jim and me with prayers and listening. My family has gathered to share stories, support one another in grief, and celebrate Brian’s life.

Why Brian chose this path I will never know, but over the last couple of months the spirits are chirping and muttering less. I have said several times that this event has given me the opportunity to see if I really believe what I say. If I really believe that “All shall be well,” that “Everything belongs,” that “God is always with us,” then I must trust that even in the darkest of days the people of God will not be abandoned. I will remember that when Jesus prayed for God’s will, not his, to be done, “Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.” Surely God will do nothing less for us.

*Oh, God, who never abandons his people, help us to see you in the world around us and in the people you send to us in times of joy and times of sorrow. May we find peace, strength, and courage as we travel the road before us, knowing that you never send us out alone. Amen*

**Tuesday, December 13**

**Isaiah 9:1-7**

**2 Peter 1:12-21**

**Luke 22:54-69**

After reading these scriptures, I couldn't help but feel like Peter after he denies Jesus. How many times have I heard the word of God and brushed it aside thinking, this doesn't apply to me, I can't help, or this can't possibly be true? Denial can be a safe zone and skepticism a way out.

What's more alarming is, as a society, we tend to repeat this cycle of denial. Think of all the things we take for granted today that perhaps 100 years ago would have been laughed at or considered blasphemous. Women can vote, African Americans can serve in the highest office of our country, and we can even fly in the air and beyond! Sometimes we fought bitterly against this progress, denying the spirit that spurred these changes on and even used scripture to find a way out. Like Jesus, many of the leaders of these movements were not fully appreciated in their own time but in the end, change came, progress was made, and we have accepted it. And like Peter, we can look back and say with certainty how the Holy Spirit fulfilled the prophecies of those who would bring the word of God to our doorsteps.

But what about right now? What voices are crying out today to be heard? We hear them on the news, in our communities, and even in our own homes. It is easy to shut off the TV, listen from a distance and shrug our shoulders, and tell those we love "I'll believe it when I see it." The challenge is to break the cycle and to face our faith. First, we must have the courage to listen, ask questions, and understand. We know when someone is speaking with conviction but can we trust their word? Do we have enough faith in God that He can change our life and the lives of all, even in small, meaningful ways? Second, if we have faith in the word that is brought before us, we must support it. We must let the Holy Spirit work through us as we lift up those voices. Lastly, we must give thanks. We must acknowledge and appreciate that we have heard and recognized when the Holy Spirit is working through others.

We cannot, and should not, deny the Holy Spirit a voice and a place in our world, our home, and our hearts.

*May you grant us, oh Lord, the courage to listen, the wisdom to understand, and the faith to acknowledge the Holy Spirit working through your messengers, whoever they may be, that bring voice to your word and action to your works. May we stand resolute in your word, breaking the cycle of denial, and serve as a beacon of Faith to those still searching. Amen.*

## Wednesday, December 14

**Isaiah 9:8-17**

**2 Peter 2:1-10a**

**Mark 1:1-8**

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ” Mark 1:2-3 (NRSV)*

Out in the wilderness, John the Baptist knew someone great was coming. An amazing thing was about to occur in the world – an event that would change everything! It was going to be so momentous, he knew that he had to prepare the people for what was about to happen. He began baptizing people in the Jordan River and telling them that this was a baptism of repentance which would forgive their sins. He was preparing the people to meet their Lord and Savior, the One who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and create within them a new relationship with God.

For us, now over 2000 years removed from this momentous happening, we know the One who came. We know the lessons He taught, the love He bestowed on us and the ultimate sacrifice He made to forgive our sins and to ultimately defeat death and bestow us with the gift of eternal life.

But even with our knowledge of Jesus Christ and the new reality He brought into the world, it is still possible to find ourselves in the wilderness from time-to-time, especially at this time of year when life becomes so busy and hectic. What can we do to find our way out of the wilderness again and into the healing light of Christ? How do we prepare for the way of the Lord as we once again prepare to celebrate the anniversary of His coming into the world?

As our Rector is wont to tell us, a good way to start is to pray. Even if only for a few minutes a day. Take a break from the busy-ness of the season and pray. See if you can hearken back to the “voice of the one crying out in the wilderness.” Listen for what the Spirit may be saying to you about how to make your path straight and to come out of the wilderness and into the Light.

*You challenge us this Advent time, this season of preparation, to put aside our pride and understand our need for repentance, forgiveness and mercy. Less of self, more of you. Preparation for our journey to the stable and beyond. Purify our hearts, sanctify our lives that we might serve you faithfully this day and all days. Amen.*

## Thursday, December 15

**Isaiah 9:18–10:4**

**2 Peter 2:10b-16**

**Matthew 3:1-12**

*Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew 3:2 (RSV)*

The call of John the Baptist echoes across the centuries to remind us that God's reign is about to come. This seems an apt greeting for the season of Advent which means "the coming" but also is a season of penitence and examination. He is on the way – near us, in us, and in the world.

The readings all speak of burning fire, unquenchable fire for those who do not heed the call. Scriptures challenge us to "bear good fruit" or face the consequences. John calls out the Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming for baptism piously thinking the act alone would save them. John notes that they must bear fruit that is "worthy of repentance." Repentance literally means "to turn, a complete change of direction." It is a conversion, a turning to a fruitful life in God.

So what is the unquenchable fire? Is it hell or is it God's persistent knock on the door of our hearts? As Jesus baptizes us "with the Holy Spirit and with fire," we ask what do we need to change in order to be bearers of the "good fruit"?

*Help us to keep our baptismal promise that we will persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. Amen.*

## Friday, December 16

**Isaiah 10:5-19**

**2 Peter 2:17-22**

**Matthew 11:2-15**

*Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Matthew 11:2-6 (ESV)*

Did Jesus ever give anyone a straight answer? It would not seem so. What would be his purpose in seeming to evade a direct response? I imagine that he intended to make the questioner think about the question posed and figure out an answer for himself, thus allowing him to use "common sense" to draw a reasonable conclusion. In essence, what Jesus is saying here is, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it is probably a duck." It would have been so much simpler to just answer, "Yes, I am the Messiah who was prophesied," but that would not have stimulated a consideration of what had been witnessed. Who but the Messiah could have accomplished these miracles!

*Grant that we may recognize the miracles that surround us every day. May we always and everywhere give thanks for your presence in our lives. Amen*

**Saturday, December 17**

**Isaiah 10:20-27**

**Jude 17-25**

**Luke 3:1-9**

*But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. Jude 20-21*

Across all three of these readings, one consistent word stood out to me: **Faith**. Advent is a time of waiting, a time of believing, and a time of excitement. We are awaiting the birth of our Lord, the one that brings the gift of grace. But with his birth, the world was changed, our future was changed, and God asked all of us to have Faith. To build our future upon Faith, believe in him, believe in his son, and believe in our salvation.

This advent, I challenge you to focus on your Faith, to pray, to listen, and to strengthen that which God calls us to do: Believe in him, give grace to others, and accept the grace that is given to you.

*Increase in us, Lord, the faith you have given us, and bring to a harvest worthy of heaven the praise we offer you at the beginning of this new day. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN*

## **Sunday, December 18**

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

**Romans 1:1-7**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

*Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (NKJV)*

I have always imagined God as omnipotent and omnipresent. As I read this passage from Isaiah, I realized that God, born as the infant Jesus, would have been completely dependent on his parents to provide for his every need.

*Grant us God, the gift of your Spirit so we may have a new revelation of the impact of the birth of your son Jesus Christ on our lives. Amen*

**Monday, December 19**

**Isaiah 11:1-9**

**Revelation 20:1-10**

**John 5:30-47**

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11:6 (NRSV)*

The reading from Isaiah is one of my favorites. It is a beautiful poem about the way the peaceful kingdom of God looks. It is the way Christmas always looks to me. I see the season today in much the same way as I did the first year I can remember. At first, of course, it is that “what will Santa bring me” excitement. But that gradually becomes replaced with something else. As we grow, we find ourselves getting excited because we can delight some loved one with something they really want or, maybe, did not even know they wanted! And then, it becomes even more significant as we grow into the knowledge of the true meaning of Christmas – the most precious gift, the gift of the Christ child. It is a time we put aside any disagreements or grievances. It is a time for church, for family, for dear friends, and for traditions. It is, very simply, a time of peace and love.

When I put out the little ceramic pieces of the nativity scene each year, I like to imagine the animals, the angel, the images of Mary and Joseph, the shepherd and the Magi, all gazing with wonder at the tiny infant in the straw. What a wonderful way to teach our children and to remind ourselves about the kingdom.

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7 (NRSV)*

**Tuesday, December 20**

**Isaiah 11:10-16**

**Revelation 20:11—21:8**

**Luke 1:5-25**

*And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And then he said to me, “Write this down for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.” Revelation 21:5 (New Living Translation)*

It has been a difficult year for our parish – losing many loved ones and dear friends as they have gone to be with our Lord. At memorial services we often hear Revelation 21:4 “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

As I reflected on Revelation 21:4 in preparing this meditation, I realized that while I have heard the passage many times, I really didn’t “listen” to it – didn’t let the words sink in. Perhaps I didn’t really want to be comforted by the words. Maybe I wasn’t ready. These have been very dark days indeed.

It’s the next verse that finally made me pay attention – “Write this for these words are trustworthy and true.” In studying the Bible I’ve learned that words like these are a special directive to pay attention. This directive is saying that the previous words are really, really important for you to hear. Listen again. Really hear these words. Pay attention. Reflect. Listen again. These words are trustworthy and true.

These passages from Revelation are really a message of hope. In our faith tradition this is what we want most for our loved ones and for ourselves – to be with God in his eternal kingdom.

Diarmaid MacCulloch in his book, Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years, refers to Advent as an introductory period of fasting and austerity during which the faithful could act out their longing for the Savior’s arrival, making the Christmas and Epiphany festivals all the more joyful – at the darkest time of the calendar when the days are shortest.

And so, in these dark days, we wait to celebrate Christ’s First Coming, the birth of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We wait, also, for the Second Coming of Christ, as described in Revelation. Jesus, the Light of the World, coming into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life and hope – especially hope about our place, and the place of our loved ones, in God’s eternal kingdom.

*“O come, O come Emmanuel”*

## Wednesday, December 21

**Isaiah 28:9-22**

**Revelation 21:9-21**

**Luke 1:26-38**

*Therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not panic."*  
Isaiah 28:16 (NRSV)

The prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of Judah and specifically Jerusalem during very uncertain times. Much of this passage for today is difficult to comprehend and accept – as it most likely was for the people of Isaiah’s time, also. In the middle of this passage, the Lord says that He is laying a sure foundation—with a precious cornerstone. Trust and do not panic. Hold to the moral guidelines that have been taught and build upon these to strengthen the social order with justice and righteousness as God intended. The change that is coming will not be easy.

Centuries later, the writer of Revelation is given a vision of “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:10). Now presented as the bride, the wife of the Lamb, Jerusalem has the glory of God and this description is breathtakingly beautiful. In Luke, we see the bridge between the prophecy of Isaiah and the revelation of Christ . . . the fulfillment of the promise in the announcement of the birth of Jesus. Mary was greeted by the angel Gabriel, most likely as she was going about her daily life. Understandably perplexed, she listens and accepts this incredible message with a statement of obedience: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

There is hope and comfort in Mary’s calm response. When the angel departed from her, she immediately set out to prepare for what was to come with what she knew at the time. Mary was faithful with that which was entrusted to her. We are also the servants of the Lord. Just as Mary, we go about our daily lives. Just as the people of Judah, our daily lives are in uncertain times. The words of assurance spoken to the people of Judah in Isaiah’s time encourage us to trust and to hold firmly to that which we already know is of God. The trust and obedience of Mary is an example to seek and understand the will of God. He is and always has been at work laying the cornerstone and the foundation. The Lamb is coming – may we be faithful as we wait.

**Thursday, December 22**

**Isaiah 29:13-24**

**Revelation 21:22—22:5**

**Luke 1:39-48a(48b-56)**

*And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Luke 1:41-42 (NRSV)*

Elizabeth knows exactly what's happening, yet she speaks with a great show of humility. She is filled with the Holy Spirit. I wonder why this account of the "birth announcement," which occurs chronologically eight or nine months prior, shows up in the lectionary three days before we celebrate Christ's birth? Why now after four weeks of contemplative expectation, preparation, and renewal? How often over these past four weeks, referred to by some as the season of "Christmas Crazies," has our process of renewal and preparation been sidetracked? The passage from Isaiah warns that our worship can degenerate to lip motion learned by rote while our hearts are distant. I would offer that, perhaps, we should pause now and reset our "renewal."

Let us pause and renew our faith in what has been spoken to us by the Lord. Pause and listen ... with patience and humility ... as we wait with joyful expectation the coming of our Lord Jesus. Both Elizabeth and Mary pondered why the Lord looked with favor upon them his lowly servants. And they rejoiced!

The same gift is here waiting for you and for me over two thousand years later. Pause and ask God to open the windows of our heart and allow the Holy Spirit to blow through. Renew our faith and spirit as we await the long expected Jesus. Then come to the Christ-Mass renewed, rejoicing and with thanksgiving.

**Friday, December 23**

**Isaiah 33:17-22**

**Revelation 22:6-11, 18-20**

**Luke 1:57-66**

*“Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; they will see a land that stretches afar.”*  
Isaiah 33:17 (ESV)

This reading is full of promise and hope. The scripture in Isaiah motivates the reader by laying out all of the prosperous things that come when we obey God and stay away from evil. It can be seen that not only will we be provided with our basic needs, but that we will also see all of the beauty that God has to offer for the rest of our lives. A lot of times we get caught up in all of the cruelty in the world and we begin to lose sight of what God has planned for us. This reading is a reassurance to the fact that God wants us to know that we are loved and protected. With this in mind, we know that we can't hesitate and we need to start trusting God's divine power now. God sees deep into our hearts, and Revelation 22:7 tells us that Jesus will come to deliver us quickly and suddenly.

*Cover us Lord from the things in our lives that can distract us from trusting you whole-heartedly. Help us to live by your word – knowing that you are aware of our well-being at all times and that you will always catch us when we fall. In your heavenly name we pray, Amen.*

## Saturday, December 24

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

**Revelation 22:12-17, 21**

**Luke 1:67-80**

*To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 1:79 (Book of Common Prayer)*

We're almost there. We've been anticipating the birth of Jesus for these weeks of lengthening nights, and at long last, we can count the hours until Jesus' birth is proclaimed.

But first we hear the words of the *Benedictus* from Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah is overflowing with joy. He has miraculously regained his ability to speak as he defies the cultural norms and names his son as instructed by the angel who foretold the child's birth.

Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and cannot contain his delight. He erupts with this song of thanksgiving. He gives thanks to God for the coming Messiah, the living fulfillment of the hopes of God's people; then announces the future work of his son John, who will be a prophet to his people and prepare the way for the Lord.

The miraculous births of John and Jesus usher in the time of a new exodus, a new beginning, for God rescues God's people with God's own hand. Never before has God intervened in the world in this way! The world encounters a new dawn with the birth of the incarnate Word.

Today we are invited to join our voices with Zechariah to proclaim the greatness of the Lord, to announce in word and deed the miracle of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Today we are invited to listen closely, for our Lord is knocking at the door to our heart, patiently asking for us to open ourselves to receive his loving gift of grace.

Will we take the time during these final hours of anticipation to stop and pray? Can we take a moment to recognize that Jesus is reaching out to each one of us?

Our Lord and Savior invites us to turn to him and receive his gift of salvation, for he was born in this world to deliver us from the bondage of darkness and the shadow of death, and guide us into the way of peace.

*Oh blest is Christ that came, in God's most holy name.*

## CONTRIBUTORS

### First Week in Advent

November 27.....	The Very Rev. Keith W. Oglesby
November 28.....	Joanie Anderton
November 29.....	Lauren McDonnell
November 30.....	Martha Wayt
December 1.....	Kathy Bochonko
December 2.....	Julie Wilson
December 3.....	Sharon Linsley

### Second Week in Advent

December 4.....	Jaden Ahadzi
December 5.....	Peggy Bryant
December 6.....	Jeff Daniel
December 7.....	Shannon David
December 8.....	Bill Kukarola
December 9.....	Anonymous
December 10.....	Mark Bohan

### Third Week in Advent

December 11.....	Colleen Norris
December 12.....	Karen Allen
December 13.....	Anonymous
December 14.....	Cathy Schlecht
December 15.....	Beth Jones
December 16.....	Alice Bryan
December 17.....	Shannon Darke

### Fourth Week in Advent

December 18.....	Mark Matson
December 19.....	Donna Cross
December 20.....	Janice Davis
December 21.....	Dorinda Rausin
December 22.....	Marty Benson
December 23.....	Will Murray
December 24.....	The Rev. Bonnie G. Underwood