

COME

BEFORE

WINTER

2022

THE ADVENT

READER

FIFTH AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



DEAR FRIENDS

We are delighted to share this fifth edition of our Advent Reader. The booklet offers prose and poetry to accompany you through the season as we prepare for the Nativity of the Lord.

Once again, the selections in this Reader were selected and edited by Kathy Henderson. This year Kathy has brought together Advent reflections and poetry from our current pastors, along with compelling (and surprisingly timely) messages from our history. Look for a selection from the Fifth Avenue Archives every Wednesday, and a Christmas Day prayer from a beloved former pastor, the late Dr. Kenneth O. Jones.

**OUR DEEPEST THANKS
TO KATHY AND TO ALL
OF OUR CONTRIBUTORS.**

From all of us at First Avenue Presbyterian Church,
we wish you a blessed Advent.

Timothy Palmer Curl
Interim Director of Communications & Development

Sunday, November 27

COME BEFORE WINTER

Scott Black Johnston

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. Do your best to come to me soon. ...Do your best to come before winter.

2 Timothy 4:6-9, 21

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Over the next four weeks, we will make our homes and our hearts ready for the baby born in Bethlehem. The rhythms of Advent are very much like other times of preparation. We clean and decorate. We open the doors of our hearts, rummage around and start pitching old cartons of resentment, anger and pride. We start our journey toward Christmas with serious stories and sober hymns. Real faith isn't an "opiate" that numbs us to the world's troubles. Real faith tells the truth.

This Advent, our first truth-teller is the Apostle Paul, who postmarked a letter from prison—possibly the last letter he ever wrote—to his young helper, Timothy. I bet Paul would be astonished to discover that the early church took a letter composed during a dark time in his life and stitched it into our holy book. The text is messy, as Paul vacillates between confidence and insecurity, between sounding prayerful and sounding petty. His final words to Timothy will break your heart: "Do your best to come before winter."

How can anyone who has ever felt tired and discouraged not nod at these words? Here is Paul the Apostle—a man who trusts deeply in God—facing soul-crushing adversity. Does he rise above it with supernatural poise? No, he does what any normal person would do, he cries out for his friends. Of course, those early Christians kept Paul's letter, copied it and passed it to their friends. It is a cry for help—sacred, human and true.

Come before winter. Come today and not tomorrow. Come when called by those in need. Do not be in love with the world. Do not delay. It is Advent, my friends. In this holy season, we wait for God. And in this holy season, we cannot forget those who wait for us.

Monday, November 28

GOD'S FAMILY GATHERING

Jonah So

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." Isaiah 2:2-3

If you're anything like me, you love your family—that's without question. But you may also find yourself heading into the holiday season hoping for the best but expecting a bit of drama from your loud uncle or your eccentric cousin. Whether you feel excitement or dread at the idea of holiday get-togethers, Advent initiates a time of looking forward to God's family gathering.

Isaiah describes a huge, diverse collection of people with one thing in common: They have gathered on a mountaintop to learn God's ways and then to walk in those ways. This "family" will be of one mind: They will seek the way of the Lord. Contrast this to the time and energy you and I spend trying to force our will upon our family and friends, because we are convinced our way is best.

God's family gathering offers a perpetual invitation to go up the mountain. This image is important, because sometimes we don't feel ready to respond to God's invitation, just as sometimes we wish we could pass on family gatherings when we're not in a place to pretend everything is okay. But rather than the arbitrary judgments handed down by us or by our relatives, God establishes rules based on love, compassion and tenderness for his children.

Imagine a world where we do not stand at the door and let people in based on our prejudices. Rather, God, who created and loves us, will be the one bringing the family together. This is the gathering we dream of. Advent allows us to await the day we can marvel at and celebrate our differences, rather than be divided by them.

Tuesday, November 29

SURPRISE!

Kate Dunn

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Matthew 24:36-37

Matthew invokes the story of Noah's ark at the end of his gospel, telling of another apocalyptic, world-changing event that will come upon us like the flood in Noah's day: the coming of the Son of Man. And it will be a surprise. Even Jesus doesn't know what that day or hour will be. Most of us haven't built arks we can bring our families into for shelter from terrifying storms. And yet Matthew urges us to prepare, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Just pondering what we already know about Jesus' life and teaching is surprising enough. Born as a homeless baby; grown into a teacher, commanding us with divine authority to acts of radical forgiveness, sacrificial giving, an astonishing new concept of neighbor and a mandate to love our enemies—how much more shocking can God get? As long as we have even the smallest faith, we will never stop being surprised by the presence and power and passion of God.

So, in this first week of Advent, how can we prepare for Christ to come again? In 13th-century England, a young priest named Richard humbly fulfilled his ordination vows after being elected bishop of Chichester. He walked through his diocese barefoot, confronted clerical abuses, insisted that priests perform sacraments without pay, and focused his ministry on preaching and teaching people of all classes. Richard of Chichester composed the following prayer, which has been passed down in varying forms through the centuries:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given me, for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.

We will not know how or when Christ will come again. But we can trust that the surprise will be good news, from our God who is Love, and we can prepare by inviting our loving redeemer, our good shepherd, our Lord Emanuel, into our hearts, into our homes, into our lives, hour by hour, day by day.

From the Fifth Avenue Archives

Wednesday, November 30

YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK

John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1945

As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. Proverbs 23:7

Deep down in human personality, the thoughts a person habitually thinks fashion his [or her] character. This brings to mind certain very important reflections.

The first is this: **We should be careful always to keep our thinking constructive.** If we can only believe that God has a purpose for us in life, then we shall harness all our thoughts, our dreams, our plans and our talents to this desired end. Therefore, be careful how you think!

Second, we should resolve to indulge only in thoughts that are beneficial to the body, mind and spirit. When Christ-centeredness, rather than self-centeredness, is achieved, we are transformed. Our basic thoughts become not fearful, but courageous; not despairing, but hopeful. We do not say, "I know that I will fail." Rather, we begin to say, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."

Finally, we should expel negative emotions that are destructive of our well-being. It is not just the dictates of Christianity, but common sense and healthy-mindedness demand that we eliminate from our minds poisonous thoughts of envy, hate, vindictiveness, jealousy, unforgiveness, malice, grudge-bearing, pride, anger and fear. The only way a negative thought can be displaced is through the reception of a greater, more powerful positive thought.

As we journey through Advent, the important questions for each of us are these: *Will my Savior come to me this Advent season? Will his spirit flood every area of my life and be reflected in the inner thoughts that express themselves in conduct?* When we enshrine Christ in the inner citadel of our lives, our hearts, our thoughts, our emotions and our desires are motivated by his spirit, and we enter upon the more abundant life which he came to impart.

Thursday, December 1

THOSE WHO BRING LIGHT

Scott Black Johnston

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:67, 76-79

While they rarely appear in Nativity scenes, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, are part of the Christmas story. When John (who was “a baby” way before he was “the Baptist”) is born, his family’s neighbors are amazed. “What do you know, the elderly couple next door have brought a child into the world!” The neighbors also worry. They size up the child’s parents and ask, “What will become of this baby?” In the first chapter of Luke, Zechariah gives an answer: “John is the fulfillment of our dreams, and that’s not all,” he says. “This baby will proclaim God’s dreams to the world.”

He will give us all the gift of light.

In Scripture, the very first words uttered by God are “Let there be light.” Light is creation’s opening act. It marks the start of cosmic order. It is our blazing sun. It is a mammoth ball of plasma in which elements are fused—in which creation continues. There is at least one point on which the ancient Hebrews and modern physicists agree: We cannot talk about the beginning of the universe without first talking about light. To the people who populate the pages of the Good Book, light was important and powerful. It could save you. So, naturally, “light” entered the people’s poetry and their theology. “Your word,” says the psalmist, “is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path.”

What does Zechariah mean when he says that his son will bring light to the world? He gives voice to a precious dream—a vision so dear to the priest’s heart that he has spent his whole life afraid to say it aloud. The baby on his knee gives him courage: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.” This Advent, I encourage you to bring the light.

Friday, December 2
ACTIVE WAITING*Werner Ramirez*

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. Matthew 24:42

During this first week of Advent, some of us are ready for baby Jesus to be born. And yet even as we wait for the holy infant, the texts and themes of this season take us beyond his birth, beyond his death and resurrection, and bring us to a place of waiting for the day when Christ will return to fully restore God's kingdom here on earth. We begin Advent not with a cute, cuddly baby, but with the reality that there are pain and hurt in this world. We wait with anticipation for Christ to return—and I believe it is an active waiting.

In August 1991, when I was five, my family moved to California from Guatemala after my father received death threats for his work with a Christian organization that served poor and indigenous people. It took 13 years to get our green cards; we almost got deported in 2003, during my senior year of high school. Through it all, we waited, patiently and actively. My parents took jobs and paid taxes. My dad was treasurer of our Presbyterian church, and my mother was a deacon. The in-between times could be tough: I remember the pain of not going on a mission trip to Mexico because I would not have been able to come back to the United States. Finally, in 2004, we became permanent residents. When the immigration officer stamped our passports, our waiting was over.

Advent is about actively waiting for God—or, better yet, actively working with God in anticipation of Christ's return. We wait for a time and place when our bodies are not hurting. We long for a time in which violence is no more. We cry out for a time when people not only are saved, but safe. What do we do in the meantime? We actively wait. We are alert, and we work for justice and for peace. We help extinguish the fires of violence and hatred.

As we light the candle of hope on our Advent wreath, we do so in the hope and expectation that Christ will come again and make things new. We actively wait, and we delight in the good gifts that God has given us.

Saturday, December 3 • A Poem for Advent

COME ON HOME

Sarah A. Speed

We all know the feeling—
the shaky ground,
sinking sand,
water-is-rising,
sun-is-fading feeling
that makes steady breathing
an entire miracle,
and holding back tears
a marvel in and of itself.

And when those days come,
I call my parents.
And I call my church,
and I call my friends,
and they say in unison
what God has said
from the very beginning,
which is, “Come on home.”

Is there anything more healing
than an open door?
If you're seeking sanctuary,
if the waters are rising—
listen.
It may be hard to hear,
But God is always saying,
“Come on home.”

Sunday, December 4

SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

Scott Black Johnston

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4

The book of Isaiah is a familiar companion to Christians at this time of year, but that doesn't mean it is sedate or saccharine. God, declares the

young prophet, is frustrated with the land of Judah. God looks down and sees injustice. But after criticizing the nation for its violent ways and neglect of those in need, Isaiah casts an alternative vision for the world.

In this vision, the very topography of the earth changes. A mountain grows underneath Jerusalem, raising the city to such a height that its spires can be viewed by all other nations. It is a beacon. And sure enough, all the people of the world, enemies and allies alike, rush to God's mountain. Together, the nations toss swords into the chutes of heaven and out the other side comes farming equipment. "Go now," says God, "and garden! Turn the planet back into Eden."

It is a powerful and provocative vision. In fact, the prophet's vision is so good, so idyllic, so wonderful it may give us jaded, don't-sell-me-an-empty-promise people reason to pause. Will humanity ever turn swords into plowshares? After all, Isaiah wrote nearly 3,000 years ago. How much progress have we made over the last 30 centuries in reducing violence?

Isaiah tells the people this vision, because he wants them to do something with it. Right after Isaiah casts the vision, he says, *O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

In other words, while we are waiting for the mountain to rise, we had best get busy. God calls us to embrace a larger vision and allow it to permeate every aspect of our existence. Peace—and I do actually mean *world peace*—depends on people who first can negotiate hurt feelings and lingering grudges in their day-to-day lives. Isaiah's message is simple: God is going to bring about peace. Until that day, we must hold heaven's blueprint for harmony in our hearts. It will nudge us to pick up a rake and garden while we wait.

Monday, December 5

THE LORD'S HERO

Jonah So

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ... He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. Isaiah 11:1-4

Do people still believe in and hope for heroes? Absolutely! We all long for a larger-than-life person who will step forward and give us what we yearn for, professionally and personally. In Isaiah 11, the prophet uses opposing

images to say that Israel's hero will come from an unlikely place. A shoot is a symbol of hope because of the potential life associated with it. A stump, on the other hand, will never grow back into a beautiful tree. Yet Isaiah tells us that a shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse; a hero will emerge from a place nearly impossible to fathom.

This hero will be different, because God will be present in him. I imagine that we all have experienced something in our lives that led us to say, "God did this." As rational as we may believe ourselves to be, something happened that we attributed to the hand of God rather than to a more common source. Isaiah describes his hero in precisely those terms, writing that "the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him." We are limited in our senses and knowledge, but the hero of God is not. He will do things differently, judging with equity and righteousness, serving justice to the wicked. Isn't this someone we would wish to be our leader?

Advent reminds us that our hero came and showed us God's heart and mission in the ministry of Jesus. I believe he will come again, and the promise of Isaiah will be kept. And because I believe this, I want to be a part of actively waiting for this beautiful time to come. All of us can play a part in ushering in God's kingdom. We do it when we forgive and refuse to seek retribution toward those who have betrayed us. We do it when we bring clothes to people who are cold and provide a meal when they are hungry. Every day, we can look for shoots springing forth from stumps. Let us seek and serve as we wait for the return of God's hero.

Tuesday, December 6

MARY'S POWERFUL "YES"

Patricia Kitchen

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." ... Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Luke 1:30-31; 38

Once, in the womb of an ordinary woman, God appeared, and Mary trusted. Luke's gospel reveals Mary as an understated, quiet revolutionary who pondered the angel Gabriel's request with a furrowed brow and said, "OK." My understanding is that there was a period at the end of her sentence rather than an exclamation point. But Mary said "yes" to God's imagination, which makes the impossible occur; "yes" to God's intended revolution of love; and "yes" to God's vision of a just and compassionate world.

Proverbs 3 tells us to "Trust in the Lord with all your heart"—with your entire, aching, dreaming, yearning heart—"and do not rely on your own

insight.” Can we, like Mary, trust in God’s imagination? Can we trust in God’s intended revolution of a love that is not always rational? Can we trust that the tidy and the traditional are good, but not always what God intends? Some days it feels so hard to live with God’s constructive ambiguity. But though we may have tried, we cannot tame God, because God’s truth is scary and messy and honest and real.

Mary reminds us of the power of God’s message to turn contrary families, systems, traditions, rituals and even doctrine upside down. Mary’s honest “*Whaaat?*” to Gabriel is foundational to our own honest questions, our honest mistakes. Our understanding is limited. We must seek wise voices. Listen. In all our ways, acknowledge the divine Spirit of God. And that Spirit, holy and surprising, will go before us, urging, encouraging, celebrating, sustaining.

Is there something God is asking of you this Advent? Each of us is called, by name, to sometimes dangerous dreams. Dangerous, because God can turn our hearts inside out. Mary, the revolutionary mother of God, listened to God’s strange request. And, believing that God was with her—*within her*—she said, “OK.” What is your “OK” to God today?

From the Fifth Avenue Archives

Wednesday, December 7

OVERCOMING WARTIME WORRY

John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1944

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

Psalm 42:5-6

As we approach another Christmas, there are visible signs of tensions and worries that are undermining mental poise and serenity. People are afraid of what the new year will bring for themselves, for our country and for the world. Here are some practical suggestions for overcoming wartime worries.

First: Live one day at a time. If you load tomorrow’s worries on top of today’s, they will crush you. Plan your day, and face each task calmly as it arises. As Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Second: Become the master of your circumstances instead of their slave. Keep your mental poise. Never run away from difficulties. Face them. When a person’s life is garrisoned by faith in God, misfortune cannot break his [or her] spirit. It is not what you possess but who you are that brings happiness and peace of mind.

Third: Devote what time you can to helping other people. When we become concerned about the problems of others, we have far less time to worry about our own. There is solace and healing in useful labor. All around us there are tasks crying out for willing hands, and the busiest people are the happiest people.

Fourth: Remember that the person who fears God is freed from every other fear. When the Bible speaks of “the fear of God,” it means awe, reverence, trust and confidence. Faith in God delivers us from the tyranny of fear. That was true of Jesus, whose trust in the Heavenly Father was absolute, so that worry and fear were utterly foreign to him.

Fifth: Keep inviolate a period of every day when you read God’s Holy Word and invoke his blessings on yourself and others. It is not a luxury but a spiritual necessity to find time to be alone with God. A prayerless life is like a well gone dry rather than one replenished by inexhaustible springs. Begin the day with an inspiring verse of Holy Scripture, and it will return to you in times of stress. If your mind is fixed constantly on your worries and troubles, then you will be a disquieted and distraught person. If your mind is fixed on God, you will be kept in perfect peace.

Thursday, December 8

PONDERING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Scott Black Johnston

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.”
Luke 1:30-32

Every once in a while, someone will ask me what I think of the virgin birth. If I am in a hurry, I typically respond with: “Why do people get so hung up on biology when reading Luke chapter 1?” You know who doesn’t obsess over biology? Mary. Mary’s mind goes somewhere else. It is right there in the text: The angel speaks with tender care. “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.” Mary is perplexed by these words. She ponders these words. These are the sort of words that can fill a heart with courage.

Nothing in her day-to-day life has prepared Mary for the possibility that God might have the slightest interest in her. And then *bam!* Gabriel shows up with the good news Advent trumpets: God, who has always had a hand in turning human history upside down, is still making unconventional choices in an effort to save the world.

The angel's words percolate through Mary and lift her spirit. You can hear it when she speaks again. The next scene in Luke's gospel is Mary singing the Magnificat. She opens her mouth and wraps her tongue around all kinds of impossible stuff:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Is the most impossible thing in the story of the annunciation the baby? Or is it Mary? Can we separate the two? I don't think so. And I don't think you can tell the story of Christmas without pausing to acknowledge the One who seeks out ordinary people and ordinary moments to let us know how much we are loved, and to enlist us in activities that will surely change the world. This is the gift Advent hands us—we who are battered by pandemic waves and discouraged by life's turns. Advent says, "Pay attention. You, too, have found favor with God."

Friday, December 9

JOSEPH'S STURDY FAITH

Patricia Kitchen

When [Jesus'] mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife.... She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ... When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. Matthew 1:18-21, 24

How often has God's voice nudged us to take a risk, but our protective instincts sputter, "But I am too busy, too young, too old, too shy, too inexperienced, too _____ (fill in the blank). Please don't ask me to storm the barricades." Joseph was not one to roar or make a scene. Mary's and Joseph's heads had never touched the same pillow, yet she got pregnant. Joseph was going to release her from her commitment quietly. Yet an angel awakened him and urged him to marry Mary anyway, because God's ways are not always rational.

What if Joseph had been self-centered rather than other-centered? What if he had been rigid rather than open to the wild and creative nature of God? God's earth-rumbling love prevailed, and when Joseph awoke from his dream-laden sleep, he did the right thing—not because he made a list

of pros and cons, and certainly not because he adhered to the Mosaic law, for such law would have dictated divorce, left Mary a beggar or even had her stoned to death. No. Joseph married Mary, because he believed that, more than it being the *right* thing to do, it was God's thing to do.

We need a sturdy, indestructible faith, like that of Joseph. God's work in the world can feel awkward, eccentric, seemingly off-center according to society. Forgive enemies? Befriend the homeless? We try to do the right thing, don't we? It can be hard when the law and love sit down at the table together. Yet God errs on the side of grace, and God asked Joseph to do the same.

And so began a theological shift with which Christians struggle to this day—a shift from the rigidity of endless religious rules to the unparalleled grace that appeared in a bassinet in a barn, rather than in a castle. God said to Joseph, and to each of us, I am with you. Trust me. You are my human eyes, my weary muscles, my hoarse voice. Counter the culture. Be courageous in the face of cruelty. Be bold for me!

Saturday, December 10 • A Poem for Advent

JOY LIKE WATER

Sarah A. Speed

Mary went to Elizabeth's house,
Because that's what we do when the world falls apart.
That's what we do when the script is flipped,
When the rug is pulled,
When it rains inside.
We go home.
We find friends.
We find love.

So Mary went to Elizabeth's house,
Harboring good news that must have felt like water—
Something capable of helping her float or pulling her under.
And only then,
Only there,
In the presence of a face that looked like love,
Does the word "joy" appear.

Mary said, "How can this be?"
The angel said, "Do not be afraid."
Mary said, "May it be so."
But when Mary went to Elizabeth's house
And Elizabeth opened the door,
Joy—like a tipped cup of water—

Spilled out everywhere.

I imagine that Elizabeth laughed.

I imagine that Mary framed her growing belly.

I imagine that both women pressed palms to stomach

When that baby began to kick,

A holy ritual as old as time.

I imagine that God smiled.

And I imagine, that for the first time,

Mary could float.

Isn't it always that way?

I could harbor joy to myself.

I could tuck joyful moments deep into pockets,

Saving memories of better days for long nights.

But when I share my joy with you,

When you open the door,

Joy spills out everywhere,

And it is love that helps me float.

Sunday, December 11

WAITING FOR REDEMPTION

Kate Dunn

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." Luke 2:33-35

During Advent we talk a lot about waiting for God to be born again in our midst: "O come, O come, Emmanuel." But our time of waiting does not end when Advent ends. Living into our faith demands patience. In the famous chapter on love in his first letter to the Corinthians, the very first word the apostle Paul uses to define love is "patient." C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison begin their wonderful book, *Slow Church*, with a quote from Pope Francis: "We are impatient, anxious to see the whole picture, but God lets us see things slowly, quietly. The Church [has] to learn how to wait."

Knowing this is true doesn't make it easier. The Church does not like to wait; New Yorkers most definitely do not like to wait. (I love the definition of a New York minute as the time between when the traffic light turns green and the car behind you honks.) I think God wants us to become more patient with waiting, and I also think God understands that waiting can be hard, even painful, whether we're waiting to hear

from someone we're estranged from, waiting for test results, waiting for healing, waiting for a wanted child, waiting for a job, waiting to find someone to love, waiting for justice, waiting for peace, waiting for redemption.

In his book *Between God and Man*, Rabbi Abraham Heschel tells us, "Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." The stories of baby Jesus help us be amazed. That's why they have such power over us, calling us to return to them year after year, generation after generation. These stories fill us with hope; they shine light into the darkness of the world; they inspire us to praise God, to pray with passion, and to wait with patience for God's reign to come on earth, even though we know we may not see it ourselves.

Monday, December 12 **GOD'S HOLY HIGHWAY**

Jonah So

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. ... Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." ... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. Isaiah 35:1-2, 4, 8

Having been raised in a suburban environment, I am the first to admit that I cannot fully comprehend Isaiah's description of the wilderness the people of Israel find themselves living in as their land is being taken over by the Assyrians. Israel is without comfort, seemingly forsaken and without hope. And yet, while in the literal and figurative desert, Isaiah declares, "Behold! Your God will come and bring salvation!" Could such a people believe in those words and accept that hope?

If our lives could be represented by an Advent wreath, I think most of us would feel familiar with being in the place of the third candle—enough time has gone by for God to respond to our prayers, but we're still waiting for a glimmer of hope. Isaiah declares that with God, there is hope, even in the wilderness. After describing a scene in which God transforms the dry, lifeless desert into a land filled with fragrant and blooming flowers, he tells of a highway that will be there—a "Holy Way" where God will meet us and no one will go astray.

While this image is poetic and beautiful, it raises the question of who the highway is for. After all, when God could have come gloriously amid armies of angels, but instead chose to come as a vulnerable infant born among farm animals, does God really need a highway to return to us? This highway described by Isaiah is a safe place that allows us to meet God on our way. No one is forced to travel upon it, but we are welcome to embark on the Holy Way when we are ready. We can find joy and gladness on our journey when we lift our hearts to God in hope.

Tuesday, December 13

THE ANGEL AND THE DRAGON

Scott Black Johnston

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. Revelation 12:7-9

“War” and “heaven” don’t go together. Not typically. War is usually associated with the basement of the celestial world. War is hell on earth. Heaven, on the other hand, is supposed to be an oasis of peace. Heaven is white robes, gold streets, and saints walking around humming the *Hallelujah* chorus. “Not so!” says John of Patmos, the author of today’s text, who describes heaven as a war zone.

John of Patmos was exiled to a small Greek island sometime late in the first century for being a follower of Christ. The emperor in John’s time, Domitian, was a ruthless man who required that citizens of the Roman Empire worship him. To ensure compliance, Domitian demanded that Christians renounce their faith, and if they did not, he had them killed. In the midst of these persecutions, sitting alone in a cave, John had a series of visions. He kept a record of them, writing about terrible monsters, false prophets and cataclysms that would shake the foundation of the earth.

Over time, more than a few enterprising souls have sought to unravel John’s wild images. I wonder, however, if this material deserves a more straightforward approach. Why did John dream? Because this is what faithful Christians do. When all hell breaks out, we dream big. The battles we fight here crash right through the gates of paradise. And when they do, the angels of God strap on their armor, grab their spears and rush forth to do battle on our behalf. Christians believe that we do not face the dragons of this world alone.

Are there not times when we discern a spirit in the world that fills us with the sense of purpose, the willingness to lay aside selfish agendas, the bravery to fight against dragons? In this Advent season, God calls us to light the candle of hope and to search both the skies and our hearts for better angels. God invites us to walk alongside the brilliant, armored form of the archangel Michael. Each of us is challenged to joust with dragons—and when we do, we are assured that we will not be alone.

From the Fifth Avenue Archives

Wednesday, December 14

WHEN HEAVEN TOUCHES EARTH

John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1945

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Luke 2:13-14

On each successive Christmas Heaven touches Earth again, and we find ourselves with the lowly shepherds listening to the heavenly anthems and with the wise men presenting gifts at the manger of the Christ child. And all the world grows luminous with star-shine and tender with love!

When Heaven touches Earth, our friendships are lighted with a fresh glory. We sometimes treat our friends shamefully in this busy world, but at Christmas time they are remembered, our affection is kindled again, and we put our friendships in repair.

Similarly, the light of Heaven touches our family circle, glorifies it, and reminds us of the love and devotion that we so easily take for granted. Edgar Guest says, "It takes a heap o' livin' in a house to make it home." Yes, and it takes a heap of thoughtfulness and consideration of others' feelings and unselfish love to make a home. At its best, home should be a foretaste of Heaven.

When Heaven touches Earth at Christmas, unless something of its glory dwells in our hearts, we shall have missed the full significance of the day. When we see children hanging up their stockings before Christmas, we should follow their example and hang up our hearts, so that a Heavenly Messenger may come with the greatest gift of all—God's Self. Let us make our hearts ready for the coming of the King.

Thursday, December 15

A PEACEABLE REVOLUTION

Patricia Kitchen

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fawn together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11:6-7, 9

I believe that the Advent narrative follows from the moral encounter of Isaiah 11, prefaced in Isaiah 9: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The God of furrowed brows and fire in the belly sent Jesus to this earth as savior and prophet of a revolutionary love. In fact, the more I researched Isaiah’s so-called “peaceable kingdom,” I realized it is a peaceable revolution—a revolution with legs, voice and a pulsing heart. When we pray, “thy kingdom come,” think what it could mean if we prayed, “thy revolution come, thy will be done on earth.”

We are called to take Jesus seriously when he says that the last shall be first. We are called to take Isaiah seriously when he describes predators caring about their prey—a wolf living with a lamb, not threatening or killing it. Isaiah’s promises point to a fundamental change in the natural order that rises from the knowledge and experience of God’s ways. Love is a muscle that lifts justice above the canopy of complacency, and of history.

The 2005 French film *Joyeux Noël* is based on the true story of the 1914 Christmas Eve truce in the trenches of World War I. That night, the music of “O Come, All Ye Faithful” led soldiers on both sides to emerge from their trenches to encounter their enemies, sharing family photos, candy, cigarettes, and a raucous soccer game. It was a peaceable revolution that lasted only a few hours, but it reshaped the remaining days of the soldiers’ lives.

To picture reality in another’s shoes requires holy imagination. It is counterintuitive, like a Christmas Eve truce. Isaiah calls us into uncharted territory to walk in other people’s shoes; to learn the visceral language of empathy. As did the soldiers in 1914, we can emerge from safe trenches—spiritual, racial, emotional, political—where we have hunkered down. And, willing to take risks to exercise the muscle of love, we can help lead Isaiah’s peaceable revolution.

Friday, December 16

WHEN DISBELIEF IS GONE

Scott Black Johnston

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

Psalm 122:1

The English poet Philip Larkin's 1955 poem "Church Going" describes his experience walking around an empty sanctuary during a cycling trip. The second stanza ends, "I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence, Reflect the place was not worth stopping for."

Larkin's poem raises a pointed question: Is church "worth stopping for"? Is it worth anything at all? This question is timely, because people really do return to church at Christmas. They slip in late, sit in the back pew, ready to bolt, even as they tentatively stick a toe in the water. They come wondering if—in a world awash in deceit and falsehood—this place might be different. They come looking for truth.

Sociologists connect the diminished role of local churches to a larger phenomenon: People are increasingly isolated from the communities in which they buy their groceries and walk their dogs. We don't know our neighbors. From its first verse, Psalm 122, is about community. The psalmist is invited by a group of people to come to worship. Together, they pray for the peace of the nation and their city. The web of social connections in Jerusalem is anchored by the house of the Lord.

What happens when these places no longer exist? This is the question to which Larkin eventually turns, after wandering around the empty sanctuary and dropping a meager coin in its box. His conclusion: "*It pleases me to stand in silence here; A serious house on serious earth it is.*"

Larkin is right. Our society needs places like this—serious places. Serious, not because we are joyless or grim or do not enjoy a good laugh; no, *serious* because the hard work of peace—of loving our neighbors—depends on a place where wisdom and truth take center stage, a place where we can speak Christ's good news and remind each other what it means to be children of God.

The fabric of society is a fragile thing. In the midst of cacophony, the psalmist drops his voice to a whisper: "I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord." This isn't the sentiment of an escapist. It is the happy, grounded sigh of a person who knows where to get a compass reading in a world that spins us around and around. In the house of the Lord, we put on the courage of the Lord, so that we might weave bold stories of grace, justice, and love.

Saturday, December 17 • A Poem for Advent
REPENTANCE CAN'T WAIT

Sarah A. Speed

Sometimes,
When the sky is still dark,
I slip sock feet into tennis shoes and go for
a walk.
Step by step
I ask my deepest questions,
While the sky lets go of its deepest dark blue.
Am I doing enough?
Ink to indigo.
Does my brother know how much I love him?
Indigo to navy.
Will my friends keep showing up?
Navy to royal blue.
Will we ever know peace?
Royal blue to gold.
And after a while, my pilgrimage must end,
So I turn apologetic feet toward home
And walk my repentance back toward the sun.
And once again, while I stand in sock feet and
tennis shoes,
God takes my breath away.
For once again,
The sky's deepest void is not a watercolor
of light.
And I am reminded
That like the sky,
God touches everything.
And I am reminded,
That like the sky,
Nothing is so broken that it can't be
painted gold.
In the morning light, there is peace.

Sunday, December 18

THE CAPACITY FOR WISDOM

Kate Dunn

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him. Luke 2:40

After Advent, our liturgical calendar moves us forward 40 days, when Joseph and Mary take their baby to the Temple to perform purification rites for Mary and to dedicate their son to God. In the Temple then, as in our congregation today, people of every life stage gather to worship and work, pray and praise, together in the household of God. One of the great blessings of being part of a family of faith is the intergenerational nature of the community, where—in Luke 2—Anna, Simeon, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus come together as an act of faith and obedience. If we live long enough, we may develop an enhanced capacity for wisdom. We may become people like Simeon and Anna: wise people.

In recent years, there has been a lot of research about what constitutes wisdom. Here are some conclusions researchers have drawn: Wise people are those who have learned to regulate their emotions and tune into the emotional state of others. Wise people think less about what they need and deserve and more about what they can contribute to their community and to the world. Wise people focus on giving back, socially, creatively, personally, financially, without expecting or wanting anything in return. Wise people trust that the good they do will live after them; they accept that the fruits of their labor may be realized when they are no longer around to see it.

Simeon and Anna rejoice over the hope and promise for redemption they recognize in Jesus, knowing full well that they will never see what becomes of this baby boy. They, like so many of the adults who have rejoiced over this baby—the shepherds, the wise men, and most likely Joseph—will not live long enough to know the man Jesus becomes. But Simeon and Anna are at peace with that reality, because they understand their lives as part of a cycle of generations.

As Simeon says in verses 30-33, while cradling baby Jesus, “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” The salvation Simeon has been waiting for and that he now sees is not his own personal salvation. It expands far beyond himself or any individual, far beyond the people of his own faith tradition. This salvation is for everyone.

Monday, December 19

JOY IN THE DESERT

Scott Black Johnston

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert ... And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35:5-6, 10

Isaiah 35 describes the people walking through a dry and desolate landscape. Their hearts are fearful. The prophet describes their predicament in stark terms, but he promises that it will not last. “Do not fear,” he says, “God is coming like rain. God is coming like a healing river. God is going to make the dry places bloom. God is going to carve a clear, safe path forward for you. God is going to give you joy—everlasting joy!” It all sounds so good, so over-the-top. We who are living in our own deserts want to know: Is this real? Or is it a mirage? Is it even possible, this water for parched souls... this everlasting joy?

Some believe that joy is simply happiness on steroids. This definition is, of course, flawed. Happiness is having our earthly needs and wants met for a moment. Joy is altogether different. In his book *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis describes his conversion from atheism to Christianity as the terrifying, humbling, heart-quickenning experience of joy. For Lewis, joy is not having your desires met. Joy is having your desire shaped. Joy isn't a personal triumph. Joy is losing—losing your ego, letting your plans go, losing your self.

Several years ago, I found myself on my knees at the Abbey of the Genesee, south of Rochester. I was alone, in a tiny chapel, with snow swirling outside. I had been feeling spiritually parched, so I came to the monastery seeking God's guidance. It wasn't going well. After two days, sleeping in a small bed, eating meals in silence and praying, all was silent. No revelations. No set of next steps for my life. I called my friend Tom to complain about heaven's customer service. “I am not going to pretend to be the voice of God,” he said, “but I will tell you what I think.” After we talked, I went back to the little chapel and prayed again. That's when it happened. Down on my knees, I felt gathered up by God. I felt held and held accountable—embraced and set free.

The exuberance of that moment still tugs at me. Joy ignites something in us. It makes us want to throw ourselves into life and community. The Lord is coming, says Isaiah. There is good news for those in the desert. Joy is on the way.

Tuesday, December 20
IN JOSEPH'S HOUSE

Kate Dunn

After [the Magi] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him."

Matthew 2:13

As Christmas draws near, what is your emotional geography? Do you feel like Joseph before he learns of Mary's pregnancy, when his life is following its predictable course: being a good son, learning his father's trade, becoming betrothed to the young woman his parents selected for him, preparing to follow the path that has been laid out from his birth? Are you feeling relatively calm and unruffled right now? Or do you feel like Joseph *after* he learns of Mary's pregnancy, and after he starts having dreams like he's never had before, beginning with an angel giving him strange but explicit guidance: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

If Joseph had any idea what the next year would hold, he would have every reason to be afraid. Into his care is born a baby, fathered by God, whom he, Joseph, is to name and protect. Then comes an astonishing visit from wise men who call the baby King and bring forth gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Soon after the magi leave, an angel warns Joseph of an impending threat on the baby's life from the malicious ruler, King Herod. By the time soldiers descend on Bethlehem to massacre every male child under two years old, Joseph has packed his belongings and fled with Mary and Jesus, leaving behind his hometown, his parents, his family, his friends, his job, everything he has ever known, to travel hundreds of miles to Egypt.

God could have been born in any grand palace in the world, but that was not the choice God made. God chose to be born in Joseph's house, on our block, on our street, in our world—to plop down that beautiful Christmas story right in the middle of everything we live with, all the beauty and magnificence and violence and corruption and injustice that makes up the world we know. God has chosen to live with us, to walk beside us in our grief, to help us shoulder our burdens, to love us unconditionally and urge us to love our neighbors and yes, even our enemies, and to promise us again and again that we are not now and will never be alone. God dwells with us.

From the Fifth Avenue Archives

Wednesday, December 21

GOD'S GREATEST GIFT

John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1954

And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

The central fact of Christmas is Christ. It is his birthday that we celebrate. Christmas sheds its radiance all around the world because of him. It is his winsome personality that makes Christmas what it is. In response to the hunger, the loneliness, the despair of the human heart came God's answer, and it was a little babe lying in a manger in Bethlehem. That is the deepest significance of the day.

We spiritually starved grown-ups need to be prepared for Christmas. It will do us little good to hear the Christmas bells unless they are ringing in our souls; to read about the angels unless we hear their voices; to talk about the baby in the manger unless he is born in our hearts. In every Christmas celebration, there is always a danger that it may degenerate into sentimentalism that lives on the surface of life and forgets the deeper significance of the day.

Are you preparing for that Heavenly Guest? Are you putting a lighted candle in the window of your soul? Will love come and make its abode with you? Will your heart be the manger that cradles the Christ child? This Christmas, God grant that there may be given to us a spiritual sense that puts us in tune with the infinite. Then all God's bells will chime, and we will hear the angels sing: "Gloria in excelsis Deo."

Thursday, December 22

THE INNKEEPER'S LAMENT

Werner Ramirez

And [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

Can you imagine being the innkeeper in the Nativity story? The wonderful Christian writer Frederick Buechner (who passed away in August at age 96) describes the plight of the innkeeper as "like being lost in a forest with a million trees, and each tree is something else to be done." With so many people traveling to Bethlehem because of the census, the inn had become impossible to manage, and Mary and Joseph were turned away. "You wait your whole life for something that is true to

come,” Buechner writes in the voice of the innkeeper. “All of us do. We wait for our destiny, for our joy, for our heart’s desire. What can I tell you? When he came, I missed him.”

The innkeeper laments missing this amazing event because of everything else that was going on. For Mary and Joseph, life was crazy, too. They were traveling to register for a census, and in the midst of their hectic life, the baby was born. God chose that precise moment to become a human being, coming down to meet the world exactly where it was.

What about today? We often feel like the overwhelmed innkeeper, wandering among a million trees, distracted by chores and responsibilities. During a normal week, I try to be attentive to the people of New York City. On the subway, I look for Jesus in people’s faces and say a prayer for them in my head. Sometimes I am too distracted to do this, but the good news is that our worries and the craziness of life will not stop Jesus from coming. Born in a hectic stable, God comes to meet us in that craziness, and although we often miss seeing God, God does not stop chasing after us.

My wish this Christmas is that all of us will slow down and meet Christ in the midst. May we experience Christ’s love and grace with our families, with our friends, and even with the random stranger. May we know deep in our hearts that this Jesus, the very being of God, came down to earth in the form of a baby to liberate us and reconcile all things to God.

Friday, December 23

THOSE WHO DREAM

Scott Black Johnston

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy.”
Luke 2:8-10

The hills around Bethlehem were home to shepherds—men and women who cared for grazing livestock. On Christmas Eve, Luke grabs us by the arm and bids us walk these hills where the shepherds keep watch. All day, all night, these ranchers sit, talking quietly around campfires. All of them are dreaming.

I am not talking about the dreams we have during REM sleep, when we wrestle with our subconscious or recall a much-missed past. I am talking about good, old-fashioned daydreams, freeing our minds to wander into the future with hope. By all accounts, shepherds in the first century were

not powerful people. They lived in the fields, far from the homes of the ruling class. As such, these nomads told themselves, “Keep an eye on your sheep. Pray there isn’t a famine, or a wolf, or bandits hiding behind younger sage bush. Watch your flocks. Don’t let your dreams grow too big.”

And then, says Luke, angels. On Christmas, the dreams of the shepherds are met by a chorus of angels crooning, “A Messiah has been born to you.” You will find this child in a room that looks like it was decorated by shepherds. This, the angels sing, is news of great joy.

What happens next? The shepherds go with haste. They run to embrace the newborn king. They run, knowing that though this old world excels at squashing dreams, this dream—this holy, mind-bending dream of a child trumpeted in the night by heavenly hosts—is simply too good to pass up.

Christmas beckons to the dreamer in each of us. It appeals to those places, nestled close to our hearts, where we stow our dearest hopes. And then it tucks another hope alongside them. On this night, we welcome God’s dream into our hearts, when we gaze at a newborn nestled in the straw and see the One who comes to shape our hopes, calm our fears, and point us toward home.

Saturday, December 24 • A Poem for Christmas Eve **EVERY YEAR**

Sarah A. Speed

My heart and I have an agreement.
very year we show up here—
here in the sanctuary,
here with the candles and the tall ceilings,
here with the creaky church pews
and the songs of silent nights.

My heart and I have an agreement.
Every year we show up here—
at the end of the year,
after another 12 months
of humanity, of me
trying to
keep it all together,
trying to
keep my head above water,
trying to
keep up appearances.

Every year we show up here,
We drop it all.
We leave it at the door.
We come into this space
and I could swear it feels different.

Maybe it's God.
Maybe it's hope.
Maybe it's love.
But whatever it is,
I need it
every year,
so we show up here.
Tell us the story of tonight.
My heart needs it.

Sunday, December 25

A PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

Kenneth O. Jones, Associate Pastor, 1963–1996

Wonderful God, whose wisdom led to the putting a face to thy love and grace in Jesus Christ, we give thanks for his birth. Bestow upon us, we pray, such love and charity as were his, to whom it was more blessed to give than to receive. May the same mind be in us which was also in Christ Jesus, even as we keep the festival of his coming to dwell among us. On this Christmas, O God of divine presence, renew our inner peace, reaffirm our faith, and fill us with that joy which comes to us only in the knowledge that thou art truly with us, in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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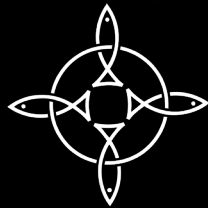
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