

2025

Advent Devotional



Journey with us through Advent with reflections
written by Apostles members, leadership council,
staff, and clergy.

We encourage you to come visit the prayer chapel at Apostles for
additional time in prayer & reflection.

You can find all the details for our Advent events on the events
page of Church Center (Apostles-raleigh.churchcenter.com).

Sunday | November 30th

Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 24:37-44

Reflection

ACC basketball fans of a certain vintage may remember the 1995 season, when legendary Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski was forced to take a leave of absence for the season due to complications from back surgery. The team, with seven Final Fours and two National Championships in the previous decade, went 14-18 on the season (still the most losses in Duke history) and missed the NCAA tournament. A talented group of players looked utterly lost without their leader. The episode provides a stark illustration of what happens when true authority is absent and is replaced by makeshift rule.

The New Testament is clear that after his Ascension, all authority in Heaven and Earth resides with Jesus Christ, who sits at the Father's right hand. And yet, do you often find yourself wishing that Jesus would make his rule over our world just a little more obvious? Looking around as 2025 draws to a close, it certainly can seem like human beings (or worse) are in charge, and the all-too-predictable result is a world engulfed by vice, war, lies, and idiocy. Nothing seems to work as it ought, and it's often the vulnerable and innocent who suffer the most.

Into this sad situation, our two passages for today speak three words of hope.

First, we learn in Isaiah 2 that a day is coming in which the rule of Christ will become obvious for all to see. The mountain of the Lord will become the highest of mountains. Every nation will seek the Lord. We will finally stop fighting one another, for The Lord himself will be our judge. It is wonderful to think, not just of Jesus returning, but that at last all peoples will want to follow his ways.

Second, from Matthew 24 we learn that the common, even natural, response from human beings to that day will be surprise. We should not despair when we see most people around us treating God as irrelevant to their lives. It's what Jesus predicted. But we should honestly reflect on where we see this indifferent attitude in our own hearts: am I sleepwalking through life by chasing after things of lesser importance as if they matter more than Christ's return?



Third, Jesus tells us we are to stay awake, ready for his unexpected coming, which means it must be possible to do so. Being unprepared may be the natural response of humankind, but it is not inevitable. I find this encouraging, because it can sometimes feel impossible to convince my heart and mind that Jesus' kingdom is the realest and most important part of existence. How do we stay awake? Isaiah points the way: "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Prayer

*Almighty God—whose reign over all the earth will one day be as apparent as Mount Kilimanjaro rising above the African plains, and who one day will draw all nations to yourself—awaken us to that future reality. Illuminate our hearts through the reading of your Word by the power of your Spirit, that we would learn to walk in the light of your ways in this life, in anticipation of that glorious life to come, for the sake of your precious son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Peter Forrest

Monday | December 1st

Isaiah 1:1-9; Romans 13:11-14

Reflection

Sometimes the Bible sounds like it's scolding us. Isaiah names the failures of God's people; Paul lists the behaviors we're supposed to leave behind. It can feel like we're being called out rather than called home. But God's heart isn't to shame us; it's to wake us up. The words of a familiar hymn can help us hear these words not as condemnation but as invitation to return, to awaken, to be found again by grace.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.

Isaiah's opening vision paints a bleak picture. God's people have turned away from the One who raised them. The prophet's words ring with the sorrow of a Father watching His children lose themselves in the dark.

Yet even amid judgment, mercy flickers. Their destruction was not total. God's promises endured, even when His people faltered. This lament reminds us that we, too, forget the God who formed us, trusting instead in ourselves, our comfort, our control.

He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood.

Centuries later, Paul echoes Isaiah's hope and links it to the new dawn: the God who preserved a remnant came to awaken hearts dulled by despair and to rescue us from the habits of darkness. Paul urges us to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," to live as those already found. As people preserved by grace, we must grapple with the darkness within ourselves and choose to let that grace lead us heavenward.

Let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.

During Advent, we hold in tension both judgment and promise, both longing and fulfillment. We wait in the hour before dawn and the brightening horizon calls our wandering hearts home. Our hope is not in how steady our steps are but in the One whose light never fades. The same Lord who preserved Judah and raised Christ from the dead shines into our shadows and gathers us in mercy. Until the morning breaks in full, we follow that light with hearts awakened and voices lifted in the hymn of those found by grace:

Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.

Prayer

*Faithful God, we thank You that Your mercy never fails and Your promises never fade. Keep our hearts awake and our lives alight with Your love. Make us, by Your Spirit, a remnant of light for a world that longs for morning. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by JoBeth Smith

Tuesday | December 2nd

Isaiah 7:10-16; Luke 1:26-38

Reflection

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38, KJV). While Mary’s words of humble obedience serve as a remarkable model for how Christians should respond to God’s message, there is something much more deeply rooted in redemptive history going on here, something cosmic. The promise to the Blessed Virgin that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear the Son of God should recall to our minds an ancient promise the Lord made all the way back in Genesis: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15, NIV). Through the seed of the woman, God would fatally defeat His enemies and bring salvation to His people.

God’s people waited with great anticipation for the fulfillment of this promise to crush the head of the serpent, and it arrived completely unexpectedly. Not only was the seed of the woman born of a poor, humble Virgin instead of someone we might expect (maybe a woman of legendary character and regal status), but God himself, the Eternal Word, the second person of the Holy Trinity, took on flesh in Mary’s womb. As our 1662 Book of Common Prayer states, “When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man: thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb.” God the Word became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man. Through Mary, the Lord took on flesh and delivered us, those who were slaves to sin, and, in His exalted humanity, He exalted us so that we may dwell with Him forever.

Thus we, along with the great thinkers, writers, and pastors of Christian history, can rightly call Mary the “New Eve.” Comparing Eve and Mary, St. Irenaeus of Lyons writes in his magnum opus *Against Heresies*, “And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so is it rescued by a virgin; virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience.” May we, like Mary, have the faith, humility, and obedience to say “be it unto me according to thy word” when the Lord beckons us to participate in His plan to redeem all creation.

Prayer

*Almighty God, you have delivered us from your enemies by sending your Son—who is God from God, Light from Light, Very God of Very God—to take on flesh, assuming everything that we are to heal everything that we are. In our deliverance from sin and death, give us humble faith to obey you, so we may participate in your redemptive work to the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Karl Stinehour

Wednesday | December 3rd

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

Reflection

The Hebrew scriptures (the “Old” Testament) are often seen to express a God of wrath and a people stuck in cycles of disobedience and punishment. And yet, in the juxtaposition of today's passages, we see an inverse, with a promise of the end to suffering and harm in the ancient prophet, and recrimination and judgement in the more recent Gospel. In many ways John the Baptist is the final prophet of ancient Israel: see his camel-hair shirt, insectile diet, wilderness habitation. In the spirit of Elijah, he calls condemnation down upon the leaders of Israel, urging their genuine repentance before the advent of divine recompense. Nonetheless, like the prophets of old, his primary purpose is to point to “he who is coming after,” the bringer of true justice and bearer of the Spirit of the LORD.

Both passages point, in the end, to the same person. Both have retribution for the wicked (Isaiah 11:4) and restitution for the faithful—don't miss the incredible richness buried in John's promised baptism with the Holy Spirit. And yet, even as John closes the chapter of pre-Christian prophecy, the character of this coming Messiah, this “shoot from the stump of Jesse” was already revealed by Isaiah. And, boy, is it comforting. He judges with absolute fairness.



Guided by the Spirit of the LORD, he is wise and understanding, a “councillor-king.” His rule is the opposite of bad governance, and ushers in an end to strife, drawing people from all nations to seek him.

So how do we respond? Does John’s call to repentance weigh on your heart? The axe had been laid multiple times to the root of Israel’s leaders. And still God promised a shoot from their stump. Yield the felled trees of your life to Jesus, and he will bring new life and fruit. Do you feel burdened by the state of the world? Isaiah’s prophecy remains only partially fulfilled. The Wise Councillor has been revealed and we know his character to be just as promised. Yet we still wait and long for him to remake our world into a paradise free from fear and pain. Sit in that longing. Pray out of that longing. It is the spirit of Advent.

Prayer

*All-knowing and most-wise Father, we await the fulfillment of your promised kingdom of peace and security and the bringing together of all nations under your Son, our great councillor-king. Grant us true repentance that leads to the flourishing of our souls by the power of the Holy Spirit and through our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.***

Today’s reflection was written by Paul Greenham

Thursday | December 4th

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 1:1-14

Reflection

In the opening verses of his Gospel, John tells us that the true light—Jesus, the Word, who was with God and who was God—was coming into the world. This is God’s greatest gift to his people. Not riches, or power, or freedom from pain, but his presence. God has come, has become one of us, has entered into our world. The creator of all things has become part of his creation.

We all know that this is the best gift. When children cry, they mostly want their parents' presence. When we are sick or broken or at our most desperate, we most fundamentally want to not be alone. Children and adults alike long for the presence of those who love us. God answers that longing and comes to his people.

And yet his people did not receive him. Consider that for a moment. The creator of all things, the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness, comes, enters into the world that he made to be with his people. And those people do not receive him. After eleven verses, all hope, it seems for a moment, is lost.

And yet, there is a different story, too, because some did receive him, and to those he gave the right to become children of God. For those, it is not a matter of lineage or ethnicity, but of God's work. A great transformation happens to those who believe. They are born of God spiritually, in a way totally different and greater than their physical birth (v. 13). Before God came to us, we were in darkness. We even quite liked that darkness. Two chapters later, John tells us that "the people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19).

But light has come, and there is a new and better reality available to us. We have seen the glory of the one who came from the Father full of grace and truth. We know that glory now, and we await its ultimate fulfillment. Isaiah foresaw this when he prophesied a feast of rich food and well-aged wine, when God will have swallowed up the veil of death spread over all nations and wiped away all tears. On that day, Isaiah prophesies, it will be said that "This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Prayer

*Almighty God, true light of the world, open our hearts that we might flee the darkness and receive you. Grant that we your children would have eyes to see your glory and hope in your ultimate redemption of all things. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Julie Tisdale

Friday | December 5th

Isaiah 26:1-6; Romans 15:4-13

Reflection

Holding a newborn baby in your arms triggers a deep sense of awe and awareness of a fragile life fully dependent on its mother. D.W. Winnicott states, "There is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone."

While we are all created for deep connection in relationship with one another and with our creator, attachment fears can linger due to inconsistent, absent, or abusive experiences of caregivers. Even at an early age, we ask the question: Am I rejected? Abandoned? Not good enough? A failure? Unlovable? Too much? Realizing our attachment fears, we recognize our need to feel known, seen, held, and loved.

Think of Jesus coming as a baby.

He stepped into our vulnerabilities and longings. He knows what it is like to be human. He knows what it is like to long for deep connection in relationships. He does not leave us to just figure it out. He does not require us to pump ourselves up and come up with our own game plan. He knows our inconsistencies, imperfections, misplaced desires and yet he offers his hands for us to just sit and rest until we experience no striving, no figuring it out apart from him.

Christ came as the Prince of Peace to offer us *PERFECT PEACE* (Isaiah 26:3). As the *Rock eternal, He makes the way of the righteous smooth* (Isaiah 26:4,7). He allows us to rest into being fully known, fully seen, fully held, and fully loved. By his Spirit, he forms trust in us and deepens our experience of rest, not anything this world offers or sells.

As you ponder Christ coming and anticipate his coming again, picture yourself climbing up into his arms and just exhale. Let your nervous system reset. Allow his touch to soothe and comfort. Remember that he gets it. You are okay as you are, and he will complete the work that he already started in, through, and around you.

In Romans 15:4-13, Paul first emphasized the importance of scripture for teaching, endurance, and encouragement, so we have hope. We literally have daily bread to sustain us. He encourages believers to be of the same mind, leading us to experience unity and acceptance of one another as an essential component of bringing praise to God and glorifying him together. In other words, he not only commissions us to love others with his love but he explains our journey is to be experienced in community.

As we stand together, faces toward heaven full of praise, we remember, our hearts are God's work. We cannot clean each other up or love each other in our own strength. We cannot fake it till we make it. We can receive the Prince of Peace and then offer this PERFECT PEACE to those around us. His aroma and presence in and through us are what builds unity amid our differences and difficulties.

What does Isaiah 26:3 communicate to you today?

Are there any attachment fears that arise as you reflect? Bring those to the Lord.

How is God leading you to build unity?

Prayer

*This Advent season, may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 15:13). **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Angela Mills

Saturday | December 6th

Isaiah 29:17-24; Matthew 4:12-23

Reflection

In Matthew 4:12-23 we are told of the calling of four of the disciples. It is such a curious scene. Jesus calls to Peter and Andrew, and they go. What kind of summons, without any details, would make someone leave everything "at once" to follow?

A bit further down the shore is another beckoning. This time he calls James and John and they also “immediately” leave to follow him. Still no details are provided or assurances of what would happen on the journey.

While this was likely not their first encounter with Jesus I don’t imagine they knew all that much about him. There was no 24-hour news cycle or newspapers. So what would make people immediately leave everything to follow a stranger?

The text doesn’t tell us if the early disciples asked any questions—questions that to my thinking would make sense. Where are you going? How will I support myself and my family? What should I bring? How long will I be gone?

They weren’t told the game plan—nothing to fall back on—and this stranger provided no details or assurances. He only tells them to come.

Who leaves everything without a plan or without any kind of guarantee that the endeavor will be a success? That does not sound like a wise idea. I want the plan—the whole plan with all the details. Why risk leaving anything to chance?

As I’ve thought about this, I wonder if a different question could be, who was the man doing the calling? What was it about him that made these fellows leave everything immediately to embark on an unknown journey?

They had little information about him, yet they left and followed. I have much more information than they did yet I hesitate to follow. I have the benefit of knowing the whole story, yet I hesitate. They knew of the promises about the coming messiah. I know the promises kept by the messiah who has come. Still I hesitate to joyfully follow. I still want all the details before I’m willing to follow.

The question Jesus posed to them is similar to what he is asking me. Will I follow him—even without a plan and all the details? Will I be willing to trust him? Some days the answer is yes! Other days I really struggle to follow. Perhaps this is true for you as well. May it be that we are more and more willing to trust and follow—even without all the details.

Prayer

*Dear Lord Jesus, I am still so divided. I truly want to follow you, but I also want to follow my own desires and lend an ear to the voices that speak about prestige, success, popularity, pleasure, power, and influence. Help me to become deaf to those voices and more attentive to your voice, which calls me to choose the narrow road to life. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Heather Bokowy

Sunday | December 7th

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

Reflection

The setting of Isaiah 11 is harrowing.

The time is about 730 BC. Judah lies in the crosshairs of a fearsome foe to the north. The mighty Assyrians will wipe out the northern kingdom of Israel and kill or exile almost everyone from those tribes. Will Judah and its capital Jerusalem fall as well?

In Isaiah 10:20-27, God speaks the unthinkable: Do not be afraid of the Assyrians. There will be destruction, there will be suffering, but somehow the kingdom of Judah will not fall.

That is the context for Isaiah 11, with its promise that "a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." Jesse's son David had reigned three hundred years before this war, and God's people repeatedly—here in 730 BC and in the centuries to come—wait for a new David. When will God send a king to fend off the Assyrians and judge the poor with righteousness? When will this son of David arise who will so fully destroy the wicked with the breath of his lips that something like Eden will be restored, a *shalom* so profound that a child can play with a serpent?



Don't jump ahead too fast. Perhaps Isaiah's hearers thought King Hezekiah was the One. He ruled nobly, purging the land of idol-worship and even holding off a later invasion by Assyria. But alas, he dies, the land is not restored, and before long, even Judah will fall and the throne of David will be empty.

Hezekiah had partially fulfilled Isaiah 11, but not fully. So the people kept waiting, through other wars, famines, and exiles, and through the ordinary stress and pain of everyday life. And lest we think that they—or we—were merely victims, God admonishes them over and over for their own sin and selfishness. Some (not all) of the judgment is what they bring on themselves. Do I want a King who will destroy sin?...

No one could have expected the King who would come. He seems to flip the script of Isaiah 11:1-10. So maybe we are supposed to read it backwards. Starting at the end: His resting place is not glorious; it is a feeding trough. He is the innocent child bitten by the serpent. He is the lamb devoured by the wolf. He is the judge whose lips stay shut as we mock him. He does not kill the wicked. He is killed by them.

But this is our King. And he does come to destroy wickedness. But what of the wicked?

This is the One about whom John warns in Matthew 3. Do I want him to come? Do I want him to baptize me with unquenchable fire?

Prayer

*Almighty God, whose blessed Son, out of love for the world that would crucify him, willingly exposed himself to unmerited infamy and insult from his very conception in the womb of the Virgin, we pray that you would reign as King in our hearts and our church, slaying our sin with the fire of your unquenchable love, until we come to that glorious resting place in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Thomas Dixon

Monday | December 8th

Luke 1:46-55

Reflection

I don't know about you, but for me context is everything. It's hard to make sense of anything substantive without understanding the moment it lives in—what came before, what's happening now, and what will follow after.

In today's Gospel reading (Luke 1:46-55, known as the *Magnificat*), we usually hear Mary's words as a pure hymn of joy. Yet placed in the context of first-century Jewish culture, other stark realities emerge—realities that were surely front and center in her young life.

In Mary's world, her betrothal to Joseph was already as binding as marriage. A young woman's fidelity was not just a private matter; it was the honor of two families. So when she learned she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit, everything around her shifted. The angel's words were stunning—promises of favor and divine purpose—but how could she be sure? Would Joseph believe her, or was the story too implausible to even share? Mary surely knew Jewish law gave him the right to clear his name of this out-of-wedlock pregnancy through public denunciation, and there was no way to know which path he would choose. The angel spoke of birth, not of life—not of what obedience would cost her before or after. Would this be her fate—rejection, shame, abandonment? Her only certainty was the word God had spoken.

It's no wonder, then, that Mary "hurried" to the hill country to see Elizabeth. Perhaps she needed distance from Nazareth's whispers, or maybe she simply needed to see the face of someone who believed her. In Elizabeth's greeting—"Blessed are you among women"—Mary found what every soul longs for when walking through fear: recognition, affirmation, and grace. And it's there, in that safe space of shared faith, that her trembling heart praised her God.

And she began to sing. Not because her circumstances had improved—they hadn't. Nothing external had changed: she was still a poor, pregnant, unmarried teenager, still carrying scandal in the eyes of her community, still unsure how Joseph would respond. Yet her soul magnified God because He saw her.

“He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant” (v. 47). That passage isn’t about God rewarding humility; it’s about God seeing the unseen. In a culture prepared to cast her out, heaven noticed her.

So, in the face of personal fears and public rejection, Mary chose to sing a song of praise—the Magnificat—a truly extraordinary thing. Consider sitting with this passage in quiet, prayerful reflection. And when the time is right, add this contemporary expression of Mary’s journey to feel even more deeply the power of her words: go listen to “Breath of Heaven (Mary’s Song)” by Jesus Culture. Come, Lord Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, who saw your servant Mary when the world was prepared to cast her out, and who so loved the world that you sent your only Son, Jesus Christ, to show us the way of love, you are the God who sees the unseen and comforts the fearful.

Open the eyes of our hearts to recognize your love at work within us,
to praise you amid our fears,
to trust that your gaze upon us is grace itself,
and to share that love with the broken.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of Mary and lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Today’s reflection was written by Michael Mangum

Tuesday | December 9th

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Reflection

Our Gospel reading today describes John the Baptist and his ministry, which was to herald a new thing coming to pass. He called for people to prepare the way of the Lord which was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Indeed, Jesus’ gospel was, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's heavenly kingdom broke through and created an outpost on earth. In her book, *To Pause at the Threshold*, Esther de Waal says that liminal space is the space between two places. A threshold in a house is liminal space. You transition from the outside to the inside of a house through the threshold. From this perspective, you could say that John's entire ministry was in liminal space at the threshold of the kingdom of God arriving on earth.

De Waal says that if she had one single word to catch the sense of a threshold opening to what is new and unknown it would be transformation. Transformation is hard and uncomfortable. We must let go of our "control" for a while in hopes that something worthwhile will come. She says that L. William Countryman uses the word conversion to describe this. Not conversion like becoming a Christian or changing denominations, but like "turning around" and "discovering that there's a whole world there that you hadn't really been aware of." John, in a sense, was asking people to prepare to transition to an entirely new world.

Liminal space is also described as a thin place. For example, the veil between our tangible, earthly existence and the intangible, spiritual world is thought to be thinner as we get to the end of our life and are near the transition to eternal life. This aspect of liminal space was true for John. The veil was thin enough for him sense God calling him to preach repentance and preparation for the Lord's coming and to obey this call; and yet, he still had to ask of Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else" (Matt 11:3). He did not live to see that kingdom come to fruition through the death and resurrection of Jesus, but the description of John's life said that he knew it would.

Much like John, we live in liminal space today. While the kingdom of God is here now, thanks to Jesus, it is here only in a limited form. Even with the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are still sinful humans. With God's help, we are transitioning to the full Kingdom of God that will only be realized at our death. Like John, in this liminal space we can "see only a reflection as in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:12), as Paul put it. Do you have the faith to believe that God will transform you and the hope to believe it will be worthwhile? Will you allow yourself to be transformed? Hopefully, we can answer as we do in our profession of faith during baptism with the words: "I will, the Lord being my helper."

Today's reflection was written by Frank Shell

Wednesday | December 10th

Matthew 11:2-11

Reflection

"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

When we read John's question in Matthew 11, we can't help but wonder—*how can this be?* How could John, of all people, question Jesus' identity?

Isn't this the same John who, according to Luke's Gospel, leapt in his mother Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's greeting (Luke 1)? The same John who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, crying out in the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*" (Luke 3)?

John the Baptizer had preached with bold conviction that the long wait was over. When Jesus came to him for baptism, John protested: "*I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?*" He had seen the heavens open, the Spirit descending like a dove, and heard the voice of God declaring, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*" (Luke 3:21-22). Surely John *knew* who Jesus was—the One they had been waiting for, the promised Messiah.

So what changed? Why the doubt now?

John, once a fiery prophet in the wilderness, is now confined unjustly to a prison cell. The Messiah's arrival has not brought the kind of triumph or deliverance he expected. Instead of overthrowing Rome, Jesus heals the sick, lifts up the poor, and preaches good news to the marginalized. The kingdom John proclaimed looks upside down from the one unfolding before his eyes.

In his doubt, John sends his disciples to question Jesus: "*Are you the one?*" And Jesus answers not with argument, but with evidence—the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor receive good news.



Advent invites us into a similar tension: the holy waiting, the sacred wondering, the watchfully expectant hope that flickers even amid uncertainty. Like John, we may find ourselves disoriented by the circumstances of our lives and the kingdom around us, asking, “Are you the one?” But Jesus’ gentle response reminds us: the signs of the Kingdom of God are already here, breaking in all around us—not in the loud, brash, and powerful ways—but in quiet ways of mercy, healing, love, hope, and grace.

Prayer

Oh Good Shepherd, you are the One for whom we wait. You have prepared the way before us. Enliven us in our waiting. Encourage us in our impatience. Free us from the captivity of our doubts. In our waiting this Advent, may we look again and see, hear, and know by the evidence of your good news all around us—You are the One who has come, and the One who is coming still. In Christ we pray, **Amen.**

Today’s reflection was written by Mary Vandel Young

Thursday | December 11th

Isaiah 41:8-13; John 1:19-28

Reflection

The prophet Isaiah provides the throughline for our passages today: “*Fear not,*” (Isaiah 41:8-13); and “*Make straight the way of the Lord*” (John 1:19-28).

O Lord God, our helper and the source of our strength, you are the one who upholds us by your righteous right hand. You have chosen us in your mercy and extended grace beyond our deserving. You see us, you know us, you love us, and you sustain us. Your promises are our hope and our confidence—greater than our own power, reputation, or influence. In you we rest secure, for you hold our hand and calm our fears. Teach us to trust in your sovereign goodness, for your purposes cannot be thwarted and your faithfulness does not fail.

As we enter this Advent season, shape our hearts to hear your ancient and ever-new call: Fear not, for I am with you; and make straight the way of the Lord. As your prophet Isaiah spoke to a people burdened by their own sin and sorrow, so speak to us now with your word of comfort and promise. Though your people have known hardship, rebellion, and wandering, your voice rises with steadfast love: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; you are Mine. And so, we remember again that your coming represents hope breaking into darkness.

We remember John the Baptist, the humble herald of Christ, who deflected glory from himself and pointed all hearts to the One already standing among them. When questioned by those who feared losing control, John did not grasp for power but declared his purpose with bold humility: I am the voice crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord. Grant us such clarity and courage. May we be ever aware that Jesus, the Savior we long for, is not distant but present. He is standing among us even now, though many do not yet recognize him.

Forgive us where fear has softened our witness, where cultural noise has muted our celebration, where we have chosen caution over proclamation. Rekindle in us the joy of our salvation. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, embolden us to speak of his peace, his hope, his healing, and his lordship. Let our lives tell the story that Jesus is the Savior of the world. May we be quick to share the difference he has made in our own life. He is the light no darkness can overcome.

Prayer

Empower us, O Lord, to reflect your love with humble confidence to our neighbors, our coworkers, our classmates, and all who cross our path. Let your church shine with renewed clarity this Advent, that many may see and believe the One who stands among them, waiting with open hands to redeem, restore, and make all things new. Through Jesus Christ our Lord: our strength, our joy, our peace, and our eternal hope. **Amen.**

Today's reflection was written by Jim Dotson

Friday | December 12th

Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 13:32-37

Reflection

It has been said that the life of Jesus can be summed up in two words: **Reconciliation** and **Healing**.

Jesus brings about and fulfills a grand project of reconciling us to God, to one another, to creation, and to our own selves. We see this in the Gospels through healing: real physical, emotional, and spiritual healing that makes all things new. But the way Jesus brings this healing is not through force or domination. It begins in absolute vulnerability.

This is what Advent returns us to: the Creator of the universe arrives as a dependent child. The One who gives life and breath to all things enters our world unable to feed Himself, unable to walk, unable to speak. He chooses dependence. He chooses fragility. Isaiah declares a Servant who will not break the bruised reed nor snuff out the faint wick—a Servant who comes in persevering, healing love.

Jesus begins in the darkness of Mary's womb. He is born into light as the Light of the world. He dies and is placed in a dark tomb. He rises, breaks open the darkness, and frees us from the dungeon of sin and death. Advent is not merely a remembrance of a birth. Advent is learning to wait in the vulnerable spaces where God is forming new life. The poet David Whyte writes in *Sweet Darkness*:

*You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.
Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.
Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn
anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive
is too small for you.*



Jesus does not bypass weakness, darkness, or confinement. He begins within them—and transforms them.

So today, in Advent waiting:

Where is Jesus opening your eyes from blindness?

Where is He freeing you from the prison of fear or shame?

Where is He releasing you from the small worlds that cannot hold your calling, your voice, your life?

This is the God we wait for: the God who comes close enough to be held, close enough to trust, close enough to heal.

Advent invites us to trust that even in darkness, Jesus, the Light of the world, is already at work—making all things new.

Prayer

*O Christ, who opens prison gates and frees captives, who releases justice on the earth and makes all things new. Come now and open our hearts, free our minds, and release our bodies that we might know your love and see your kingdom come on this earth. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Jason Young

Saturday | December 13th

John 8:12-20

Reflection

Advent is a season of longing—a time when we wait for the Light to break into the darkness. In John 8, Jesus declares, *"I am the light of the world."* This is not a distant glow or a flicker of hope; it is a bold claim that in Him, life itself shines. The world often feels shadowed by uncertainty, fear, and sin. We can feel the overwhelming challenge of darkness making it hard to see our way forward. Yet Jesus promises that those who follow Him will never walk in darkness.

Notice the setting: Jesus speaks during the Feast of Tabernacles, where lamps illuminated the temple courts as a symbol of God's presence guiding Israel in the wilderness. God was the light by which Israel could follow him in faith. Against this backdrop, Jesus says, "I am the light." He is not just pointing to God's light—he is God's light, come to dwell among us. He declares this truth boldly as a witness for himself and with his Father as the second witness. The Father and Son are one and reinforce each other. Knowing one is knowing the other. Being blind to one is being blind to the other.

Jesus, the light of the world, is illuminating who the Father is. He is bringing into sight the very nature and presence of God in their midst. If only we choose to see him as he is. Advent reminds us that this Light entered the world in humility and will return in glory. Until then, we are invited to follow him and in doing so we get to walk in his light. A light that breaks into the darkness and reflects his presence in our midst, right where we are.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, shine into the shadows of our hearts and our lives. Dispel fear and doubt with your presence. As we wait for your coming, teach us to walk in your light and be witnesses of your love. Amen.

Today's reflection was written by Brian Mann

Sunday | December 14th

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46-55

Reflection

The theme of today's reading is complete and total reversal—utter recapitulation and restoration of all things (Ephesians 1:9-10, Colossians 1:19-20, Acts 3:19-21, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). The force of the text's assertions is the total permeation of all reality—physical, spiritual, political, social, economic. Nothing less than ontological transformation and complete renewal is promised in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. *Magnificat anima mea Dominum.*



Deserts become prosperous, transformed from desolation to abundance (Isaiah 35:1-2). Weak hands become strong (v. 3), fear is removed (v. 4, cf. 1 John 4:18)—miracles heretofore never performed by prophet, priest, or healer are now manifest: the blind see, deaf ears are opened (v. 5), the lame leap like deer (v. 6), streams flow through the desert, burning sand becomes a pool. Magnificat anima mea Dominum!

A new Holy Way is established (John 14:6, Isaiah 35:8), promising complete ritual purity and full communion with God (John 1:29, Colossians 1:19-20, 1 John 1:7, Romans 5:18)—the fool becomes incapable of foolishness, incapable of straying! Magnificat anima mea Dominum!

The ransomed of the Lord return from exile by sin, never to return (1 Timothy 2:3-6, Hebrews 2:9, Romans 5:15-19, 1 Peter 1:18-19, Colossians 1:13-14). Sin and evil are eliminated, eradicated from existence—replaced with everlasting joy and gladness. All sorrow and sighing cease. Magnificat anima mea Dominum!

The strength of the Mighty One's arm does not end at healing and soul-salvation. When the Anointed, mashiach, arrives, the Mother of God declares the full scope of his consummation of all things (Revelation 21:5). He scatters the proud enraptured in the pretentiousness and delusion of their hearts. He brings down rulers from thrones and lifts up the lowly. He fills the hungry with food but sends the rich away in the emptiness of their now-irrelevant economic gains—complete socio-political and economic reversal. Magnificat anima mea Dominum!

Single-handedly, he fulfills his covenant by extension of his own faithfulness—pure, unadulterated grace—to all ethnic, social, and national groups (Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). Not by permission. All of this is the promise of the incarnation. Christ in Mary and Christ in you is the hope of glory—you have been made clean and he is making all things new (Colossians 1:27)!

Theologian Cherith Fee Nordling once said: "In Mary's womb, heaven and earth were reconciled, united, indivisible."

Prayer

"Let Mary's soul be in each of you to proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Let her spirit be in each to rejoice in the Lord. Christ has only one mother in the flesh, but we all bring forth Christ in faith." **Amen.** (St. Ambrose, Comm. of Luke)

Today's reflection was written by Steven Showers

Monday | December 15th

Isaiah 40:25-31

Reflection

Early one morning in October I whispered to God (again), "Oh, Abba, my heart is aching to be with my son. It's so hard living this far away from him as he undergoes chemotherapy. Please heal him completely." Then I opened my Bible to see that this passage in Isaiah was my reading for the morning—the perfect words for my weary soul.

The past seven months brought one wait after another. We waited for CT scans to be read, for the right kind of surgeon to be identified, for the news of the outcome of each surgery, and for his body to recover from much trauma. We waited for biopsies, for a plan for treatment, and to see how his body endured chemotherapy. Over the months I have cried a lot and cried out often, because I know God holds my tears and hears my prayers.

God created the stars "calling them all by name." Imagine how intimately he knows you and me—his beloved image-bearers. He knows that our circumstances, our sin, and the brokenness of this world can wear us down, even lead us to lose heart. God calls us out and calls us up: "Lift up your eyes on high and see . . . Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God . . ." He never gets tired, but he knows we will. He invites us to draw near, to depend on him, to wait for him as a faithful follower.

The people in Isaiah's day waited for the Messiah, and we await Jesus' return. The question is—how will we wait? What will our experience of waiting for Jesus be like? Make the most of this meanwhile.



Every hard thing in our life is a significant segment seen by God as he continues his good work in and through us.

This life provides many opportunities to practice waiting, or perhaps to learn how best to wait. Sometimes we wait with our eyes fixed on a circumstance or person, and we place our expectation—even hope—there. When we try to wait for the Lord, we practice fixing our eyes on Jesus and place our hope in him, the Author of our days. The scriptures supply truth and promise to cling to, while prayer helps us honestly share our real feelings, just like the psalmists did. The Spirit of the Prince of Peace who indwells us helps us learn to trust him as our Closest Companion.

When we wait for the Lord, we wait with him and he with us, Immanuel.

Prayer

*Thank you, Holy God, that you give power to the faint and when we have no might, you increase our strength. Help us to take you at your word that “they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount us with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Teresa Glenn

Tuesday | December 16th

John 6:25-35

Reflection

Ironically, as we experience (and likely lament), Christmas season tends to be the busiest time of year. Our work on decorations, cards, gifts, food, parties, and travel can easily create a mindset that, while generally enjoyable, allows us to minimize why Christmas exists. Many of us have celebrated Christmas this way each year since we were small. Our excitement can be for the season, not “the one he has sent.”

In John 6, shortly after Jesus fed over 5,000 people with meager provisions (five loaves and two fish), he left his friends' presence.

When the disciples finally found him (v. 25), as he does so often with us, Jesus immediately identified the condition of their hearts: they weren't looking for him as Lord or because of "miraculous signs" they witnessed, but because he had fed them well (v. 26). The next day they would be hungry again.

Jesus gently rebukes them (and us) not to "work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life" (v. 27). What do we remember from that fun Christmas party last year? The gift we so wanted three years ago? The great Christmas dinner five years ago? All those were good things, fun things, nice things—enjoyable at the time—and bring us back to the same Christmas season routines year after year. Like the bread the disciples ate with the 5,000 a day or so before, it was satisfying, but not an activity that "endures to eternal life."

At Christmas, we celebrate the incarnation of what God has made available to each of us, the bread from heaven (v. 31)—that gives us eternal life and allows perfect communion with God (v. 33). Unlike prior Christmas meals (tasty as they were) or manna that spoiled daily (vv. 31-32), celebrating God's provision of the bread of heaven, the infant Jesus, is the gift of the Son of Man that will never spoil (v. 27).

After Jesus explained that the bread they had eaten with the 5,000 and the manna in the wilderness was not the bread God was offering, they "jumped at that," in excitement asking for that bread "now and forever!" (v. 34, Message).

The events of this Christmas, like Christmases of past years, will fade in our memories. But if we come to Christmas anew this year to find and celebrate Jesus, the "bread of life" (v. 35), we will never go hungry and, if we truly believe in him, we will never be thirsty (v. 35). What if this year was different?

Prayer

*Heavenly Father, as we prepare our hearts for Christmas, let our outlook be different this year. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, please help us, like your disciples, to jump at the opportunity to celebrate your gift of the bread that never fails to satisfy, never spoils as it endures to eternal life, now and forever. Thank you for the reminder, through the excitement of this season, that your work is to believe in the one you have sent. Help us to do just that. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Bruce Berger

Wednesday | December 17th

Isaiah 52:7-10

Reflection

I have ugly feet. I think of my feet and laugh when I read these words from Isaiah. I wonder if those who first heard these words of promise could relate. They lived before *Hokas* and indoor plumbing.

The first hearers of these promises also lived in the ruins of Jerusalem. The Babylonians had come and the worst had happened to the temple, to those who loved the Lord, and to those who had been left behind in the rubble. And then there is the promise of beautiful feet coming with remarkably good news for Israel. The poetic vision is of a messenger cresting the mountains and bounding through the passes with a royal message of salvation. These feet will be beautiful because they will come with a message of redemption and peace. For people left in the ruins it wasn't a laughing matter.

For us now we can look back on the fulfillment of these promises and see the feet of John in the shallows of the Jordan. We can see the tiny feet in the manger. We can imagine Jesus standing on the mountain preaching the good news of the Kingdom or leap forward and see those same feet pierced for the salvation of the world. Then in the garden we can fall with Mary at those feet that have walked out of the tomb.

In Advent we stain our minds and imaginations to retell all these parts of God's story. We remember all that has been and that the coming King promises more, including coming to show his face and revealing his glory to all the nations while filling all things with infinite joy. As we do so we can risk opening our eyes to ruins around us. We can also risk going out into this broken world with hope that comes from hearing and sharing good news. As we do so, even our feet become beautiful.

Prayer

*Holy Spirit, you are the one who spoke through Isaiah. You are the one who came to rest on Jesus in the Jordan before raising him from the dead. Come now on us and fill our hearts. Kindle in us the fire of your love. Set us free to groan for glory and go into the world with good news, playing our part in the way that you, the Father, and our Lord Jesus are making all things beautiful. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Tee Gatewood

Thursday | December 18th

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection

Growing up in the church, I have fond memories of the annual Christmas pageant. My friend's fathers, and other deacons, would dress up as shepherds and townspeople and fill the stage to bring us, the audience, into Bethlehem. But one of my clearest memories is of the wise men and their retinues making their way down the aisles from the back of the sanctuary to bring to the Christ child the gifts spoken of here in both Isaiah and Matthew. There was something, dare I say, magical, about the moment in the eyes of a seven year old.

The adoration of the child was usually the highlight in those pageants. I do not recall a time when Herod was portrayed. Forgive me if my memory is wrong, but there never seemed to be a time when the men at my home church stood to demonstrate the "thick darkness" covering the peoples of the earth. That kind of wickedness was probably too far beyond the capabilities of the actors. Or, if not that, then probably too well known to need showing on stage. Having Herod summon together his wisest men to ascertain the location of the child, ostensibly to put him to death, was not a central focus of pageants squeezed in between classic carols and contemporary Christian songs from the '90s.

I am not mad about it. How could amateurs faithfully have portrayed such darkness and landed such a powerful image of the Adoration? I don't know. Maybe they dropped the ball. All I know is that I did come away with a sense of the joy that was felt as the King was seen for the first time. No doubt I felt, and still feel, that sense of exceeding joy that leads to rejoicing in remembering the birth of our savior. No doubt I could tell that all the peoples of the earth, men and women from afar, came to worship at the manger. Truly, I felt the good news was brought in that frankincense and gold, and the Lord was praised. May he still be praised; may we still fall down and worship.

Prayer

*Almighty God, who has poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Draw us to worship with zeal and joy; beginning at the throne of your Son and extending into all the earth to the glory of your name, through the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Jon Horner

Friday | December 19th

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; Luke 4:16-21

Reflection

In Isaiah 61, the prophet's voice rises over a landscape of loss, speaking to a people returned from exile. Their city lies broken, walls fallen and gates burned. Yet into that desolation comes a prophetic word of hope: *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.* The Spirit moves through a human voice and promises that the ancient ruins will be rebuilt, that those who mourn will be comforted and clothed with gladness.

This promise does not offer abstract hope, but instead a heartening vision for the particular wounds of a people returning to ruin. God's word meets them where the damage is most painfully real, in ruined cities, grieving hearts, and a dispirited community to rebuild. The envisioned renewal is both spiritual and physical, inward and communal. The joy to come will inhabit human hearts and public spaces.

In Luke 4, centuries later, Jesus stands in a small synagogue in Nazareth and reads these same words from Isaiah. As he closes the scroll and sits down to teach, he says, *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* In that moment, prophecy becomes presence. The Anointed One has come, carrying the same Spirit foreseen in Isaiah and the long silence between promise and fulfillment breaks in a single word: *Today.*

Isaiah 61 gives the vision of restoration and Luke 4 reveals the face of that fulfillment in Jesus. And the promise once spoken over a ruined city and mourning people now stands among us, still speaking through his Spirit. We wait for the fullness of what has already begun: the renewal of all that is broken, within us and throughout the world, and the return of beauty to what seems beyond repair. In waiting we can turn our attention to that powerful word "*Today*"; we recognize that redemption is moving in our hearts and among us, even as we long for its completion.

Prayer

*Gracious God, stir in us the hope of your kingdom begun, that we, sharing in your imagination and renewed by your Spirit, may join in your work of mending the world you love. Make us signs of your restoration in the midst of all that is being made new; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Beth Finneran

Saturday | December 20th

Isaiah 9:2-7

Reflection

In Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*, a traveler recounts passing by the ruined statue of an old Pharaoh and shares:

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

What about the world around us causes us to fear? The seeming might of threatening powers? Our own inescapable frailty? If every kingdom of this world falls to ruin, how do we not despair? Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells the Israelites that—even in the face of approaching captivity and exile—they have a hope. A future King is coming who will not fail. Unlike the rulers of this world he will bring peace, govern justly, and uphold his kingdom in righteousness. Consider the prophetic names of the king: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." "Wonderful Counselor" comes from the Hebrew words *pele* and *yo-etz*. *Pele* signifies something miraculous and worthy of awe. The king gives wise counsel beyond human explanation. "Mighty God" comes from Hebrew *el gibbor*, which describes a powerful champion who shall not be overcome. The King is the hero of the great true epic. "Everlasting Father" translates literally from *ab-ad* to "Father of Eternity."

When we try to wrap our heads around this, we have to marvel. The King is the beginning and the end, unchanging and everlasting Father. "Prince of Peace" comes from Hebrew *sar-shalom*. The "peace" expressed in *shalom* means much more than concord. It encompasses wholeness, complete flourishing, and safety. The king is the only authority who can make his people whole. Christ Jesus—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—will reign. By his grace, all who put their hope in him have been grafted into the kingdom inheritance promised to the Israelites. Neither the power of oppressors nor our own weakness must lead us to despair.



We are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own; we are citizens of God's kingdom and not of this world. This advent season, contemplate the promised King. With hope, anticipate the day when he will complete His kingdom work and renew all of creation. As Isaiah declares, "Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (9:7).

Prayer

*Heavenly Father, who reigns with justice and righteousness, help us daily to place our hope in Christ our promised King; keep us from fear or despair, teaching us to depend on you who have overcome all powers of this world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Gigi Curlin

Sunday | December 21st

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:26-38

Reflection

Long before Gabriel appeared to Mary, the Old Testament prophet Micah offered an announcement to Israel. Micah was "filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord" to proclaim to them their sin (3:8). The prophet declared the Lord's judgment: God's withdrawal of protection from Israel and their eventual exile. Their situation was certainly grim, but God's people also received from Micah a flicker of hope: he shared God's promise to ultimately restore his temple, bring back his people, and rule the earth in peace.

In Micah 5, the prophet spoke of the promised messianic ruler of Israel: the one who will "stand and shepherd his flock in the *strength* of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God"—on God's very authority! Because his greatness is everlasting and unending, the people were assured that they will "*live securely*" under the rule of this king, who cares for them as a shepherd cares for his flock (5:4, emphasis added). Though he is great, he would hail from a modest background—Bethlehem, a small town in Judah and the birthplace of King David.

Hundreds of years later, the Lord sent the angel Gabriel to another small, unassuming town with another announcement—the annunciation of the coming of this promised king. Imagine yourself as Mary, a young girl hearing these words for the first time: “The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. [Your son] will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. His kingdom will never end.”

What might she have been thinking, feeling? Luke does not offer us much insight into Mary’s inner world when she receives news that she, a virgin, will bear a son who will reign as king forever. Her response of faith was humble and brief—two short sentences. “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

This announcement would change her life in plenty of ways she likely did not consider at this moment, but Mary did not press Gabriel for more details or instructions. Maybe it is because she knew, as Gabriel assured her, that “no word from God will ever fail.” The promise the Lord spoke through Micah generations ago is guaranteed. The shepherd-king that would make his flock live securely is finally coming to be with his people.

May we all truly believe that Christ has come and is coming to us and put our full trust in him, responding to his call as Mary did. May your word be fulfilled, Lord, because no word from God will ever fail!

Prayer

*Almighty God, from whom no word will ever fail; secure us in your strength and shepherd us with your presence; that we may, like Mary, respond in faith when you call to us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of the Most High. **Amen.***

Today’s reflection was written by Derren Lee

Monday | December 22nd

Isaiah 7:10-17; Romans 1:1-7

Reflection

Ahaz was a wicked king. He sacrificed his son in the fire, he offered sacrifices at pagan altars, and he didn’t walk with the Lord.

He also found himself in a messy political situation when two local kings formed an alliance against Jerusalem. God graciously told Ahaz that he need not fear; he needed only to stand firm in his faith. Yet Ahaz thought it wiser to ally himself with the regional superpower, Assyria. He even plundered the temple of the Lord to send gold and silver to the king of Assyria—demonstrating who he thought could save.

Today's reading begins with the ever-patient Lord speaking to Ahaz again. God instructs Ahaz to ask Him for a sign. God was willing to strengthen his faith, to help him stand firm, and to help him wait for the Lord's deliverance. Yet, feigning piety, Ahaz asserts that he will not put the Lord to the test. (No, God. I will handle the situation my way.)

The Lord responds by giving Ahaz a sign anyway. The sign is this: "the virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [which means God with us]...But before the boy [comes of age]...the Lord will bring on you... the king of Assyria" (Isaiah 7:14-16). (Soon, that power you trust in to save you, Ahaz, will be the very thing that destroys you.)

The sign—a son that would be born to an unmarried woman (presumably to Isaiah)—is here a sign of impending judgment, not a Christmas card comfort. It calls Ahaz—it calls us—to evaluate who or what we are trusting in. In times of trouble or insecurity, when we feel overwhelmed, or when we are facing something that seems to threaten our very lives, isn't it easy to trust, as Ahaz did, in what we can see? Can't we also grasp for control, and place our faith in something—other than God—that we think might save us? Let us instead wait on the Lord's deliverance.

About 750 years after God gave Ahaz the sign of the baby boy, there was another son who was born. This time, though, the omnipotent, infinite, saving God of Israel, curled up in a teenager's womb. Immanuel. This Immanuel still served as a reminder that there is judgment for all those who do not trust in God, yet this Immanuel also did the unthinkable. Jesus laid down his life to take God's judgment for our sins upon himself. He is God with us. Will you trust him to save you?

In the flurry of this season, let us not neglect to make time to meet with Jesus and marvel at the saving love of God, incarnate.

Prayer

Lord Almighty, because of your radical love for us, you became incarnate in Christ Jesus, our Lord. He, who was both a descendent of David and was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:3-4), is our Savior, our Light, our Redeemer, and our Hope. Have mercy on us, and forgive us for putting our trust in anything other than you. You alone are our safety, security, and freedom; in you alone we will place our trust.

Amen.

Today's reflection was written by Sarah Alexander

Tuesday | December 23rd

Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 2:8-14

Reflection

Isaiah's prophecy came during the Syro-Ephraimite War (~700 BC): the northern kingdoms were threatening to attack, Assyria was pushing in from the east, and Jerusalem couldn't agree on a plan. Yet in that swirl of unrest and fear, God spoke through Isaiah promising a royal child who will bring peace, and who will be known by many names.

In Scripture, peace means shared, covenantal wholeness: God, neighbor, and creation set right under a just King (Isaiah 9:7). More than just a feeling or a truce between countries, peace is God re-ordering our lives under his wise rule. The restoration begins with reconciliation to him and then to one another. Already at work where Christ is received, peace will be finished only at his return.

So, today's headlines with broken people still persist, but the King is forming a distinct people who reflect his character. He himself is our peace, the light of the world.

700 years after Isaiah's prophecy, Luke takes us to a field at night where an angel announces the arrival of that child of peace: "A Savior...who is Christ the Lord." A swaddled infant in a manger. The promised King arrives in such a vulnerable state. More angels appear, singing: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14).

It's part of the incredible rescue plan to bring peace once and for all. And as we wait, his names give us hope in this broken world.

Advent is a season that encourages slowing down. Now that we are only days away from celebrating the birth of our Savior, take some time and let his names influence your day to day. Maybe just try one. Let **Wonderful Counselor** guide a challenging decision (pray before you act and seek wise counsel); entrust a specific fear to **Mighty God** (name it aloud and release it in prayer); reflect on **Everlasting Father** by offering steady care to someone vulnerable or in need (a call, a meal, a ride, childcare); and follow the **Prince of Peace** by taking the first step toward reconciliation with someone. Receive peace from Christ and make peace with others, while we wait for his full and final restoration.

Prayer

*Almighty God, who humbled yourself as an infant rescuer to save us from our brokenness. Guide our hearts this Advent season to pursue peace with our neighbors and enemies, and to trust in your just reign over your kingdom: through Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.***

Today's reflection was written by Erik Newby

Wednesday | December 24th

Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14

Reflection

Christianity is a received faith. Our knowledge of God doesn't emanate from within. If we are ever to know him, he must reveal himself to us. God's love isn't an innate characteristic within us. He first must demonstrate it to us and make us the objects of it before we can ever experience it. New life in Christ doesn't occur through some spiritual osmosis. It is offered to us by God as a gift and received by us when we take him at his word.

To be a Christian, we must learn how to receive, particularly how to receive gifts. It sounds simple enough. But is it?

Have you ever been complimented? What did you do with it? Receive it or “modestly” refuse it? I had a friend who at Christmas kept a few wrapped, unassigned gifts so she could have something to give to anyone who gave her a gift that she wasn’t planning on giving a gift to. That’s generous, but that’s exchanging presents, not receiving a gift. John begins his Gospel account by describing that Jesus, the Word, came into the world that he participated in creating and that same world did not see him for who he was. Even the very nation that God entrusted with the chronicles of his mighty acts, the rituals designed to be a reminder of our desperate need for forgiveness and God’s patient provision for it, and the treasure of his promise to send a savior to us...even they, tragically, did not receive him.

But John quickly juxtaposes tragic rejection with the loving and generous gift of God. “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (v.12).

One day Jesus noticed his disciples rebuking parents of young children for wanting him to lay hands on their kids and bless them. Jesus was indignant and told the disciples not only to allow it, but to encourage it. “Let the children come to me: do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall never enter it” (Mark10:14b-15). Jesus told the disciples, and us, that we must be tutored by four-year-olds in order to learn how to receive. Have you ever seen a child receive a gift? How did they receive it? Did they say, “Oh, you shouldn’t have” or “Oh, I don’t deserve this” or “I don’t need your charity, I can make it on my own”? Probably not. They are awed by it, excited over it, curious about what it is, enthralled with it. They rip off the paper, open it up and immediately play with it or put it on or eat it as soon as they see it. They receive it.

This Christmas, let’s get schooled by kids. Receive Jesus and his kingdom like a child.

Prayer

*Lord God in heaven, giver of all good gifts, without which we would never know you. Grant to us a child-like faith to receive with joy all of the gifts you give to us so we could become your children forever. In Christ’s name, **Amen.***

Today’s reflection was written by Bishop Terrell Glenn

Thursday | December 25th

Luke 2:1-16

Reflection

Rather than recording a standard Christmas classic, the seminal indie rock band Big Star wrote their own song in 1975, simply titled: “Jesus Christ.” These are some of the lyrics:

Angels from the realms of glory
Stars shone bright above
Royal David's city
Was bathed in the light of love
Jesus Christ was born today
Jesus Christ was born

One member of Big Star, a musician’s musician named Alex Chilton, penned the song. David A. Graham, who writes for *The Atlantic*, wonders about Chilton’s mindset as he sings: “[In the middle of the song] Chilton does a wry parody of a bandleader introducing the solo. Chilton says—“Now we’re gonna get born”—with a suggestion of a sneer. But there’s so much sarcasm and so much aching sincerity across Big Star’s catalog that you have no idea whether to take a line like ‘And the wrong shall fail, and the right prevail’ as mockery of Christian piety or a tribute to genuine faith. I think that ambiguity makes the song... As both a [*smart aleck*] and a believer, I like to listen to it all year, but it takes on particular meaning around Christmas.”

Graham notes something in Chilton’s delivery that can describe the conflicted way we can all feel about this day. Christmas can sometimes feel tacky, superficial, and overdone—which can lead to some sneering. But with deeper contemplation, the Savior of the whole world arriving in quiet, unadorned obscurity among dirty livestock—in this light, Christmas becomes mysterious and breathtaking.

Whether sincere or sarcastic, Alex Chilton’s lyrics capture the sublime and simple elements of Christmas. Angelic messengers burst from the realms of God’s glory. The stars shine. And these shepherds decide to leave the countryside, and travel into Royal David’s city to see for themselves.

The shepherds say to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened..." (Luke 2:15). This "Let's go and see" impulse is a good Christmas Day practice. The invitation on this Christmas morning is to wake up and take notice. It is a countercultural, peace-instilling practice on Christmas Day to pause. To sit still. To widen our eyes so that we can see and name the proximate presence of God.

Today, where is the presence of Jesus Christ evident to you? Steal a few minutes by yourself to sit with the Lord Jesus and name the good things you see, as well as the hard things you are facing. And then, sit with him—as closely as a mother with her newborn. See what he brings to mind. Express to him your gratitude. Petition him about a dire need. And then, let his promised nearness be your reassurance.

Jesus Christ was born today
Jesus Christ was born

Today's reflection was written by Eric Bolash

Thanks for journeying through
Advent with us!