



Blossoms in the Desert

Advent 2022

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 shouting.

Isaiah 35: 1-2



Friends of Friedens Peace and Epiphany UCC,

You hold in your hands - or are viewing on your screen - the good fruit of working together and sharing from our hearts, minds, and souls. We are diverse communities. We do not all agree on doctrine or politics, but we are bound together in community through Christ. As such you are invited to take what you can use and leave the rest, knowing it was offered in love.

Our theme, ***Blossoms in the Desert***, comes from a passage in Isaiah where the prophet is offering a vision of life in a world where God's reign is complete. We had looked back through our previous themes, noticing that so many of them were about light and one of our sages pointed out that there are blessings to be found in darkness too. We have left the theme pretty open to the writers to speak to unexpected blessings here and now; blessings in unexpected places; or the promises of the coming Kingdom of God.

You see, the prophet saw the **whole** desert blooming, but there are always blossoms in the desert, and the sidewalk cracks, and the craters of volcanos, and all sorts of ridiculous places because flowers are so much like us: diverse, colorful, silly, beautiful, so fragile in some ways, and tough as iron in others!

I want to thank Pastor Lauren for inviting us into this collaboration, and I pray that this devotional will feed your mind and your soul! Have a holy and blessed Advent!

Pastor Krissy Avise-Rouse
Epiphany UCC
November 2022



November 27

Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

In the driest whitest stretch of pain's infinite desert, I lost my sanity and found this rose. - Rumi

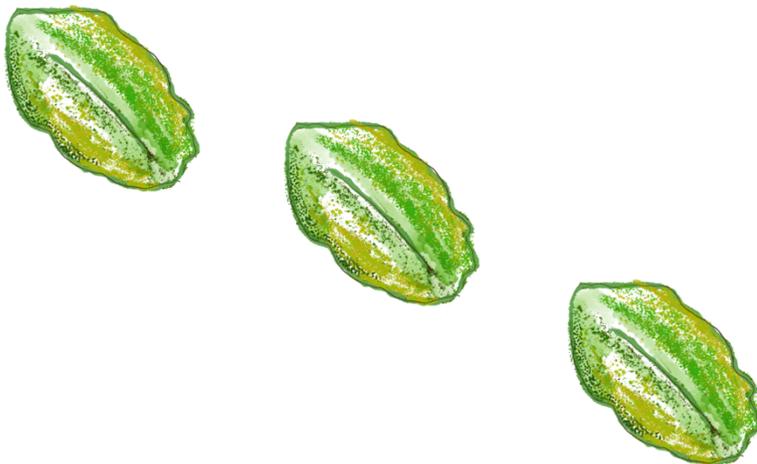
Faith can feel pretty irrational, especially in Advent: we are waiting for a time already come and also part of a future we do not see; we prepare for a coming we are sure of but which is also a mystery. "About that day and hour no one knows," and yet here we all are gathered around the uncertain certainty that is a God become human in the person (baby!) of Jesus.

What are we even doing?

I don't know! And also I do: we have looked at this world and seen the other one that is right here waiting for us if we are willing to pay attention. Some of us have had "superbloom" experiences where we have been overtaken by a wild divine beauty. Some of us are captivated by the blossoming cactus that brightens our window in the graying winter seasons. Some of us just love the stark beauty of an expanse of desert.

Congratulations, my friends, we are all holy fools! We love differently, we notice differently, we move differently through the world. This Advent, may we continue to behold the blooming world as gift, as promise, as the fullness of life.

Lauren Verseman



November 28

Psalm 124, Genesis 8:1-19, Romans 6:1-11

Romans 6:10

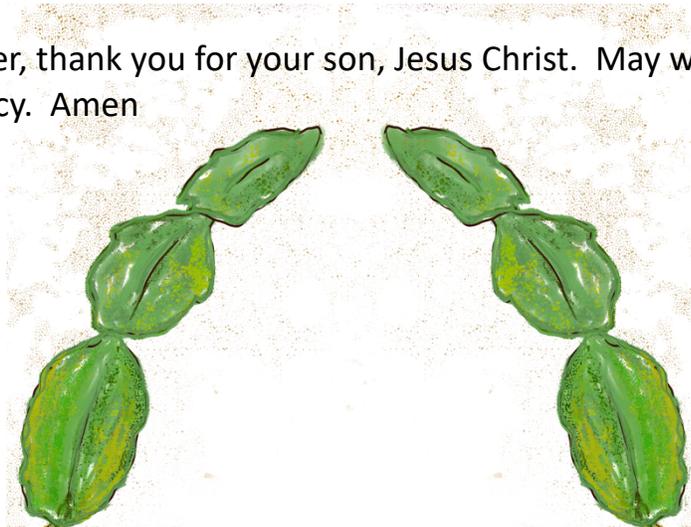
The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

Wow! This is a very powerful verse for me. To think he died once for ALL sin and took sin with him to his death, so that we can live to God! Wow!

When I have a rough day, I try to take a minute to myself, which usually leads to me thinking about the day Jesus died a horrible death just for you and me. I tell myself, "suck it up buttercup" this is not a bad as Jesus' last day! Get over yourself and live the way our Heavenly Father showed us by giving us his son to live among us. He showed us the way God wants us to live, loving one another...thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your son, Jesus Christ. May we live and bloom in his grace and mercy. Amen



Jill Climer

November 29

Psalm 124, Genesis 9:1-17, Hebrews 11:32-40

Blossoms Along the Way

Share hope.

Share joy.

Share sorrow.

Show hospitality,

Be kind.

Be patient.

Uphold others in prayer.

Speak your truth in love.

Listen to other perspectives.

Forgive yourself and others.

Be compassionate with yourself and others.

Be intentional in seeing the value in the “other.”

Share and nurture gifts – your own, as well as others’.

It’s not all about me, and it’s not only about you, but you and I

together as part of God’s kin-dom.

Let God’s light shine upon you, and around you, and in you, and through you.

And be a blossom in the desert, this Advent/Christmas season and every day.

Fred Hudson

November 30

Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10, Matthew 24:23-35

I grew up in one of those churches that expected Jesus to come back at any time. The minister preached about it. We sang songs about it. We found clues in the newspaper that prophecies were being fulfilled and the world would end soon, followed by the Judgment Day.

Matthew 24, especially the parts before today's reading were frequently cited as we searched out signs of "the end times." We took the war in Vietnam, a 1968 earthquake in southern IL (minor, but scary), and stories about famines in various countries to be indicators that "Jesus is coming soon."

What we failed to notice is that the good news that Jesus preached was not about himself. His message was repeatedly that "the kin-dom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). In fact, he taught us to pray for the fulfillment of God's commonwealth right here on this planet, saying "Thy kin-dom come on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). I wonder how many opportunities I missed, along with my church community, to embody God's values, because we were too busy trying to solve the "when will the world end?" puzzle.

When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to discover whether he was truly the Messiah (Matthew 11:2-6), Jesus' reply was:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

It is not just Jesus who can open closed eyes and ears, restore outcasts to community, make the world better for people living in poverty, and accompany our neighbors on journeys from death to life (out of domestic violence, addiction, etc.). All of us have that capacity in some measure, especially when we accept the Spirit's invitation to work through us.

May I be a sign of God's commonwealth for someone today. Amen.



Jeanette Mott Oxford



December 1

Psalm 124; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 24:23-35

On the heels of mass shootings in our own backyard, stressful local and national elections, imperial wars, and natural disasters worldwide, these scriptures speak to me about our community, our nation.

The Psalm of David observes, if the Lord had not been on our side, “the raging waters would have swept us away.” Isn’t this the story of 2022?

And now Isaiah summons us, like the barren woman God promises will have more children than she could have borne, to “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.”

In other words, make room. Make room for the refugees of war, climate destruction, conflict. Make room for people who look different, pray differently, eat differently. Make a place for the loner, the outsider. Make room. Strengthen your infrastructure to accommodate. Make room for all. And grow the family. And be blessed.

We are reminded that all children are God’s children and that a nation, in its highest ideals, will welcome all, defend freedom, and nurture opportunity. We shed tears and fight for justice when we fall short of those ideals and yet the promise remains. Didn’t the Israelites fall short of God’s expectations rather frequently? And yet the promises remain.

And finally, Matthew warns of false prophets who would deceive even the elect. We will know the capital T Truth by its fruits. Where love and justice manifest, there is the kin-dom of God.

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.”

Kat Logan Smith

December 1, 2022

Acts 1:12-26, New International Version



I can only imagine the tornado of feelings swirling among the disciples in the days after Judas's suicide and Jesus's murder. Grief. Betrayal. Anger. Fear. Indecision. There were holes in the fabric of the community they had formed over the past three years. The Messiah they had experienced was something altogether different than the one they had anticipated for generations, unwilling to play it safe, hold back, until they were strong enough to challenge Rome. And one of them had been willing to participate in Jesus's murder. Who would have thought it possible that one of their own would be willing wreak so much damage, and then abandon them with no explanation, no apology, no effort at restitution- leaving them to pick up the pieces.

Eventually Peter stood among his friends, still in the midst of their grief and discernment. He reminded them that there was work to be done, that they must bear witness, tell the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. They looked around the still holy body, the body that continued to hurt and to heal. They acknowledged the need to fill the gap Judas left. They choose Matthias, who had been with them all along, who remembered the story, who was willing to tell it again and again to whomever would listen.

They did not know then that the work they were doing to grieve and heal, to take small steps forward, was to prepare for Pentecost. They could not know how soon the Holy Spirit would blow in to fill them with gifts for the tasks ahead. They could not know that their first opportunity to preach the good news would come so soon or that Jews from all over the world would hear the Spirit in their own language and be transformed. They could not envision the church, the kin-dom, for which they were building the foundation.

They were just a small, tired, grieving group of people, gathered around a table, trying to make sense of the past and imagine the future. Then they perceived God at work among them, as unexpected and as hope-inspiring as blossoms in some rocky hillside in the desert.

Dorothy M. Gannon

December 2

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Isaiah 4:2-6, Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

When you read this, it will have been two weeks since I stood in the cold November night with nearly one hundred trans, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, gender non-conforming, and gender transgressive humans in the St. Louis Trans Memorial Garden to commemorate Trans Day of Remembrance. It is a solemn thing to read the names of trans siblings murdered in the year from October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022. 32 of them in the U.S. (that's the list we read) and 327 worldwide; and then we stop and remember those who have taken their own lives and those who are not the list, either because they were still in the closet, or because their family and community did not respect their identity or report their murder as anti-trans hate. We could have stopped there in the grief and the pain, but that is not who we are!

Christians and Jews and atheists and humanists praying together for an end to the hate and violence aimed at us. Trans folk pledging to take care of each other. In the dark and the cold with candles and flowers and beautiful humans of all shapes sizes and colors CELEBRATING our transness and our community and our love!! "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." and so we comforted each other in memorials read, blessings offered, tears shed, humanity claimed, survival celebrated, and hugs given.

Paraphrasing the Psalmist we pray, 'Endow the governors with your justice, O God, the legislature with your righteousness. May they judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.'

Pastor Krissy Avise-Rouse



December 3, 2022

Isaiah 40:1-11, John 11:19-28

The Promises of God

Divorce for me in the early 1970's was a catastrophic, totally disruptive event. My world, my love, was in disarray. No matter how I tried I couldn't put it back together again.

Fortunately, I had become immersed in a beloved community. Through the friendships, the rituals, the opportunities for learning and service, the faithful leadership I became more fully engaged with the life and love of Christ. The rough places became plane though I was still broken in many places. But now I was on a well-nourished path.

Today, collectively, we are experiencing many hardships, heartbreaks, broken dreams. Yet in our midst is the powerful reality of God's steadfast love made known to us bodily in the friendship of one another and in the vibrant leading of the Spirit among us.

Let us celebrate the One who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen.

Lois Yatzeck



December 4

Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7 & 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As I was reading some of the chosen scriptures, I was drawn to this one. Those who believe in God, will be filled with joy and peace! Yes, that's what we all want, joy and peace! Especially when we are in the season of Advent, I think we want it even more. Yet, I believe if we, as believers, flourish and prosper in this hope that we can show nonbelievers a different way of living in Jesus Christ. That we can see a future for ALL people to be filled with this joy and peace! That our world, may be a better, more faithful place in years to come.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we are grateful for the joy and peace that you fill us with. May we pass it on to all we meet and see this season of Advent. Amen

Jill Climer



December 5, 2022

Psalm 21

The Conquering God

Delivers Victory; Utter Desolation of the Enemy.

Who doesn't have these fantasies? But what about the suffering? Cue Ukraine. And CVPA. There is no real victory. It is illusion.

Isaiah 24:1-16a

The Punishing God

Delivers Destruction for All

Harkening to that message that sometimes resonates with old and young alike: "Burn It! Burn it all!"

Again with the suffering: Ian, Fiona, Nicole, Julia and Bonnie (\$54 billion in damage. 337 dead), wildfires, earthquakes, floods, droughts, heat waves.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

The New Covenant God

Rewards Compassion Over Passion;

The PBS News Hour over the Jerry Springer Show.

Dolly Parton over Steve Bannon.

Diplomacy over destruction. Resistance over rage.

Gentleness, is, as friends suggest, Power Under Control.

And it is this God who wakes me with the winter sun, puts songs in my heart, prompts the care of little children, the planting of seeds, and demands tenderness for the planet and its people.



Kat Logan-Smith

December 6, 2022

Psalm 21, Isaiah 41:14-20, Romans 15:14-21

If you read the Hebrew scriptures recommended for today, you will find writers extolling the might and strength of their God as displayed in God's violence against whomever the writer sees as the enemy. I suppose this should someday cease to shock me. The writers lived in a violent, frightening world so it makes some sense that the writers would imagine a God who would destroy the enemy in power and might and violence.

Some things have changed in the intervening millennia since they wrote. Some things have not. The world is still violent and frightening. We could choose to draw on these violent images of a mighty, violent God to comfort ourselves. Many still do. But I prefer to align myself with those who know and remember God as a hen protecting her chicks under a sheltering wing or as the eagle that will bear us up when we are tired. I prefer to count on the God who grew shade in the desert to protect Jonah from the burning sun even while Jonah was fleeing God's call. I hope to trust firmly in the strength and might of God who was angered by the faithlessness of the Hebrew slaves wondering in the desert but vented a while and then faithfully sustained them and led them to promised land. I want to draw on the strength of God who "makes a way out of no way" and who holds nations accountable for how they treat the poor and the sick and the imprisoned, not by punishing us with violence but by reminding us of consequences.



Our nation recently experienced an election in which so many people chose to vote to reject the idea that strength equals hate or tyranny or bullying or violence. Despite all predictions, the movement was toward more healing rather than more divisiveness. I choose to believe this was the sure movement of God. In this Advent season, this season of waiting, I wait in hope to see what God will do next.

Dorothy M. Gannon

December 7

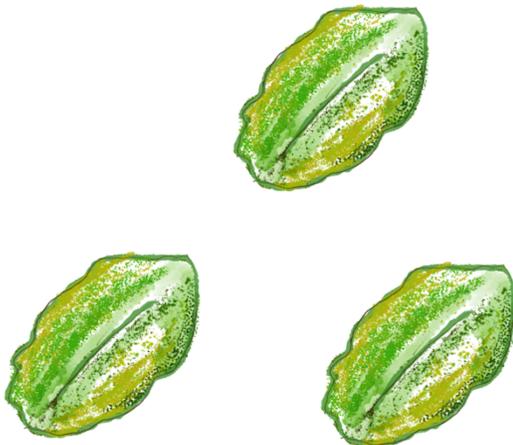
Psalm 21, Genesis 15:1-18, Matthew 12:35-37

The Genesis reading from this day tells about how God made a covenant with Abram. Abram was childless and worried about not having an heir. As someone who does not have (nor plan to have) children, this particular concern doesn't really resonate with me.

However, Advent is a time of expectant waiting, and preparation, and *looking to the future*—and I can relate to those things very much. I think we all care about the future of our world, whether we have children and grandchildren or not. We all worry about the state of the world and its future.

Today, I'd encourage you to try to take a few moments to think about ways you can improve the future in your neighbor's life, a friend or family member's life, or just in general. And sometime between now and Christmas Day, do that thing.

Wes Buchek



December 8, 2022

Psalm 146:5-10, Ruth 1:6-18, 2 Peter 3:1-10

When you read Psalm 146, I am sure you think, "Wow, God is amazing!" God is amazing...and God does all of those things. But how? The answer is simple enough. Through all of us.

God feeds the hungry. Through kitchens and pantries, and the Wednesday breakfast ministry, we feed the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free. The Lord helps us help the imprisoned like Bobby Bostic who became free with many hands helping.

The Lord gives sight to the blind. Physically through medical advancements by us, and metaphorically through us touching others who need their sight restored.

The Lord watches over the foreigner. Even when the wicked want the foreigner out, we help and take care of them by providing for their needs.

The Lord sustains the fatherless and the widow by giving us friends who look in on us and care for us, especially during low times.

God is amazing!

Prayer: Thank you, God, for giving us the ability and desire to help our fellow humans so we can be like God. May you remember all of the God-like people in your life when you are experiencing a low. Amen.



Nicole Avise-Rouse

December 9, 2022

Psalm 146:5-10, Ruth 4:13-17, 2 Peter 3:11-18

Waiting, oh how hard it is,
Waiting on the house to become clean,
Waiting on the water to become warm,
Waiting on the children to be ready to leave,
Waiting on the bills to be paid,
Waiting on the food to become cooked,
Waiting on the company to arrive,
Waiting, on how hard it is!

Waiting on God's promise,
Waiting on the peace that only God can bring,
Waiting to grow in knowledge,
Waiting to grow in grace,
Waiting to be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.

Amen



Tina Benne

December 10

Psalm 146:5, 1 Samuel 2:2,6-8, Luke 3:10-11

For this, the first devotional I've ever written, I studied the list of suggested scriptures to hear which day called to me. But in the end, I asked to be assigned a date. December 10th is what She gave me. What an auspicious date it is for me!

Thirty-one years ago, on December 9th, we learned my unborn child had lost her life. December 10th her little sister was born to us. The day before, my heart was dry as a desert while tears streamed day and night. When we received the news that we had lost "Twin A", I felt God's great grief, even greater than mine. There was no consoling me. The next day, there she was! Our beautiful desert blossom; full of grace, beauty and life!

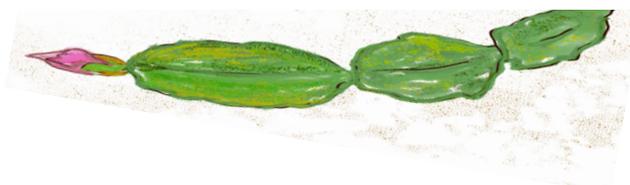
But, for this devotional, we were asked to share where we see God showing up in unexpected ways. How do those examples of Love thriving in a desert of need, pain, and conflict help me envision God's commonwealth being realized?

I recall the homeless persons I've witnessed. I think of the man on the corner who saw me weeping in my car who turned his "Homeless and Hungry" sign around and smiled as he showed me the other side. "You are beautiful!"

I think of the huge tent villages along the river where people share everything. No one asks who they voted for or where they went to high school. I am reminded of small encampments under bridges, where people of all skin color, gender and ages support each other. I smile when I remember the one man, at the foot of the pedestrian bridge I crossed every day, who showed me the greatest kindness of all by sharing a nod of recognition, and by accepting my gifts of warm oatmeal from the fast food restaurant. His acknowledgment of my humanity and desire to be in communion with him will always be a blossom in my soul. I take it out to admire its beauty when I feel I've lost my way and am wandering through a desert.

Thank you, God, for giving me examples set by the humblest, the most impoverished, the ones who others pass by and don't see. Thank you, God, for these beautiful desert flowers!

Doris McCarter



December 11, 2022

Isaiah 35:1-10

TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY

I feel like the desert is all around us. The thorns of injustice pierce the skin of the stranger. The sharp rocks of oppression bruise the heels of the weak and the feeble. And the heavy heat of the sun supports the carrion of evil, eating at our souls.

TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY

And yet, water flows with justice for the oppressed. Spring beauty blossoms in the desert to sooth the stranger's brow. And the spring sustains our kin-dom.

TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY

Vernon Kays



December 12

Psalm 42, Isaiah 29:17-24, Acts 5:12-16

As I read through the passage from Acts, one line kept sticking in my head: “No one else dared join them (the Apostles), even though they were highly regarded by the people.”

It reminds me of Epiphany! Plenty of our friends and siblings in churches appreciate what we do and stand for at Epiphany, yet no one dares join us.

Now, you may know the Apostles mostly suffered terrible deaths. So, let’s hope that’s not the case for us!

Wes Buchek



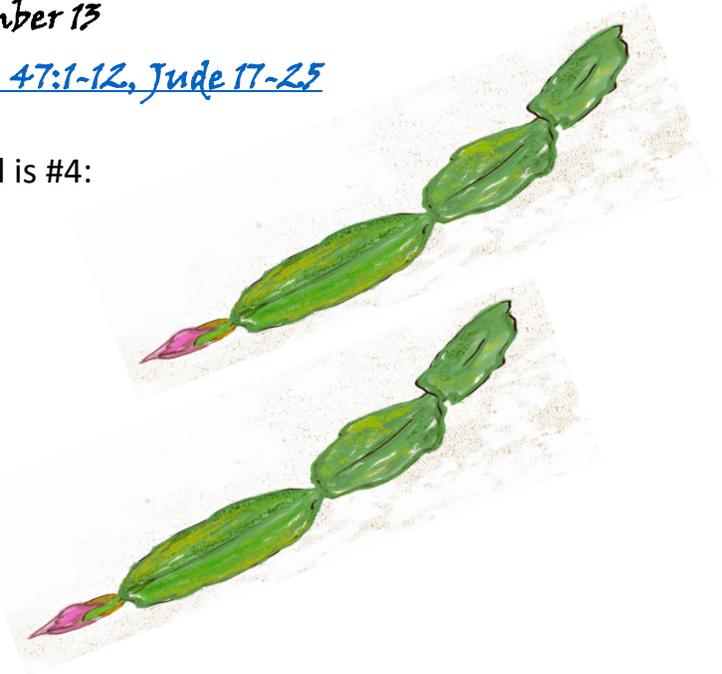
December 13

Psalm 42; Ezekiel 47:1-12, Jude 17-25

One of my favorite songs in our blue hymnal is #4:

*As the deer pants for the water
So my soul longs after you
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you*

*You alone are my strength, my shield
To you alone does my spirit yield
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you*



This song is taken from Psalm 42, and the emotional tone of the music and the words of both the song and the ancient Psalm perfectly fit my experience of Advent. So often I feel crushed by oppression, heartsick as I see racism's latest mutations or feel taunted by foes who claim that my sexual orientation and gender identity are unacceptable, sinful. I long for the kin-dom of God to finally be realized and peace and liberation to flourish worldwide.

I take three encouraging thoughts from Psalm 42 today:

- 1) God desires my honest communication – even if I am feeling forgotten, abandoned, in agony. Deep relationship requires honesty.
- 2) My life is lived within God – all day and night. As Psalm 42:8 describes, God's love is directed to me by day, and God's song is with me by night. Each moment is God praying through me. Perhaps worship is the right word for any moment when I take time to notice this and feel my union with God.
- 3) Even in times of great distress, I may be ambushed by hope. As Rachel Hackenberg wrote in the [November 3 Still-Speaking Devotion](#), "...hope with a plan isn't hope. It's a plan ... and that's lovely, but it's self-made and assumes the self I already have in the space it already occupies and the life it already knows. Hope—the hope to which God calls us—comes from an alien space, a wild space, a holy space. And from that space, hope offers possibilities we cannot devise ourselves."

Jeanette Mott ("J-MO") Oxford

December 14

Psalm 42; Zechariah 8:1-17, Matthew 8:14-17 & 28-34

As we await the coming of advent, I've been awaiting the blooming of this cactus. The buds have been maturing and I've had to have patience for months. I thought I was doing something wrong as they looked like they should have bloomed months ago. But then, when I least expected it, they all started to explode. I kept the faith and was rewarded with their beauty. It reminds me of what I need to do in my life and in thinking about advent... keep the faith and await the beauty.

Helen Proctor-Tu



December 15

Psalm 80:1-7 & 17-19, 2 Samuel 7:1-17, Galatians 3:23-29

We have a place.

When we feel lost and without hope, we are still welcome.

When we have wandered and wondered how we fit in, there is room for us. Sometimes the room doesn't seem big enough or the conversation is too loud

I started watching birds when we were at home during COVID times. How did I never notice them before? I feed them daily and enjoy just watching them come and go, chattering away and teasing each other. They are joyful. They are energetic. They watch out for each other. They fight for space and food. Sometimes they appear sad. They are a lot like us. And yet, there is room for them all. They are all welcome and get what they need as they travel on or stay for a while. They have a place.

When you feel like you don't belong or you don't fit in, God has given you the space to be and holds you in their arms. Galatians 3 states we are all children of God. I think of my dad when I write this. He never felt like he fit in. Today would be his 73rd birthday, yet he only made it to 44. My hope lies in the promise that God made him a space, though his is beyond this realm. Yours is here, now. You have a place. Let God hold you in their arms and hug you tight especially when you feel lost. You have a place.

Nicole Avise-Rouse



December 16

Psalm 80:1-7 & 17-19, 2 Samuel 7:18-22; Galatians 4:1-7

We wait for you, our Mothering God
Like those looking for water in the desert,
Like ones who feel alone and isolated,
Like people who know our sin and feel our shame.
Come to us, that we may be saved.

We wait for you, our Mothering God,
Like children who are lost in the dark,
Like teenagers who must rebel to mature,
Like adults whose passion sometimes burns brighter than our wisdom,
Like elders who whose hope perseveres even as energies wain.
Come to us again, that we may be saved.

We wait for you, our Mothering God,
Like your created ones who have known brokenness and healing,
Like your co-creators who have known failure and success,
Like your beloveds who have known your unconditional love.
Come to us anew, that we may be saved.

Amen



Dorothy M. Gannon

December 17

Psalm 80:1-7 & 17-19, 2 Samuel 7:23-29, John 3:31-36

Our family has a Christmas cactus that spans three generations. It first belonged to my Great Grandma Wight, who nurtured it for decades in her farmhouse in Dimondale, Michigan. When she died, it became my Gramma's cactus. She and my Grandpa moved that plant to about a dozen houses, and now it resides in their small assisted-living apartment.

Years ago, I took a few cuttings to propagate so that my mom and I could have a piece of the cactus in our homes. Both plants took off, giving us gorgeous pink blooms every winter. But two winters ago, mine decided to go on strike. I had three tiny buds, and only one bloomed. What a disappointment!

Fast forward to last Christmas, when I noticed that my cactus had more buds than I had ever seen. They bloomed beautifully and I enjoyed sending my grandma daily cactus updates.

When I mentioned to a friend that I weirdly had no blooms one year, and then a hundred blooms the next, she reminded me that I had taken many cuttings that spring to propagate for friends.

Often in the holiday season we turn to excess – it's easy to get caught up in the parties and treats and presents. But in this Advent season, as we anticipate the humble birth of Christ, what if we contemplate what a good pruning might look like in our lives?

Sara Johnson



December 18

Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7 & 17-19, Romans 1:1-17, Matthew 1:18-25



“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which mean ‘God is with us.’”
Matthew 1:23



In this Advent season we are reminded of this promise, *God is with us*. The coming of our Savior marked the promise of the Presence of God to all humankind. It is a promise that can be easily taken for granted when times are good. It is a promise upon which we cling when times are bad.

When we as faith communities gather in worship, *God is with us*.

When we gather at our workplaces, *God is with us*.

When we are in our places of shelter, *God is with us*.

When we feel the Spirit surrounding us with comfort, when we in anger proverbially “shake our fist in God’s face”, when we doubt if God really cares, *God is with us*.

When we are in good health, when we are ill, when we are jubilant, when we despair, when we are weary, *God is with us*.

When we eat, when we sleep, when we laugh with loved ones or long for someone to love, *God is with us*.

When we enter this life, when we depart from this life, and every moment in between, *God is with us*.

As we prepare our spirits to once again celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us pause for a moment and breathe in the joy and peace of this promise: *God is with us!*

Rev Dr. Carol Trissell

December 19

1 Samuel 2:1-10, Genesis 17:15-22; Galatians 4:8-20

Rejoice in the Lord



The beloved Magnificat, (Luke 1:46-55) which celebrates the virgin Mary's joy at becoming pregnant with Jesus, has its model in the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 1-10). In this poem from Hebrew scripture, Hannah rejoices that she has born a son, Samuel, after many years of infertility. In gratitude she dedicates him to the service of God and leaves him at the Temple in Jerusalem where he will be brought up by the chief priest there, Elkanah.



What woman has not rejoiced in finally conceiving a child (or adopting one) after many years of childless longing? But for many African American women, bearing a male child brings a special fear because of the vulnerability of black men, teenagers in particular, to police, gang, and other racist violence. Yet there is rejoicing, nevertheless.



We too can rejoice that in our times we can give birth - to a kinder and gentler nation through acts of kindness and generosity. We can put on the compassion of Jesus, not just for this season, but for the years to come, and live out of forgiveness and peace.



May it be so.

Lois Yatzeck

December 20

1 Samuel 2:1-10, Genesis 21:1-21, Galatians 4:21-5:1

Today's lectionary from Galatians offers an interpretation of the story of Sarah and Hagar, telling us it has to do with peoples and lineages and slavery and freedom and faith...

Did you notice that somewhere in this process of scriptural telephone, the women lose their names and agency? That somewhere the embodied, fleshy, life-bearing part of the story disappears? I should probably use my seminary tools to approach and unpack this.

I should....

I should...

But I can't.

Because coming to this text today all I seem to be able to do is feel.

broken kinship

blood and dust

dry desert air

the skin of Hagar exposed against the elements

the parched feeling in the back of her throat

having to watch her child die or abandon them in the desert

the anguish of abandonment

the shock of being seen and heard



As you go back to the story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis, can you find a way of reading that allows you to feel? What is your inner wisdom saying? What life-sustaining resource might God be trying to show you in the midst of this difficult text?

Lauren Verseman

December 21

1 Samuel 2:1-10, Genesis 37:2-11, Matthew 1:1-17

Great Dependance



I have spent a great deal of time contemplating a great many things during my recovery from knee surgery. One of those things, that today's scriptures recalled, is family. Of equal importance to the subject of family is the subject of dependance. Not long after we are born our desire to "do for ourselves" develops. Growing to adulthood brings about the hope from our guardians that we will be able to "launch" successfully to support ourselves. Ultimately, we strive to become independent from our guardians, siblings, and friends.

But the wisdom of God teaches that complete independence is illusion. In some shape or form we are completely dependent on other people for everything. Our God teaches that our dependence on others is so deep that it, literally, connects us together as blood relations. We are all of God's blood. We are all related.

In a few days, our faith will recognize the depth of our dependence on each other in the most human way possible: birth as a human. Be humbled to get a glimpse of a reality that decimates the foundation of our understanding of self-importance. We are nothing without each other. Keep The Faith.



Prayer: Gracious God. During this time of preparation may I be intimately prepared to accept the necessity of community. Amen.

Doug Kaufman

December 22

Luke 1:46b-55, Isaiah 33:17-22, Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20



Do you believe there are blossoms in the desert? What an image. A lone explosion of color lasting a brief moment in a harsh environment. When Jean Kuczka stood between her students and a crazed gunman she was a blossom, offering all that she had to an impossible moment. But with thoughts of her sacrifice the mind broadens, and I remember pictures of a vast desert filled with a multitude of flowers; I am reminded that God calls on all of us to offer our best.

Today's passage from Isaiah speaks of the constancy of God's power and expectations, that they are everlasting and exist in vast and beautiful surroundings. By virtue of our access to these readings we are invited, expected to be open to God's plan.

And in Luke we are reminded by Mary that God's promises are kept, while again we are held to be faithful, to blossom wherever life puts us.

I believe there are blossoms in the desert, though I've never seen them myself. A photograph is difficult to challenge, near perfect evidence. How do we see God's way in the world that clearly? Our Faith is defined by stories we've heard or read but more often by the goodness displayed by others, actions of love and sacrifice.

So my hope for this season of Advent is that I, that all of us, will not only seek ways to bloom where we are, but that we look for the blossoms around us, the deeds large and small that prove again and again that we are faithful and loving in this place where all of us are.

Beckie Tilinski

December 23

Luke 1:46b-55, 2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29, Galatians

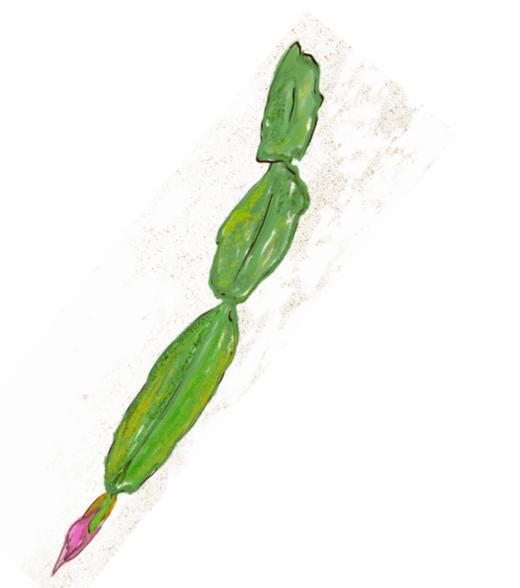
3:6-14

Words of a thankful woman bearing a child and rejoicing reminded me of the first time I encountered the Planned Parenthood Organization almost thirty years ago. Churches and synagogues were mobilizing members to work against a citizen petition in Missouri to create laws to punish and control LGBT folk. The first meeting I attended was in the Planned Parenthood facility. It was fully staffed by women. Almost all of them were pregnant, happy, and radiant. The atmosphere was pure joy and confidence.

That petition drive threatened but fizzled. It did, however, expand dialogue and friendships across denomination and faith lines. Those who would use law to suit their mindset and make life difficult for all who don't agree with them are still with us, still making or misinterpreting laws at every opportunity and still promoting law as a curse or a weapon.

This Advent we might want to give thanks for all happy mothers to be, but also have compassion and find help for women made to suffer, risk life itself, or be denied hope for a bright future by those who love to lay down the law. We can use our blessings as well as count them. We can vote; we can speak; we can write.

Remember Paul's words: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."



Fred Tilinski

December 24
Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

There are two visions of the Messiah in the readings for today. One reflects the desire for an all-powerful Messiah/King who will make all the world right. He seems to be more than a King. The Messiah's visible acts physically remove the burdens of the world.

I focus instead on the incarnate being of Christ as a child in a manger, the child of a poor working-class family. He is with us to help bear the challenges of life. He is my leader, a divine human. He is not over us but with us.

This child is a new kind of Messiah. It is up to us to believe and patiently open ourselves to awareness of his presence, in awe of both his humanity and his divinity.

Vernon Kays



December 25

Isaiah 62:6-12, Psalm 97, Luke 2: (1-7), 8-20

Christmas Day, the absolute definition of blessings in unexpected places! Terrifying angels bringing good news; shepherds as witnesses? A child born in a stable? Or a cave/stable? Or the chaos of the extended family crammed into a too small house and the guest room is full? A king born in poverty? A blessed unwed mother?

When I was a kid, I sang in church the Noel Paul Stookey song *Christmas Dinner*

“And it came to pass on a Christmas evening
When all the doors were shuttered tight
Outside standing, a lonely boy-child
Cold and shivering in the night
On the street every window
Save but one was gleaming bright
And to this window walked the boy-child
Peeking in saw candlelight
Through other windows he had looked at turkeys
Ducks, and geese, and cherry pies
But through this window saw a gray-haired lady
Table bare, tears in her eyes
Into his coat reached the boy-child
Knowing well there was little there
He took from his pocket his own Christmas dinner
A bit of cheese and some bread to share
His outstretched hands held the food and they trembled
As the door it opened wide
Said he "Would you share with me Christmas dinner?"
Gently said she, "Come inside"
The gray-haired lady brought forth to the table
Glasses two, the last drops of wine
Said she "Here's a toast to everyone's Christmas
And especially yours and mine!"
And it came to pass on that Christmas evening
While all the doors were shuttered tight
That in that town the happiest Christmas
Was shared by candlelight”

Holy One, this Christmas we pray that the Christ Child may be born again in us! Help us to see the blessings in the dark and in the unexpected places. Amen

Kris Avise-Rouse

