

The Light Breaks In



An Advent Daily Devotional

ADVENT 2006

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Introduction

The season of Advent comes, in this part of the world, as we approach the longest night of the year. After we cross the winter solstice, we light our candles on Christmas Eve. From that point forward, the night gives way to longer periods of daylight. In the darkest times, the light breaks in.

For many, this season brings as much sadness as it does joy. Our families may not be supportive; this may be the first (or fortieth) holiday season without our beloved one; too much hype and “holiday trappings” can actually dampen the Spirit. And then, in sublime and surprising ways, in a smile, a plate of cookies, or a holiday hymn, the light breaks in.

If we take the time to be still, reflective, and intentional, Advent can be a rich time of spiritual development. Four pastors have compiled these reflections to help you in your efforts. These daily readings are as diverse as the four of us. We think that the diversity is a good thing.

We are:

The Rev. S. Michael Pater, Senior Pastor, Urbandale United Church of Christ
(Nov 27-Dec 3);

The Rev. Julia Rendon, Pastor, Crossroads United Church of Christ
(Dec 4-10);

The Rev. Dennis Eastin, Pastor, Ankeny United Church of Christ
(Dec 11-17);

The Rev. Emily Goldthwaite Fries, Associate Pastor, Urbandale United Church of Christ
(Dec 18-24).

You can find information about the churches we serve at www.uccdmmetro.org.

We would also like to thank Tara Aukes, Elsie Naylor, and Jane Robinette from Urbandale UCC for their help on this project!

I might suggest that you find a regular time each day to use this devotional. Try centering yourself with a few deep breaths and moments of quiet before you begin the reading. If there is a longer scripture focus, read it before you read the devotional. Invite your heart, mind, and spirit to be open to God. Be open to the places where the light is trying to break in...

In hopes of wholeness,
The Rev. S. Michael Pater, editor

The Two Directions of Advent

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord...
~Jeremiah 33:14*

The word *advent* comes from the Latin *adventus* and means “coming.” The season is the four weeks prior to Christmas and it begins the Christian “church year” (called the “liturgical year”). The church year has two three-part cycles: Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter-Pentecost.

While the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle is longer, both three-part cycles have the same movements: preparation, main celebration, and a season of taking the meaning of the main celebration deeper into our spiritual lives. Advent is the season of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Epiphany (January 6th) is the celebration of the arrival of the magi and during the season of Epiphany we are invited to take the Light of Christmas deeper into our hearts and actions (yes, “to keep Christmas all year round”). The season of Epiphany ends at “Shrove Tuesday,” the day before “Ash Wednesday” that begins the season of Lent.

During the season of Advent, we look in two directions. We look back and remember that which has all ready come, namely the birth of one in a manger whose life and teaching would transform the world. But the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah also reminds us that “the days are surely coming...” In Advent, we also look forward to what is still trying to come and what yet yearns to transform us and our world. We remember that a birth over two thousand years ago changed the course of history, but the birth of every child represents an opportunity for a new direction. Each moment of our lives is an opportunity to make space for the transformation that Christmas desires to birth in the world.

During this Advent, I’m trying not to just look to the past and send nice cards with platitudes; I’m looking forward and trying to prepare for what wants to be born in my life even now.

Holy One,

We hear your word to the prophets of old and we are grateful for the long-ago birth of your Chosen One, Jesus. Help us to also look forward to the days that still are coming. Help us to prepare for what you still yearn to have birthed in our own lives, our families, and our many communities. Help us to believe that transformation is still possible. Amen.

A Safe Journey

*...I will fulfill the promise I made...
~Jeremiah 33:14*

Anyone who has ever been around me during Advent knows that I have a longstanding tradition: the figures of my crèche travel throughout the season. I don't just set the manger scene out; I build it slowly, all the way to Epiphany (January 6). Mary and Joseph travel toward the stable for four weeks and I place Jesus in the stable on Christmas Eve. The magi journey for twelve days (yup, "the twelve days of Christmas") before they arrive at the Holy Family. It happens in my home, in my study, and in the sanctuary of Urbandale United Church of Christ. Journeys are in progress all around me!

A little before Thanksgiving this year, I decided that it was time to add a new crèche to my small collection. So, I set out on my own journey to discover new figures to represent my sojourn. I knew immediately that I did not want them to be Caucasian figurines—Mary and Joseph would not have been light colored skin. Seeking them in Des Moines proved to be more of a challenge than I thought. A lot of money can be spent on a Nativity set!

I finally found a good source that had sets that were as diverse in price as they were in culture. I took a long time making my decision, even after I knew that I would purchase at least one of them. I picked one made of banana fiber from Uganda. Women from a national organization made the figures. The store I bought it from only import items from organizations that guarantee a safe working environment and a fair wage.

I picked this store not just because it would have what I was looking for, but because it would also support a few of my core values. I selected the new set from Uganda not just because I thought it interesting, but because it also represents a region of the world that yearns for justice.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks for God who claims that promises will be fulfilled. When justice is executed, people will "be saved" and "will live in safety." While God will do what only God can do to fulfill these promises, there are parts that we can do, too. I hope that my mindful purchase of my crèche was a small act of justice that positively contributed to the safety and economic good of a woman in Uganda. Like Mary, she, too, is on a journey. I'll be thinking of her as the banana figure travels in my study.

*Holy One,
As I travel on my Advent journey, may I be aware of others who are journeying, too.
May I not be so focused on my needs that I neglect the small ways
in which I can help to make other lives safer or easier.
May I be an instrument that enables the fulfillment of your promises.
Amen.*

Hope: The Unseen Guardian

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust...
~Psalm 25:1-2*

My Ugandan crèche is nearly complete. It has a nice stable with a star on the top. All the figures are independent so they can each have their own journey: Mary, Joseph, and magi. There are a couple of shepherds and two spindly sheep. There remains only one piece that was missing: an angel.

And so, I bought a Guatemalan hope angel from the same store. I know that it's not a "match" and the Guatemalan messenger is almost as tall as the stable, but I like it. I needed someone to watch over the travelers. And I liked that it was a "hope angel."

I attempt to be aware of hope as it travels with me on my journey. I do not always know where I am going, but I am fond of saying that "all who wander are not lost." I mean several things when I say that "bumper sticker" phrase. I'm attempting to posit that just because my life path has taken me in different directions than my "family norm" and my adult faith looks substantially divergent from my childhood beliefs—I have wandered and am *wondering*, but I am not "lost." I may not know where I am, and sometimes even the best map may not be of much help, but I have not lost my way. Hope travels with me, if not as my guide than at least as my companion.

The psalmist writes, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust..." In Hebrew, Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem, that is, a poem which begins each line with a successive letter of the alphabet. While Psalm 25 is a poem prayer to God for guidance and deliverance, it is also a prayer *about* God. *Because* God is merciful and has "steadfast love" toward the poet (vv 6, 7, 10), the poet is able to put their trust in God. The journey of the writer appears to be perilous at the time of the poem's composition, but God, like a Guatemalan hope angel, is an ever present companion.

As a prayer exercise for today, try writing an acrostic poem about where you are in your life right now. The first line should begin with a word that starts with "A," the second with a word that starts with "B," and so on. It may seem a little forced or contrived, but it might bring to your awareness what types of "angels" would be helpful as your companions.

Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!

*...for you I wait all day long.
~Psalm 25:5*

I hate to wait. It's unfortunate, but true. I'm frequently impatient in lines. I try to sneak through the fast lane at the grocery store, even if I have a few too many items. I usually drive faster than the speed limit—I know, "it's illegal!" I track my book purchases online—they usually go through a place called "Earth City, MO," I didn't even know there was such a place.

I hate to wait and I've never been really good at it. When I was a child my family always had an Advent calendar. Each day we would open a little flap or box and reveal a surprise: a picture, a piece of candy, or an activity to do that day. One year we had an Advent calendar that gradually completed a larger picture. Each day was another piece. These calendars were often accompanied by an Advent chain—every day we would tear a link off as we moved toward Christmas. I have a younger brother, so each day we rotated who would "open" and who would "tear."

I've never confessed it until now, and only now do so with some fear of judgment, but I always hated the calendars and the chains. Sad, but true. I thought they were cruel: I already had enough anticipation with Christmas coming and finding out if I was nice enough or too naughty this year. And on top of that we added a daily waiting exercise! (And no—I never cheated on the calendar and peaked at a day before its time. My parents were careful monitors and I didn't want to press my luck that late in the season.)

Advent is a season of personal spiritual growth, in some ways it is more powerful than Lent for me. Learning to wait is a good spiritual discipline, and for this I find the Advent wreath a helpful aid. Each week another candle is lit as we move closer to Christmas Eve and the lighting of the Christ candle. Each day I muse about where the light is trying to break into the world and in my life.

The psalmist writes, "Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long." It is hard for me to wait—even to wait for God. But as the candles burn, and I wait in holiday lines and traffic, I am trying to make more space for God's leading. I'm not just trying to act more patiently; I am trying to become patience. I'm trying not to just "do something," I'm trying to "stand there and wait."

*Long-suffering God,
May the way that I use time be a reflection of how patient you are with me.
May I remember that the person in front of me in the grocery store might be taking that
food to a sick loved one and the person in traffic may be coming from an emergency.
And may I be as patient with myself as you are with me. Amen.*

A Prayer for World AIDS Day

*...abound in love for one another and for all...
~I Thessalonians 3:12*

Today is World AIDS Day and the following is an adapted prayer from the United Church of Christ:

Gracious God, we celebrate your love for us all on this World AIDS Day as we pray for all those who are living with HIV and AIDS, and for all those affected: family members, friends and lovers, all of us. We rejoice that many now receive life-saving medication, and give thanks for medical advances, creative advocacy and generosity that have made this possible. But so many have already died, so many continue to suffer, so many are cut off from vital information and medication.

We pray for the children who have lost parents, and for the millions of children who are themselves living with HIV or AIDS. Empower us to help change conditions that put them at risk: poverty, war, lack of education, and inadequate health care.

We pray for women, celebrating the many gifts they bring to the front lines of response to this pandemic as caregivers, educators, entrepreneurs and activists. But we know too, many women are vulnerable and at risk for infection. Show us how to protect, empower and heal all women and girls, in our own communities and throughout the world.

Help us, O God, in the power of your love, which casts out fear, to eliminate AIDS-related stigma and discrimination. Help us break through silences that block effective response: let us teach all who are vulnerable about the means to prevent infection, let us encourage the frightened to know their HIV status, let us encourage all who are at risk to seek treatment.

O God, embolden us with your Spirit, so that we can stop AIDS. Grant that your church may be a healing presence in the face of HIV and AIDS. Show us your vision and guide us to the words and actions that will make a difference. On this World AIDS Day, we raise our prayers to you, placing our trust in you for compassion, healing and courage in the struggle to stop AIDS. Hear us and answer us according to the richness of your mercies. Amen.

Two Types of Time

Be alert at all times...

~Luke 21:36

It is only December 2nd and already I've been absorbing Christmas commercials for at least a month. I try to avoid department stores during November to keep from being inundated with Christmas too soon, but usually to no avail. I love the tree, the ornaments, the lights, the colors, and even the "trappings." I just don't want them to come too soon. As much trouble that I have waiting, I am really fussy about being rushed. I like November to be a sacred season of memory and gratitude, not the first month of a two month Christmas extravaganza.

The December frenzy and Christmas excess, however, intrude into November (and even October) by the will and actions of the merchants. They seem to be the keepers of the calendar. It is true that "time waits for no one," but it also seems that time is rushed by many who want a longer buying season. I'm not sure how the store managers measure their time, but the ancient Greeks had at least two notions of its passage: *chronos* time and *kairos* time.

Chronos time is the time that can be measured, most notably by a chronometer. You probably have one on your wrist: a watch. I call *chronos* time "tick-tock time," it ticks along even when you are not noticing and even when you wish that it would stop. The minute that is now soon passes into history.

Kairos time, however, cannot be measured. It is an "appointed" time or season; and if you are not watching, you will miss it. Often we experience *kairos* time as an interruption of our normal routine—it comes as a surprise and often *with* a surprise. We are often caught "unexpectedly (v 34)."

The text for today is about *kairos* time, and God usually moves in *kairos* time and not by the clock. It may seem like a strange text for Advent; there is, after all, no baby born "away in a manger" and instead it reads like a doomsday prophecy. I bet that a pregnant teenager traveling to Bethlehem many years ago thought that a birth was the fulfillment of a *chronos* moment, nine months had passed. It was, however, a moment of *kairos* time that would shake, and still shakes, the order of normalcy. An inconvenient birth is still disrupting our sense of time.

O God of all times and seasons,

Help me to be aware of those moments in my life that seem like inconvenient interruptions that are your attempts to enter my routine with something surprising. May I be alert to your movements and your timing, so that I, too, might better participate in the bringing of your realm of love on earth. Amen.

Liminality

*...your redemption is drawing near...
~Luke 21:28*

So Advent means “coming” and is a 4-week season of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. It is a time that looks back at the ways the love of God has already come into our lives and looks expectantly, with hope as a companion, for God’s love to come more fully into our daily living. We know that God works in our chronos time (by the clock), but is more likely to be discovered in interrupting and surprising seasons (kairos time).

The Gospel lesson for the First Sunday of Advent is an apocalyptic discourse of Jesus that looks forward and yearns for the peace that only God can bring. It may seem a strange message from the one whose birth we are preparing to celebrate—the end of world is near! Is this the same guy of whom the hymn melodiously states “no crying he makes” when the cattle wake him in a manger? Yes, this is the one.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke borrows material from both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark when writing this Jesus discourse. However, in Matthew and Mark this section comes while Jesus is teaching the disciples on the Mount of Olives. Luke changes the location and the audience: Jesus is in the temple and addresses it to all who will listen. Such a narrative change is no accident, I think.

The temple, the center of their worshiping life, is under occupation by the Romans. Some in the crowd believe that Jesus has come to liberate them and free the temple from foreign occupation. They ask a pair of questions earlier in the narrative in Luke 21: when and how (v 7). In response, Jesus tells them that all Jerusalem will be destroyed (vv 20-24) and that the whole of creation will be in distress. Not exactly what the crowd was hoping and expecting to hear!

The crowds are experiencing a time of liminality, that is, a time “in between”. A liminal space is like the doorway to a room; the space that is not quite the room you are entering, but also not exactly the hallway. It can be a difficult spiritual terrain. It is a mixture of either/or and neither/nor. That God’s love has and is changing the world is certain. Uncertain, however, is when the process reaches a state of “completeness.” Some days it feels as if “heaven and earth will pass away;” but take heart, “your redemption is drawing near.” The wreathed circle of light will again be completed, the Christ candle will be lit just after our longest night, and our liminality will pass.

God of our liminality,

We long for immediate transformation and release from our own oppression. Help us to live in the doorway and to be comforted by your presence in the in between times of our lives. May we use this time of waiting as a time of spiritual reflection and growth. Amen.

December 4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to the temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, that One is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

~Malachi 3:1

This verse answers a question immediately preceding it in 2:17, “Where is the God of justice?” That is a question that we know all too well. We live in a time when hard work does not necessarily yield enough to live on, when many workplaces demand more than our 40 hours a week, when good and capable people cannot find employment. Where is the God of justice?

Sometimes we feel betrayed by God because God doesn’t wave a magic wand and just fix it. But that’s not the kind of power God has. God’s power is the power of resurrection, the power to write another chapter after the book has been closed, the power to make a way where there is no way. Where is the God of justice? The God of justice is breaking logjams so far up the river, you can’t even hear it. The God of justice is building community among people who organize and struggle for each other’s sake. The God of justice hurts with our deepest pain, but never gives up.

When you are at an impasse, know that it’s not all right with God. When you are stuck and *it is not right*, remember this promise: *The messenger in whom you delight is coming.* There is light ahead.

December 5

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to God in righteousness.

~Malachi 3:2-3

It sounds painful but delicious, to be purified and refined so that we are more truly ourselves, the way God meant us to be. It would be lovely to be utterly transparent and unashamed of who we are—but most of us are a swirling mixture of flotsam and jetsam, monkey thoughts scampering and fears and anxieties eddying till we can hardly see past our own eyeballs.

Here’s what you do: Tell the monkey thoughts you see them, thank you very much. Tell the fears and anxieties you’ve heard them. Take a breath and let it out. Do it again.

Getting to be who you are is a full-time job. Breathing helps. Prayer helps. If you have internet access, you might like this daily prayer routine: www.sacredspace.ie.

The offering that God wants from you is yourself, not a picture.

December 6

*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.
~Philippians 1:6*

I knew before I ever saw the inside of our house that I wanted it. It was big, it was on a tree-lined street where our kids had friends, it was in Des Moines. It wasn't actually on the market yet, but it was going to be soon, and the owner's sister agreed to show it to me.

This was a house that had been lived in and loved for years. It had all the little touches of long ownership—motion detector lights in the basement to save the trouble of flicking a switch, a handy jar opener under the cupboard to spare my delicate hands, a power strip *all the way around* the four walls of the rec room, for convenient and near-infinite plug-in access. Of course it had drawbacks too. The kitchen cabinets were 40 years old, and not from a particularly outstanding epoch of interior décor. A child of the family had painted strange murals on the basement wall. There was a stairway from the back yard to the basement that practically screamed, “Burglars, welcome!” and produced world-class mildew.

The owner's sister said apologetically that they weren't *quite* finished fixing it up yet, and I, wanting to forestall any expensive improvements that would put it out of our price range, hastily assured her that every home is a work in progress. It was, and it is, and since we got the house we have both updated the kitchen cabinets *and* stained the lovely new carpets that she put in. We have blocked up the burglar door and dinged the woodwork. Those fine motion sensor lights and the jar-opener remain undisturbed.

Our house is a work in progress—sometimes two steps forward, sometimes one step back. So is my congregation. So am I. We serve a fabulous meal at the Catholic Worker House but neglect to organize this year's AIDS benefit. We welcome the outcast to our gathering but are not sure what to do when the outcast in question comes drunk.

But St. Paul assured the congregation at Philippi that God who had begun a good work among them fully intended to bring it to completion, and I am sure the same is true of us. We do some great things, with the help of God, and we mess up too, while God alternately laughs and cries till she hiccups. But we can't go too wrong, not while we keep returning to the grace and power of God. As the old song says, “I don't believe God's brought us this far to leave us.”

December 7

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

~Philippians 1:9-11

Paul suggests to the congregation at Philippi that the critical factor in “determining what is best” is love—that is, those who cultivate love first will find themselves best equipped to make decisions. Isn’t that interesting, that discernment must be guided by love and not by our other manifold and estimable virtues? And doesn’t it make sense.

Love keeps us humble. It forces us to respect others, to acknowledge them as beloved children of God even when we personally can’t imagine what God sees in them. And thus it forces us to cede control of the universe to someone else, who can see what we can’t. We can’t know best. All we can do is look for Christ in the other and trust that God knows what s/he’s doing.

December 8

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

~Luke 3:1-2

In one of my favorite poems, W.H. Auden muses about Pieter Breughel’s painting, *Fall of Icarus*:

**About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away**

**Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.**

In a real time and a real place, with many important affairs of state going on and many important profiles being struck on coins, off in a corner where no one was looking, John was in the middle of something else when the word of God came to him.

And if you think that the word of God comes to you only when you're freshly showered and dressed and have finished all your chores, you have another think coming. Watch and be ready. God is full of surprises.

December 9

*John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
~Luke 3:3*

Whatever you and Karl Menninger may think of sin, there is this to be said: All of us need a good cleaning off sometimes. When you stagger home from the airport, smelling of conditioned air and your seatmate's cologne, what is more refreshing than a shower and some clean clothes? Who among us has not cleared a small space on the desk, then a larger space, then gone out and bought file folders and ended up reorganizing the entire office? When you give a mouse a shower, he's going to want a whole swimming pool.

John went out and offered people the cleansing they longed for. How liberating it is to think of one's grime floating downriver while the self one wants to be once again has open pores and infinite potential. Here's the good news: You are that self. God is always making us new, and baptism is the reminder of that truth.

Spiritual activity for today: Take a hot bath. Wash some dishes. Clean your closet.

December 10

As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

~Luke 3:4-6

Let's be clear on agency here: the ones doing the path-straightening are us. The one traveling on the path is the Lord, who once said, "That which you've done for the least of my sisters and brothers, you've done for me."

If I want to straighten the path for the Coming One, I could start by eliminating the obstacles that stand in the way of abundant life for Jesus' sisters and brothers. I could help a poor family get the attention of the landlord to fix their window. I could help a refugee fill out a Medicaid form. I could add my voice to the chorus of concern about adequate care for nursing home residents with dementia.

We can't do everything, but we can do something. Whenever I straighten the path a little bit, I catch a glimpse of the salvation that's being wrought for all flesh.

December 11

"Joy - hidden in the pain"

I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time I will gather you...

~ Zephaniah 3:19-20a

The prophet claims that God will deal with all the oppressors...at that time. Hmm, that's a tricky bit of writing there Zephaniah. I don't know about you all, but I'd like to know when this "dealing" with the oppressor will happen? We still have plenty of oppressors, and there are still a large number of lame and outcast folk without homes. Some are gathered, but if I had to guess, I would say it's not the vision of gathering the prophet had in mind.

There is a little three year old girl who attends the preschool in our church. Like the 20 or so other blessed children in the class, she has gleaming eyes and the gift of her presence fills my heart with genuine warmth. Over the last four months I have tried desperately **not** to know her. Yes, that's right... I tried not to know her. Though I saw her from a distance, and the preschool teachers told me about her, I still wanted to keep her at arm's length.

Subconsciously I looked for ways to evade her. I knew she was being pursued by an awful Herod, a Pharaoh committed to slavery, and an army dedicated to her demise. I knew there was nothing I could do, nothing her parents or anyone else could do to stand in the way of her pursuer. The pursuer is an unforgiving, mindless, heartless, tormenter named Cancer.

One teacher in particular would not give up on the prospect of me really meeting Makenzie. She brought me the most recent excerpt from a journal written by the little one's mother. It was impossible for me not to respond after reading her words about a little girl's vision. Later in the week I gave her a little pewter angel that I had in my office. She looked at it carefully and asked if she could put it in her pocket. According to her mom, her words, her visions are all about going home. Her words are her own, not planted by mythology, or parents, or goofy ministers. Somehow she has found the home Zephaniah sought for his people. I, on the other hand, found myself pressing the issue through questions about promises. "When will the saving action that is promised come? Why not now!"

Makenzie came to see me this morning. She smiled and said, "I have the angel." She has become a part of my everyday thoughts and prayers since the day I read her mom's journal entry. She is a part of the body of Christ. Until today I did not realize that she is not just a vision of God in our lives but she is God's vision: She is a vision of God's expectation of life when we would rather run from love, and a vision of miraculous love in the midst of what we mistakenly assume to be total loss in death. We know that there are times we'd rather not be a part of Christ's body because of the cost in feeling others pain so greatly. It's the cost of love and right relationship. But as Henri Nouwen once wrote, "Joy is hidden in the pain. When we share the pain we also will share the joy."

"You are the God who makes all things new. We gladly raise our voices and move our lips to acknowledge, celebrate, and proclaim your staggering newness. As we do so, we hold in our hearts deep awareness of all the places your newness is not visible, and has not come.

Our hearts link to many places of wretchedness short of your newness. We picture our folks at home, sick, in pain, disabled, paralyzed, (we know their names) and no newness yet. We know up close the deep wretchedness of poverty, of homelessness, of hunger and no newness yet. Move our hearts closer to the passion of our lips. Move our lips closer to your own newness. Work your newness in hidden, cunning ways among us. Move us closer to your bodied newness in Jesus, newness in strength come in weakness, newness of wisdom come in foolishness. Draw us from the wretchedness into newness of life.

We pray in the name of his suffering to newness, to life again, Amen.

Walter Brueggemann—"Awed to Heaven—Rooted in Earth" pg. 43 *adapted*

December 12

“What’s bugging you at Christmas?”

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
~ Isaiah 12:3*

As I was driving down route 40 in St. Louis, I tuned into a local radio station just in time to hear an interesting Christmas segment. **“What’s bugging you during the Christmas season?”** You can imagine some of the usual complaints. Some complained of long lines, others complained about commercialism, and still others moaned about the hectic pace. Then, one of the most interesting statements I have ever heard about Christmas, broke out over the airwaves. The two radio show hosts were completely speechless after a woman called in and proclaimed; **“I just wish these people would stop talking about Jesus all the time during Christmas. I would like to enjoy all the preparation and do my own thing without all this religious stuff. Please take the Jesus out of Christmas altogether!”**

If anything, the woman’s suggestion affirms the need to rehearse our stories of Advent expectation. Of course we know the season has been washed out by the norms and marketing strategies of our materialistic world. We have all been aware of the perceived exploitation of the season. However, over the years I have come to understand that Christians do not own the season. In fact, it could be said that the woman has at least a small point... Christians have borrowed and made many secular traditions of this season their own. Though she clearly has missed the “Christ” in Christmas, she also has made it clear that not all people buy, or are privy to the story. I would argue that the declaration made by the woman does provide us with a truly valuable opportunity. Her words allow us to take a closer look at our practice and intent as we prepare for God’s light.

I would argue that the modern perception of this season provides far more potential in claiming our identity than the perception of days gone by. There was a time in this country when we simply assumed that everyone was Christian (an inaccurate assumption to say the least). It is interesting that the woman used the word, “enjoy” when she spoke of her intent to have a good time in her preparation for Christmas.

Today, our customs, commercials, and commitments reveal our relative inability to experience joy. They create a market mentality truly provides a place where no matter what you have, you will always “need” or “want” more in order to be happy. And beyond the stuff, our expectations are often wrapped in the shallow hope that we simply make it through the holidays!

Isaiah and his people were hoping to survive their exile. Hope seemed fleeting and feelings of joy were lost in the depth of their pain. Israel faced the prospect of a long term absence of real joy, yet the prophet calls them to imagine God’s well of salvation. I would venture to say that in the midst of losing homes, land, and loved ones, most of us would also feel abandoned.

In truth it is important for us, (just as it was for the people of Isaiah's time), to use the crisis and joy we experience, in order to redefine and claim who we are. In preparing for Christmas (in Advent) we must be willing to look deeper into our journey of faith. It is easy to blame culture for taking Jesus out of Christmas, when in fact we are responsible for our own imaginations! It is far more productive and faithful though to look at our self imposed exiles. God invites us all to look deep into our own true vision of Advent. If we seek to journey and find God, then Advent will be filled with moments of drawing water from the well of joy. If we quench our thirst in the expectation and imagination of the prophet, perhaps a different Christmas will be found.

Loving God, from the wellspring of your love we seek to know the joy you offer all your people. As we journey this Advent season, allow us to sense and embrace the moments of your revealed presence.

Come to us in both expected and unexpected places and dwell in mix of all our lives. Light of our world, in the full spectrum of your wonderful creation, guide our seeking, and reflect your guiding love upon our way. Amen.

December 13

“God is near”

*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.
~ Philippians 4:5*

“Whence comes love?” Soren Kierkegaard asks in his book, “Works of Love”.

“As God dwells in a light from which every ray of light which illumines the world issues, yet by none of these ways can one enter in order to see God; for the way of light changes to darkness if one faces toward the light: So light dwells in secret, or is hidden in the heart. As the spring-fed mountain stream by the murmuring persuasiveness of its rippling entices, almost begs, one to follow it along its course...Love’s secret heart is unfathomable, and it also has an unfathomable connection with the hole of existence. As the peaceful lake is grounded deep in the hidden spring which no eye can see, so one’s love in grounded even deeper in the love of God.”

I have had this quotation pinned in my office since I first graduated seminary. It has been a reminder of the path to gentleness based not in my own selfish love, but in the love of God. I am empowered and intrigued by the image of light reflected in and around our world. We can find hope in light images. They can be a visual reminder and representation of God’s real presence.

Kierkegaard’s writing tells us that the light of our creator resides in each heart. Thomas Merton also writes about a place in each of us, a point that is untouchable by our greed, fear, lust, and selfish desires that remains wholly of God. He writes,

“This little point of absolute poverty... is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. It is the glory of God in us! It is so to speak, God’s name written on our hearts.”

God is nearer than we may reason, understand, or want to think. God’s gentleness is in the very heart of all humanity, yet we seem so willing to mask, distort, and chose discriminately who deserves our gentle love. In truth, Jesus revealed a centered love focused on that point of God in us. The spring-fed mountain stream still calls to us, and begs us to follow the course to know and give unfathomable love.

Compassionate God you reach out to us. You bridge the gap that keeps us from loving one another, and break down the barriers that divide. When we cry out from the depth of our brokenness for a hand that will touch us, you reach out further to embrace us. You feel our own pain as no other, you come near. Still closer you become our breath, our heart that beats, and our tears that flow. You are the one who is not only near us, but truly with us.

Amen.

December 14

“Emma’s Peace”

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

~Philippians 4:7

***“Happiness isn’t good enough for me! I demand euphoria!” –Calvin
-Trust me, it is from Calvin – (of Calvin and Hobbes)***

Paul writes to the Philippians with great warmth and encouragement. There is a show of wonderful tenderness and affection expressed by Paul, he says, “I hold you in my heart.” (1:7). The words were shared because Paul found God’s peace in the midst of this fellowship.

Emma was a demanding elderly woman (by elderly I mean at least 2 x 50). I do not think she demanded euphoria, but she did expect a great deal out of life. Emma expected a lot from her relationships, and she nurtured folks in her own unique way. She cared for the farm animals she raised, and loved dearly, her beer drinking dog. (Just two, or three beers, mind you, no more.) I once asked her if she meant they **shared** three beers or had three a piece. She replied, “That’s between me and the dog.” Emma lived on a small southern Missouri acreage, in an old trailer house, with out buildings surrounding a burned out farmhouse.

The first time I visited Emma, she met me on the teetering, semi-attached front porch of the trailer. She had a shotgun in hand, and a who the (blank) are you invitation on her lips. When she realized, by my shotgun induced, quick reply that I was the new preacher, “Hiiiiii, I’m Pastor Dennis!” she loosened up some. With a half grin on her face she switched hands and shook joyfully - shotgun in one hand, my hand in the other. Ah yes, the Peace that passes all understanding!

Emma and I became close. The warmth of our friendship grew far beyond any expectation I could have imagined on our first meeting. Of course, I must say, that I limited my expectations at first. After all, I had visions of buck shot scars, to remember the first day of our meeting. (Emma’s form of greeting tends to diminish expectations of relationship... just a little.)

As I began to serve Emma’s church, I had some prejudicial, first impressions about southern Missourians. I had preconceived notions about aged, shotgun toting women, and I am sure they had their opinions about me. (Come on now, really, we all know that opinions about others, **especially before we really come to know them**, are in fact prejudices.) Emma even confessed to me what she thought about me. “Young, white, pastors from small towns in Nebraska....we all know how those people can be, don’t we?!” We laughed together, argued about theology, she would stretch me, and she let me believe that I was stretching her.

Her life had been difficult. She lost two children to disease, experience real scarcity during the depression, lost a husband to a farm accident, and her house to a fire. She was left alone with distant relatives keeping tabs on her. Emma had every reason to stop living, every opportunity to give up, but she never did. She held relationships close, real ones based in risk and vulnerability, and she never let go.

The final day of my service to the church was Christmas Day. The night of Christmas Eve, I went to Emma's place after services. From her porch we looked at the lights of our church steeple that formed a cross, we had a beer with dog, (one a piece) and sang silent night together... dog too. Euphoria?! Well, maybe the fellowship, I'm not sure about the singing. The Peace of God which surpasses all understanding! Yes, there are moments we are truly held in the heart.

*O God, we have felt your peace in times and places we did not expect to feel peace.
We have felt your gift of peace in our need, and in our celebrations.
And yet there have been times we have longed for, prayed for, and begged for your peace...
and have not found peace.*

*God of Peace, grant us the strength and courage to seek you always, to leave our
controlling fears behind, and allow your love to move in ebb and flow, as your Peace wills,
throughout the days of Advent. Amen.*

December 15

“Repent or else?”

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

~ Luke 3:7-10

Whenever I read prophetic voice like this in the Lection, I wonder what it would be like to preach this way myself. I can't imagine the courage, or perhaps excess bile, it would take to preach such words so convincingly. Maybe the camel skin was a bit too tight or itchy that day, or possibly his diet of locusts was getting old. I guess there's no grey area in terms of what we need to do to prepare ourselves for the Messiah according to John – (Luke's John that is). Bear fruits worthy of repentance or get chopped down like an old tree and thrown in the fire.

With my state of mind on this particular day, I had to laugh a little when I read the following commentary by Fred Craddock.

“As Luke has already made abundantly clear, both the Lord’s coming and the preparation for that coming are the initiatives of a gracious God. Traditional lectionaries honor this truth by using Gospel lections about John for the first and second Sundays of Advent.”

What is abundantly clear is that John is cutting no one, and I mean no one, slack. His indictment is against all the people of Israel. He echoes the chorus of a long dead prophet named Jeremiah. Its over folks, the time has come to turn or be lost. It may appear as though John has found fear to be a great motivator. His approach is reminiscent of fire and brimstone prophets of the past. When reading these words, the graciousness of God, is not the first thing that comes to mind.

Why then, if we have such a loving gracious God, does his prophet give us the axe? Does Luke’s John have your attention now? “Can you hear me now?”

John hits us between the eyes. His word is hard, but in his defense, the motive is consistent with the prophets of old. He only wishes to see his people turn and love God. He want see them believe in loving and one another, and accept it as their legacy in covenant with God.

“I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

Yes, I suppose God could do that. But for some reason God would rather invite us into the Kingdom. The Kingdom in Jesus’ proclamation is a human experience, but it is not a human construction or a human program-it is God’s gift of grace. Jesus himself incarnates the presence of this kingdom of grace. Again and again Jesus insists that the kingdom is a gift of grace to be accepted without merit or pretension, freely and openly, as a child. The kingdom of God comes as grace, and it has to be received as a gift.

So, it is really up to us to receive the gift or not.

Awaken us, O God, not to dwell in fear but to live in right relationship with you. Invade our days, our nights, and all our lives with the call to prepare ourselves for your coming. Move us with the fire of your burning love that we may turn and accept the life you offer.
Amen.

December 16

“Stop the numbness!”

And the crowd asked him, “what then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

~Luke 3:10-11

*“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing his or her self.”
Leo Tolstoy*

In one of Walter Brueggemann’s Old Testament prophet lessons, he spoke of a woman who became a part of a radio program in St. Louis, Missouri. The story is retold in his book, “The Prophetic Imagination” (pg 43).

“A cleaning lady who one day walked through a studio during a program offering advice turned out to be more sound and clever than what was officially offered, and as a result, she was made a part of the regular programming. Miss Blue became a feature, and the words she began and ended with were “All is well.” Sometimes, depending on the mood of the announcer, she was invited to say it repeatedly, perhaps only to cause a chuckle, probably a bit of mockery, even self-mockery, but also to practice the religion of deception. From the ghetto community out of which she spoke, it could be “all is well” is a trusting affirmation that enables persons to cope. But when the same phrase is co-opted for the media, it becomes an endorsement of the status quo that serves further to deny and numb. It is like a king who says “forever” to keep all serious questions in check... not wanting to know. If we don’t know, perhaps it won’t happen, and we can pretend a while longer. When I must deny about myself then I can afford to deny about my neighbor as well, and I don’t need to know what my neighbor has or doesn’t have. I can imagine both my neighbor and myself out of historical existence, and “forever” becomes not an affirmation, but a denial.”

The call of the prophet is a burning, consuming, Spirit driven force. The prophet attempts to shake the foundations of a world built on the backs of the poor, the lost, the sick, the outcast, and the lonely. His poetry shatters old images that keep his people numb and passive. He calls the people to remember their covenant with God in order to create new pathways for life.

Brueggemann suggests that we desperately need to break away from our numbness in order to know God and one another fully. To empathize, to reach out to the other is vital not only to the lives of those others, but to our own true living. It is not enough just to consider a change or a turn around... we must become free enough to imagine a new way.

“We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by the royal consciousness (the powerful) that we have been robbed of the courage or power to think an alternative thought.”

For us to become free we must be able to embrace symbols that powerfully confront those who would keep and make us numb. For us to become filled with the imagination of how it can be, we must be bold enough to convey the fears that have been denied in our world for so long. For us to be filled with God’s Spirit again, we must use new and empowering symbols, and we must speak about the real deaths in our world. In doing so we claim our identity; we are a resurrection people. From death to life, we are kin of the resurrected God!

Ruth C. Duck — an excerpt from: “Prayer for the Journey”

“Our lives are a journey, and the road goes ever on. It’s a road that began with our birth, that winds its way through meadows and mountains, that crosses rivers and canyons.

We pray for those whose journey ends mere moments after it has begun.

We pray for those who do not have the strength to travel on.

We pray for those whose path seems continually to wind back upon itself.

And for those whose path coils with malice until joy and power and life itself are crushed out.

In the landscape of your abounding love we know there are paths leading into tomorrows yet unfathomed. There are days ahead when all your children shall walk upon a green and fruitful earth. Unafraid of war, un-beset by want, untroubled by pain or loneliness, selfishness or uselessness.

Help us to shape such a world. Amen.

December 17

“Jacob’s expectation”

And the people were filled with expectation...

~ Luke 3:15a

This story is taken from a time when I used to journal.

June 12th 1988

I served communion for the first time as a licensed minister, however, my professors did not prepare me for what happened today. It was stressful enough to serve communion, getting the words right, even mustering the nerve to act like I knew what I was doing. Things were going just fine until a little guy named Jacob threw me a real curveball.

Just as I finished the words of institution Jacob, who frequently wanders about the sanctuary, came forward and stood directly in front of the communion table. The words Jacob responded to where words spoken from the book of worship:

Beloved in Christ, the Gospel tells us that on the first day of the week Jesus was raised from death, appeared to Mary Magdalene, on that same day sat with two disciples and was made know to them in the breaking of the bread.

This is the joyful feast of the people of God!

Men and women, youth and children, come from the east and the west, from north and south and gather about Christ's table. This table is for all who seek the presence of Jesus!

Loving God, we ask you to send your Holy Spirit on this bread and wine, and on us. Be present with us as we share this meal, and in all our lives that we may know the presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen! Come, for all things are ready!

Jacob came forward – The only problem was that I was serving pew communion in a church where you must be confirmed to receive the elements.

Jacob put me on the spot. He came forward to receive what Jesus had offered. He wanted what he was promised, the presence of Jesus, the love of God, and the acceptance of the church family. As I leaned over to hear the five year old boy say, “I want some of that bread from Jesus”, the truth of the Gospel became real for all of us.”

The church table that day, became the table Jesus wanted it to be, intended it to be, and invites us to participate in – “forever”. One by one they came forward - young, old, moderate, conservative, liberal, whole families, singles, men, and women,...it became a moment of God's Kingdom realized. They all came because one young child heard God's promise and responded. He expected nothing less.

God of expectation,

*Reclaim and remake us into your children of expectant love once more!
Surprise us with laughter, calm us with trust, and open us to the presence of Jesus
at the table.*

*Help us to make your table a place of welcome, by living what we offer, and
by offering our lives to others.*

*Come, God of light, guide our imagination, and feed our expectation of your realm
in this world.*

Amen!

We Have Seen a Great Light

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.

These words announce the prophet Isaiah's vision of how life will be when the messiah arrives. In fact, throughout the history of Israel, the pattern repeats itself. The whole Bible can be seen as alternating stories of disappointment and salvation. Sometimes the Israelites cause their own suffering, and the suffering of the earth; sometimes they are oppressed by others more powerful. But God is with them all along the way. Isaiah's vision is one of the contrast between light and darkness. At times, God's presence is obscured, and people feel very distant from the divine. The image of light breaking in gives us a way to imagine that day when we feel closer again, and when all those around us will be able to see the peace we had been hoping for.

I invite you to reflect for a moment on the darkness in our world. You can do this in a journal or in your imagination, alone or with a companion. Where do you hope to see light break in? First, imagine a light that exposes an injustice lurking in the shadows, perhaps an evil we have ignored for a long time. Imagine the bright light of truth filling this place.

Now imagine another place where light is needed. In this other place, justice and compassion have been obscured by negativity, and the light you imagine shines so that all can witness the goodness happening there. Maybe this is a person or a community who is doing great work. Maybe this is a natural place in creation where you feel at peace. Maybe this is someone you love who needs to know you appreciate them. Imagine the bright light of truth filling this place. Conclude your meditation with the following prayer.

Let us pray.

O God of light and shadows, be with us on this Advent journey. In times when we feel distant from you, it becomes difficult to see the injustice in the world, and our participation in it. At the same time, our disappointment causes us to ignore those places where your work of peace is being done faithfully – where small victories happen every day as the hungry are fed, the depressed are lifted up, and the lonely are loved. We are striving to see clearly in the darkness. We are praying for the bright light of truth to surround us, to light our way. Amen.

A Child Has Been Born For Us

*A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Have you ever noticed how a baby changes everything, from the moment of birth (or even sooner for the pregnant mother!)? Think about babies in your life – perhaps in your family or in your congregation. The moment a baby arrives, people behave differently. Their voices change, they flock to the new little one, and each tiny child is treated almost as if they possess healing powers – everyone wants to be near the baby. And for the baby’s parents, life is forever changed, because the baby needs constant attention, feeding, contact, care. Lives are rearranged to accommodate the new baby, and rooms are redecorated to make a place for a new addition to the family. Parents begin to plan ahead to offer the best possible opportunities for their child. They question everything they were used to, and the way their parents raised them. They have a new identity, and a new shape to their family.

Babies really do change everything. Without being able to walk, talk or feed themselves, they demand full attention and respect. This was just as true in Isaiah’s day as it is in ours. Proclaiming, “a child has been born for us,” Isaiah’s vision announces a new day as a messiah is born to Israel, to bring the people from darkness to light, from war to peace, from oppression to justice. This message will not come from a palace where a king has won battles. It does not come from the rich and powerful as people might expect. The message of God’s kingdom arrives with the birth of a child, who is anointed for leading the people to endless peace. This vision of the baby messiah is very powerful to the story of Israel, and continues to greatly influence the story we still tell about Jesus’ birth. As you move through your day, remember to look for signs of God’s presence and power in the unexpected places – maybe even in the smile of a baby in line ahead of you at the grocery store.

Let us pray.

God, we are so grateful for those who announce your presence to us, for we know that even a tiny baby can influence our lives, and remind us to turn our hearts toward you. In our times, as in the time of Isaiah, we desperately need to be led toward the light of peace, out of the darkness of grief and sadness. We await your message of new life, made tangible in the birth of the child Jesus. Amen.

Facing the Light

*Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

When I lived in Albany, California, our apartment building did not have a lawn. Instead, out in front of the building there was a big sandy box where our landlord planted beach grasses that didn't require much care. Most of the year, the beach grass was unremarkable; just a patch of green in a city with a lot of pavement. But in the spring, little flowers would bloom, interrupting the green with cheerful bursts of purple and blue. They were like little beach grass daisies with petals shaped like exclamation marks. One night I was walking home from the bookstore where I worked late at night, and I noticed that the flowers had suddenly disappeared. I looked closer at the beach grass, and I realized that the flowers closed up at night. The next day, I checked on them frequently and watched as they opened with the first rays of light, and followed the sun across the sky until it rested in the east for the night. The whole day long, the flowers kept their faces turned toward their source of heat and light, and when the sky went dark, they had nowhere else to look. They closed up to wait for the morning.

This reminded me of something one of my seminary professors taught me. Ibrahim is a Sufi leader in the community, who tries to explain to his Christian students what being Muslim is about. Sufis pray many prayers every day, and when they gather together this prayer lasts for hours, concluding with feasting and celebration. Ibrahim taught me that for Sufis, and for many Muslims, prayer is about keeping oneself connected to God. They constantly remind themselves to keep their hearts turned toward God. The little beach grass flowers became for me a visual symbol of this kind of prayer, the constant seeking of God's warmth and the desire to follow that light.

Psalm 80 expresses, too, this desire to be closer to God's warmth and light. Here, it is God's face that the psalmist longs to see – or rather to *feel*, since in the ancient Jewish tradition, God's face may never be *seen*. The people yearn to turn their faces and their hearts toward the light that signals God's presence breaking into their troubled world. Tomorrow, we will reflect on how we experience this presence in our own lives.

Let us pray.

Your generosity and warmth light up our world. Yet, in times when we feel small and cold, we turn inward and feel so far from you. Guide us through the chill of winter toward your light, so that we might feel the divine spark rekindled in our own souls. We long to turn our faces toward you like blossoming flowers following the sun. Amen.

Restore us, O God With Your Light

*Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

Prayer Exercise

I invite you to light a candle and be comfortable. Focus on your breathing, and on relaxing any tense places in your body. As you breathe, watch the candlelight flicker – it is breathing too, as air moves around it.

You have read the following words from Psalm 80 two days in a row. Now I invite you to read them again. Read the words aloud, then sit with your candle in silence for a few moments. I have provided some questions for you to consider – you may choose one or think of your own. The goal is simply for you to spend a moment with God, in order to feel restored in the midst of our busy holiday lives. When you feel ready, you may finish your meditation with the prayer printed below. If you are using this devotional with a group, you may decide to share your insights, or to simply be in silence together.

*Restore us, O God;
Let your face shine that we might be saved.*

Questions:

Where in my life have I felt God's face shining recently?

What part of my life is in need of healing or restoration?

What does God's face look like to me?

Let us pray.

In the silence, and the darkness, we enjoy a quiet moment with you, the God who created us and restores us when we grow weary. We offer to you our thanks for this peaceful time during a season our culture has made so busy and stressful. By taking this daily time with you, we proclaim that we are your people, even when we feel confused or distant from you. In deep gratitude, we lift our hearts toward your light. Amen.

Namaste!

*Mary set out and went with haste to... the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.*

In the yoga tradition, faithful yogis greet one another with a special word: “*Namaste!*” In Sanskrit, *namaste* (nah-mah-STAY) means, “the light in me honors the light in you.” Yoga is an ancient Indian practice of breathing, stretching, and meditating that teaches tools for nurturing the divine spark in each of us.

In today's scripture, Mary and Elizabeth share a true *namaste* moment. Each of them carries a baby who is destined to bring light to the world – we often hear of light as a symbol for Jesus. When Mary travels to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth's baby (John the Baptist) leaps for joy in the womb because he recognizes Jesus. This reminds me of the spirit of *namaste*; the divine spark in Elizabeth honors the divine spark just beginning to grow in Mary.

How many of us are good at honoring, acknowledging, and celebrating the divine spark in those around us, especially at the holidays? It's possible to become so preoccupied that we go through the holidays without even making eye contact across the table! By this time in our advent journey, final preparations for Christmas have begun. Maybe you are finishing last-minute shopping or running to the airport to pick up a visitor. Maybe you are surrounded by friends and family, or enjoying a quiet day away from the busy crowds and the barrage of seasonal advertising. Maybe you are working hard in order to afford taking an extra day off for Christmas.

No matter what joys or stresses fill your life this weekend, I challenge you to find a way to say *namaste* to someone in your life – the sweet moment between Mary and Elizabeth is a reminder to us in this season to really appreciate one another. Someone in your life needs to hear that you honor the light that shines within them.

Let us pray.

As last-minute holiday advertising and busy traffic conspire to fill our lives with stress, we are grateful for this moment of retreat. It is in these times of quiet, when we slow down our busy schedules and make a place for prayer that we feel so aware of the holy spark in each of us. We pray for the wisdom to cultivate the light in our own souls and to honor the light in others. Amen.

My Soul Magnifies the Lord!

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

We use magnifying lenses for lots of purposes in our world; for reading, for looking closely at tiny cells and organisms, for taking pictures at a distance. As light interacts with a magnifying glass, an image becomes bigger and more visible. In this passage from Luke's gospel, Mary proclaims that her "soul magnifies the Lord." Today's meditation will lead us to explore this wonderful metaphor of the soul as a magnifying glass.

Light a candle and be comfortable. Focus on your breathing, and on relaxing any tense places in your body. As you breathe, watch the candlelight flicker. Feel the warmth from the candle reaching out to you and filling the room. Take a few minutes to think about the following questions. You may write your thoughts in a journal or simply let your thoughts flow through your mind. When you feel that it is time to finish your meditation, read the prayer below, and extinguish the candle.

Questions:

What does it look like when God's light shines through someone in a visible way?

When have you felt God moving in your life?

Imagine that others can see God more clearly because of your actions.

What are the qualities of God that you would hope to "magnify" in the world?

Let us pray.

Loving God, your warmth fills our lives in so many ways we never notice. As we await the birth of the child who will shine your spirit anew in our world, we pray for the courage to live our lives as magnifiers of your light and grace. We know that the spark of your Holy Spirit burns brightly in each of us, and we look with great anticipation to those opportunities we have to shine your light forth in a way that others will recognize.

Amen.

Shining in the Night

There were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

In our time, it is becoming rare to ever see the number of stars these shepherds would have known. If we live close to cities, the sky is filled with light. If we go camping, we immediately build a fire, even in hot weather, and we sit close, which prevents us from seeing all the stars above us. In many of the scripture passages of our Bible study, “darkness” has negative connotations – and people of our times relate to this, I think, because we are so rarely in the dark.

But for a shepherd, darkness was survival – the lights of the sky helped them see where they were going and do a good job tending the sheep. They saw the beauty of darkness in a way most other people missed as they slept through the night. It was the blinding light around the angels, shining the glory of the Lord, that was terrifying to the shepherds.

What a fitting way to get a message across – the angels shone light that did not fit the picture the shepherds were used to seeing in the middle of the night. This unexpected bright light in the darkness was terrifying when it was all around them, but it sure got their attention. This light in the darkness foreshadowed the ministry of Jesus, which would again and again show the world that the good news they waited for would not come in the form they expected. Jesus challenged his disciples, and continues to challenge us, to understand that the “kingdom” of God would not look like the kingdoms of the Empire. Every time we become comfortable with our ways, as the shepherds were comfortable in the dark, the light breaks in to startle us, and knock us off center.

For so many of us, Christmas is all about tradition – we want things to be perfect, or so the home decorating magazines tell us. As you sit down to enjoy a meal with family and friends, or watch “It’s a Wonderful Life” for the 79th time, or create a brand new tradition, I challenge you: remember the Christmas of Mary and Joseph, stuck in the barn with a newborn. Remember the Christmas of the shepherds, blinded at midnight by painfully bright angel light. Remember that the grace of Christmas is not so much in the perfectly executed holiday tradition, but in the unexpected, inconvenient ways God’s light breaks into your world. Our prayer today may be used as a table grace; whether your table is an Oak heirloom or the aluminum TV tray variety, I pray that the people who gather around it enjoy the peace of Christ all year long.

Let us pray.

God of light and darkness, your angels burst into our comfort zones in ways that startle and sometimes terrify us. This Christmas Eve, we celebrate the birth of one who continues to surprise us and shine your glory in our lives. May the meal we enjoy be a blessing to those around this table, and may the love we feel here shine out beyond these four walls to benefit all of your people. Christ is born! Alleluia! Amen.