

We Wait: An Advent Poem

by Brittany Longsdorf

As a child watches the window
for signs of first snow
we wait
for you
oh, infant Christ
We have stooped low at the river Jordan
with John the Baptist
plagued by uncertainties,
our world in turmoil,
tempest-tossed days
We have been righteously called out,
over-taxed, burdened,
found wanting
on our journey
We have knocked at the Inn,
found rejection,
uncommon hope,
deep warmth
in the unlikely places
We have gathered here
compassion and community
sifting through the darkness
for one white flake
one flurry of light
for the world
We are watching at the manger
we wait
for you
oh, infant Christ.

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Advent Reflections

2018

“Keep company with me . . .”

Matthew 11:30 (The Message)



*The Episcopal Church of the Advent
Spartanburg, SC
Churchofadvent.org*

*“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. **Keep company with me** and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30).*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Advent is here! We are no longer waiting for its arrival. Advent means “arrival”, and has been observed by Christians throughout many centuries as a time to ponder and contemplate the birth of Jesus. For many of us, December seems to always fly by in a flurry of activities, few of which have anything to do with pondering or contemplating and the observance of Advent is relegated to an hour or so on Sunday.

The lyrics to the popular holiday song may tell us “It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” but it often becomes the most stressful time of the year. And yet, we are invited, year after year, to *keep company with* Jesus by preparing for the celebration of his birth at Christmas. I hope you will take advantage of this invitation to prepare in your heart, mind, and soul, for the coming of Christ, the Savior.

The promise of Immanuel (God is with us) is evident throughout these pages. Devotions written by several of our parishioners, staff, and the clergy are preceded by a passage of Scripture chosen from the Lessons for the weekdays of Advent found in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. The Bible readings are from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. I hope this refreshing translation will assist you in connecting the old with the new. Words that may sound old and familiar in one version, when heard in a different voice, can open us up to new and surprisingly meaningful understandings we didn’t know were possible.

Advent gives us the chance to take time out of the stressed filled calendar of events, to pause and connect with, and *keep company with*, Jesus, our Immanuel.

God bless you and keep you throughout Advent and Christmas.

Ned Morris+
Rector

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Gabriel's songs are directed by God. The mortals' songs -- Luke makes it clear that these are responses to activity of the Holy Spirit -- are inspired. The Spirit moved across the waters in creation. The Spirit anointed Jesus as the Messiah at his baptism by John. The Spirit is with us whenever we are born anew. And now it is Christmas Eve -- a day that for me typically has been too busy, too filled with last-minute shopping and wrapping of gifts. My prayer is that each of us finds a still point today, when we can listen for the voice of the Spirit, hear it in the wind and in our hearts. For the Spirit is abroad, and active; and Christ is coming into the world!

I, John, announce, tis mine to sing: make straight the pathway for our Lord.
For e'en before was he, who brings, fire and his redeeming Word,
His race to save, all mankind's sword. Let us haste! comes Christ the King.

Behold the Lamb of God this day: now manifest the long foretold.
The son of God with Man does stay, Savior who since days of old,
His love did sing through prophets bold. Kingdom come! we thrill to say.

Sunday, Dec. 2 (David)

Jeremiah 33:14-18 A

¹⁴⁻¹⁸ ““Watch for this: The time is coming’ - GOD’s Decree - ‘when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. That’s when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, “GOD Has Set Things Right for Us.” GOD has made it clear that there will always be a descendant of David ruling the people of Israel and that there will always be Levitical priests on hand to offer burnt offerings, present grain offerings, and carry on the sacrificial worship in my honor.’”

Reflection:

It is a period of waiting in the darkness. It is a season in which we are caught between joyful expectation and the harsh realities of the present condition while we wait for the promise to be fulfilled. And the discipline of this season puts the church at odds with contemporary American culture, in which the holiday season consists of bright lights and celebrations and packages tied with neat bows.

There is no room for darkness and little patience for prayerful expectation when holiday carols blare from every speaker and the neighborhood is glowing with displays of lights. Yet ironically, this experience of being out of sync with our surroundings may attune us more deeply to the nature of Advent. In Advent, we live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be.

Monday, December 3 (Trey)

Matthew 8:5-13

⁵⁻⁶ As Jesus entered the village of Capernaum, a Roman captain came up in a panic and said, "Master, my servant is sick. He can't walk. He's in terrible pain."

⁷ Jesus said, "I'll come and heal him."

⁸⁻⁹ "Oh, no," said the captain. "I don't want to put you to all that trouble. Just give the order and my servant will be fine. I'm a man who takes orders and gives orders. I tell one soldier, 'Go,' and he goes; to another, 'Come,' and he comes; to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it."

¹⁰⁻¹² Taken aback, Jesus said, "I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know all about God and how he works. This man is the vanguard of many outsiders who will soon be coming from all directions - streaming in from the east, pouring in from the west, sitting down at God's kingdom banquet alongside Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then those who grew up 'in the faith' but had no faith will find themselves out in the cold, outsiders to grace and wondering what happened."

¹³ Then Jesus turned to the captain and said, "Go. What you believed could happen has happened." At that moment his servant became well.

Reflection:

Pax Romana. A gentile officer, likely of Herod Antipas' army maintained in service of the Roman imperium (H.K. Bond, U. of Edinburgh), comes in the forefront of those throughout all the world who will be coming to Christ. Interesting, but perhaps not so odd. It is not uncommon for an outsider to have keen interest in, and even clear insights into aspects of another culture or tradition. Ask an open-minded ex-patriate or a curious tourist. Perhaps what is remarkable is the strength of the captain's faith: that Jesus could heal with a word.

Pax vobiscum. Jesus on multiple occasions extends healing, and more, to outsiders. Consider the exorcism for the Gerasene demoniac, the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, the gift of living water to the Samaritan woman at the well. Seeing the captain's faith and his loving concern for his servant, Jesus grants the captain's request, telling us that true faith, not tribal affiliation, is the way to obtain God's grace. Jesus shows us that his ministry to the Jews already contains the seeds of the Great Commission: that his disciples should spread the Gospel to all peoples.

Pax Dei. A man of authority, the Centurion also defers in faith to the higher authority that has come into the world. There is order here, and also progress. A new thing is happening, but also that which was before creation. "Thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy." Help me, Lord, to acknowledge your authority over my life; and to open myself this Advent to all that you would have me learn and do. Strengthen me, Lord, into a faith like the captain's, to recognize and trust the power of your ever-lasting newness!

Monday, December 24 (Trey)

Luke 1:67-79

Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he came and set his people free.

He set the power of salvation in the
center of our lives, and in the very

house of David his servant,

Just as he promised long ago

through the preaching of his holy prophets:

Deliverance from our enemies

and every hateful hand;

Mercy to our fathers,

as he remembers to do what he

said he'd do,

What he swore to our father Abraham -
a clean rescue from the enemy camp,
So we can worship him without a care in the
world, made holy before him as long
as we live.

And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest,"
will go ahead of the Master to prepare

His ways,

Present the offer of salvation to his people,
the forgiveness of their sins.

Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,

God's Sunrise will break in upon us,

Shining on those in the darkness,

those sitting in the shadow of death,

Then showing us the way, one foot at a
time, down the path of peace.

Reflection:

The beginning of Luke's Gospel, like an opera in counterpoint, tells of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, and then describes Jesus' early life culminating in his baptism by John, which also serves as the gateway into Jesus' years of active ministry.

Set into Luke's composition are many beautiful arias. The angel Gabriel sings the Annunciations of John and Jesus. And mortals sing three songs: the Magnificat, read two days ago, is Mary's; the Benedictus we read today is the song of Zechariah, elderly priest and father of John the Baptist; and the Nunc Dimittis is also known as the Song of Simeon. All three songs are among the canticles prescribed as options to follow scripture readings during Morning Prayer.

I love to use the Benedictus whenever a scripture reading points especially towards the coming of the Messiah, or describes God's fulfilling of his promises. The Benedictus is Zechariah's effusion of joy, thanksgiving, and even relief at the working out of God's plan in Jesus Christ, for whom John will prepare the way.

Continued next page

Sunday, Dec. 23 (David)

Micah 5:2-5a

²⁻⁴ But you, Bethlehem, David's country,
the runt of the litter-

From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule Israel.

He'll be no upstart, no pretender.

His family tree is ancient and distinguished.

Meanwhile, Israel will be in foster homes

until the birth pangs are over and the child is born,

And the scattered brothers come back

home to the family of Israel.

He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by GOD's strength,

centered in the majesty of GOD-Revealed.

And the people will have a good and safe home,

for the whole world will hold him in respect-

Peacemaker of the world!

Reflection:

I love this passage. The most unlikely, the most insignificant, are exalted. "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." I'm reminded of Nathanael's statement when he hears about Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Can anything good come out of Nazareth, or Bethlehem, or Spartanburg, or Fort Lauderdale (where I was born)? It is a judgment both on the town and on those who live there.

Yet, in the case of Bethlehem, the biblical pattern holds true: the insignificant are exalted. The tables are turned, and the most unlikely of people are instruments of God's salvation. From this insignificant little village, a young shepherd boy grows up to become the most beloved king in Israel's history--David. And a descendant of that king fulfills God's long-awaited promises of deliverance, not just for Israel, but for the whole world. It is not the way of the world, this exaltation of the lowliest. But it is the way God works, over and over and over again.

An insignificant village. A child born to a young unmarried girl, and that girl's song, heard today: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52). And the one who comes from that little village and that young girl becomes the one Micah proclaims as "the one of peace" (5:5).

Tuesday, December 4 (Debbie)

Luke 10:21-24

²¹ At that, Jesus rejoiced, exuberant in the Holy Spirit. "I thank you, Father, Master of heaven and earth, that you hid these things from the know-it-alls and showed them to these innocent newcomers. Yes, Father, it pleased you to do it this way.

²² "I've been given it all by my Father! Only the Father knows who the Son is and only the Son knows who the Father is. The Son can introduce the Father to anyone he wants to." ²³⁻²⁴ He then turned in a private aside to his disciples. "Fortunate the eyes that see what you're seeing! There are plenty of prophets and kings who would have given their right arm to see what you are seeing but never got so much as a glimpse, to hear what you are hearing but never got so much as a whisper."

Reflection:

Not long ago I read a book titled "*The Sin of Certainty*" by Peter Enns. I chose to read this book based on the title. How can being certain be a sin? Are there not things about which we ought to be certain?

The sin of certainty, according to this author, is something akin to what Jesus was speaking about when he thanked God the Father for hiding Kingdom values from the "know-it-alls." Those seventy-two disciples whom Jesus sent out on a missionary journey were mostly naïve about sophisticated religious doctrines. And yet, here we see that the mission had been a huge success. Jesus was exuberant. The disciples were nearly giddy with enthusiasm.

We so value competence and confidence and intellect! Society measures success based largely on numbers. Kingdom success has more to do with relationships and changed lives. There was a time in my life when I had a need to be right. I wanted to be seen as knowledgeable and sophisticated. Certainty mattered. But the kind of certainty I sought was, at times, sinful. It left little room for the Holy Spirit to move in my heart and in my mind. And sometimes needing to be right brought unnecessary conflict to relationships. Moreover, as it turns out, I was often wrong.

When we surrender to the possibility that we may not know it all and that Jesus may be doing something beyond our reasoning, we begin to have eyes to see and ears to hear things that we never imagined, in our finite certainty, could be true. Advent speaks to us about surrender to mysteries beyond our ken. What "certainties" do you need to let go of in order to have eyes to see and ears to hear?

Wednesday, December 5 (Jean)

Matthew 15:29-39

²⁹⁻³¹ After Jesus returned, he walked along Lake Galilee and then climbed a mountain and took his place, ready to receive visitors. They came, tons of them, bringing along the paraplegic, the blind, the maimed, the mute -all sorts of people in need—and more or less threw them down at Jesus’ feet to see what he would do with them. He healed them. When the people saw the mutes speaking, the maimed healthy, the paraplegics walking around, the blind looking around, they were astonished and let everyone know that God was blazingly alive among them.³² But Jesus wasn’t finished with them. He called his disciples and said, “I hurt for these people. For three days now they’ve been with me, and now they have nothing to eat. I can’t send them away without a meal - they’d probably collapse on the road.”

³³ His disciples said, “But where in this deserted place are you going to dig up enough food for a meal?”³⁴⁻³⁹ Jesus asked, “How much bread do you have?”

“Seven loaves,” they said, “plus a few fish.” At that, Jesus directed the people to sit down. He took the seven loaves and the fish. After giving thanks, he divided it up and gave it to the people. Everyone ate. They had all they wanted. It took seven large baskets to collect the leftovers. Over four thousand people ate their fill at that meal. After Jesus sent them away, he climbed in the boat and crossed over to the Magadan hills.

Reflection:

In the first week of Advent I spend lots of energy getting ready to wait for Jesus. He got ready more efficiently than me. He climbed a mountain, took his place and He was ready for visitors (with no huge kerfuffle, I notice, of cleaning up or decorating the mountain). And when He’d done what He came to do, everyone knew “that God was blazingly alive among them.” Even though I’m not aware of dramatic healings, there are also times here on Sunday morning when God is aglow among us.

But Jesus wasn’t finished with them, and He’s not finished with me on a Wednesday afternoon. In fact, He claims the party is just getting started. I typically argue, just like the disciples, and whine that I’m not equipped to be a functioning Christian (on a weekday?!). That’s when Jesus usually makes me take inventory, answering the question, “How much do you have? What resources are already on hand?” Sometimes I can see then that there’s one small thing -- one hour, one phone call, one e-mail or postcard I can pass along or give away this day. I notice then that I am blessed with more than enough.

I give thanks, and share, and gather the leftovers.

Saturday, December 22 (Paula)

Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said, I’m bursting with God-news;

I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.

God took one good look at me, and look

what happened - I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be

forgotten, the God whose very name

is holy, set apart from all others.

His mercy flows in wave after wave

on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his strength,

scattered the bluffing braggarts.

He knocked tyrants off their high horses,

pulled victims out of the mud.

The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.

He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies,
piled them high.

It’s exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up
to now.

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three
months and then went back to her own
home.

Reflection:

We really know little about Mary, and in fact the brevity of biographical information only heightens our tendency to wonder and marvel at this woman. Most scholars are in agreement that Mary was an adolescent girl when Gabriel appeared to her. She was a teenager - probably between the ages of fourteen and sixteen receiving a message that God has found favor with her and that the Holy Spirit would come upon her.

There is no way she could have known what the future would bring. There could be no way that she could have any idea what it would mean for the Holy Spirit to come upon her. There is no way she could have known what her “yes” would mean. Yet she accepts the call to be God bearer - to be the one who would give birth to the one who would give life to others. To give birth to the one who would call us to the continued ministry of bearing God into a broken world.

One of the titles Mary is sometimes given is theotokos. The term literally means bearer of God or Mother of God. And you can imagine that this term has been somewhat controversial at times. The term is not meant to imply that Mary brings God into existence. The term is meant to identify Mary who brings forth God into the world. But isn’t that what we are all called to be? Isn’t that what our baptismal covenant is about? When we promise to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” we are, in fact, bringing forth the good news into the world.

Friday, December 21 (Anne)

John 5:33-36

³⁰⁻³³ “I can’t do a solitary thing on my own: I listen, then I decide. You can trust my decision because I’m not out to get my own way but only to carry out orders. If I were simply speaking on my own account, it would be an empty, self-serving witness. But an independent witness confirms me, the most reliable Witness of all. Furthermore, you all saw and heard John, and he gave expert and reliable testimony about me, didn’t he?”

³⁴⁻³⁸ “But my purpose is not to get your vote, and not to appeal to mere human testimony. I’m speaking to you this way so that you will be saved. John was a torch, blazing and bright, and you were glad enough to dance for an hour or so in his bright light. But the witness that really confirms me far exceeds John’s witness. It’s the work the Father gave me to complete. These very tasks, as I go about completing them, confirm that the Father, in fact, sent me.

Reflection:

As we await the birth of Christ, we can look ahead to Jesus’s life and works. In this passage, Jesus has been travelling and teaching, dealing with people who are skeptics and doubters. Jesus knows how hard it can be to believe when there is no human experience that can give us an easy -to-understand guide to what is happening. And he is full of loving sympathy. Jesus tells his followers that his words and his actions are God, working in the world through his Son.

Prophets blaze and inspire, but even prophets can’t give us the whole picture. In fact, we can’t comprehend that whole picture. So we need to trust that Jesus is carrying out the work of the Father. We can’t rely on our reason or our judgment or our human experience to measure and assess what Jesus is doing. We have to have faith. The darkness of Advent can make it hard to have that faith, but Jesus tells us he is coming to complete his tasks and to save us.

Thursday December 6 (Ned)

Matthew 7:21-27

²¹⁻²³ Jesus said, “Knowing the correct password—saying ‘Master, Master,’ for instance—isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. ***What is required is serious obedience—doing what my Father wills.*** I can see it now -at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, ‘Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.’ And do you know what I am going to say? ‘You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here.’²⁴

²⁵ “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. ***If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.***²⁶⁻²⁷ ***“But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.”***

Reflection:

This past year it feels like our world has been rocked by natural, manmade, and weather-related disasters. After the waters have receded, the winds have died down, and/or the flames have been put out the photos and images transmitted via TV, internet, and social media have been overwhelming.

Not even the craft and skill of the smartest carpenter could build a house that would survive the destructive wind and storm surge of Hurricane Michael’s landfall at Mexico Beach, FL, the relentless rain and flooding of Hurricane Florence as it stalled over southeastern NC and parts of SC, or the scorching blazes of the wildfires in California.

In today’s reading, Jesus is nearing the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and he is warning us, his hearers, that there is a vast difference between those who simply hear and repeat what he says and those who hear and *do* what he says. The season of Advent is a time to remember that if our faith is to be the strongest it can be, we must be grounded in the teachings of Jesus and put these teachings into action. Faith in God’s love, mercy, and grace, and our obedience in living our lives accordingly is the only way we can hope to have the strength to withstand the hardships of life -- natural, manmade, and weather-related disasters.

Friday, December 7 (Anne)

Matthew 9:27-31

²⁷⁻²⁸ As Jesus left the house, he was followed by two blind men crying out, “Mercy, Son of David! Mercy on us!” When Jesus got home, the blind men went in with him. Jesus said to them, “Do you really believe I can do this?” They said, “Why, yes, Master!”

²⁹⁻³¹ He touched their eyes and said, “Become what you believe.” It happened. They saw. Then Jesus became very stern. “Don’t let a soul know how this happened.” But they were hardly out the door before they started blabbing it to everyone they met.

Reflection:

Become what you believe. Those are hard words. They seem easy—we see them in cheery slogans everywhere from advertisements to signature blocks on social media—but Jesus is giving us a lifetime of labor when he delivers this injunction. During Advent, as we wait and reflect, we think about what we believe and what we hope to believe, what we are and what we want to become. We hope, in the darkness, for a new birth that will give us the strength and the inspiration to become like Jesus. But it can be hard to become.

Becoming is a process, not a moment, and Jesus knows this when he tells the blind men to keep the source of their new vision a secret. They have had a moment, and they rejoice, and go out and blab to all their friends; but they face long, difficult work as they adjust to their sight, to become truly seeing men. They have been blind; now they are becoming whole, able to fully live in the world. And Jesus knows that this becoming is more than the instant in which we lose our blindness. It is the process by which we learn how to use our vision, our hopes for the world and for the world to come, our responsibilities to help one another out of the darkness into the light.

Thursday, Dec. 20 (Ned)

Luke 7:24-30

²⁴⁻²⁷ After John’s messengers left to make their report, Jesus said more about John to the crowd of people. “What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pajamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A messenger from God? That’s right, a messenger! Probably the greatest messenger you’ll ever hear. He is the messenger Malachi announced when he wrote, ²⁸⁻³⁰ “Let me lay it out for you as plainly as I can: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer, but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him. The ordinary and disreputable people who heard John, by being baptized by him into the kingdom, are the clearest evidence; the Pharisees and religious officials would have nothing to do with such a baptism, wouldn’t think of giving up their place in line to their inferiors.”

Reflection:

John the Baptist had sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?” (Luke, 7:19)? John was in prison facing certain death (9:7-9). He felt a sense of urgency in wanting to know the truth about Jesus. Was Jesus the one for whom he was smoothing the way or was his message preached in vain?

Jesus answered John’s questions. “Go back and tell John what you have just seen and heard. . .” John’s disciples returned to him with their report. Was John relieved? Surprised? I hope that in the loneliness of his cell John experienced some peace and comfort. I believe in the end, John went to his death with the assurance of God’s love for him.

Many of us live with a sense of urgency. We feel as though we just can’t wait for outcomes. Mary and Joseph couldn’t wait either. When they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary was about to give birth. We know that there were moments of doubt and uncertainty throughout their relationship. Mary questioned the angel Gabriel’s message. Joseph was ready to break off the betrothal after learning of Mary’s mysterious pregnancy.

Jesus arrived despite their doubts. Jesus comes into our lives at Christmas and he loves, heals, forgives, and transforms us. May the questions and doubts we have find their answers in our urgency to carry out acts of love, healing, forgiveness and transformation. In this way, we will serve as God’s messengers, smoothing the way for Jesus to enter our lives and the lives of others, again and again.

Wednesday, December 19 (Jean)

Luke 7:19-23

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ John's disciples reported back to him the news of all these events taking place. He sent two of them to the Master to ask the question, "Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

²⁰ The men showed up before Jesus and said, "John the Baptizer sent us to ask you, 'Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?'"

²¹⁻²³ In the next two or three hours Jesus healed many from diseases, distress, and evil spirits. To many of the blind he gave the gift of sight. Then he gave his answer: "Go back and tell John what you have just seen and heard:

The blind see,

The lame walk,

Lepers are cleansed,

The deaf hear,

The dead are raised,

The wretched of the earth

have God's salvation hospitality extended to them.

"Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves fortunate!"

Reflection:

John's disciples were on a mission. They needed confirmation - "are we done waiting?" Their question sounds a bit like, "Is this *it*? The Messiah we've been expecting is here?" Sometimes during Advent I, too, feel an impatient twinge. "Are we there yet?" And I'm confused. Am I waiting for the arrival of the One who is already here - the same One I waited for last year? I look around, seeking a Christmas miracle – evidence please.

And sometimes Jesus shows me that relationships have been healed, that spiritual death has been overcome, that moving through a day is possible in new ways, that vision is restored or renewed between siblings and "the wretched of the earth have God's salvation hospitality extended to them". The miracles He shows me are not anything I expected. (I think my image involved snow and maybe angels). But this Messiah is so much more.

This year there could be growth in this cold dark season, and a new awareness of His presence among us. And next week if I manage a bit of stillness and quiet I'm pretty sure there will be evidence of new birth. And maybe the rustle of wings?

Even so, come Lord Jesus. Again.

Saturday, December 8 (Paula)

Matthew 9:35-10:1,5-8

³⁵⁻³⁸ Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"

¹⁻⁴ The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives.

⁵⁻⁸ Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge: "Don't begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.

Reflection:

"And he gave them power."

Hurricanes, ice storms or just a random fallen tree almost guarantee that conversations for the next few days will include a discussion about "losing power." I remember attending a women's retreat during a hurricane and making that exact comment. One of the leaders quickly reminded me that we had lost electricity but we had not lost our power. Her gentle invitation to re-phrase and reframe the situation has stuck with me, offering an important reminder. Losing power and losing electricity are different things.

Jesus sent those first disciples out to a hurting and confused world. Jesus sent the disciples out without the promise of an easy journey. He gave them no guarantees that they would always be welcomed with open arms. He sent them to neighborhoods - right into the places where ordinary life unfolds to share the good news of God's loving reign - and he didn't send them empty handed.

As we journey through Advent, waiting and watching, may be reminded of our own power. When we are traveling with the authority of God, with the always sufficient grace of God and are filled with the abundance of God, we will go places - we may be traveling lightly but we surely aren't traveling empty. We are free to rely on the God who has been faithful in the past, who is the same God who travels with us into the future.

Sunday, Dec. 9 (David)

Malachi 3:1-4

3 “Look! I’m sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Leader you’ve been looking for will enter his Temple—yes, the Messenger of the Covenant, the one you’ve been waiting for. Look! He’s on his way!” A Message from the mouth of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies.

²⁻⁴ But who will be able to stand up to that coming? Who can survive his appearance?

He’ll be like white-hot fire from the smelter’s furnace. He’ll be like the strongest lye soap at the laundry. He’ll take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes. He’ll scrub the Levite priests clean, refine them like gold and silver, until they’re fit for GOD, fit to present offerings of righteousness. Then, and only then, will Judah and Jerusalem be fit and pleasing to GOD, as they used to be in the years long ago.

Reflection:

It is not an easy process, of course. There is pain involved in refining and cleansing. There is pain involved in dying and rising. But it is a process that is designed for our good, for our well-being, to prepare us for the coming of the Lord. God comes into our midst as Emmanuel, comes to destroy the evil in us and in the world, comes to draw us out of death into life. And though that is an alarming prospect, it is also one that should fill us with great joy. Revelation is one of those writings people tend to stay away from. It can be a challenge to parse all the symbolic meaning in any coherent manner.

There is one thing I have noticed having read through the book several times, after Christ is revealed in the first chapter, the scenes that follow are focused on removing everything that isn’t Christ-like. It is an apt word to us in this Advent season. God is coming. Christ is being revealed to us. God is coming as a baby in Bethlehem, but God is also coming again "in glory to judge the living and the dead," as the Nicene Creed puts it. And our response? Any reasonable person should feel at least some fear.

Tuesday, Dec. 18 (Debbie)

Matthew 21:28-32

²⁸ Jesus said: “Tell me what you think of this story: A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, ‘Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.’

²⁹ “The son answered, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later on he thought better of it and went.

³⁰ “The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, ‘Sure, glad to.’ But he never went.

³¹⁻³² “Which of the two sons did what the father asked?” They said, “The first.”

Jesus said, “Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God’s kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn’t care enough to change and believe him.

Reflection:

The words “he thought better of it” strike a chord. How often we speak before we think. I resonate with the first son especially. In this season leading up to Christmas, there may be numerous things that we don’t especially want to do; yet another trip to the store to purchase a gift or putting up the outdoor Christmas lights are two such things that come to mind for me. Yet we do these things because, well, because we want to make the season festive.

Jesus asks us to do some pretty difficult and certainly more consequential things if we are going to follow him. He tells us to forgive those who have done wrong by us. He expects us to serve and care for others, to be generous in giving of our time and our financial resources, to be faithful in prayer and study. At times we grouse. Sometimes we actually let it be known that we just don’t want to forgive, or serve, or pray, or. . . Being thoughtful, as in thinking things through, is a habit. It’s a habit that is cultivated through pausing and patience. The payoff from such a discipline is that we learn to get our priorities in order.

Someone once said: “Doing the right thing is the right thing to do.” Discerning the right thing, even when we don’t especially want to put forth the effort, is part of our calling as disciples of Jesus. Such thoughtfulness and discernment is evidence of the “changed life” that Jesus speaks of. At the same time, keeping our word – doing what we say we will do – this is a character trait that is central to a life in which the love of the Lord is integrated fully into daily undertakings.

Jesus calls us to be “Kingdom-bringers” even as we await his return. Kingdom-bringers are people of integrity.

Monday, December 17 (Trey)

Matthew 21:23-27

²³ Then he was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, “Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?”

²⁴⁻²⁵ Jesus responded, “First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I’ll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?”

²⁵⁻²⁷ They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, “If we say ‘heaven,’ he’ll ask us why we didn’t believe him; if we say ‘humans,’ we’re up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet.” They decided to concede that round to Jesus. “We don’t know,” they answered. Jesus said, “Then neither will I answer your question.”

Reflection:

How utterly transformative, when truth encounters duplicity; when pertinence encounters impertinence. Tables turn. Scribes and Pharisees are hoist with their own petard.

In Advent we anticipate a coming encounter with Truth, as we prepare to welcome our Lord, “who was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.” How shall we prepare? With reflection and penitence. And with faith and hope. “The light is coming into the world, and the darkness shall not overcome it.”

How shall we react to Christ’s coming? By living into the fullness of life transformed through grace. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Joan of Arc, when asked by her inquisitors whether she were in a state of grace, replied, “If I am not, may God put me there; if I am, may God so keep me.” She knew “whence cometh our help.” We know, too. And likely so did the Scribes and Pharisees. God, give us grace to acknowledge your greatest gift: that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners;” and grant us to live the power of that Truth.

Monday, December 10 (Trey)

Luke 5:17-26

¹⁷ One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and religion teachers were sitting around. They had come from nearly every village in Galilee and Judea, even as far away as Jerusalem, to be there. The healing power of God was on him.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ Some men arrived carrying a paraplegic on a stretcher. They were looking for a way to get into the house and set him before Jesus. When they couldn’t find a way in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof, removed some tiles, and let him down in the middle of everyone, right in front of Jesus. Impressed by their bold belief, he said, “Friend, I forgive your sins.”

²¹ That set the religion scholars and Pharisees buzzing. “Who does he think he is? That’s blasphemous talk! God and only God can forgive sins.”

²²⁻²⁶ Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking and said, “Why all this gossipy whispering? Which is simpler: to say ‘I forgive your sins,’ or to say ‘Get up and start walking’? Well, just so it’s clear that I’m the Son of Man and authorized to do either, or both . . .” He now spoke directly to the paraplegic: “Get up. Take your bedroll and go home.” Without a moment’s hesitation, he did it - got up, took his blanket, and left for home, giving glory to God all the way. The people rubbed their eyes, incredulous - and then also gave glory to God. Awestruck, they said, “We’ve never seen anything like that!”

Reflection:

Thank you, Lord, for faith-filled friends;
We are the company we keep.
Jesus seeing faith, heals sins;
Forgiven, paralytic leap!

Lord, O hope of ages, come;
Come, for we are needful, sin-sick.
Highest priest, heal your kingdom;
Patience, faith, we wait the physic.

Skeptics answer what they ask;
Whispering lest our Lord should hear them.
In forgiving, highest task,
Our Lord grants life-giving freedom.

Let us all clasp hands, help, hear;
In communion love is given.
Lamb of God on earth appears;
Glorify Him come from heaven!

Tuesday, December 11 (Debbie)

Matthew 18:12-14

¹²⁻¹⁴ “Look at it this way. If someone has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders off, doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go after the one? And if he finds it, doesn't he make far more over it than over the ninety-nine who stay put? Your Father in heaven feels the same way. He doesn't want to lose even one of these simple believers.

Reflection:

There are at least two ways to read this brief passage. One is from the perspective of the shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is missing. Another way to engage the passage is from the perspective of the lone sheep who wandered off. Being separated from the flock is dangerous for a sheep. Sheep do not know what is best for them. Predators are always lurking, looking for the lost and vulnerable solitary sheep. The shepherd and the flock are absolutely essential to survival for sheep.

When you are trying to stay on track don't you find it helpful to be part of a community that can encourage you, shelter you and even keep you safe? It's when we wander off on our own and especially when we keep secrets that we are most vulnerable to discouragement and self-deception. Created in God's Trinitarian image, we find completion and wholeness in community – community with God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit and with one another.

So much of life is spent waiting and anticipating a next thing. Restlessness can be a good thing. It can cause us to seek after God and his purposes more deeply. On the other hand, restlessness can cause us to wander off from the flock – to go out looking for something that isn't in our best interest. To this point, I am reminded of that portion of the hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” that goes like this:

Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood

We wander. Jesus risks everything to draw us back to himself. This season of waiting is a good time to stay close to the flock and close to the Shepherd. It's in community that Jesus is most fully experienced. It's in community that we learn to care for one another and to trust the Shepherd to care for us all.

Sunday, Dec. 16 (David)

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ So sing, Daughter Zion!
Raise the rafters, Israel!
Daughter Jerusalem,
be happy! celebrate!
GOD has reversed his judgments against you
and sent your enemies off chasing their
tails.
From now on, GOD is Israel's king,
in charge at the center.
There's nothing to fear from evil
ever again!
¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Jerusalem will be told:
“Don't be afraid.
Dear Zion,
don't despair.
Your GOD is present among you,
a strong Warrior there to save you.
Happy to have you back, he'll calm you with
his love and delight you with his songs.

Reflection:

We are accustomed to images of God as judge. In fact, much of Zephaniah uses such imagery. We are accustomed to images of God as shepherd, gathering the flock into the fold. But how often do we imagine God as one who rejoices? One who sings? Yet here, in our text, God and God's people alike are caught up in a joy that overflows into song, a joy that springs from love renewed and relationship restored. This joy is not one-sided. It is not simply God's people who rejoice because God has forgiven and restored them. That is an altogether understandable reaction to God's redemption. But here God sings and shouts with joy over this love restored.

The divine heart overflows with jubilation! This image of God bears no resemblance to Aristotle's "unmoved mover," or, indeed, to many people's image of a divine watchmaker who sets the world in motion and lets it go. The song, "From a Distance," made popular nearly twenty years ago by Bette Midler comes to mind: "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us. . . from a distance." This God does not watch from a distance, but enters into the life of the world. This God enters even into human flesh, in the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ “The accumulated sorrows of your exile
will dissipate.
I, your God, will get rid of them for you.
You've carried those burdens long enough.
At the same time, I'll get rid of all those
who've made your life miserable.
I'll heal the maimed;
I'll bring home the homeless.
In the very countries where they were hated
they will be venerated.
On Judgment Day
I'll bring you back home—a great family
gathering!
You'll be famous and honored
all over the world.
You'll see it with your own eyes—
all those painful partings turned into
reunions!”
GOD's Promise.

Saturday, December 15 (Paula)

Matthew 17:9-13

⁹ Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t breathe a word of what you’ve seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk.”

¹⁰ The disciples, meanwhile, were asking questions. “Why do the religion scholars say that Elijah has to come first?”

¹¹⁻¹³ Jesus answered, “Elijah does come and get everything ready. I’m telling you, Elijah has already come but they didn’t know him when they saw him. They treated him like dirt, the same way they are about to treat the Son of Man.” That’s when the disciples realized that all along he had been talking about John the Baptizer.

Reflection:

“Don’t breathe a word of what you’ve seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk.”

Can you keep a secret?

Anyone who has ever been asked that question — or who has been sworn to secrecy knows how hard it can be not to tell just one other person. Can you imagine how the disciples felt hearing those words that told them to wait?

Waiting is difficult. Holding onto faith while we wait stretches us and bends us in ways until we begin to feel like some sort of a spiritual contortionist

I am pretty experienced at waiting — maybe even expert.

As a chaplain I spent countless hours in waiting rooms.

I have waited as people died and waited as babies were born.

In my own life, I waited almost forty years for a husband.

Five years later, I waited while my husband was on a ventilator for a week.

I waited and hoped for a child.

I’ve waited for the right jobs.

I’ve waited for prayers to be answered.

I wish I had magic words to tell you how to get through times of waiting, but the bottom line is that waiting simply is not an easy process.

But this is what I believe.

That time and time again I can look back and see God’s presence in my life and in the lives of others around me. And even in the darkest nights I believe God was with me and in some way, was holding things together. And I believe that God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in the future and that we will not wait forever.

Wednesday, December 12 (Jean)

Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸⁻³⁰ “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Reflection:

Here in the middle of Advent Week 2, I have too much to do, no time to do it, and can’t decide which to not do first. But tired?!? Oh yes! I tell you being festive is exhausting, and when Jesus offers an exit from all this weariness by working with Him, it feels like a contradiction.

How in the world can I do that? Maybe those first century Christians could manage. They lived in simpler times, but my life is very different from theirs. I have people counting on me to provide glitter and a side dish, to tend to relatives, greet neighbors, give a small something at the office, all of it wrapped with a bow. Still, could I learn something useful if I watch how He did it? For one thing, He didn’t rush, and Jesus knew when to get away, how to take real rest.

Here in the middle of all my lists, learning His “unforced rhythms of grace” might be worth risking all this seasonal busyness. So today I’ll slow down. I’ll try to do less, to delegate more, to listen for His guidance on how to “live freely and lightly.” This seems a lot like abundant life.

Thank you, Lord.

Thursday, December 13 (Ned)

Matthew 11:7-15 The Message (MSG)

⁷⁻¹⁰ When John [the Baptizer's] disciples left to report [to him all that Jesus had said], Jesus started talking to the crowd about John. *“What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pajamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That's right, a prophet! Probably the best prophet you'll ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, ‘I'm sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.’*

¹¹⁻¹⁴ “Let me tell you what's going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him. For a long time now people have tried to force themselves into God's kingdom. But if you read the books of the Prophets and God's Law closely, you will see them culminate in John, teaming up with him in preparing the way for the Messiah of the kingdom. Looked at in this way, *John is the ‘Elijah’ you've all been expecting to arrive and introduce the Messiah.*

¹⁵ “Are you listening to me? Really listening?”

Reflection:

We are at the midpoint of Advent. Only 12 more days 'til Christmas. If you live with younger children, you and they may be wondering if Christmas will ever arrive. For well over a month now, we've been bombarded with Christmas songs on the radio, Christmas ads on TV, and confronted by displays in stores. We've been waiting for Christmas Day for a long time. The anticipation is growing and expectations are forming.

As a child, I remember sometimes building up my expectations to unrealistic proportions and losing focus of the true meaning of the season. I find myself now looking forward to Christmas for different reasons and with different expectations.

Today's Bible passage takes place after John the Baptist has been imprisoned. He has sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting” (11:3)? Jesus gives them a remarkable answer* to take back to John. Then Jesus turns to the crowd gathered around him and asks them questions regarding their expectations about John the Baptist. They seem to have been expecting John to be different from who they found him to be.

Sometimes our expectations of others are off base. Sometimes we build people up beyond their capacities or tear them down and disregard them and we then miss out on something of great value and importance. Take a moment at this mid-Advent and check your expectations. It might help to make this Christmas the best one you've ever had.

Friday, December 14 (Anne)

Matthew 11:16-19

¹⁶⁻¹⁹ “How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, ‘We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.’ John came fasting and they called him crazy. I came feasting and they called me a lush, a friend of the riffraff. Opinion polls don't count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

Reflection:

Here we have Jesus using homely, familiar, and even undignified language to tell us to get over ourselves. People want one thing and then another; they are fickle and fussy; they complain about what they get and what they want. Like the three bears and their porridge, the people find John's behavior too cold, Jesus's behavior too warm, and nothing is just right.

Jesus tells us that we are trapped in the conviction that we know what we want: we think we want play, but no one will play with us; we think we want to sit and chat, but no one will join us; we think we want a serious prophet, but then we call him crazy; we think we want a commoner, but the Son of Man is too undignified.

We need to stop imagining we know what we need. We need to stop judging what we don't understand. Instead, we need to let the work of Jesus teach us. Advent gives us that time to pause, to realize we make mistakes when we have a preconceived notion of how our lives ought to be, and that we are part of a Creation that is wondrous and ineffable, beyond our comprehension but filled with God's love for us.