

# 2016 Advent Devotional

## Presbyterians for Earth Care

*The dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom...  
Isaiah 35: 1-10*

### Awaiting Renewal

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Mojave Desert photo by Steve Berardi

Peace, Grace and Hope to you all as we prepare for the beautiful and deeply sacred season of Advent. At this time, late in 2016 particularly, we deeply need those three gifts.

I am SO grateful that PEC can share with you all an opportunity to truly BREATHE in that Peace, Grace and Hope...yet, at the same time, balance it with the actuality which is upon us...that our world has been thrust into a very challenging spiral...of mistrust of neighbor (far and wide) and heaviness of heart in grieving for our sisters and brothers who are in the midst of war or war-like situations...in many countries, including our own... We have also found ourselves in a time, for many, of a tragic apathy toward our Common Home.

Thus we invite you to share with us our Advent Reflection for 2016, based on Isaiah 35:1-10, which begins, "...the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom..." Our theme... "Awaiting Renewal."

I give thanks for our brothers and sisters who have accepted the request to share their reflections with us from New York through the Midwest to Seattle; from Africa to Alaska. We have asked our authors to share their thoughts and feelings about the connection between God's gift of Christ and God's gift of Creation...about the biblical Hope of moving from the dry land to the blossoming desert.

Many thanks to Laurie Fisher, Heartland Presbytery, who has helped coordinate this "gift" and to Jane Laping, who has assembled it, and to all of you reading and sharing our Advent reflection. All of you, as the body of Christ...Hope of the world. Amen.

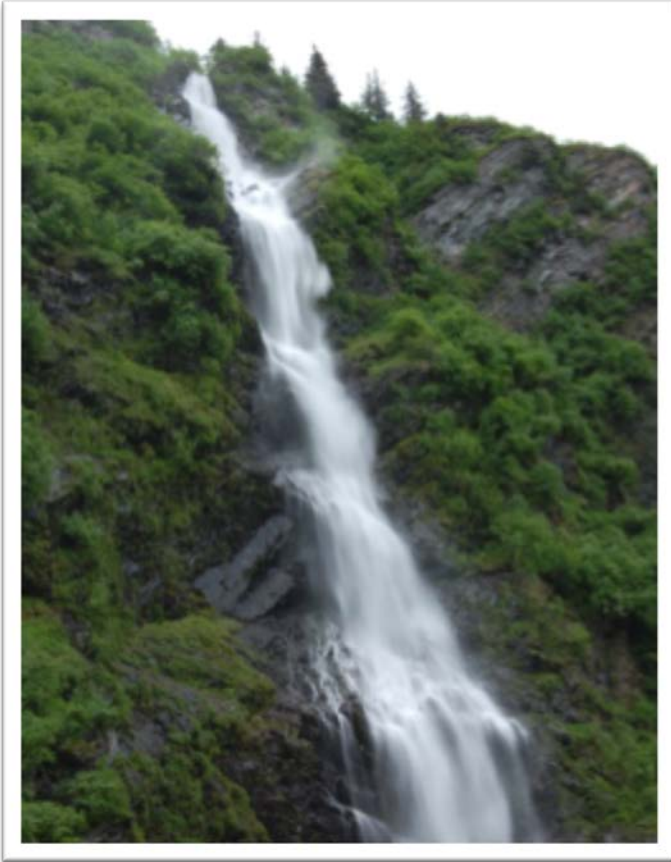
Diane Waddell, PEC Moderator

# First Week of Advent Reflection

## Awaiting Renewal: Let the Waters Flow

### by Betty Tom

*Isaiah 35: 6-7 "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.*



The passage from the prophet Isaiah speaks of a day when God will redeem God's people from exile and bring them home again to Mt. Zion. Notice that not only will the people rejoice and be glad but the land will rejoice as well! Dry land and wilderness will show signs of gladness, singing and blossoming. Flowers will grow and refreshing waters will break forth in dry places, and there will be streams of water in places that were once severely dry and barren.

In July of 2015, I had the awesome opportunity to see a portion of the wilderness land of Alaska and to see the mighty glaciers of Tracy Arm a fjord near Juneau. As the cruise ship inched its way into the fjord, I looked up into the mountains and to my surprise I saw streams of flowing water gushing from the mountain! Never did I expect to see water flowing so beautifully, peacefully, and freely in the Alaskan wilderness. During this season of Advent, let us seek to allow the life-giving water of God to flow freely in our lives and let us in turn care for earthly waters so that they too, may continue to flow freely.

*Prayer: God of Ever Flowing Streams, Flow into our dry places and refresh us as we begin this season of advent. May we be reminded of your great love and care for all humankind and may we go and do likewise as we love and care for all the waters that cover the earth. Amen.*

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**The Rev. Dr. Betty Tom** is the pastor with the First Presbyterian Church, Mt. Vernon, NY. She has served with the Presbyterian Hunger Program Advisory Committee for the past three years.



## Second Week of Advent Reflection

### by Doug Tilton

Each year, when the spring rains fall, the Namaqua desert in South Africa's Northern Cape becomes a blaze of colour. Wild flowers, coaxed back to life by the moisture, create intricate tapestries of purple, orange, yellow. Over a period of just a few weeks, this brilliant display sweeps from north to south and then evaporates until the following year.

Though regular, the event is also unpredictable. It is dependent on the rains, which have become increasingly erratic due to climate change. (South Africa has just experienced its driest year since records started 112 years ago!) The viewing opportunity only lasts a few days, and not knowing *which* days certainly inhibits planning.

This is my excuse for never witnessing the spectacle, despite having lived in the Cape for over a decade! Every year, I think: "This year, for sure." But then I am caught unaware. The agenda is full; I am travelling. It just isn't convenient to go. "Next year," I repine.

Often I feel the same way about Advent. A child of the northern hemisphere, I struggle to cultivate a preparatory posture in the middle of summer. The Christmas decorations that begin to appear in early October seem more like harbingers of some lame "Christmas in July" party than real reminders of the approaching celebration of Christ's birth. Even the lighting of the Advent candles each Sunday



Photo by Winfried Bruenken

seems a bit surreal and out of place. So it is usually only a few days before Christmas that the imminence of the holiday suddenly seizes my consciousness. There is little of the anticipation, the reflection, the preparation that I remember from my childhood. No Advent calendars, no frosty caroling outings, no ritualistic decorating.

How often does Christ catch us unaware and unprepared? How often do we think: "Next year, for sure"? How might we incorporate constant anticipation of God's promise of renewal into our spiritual discipline? The good news is that, like the flowering desert, God's grace always gives us another chance.



**Doug Tilton** is mission Presbyterian Church (USA) mission co-worker who has been based in South Africa since 1992. He currently serves as regional liaison for Southern Africa, helping to strengthen the mutual ministries of the PC(USA) and its partner churches in Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

## Third Week of Advent: Patience

### by Abby Brockway

*James 5:7-8 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near.*



As we read this text in the third week of Advent, we are preparing; we are hopeful, and we wait. In ancient Israel, the dry-land farmers had to rely on the rains to water their crops. The farmers did everything they could to prepare their fields, and they realized they were not in complete control – they hoped and expected that rain would come.

We who care for creation are the dry-land farmer. In Washington and Oregon alone, we have seen more than 25 fossil fuel infrastructure projects seeking permits. Out of concern, hundreds of thousands of citizens participated in public hearings and raised questions about the impacts.

*Prayer: God of hope, we thank you for the life-giving rain. Thank you for the earth that you have entrusted us to care for. We see the dry land and we worry. Guide us as we struggle to know how we each are called to prepare for, and be ready for the rains. In Jesus' name -- Amen.*

On the one hand, several of these proposed projects would be developed in struggling communities that desperately need jobs. On the other hand, we recognize that this infrastructure would have irreversibly long term effects on the environment.

While the need is urgent, these resisters have had to exercise great patience – the kind of patience described in James. If, six years ago, we saw the work to be done in order to defeat 25 massive fossil fuel projects, we would not have believed that it was possible to influence even one of those projects.

During Advent, we remember where hope comes from. To move mountains, we do what the dry-land farmers do. We prepare the soil and sow the seeds; we are patient. We tend the garden even when the weather forecast is bleak. We stop worrying about the outcome and do what is required to cultivate our land. We realize we are partnering with a radical, illegitimate homeless, baby boy who came and will come like the long-awaited rains.

**Abby Brockway** is a ruling elder at Woodland Park Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. She is a member of the Delta5 - a group that committed an act of civil disobedience. They were charged with trespassing and blocking an oil train. They went to trial and tried the necessity defense in court because they believed their act was necessary to prevent a greater harm.



## Fourth Week of Advent Reflection

### by George Pasley

Walking on the blistering pavement  
 On the hottest day of the summer  
 On the hottest year in decades,  
 I discovered  
 Thriving in the split concrete of the walk  
 Some sort of flowers, miniscule,  
 That only God could have planted  
 And only somebody looking straight down  
 Would have noticed.

They thrived there,  
 And bloomed,  
 When they would have died on the lawn  
 Or been yanked out and discarded from the garden  
 Or never grown at all,  
 In the shade of the giant tree.

And before long  
 There came a thunderstorm  
 And those miniscule flowers disappeared,  
 While along that street hibiscus flourished  
 And hydrangea showed off their stuff  
 And gladiolas burst forth in shouts of color.

But I remember first those miniscule flowers  
 That only God could have planted  
 And who only bloomed  
 During that one hot, dry spell.



I remember,  
 Because God sent them  
 To where I was  
 And they were my talisman of hope  
 Until blossoms burst forth  
 In the desert turned garden.



**George Pasley** is a poet and pastor of Ketchikan Presbyterian Church in Ketchikan, AK. The question most often asked of George Pasley by his Alaska congregation is, "Where are you going now?" In 2016 the vagabond pastor visited Cuba with the Outreach Foundation, and South Korea with the Presbytery of Northwest Coast Korea study group. Next year, he may just stay home.

# Christmas Eve Reflection

## by Emily Brewer



In October, I gathered at the border fence in Nogales with a thousand others--Christians, Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Native Americans, European Americans, Latin Americans, documented and undocumented. On both sides of that rust-colored wall, we sang and prayed and shouted: "Tear it down!" We shouted and sang and protested because we are told time and time again that this wall, these policies of exclusion, this violence that has marked the US southern border will make us safe. It is not true.

We know what is true: that this wall is an "open wound" in the desert, a visible scar that continues to hurt the earth and her people. What is true is that the land and the communities along the border wall, while wounded, continue to resist

these policies of exclusion by surviving. What is true is that, were we awaiting the birth of the Christ child in our context today, in 2016, we would be waiting along that wall for a child born to undocumented parents, a child born in the desert to parents who were fleeing violence in their home, a child born into a world still desperate for renewal.

We also know that this is true: climate change forces more and more people to migrate to new lands in search of food and other resources. What is true is that if we do not change our hearts and minds and policies toward climate change and toward immigrants, renewal cannot come and we will miss the birth of the one whom we await, the one who brings renewal.

*Prayer:*

*As we await the Christ child on this holy night, we are not silent. We sing and pray and shout in joyous expectation with the earth and all her creatures of the one who will come--the undocumented, Brown, Jewish baby—*

*who will bring down the mighty from their seats of power,*

*who will fill the hungry with good things,  
who will tear down all walls of division and hatred,*

*who will renew the earth and her people from the wounds we have inflicted if we will let him, if we will help him.*

*O come, Emmanuel.*

**Emily Brewer** is the director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. She is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York (2015) and Maryville College (2009). She lives in Brooklyn, NY but will always consider East Tennessee home.



# Christmas Day Reflection

## by Rodger Nishioka

*For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6*

Death Valley on the California-Nevada border is the hottest and driest place in North America. But every decade or so, something magical happens: the valley explodes with color as thousands of native plants come to life. This rare phenomenon is called a “super bloom” and it is the result of another rare occurrence, the coming of rain. In October 2015, three separate rainstorms fell on Death Valley. The parched, dry land soaked up that rain and in an instant it was gone. Yet those rains were enough to spur the bloom of thousands of desert sunflowers and other plants six months later. In March of this year, the barren land gave way to brilliant color. “It is the most amazing thing,” commented one of the park rangers.

“These flowers lay dormant for years waiting for even the hint of moisture. Then when it comes, wow!”

That same scenario plays itself out every year for us. Every year we enter the Advent season waiting. Some years we are in a desolate and desperate place, and we are more dry and parched than ever. Some years we are in a more contented place and our anticipation of Christmas takes on a



different way of being. Still, the advent season is about waiting and anticipation. And not unlike the wildflower seeds waiting in the desert soil of Death Valley, the good news that God has been born in Jesus Christ reminds us all of God’s faithfulness and love for the creation. When that good news reaches us, we spring forth with color and wonder and joy and hope. Christmas Day has come! And like the park ranger, all we can say is “Wow!”



**Rodger Nishioka** serves as the Director of Adult Educational Ministries at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, KS, and is grateful to work with the congregation’s Environmental Action committee.