



Presbyterians for Earth Care

2020 Advent Devotional

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven...

Isaiah 55:10

Isaiah 55:10-11

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

Introduction...	2	Jonathan Lee
First Sunday...	4	Carter Grant
Second Sunday...	7	Matt Davis
Third Sunday...	9	Tyler Sit
Fourth Sunday...	11	Ashley DeTar Birt
Christmas Eve...	14	Malcom
Christmas...	16	Matt Samson
Credits...	19	

Introduction

For those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent comes at a time when night's darkness grows deeper and longer as the Earth leans farther away from the sun's light. However, there is a point near the end of December when all of this starts to change, when darkness begins to recede and light comes again. Astronomically, we understand this to be the Winter Solstice, the longest night in the Northern Hemisphere after which the Earth begins to tilt back towards the sun and the days begin to grow longer.

But we aren't a people that celebrate the solstice or the subtle teetering of the planet. No, we recognize the approach of a different light, a different kind of cosmological revolution. At the darkest time of the year, Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus, the birth of the Word made flesh (John 1:14), and we all know what comes after that. We are then doubly assured that this time of darkness is not permanent. Just as the Earth begins its slow lean forward towards the sun, so too does the birth of Jesus assure us that the grip of death is not permanent, that there will be a time when the sun's warmth will burst through and usher in a new day where we won't have to stumble forward in uncertainty and fear. "Arise, shine; for your light has come... For darkness shall cover the earth...but the Lord will arise upon you." (Isaiah 60:1-2)

But life doesn't work so simply. After all, this is not the first Advent-Christmas or Winter Solstice we have lived through. And as much as people might hope 2021 will be better, there is no guarantee that the problems we are facing now will magically disappear once the calendars flip over. Just because the light is here does not mean our problems vanish. No, the light just helps us see what needs to be done so that justice, mercy, and love can flow like flooded rivers (Micah 6:8). After all, Jesus Christ did not change the arc of history by simply being born. The power of Jesus lay in what he did, in his actions, in his ministry amongst the people.



And so, I turn to this year's Advent scripture: Isaiah 55:10-11. Just as the rain does not return to the heavens until it has also watered the earth, neither can we simply hear God's word and ignore what it tells us to do. 2020 was not just a year of natural disaster, pandemic and hardship; it was a year when so many voices cried out, pleading to the heavens and to anyone else who could hear, that enough is enough. We have heard so many cries. We ourselves have cried.

Just as Jesus, the Word incarnate, came and did that which God the Creator sent him to do, so too must we hear the words that so many have cried out over the past several months and do what they ask. As instruments of God's justice and mercy in this world, how can we sit idly hearing these cries for help from our siblings and not rise up to meet them? Will we let the word of God and God's people rain down and water the fields in our heart or will we let our land remain dry and fallow? For only when God's word accomplishes and succeeds for that which God purposes will the mountains and hills burst into song and will we be able to go out in joy (Isaiah 55:12).

The writings in this devotional are just a small sample of the different voices that are crying out at this time. As you make your way through and finish the devotional, I invite you to not only let the words sink into your hearts, but to try and find the voices and stories not represented in this collection and listen to what they have to say.

To the glory of God,
Amen.



Jonathan Lee is a second year Masters of Divinity student at Yale Divinity School. Born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, Jonathan's faith and love for God's Creation were simultaneously cultivated during a time in the Maine woods. In addition to considering a career in ordained ministry, Jonathan is interested in environmental and Asian American theologies. He is currently serving as Presbyterians for Earth Care's Programming and Learning Fellow.

First Week of Advent

The classic Christmastide hymn, “Silent Night,” reads: “All is calm. All is bright.”

Yet we are not entering into this Advent season in a time of peace as “Silent Night” proposes. There are no silent or calm nights, and no promise of an end to our waiting.



Instead of bringing peace, this year’s Advent waiting brings anxiety. We are waiting for God’s arrival on Earth in the form of Jesus Christ, yet we also believe in a Triune God who is actively working in and among us. If God is with us in the anxiety, God is with us in the Advent.

In the book of Isaiah, God promises that God’s word will never return to heaven void. Yes, we are waiting, but I like to think of this as an active waiting. Isaiah 55 says that not even a drop of water from the heavens is wasted - each drop serves God’s purpose. As God’s children, we have our whole life cycle to plant seeds and to be cultivated as a seed in God’s Creation.

First Week of Advent cont...

This Advent, you might find yourself being cultivated, even pruned, or planting seeds. It can be frustrating to plant seeds and never see the fruits of your labor. But we are promised that we never plant seeds in vain. God's plan will always outlive us, so our accomplishments through God's power should outlive us as well.

In a sense, we are waiting more than usual, yet we are not idle. Just like in God's Creation, hope comes from knowing that God is using this anxious time to work in us; we are changing and growing.

Whether you are in a season of pruning, flourishing, or dormancy – God is using you in this season and you “shall accomplish that which is God's purpose and succeed in the things for which God sent” you (Isa 55:11).

What season are you in? How can you find ways God's word is alive through you?

Prayer

Creator God, though our nights are no longer silent and your creation is in anxious distress, we know that you are with us in the waiting. Thank you for using us in your plan. Show us your love in every season. Show us what seeds to plant in this waiting. Teach us to be your disciples while we are active in our waiting. Be with us until we meet your Son again and rest in His embrace. In your name we pray,

Amen.



Carter is a second year Masters of Divinity student at Princeton Theological Seminary and a candidate for ordination through the Presbyterian Church (USA). She is from St. Augustine, Florida and comes to seminary by way of Columbia, South Carolina. Carter feels extraordinarily lucky to be supported by a church and denomination that are walking alongside her in discerning her call, and she feels God's presence in her life in Princeton.



Second Week of Advent

Sometimes we go through the motions. Sometimes we go through the rituals. Sometimes—thankfully—we get jerked from our rhythms sparked by the very irony of what we are saying.

Sharing the Isaiah 55:12 benediction to the Mendocino Presbyterian Church congregation amidst the Mendocino Complex Fire in 2018—the largest in California history—I knew our congregation had to respond with action to the intense wildfires devastating our communities. We couldn't just say the words of the prophet; we had to live into them working for a better world where the “trees of the field shall clap their hands” rather than allowing dense dry fuels to alight because of changing weather patterns and micro-climates.

Sometimes God calls us to make a difference.

In response to our vulnerability in California to wildfire, my community created the “Holy Goats: Your Fire Protection Angels”. Our herd of 30 goats reduces fire propellants, providing a critical tool in enhancing forest health and decreasing threat to lives. The Holy Goats chomp down coyote brush, grasses and even gorse—a thorny invasive brought over to Mendocino by Presbyterian pastors in the 1880's that has now taken over the landscape creating a overbearing monoculture. Let us all live into the words of the prophet finding our own unique ways to make a difference. Let's not just say the words of the prophet. Let's live into them!

Prayer

*Lord Creator, we ask Thee to support us all the day long.
Create in us loving hearts to care for Your creation, adoring the world and all therein.
Bless us with the Spirit of Jesus to bless others.*

Amen



Pastor Matt Davis serves the Mendocino Presbyterian Church located 3.5 hours north of San Francisco on Highway 1.

Holy Goats: Your Fire Prevention Angels can be contacted at 20holygoats@gmail.com



photo provided by Pastor Davis

Third Week of Advent

I am the pastor of New City Church (@grownewcity), a United Methodist Church just a short walk away from where the racist murder of George Floyd occurred in South Minneapolis. What the news didn't cover, though, was that this is a neighborhood historically saddled with highway pollution, industrial factory smog, and the exhaust of diesel engine trucks that drive through all day and night. Decades ago, families in the neighborhood—many of which are Somali, African American, or Latinx—started noticing that their children were developing asthma, and that the seniors in the community were suffering health impacts of dirty air.



This is the difference between police brutality and environmental justice: police brutality shows a horrifyingly acute, filmable instance of a police officer kneeling on a man's neck as he says, "I can't breathe." Environmental justice shows the economic and environmental decisions of a whole city invisibly kneeling on the necks of communities of color over the course of decades, creating a whole generation that can barely eke out "I can't breathe."

Third Week of Advent cont...

But I believe in a God who wants people to breathe, a God of breath. When God breathes life into us, it is a blessing for flourishing. God speaks a word, and with those syllables we rise. When Isaiah 55:11 says:

“so is my [that is, God’s] word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead, it does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend”

It means that God doesn’t speak in vain. God doesn’t say “choose life” (Deut 30:19) just for us to construct societies that stifle the poor; Jesus didn’t say “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” only for us to create structures of racism that try to steal—one way or another—the breath of people of color. God’s word is powerful, and when God’s word moves through us, we become powerful. And I do believe that once we can live into this truth, day after day and community after community, we will welcome in a world where everyone can purely and simply...breathe.

Prayer

God,

As we slowly breathe in, we remember that you restore and heal us.

As we slowly breathe out, we remember that we can pray a blessing upon the world.

While we still have breath in our lungs, God, show us how to live more humbly, advocate more fiercely, heal more tenderly, and love more broadly.

All this we pray in Jesus name, Amen



Rev. Tyler Sit (@TylerSit) is the pastor and church planter of New City Church, a multiethnic community in South Minneapolis. He is the author of the upcoming book tentatively titled, *Staying Awake: the Gospel for Changemakers* (early 2021). New City has been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, Minnesota Public Radio, and more. When he’s not working, Tyler likes to dig into his Chinese heritage and go for hikes with his boyfriend.

Fourth Week of Advent



I live in an apartment that's been under construction for over a year. Nearly every day, men in hard hats with loud tools work directly outside my windows. Pre-pandemic, this was fine, but now that I work from home, my hours are filled with sights and sounds of a project that has no end. It's a taxing situation that feels impossible to escape, but that doesn't mean I haven't tried.

My wife and I ventured out a few times. We felt rain on our arms as we stood with masks and made friends with hermit crabs in Pelham Bay. We watched birds swoop from treetop to treetop as we worked our way through Harriman State Park. For a few moments, we were reminded that there's life outside our apartment, outside the loud or frustrating elements of our lives. We just had to be willing to try and find them.

Fourth Week of Advent cont...

These weren't my first times out. That honor goes to one Sunday when, after finishing worship, I saw a Black Lives Matter protest passing by my window. I grabbed my mask and joined, collar and all. Before that, I saw no reason to escape my constraints of construction. In that moment, however, I felt God's calling, reminding me that there's life outside my apartment, and that I can be responsible for making it better as long as I was willing to try.

This Advent season, as our lives continue to be restricted, let us remember that there's life outside of our constraints. There's beauty and quiet and rage and righteousness. Like the earth, the rain and snow of God's word falls on us, nurturing and calling us to life outside of ourselves even if we're never able to leave our homes. So, in this season, what are YOU willing to try?

Prayer

God of growth, we know that you water every single one of us with your nourishing word. During this time of waiting, help us to listen and observe what you are creating inside of us. Give us courage to look beyond ourselves and find the places we can try to make change, find peace, and take care of your world. May we connect with each other and the earth as you connect with us.

Amen.



Rev. Ashley DeTar Birt is a pastor ordained in the PC(USA), and obtained her M.Div from Union Theological Seminary. In addition to serving as Co-Moderator for More Light's Board of Directors, Ashley has served as the Pastoral Fellow for Youth and Families at Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York, NY. Her interests include the intersections of racial justice, children and youth, interfaith communication, LGBTQIA+ issues (particularly the B), and Christianity.



Christmas Eve

As of today, there are over 45 million confirmed Coronavirus cases globally. This virus has wreaked havoc on us our economies and exposed many injustices. In addition, the virus is once again spiking as we wrestle with visioning a new path forward. This is a chaotic time. In times like these, words of encouragement and affirmation are needed to build our faith.

This Isaiah text paints for us the beauty of God's ecology. By showing us nature's participation in God's ecology we see that there is a system at work that is designed to be regenerative. Our society today is designed to be extractive with our natural resources and our relationships. We believe that we are lords over creation instead of participants of it. This text also challenges us to vision a path forward that is regenerative and operates with the ecology.

When I read Isaiah 55:10-11 juxtaposed to Christmas Eve, I am filled with anticipation because it is an announcement that God is participating in my care. God participated in my care through the birth of Jesus the Christ. Christ participates in our care through salvation. God participates in my care through nature and community. Our role in ecology is to maintain God's ecology by participating in caring for creation also.

Alabama IPL is operating in the new path and inviting others on the journey. Beloved Community Church is the local church that I attend and serve in Birmingham, AL. The church is located in downtown Birmingham on a small lot. There is not a great deal of open space and a great deal of traffic. On this lot, we carved out and maintain a bird sanctuary that Alabama Interfaith Power and Light sponsors. In the middle of the chaos and lack, we carved out space for regenerative relationships in God's ecology.

God's created we maintain.



Christmas Eve cont...

Prayer

God Our Creator,

We anticipate the newness that you are bringing forward.

We commit our energy to caring for creation.

We thank you for renewing our hope.

Amen.



The Reverend Michael Malcom is the Founder and Executive Director of The People's Justice Council and Alabama Interfaith Power and Light, and is a licensed and ordained United Church of Christ Minister. He currently serves as the International Liaison for the US Climate Action Network. He considers himself an impassioned environmental justice advocate, and sees environmental justice as the moral obligation to love your neighbor.

Christmas Day

Advent is the season of expectant waiting. As the snow and the rain in Isaiah offer rejuvenation in times of planting and harvesting, we seek constancy both in the turning of the seasons and in good work—even in the production of our “daily bread.” In the southern Appalachian Mountains, not so far from where I live, autumnal pilgrimages are marked by the desire of many to experience the sight and sounds of flowing water in crystalline mountain streams and the aesthetic explosion of the turning of the colors of the leaves of the trees. So it is that in our waiting, we look beyond ourselves for a constancy that offers sustenance in the face of unease and uncertainty.



In Guatemala, where I do much of my work, a Maya friend begins prayers by invoking our “Creator and Former,” a rendition that reminds us that we are called into being and shaped only in relationship with others and with the creation itself. We are not self-made, and the Maya articulate a cosmovision in which balance, harmony, and equilibrium are crucial components of our being in community with other humans and our being in the cosmos. As well, we are shaped by the past, not only in the presence of those ancestors and siblings we carry in our memory but also in the knowledge that the words of the Creator will not return empty in the lives of the faithful. The snow and the rain fall, often in unequal portions in these days of human-induced climate change. Yet we find constancy in the possibility of an expectant return from exile and the renewal of lifeways that may yet enable us to transcend enmity between peoples and the estrangement between our species and the creation from which our shared being cannot be separated.

Christmas Day cont...

What if Christmas, then, represents a sign of constancy on the horizon? What the liberationists refer to as an “in-breaking”? A new reality emerges out of our expectant waiting our longing in THIS year punctuated by so much loss, anxiety, and fear. The Creator speaks a Word, and with that presence in our midst, we read the signs of our times and remember the promise of the tree of life that stands beside the river of life and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Revelations 22.2). Instead of normalcy, we look for renewal and restoration, a hope that watered by snow and rain and our own commitments will break forth in the redemption our times.

Prayer

God of life, you call us into being as our Creator; you redeem us in your words spoken throughout history and in your eternal Word that speaks to us through the generations; you sustain us with the constancy of your presence in the face of all that threatens. Teach us so to live that in our living, like the snow and the rain, we might water the earth with steadfastness and loving kindness.

Amen.



Matt Samson is an associate professor of anthropology and chair of Latin American Studies at Davidson College. A graduate of Austin Presbyterian Seminary and the University at Albany, his research and teaching are centered on religious change, ethnic identity, and human-environment relations in the Americas. Matt enjoys introducing students to ethnographic approaches, and currently serves on a PCUSA study team on Central America under the auspices of the Advisory Council on Social Witness Policy.



Credits

Cover Art

The watercolor sketch on the cover was provided by Michelle Chun. Michelle is an artist and painter in the greater Los Angeles region. Painting is the primary medium of her work, however, she is invested in cultivating an interdisciplinary language involving sculpture, prose, and video. Her studio practice is influenced by liturgical rhythms, research, and interpersonal relationships.

Michelle received her BFA in Painting at Rhode Island School of Design and her Master of Arts in Religion with a concentration in Visual and Material Culture at Yale Divinity School. She has taught as a Wurtele Gallery Fellow at the Yale University Art Gallery and has attended residencies at Art Farm in Nebraska and Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine Monastery in Ireland.

Visit www.michellejchun.com to view more of Michelle's work.



Photos

All photos used in this devotional were provided by David Kepley. You can view more of David's photography at: davidkepleyphotography.smugmug.com

PEC is extremely grateful to both Michelle and David for their exquisite work.

Layout and Coordinator

This year's Advent Devotional was the work of Jonathan Lee as a part of his internship experience with Presbyterians for Earth Care..

Thank you so much to all of the contributors, editors, and people who helped me on this undertaking. This project would not have come together without your voices. May you go out and soak in the words of God that are raining down on you today.

Peace and blessings to all. Merry Christmas.