Advent 2021 daily Devotional

PRESBYTERIANS FOR EARTH CARE

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First Sunday of Advent: November 28th

Psalm 25:1-10

Betty Whiting

"Expectant waiting" is common in the Religious Society Friends (Quakers) as they meet each Sunday to listen to God. The result can be powerful as when in the silence an elderly member was helped to stand with his bones creaking to announce firmly, "My Friends, we must end wanton consumption."

In Psalm 25: 4- 5 the writer says to listen to God, waiting expectantly: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. . . for you I wait all day long." It's not easy for U.S. citizens to wait; we want immediate results. It took centuries for the Messiah to be born, centuries for the human population to expand and spread across the entire earth, and another century as industry and technology allowed us to overuse resources to the point of destroying each other and the earth itself with weather havoc.

We beg for forgiveness as the Psalmist (25:7) does: "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions" recalling the times we chose luxury over simplicity. In repenting we also ask God, (25:6) "Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old."

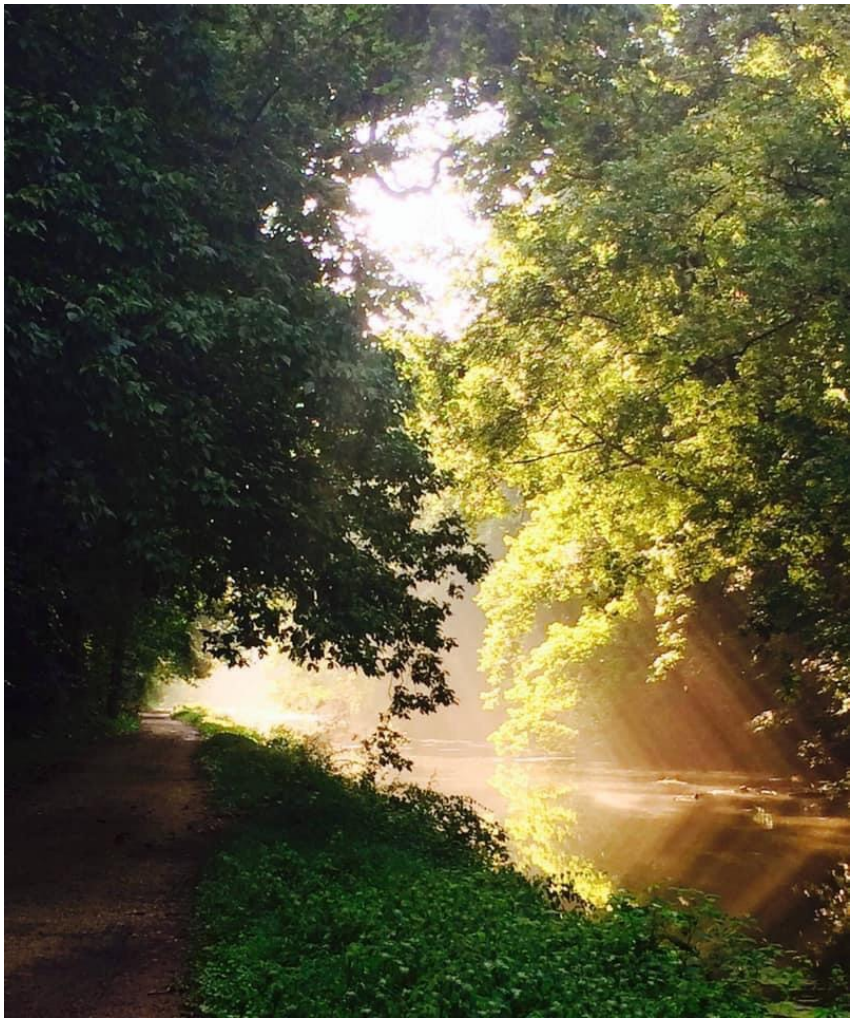
As a parent pregnant with child, fearing and hoping for the approaching birth, we expectantly wait for all to recognize the dangers, act on mitigations, and develop solutions to climate chaos.

Prayer: O God, teach us to humble ourselves, to wait expectantly to hear your voice. "God of grace and God of glory . . . bend our pride to thy control; shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul. . . . Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days." (Harry Emereson Fosdick) Amen.

November 29th

Luke 1:68-79

Roy Howard



(Photo by Roy Howard ©)

"… guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:79)

November 30th

Luke 3: 1-6

Barbara Overton

A Voice Cries Out in the Wilderness

One of my favorite traditions leading up to Christmas is to head into the wilderness by myself and disconnect from the busy-ness of the season. Newsletter drafts, travel plans and post office deadlines are left behind as I drive into Everglades National Park.

I am engulfed by the chirps, rustles, and whirrs of natural life. This slow-moving river dotted with tree islands once encompassed all of South Florida. It is now hemmed in by canals, agriculture and encroaching development.

But still it calls to me. Great Egrets greet me like an old friend. My mind quiets, my heart opens. Joy blooms at the sight of wild orchids and flying herons. I feel the peace of the Advent calling to me. I am restored and ready to experience once again the mystery of Christ's birth.

When John was calling out from the wilderness, the wilderness encircled humans. Today, human development encircles the wilderness. The first call to Advent comes from the wilderness. If we want to keep hearing that call, we must protect the wilderness from which it comes. Presbyterians are called to creation care and have many resources available, starting with the Climate Care Challenge https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Climate-Care-Challenge-11X17.pdf . Personal steps and public commitment are all needed. No one will do it perfectly, but we can all do something.

Imagine your vision of wilderness. Perhaps it is a forest, a rocky shore or the desert. Be in that place and hear the call to prepare for Christmas.

Creator God, You call to us from a wilderness filled with wonderful things. We give thanks for creation in which we are restored and ready to hear the call to Advent, to prepare for the miracle of Christ's birth. Amen

December 1st

Luke 1:68-79

Sam Hamilton-Poore

These verses from Luke—the "Song of Zechariah"—are sung each day in morning prayer by Benedictine communities around the world. It has been my joy to sing these words with sisters and brothers in several monastic communities in the U.S. Zechariah's song is a song of praise to God for promises fulfilled, the gift of a prophet who prepares the way, and the prophecy of peace.

I love the climax of the song which comes in the closing lines:

> Out of God's deepest mercy
>
> a light will come from on high,
>
> a light for those shadowed by death,
>
> a guide for our feet on the way to peace.

From the depths of God's grace, a light dawns, leading us on the path to peace—a reference to the light of Christ who came and comes, even amidst the shadows of suffering and death.

Where and when do we catch glimpses of this light dawning today? Who are today's prophets pointing us toward the light? I think of all those who either within or beyond the church work for the healing of the earth, the dismantling of systemic racism, and eradication of poverty—who point us toward the path of peace, the very path Christ calls us to walk today. On nearly every side we are "shadowed by death," but thanks to Christ working in and through these "John the Baptists," the light breaks through like the morning dawn.

May God keep us awake and alert to the many "John the Baptists," young and old, who are pointing us toward the path of peace today—peace with God, peace with the earth, peace with each other. And singing together with Zechariah, may catch glimpses of the light of Christ which comes to us like the morning dawn.

December 2nd

Philippians 1:3-11

Rebecca Barnes

Thankfully, we don't do gospel work alone. Caring for God's creation and all people in it, working to have hope in the face of the climate crisis, living lives worthy of the calling—it's hard work, and we lean on each other. We "share in the gospel" as mutual mentors, encouragers, and partners. God has begun good work in all corners of the world, in the diversity of people's skill sets and passions and lives, and in the generations prior, present, and still to come. Advent is a good time to recognize God's good work bubbling up in all kinds of people in all kinds of way in our own time, even as we look towards the fullness of love, hope, peace and joy as Jesus Christ is born.

While some environmental and human rights defenders are actually imprisoned, as Paul was, we all face uphill battles if we're serious in our commitments to resist society's messages of competition, individualism, consumerism, discrimination, and more.

Presbyterians for Earth Care has been an inspiring community for me, one that I found after attending the St Simon's Island conference in 2000. I continue to be grateful for this community of folks willing to claim kinship with non-human creatures, care for the earth's natural systems, and support for one another.

Wherever organizations are working for the well-being of all people on a thriving planet, I am grateful for their witness and thankful if we get to partner for the good of creation. In the Hunger Program, we have learned from Climate Justice Alliance, from Organisation Boricua in Puerto Rico, from Soul Fire Farm in New York, from Owe Aku in South Dakota, from Alaska Community Action on Toxics, and from Ekvn-Yefolecv in Alabama, among many others. I am grateful for their wisdom and leadership in creating a better world.

Prayer: God of all people and places and times, we pray with joy for all those who share in the grace of working for a better world. Continue to surround with care all in whom you've created such good work. May our hearts overflow as we seek to create right relationships with all people and all the earth. Amen.

December 3rd

Luke 3:1-6 w/ a shoutout to Mal. 3:2-3

Phyllis Windle

Once I played Mary in a Christmas pageant, trying to look pious with a blue bedsheet over my head. Maybe you read Advent scripture aloud or, shaking, recited it from memory. For many of us, the Christmas story is as familiar as old pajamas. Sometimes, though, once-comforting words are grating.

With worldwide climate negotiations just completed, I take Luke 3:4-5 literally. I am horrified by Appalachian mountaintops "made low," their "every valley…filled" with mine tailings and other pollutants. I regret rivers channelized and dammed so "the crooked shall be made straight." We didn't intend to increase downstream flooding and cut off migrating fish. But we did -- and the marginalized among us bear much of the burden.

To prepare a new way for Jesus, let's reframe scripture about care for the Earth. Such work is ongoing for those too often at the margins of the Bible. For example, Wilda C. Gafney reframes stories about women and girls in her 2021 book. Similarly, we could learn much by moving the natural world to the center of scripture, seeking Good News there.

This won't take away Jesus. After all, his stories starred mustard seeds, sparrows, and sheep. He seems strong and wise enough to hike up a mountain and value undamaged fields and wildflower-filled coves below. Certainly, he would understand the plight of those depending on at-risk fisheries.

The smooth, the straight, and the easy can also be the short-sighted, the ill-conceived, and the selfish. Far better to meander and explore with Jesus, while loving all of the Earth's living things.

Meditation: May we not always seek the smooth, the straight, or the easy this Advent. May we open our hearts to the consequences of our actions. And may the beauty of the Earth console and restore us.

December 4th

Malachi 3:1

Holly Hallman

From age 4 to high school, I did not sleep on Christmas eve. I wish I could say that it was in anticipation of the birth of the baby Jesus. But, since it is a sin to lie, it was in anticipation of the gifts under the tree. Many years later I would wake before dawn and light the appropriate candles on my advent wreath and contemplate the darkness that wraps around us as we wait. I've loved the settling of winter, the quiet dormancy, and time to reflect.

This winter is so different. How is it that my fellow humans are so divided? Why are we not willing to change our lives so future generations can live here? How is it that ten million people are on the brink of starvation in various parts of the world? How did a category four storm roar into the northwest? This is not the tropics.

The rituals this year are different—more honest. When I read, "Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear a path before me", I am praying that it may be so. Pleading for the promise to be fulfilled. The candles I light this advent are reminders of all the candles lit the past many months for those who died and are dying of covid.

This is a very different time of anticipation. Like the rest of life, a bit off-center. Richer because it is not ritual but heartfelt longing and hoping. Come precious Christ child. Come Prince of Peace. Open us to the ways of your love in a time of change.

Second Sunday of Advent: December 5th

Philippians 1:3-11

Fred Milligan

On this day, the 12th of November, the 40,000 some people who came from throughout the globe to participate in this "last chance to save planet earth," called COP 26, are now beginning to catch their flights and trains back home. (How those who walked here will return, I have not heard). Whether or not we have been successful in making our case to the powers that be from the 196 nations represented here in sufficient degree to actually save the planet, we cannot yet say. In fact, even after the final ink is put to paper in the form of a final decision document, (which should happen within the next two days), the real test will be in the political will to follow through on whatever commitments are made.

I have heard a lot of prophetic pronouncements this week. The science is irrefutable, our climate emergency is humanity's doing. And unless we repent and go in a new direction life as we know it, is doomed. But among the passages of scriptures for the Advent season, the one from Philippians stood out because it speaks to the steadfast perseverance of love at work in the midst of the community to bring the necessary repentance into being.

As I end this very frightening (and exhausting) two weeks in Glasgow, I too am thankful to God for all of you, who steadfastly and persistently allow the love of Christ to sustain your work of prophetic action in the life of the Church and in your communities year in and year out; knowing that the one who calls us is faithful and is with us on this journey.

Of course, for many species our action as stewards of creation is coming too late. They have paid the price of our greed and sloth. But when the eventual "knowledge and full insight" finally comes and the human family makes the changes we must to preserve what is left of creation, we will know that it is because enough of us have kept faith with our redeemer to make the difference. So I thank God and am honored we are in this pilgrimage together.

Praise be to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who was, who is and who is to come.

December 6th

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Jessica Maudlin Phelps

God delights in you. God desires to quiet with you love. God rejoices over you with singing.

I'm one of those people that my mind runs at about 120 miles an hour all the time. I'm constantly trying to figure things out, I have to be ten steps ahead all the time. With all that commotion going on, my head and heart are very noisy most of the time.

Years ago, I had returned to the US from Haiti and had started the job I have now but I still struggled to reconcile where my life was with my desire to work internationally. The earthquake that happened in 2010 changed the life of so many Haitians, but it changed my life too. I was able to use the language skills I'd acquired to assist our local refugee resettlement agency. It was an intense time of my life working what amounted to two full time jobs while navigating all the trauma points that helping folks navigate this new reality brought with it.

One particular day I stood in my kitchen filling plates with rice and beans as my tiny apartment living room overflowed with the refugee families I'd been working with, new friends from the Haitian community in Louisville, laughter, music, and the Creole language. One of these friends sauntered into my kitchen singing a song from the creole hymnal that is used by many Haitian churches, including the one I attended while I lived there. The familiarity of that song in a place where it didn't normally "belong" stopped me where I stood. I realized right there in my home for that moment, I was able to see with great clarity the purpose in my being in Haiti and in my leaving Haiti when I did. I believe that God desires to quiet us, so that we can see ourselves and our situations clearly enough to understand the delight God has when we are able to be exactly who we were created to be.

Too often our worries prevent us from being quieted. The past two years have been a difficult season of waiting, waiting for COVID to end, waiting for justice to prevail, waiting for the Zoom call to start, waiting for a return to the familiar. It can be overwhelming. But take heart, the God who is coming, loves you, delights in you, rejoices in you and longs to quiet you. You will see the other side even if you don't know how you got there.

In the meantime; Rest.

December 7th

Phillipians 4:4-7

David Kepley

The first words sung in Handel's magisterial work *Messiah*, come from Isaiah 40: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." So too, our advent season begins with words of comfort and solace. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he addressed the church about two people who have been in conflict. Then he ends this passage by praying that "the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Comfort… the peace of God….

I find that when I write notes of comfort to those in my congregation in distress, that I am frequently drawn to Paul's phrase: "the peace of God, which passes all understanding." Because so many of the trials we humans face cannot be overcome, what I am praying for is that those in need of comfort allow themselves to rest in God's shalom. That acceptance can be like being wrapped in a warm shawl on a cold winter's night. God's shalom promises a wholeness that transcends human needs and understanding. In a world in which we are determined to control every aspect of our lives, God's shalom can help us accept what is happening, even if we cannot understand it.

Prayer: During this holy season of advent, may the peace of God that passes all human understanding open us to the new life that the Christ child brings to humankind.

December 8th

Isaiah 12:2-6

Nancy Jones

One Christmas when my sister and I were young, my father gave us an incubator. It was a strange little plastic thing that looked like something from a 50's era science fiction movie. It was just big enough to hold three eggs. How we cared and fussed over those eggs, imagining with wonder God's unseen hands knitting together a tiny chick inside each hard shell.

As the days went by we grew more and more excited. My father counselled patience. Just like in Advent, he reminded us, we must wait patiently for a miraculous birth! And then one day it finally happened. I'll never forget the thrill of watching that tiny beak break its way through the shell. It seemed to take forever. Again, my father told us to be patient and let the chick do its work. At last, the halves of the shell fell away and there lay the ugliest little thing we had ever seen! Once again, my father told us to wait and see. He was right. The little bedraggled creature soon became a golden ball of fluff that grew quickly into a noisy feathery chicken. The other eggs didn't hatch but my father helped us see the miracle of even one hatching.

Our chicken was a rooster. Each day he would sing his praises to God at the top of his lungs – clearly shouting aloud and singing for joy, letting the glory of God be known throughout all the earth! My sister and I rejoiced along with him. Our neighbors - not so much! Rufus was sent to a farm but we never forgot the lessons we learned from that Christmas gift: patience, wonder, and to rejoice with each new day.

Thank you, Loving God, for the wonder of your Creation. Help us remember to shout your praise to the world.

Amen

December 9th

Philippians 4:4-7

Nancy Corson Carter

This text tells us of the powerful proclamation of John the Baptist to crowds hungry for baptism and forgiveness of sins. However, lest any take God's forgiveness for granted, he warns: "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." How can this be an Advent message?

Dennis Ormseth writes, "From Babylon to the Roman Empire, from Isaiah's to Luke's audience, historical contexts and textual connections combine to make 'an ax lying at the root' an ominous sign of threatening disaster--material, social and religious." He notes that early readers of Luke would remember Rome's terrible stripping of forests, especially those in the beautiful countryside around Jerusalem, for timber to construct massive wooden defenses.

The depletion of trees in the current climate crisis is in stark contrast with Scripture's portrayal of trees as powerful symbols of life and of blessing. Do we who delight in our sparkling Christmas trees, hear John calling us to repent of our lifestyles' contributions to felling our own great forests? Certainly COP26 calls attention to that!

This reminder of our responsibility to protect Creation need not lessen our joy as we prepare ourselves for Christmas. John's heralding of the Messiah's coming to "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire" announces the way to an ever-renewed Creation, with Christ's birth of love again and always in our hearts.

May this meditation encourage you to see the beauty of your own Christmas tree as a symbol of God's Spirit in our time. Let it summon forth actions whose fruits honor the sacredness of trees…and all Creation. Amen.

December 10th

Luke 3:7-18

Courtney Bowen

A Spirit of Abundance

"What then should we do?" the crowds ask John the Baptist in desperation to escape "the wrath to come." John responds, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." John reminds us of our biblical call to clothe the naked and feed the hungry; but notice we are not to do so by making more goods. His answer is not to increase productivity, but rather to share what we already have.

Likewise, he tells the tax collectors and soldiers not to extort the people, but to "be satisfied with your wages." Don't strive to acquire more, but instead, see what you have as sufficient. John's call is to move us away from a mindset of scarcity, in which we're fearful there won't be enough for us, so we strive to collect more and more. And he moves us towards a mindset of abundance, perceiving what we have as plenty and giving us the freedom and security to share our resources.

What might such sharing look like in our modern context - especially this Christmas season when many of our tables will be crowded with more food than our gathered guests could ever eat and many of our "leftovers" will end up in the trash? How might we be satisfied with only as much as we need? Can we find a way to share what we already have? What good fruit might we offer?

Abundant God, Giver of all good things, place in us a spirit of abundance that we may look beyond our own self interest. Help us to bear good fruit by being lavish and loose-fisted, sharing what we have with others. Amen.

December 11th

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Michelle Ward

"El cielo canta alegria, aleluya, porque en tu vida y la mia brilla la gloria de Dios (Heaven is singing for joy, alleluia, for in your life and mine is shining the glory of God)."

--Hymn 382: "El Cielo Canta Alegria (Heaven is Singing for Joy)," *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*

This hymn was written by Pablo Sosa for a picnic of Argentinian theology students in the 1950s using Latin American folk music. As they gathered to eat and to fellowship, to praise God, in the midst of God's creation, they were full to the brim with a song of joy. The image of seminary students singing this hymn together, the first one of its kind in the 20th century using Latin folk music, is a beautiful one. The story behind this hymn fills the imagination with this excerpt from Zephaniah 3: "[God] will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you with his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." As the students celebrated like the heavens celebrate the arrival of Jesus, we also join in their celestial song during Advent. We have cause to celebrate in the days of waiting for Christ to live and breathe among us. The God of the cosmos entering our planet to be with creation and redeem it--what a world altering moment that awaits us each year on Christmas Eve! May we be filled with joy and praise, like the theological students of Argentina, like the heavenly hosts, and like the prophet Zepheniah, all of those years ago.

Prayer: Jubilant God, give me a taste of your celebratory spirit this Advent. Fill me to the brim with singing and praise so I may bear the good news of your coming with great joy. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent: December 12th

Isaiah 12:2-6

Greg Allen-Pickett

When I read the phrase, "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation," I immediately think of my sisters and brothers in Guatemala, where I worked in water purification for a number of years, and the joy of safe drinking water being available in a community following the installation of a water system. As the water flows, smiling mothers and fathers realize that their children will not suffer from water-borne disease and they shout aloud and sing for joy!

The lack of access to safe drinking water for a quarter of the world's population is a preventable tragedy. As Christians, we are called to give drink to the thirsty and care for "the least of these" among us, so this is an issue that our faith compels us to work on together. Ultimately it is not just an issue of caring for others, it is also an issue of how we care for the earth.

We are called to hopeful anticipation in this season of Advent. But this is not passive waiting, the work of hope that we are engaged in is active! As we reflect on the global water crisis that humanity has caused, and the disproportionate impact it has on those living on the margins, may we use our time, talent, and treasure during this season of Advent to engage in the work of hope needed to address this issue. Find a worthy water organization doing this work of hope and support it! Instead of buying more stuff, make a gift to a water organization in someone's name. That is a way to meaningfully follow the call of the prophet Isaiah to let God's love be known through all the earth!

A few water projects I support are Living Waters for the World and PC(USA) Mission Workers Jim and Jodi McGill.

December 13th

Luke 1:46b-55

Sue Smith

In this season of hope and anticipation, I cannot help but think about the climate crisis we are facing. Those of us advocating for creation raise our hopes that our legislators will pass laws to solve the crisis. Hopes dashed. We raise our hopes that UN Climate meetings will result in a treaty where all nations work together to solve the crisis. While the latest pact, the result of the Glasgow talks, plans on reducing coal power, it does not go far enough to limit temperature rise. Hopes dashed.

Mary envisions a new world, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (v. 52) This is a world of equity created by God. When this vision is fulfilled, we will be bound to each other in ways the powerful do not think of today. Today, in the name of economic security and prosperity, in the name of profits for the powerful, the wellbeing of all peoples is disregarded. May a more equitable world be our hope.

In these days of Advent, the last verse of O Come, O Come Emmanuel is a reminder of what it can look like when we are truly bound: "*O come Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife, and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace*."

Prayer: Creator God, as we anticipate the coming of your son, Jesus Christ, our hope is for a more equitable world. O Come, O Come Emanuel.

December 14th

Luke 3:7-18

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

The crowds asked John the Baptist, "What should we do?" and he spoke to them of economic justice and respect for human dignity. These practices also help us to care for creation. The current "Buy Nothing" movement encourages local groups of neighbors to share items instead of buying them. This builds community, simplifies our lives, creates less waste, and creates less pollution. Generosity, respect and community are just a few of the building blocks for creation care. Here is a hymn I wrote (© 2015), called "If I Have Two Coats." The tune is LYONS ("O Worship the King, All Glorious Above!")

If I have two coats, God calls me to share;
There's someone nearby with no coat to wear.
And if I don't know who that person might be,
It's to a new friendship that God's calling me.

If I have some bread — and soup, all the more —
I'm called to reach out to someone who's poor.
And if I don't know who that person might be,
It's to a new table that God's calling me.

If money is mine, God calls me to live
As someone who loves to generously give;
And if I don't know someone suffering near me,
It's to a new neighbor that God's calling me.

O God of great truth, John's call to obey
Prepared us for Christ, who shows us your Way.
May we have the courage to try something new,
To care for creation and so welcome you.

December 15th

Luke 1:46b-55

Susan Berry

Humble. Anyone who has read the beloved classic, "Charlotte's Web," may remember that "humble" was the final word that Charlotte wrote in her spider's web to celebrate and call attention to her dear friend Wilbur. It was a word that was understood and that carried respect among the farmers and their families who are depicted in the book.

Christians find repeated reminders within Scripture that God lifts up the humble. God looks with favor on the lowliness of his servant, we are told in Chapter 1 of Luke. And later in Chapter 14 we read, "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Humans in the modern world are rarely convinced that humbleness is a virtue. Many of us are not even sure what the word means. Not surprisingly, one of the few things that can make most of us feel humble is the power of the natural world. Mighty rivers, majestic mountains, rugged valleys, and major weather events remind us how small we are, and how powerless we feel next to their size and force. But the natural world also carries messages about how God works through animals and plants that don't seem so mighty, so majestic, or so rugged. Creation shows us, when we take time to look, how God works through the "lowly." Tiny, seemingly insignificant flowers of not-very-showy asters and other "weedy" plants are the flowers that are generally covered with native bees. Old, decaying trees, long past their glory days, provide homes to numerous species of birds and beneficial insects that can't live anywhere else. Unappreciated and unflashy beetles decompose material and return nutrients to the soil. The lowly common violet provides the necessary nourishment for caterpillars that will eventually become fritillary butterflies. In nature, the small, the messy, the old, and the lowly all magnify the Lord.

At some point in our lives we will all find a time when we feel small, messy, old, or lowly. And yet, like the tiny aster's flower, the decaying tree, the beetle, and the violet, God works through us still. God's power shines through our lowliness, and when that happens, we magnify the Lord. Then, we are raised up.

Creator God- In this Advent Season, we thank you for the gift of plants and animals that remind us how you work through the small, the messy, the old, and the less-than-showy. Let us learn from the ever-present example of your creation of what can happen through the "lowly." Remind us that when we allow ourselves to be lowly, to be humble, your light shines through us and we magnify you.

December 16th

Hebrews 10:5-10

Casey Carbone

I have fond memories of waking up on Christmas day as a child and listening to the Bill Crosby song, *Do You Hear What I Hear?* The song opens with, "Do you hear what I hear? Said the night wind to the little lamb..." There is a resonance with the passage from Paul's Letter to the Hebrews, which beckons us to listen wholly and to act wholly with our entire selves in response to the good news of incarnate love that inspires a call to preserve life and make creation whole.

The reading makes it clear that God delights in our faithful obedience. We are also told that this faithful obedience comes from our desire to obey God and the will of God. Yet, we have neglected the call to faithful obedience by ignoring the created world crying out for justice, healing, restoration, and reconciliation in many ways. And to this day, we have not listened to the sacred voice of creation. During our Advent journey, may we not only pray that God prepares a courageous body for us but also opens our ears (Psalm 40:6) to hear the voices in the wind and life itself.

Do you hear what I hear? I hear a world that is groaning and yearning for justice. Too long have we ignored the growing climate crisis, and now the consequences will have repercussions for generations to come. However, there is still time to lean in and listen to mournful cries and work to turn them into shouts of joy. As the passage reminds us, this Advent season, we are to offer ourselves fully to serving the will of God, which includes rectifying the ways we have not lived as caretakers and stewards of this world.

December 17th

Psalm 25:10

John Preston

The Right Path?

There is no one right path to follow the callings of our God suggests the Psalmist.
There are many paths that can be walked with love and faithfulness. It's not a matter of the "right" path. It's a matter of how we walk the path placed in front of us. Will we walk it with strivings of personal ambition that narrows down to glorifying what a good and successful person we are? That may be the American Way, but it isn't the way suggested by the Psalmist.

No, we are rather encouraged by the Psalmist to walk our path with love and faithfulness, not just seeking success in the eyes of the world. That may be a hard sell to many of us raised in an American society which all too often worships the goddess of success.

Still there is much to gain by following the Psalmists advice. For as we journey with "steadfast love and faithfulness" we follow the path we are called to follow. It may not be merely circumstance. Maybe we are being called by a still small voice well beyond the clutter of worldly calls. Maybe we don't even recognize, at first, whose voice this is. No matter.

No matter if we follow the path before us "with steadfast love and faithfulness."

December 18th

Micah 5:2-5a

Mindy Hidenfelter

Since 2000, Wake Forest Presbyterian Church has presented an annual "Christmas card to the community" in the form of a live re-enactment of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem for the Savior's birth. Our "Walk Thru Bethlehem" is coordinated, built, costumed, and acted out each year by the members of our congregation. It takes a group of 150 cast and crew to do it, and we do it well. As of 2019 (pre-pandemic), we were providing this event over a single weekend, in three evenings, to hundreds of people each night. As the tour guide brings each group to the "end" of the story after a 30 minute outdoor walk, the group stands out in the cold and dark under a (usually) starlight sky. A church elder quietly reviews the experience and sends the group home with a solemn "shalom". It is the quiet, calm ending to a deeply spiritual outdoor experience, and each person is reminded that we await the one who was born in the open air in a stable, with night sounds of animals and wind all around.

"For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace". The peace of a humble beginning in an outdoor stable, yet to become the one who is great to the ends of the earth. Let us keep this in mind, as we try to remember to remain humble in our decision-making of how to take care of those elements of creation to the ends of the earth – from the dunes to the mountains, from the rivers to the oceans, from the forests to the deserts.

Lord, keep us as humble as your son's birth in a lowly stable. Remind us to make humble decisions when it comes to managing your creation to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 19th

Luke 1: 39-56

Robin Blakeman

The story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth gets me into a nostalgic mood for family gatherings of my past. Extended family can bring out either the worst or the best in people. In Mary and Elizabeth's case, it seems a "best case scenario" for both women. Both are improbably pregnant with new life; their unborn children even seem to recognize each other, and Mary is inspired to sing a song of praise that echoes through even more generations – at least as far back as her ancestor, Hannah. Although they likely didn't have greenery and holly adorning their homes, or a yule log on the fire, this is the best and greatest hope of our holiday gatherings. We are reminded of the generations that go before us, and of those yet to come. We share old stories, make familiar, favorite recipes and nourish each other for the trying months of winter that may be ahead. I am reminded of the tradition my father and I had of cutting a Christmas tree from our family farm during my teenage years. These trees were never perfectly shaped – like those you buy in a tree lot, but they were very special because of where they came from – a place occupied by my ancestors for seven generations prior to either one of us stepping foot on the land. Seven generations is a very special number in Native American traditions, which I cannot clearly claim as my own. Still, we – like Mary and Elizabeth – may want to recognize the new life to come in our midst for the next seven generations as holy and protect it – both in our homes and families, and within the broader ecosystems and communities we inhabit.

December 20th

psalm 148

abby mohaupt

Praise God all that has been created. Praise God—you animals with fur and scales and wings and skin. Praise God—you plants with roots and leaves and flowers and thorns and fruit. Praise God—you cosmos with stardust and minerals and darkness and light. Praise God—you earth with rocks and soils and mountains and

And praise God—we humans who somehow thing we are disconnected from all else that praises God. We who are made in mysterious diversity. We who are called to love planet and people with our whole selves. We who are broken open by suffering and grief and anger and injustice and unequal power.

We who belong to a chorus of life, beloved by a God who named everything into being. We belong that that chorus and it to us, and yet we have forgotten the words to our shared song.

Instead, some of us (with white, class, national privileges) have orchestrated a cacophony that has squandered power, giving over our hearts to corporations that profit from the destruction of God's planet. We have tried to control creation's praise of God, catching ourselves –and nearly all life—in a death dirge. Others of us have been pushed into the background, forced to sing the words of powerlessness and death, when God claims each part of creation for life abundant.

In this day when we wait for the Coming Christ, may we hum together again, letting our souls remember when those of us with power need to be silent and get out of the way so that all voices made be heard. And then may we act—boldly and faithfully—for all creation.

Oh God of compassion, change our hearts and spur us into action rooted in your love. And may we lift our voices to sing your praise. Amen.

December 21st

I Samuel 2:18-20

Allison Davidson

I love this passage of Scripture because it serves as a reminder that even a little child can "minister to the Lord." It always reminds me of an Advent custom practiced by my Louisiana grandmother, Mildred, taught to me even before I could read or write.

I spent my childhood in Texas, and that state provides a most coveted winter-season gift to fortunate recipients - a crate full of Texas "ruby-red" grapefruit. My grandmother's niece, who lived in "the Valley," in the warm, southern region of the state, always sent a crate of these for our family to share during the last week in Advent, and we always broke into that box right away. After enjoying the delicious fruit, my grandmother removed and composted the pulp, then had us grandkids gather 'round to fill the bright yellow, bowl-shaped half-rinds with nuts and seeds from her pantry storage. Then she drew brightly colored embroidery thread through the rim of the rinds with her darning needle to make hanging cords.

We hung these improvised birdfeeders from the tree branches in Mildred's garden, delighting in the birds' antics as they helped themselves to the treats. Mildred explained that the birthday feast of Le Divin Enfant (The Holy Child) was for all creatures, not just people, hence our annual creation of "the birds' Christmas tree," so the winged ones could celebrate, too.

This week, especially if you are tired, frazzled, stressed, or distracted, take a moment to feed the birds, alongside a child if possible. You needn't craft feeders from grapefruit rinds if time doesn't permit, but just give yourself that moment of rejoicing in the coming Savior alongside the avian kingdom of the natural world. And even if you can't bring a child alongside, no worries; the child-like faith within you will be revived. Prayer: Eternal God, even the tiniest child can serve you by serving Creation. Help us to be as little children in these final days of awaiting the arrival of the Christ Child. AMEN.

December 22nd

Colossians 3:12-17

Diane Waddell

Several years ago, as a student in Wisdom University, I enrolled in a self-study class on gratitude. Of the dozen or so classes I have taken through that institution, that was one which has had particular lasting significance for me. As a result of the class, I try to filter much that has happens each day through a lens of gratitude, which, among other things, encourages a positive reflection of the day.

Holding gratitude in our hearts is a gift which enhances our lives and can ultimately flow over with positivity to others' lives and to the consciousness of other sentient beings.

Those of us who acknowledge the fragility of the balance of life on Earth, understand that some of God's Creation could not survive even a tenth of a degree of increased global warming. With that realization, let us reach toward being prophetic in our thoughts, words and action as we strive to care for Creation.

Our prayer: Divine Parent, We give thanks for your gifts in and of Creation, of tree, rock, mountain, of wolf and star, of All. Particularly at this time, Holy One, guide us, as we share The Mystery and look toward the birth of Christ, our True Guide. Amen.

December 23rd

Psalm 126:3-4

Rick Person

Late on this day in 1914, British and German soldiers commenced their unofficial Christmas Truce, which carried on through Christmas Day, roundly disapproved by officers and generals on both sides. Hundreds of men along the Western Front ventured out of the trenches onto 'no man's land' to share food, exchange gifts, sing The 1st Noel and Stille Nacht, play football matches, and engage in merry-making just as families do.

The truce was a reminder that we are all God's people, who have celebrated the birth of His son Jesus Christ in similar ways throughout the world for millennia. Today Christmas is more than ever an urgent time for renewal of both the environment of relationships, and of restoring the watercourses of the Negev and all the deserts, the flooded rivers and rising seas, the burnt out forests and choking skies, in the face of the onslaught of climate change.

Lord God our Creator and creator of all things, we rejoice in everything you do. But we have not been good stewards of the abundant natural environment you give to all peoples and to all the plants and animals of the earth. Lord help us declare a truce from our selfish consumption of the gardens meant for all. To the glory of your newborn Son we promise we shall care much more deeply for your creation. Amen.

Christmas Eve - December 24th

Psalm 96

Bill Brown

"Joy to the World, the Lord is come!" is one of my favorite hymns. But on Christmas Eve, singing "the Lord is *coming*" would be more fitting. Christmas Eve prepares for God's coming into the world by way of Jesus' birth. Psalm 96 is all about God's coming and all creation caught up in riotous joy! Even the sea is given unbridled opportunity to render praise.

Why such creation-wide praise? Because God "is coming." The NRSV translates: "for [the Lord] is coming to judge the earth" (96:13). But, I ask, is God coming in judgment? No. God is not putting the earth on trial. If that were the case, the seas would be silenced rather than allowed to "roar" with praise (cf. Ps 65:7). Punitive judgment is not the issue. God is coming for another reason: to establish justice. The CEB translates "to establish justice on earth." But that doesn't quite capture the psalm's resounding conclusion either. Creation is not a mere staging ground for God's justice. Creation is, in fact, the very recipient of divine justice. "The Lord is coming to establish justice *for* the earth" is what the psalmist proclaims.

Ethicists distinguish at least three kinds of justice: procedural justice, distributive justice, and reparative justice. Procedural justice involves legal decisions, verdicts, and often punishment. But that is not the kind of justice celebrated in Psalm 96. God's coming is about restoring and repairing the world such that all creation can rejoice in praise. Justice for all creation! "Joy to the World, the Lord is coming in justice!"

Prayer

Come, Emmanuel. We wait for you with joyous anticipation, knowing that you come to repair the world. May your justice reign and *shalom* prevail, as you are birthed into a world that awaits the birth of its renewal. In the name of Christ, the Word made flesh for all flesh, amen.

Christmas Day – December 25th

Luke 2:1-20

Bruce Gillette

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16a) is one of most famous verses in the Bible. The word "world" in this verse is "cosmos" in the original Greek which means that God loves all of creation-- humanity, animals, plants, land, water and air. As we celebrate the gift of Jesus this Christmas, it is good to reflect on how this gift is for all creation.

Kenneth E. Bailey in his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Studies* (InterVarsity Press, 2008) points out "For the Western mind the word *manger* invokes the words *stable* or *barn*. But in the traditional Middle Eastern villages this is not the case…simple village homes in Palestine often had but two rooms. One was exclusively for guests. The main room was a "family room" where the entire family cooked, ate, slept and lived… Each night into that designated area [often a lower level within the same room], the family cow, donkey and a few sheep would be driven" inside for their protection and to add warmth to the home (pp. 28-29). It was near the animals that Jesus was born and his first resting place as a newborn baby was in the animals' manager, "a bed of hay" (CEV) or "feeding-trough" (N.T. Wright's translation).

Understanding the Bible from a new perspective can be helpful in our discipleship. Just as seeing the Christmas story in a Middle Eastern context can be helpful, so too it is good to understand the Bible from a creation care perspective. Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that dwelling was not only with people but also God's creatures. Jesus came not only for humanity but all of creation that was groaning for his redemption (Romans 8:22). The gift of Christmas is for God's whole world. In gratitude, let us renew our commitment to care for this wonderful world as our gift to Jesus on his birthday and every day.

Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC) invites individuals and congregations to participate in the growing earth care movement within the PC(USA) and beyond.

PEC is a national eco-justice network that cares for God's creation by connecting, equipping, and inspiring Presbyterians to make creation care a central concern of the church.

Presbyterians for Earth Care (then Presbyterians for Restoring Creation) was founded in 1995 as a national, grassroots organization to support people of faith working towards "environmental wholeness with social justice." PEC helps the church to fulfill its current environmental policies, to create new policies and practices, and to energize and educate church members about eco-justice, the well-being of all humankind on a thriving earth.

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