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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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ADVENT 2022 DAILY DEVOTIONAL

Let Heaven and Nature Sing!



PRESBYTERIANS FOR EARTH CARE

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First Sunday of Advent: November 27th

Romans 13:11-14

Paul Galbreath

Wake Up!

Advent begins with the sound of an alarm going off. The Apostle Paul insists that as followers of Jesus Christ we must awaken and respond given the urgency of our time. There were moments in the church's history when readers preferred to brush aside these strange texts about last things and the end of the world. Yet here we are in the midst of dramatic climate change, facing the extinction of countless numbers of species, looking at the ocean levels rising cataclysmically, and experiencing our local weather swing drastically in new directions. Perhaps these eschatological texts that form the basis of the lectionary readings during the season of Advent still have something to teach us. Today's reading from Romans urges us to change our ways by laying aside old habits and adopting new ones.

What does honorable living look like for you and me? During the past year I have started picking up the litter on the road beneath my house: fast food containers, car parts, beer cans, you name it and I have picked it up. It's not fun and it doesn't seem to deter the hordes of drivers from continuing to toss unwanted items out their car windows. Yet, I continue to persist as a way to express thanks to the earth that provides us with a home and the resources that sustain us.

Prayer: Spirit God, move among us during this season of Advent. May we put on the armor of light and work for the healing of your creation. Amen.

Practice: Adopt a street or park in your neighborhood and keep it clean this Advent season.

Christmas Day - December 25th

Matthew 2:11

Brenda Barnes

Christmas Day – a beautiful day of celebration with others around us, good food, and, of course, the gifts. When I was a child, we received one large (main) gift, a handmade gift (usually a crocheted sweater or poncho) and our stockings, which were filled with little gifts, fruit, and candy. We thought we were rich. Now the pyramids of gifts that my extended family provides for one another demonstrates what I view and experience as excess. I read somewhere that instead of giving numerous gifts to one another, we should be more thoughtful, using the example of the Magi. A gold wrapped gift would be something the recipient truly wants. The frankincense gift should remind the recipient to meet with Jesus (a devotion book or music CD or journal book); this gift could be wrapped in white. The myrrh gift can be anything that prepares the body (lotions, soaps, shampoo, shaving cream) and reminds us that Christ's coming in the flesh has significance beyond the manger. This gift is wrapped in dark paper to remind us that Christ was born to die and rise again not just for humanity, but for all of Creation, as it groans in anticipation of salvation.

I have rebelled against the excess. Instead, I give the three gifts, wrapped as noted and then I use the rest of my holiday budget to give gifts to Creation on Christmas Day. I feed the birds. I feed the deer and buy them a new saltlick. I feed the crayfish in the stream behind the house. These are my gifts to the Lord of all Creation.

PRAYER: Jesus Christ, Lord of All, you came that we might have life and have it in abundance, but we take the abundance for granted. Give us an understanding of the need to take care of Creation in dismal winter weather and allow us to see You in all that You have created. AMEN

Action Item: Smear pinecones with peanut butter or suet and roll them in bird seed. Hang these "bird feeders" on Christmas Day for a special treat. (The peanut butter/suet gives extra nutrition to the birds during the winter weather.)

November 28th

Genesis 8:1-19

Robert A. Bryant

This text's opening declaration that *God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals* is the turning point of the entire flood story. It is among the most hopeful words of scripture. After God's heartbroken lament over a rebellious humanity that abandoned God's call to serve and preserve creation (Gen 2:15; 6:5-6), and after God's terrible judgment upon sin with a flood (7:6-24), God remembers. God's mercy triumphs over sin and judgment.

To say that God "remembered" does not mean that God had forgotten. In the Bible, God's remembering is an expression of God's identity and conduct as the Lord of creation who establishes life and keeps covenants. God desires that life flourish upon the earth (Gen 1:28; 8:17). Now that the world is cleansed of sin and recreated, a new beginning is at hand with Noah as a new Adam able to care for all living things and their habitats and with an earth ready for life of every kind to flourish.

This text reminds us that the earth is not our domain; it is the Lord's (cf. Ps 24:1). It also reminds us that God's judgment occurs in the realm of God's mercy. In mercy, God does not abandon humans to themselves. In mercy, God provides fellowship with God and our fellow creatures, "with birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (v. 17), with all the "families" of every living thing (v. 19).

Prayer: Dear Lord, in this Advent season of hope, enable us to hear your word to care for your world and all that is in it, so that we—like Noah and his family—may reach out our hands to all the families of your earth, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Action: Bless a human and non-human neighbor today with a tangible act of care.

November 29th

Isaiah 59:12-13

Collette Nies Von Hanna

Growing up in northeast Louisiana, the bayous are often lined with Bald Cypress trees with long strings of epiphytes hanging down (better known as Spanish moss). Playing on the banks of Lake Darbonne or the Ouachita River, I would jump from knee to knee, using them like pedestals, looking for tadpoles and more importantly staying clear of water moccasins. Decades later, in New Braunfels, Texas, less than a mile away is Cypress Bend Park. A park that has massive 400 year-old, Montezuma Cypress trees lining the Guadalupe River that dwarf anything, or anyone near, as they are 20 feet around. Throughout Scripture, trees are used in parables, to enclose the inside of the temple, for carving of weapons, to symbolize holy entrances, and in the crucifixion and resurrection, and so much more. Trees are mentioned in the Bible more than any other living thing, other than humans. And in Isaiah 55:13, the iconic Cypress replaces the thorns from the fall as God's everlasting sign of salvation replacing judgment. Nature once again takes part in redemption as it also took part in the Noahic covenant. Repeatedly creation sings and claps their hands and here ushers humanity out of Babylon into divine communion. God called God's people to turn their backs on Babylon and to so with joy and be led forth with peace. For the oldest living things on earth join in on this celebration of transformation. We know that trees communicate with all different types of species of plants, insects, and animals through mycorrhizal networks and have the ability to see through photoreceptors, so why is it sometimes difficult for humanity to imagine creation praising God? Often humanity's worldview of the Holy Spirit and God are limited to self-centered relationships, however over and over scripture reminds us of creation taking part in the covenants of promise and redemption. And even today, communing with the majestic Cypress trees growing near the river, I am reminded that they are God's sign that we will never be abandoned or cut off and that we may praise the Almighty together.

Action: Spend some time listening to the sounds of a tree. Really listen. Discern different forms of wisdom in creation that God has for you.

Prayer: Creator God, as we look inward and out into the world to seek and know You, may we know the thing for which we were sent and do so in joy and peace, through your Son Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Christmas Eve – December 24th

Luke 2:8-15

Susan Gilbert Zencka

The angel stood before them. The word 'angel' comes from both Latin and Greek words that meant 'messenger.' Angels bring messages from God. How do we receive messages from God? Where does revelation happen? We believe that the Bible is the revealed Word of God, that God inspired the writers and assemblers of the Bible—even if there are contradictions among its texts, and even when we find the Bible challenging.

As Presbyterians, we believe that we can sometimes receive revelation in community—ours is a conversational polity.

Many places in the Bible tell us that creation reveals God to us, too. We get messages from God through the world that God has made. Heaven and nature sing—every day—not just when Jesus is born. Sometimes nature is singing songs of joy—as bees suckle from wildflowers, as creeks gurgle in the woods, as the snow crunches under our feet. Other times, nature is lamenting—as storm surges crash onto shore, as winds break or uproot trees, as species face extinction—leaving creation forever.

We can all experience God's loving energy mediated through the particular community of creation where we live. Just as the shepherds experienced God's messengers coming to them as they watched their flocks by night, and the magi experience God's guidance as they watched the stars, we may experience God's nurture in nature—and we can participate in that nurture.

Let us pray: God, help us to hear your voice throughout creation, and give us hearts willing to welcome the smallest creatures around us—just as the shepherds welcome the helpless infant Jesus so long ago.

Action item: By planting native plants in your yard, or encouraging native plants at your church, in neighborhood schoolyards, and local parks, you can provide food and habitat for a variety of insects, birds, and small mammals whose needs are met by native plants.

December 23rd

Luke 2:13-14

Phyllis Windle

How astounding for a birth to be announced by an angel and heavenly array, breaking into song. Later, the Generous One speaks of Jesus directly and lavishly, including at his baptism. In seven verses, the words are nearly the same – words fit to announce a new child, too. To paraphrase:

“You are my chosen child, my beloved, in whom my soul delights and is well-pleased.”

Wouldn't it be magnificent if every child, everywhere, was welcomed by angels singing – in an unpolluted sky? Wouldn't we be stunned if the Generous One interrupted church baptisms to bless us with love and delight – and clean, safe, drinking water, where none existed before?

In high school Latin, Virginia Grande taught me that Luke 2:14 reads, “Peace on Earth to men of good will, not “Peace on Earth, good will to men.” She was right. Bibles were corrected. For example, Gafney's 2021 lectionary offers: “on earth peace among peoples whom God favors.”

Without inner peace, there is neither peace on Earth, nor for the Earth. Too often we try to soothe unrest inside with greed and arrogance; selfishness and short-sightedness; apathy and addiction. Destructive corporations show the same traits, with outsized impacts.

If only we were wise enough to remember being beloved, delightful, and having a place in the Generous One's soul. Surely, we would damage ourselves, and the Earth, less. Surely, we would find ourselves more often among the favored people, for whom heaven and nature sing.

Prayer: Grant that we know, always, that we are beloved, delightful, and pleasing to the Generous One. May we carry that message to the Earth, along with our love, generosity, and wisdom.

Action item: Embrace the message, “You are my chosen child....,” for yourself, then tell several people they are beloved and delightful to you.

November 30th

Romans 15:4-13

Natalie Moon-Wainwright

This passage talks about the steadfast endurance of God. The end of the passage refers to the *root of Jesse*. I love The Message translation of these verses taken from Isaiah:

There's the root of our ancestor Jesse,
breaking through the earth and growing tree tall,
Tall enough for everyone everywhere to see and take hope!
Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that
your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over
with hope!

When I was young, choosing our family Christmas tree was often a family outing to a tree farm. When we moved to the Sierra Foothills of California, I remember choosing a tree from our 130 acres of woods.

One year, my parents were combing the property looking for a tree. They went in separate directions and came back with the same thought: a manzanita tree would make a perfect Christmas tree with its smooth red bark and spacious green branches. Indeed, it was beautiful with all the lights and generous places to hang ornaments.

It's appropriate that we bring trees into our homes at Christmas time. Trees, especially evergreens, have been a meaningful part of our lives throughout history. They've symbolized everything from eternal life to protection from evil. Throughout the Bible the symbol of a tree is used as a symbol for the longed for Messiah, among other things. These days we have a wood spiral in our house that we use over and over for our holiday tree.

God is described as steadfast, like a strong tree would be, providing green hope, joy, peace. May the steadfast endurance of God be present in your home in this advent and Christmas season.

O God, remind us to honor the trees that provide shelter for so many creatures, including us. Remind us how dependent we are on trees for clean air, shade, and food. Amen.

Action: What have your traditions been around Christmas trees? How have they changed through the years? How can you honor the sacredness of trees in this season?



December 1st

Psalm 72:1-7

Courtney Bowen

Justice Rolling Down Like Waters

“Give the king your justice, O God,” the Psalmist implores, “may he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice (v1).”

Once again, we see God’s special concern for the poor of the earth. The poor are indeed not “the poor” but *your* (God’s!) poor. And the poor are to receive justice; the needy are to be given deliverance; and the oppressor is to be crushed (v4). To be a good leader - to be guided by God - the king is not instructed to show signs of strength or consolidate power, but rather to “be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth” (v6). The king is to be nourishing and life-giving, like water to crops, particularly to the most vulnerable.

Today, the most vulnerable in our world are unfairly also those hit hardest by climate change. Changing weather patterns may be a global phenomenon, wreaking havoc across the earth; but it is the people already burdened by poverty and oppression who are most the impacted and have the least ability to cope. God’s poor are not receiving justice.

How can we respond? How can we be “like showers that water the earth?” We make intentional changes to lower our own carbon footprint, encourage our churches to become Earth Care Congregations, pressure our politicians and groups like COP27, etc. And we pray with the Psalmist that may “peace abound, until the moon is no more.”

Loving God, help us to share your special concern for the poor and most vulnerable among us. Grant that we and our actions to be like nourishing water. Guide us in the ways of peace and justice, so that all people may flourish. Amen.

December 22nd

Titus 3:4-7

Scharmél Roussel

STOP SHOPPING AND START SHARING

Holiday sales started the 2nd week of October. Retailers wanted to give consumers plenty of time to buy more. The news was full of anxiety over inflation, but I observed no slowdown in frenzied shopping.

Our culture is obsessed with consumerism. As Patricia Tull reminds us in “Inhabiting Eden,” between the 1950s and the 1990s, Americans more than doubled the number of cars we owned and used 21 times more plastic. The trend continues.

Jesus owned no home and few possessions. His messages are clear on materialism: a life focused on possessions is a poor life. He walked gently on the earth, offering God’s love.

I am committed to offering gifts consistent with my values. One year I gave local organic soap wrapped in paper. I began to explain that I was offering soap without plastic because... but after I got out the words “I am offering soap...,” everyone’s laughter drowned my words that connect the dots to protecting fragile ecosystems that sustain life. This year I will be more intentional explaining why everyone is getting local honey from bees I have personally met.

As heirs with hope for eternal life (Titus 3:7), let’s share gifts that say “I love you as God loved us” and also “the best things in life are not things.” Because we all have more than enough, let’s open our homes, our hearts, and our tables, ready to accept God’s gift of renewal and ready to protect God’s creation. Let’s stop shopping and start sharing the Good News of God’s kindness, love, and mercy (Titus 3:4-5).

Prayer: Creator God, I pray for those whose forests, mountains, beaches and habitats have been destroyed by our material desires. Help me make choices based on creation care values.

December 21st

Titus 3:4-7

Sara Gannon

In recent years "In the Bleak Midwinter" has become one of my favorite Christmas hymns. I don't remember singing it while growing up –maybe because despite its beautiful melody by Gustav Holst, it seemed a bit stark next to the great celebratory carols such as "Joy to the World" and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Poet, Christina Rossetti's first stanza sets a sorrowful tone:

*In the Bleak Midwinter, frosty wind made moan;
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

Though this wintry setting is probably inspired more by Rossetti's England than ancient Palestine, the bleakness and frozen scene resonates metaphorically with the hopelessness and heaviness of the immovable and oppressive occupation of one's homeland, the setting into which Christ was born. In the middle verses Rossetti marvels that despite the vastness and grandeur of the Creator, God appears most clearly in a mother's kiss of a child born in poverty.

Sometimes the climate crisis seems so immense and unchangeable like the heaviness and coldness of a deep, dark winter. And yet it is exactly in the dark, dead places in which the Spirit of God surprises us with life and light and love. In the last verse, the author ponders her part in the story.

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wiseman, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*

***Kind Creator,
I give you my heart. Lead me to what is mine to do. Amen.***

Action Item:

Take a walk in the cold on this Winter Solstice consenting to God's work within and through you.

Rosetti, Christina (text) and Holst, Gustav (music). "In the Bleak Midwinter." Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal. (2013). Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. p. 144.

December 2nd

Isaiah 11:1-10

Angela Michler

Nature's Pulpit

The passage of Isaiah I've based this meditation upon talks about how trees and the Holy Spirit go hand in hand. Trees are a very important part of Christian Faith. I am becoming a grandmother in April 2023; I am very excited. Now I wonder if we as a people of God will promote caring for God's creation. Trees give us oxygen to breath and take away carbon dioxide out of the air. We are losing trees by deforestation at a rapid amount and failing to replace them when gone. A quote by Betsy Painter's book, *A Christians Guide to Planet Earth*:

"Humans have wiped out more than 30 percent of all the planet's forests since postindustrial times, and we've degraded and fragmented swaths of what's left."

Trees are an important part to cultivating Faith and The Holy Spirit: The Bible references a variety of life-giving trees: almond, apple, chestnut, cedar, myrtle, oil, sycamore, mustard, and fig. God made them for provide for creation forever, not to be destroyed for short-sighted goals.

Trees in the Bible offer important lessons. In Genesis with Adam and Eve, apple picking started one of the most recognized biblical lessons. In Matthew 13:23 Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a tree. Spreading out its considerable branches to care for his creation. Jesus's ministry began with trees and ended with trees. Take a seat and enjoy the service from nature's pulpit, let the Holy Spirit flow through you.

Precious Jesus, Help us to remember your ministry began and ended with a tree. Help us remember to treasure trees for future generations. Help us to always remember nature's pulpit.

December 3rd

Romans 15:4-13 (part 2)

Natalie Moon-Wainwright

I'm writing a second piece on Romans 15:4-13 because singing praises to God is a key component of the passage; and singing and music is such an important part of the celebration of Christmas. As a matter of fact, for me, it's an important part of every day.

My introduction to music took place early in life. I grew up singing in harmony around the piano, especially when with extended family. Grandad sang bass, Mom was usually at the piano singing alto, I sang soprano, and other family members filled in with other parts where needed, Dad and I trading off in taking the melody. Of course, at Christmas time, we sang Christmas Carols and holiday music.

As an adult I began to learn other parts, singing second soprano, alto, and even tenor. I discovered that not only did I enjoy taking the lead on the melody line, but it could be fun to harmonize in support of the melody.

Today, unless I'm rehearsing for a concert, I don't want to hear or sing holiday music unless it's after Advent starts and before the twelfth day of Christmas. There is a time and a season for everything.

We are in a season of crisis in our world. The author of Romans encourages us to live in harmony with one another so we can glorify God with one voice. In harmony with one voice. Like a choir singing different parts making beautiful music together. If we work together in different ways and from different parts, we can create the change we want to see in the world.

May heaven and nature sing in and around you in this season.

Holy One, help us to glorify you in all we do by raising our voices in harmony with others. Amen.

Action: Reach out to someone you know who has a different perspective on the climate crisis than you. Use words like *I wonder* or *I'm interested* to invite them to share. Engage in deep listening.



December 20th

Isaiah 62:6-10

Paul Heins

"You who call on the LORD,
don't rest,
and don't allow God to rest" Is. 62:7

What a remarkable statement by the prophet Isaiah..."Don't allow God to rest."

Can you sense a little frustration, disappointment, or impatience on the part of the prophet who was waiting for God to make things right?

The people of Israel had suffered a brutal exile and returned home to find that home was not shaping up the way they expected, and God was distant. "Don't allow God to rest." C'mon Lord! Hurry up!

Advent is about eager expectation—not just for the joyful arrival of a baby in a manger, but for the restoration of life, of balance, of harmony to a creation that is struggling. If you feel God is distant from our struggle or wondering why God would allow things to go so slowly, or backward two steps before going forward one, then you are not alone. It's ok. Like the prophet, give voice to your struggle. Join your siblings on the ramparts...and don't allow God to rest until things are set right. It's Advent, a time of holy impatience.

On a recent trip to Hawaii, I had occasion to visit Volcanoes National Park. Did you know an eruption is in progress? This one is not spewing lava into the air and exploding, it's slow, but unstoppable.

The prophet will go on to say, "prepare the way for the people. Build, build the road; clear away the stones!" Get ready. Partner in the work and look for a fresh coming.

Lord, hear our cry. Receive our impatience and frustration. Come.



December 19th

Psalm 97:1-7

Jody Mask

As a lifelong Florida resident, I have come to appreciate the critical role of fire in the health of our natural lands. The low crackle of flames cleaning the forest of understory overgrowth is how nature sings in this part of the world. When I read this part of Psalm 97, I take heart that God dwells in thick darkness as flames go before him. God knows that cleansing fire is not to be feared, but to be embraced and employed to give scrub and longleaf pine ecosystems a chance to regenerate. Lightning plays a role in this cycle of growth and cleansing. Even our coastlands, when they remain free from development, are glad when periodic flames visit. The thick darkness of ash on the ground also proclaims God's glory!

When I lead nature hikes, I always talk about how cleansing fire leads to healthy habitats for all of creation. In the past--and sometimes in the present--controlled burns concern people who are unaware of the benefits of regulated fire. But the alternative path of fire suppression leads to eventual wildfires that scream instead of sing. They are signs of an unhealthy ecosystem.

The Christ child came to reset and restore order to our spiritual ecosystem. Without the Messiah, the wildfire of human passion proves to be our undoing. In thick darkness pierced by the flaming light of a single star, God once again lit the way to righteousness and glory. May our mountainous egos melt in recognition of our own need for cleansing.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your regenerating flames. Help us not to fear the clouds and darkness, but trust that you are present within them, as well as in us. Amen.

Action: Research your state's prescribed fire policies and help spread awareness of their benefits, or start with this U.S. Forest Service webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/prescribed-fire>.

Second Sunday of Advent: December 4th

Romans 15:4-13

Marie Mainard O'Connell

It is an anxious time in the world, especially if you pay attention to the earth. The increase in hurricanes, droughts, and wildfire heightens our hearing of John the Baptist's panic-inducing proclamation "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance... every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." And that fire no longer seems like a metaphor!

In my backyard garden, the only crop that grew well this summer was okra. Other amateur gardeners experienced the lettuce/tomatoes/peppers that grew small this year, if they grew much at all. But not the okra.

In the heat the okra stretched skyward, yellow trumpets transforming daily into a plethora of tender pods--more than we could harvest! The garden is bare now, but I still remember the tallest okra I've ever seen flourishing in a drought.

If I'm honest, both this reading and my summer garden made me anxious, like the world is barreling towards catastrophe I cannot avert. But as much as John and changes in the earth demand I take notice, there is good news. John calls us to repent *because* "the kingdom of heaven has come near" and we are called to *join it*.

The kingdom of heaven blossoms despite climate change. The good news stands tall: God is with us and will not abandon us to our sin and suffering, even that which we inflicted irreparably on the earth. God is not content to let brokenness have the final word. Christ's love grows despite adversity, refusing to fail even when the rest of the world withers. The world is changing, but the good news does not.

Prayer: Merciful God, help us hear the voice in the wilderness, calling us to turn back to you. Help us to see how we are not powerless in you, how we can be your hands of hope in a world desperate for your love; help us to see where new growth is happening even amid disturbing change. Amen.

Contemplation: What has been a difficult part of your life lately, and where do you see God at work in it?

December 5th

Isaiah 35:5-7

Trina Portillo

Isaiah's vision of the desert becoming a lush, green pasture, flowing with streams of water, and pools of water to quench the thirsty animals, paints a vivid picture. The people in exile longed for a return to the land that they had lost; longed for the restoration of their home and their freedom. This is a portion of a longer oracle that speaks of the coming day of the Lord, who will act with justice and restore the fortunes of Israel. In the language of restoration, the prophet also speaks of persons with disabilities being "restored" to wholeness by God.

We must be careful not to equate disability with sin, or with a condition of being less-than whole. Disability studies have advanced a great deal from the context of the Ancient Near East, where physical disabilities often impeded a person from being able to live a full and enjoyable life. In this context, the prophet's words speak of the hope of a restored future, in which every person will be able to participate fully. But in our present context, we know that people with physical or cognitive differences are capable of living full lives with their disability – it is part of their identity, and there are many accommodations that can be made for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in schools, workplaces, churches, and every sphere of life.

Lamar Hardwick, a pastor with autism and a disability inclusion advocate says: "One of the most important roles of the church in creating spaces for disability inclusion is to recognize the image of God that can be found in every part of God's creation, including those with disabilities.

How can the church bring hope and at the same time highlight the image of God in the lives of the disabled? How can the church intentionally look beyond their disability and look for the glory of God shining through their lives?" (Hardwick, Lamar. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for diversity and Inclusion*, InterVarsity Press, 2021, p 62.)

Let us look for the beauty of the image of God in each person that we meet, and let us work to find ways to become a more inclusive, diverse, and beautiful community as we seek to realize the vision of God's beloved kin-dom and a world that is life-giving and liberating for humanity and creation alike.

Prayer: Creative, Redeeming, and Liberating God, you have formed each of us in your image, in all of our delightful differences and with our varied gifts and challenges. Help us to see the beauty in your diverse creation, and to look for ways we can honor and welcome the gifts of all of your children, in our houses of worship and everywhere we go. Amen.

Action Item: Identify a barrier to full inclusion for disabled persons in your worship space, and work with church leadership on ways to change it.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 18th

Matthew 1:18-25

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

The challenges of this world— like climate change— may seem overwhelming, and we may worry that there are no good solutions to them. Praying is always a helpful first step. Take a moment to reflect on this hymn-prayer based on the Christmas story in Matthew:

Joseph Was Troubled

Tune: ADELAIDE ("Have Thine Own Way, Lord")

Joseph was troubled by what he knew!
Mary was pregnant; what should he do?
He wanted justice— not to cause shame.
He would dismiss her, placing no blame.

Joseph was sleeping; that night he dreamed.
Nothing was really as it had seemed.
"Don't be afraid— make Mary your wife.
God has a plan for your baby's life."

Hearing that message, Joseph obeyed,
Seeing a new path God's love had made.
He stood by Mary, waiting that birth,
Seeing God's Son there— Savior of earth!

God, when our troubles seem far too great,
Help us to listen, wonder and wait;
Sometimes the world is not as it seems.
Give us your vision; give us your dreams.

Biblical Reference: Matthew 1:18-25 Tune: Adelaide A. Pollard, 1906.

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Copied from *God's World is Changing: New Hymns for Advent and Christmas* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

Climate change can be a trouble that seems "far too great." Ground your "action" in a life of prayer and an openness to God. You may be surprised! God gives courage, new vision, dreams that can turn into reality, and new ways of living that are life-giving for everyone.

Action: Ponder ways to counter climate change as a Christmas gift to Jesus. For ideas, check out the PEC website:

<https://presbyearthcare.org/educational-resources/>

December 17th

Psalm 80:17-19

Betty Whiting

"You may be able to drive through to your cabin but we can't guarantee you'll be able to come back out," the forest ranger told us as rain fell. We turned around. The next day bridges and miles of road had been washed out. Those at East Rosebud Lake and their cars were lifted out by helicopter.

The river coming from Granite Peak had broken its banks creating truck-sized boulders to crash into one cabin and to create a 6 foot crevice between neighbors' cabins.

"Maybe Mother Nature doesn't want us there," a grandchild contemplated. Our earthly paradise is closed for a couple years.

Climate change changes the earth. . . and us. Weather chaos reminds us God is in charge, with majestic mountains and wild rivers determining their own formations. We cannot control swirling hurricanes, horrendous flooding, and ferocious wildfires. The awesome patterns of nature humble us.

The psalmist in Psalm 80:17-19 asks us to call on God and not to turn away. Jesus is at God's right hand to revive us. Jesus' birth is a time of renewal when once again we know the Creator's love. Land can heal and so can we. God Almighty's face will once again shine on us.

Prayer from GTG Hymn 355: Hear Our Cry, O Lord. Enthroned above all worlds, you shine with holy light. Lord, pour your power upon us all and save us with your might. O come; Lord, come; restore and save us now.

Action: Allow time to lament and listen to each other's pain. Then turn to feel God's face shining on you, restoring you and the land, and hear nature singing once more.



December 6th

Isaiah 35:1-10

Maureen Wise

God's Transformative Power

This Christmas season, let's consider transformation. God can transform hearts, man-made materials, and creation itself. Of course he can, God is all-powerful and as the creator, can change his creation how he sees fit. This isn't anything new. Jesus turned water to wine and healed the sick. But on a more personal level, God can help us transform our own minds and our own land and the minds and lands of those around us. He can transform negative mindsets on caring for creation. If he wanted, God could halt climate change. But I think he wants us to do the work for him.

These verses in Isaiah speak of God coming to save us, to bring recompense for his people. Once he has done so, both people and their land will be transformed. The mute will sing praises and the desert will host new streams. God's love and power have this sort of transformative effect. Let heaven and nature sing the praises of our God Most High!

Climate change is bleak. It's scary to think about the effects that people have had on the planet and the major work we must do (and work that must do *together!*) to both mitigate the effects and reduce the causes. When Jesus came to Earth as a baby that first Christmas, he came to transform the world and he most certainly did. God's power is infinite and we should trust that God can help us deal with climate change.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your power and for your ability to change people and creation itself. Direct us to do your work for the Earth and its people that you created.

Action Item

In this season of transformation, consider who you can pray for to help change their creation care and climate change negative mindsets. Listen to God and how you can be used to plant seeds of creation care in those around you.

December 7th

Psalm 146:5-10, Luke 1:46b-55

Barbara Hassall

Mothers play an important role in the Christmas story; a story of birth and renewal for our world.

Bookending the scripture for today, there are 2 mothers-to-be, closely related, that hold center stage. Elizabeth, barren into her "old" age now pregnant and Mary, her young cousin, chosen by God to bear the savior of the world: both living out miracles from God. Both will give birth to sons who will find their lives intertwined as adults in changing the direction of our salvation.

Joy surrounds the women as Elizabeth and her unborn child acknowledge the presence of God in Mary's womb, a joy that can't be contained in mere words; song is the only outlet! In Mary's "song" she, too, praises God's action in her life. She sings and dances out of pure joy for the blessings God has brought upon her. She praises all that God has done to fulfill promises to Israel's people across the years. She, in some way, understands that she will play a role in bringing blessings to the world through God's actions in her life.

These same expressions of joy and blessing should be ours as we interact with the world, the "Mother Nature" we have been given by God. We are blessed by the daily renewal of Creation as God continues to keep the promises made from the beginning. Our response in this season of Advent, this season of preparation, should be one of joy, nurture, and care for the gift we have been given by God, a world full of beauty and majesty. God's gifts should not be taken for granted, but like a mother caring for her child, given a place of honor. Creation should be number one on our Christmas list.

Prayer:

Creator God, Maker and Sustainer of all things, grant your children the joy of renewal and birth that you gave to Elizabeth and Mary at the time of Jesus' nativity. Grant us renewal of our love and joy and care for the Creation You have gifted to us that we may honor You always. Amen

December 16th

Psalm 80:8-11

Mark Eakin

Psalm 80 sings of God spreading the faithful across Israel: "You brought a vine out of Egypt ... The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River."

The psalmist had no idea how big the world was beyond the Middle East. He also had no idea of the new perspectives on faith Jesus would bring. These were as foreign as the parts of the world the psalmist had never seen. Two millennia later, Jesus' message of love and forgiveness would reach across the whole Earth, across all the oceans and lands.

Similarly, we now realize our technology and "progress" impacts all of God's creation, from the highest part of the atmosphere to the deepest part of the sea – for bad and for good. We have trampled the Earth and soiled the rivers and seas as Psalm 80's metaphorical wild boar ravaged the vine God had planted.

But our ancestors' faith and God's never-ending love restored the nation of Israel after its desecration. Can we find the faith to repair our desecration of the world God gave us to protect?

Meditation: Wonderful creator God, help us all alleviate the harm we have caused our environment. Just as God restored the nation of Israel so long ago, may the Earth be restored.

December 15th

Matthew 1:18-25

Rick Person

Several years ago my wife Barb and I took a wonderful tour of Jordan and Egypt with friends. There were a number of religious sites on the itinerary. In Jordan we visited Bethany beyond the Jordan, site in Matthew 3: 13-17 of John's baptism of Jesus, marking the beginning of His ministry. We explored Mt. Nebo, where in Deuteronomy 34: 1-4 God grants Moses his wish to see the 'promised land' before his death nearby. Views over the Jordan River Valley today -- 'the land of milk and honey' -- are of total desert and scrub vegetation. Farther up the Valley the land is very productive but accompanied most years when the polluted Jordan is a trickle reaching the Dead Sea, barely a drop leaving it. On our way to Petra, we visited St. George's Greek Orthodox Church in Madaba to see the striking mosaic floor depicting the oldest map of Palestine and the Holy Land in existence. In Cairo, an early stop was a Coptic Christian Church built on one of many purported Holy Family places-of-rest. Matthew 2: 1-13 tells the familiar Christmas Story of Wise Men from the east following the Star of Bethlehem to Jesus' birthplace, bearing gifts for the new King of the Jews. While paying homage to King Herod, he asked them to report back when they found the Baby. They did not, instead warning Joseph of Herod's slaughter of infants plot, repeated by an angel through a dream. The Family immediately took flight into Egypt, lasting nearly four years, Matthew 2:13-23.

What has changed since Jesus' birth? Almost everything, climate change being one of the most serious. From desertification to mega-storms to melting glaciers, fires and floods. From heatwaves to mass migrations, species destruction, rising oceans, pollution and environmental injustice. Humankind has led the escalation of all these changes to God's Creation. What hasn't changed? The resilience of our faith in Jesus Christ, the worldwide Christian Church, and celebration of Jesus' birth.



Wise Men, by Lucinda Naylor, linocut print, 1997, The Westminster Collection

Prayer: Lord of us all, In this season of creation and giving, grant us strength and wisdom to boldly take action on climate change in our churches, homes and locales and as citizens of Mother Earth, applying the Universal Golden Rule to all. Amen.



The Flight Into Egypt, by Joan Bohlig, etching, 1975, The Westminster Collection

December 8th

James 5:7-10

Karen and Travis Webster

It is easy to become discouraged with the state of the world right now. However, Advent is supposed to be a time of preparation and hope. One of the ways we have enjoyed getting ready for the coming of Christ into the world is by putting up wildlife-friendly garlands and ornaments on the evergreen trees and bushes in our backyard for the birds (and other critters) who are wintering over where we live in western Pennsylvania. Our winters are long and cold, and they seem to appreciate the nourishment!

On the one hand, this fills us with great joy, because we can provide sustenance for the birds (our backyard choir) – northern cardinals, white-breasted nuthatches, blue jays, red-bellied woodpeckers, black-capped chickadees, and others. Plus, seeing their bright colors and active movement cheers us up even on the dreariest days and gives us the opportunity to stay connected with nature during a time when we don't spend as much time outside as we do during the warmer months. This is restorative to our souls. When we put out food for the birds, we are humbly reminded that they are providing so much more to us than what we are giving to them, much like how God gives us far more than we are ever able to offer in return.

If you would like to decorate your yard, church, and/or other outdoor spaces during the holidays (and other times of the year), here are a few links that you might enjoy checking out:

- <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/winter-2020/diy-outdoor-holiday-decorations-double-delectable>
- <https://www.audubon.org/news/make-your-own-suet>
- https://www.sfvaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Audubon_Guide_Bird_Feeding_printPDF.pdf

Prayer: Lord, thank you for giving us backyard choirs who not only remind us of your providential care, but also assist us in singing out for joy at your coming into this world. Amen.

December 9th

Isaiah 35:1-10

Susan Stephenson

Joy of the Redeemed

These verses from Isaiah are so full of yearning for redemption, for the great homecoming the prophet envisions for the Israelites. The highway God will create from the desert even has a name, the "Way of Holiness" and it will be reserved for the redeemed, who will walk singing, with no "ravenous beasts" or "wicked fools" in sight.

I love the images of nature rejoicing, the land being glad, of the wilderness blossoming, the crocus bursting into bloom. That redemption and transformation is extended to nature, not just humans.

We can relate to that longing, as we wait for Christ's birth, to redeem the whole world.

As a climate activist, it's hard not to see images of climate change in the "parched land" and the gushers suddenly opening in the desert. Even in the promise of "divine retribution" and the "eyes of the blind being opened" makes me think of climate skeptics or deniers – how satisfying it would be to have their eyes opened to the reality of climate change!

As a Christian climate activist, I am comforted by the knowledge of the divine. Even now, in the midst of this seemingly intractable crisis we have created for Earth and all our fellow creatures, God is with us and knows the way out.

"Lord thank you for being with us as we work to redeem ourselves and to protect and restore your Creation. Help us to find the Way of Holiness where we will one day join with all of nature in shouting and singing for joy."

Suggested Action: urge your Senators to vote yes on the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. This legislation will invest \$1.3 billion to address the extinction crisis. Here's a sample letter:

<https://interfaithpowerandlight.salsalabs.org/rawaemail/index.html>

December 14th

Isaiah 7:10-16

Carol Mathews

In a few days we begin the final part of Advent, a period some know as Late Advent (Dec. 17-23). During that time Old Testament names for the messiah are often used at prayer. Known as the 'O' Antiphons, each name begins with 'O': O Wisdom, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David ...

This scripture passage from Isaiah foretells the coming of Immanuel ('God with us') and how we will recognize the Messiah. The ancient 'O' Antiphon texts form the basis for the hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel".

Late Advent for me is a solace. The beginning of Advent often seems to be lost in other things I love and celebrate: Thanksgiving, Harvest season, fall weather with its opportunity to fully immerse oneself in God's creation. Sometimes they can impinge upon the early part of Advent, however.

The end of fall and the beginning of Advent with all these competing priorities is when I most treasure pine cones. At this time of year in the northern hemisphere, when more attention-getting plants have declined, pine cones evoke in me gratitude for all creation. Either found where I live or in places I may be visiting, they remind me of God's enduring love and the beauty of what can be the most ubiquitous of natural objects.

I use pine cones to decorate spaces, either alone or with evergreens. I delight in finding ones with different shapes. Sometimes other forces beyond my control can divert focus from earlier weeks of Advent. Each year, however, I recall the steadfast, lowly pine cone and mark my calendar for Dec. 17, in an effort to clear my life for those seven days before Christmas.



December 13th

Isaiah 7:10-16

Sue Smith

Isaiah is prophesizing for the first time after responding to God's call, saying "Here I Am; send me!" It is a prophesy to Ahaz during a time of war, but it can be interpreted to be a prophesy for creation as well. It is a prophecy with a sign of hope and a sign of despair. These are the same feelings we have about creation – hope for its future, despair at the current ruin. What is the hope in this prophesy? There will be a child born named Immanuel – God with us. And that child will eat curds and honey – a sign of the abundance in God's creation. What is the despair? The land of the kings Ahaz has been at war with, but with whom he is considering an alliance, will be destroyed – a sign of despair about the desecration of God's creation. How are we going to hold on to hope in this season of Advent and not end up in total despair? We need to consider who we build alliances with and how those alliances will impact creation. Congregations can and should examine their alliances. Do our alliances contribute to climate change and the desecration of creation? Or do our alliances contribute to the hope of a renewed creation? May they contribute to hope. We all want Heaven and Nature to sign in this Advent season!

Prayer: Creator God, in this Advent season, help us to find hope and not despair in the care of your creation. Amen.

Action Item: Review your congregation's investments – are you allied with the fossil fuel industry?

December 10th

Matthew 11:2-11

Bruce Gillette

Two verses stand out in this story of Jesus responding to John the Baptist's followers questioning about Jesus' work: "Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:4-5).

You would think the list from Jesus would end with the miracle of miracles, "the dead are raised." Rather the teaching lifts up "the poor have good news brought to them." This echoes Jesus quoting the book of Isaiah in his first sermon at his hometown of Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). The concern for poor people is also in Jesus' teaching about the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 emphasizing that our care for "the least of these" is God's criteria for our final judgment.

How can we follow Jesus in bringing "good news to poor people"? Words without deeds are condemned in the Bible. We need to generously, sacrificially support Presbyterian and ecumenical efforts to help the poor. The poor suffer unjustly from climate change.

Action: This Christmas, as we remember that our Savior was born into a poor family that could only provide him with a manger for his first resting place, let us explore giving gifts to Presbyterians for Earth Care and other environmental groups countering climate change's growing disasters that impact poor people.

Prayer: Guide us, O God, in your ways of truly caring for poor people and your creation. May our deeds help bring joy to the world, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent: December 11th

Isaiah 35:1-2, James 5:7-8

Barb Brown

As I write this it is autumn, and God has been at work painting the earth with rust red on the dogwood, butterscotch yellow on the birch trees and cherry red on the high bush cranberries that surround my house. I look out and see the mountains that ring the valley in which I live and they are covered with new snow. As the seasons change throughout the year we can be assured that God is with us. In our troubled world there is much distress and injustice, but God keeps faith forever, and will bring about God's justice. As we wait during Advent to celebrate Christ's birth, know that our hope is in God.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, for those who are hungry and weak, help them to know your providence. For those who are afraid, we pray they will know your peace. For those who are bowed down, we pray they will be lifted up. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Action Step: When you are feeling distraught for any reason turn to God and "strengthen your heart, for the coming of the Lord is near." (James 5: 8)

December 12th

Isaiah 7:10-16

Paul Heins

"As deep as the grave or as high as heaven," offered the prophet Isaiah to the anxious King Ahaz. The powers that be were inspecting the defenses of the city under threat by forces greater than they. How things change. How they stay the same.

Creations crisis is throwing up all kinds of signs from microplastics on the sea floor, to decimated mountaintops strip of their minerals, to raging storms and parched riverbeds. Forces greater than us threaten the well-being of the planet. We long for a different kind of sign that there is deliverance or hope on the horizon. Isaiah assures the king-too despairing to hope-that God was active, moving beyond his sight...beyond our sight, for peace. This is our advent faith.

Our advent faith also encourages us to hold up signs, signs telling the powers that be that their ramparts-consumption, convenience, profit-are creating the crisis that casts shadow on all of us. We can hold up signs of hope, connection, resilience, and simplicity; signs that proclaim we are partners with the God who even now is active beyond the horizon to bring peace. This is our advent faith.

A small congregation on the Puget Sound has held up such a sign. It is accompanied by power to charge electric vehicles when they are running low on juice. It is their gift to the community. It is a sign of hope.

What sign of hope will you, or your congregation hold up this Advent season and beyond?

Holy God, may we trust in your faithfulness and intention for peace and healing for all life. May we hold up signs that encourage and empower us to partner in your faithfulness. Emmanuel.

