



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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Artwork by Judith Nettleton



# ADVENT DAILY DEVOTIONAL 2023



Photo: David Kepley <[davidkepleyphotography.smugmug.com](mailto:davidkepleyphotography.smugmug.com)>

**PRESBYTERIANS FOR EARTH CARE**

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## **November 27<sup>th</sup>**

Isaiah 64:1-12

Lucy Youngblood

### **Why Not Us?**

Back in October of 2015, my home of Columbia, South Carolina, was hit by a 1,000-year flood. The historic storm hovered over our community for several hours, dumped 20 inches of rain, broke dams, made well water untrustworthy, damaged our city water treatment system, blocked roads, and ruined buildings. My back yard became a lake. Our community is 120 miles inland. When hurricanes hit, mostly along the state's beaches and Lowcountry cities and towns, we in Columbia secure the lawn furniture and welcome visitors from the coast. We provide support for others during hurricane season, but we are not accustomed to needing support ourselves.

But, why shouldn't we? Other places have disasters, so why not my home, too? The Earth is a powerful, living planet. The ground shakes, waters churn, and fires burn. Human beings contribute to climate change, and we have important work to do to counter the effects of the damage we have already done. We have the ability to make things better or worse. However, we cannot CONTROL the Earth, and we fool ourselves when we think otherwise.

Let us remember that lack of control does not equal powerlessness. God has given us the power to show love to one another.

Prayer: Eternal and Everlasting God, we thank you for blessing us with life on this living planet. When we are overwhelmed by its power, and when we have moved from feeling awe to feeling fear, remind us that you are not just a fair-weather friend.

Action: Love during a disaster is rooted in communication. Whom do we ask for help? Who needs help from us? During this Advent Season, double check the names and phone numbers of those who live close to you. If you are so blessed, get to know them a little bit better.

## **Christmas Day - December 25<sup>th</sup>**

Job 12:7-10

Fred Milligan

In 1865, an Englishman named William Chatterton Dix penned the words to a poem entitled "The Manger Throne." A few years later the first three stanzas of that poem were set to the music of an English traditional folk song called "Greensleeves" that soon became known as the beloved Christmas carol "What Child Is This?"

I once preached a series of sermons about the characters mentioned in the carol: Son of Mary, Friend of shepherds, Lord to wisemen. But as I think of that first Christmas day in the context of earth care, I'm suddenly aware that not all of them made it into my sermon series. We find them in the verse which sings: "Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?"

The animals! Of course! No manger scene is complete without some sheep, an ox, a donkey and camels. But contrary to the carol, I believe that their presence was more than evidence of Jesus' "mean estate". Rather, I believe their presence at Jesus' birth represents a very profound theological truth about our creator's relationship with all creatures. Jesus was a child of God who learned from the moment of his birth to listen to the animals. And like Job, I believe we too have a great deal to learn from them about faithfulness to the task of earth care for which we were created.

Loving God, we thank you today for the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ who was born among your creatures and taught us to cherish all forms of life on this planet which you love.

Action: Hug your pets close and listen to what they and other creatures have to teach us about our care for the earth.

## **November 28<sup>th</sup>**

Psalm 80

Catherine Belles

"Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

Psalm 80 arose in response to the annihilation of the Northern Kingdom. The history of "Edom's" loss fits the repetitive pattern of sinful destruction and waste of life.

The 1971 Pogo comic strip:

Porkypine: "Ah Pogo, the beauty of the forest primeval gets me in the heart."

Pogo: "It gets me in the feet, Porkypine."

Porkypine: "It is hard walking on all this stuff."

Pogo: "Yes son, we have met the enemy, and he is us."

Pogo and Porkypine gaze upon a field of trash, "nestled" between and upon the trees of their swamp home.

Pray: Thank you Holy One for the places I have called home. I cry out for your salvation Holy Creator. Save me from myself, from the sin of waste and desire. Lead me into your peace that I no longer desire things. Guide my feet to seek your blessings in this world for all creatures. As I look and listen to your whole creation, give me the courage to step away from my home. Courage, to step into another's home and be present with them. Joy to see the hope of home for all people in my communities. "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Amen

Activity:

At home: Seek a place you can restore. Perhaps carry a plastic bag with you as you walk and collect the street litter. Set a firm limit on your gift giving and share that with your family and friends.

Step out: Volunteer for a Habitat workday. Cut your older neighbor's grass. Take one step out and it will lead to other opportunities. Godly living is not limited to inside your home.

## November 29<sup>th</sup>

1 Cor. 1

Kirianne Weaver

Talk about gifts in this season, and we tend to think of what we might buy for one another. But then, as a caregiver of the environment, we check ourselves: what can we buy that doesn't have a hidden harmful impact? What gift do we have to give that has no shadow side? There are too many trinkets already. The people we want to give gifts to seem as though they have everything they need already.

Then, here comes a passage like a star in a dark sky, reminding us what our best gifts are: speech. Knowledge. Grace, care, and all the simplicity of Christ's testimony - he who did not even keep a place to rest his head. We are reminded that the most wonderful things we have to give one another come without any carbon impact at all.

In our family, the presents my children look forward to the most are homemade coupons. An extra 10 pages of reading a book they love; an extra half-hour before they must go to bed; popcorn to be made for a home movie of their choice. They make me coupons, now that they are older: 30 minutes of back tickling. "Mom gets to pick the podcast" coupons. 1 Wild Card: good for any other coupon.

But even beyond these, the gift of speech is best discovered on a quiet winter walk. The gift of grace is given when a warm pocket is shared on a cold day. The gift of knowledge is greatest when our loved ones come to know how much we love them, how important they are, how deeply we care.

The concerns of every generation teach us to understand Christ in new ways. In today's world, we must all learn the beauty of Christ's simplicity, and the perfection of the gifts already within us, freely given to us in our making, ready to be shared and given in love.

## Fourth Sunday of Advent - Christmas Eve – December 24<sup>th</sup>

2 Sam. 7:1-11,16

Jody Mask

King David was conflicted. He was devoted to God and thought the presence of God (the Ark of the Covenant) should reside in a better place. After all, here he was in a house made of strong cedar while the ark remained in a fabric tent. God had been with David all this time, protecting him and his people from their enemies. Shouldn't God live in something grander than he himself occupied?

God's response is telling: "I never asked you or anyone else to build me a house of cedar, did I?"

Was David honestly honoring God, or was he also feeling a bit guilty that he lived in a fancier home? Maybe both feelings were at play.

Through the ages of Christianity, as the Church acquired more power and wealth, it sought to honor God with larger and more elaborate houses of worship. Such structures inspire wonder and awe, but they should also give us pause at the cost of their construction. Remember that some of the funding for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was through the selling of indulgences, a leading factor in Martin Luther's spark for the Protestant Reformation.

Here we are on the eve of the nativity of Jesus, with a much needed reminder of his humble birth in a feeding trough. Though the popular story is that the manger was a wooden, free-standing piece, it was likely indoors, dug out or hewn from the floor of the home.

Regardless, God was always content to live in a humble dwelling, whether on the move or in a permanent residence. So should we be content to live humbly, to avoid ostentation, and to seek harmony with God's creation entrusted to our care.

Prayer: Lord, you began your human life in low estate, and never strayed from it. Help us live simply and in concert with the home we all share. Amen.

Action: Advocate for green building practices in your community like planting native plants in landscaping, adding water-saving devices, and using sustainable building materials.

## December 23<sup>rd</sup>

Luke 1:26-38

Sally Swan

We often hear of Mary as “doubtful” or “afraid”. Is there doubt or weakness in this passage? No! This reading reveals Mary as thoughtful and courageous. Mary is ready to further God’s work in the world.

God has chosen Mary, a young woman living in a small and remote village, to birth and mother the Son of God. God knows Mary’s soul and knows she is ready for the work ahead. God trusts Mary to be valiant. And Mary trusts God. “Let it be with me according to your word.” Mary is trusting and very, very brave.

Angel Gabriel assures Mary that she has found favor with God. She is truly favored, for over the next nine months God’s Son in human form will grow in Mary’s womb... share Mary’s heartbeat... hear Mary’s voice... join with the pace of Mary’s life.

And later, Mary will be alone with Joseph as labor comes on. She will give birth to Jesus in a simple stable. Jesus will be born in obscurity. Cradled in love.

Such an amazing beginning... Gabriel announces that Mary will have a son. She is to name him Jesus. Gabriel announces that Jesus will be Great. He will live on earth, and he will be called the Son of the Most High. For God, Creator of all, can do all things... on earth as in heaven.

Prayer: Holy God, may we have the strength and faith of Mary. May we trust and be open to You working through us in the world.

Action: Read and reflect on Mary’s Song of Praise, Luke 1: 46-55. The passage begins with the words “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

## November 30<sup>th</sup>

Mark 13:24-31

Martin H. Kamaidan

### Lesson from Nature

In the Apostles’ Creed, we confess “*He ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*” This confession is not about global prophecies based on Bible math or timeframes. It's just a statement of faith that life is heading in God's direction. It also has to do with responsibility. We have to answer to God. Both our words and deeds have repercussions. Our behavior and how we relate to others or what we do on a daily basis. Our reactions to the environment we live in and how we make use of the assets that have been given to us.

Our scripture tells us that a host of cosmic disorders that involve the sun, moon, and stars would occur right before the Second Advent. This makes a clear reference to observable changes in the physical cosmos caused by celestial bodies. In order to comprehend his second coming, Jesus encourages us to learn from nature. This suggests that the constructions made by non-human entities hold great significance for our comprehension of future occurrences, as exemplified by the fig tree lesson.

Action: Take note of the ways that nature is changing around you, such as the trees, animals, and weather. Make an effort to hear what they have to say and learn.

Prayer: We don't know what the future holds, but we know it's in your hands. Form, shape, and employ us so that we might be good news in the world. May our hope for your bright future motivate us every day, reminding us that what we say and do counts. Give us knowledge to care for and learn from nature. In Jesus name, Amen.

## December 1<sup>st</sup>

1 Cor. 1:1-9

Dawn M. Nothwehr

This year 2023, has left many wondering in unprecedented darkness: climate emergency of historically extreme heat waves; wars in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine; a dysfunctional House of Representatives – and more. Can things get any darker? Yet, we do have reason to hope! We know what must be done to change – but will we act?

St. Paul addressed the Church at Corinth, reminding Christians of the source of their calling and their capacity to do and to be better. They were experiencing divisions and serious moral failings with each other and the wider community, Their hope was nothing less than “the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 7). Though St. Paul knew of the extraordinary troubles among his audience, he challenged forth their very best. He bears witness to the God’s power manifested in his own experience of being “Called.” He consistently reminds the Corinthians of the profound and gracious work of God in and through them. It is not only he (Paul) whom God has called to be transformed through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ – but all Christians (then and now).

A U.S. Navy crew once returned from a long voyage. As they approached shore, the crew all looked for their dear ones on the shore who came to meet them. But one man was all alone. No one was there to meet him. Worried, he hurried home. As he entered the brightly lit house, his wife greeted him, "Honey, I've been waiting for you!" Though relieved, he was struck with disappointment. 'The other crew's dear ones were watching for them!' The difference between waiting and watching was only too clear!

In this season of Advent, we are called to watch, wait, and act confident that God is present in history to lead us and all Creation to its goal and to lead us to its fullness, which is the Lord Jesus Christ!

In HOPE let us pray:

Came, Lord Jesus, come. Fill us and renew the face of the Earth with the power of your Spirit! AMEN.

## December 22<sup>nd</sup>

Psalm 89:1-4

Marion Gamble

When I was a child, our family gathered around the tree before bedtime on December 24 to listen to my father read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. He was doing what the psalmist exhorts us to do, to tell of the covenant God made with David and his descendants, to sing of God’s faithfulness “for all generations.” Now as a grandmother who reads stories to her grandchildren, I would like to tell them the “old, old story” of David and the birth of his descendant Jesus.

But some of my unchurched adult children may not approve of my reading Bible stories to their children. These grandchildren may think Luke is a character in Star Wars and Jesus a bobblehead in a thrift shop.

I wonder if it is enough for now that they see faithful Love in the stories of their own lives. Once I received a thank-you-note from a grandchild, who didn’t mention my gift, but simply stated: “You are a graet grama. I love you bkas you love me.” I’m sure this child hasn’t read I John 4:19 (“We love because God first loved us”), but he gets it. The more I open myself to receive the Love demonstrated in the Christmas story, the more I am able to offer unconditional love to my descendants.

Sometimes grandchildren ask me why I save my table scraps and put them in a bucket which a farmer picks up for compost, or why I don’t have any plastic wrap in my house to cover their leftover pizza? I tell them that just as I don’t want them to get hurt because I love them, I don’t want to hurt any other part of God’s Creation which I love. Love reigns over all for all generations.

Jesus, help us to tell your story though our actions.

## December 21<sup>st</sup>

Luke 1:46b-55

Sue Smith

Mary's song of praise – known as "Mary's Magnificat." Mary is praising God for choosing her to be the mother to the Messiah. And she praises God for all that God has done in the world – in the past and from generation to generation. She lifts up God's acts of justice: bringing down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry. Mary is anticipating that the coming of the Messiah signifies that these acts of justice will continue.

Advent is a time of anticipation as well. For us, it is not only about the coming of Christ, but the coming of all that goes with the Christmas season as well. Anticipating the presents, the decorations, and singing the carols. Our decorations bring some of creation inside. The tree, some boughs, and poinsettias. Maybe our trees are decorated with pinecones or popcorn and cranberry strings. As we anticipate Christmas with these signs of creation, it is a reminder that we need to lift the care of creation as an act of God's justice, the justice that continues from generation to generation. In this season of Advent, we want to anticipate a restored creation, but these days of climate change leads us to anticipate a further destruction of creation. Storms are causing more damage. There is flooding where I have never seen flooding. Wildfires are causing wide-spread damage.

As I anticipate a restored creation, I remember the hymn, "My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout" (Glory to God #100), which is a paraphrase of Mary's Magnificat. Its refrain gives me hope.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

Prayer: Creator God, in this Advent Season of anticipation, help us to bring about a restored creation as an act of your justice.

Action: Spend time outdoors and pray for a restored creation.

## December 2<sup>nd</sup>

Mark 13:27,34

Scott Crane

I lean back and gaze out the window on a wintry scene. Snow flies past and bare branches outlined with a touch of snow rise above local shops and buildings. I'm at a local café, far from home, and in the background Christmas music plays calling me to nostalgic reminiscences of "the good old days." A Chai tea steams on my tabletop as I compose, its rich creamy taste tingling my taste buds and reminding me of yet another homey kind of feeling. What *is* it about this time of year...?

Home. Going home for the holidays. It can be a mental or emotional journey, either good or bad. I will focus on a positive: going home is where the soul safely resides, the place where one is most complete. It is the heart of things that we long for. It is the authentic presence of someone or some Other that speaks to us of comfort; an Other that reaches out and bridges the gap between this time and another; this place and the place we've journeyed from.

Yet it is also an echo of the future. Going home is knowing there are open arms waiting to draw you close. Going home is knowing there is a place prepared just for you. For a faithful heart, it is knowing that the soul will come to rest on a farther shore. Divine hospitality waits, and it is my prayer for you this year that your path will bring you ever nearer to the bosom of God. After all, any expression of home that we find in this worlds-realm reflects a much brighter existence imprinted in the very heart of things, the heart of our ultimate and eventual *Eternal Home*.

Be Watchful. Embrace Peace. Love in Christ.

## First Sunday of Advent - December 3<sup>rd</sup>

Isa. 40:1-11

Richard E. Shore

The plants, the animals, the people all dwell  
in one space, one island, our home  
What hurts the plants, what hurts the animals, hurts this island our home  
Who would be Lord of Creation, my friend  
must first be servant of all  
What's being created let no one destroy  
this earth, this island, our home.

Sometimes gather, children, wherever we be  
healing, setting free  
From debt, deceit, domination,  
restoring community  
We giving turns, a hand, giving ear,  
giving and keeping our word  
Pouring Justice, Mercy, Humility, Fidelity  
as the waters cover the sea.

Prayer: Most special one, You give each life  
That we give turns, a hand, an ear, our word  
And keep it too, beginning now,  
Much more than ken or hopes or dreams.  
May we share food, you give to all;  
May we share water, yours always;  
May we share earth and sea and sky;  
So may your earth give life today.  
Turn all we do in this your world  
To giving turns, a hand, an ear, our word  
So may we turn what comes our way  
To giving turns, hand, ear, and word  
Be with us now, and in the rocks;  
May we not cut nor be cut off;  
We dare to ask who gives all turns  
Who hears all cries, May this be so.  
After Mtt 6:9 ff. /about 1990 res

## December 20<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 61

Richard Gibson

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!" sets our ADVENT mood. Yet and Not Yet. Luke tells us Jesus used this text for his sermon in Nazareth. We may not feel the ability to claim the Spirit as Jesus did. The world we live in is broken: by wars, mis-information, denial, conspiracy and general godlessness. Our weather patterns are changing, crops are withering, ski seasons begins later and end earlier, crabs aren't molting and the fish aren't running.

ADVENT turns all this gloom on its head. The Bible proclaims the world as a place for God's glory (Ps 19, Is 45) The hymns we sing, the Bible stories we read help us see with new eyes. Hope is coming, Hope is all around, Hope is alive.

This Isaiah writer just returned from exile. There it was gloom and doom. The only things holding the exiles together were remembering Jerusalem and singing a few songs. Now they were back in their land. Isaiah could ask the people to practice justice, to care for one another, to lift up the poor and comfort the broken hearted.

Today we are building solar panels, wind farms, raising gas prices to build a fund to help people electrify their homes and cars, protesting oil companies, their pipelines and LNG shipments. Scientists now say by 2029 we may reach a warming threshold in our environment. Many are working together to be responsible stewards.

If we are willing to open ourselves to dreams, we may hear God's voice. Isaiah was dreaming, as he saw hurting people returning to their land. He knew the story of Moses. If God could do it then, God would do it now. Isaiah called faithful people to respond. Now they would proclaim liberty to the captives of big oil, to farmers who pray for rain and sunshine. Tell them "This is the Year of the Lord's favor, if you will obey the rules of good fishing, healthy agriculture, forest management, God will comfort all who mourn.

So as we remember stories of old, we begin to sing praises and obey the covenant. God will clothe us and the earth with garments of salvation. Our careful stewardship will enable the earth to bring forth shoots and gardens will grow up! ADVENT brings us Hope!



## December 19<sup>th</sup>

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Courtney Bowen

Recently our beloved English Setter (ever the escape artist) got out and was missing for three days. Our family fretted about her. Was she warm enough? Hungry? Safe? Scared? Lonely? Missing her family? We cried, searched for her, and prayed for her safe return. When we finally found her, she was excited to see us, but didn't seem all that chastened by her big adventure. She still looks longingly out of our windows at the squirrels and cats just beyond her reach. She runs to the front door whenever someone goes in or out. I fear her wanderlust is unabated. She is a devoted family dog with a loving family; and yet wild at heart - happiest when running through wide open spaces, no barriers or fences, just complete freedom. We've tried to domesticate a creature that was never meant to be enclosed.

Don't we do the same with God? We want to domesticate God, tame God, make God act like us, do what we want. King David commands a cedar house be built for God, because the king himself resides in such a house. David wants to make God like himself; make God in his own image. But, God refuses to be tamed. God rejects the house of cedar, opting instead to have the ark of God reside in a simple tent. God prefers the freedom to move among the people, rather than being nailed down to one location. God prefers the simplicity of humble dwellings rather than a more stately house. God prefers to be out in the midst of things - in our midst, in creation - rather than behind walls and borders. We may try to tell God to sit and stay, but God will not be contained. God's mercy and love are boundless.

*Gracious God, we give you thanks that your love for us and for this world are boundless. Help us to let go of our desire to domesticate you and instead allow ourselves to be made in your image. Amen.*

## December 4<sup>th</sup>

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Dan Turk

### Fire and Hope in Madagascar

To get to Christmas, Madagascar must first get through the season of fire. Every year, especially in October and November, many thousand square km of grassland and forest burn, killing trees, impeding regeneration of natural forests, and frustrating tree-growing efforts. Madagascar faces similar challenges as Adam and Eve: how to preserve Creation while at the same time producing food to eat (Gen. 2:15). Fire combined with peoples' needs to grow food and get firewood and charcoal for cooking meals has resulted in destruction of natural forests, putting many of Madagascar's endemic plants and animals on a path towards extinction. Climate change is making the situation worse. Far too often, native forests are being replaced with forests of exotic trees, that provide products for people but contribute little to the preservation of endemic plants and animals. Astronaut John Grunsfeld, who went to space 5 times, reflected, "Looking down on Madagascar, I have watched what little forest there was shrink to several tiny reserves."



The Presbyterian Church (USA)'s partner denomination in Madagascar is the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM). At its General Assembly in 2021, the FJKM decided that all of its over 7000 churches should become green churches. PC(USA) assists the FJKM's Fruits, Vegetables, and Environmental Education Program (FVEE) as it helps FJKM churches and schools become green. The FVEE provides native trees and fruit trees for planting on the grounds of FJKM schools and churches. Many of the native trees planted are endangered species. They remind people of the value and beauty of Creation and the need to preserve it.

Before the earth was destroyed by flood, God called Noah to take extraordinary action to keep species from extinction. What is God calling each of us to do in the face of fire and climate change?

*Prayer: O God, who are we to turn our backs on your Creation? Please help us to know what you want each of us to do to preserve Creation and help your people have adequate food to eat.*

*Action: PC(USA)'s partners around the world, like the FJKM, could use your help to strengthen their efforts to address the challenges of preserving Creation and fighting hunger. Please consider ways that you can help.*

## December 5<sup>th</sup>

Ps. 85:1-2,8-13

Nancy Jones

There is a story that when God was creating everything, the holy counsel of angels weighed in on the creation of Man. Love said that man should be created to dispense acts of love. Truth argued that man would be filled with lies. Righteousness said man would perform righteous deeds. Peace worried that man will always be filled with strife.

God took all this into consideration and created a being in God's image, separate from and above all the rest of God's creation. Genesis tells us that God planted a garden and placed the man in it to tend and keep it. The Hebrew words here could also be translated as care for and learn from it.

We know what happened. Man was unable to keep that first commission to care for the world that God created. Truth and Peace were correct in that we have lied, cheated, stolen, and killed rather than learn from, love, and care for this world and those living in it with us.

In sending God's Son, God sought to reconcile us with God and our true calling. To help us to listen to what the Lord God says, to uphold God's promises of peace to God's faithful servants. To help love and faithfulness meet, righteousness and peace kiss as faithfulness rises up from the ground with the care of God's people.

During this Advent season, what can you do to reconcile yourself to God's commission to love and care for God's garden? How can you spread peace, love, faithfulness and truth?

Prayer: Loving God,

Help us to remember your commission and your commandments. Help us to tend and keep your garden, loving and learning from it, living in faithfulness and peace. Amen.

Call to Action: During Advent look around you at God's world. See, though much of it lies dormant in the winter weather, how very alive it is. Notice the trees, the flowers, the birds of winter. Life is all around us! Go out and help it flourish!

## December 18<sup>th</sup>

Luke 1:46b-55

Scharmél Roussel

### Feeding Our Neighbors and Our Minds

We are mindful of the call to feed our neighbors in need. Our faithfulness does not stop there.

These verses remind me of our hunger for wisdom, as well as our obligation to communicate God's truth. We are called to share fact-based knowledge and not to diminish truth. Those who "fear" God fear separation from God's natural world, which includes ignoring the suffering of people and all of creation through negligence. When God's Creation suffers from mindless neglect, we are called to be God's messengers to protect fragile ecosystems that sustain life.

God created the natural world and provides its resources. Instead of enriching ourselves, we all benefit when we take only what we need. When we as individuals and as congregations suppress the truth of harmful habits, we hurt ourselves, our communities, and future generations.

Prayer: Righteous Teacher, You are the great instructor of eternal truth. Your words provide clear lessons that instruct us to serve others, feed others, search for wisdom, share your messages, and protect your creation.

Action Items: 1) After the holidays, recycle your Christmas tree. If you live near a lake or pond, toss branches into the water to provide sheltering habitat for fish. (Permission from local officials may be necessary.) Think ahead to Christmas in July, and join the challenge at Plastic Free July every year. <https://www.plasticfreejuly.org/>

### Third Sunday of Advent - December 17<sup>th</sup>

Romans 16:25-27 (Paul's Closing Prayer)

Bruce Gillette

"If you read Paul's letter to the Romans, it will change your life," was the bold assertion by the Rev. Dr. Charles "Buz" Myers of Gettysburg College at the start of a week-long seminar at the Synod of the Trinity's Synod School years ago. He explained how Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, and others had been inspired by this remarkable letter, and their writings about it transformed the Church.

Paul was writing to a community facing challenging times—persecution and suffering-- and he lifted up a message of love and hope for everyone. His letter is not only an introduction to himself and to the foundations of faith; it also includes his hope that they will support him in his travels to Spain, as he goes on to share the good news with the world. This message of love and hope for the world is needed today.

All the nations and all of creation (Romans 8:19, 22) need all Christians to respond with loving actions. "Humanity just lived through the hottest 12 months in at least 125,000 years Scientists have compared this year's weather extremes to "a disaster movie" soaring temperatures, fierce wildfires, powerful storms and devastating floods — CNN, 11/9/23).

Prayer: Loving God, help us to take time daily to be informed about the challenges facing your world, near and far from our homes. Help us daily to know that you are at work in your world today, and guide us in acts of love for all creation. Amen.

Action: Talk with others about the climate crisis. For ways to do so, see Katharine Hayhoe's *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*.

### December 6<sup>th</sup>

Mark 1:1-8

David Kepley

Water was symbolically important to first century Jews. If a Jew became ritually unclean by say touching a corpse, they were required to immerse themselves in water before they could rejoin the worshipping community. Depending on the gravity of the infraction, Jewish custom rated types of water that could be used for immersion from puddles at the low end to "living water," meaning water in rivers, lakes, and springs, being the highest.

John the Baptist took this immersion concept to the next level. He demanded that people first look inward to purify their souls and then to perform acts of compassion, showing that they had truly repented. For John this inward purification was necessary before any outward cleansing. Notice also that John baptized people in the River Jordan, which as "living water" was the most highly rated for its ability to purify the gravest sins.

Today we face the opposite problem. Because of our neglect and indifference, we have allowed bodies of "living water" in places like Flint, MI, and Jackson, MS, to become polluted. Is it any wonder that this water impacts the health of nearby communities of color? John would rail against us! So, ancient Jews sought out the purest form of water to cleanse the most grievous sins, but we allow the purest of form of water to destroy the health of our citizens!

Gracious and everlasting God, we humbly confess that we have taken the rain that you have so generously provided and through our neglect have allowed it to harm the plants and animals that you have entrusted to our care. Forgive us, O Lord! Amen.

Action Item: Investigate how the type and amount of chemicals we apply to our lawns and gardens align with best practices to ensure the highest quality of water in our communities.

## December 7<sup>th</sup>

2 Peter 3:8-13

Barbara Hassall

Surprise is defined as a reaction to an unexpected event, fact or thing. It can be pleasant and bring joy to your heart or it could be devastating and life changing. You may be alerted to the possibility of the event, just not knowing when or how or you may be completely blindsided and caught unawares.

Today's date, December 7<sup>th</sup> is known as "a date that will live in infamy" following a deadly surprise Japanese attack on the US Naval base at Pearl Harbor, bringing the US into WWII against the Axis powers. The US was caught by surprise, but were they unawares? Although intelligence capabilities then are not what they are today, there were talks for months with the Japanese ambassador in Washington, DC. There were sightings of Japanese ships near the Philippines, Guam and Wake Island. And yet the US wasn't prepared for this historical and life changing event.

Today's passage from 2 Peter 3:8-15 speaks of knowing that our Lord is returning, and we need to be prepared so that we experience the joy of His return and not the devastation of **not** living a life of repentance and peace, following God's commandments. We have been given responsibilities to care for God's earth and all its creatures – plants, seas, birds, fish, and animals, including humans. We can't coast along, waiting for a sign that the return is near and then start to show we care. We are aware of the coming event. We just don't know the day or time. It will be a surprise, but one we can be ready for if we daily follow God's will. We can live with the anticipation of a joyous surprise.

Prayer:

Creator God, your world is in turmoil from war, storms, fires, floods, and earthquakes. Empower your children to be agents of peace and calm to reverse the damage we have allowed to happen to your world.

Action Item:

During this season of peace and joy take time to clean up trash along a local roadway or waterway or beach.

## December 16<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 126

Angela Michler

Nature's Worship Service

"Songs of Joy"

The Book of Psalms is written to be sung, to praise God's beautiful creation. This devotional is a special worship service, inviting joyous celebration of God's good gifts.

Welcome to our worship service, let us begin. Let's start out with this song:

Water rushing over a waterfall, Crash, Crash

Deer walking in the snow, Crunch, Crunch

Rain drops falling into a puddle, Splash, Splash

Birds chirping in the trees, Tweet, Tweet

A leaf quietly falling to the ground, Swish, Swish

In Psalm 126, the description "Songs of Joy" is mentioned throughout the Scripture. Verse 6: "Those who go out" seeking God through nature "will return with songs of joy". In return for finding God in his creation, you will be carrying his joy in your heart. Creation is to be explored and praised as Christians. Have you worshiped in nature and found God? What "Songs of Joy" have you treasured from your own worship services in nature?

Dear Creator: We humbly submit ourselves to the care of your creation, now and forever. Help us to listen to you through nature. Teach us to STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN for your presence in your world. Amen

Leave with memories, leave no trace behind. Explore nature with your senses and The Bible.

Find your place in God's creation!

## December 15<sup>th</sup>

1Thess. 5:16-24

Douglas Carey

**Meditation:** Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, *escribió* (wrote) that despite their losses, their collective grief, *los obstáculos* (the obstacles) in front of them, they need to remind themselves to, "*Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances...*". This is reminiscent of our recent struggles and challenges *del pandémico* (of the pandemic) beginning during *el cuaresma* (lent) in 2020. Many of us lost *familiares* (family members), and yet, people around the world reminded us to nurture those seeds of fé (faith), water the seedlings of our ancestors and continue to see the joy that sprouts amidst the "troubled waters". Smoky skies for days upon days, rain storms and flooding in one area and drought in another...yet, the children of God give thanks. We continue to pray for the *tierra* (earth), to rejoice in the daily act of composting, the sacred ritual of seed saving as well as *compartiendo semillas* (sharing seeds). *Alegrarse* (Rejoice), be thankful that we are the chosen people who have the opportunity de *cambiar nuestros hábitos* (to change our habits), to take steps to improve our care of *el medio ambiente* (the environment), so that *los nietos de nuestros nietos* (the grandchildren of our grandchildren) *tendrán* (will have) the chance to live in a clean and healthier environment.

In our bilingual Earth Care Team activities in Port Chester, NY, we carry on an *adviento* (advent) tradition of a community *corona* (wreath) making workshop. Then, al fin de (at the end of) advent we collect new wreaths that were designated for the garbage, compost the branches, and save the metal rings for our next annual wreath workshop.

**Prayer:** *Nuestro Señor, nos da la gracia y la fe de seguir cuidando su creación aquí en la tierra.*

Lord, grant us the grace and the faith to continue caring for your Creation on Earth.

**Action:** This January, después del día de los magos (after January 6th) , ask your neighbors if they can donate their wreaths, instead of putting them in the garbage. Then you can compost the branches and save the metal rings in the center and save them for a community wreath-making workshop next year!



## December 8<sup>th</sup>

Isa. 40:1-11

Elena Delhagen

### A Promise Not Forgotten

Here, in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, we get the sense that the prophet's message has shifted. In previous chapters, the overarching theme is one of the Lord's judgment upon God's people for their sins. Yet here, we listen to the voice of God consoling the people, gently comforting them and reminding them of YHWH's forever-promise: "***I am coming back to you.***"

Beloveds, hear this good news! We will not be left alone in this broken, aching world in which we currently find ourselves. Just as verse three illustrates the deserted wilderness of exile, we, too, are wandering in barren spaces, and we, too, know we are not yet home. One simply has to simply watch the news or read up on current events to understand we are living in desert days, full of valleys, uneven ground, and rough places. ***But God is on the way to us***, and this passage in Isaiah reminds us that God's glory will remain forever while all else fades and withers like flowers or grass.

This is the hope of Advent – that the way things are is not the way they will always be. God promised to come back to us and make all the wrong things right again. And what's even better is that we get to help prepare the way. In the wasteland, we can make mountains and hills of justice, mercy, and love, places we can stand upon as beacons of light in the darkness and call out to all, "Here, beloveds, is your God!"

Prayer: "God, we confess that we often feel alone in this world, that sometimes the hurt and pain seems too great to bear. We stand on your promises today that you are coming back to us; help us to do all that we can to make ourselves and our world ready for you. Amen."

Suggested action: A wonderful way to practice cultivating hope is through gardening. Whether it be a plant, a crop, or a flower, spend some time with your hands in the dirt and practice, literally, preparing the way for new life to sprout forth.

## December 9<sup>th</sup>

Psalms 85

William P. Brown

The psalmist recalls a once flourishing and “favorable” land, which is now no longer so. The speaker prays for restoration, not only of the land but also of the community. The two cannot be separated. For their sake, the psalmist anticipates a convergence of the four highest values set forth in Scripture: steadfast love (*chesed*), faithfulness (or truth), righteousness (or justice), and peace (*shalom*). They are personified in the psalm: the first two “meet” and embrace, and the other two “kiss.” They long for each other; they belong to each other; they depend on each other.

Such values have all to do with the land as well as the human community. When the beloved community embodies love, the land will no longer languish. A flourishing land testifies to faithfulness itself “springing up from the ground,” and righteousness “looking down from the sky.” No bombs or airborne pollutants raining down from above. No toxic creeks and minefields scarring the land from below. People and land are deeply interconnected just as much as justice and peace and love and truth are meant to converge. Imagine justice and peace embracing each other in your neighborhood, in your city, on your land. What would change? What changed when God in Christ embraced human flesh and dwelt in creation? Everything. What would it mean for us to embrace the land, to “kiss the ground,” to treat the land as a living and life-giving partner in all that we do?

**Prayer:** How long, O God, must the land mourn? We yearn for the day when justice and peace embrace for creation’s sake. Teach us to make it so. Amen.

**Action:** Consider organizing an electric vehicle event at your church.

## December 14<sup>th</sup>

Isa. 61:1-4,8-11

Carol Mathews

It is the third week of Advent—only a few days until Christmas, and fewer still until the winter solstice (Dec. 21). This event marks the time when the northern hemisphere begins to see the end of longer nights and the return of longer days. Darkness begins to retreat and light begins to increase.

In the scripture passage above, the prophet declares “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me”.... We hear Jesus say these same words in Luke’s gospel. I wonder if any of us might be called by God’s Holy Spirit...‘anointed’, as it were?

The Spirit sends the anointed to comfort those who mourn, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives. Could one of us be called to do such things? How might the ‘return of the sun’ and Jesus, the Firstborn of Creation, enlighten us?

Isaiah says “... as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness...to spring up....”

I wonder if Creation itself may be mourning, held captive, brokenhearted. What might that mean to we who celebrate Jesus’ birth and who believe in the sacredness of all life? How might I be called to bring healing and liberty to any living organism, to bring the light of Christ forms of life on our earth?

**Prayer:** Help us, Spirit of God, to discern your presence and your call in this sacred (and busy) time of year. Enlighten humanity and strengthen us to bring healing and liberty to all life in your Creation. “Let heav’n and nature sing....” in this blessed season of Advent/Christmas!

**Suggestion:** Plan some time each day to gaze on something from the natural world....a pine cone, an evergreen branch, a wax candle, etc. Strive to become aware of what the Lord God may be doing in your life to help you care for Creation.

## December 13<sup>th</sup>

Luke 1:46b-55

Phyllis Windle

Luke recorded what Mary sang when she heard she's pregnant. We call it "The Magnificat." Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it "the most passionate, the wildest, ...the most revolutionary hymn ever sung." Sometimes churches drop v. 51-53, uneasy with revolution. In the early church, artists depict Mary as an honored scholar. She teaches from scrolls, with Peter and Paul at her feet. She would have known the Roman Empire's vast brutality; she sang its end.

I paid Mary's words scant attention until reading *Miryam of Jerusalem*. Author Ann Johnson wrote Magnificats of Peace, of Remembering, plus 17 others. "Magnificat" means to amplify, to expand, and that's what she did. We can expand more, asking, "What words would I amplify in these fear-filled times of climate disasters?"

Initially, the environmental movement used fear to motivate action. Later, we learned that powerful and sustainable change more often comes from love and what is deeply meaningful. Gayle Boss wrote 24 Advent meditations in *All Creation Waits*, showing what's meaningful to her. Each meditation tells how one animal survives winter, in ways intricate and unique. Her stories fill me with wonder and let my own fears rest a bit. So mine is a Magnificat of Wonder:

My soul delights in you, Spirit of Wonder,

for a Colorado columbine, a sandpiper, and one elegant snowflake,

for a romp of otters, an obstinacy of bison.

My heart rejoices in you, Lover of the Lowly and Invisible,

I rejoice in lichen crusts, soil-building from rocks,

and in squirrels, caching acorns of red, but not white, oaks.

Spirit of Earth Care and Environmental Justice,

You shame the demagogues and raise up wise leaders;

You scatter the wasteful and sate us with less;

You give our lives meaning and move us to awe.

**Action item:** Write your own magnificat of some change, some creature, somewhere, or someone you love.

## Second Sunday of Advent - December 10<sup>th</sup>

John 1:6-8,19-28

Michael Bowe

When I was younger, my boys youth group had to clean the sides of the roads. It was awful work. I remember it being hot and picking up trash on the side of the road is disgusting. My church did this year after year. I often wondered what was the point because each year, there was always trash to clean off the side of the road. It was discouraging. However, I had to remember that I wasn't supposed to be the solution. I was just called to serve.

The same could be said for John the Baptist. In John's gospel John the Baptist's mission was to testify to the light so that all might believe. In John's gospel, the baptist did not call people to reform or repentance. In fact, the gospel makes it clear that John was not the light and was not the messiah. Instead, he was called to serve. Everything John did was supposed to make the way for the Lord.

It seems the task of Earth care can be daunting and almost impossible. There are moments where it seems like the problems are getting worse and worse. It can be discouraging. However, we are not called to be the solution or the savior. Jesus has the job locked in and does a better job of that than anyone of us could ever imagine. However, we are called to join John the Baptist in making a way for the Lord and testifying to the light.

The best way to testify to the light is to roll up our sleeves and get to work making this world a better place.

Magnificent God and mighty God, help us remember that we are not called to be the light or even the savior. Instead, we are called to serve. In Jesus name, Amen.



## December 11<sup>th</sup>

Ps. 126:5-6

Nancy Corson Carter

Our church, in commiseration with violence, especially in Israel and Palestine, held a vigil. With song, scripture, and candle-lighting, we called for God's help. Similarly, all of us begin Advent, opening our hearts to listen in dark silences for God's healing word. As the exiles did, we offer up our grief even as we dream of restoration of joy.

Thinking of this text, I remembered the joy of learning to make yeast breads. My mother, a superb baker, taught me. After I'd learned the basics, I found a recipe for Stollen, a traditional bread served in Germany on Christmas Eve. I was enchanted by reading of families gathered to eat the Christstollen before going to church, then returning home for gift-opening and late supper.

Stollen soon became my favorite offering for our Christmases. I loved adding almonds, candied fruit, and golden raisins to the dough, then shaping it into a traditional folded-over oval which later, still warm, was frosted with confectioner's sugar and decorated with candied cherries.

The Psalm's final words of joyous restoration and the people's testimony of coming home "with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves" seems to me like eating the Christstollen and enjoying special fruits of the Earth during the holy days. Given seeds which have ripened into grain for our bread, we come once again to Bethlehem, that "city of bread" where Christ is born.

Prayer: Holy God, giver of all great things, let us be restored even through tears, to your love, to your words that kindle joy beyond our dreams. Amen.

## December 12<sup>th</sup>

Isa. 61:1-4,8-11

Naomi Kelly

In the woods near my home in the Adirondack Mountains, there are a few red oak trees among other species. These trees are tall and strong, and their leaves are tenacious. One morning after a late-autumn snowfall, the oak leaves still clung to the branches. They were brown and dry, but encased in sparkling white frost so they glittered like crystals. The oaks stood out in their unique beauty while all the other deciduous trees were bare.

The images of nature in Isaiah 61 are the oak tree and the garden. The brokenhearted and the oppressed will be blessed as a strong planting from God. In the midst of chaos, of war and the suffering of the earth and its people, we see in this passage a turn toward hope. The resilient strength of the oak tree, the mystical garden where plants of all kinds spring up from the earth remind us that though there is great suffering, we also have a capacity for restoration and beauty.

These nature images can bring comfort in the face of societal and personal turmoil. They remind us that we are not alone in our struggles, that the earth nurtures and cares for all growing things.

As we care for the earth, and for one another, we are cared for. That is a message of great comfort.

*Creator God, remind us that when the world seems bleak and we are on the edge of despair to look to nature to see signs and wonders of your work. The trees, the gardens, the beauty of nature that surrounds us are reminders of your love.*

