

Prayerful Reflections

An Advent Devotional for 2024



Edited by Julia Styles

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Welcome to *Prayerful Reflections, An Advent Devotional for 2024*

This is the eighth edition of *Prayerful Reflections*. During the last four years, *Prayerful Reflections* has brought together the written reflections of 130 different women—pastors, theologians, missionaries, artists, writers, and community leaders from around the globe. Over the years, we have written 324 biblical reflections, offering readers an opportunity to pause their busy days and create space for holy listening. Over the last four years, as we all traversed a global pandemic, national protests, wars, and the challenges of everyday life, authors have shared their honest struggles, laments, proclamations, celebrations, and wonderings through the rhythm of *read, reflect, respond, and rest*, inspired by the spiritual practice of *lectio divina* or holy listening.

This edition is the first to immediately follow a U.S. presidential election. The re-election of a leader (and his allies) who repeatedly disrespected and harmed marginalized groups through rhetoric and policy, has left many feeling hurt, fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness. There is space for that in these pages—space to lament or question the public sphere and private realities of our everyday lives. For many of our readers it will be a breath of fresh air that Christian leaders are addressing real concerns and not brushing contentious topics under the rug, but for others these laments might be uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Each of you may resonate with some reflections more than others, which is why I encourage you to come back to the practice each day, recognizing that each reflection is the views of the author and not of everyone.

As a spiritual director, I acknowledge that many spiritual practices, including spiritual direction, are deeply personal and often done in private. However, just because something is private doesn't mean it's apolitical. After all this devotional celebrates the anticipation of Jesus, a person who was anything but apolitical. Jesus challenged the religious and political authorities of his day, championing the cause of the marginalized and oppressed. His radical message called us to love our enemies and to pursue justice for all.

In spiritual direction, we don't shy away from hard topics or discomfort. Instead, we pause, listen, and acknowledge our feelings. We seek guidance from the Holy Spirit and our conscience. This devotional and its community are a form of group spiritual direction, where we listen to the Divine within the words and silences of the text. My hope in spiritual direction is to bring out our inner mystic and our inner prophet, that as we encounter the mystery and goodness of God, we would also bravely face the inequities and injustices in our world and be inspired to loving action.

May the light of Christ meet you in the darkness of Advent.

-Rev. Julia Styles

Lament: A Powerful Act of Worship

A Reflection for Sunday, December 1, 2024 by Rev. Julia Styles

Lectionary reading for 12/1/2024: [Psalm 25:1-10](#), [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#), [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#), [Luke 21:25-36](#) Selected passage for reflection: *Psalm 25*

Read

Psalm 25 NRSVUE

Of David.

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

3 Do not let those who wait for you be put
to shame; let them be ashamed who are
wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and
of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth
or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love
remember me, for the sake of your
goodness, O LORD!

8 Good and upright is the LORD;
Therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right
and teaches the humble his way.

10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast
love and faithfulness, for those who keep
his covenant and his decrees.

Reflect

Psalm 25 is a poignant example of lament, a heartfelt cry to God in times of suffering and pain. Attributed to David, it is a poetic expression of his distress during a period of intense persecution. In verses 16-19, he pours out his heart to God: "16 Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me[a] out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. Consider how many are my foes and with what violent hatred they hate me."

David's honest and vulnerable expression of pain invites us to reflect on our own experiences of suffering. When faced with adversity, how do we respond? Do we turn to God with our lament, or do we suppress our emotions?

Many mistakenly believe that God doesn't want to hear our complaints or anger. However, Scripture reveals a different truth. Over half of the psalms are laments, demonstrating that

lament is a vital part of the human experience. It's a powerful form of prayer and worship that draws us closer to God during times of great suffering and pain. Lament allows us to be honest and vulnerable with God, acknowledging our pain and seeking His comfort and guidance. Just as we offer God praise and thanksgiving, we should also bring our lament before Him. By doing so, we honor our humanity and deepen our relationship with the Divine.

Today, I deeply resonated with David's lament. After the election, I have felt a profound sense of pain, disappointment, and anger. Inspired by the psalmist, I decided to express my feelings through writing. This practice allowed me to acknowledge my pain rather than suppressing it. It enabled me to be honest with God and with myself. In my own words (three pages worth), I wrote, "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me." By putting my grief into a creative outlet I gave myself space to hurt and to heal.

Whether you are experiencing a personal obstacle, grieving a communal loss, or angered by injustice, take your laments to the God who listens with compassion and patience.

Respond

With the Psalmist David as your example, set aside some time to creatively express your pain to God. It could be in a poem, a song, or a simple journal entry.

Or if it's difficult to access words, consider channeling your pain into a painting, collage, or dance. Not ready to express your own pain? Find some songs that reflect your mood and listen as a meditative practice, noticing if there are any phrases that stand out to you.

Rest

God who listens, thank you for hearing my cries. Help me to accept my emotions, and rise above whatever ugliness I encounter. God your goodness reminds me to channel my energy into acts of love, joy, and healing. May the fruits of your spirit be my resistance and protest in these uncertain times. Amen.



About the Author

Reverend Julia Styles is a community minister, ordained through [FCM](#). Julia is a [spiritual director](#) who enjoys meeting with people one-on-one to listen to their stories and encourage them in their faith journey. A firm believer in the power of community, Julia uses her leadership gifts to build a community of moms to support one another in faith, life and parenting in the Atlanta area. Find out more www.themom.co/groups/oakgrove.

Living At Your Best - In Purity and Peace

A Reflection for Monday, December 2, 2024 by Rev. Emily Wickstrom

Lectionary reading for 12/2/2024: [Psalm 90](#); [Numbers 17:1-11](#); [2 Peter 3:1-18](#)

Selected passage for reflection: [2 Peter 3:1-18](#)

Read

2 Peter 3:1-18, *The Message*

In the Last Days

3 1-2 My dear friends, this is now the second time I've written to you, both letters reminders to hold your minds in a state of undistracted attention. Keep in mind what the holy prophets said, and the command of our Master and Savior that was passed on by your apostles.

3-4 First off, you need to know that in the last days, mockers are going to have a heyday. Reducing everything to the level of their petty feelings, they'll mock, "So what's happened to the promise of his Coming? Our ancestors are dead and buried, and everything's going on just as it has from the first day of creation. Nothing's changed."

5-7 They conveniently forget that long ago all the galaxies and this very planet were brought into existence out of watery chaos by God's word. Then God's word brought the chaos back in a flood that destroyed the world. The current galaxies and earth are fuel for the final fire. God is poised, ready to speak his word again, ready to give the signal for the judgment and destruction of the desecrating skeptics.

The Day the Sky Will Collapse

8-9 Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change.

10 But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a raging inferno, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment.

11-13 Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but we'll hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness.

* * *

14-16 So, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master’s patient restraint for what it is: salvation. Our good brother Paul, who was given much wisdom in these matters, refers to this in all his letters, and has written you essentially the same thing. Some things Paul writes are difficult to understand. Irresponsible people who don’t know what they are talking about twist them every which way. They do it to the rest of the Scriptures, too, destroying themselves as they do it.

17-18 But you, friends, are well-warned. Be on guard lest you lose your footing and get swept off your feet by these lawless and loose-talking teachers. Grow in grace and understanding of our Master and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Glory to the Master, now and forever! Yes!

Reflect

The title of this section of scripture made me pause... “In the last days.” If I’m being honest, lately, it has felt like the last days to me.

In May of this year, the organization World Relief wrote an article that highlights five humanitarian crises we can’t ignore, stating, “We are living through the greatest displacement crisis in recorded history.”¹ The Israel-Gaza crisis has continued for over a year, with an estimated death toll of more than 43,000 people over the past 13 months, and 70% of victims between November 2023 and April 2024 were children and women.² The War in Ukraine is well into its third year, and according to UNHCR, an estimated 3.7 million people are internally displaced in Ukraine and more than 6.4 million have fled the country as refugees. The conflict in Sudan that arose in April 2023 is now expected to cause famine for 7 million people. The violent instability in Haiti reached an unprecedented climax in February 2024, with an estimated 362,000 Haitians (as of May 2024) that are displaced within the country. The U.S.-Mexico Border continues to be an ongoing humanitarian crisis that is multifaceted and complex, especially for families and minors.³

These humanitarian crises, along with what seems like countless others, compounded with the impact of climate change and the continued polarization within the U.S. political sphere, cultivate the environment for yet another unprecedented season. And not to mention the

1

<https://worldrelief.org/blog-current-humanitarian-crises/#:~:text=Israel%2DGaza%20Crisis%20%C2%B7%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20%C2%B7.Violent%20Instability%20in%20Haiti%20%C2%B7%20The%20U.S>

2 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn5wel11pgdo>

3

<https://worldrelief.org/blog-current-humanitarian-crises/#:~:text=Israel%2DGaza%20Crisis%20%C2%B7%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20%C2%B7.Violent%20Instability%20in%20Haiti%20%C2%B7%20The%20U.S>

hardships we face in our own personal lives: estranged relationships, financial difficulties, work troubles, dreams deferred. It's certainly not hard to think that the "last days" are here.

In today's passage, Peter is addressing false teachers of the time, and how dangerous it is to twist the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ - their own crisis. Peter warns his readers of this, and to encourage them to remain faithful and remember who Jesus is.

I'm not sure about you, but it can be tempting for me to feel more hopeless than hopeful in times like these, as if the false teachers and fear-mongering are gaining the upper hand. But then I'm reminded of God's faithfulness, like what Peter shares in this passage. I love how *The Message* translates verse 8, saying, "God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness." And while God's timing may, at times, seem late to me, God is always at work - right on time. God will get the final say to make all things right in accordance with God's justice and mercy.

Peter goes on to say that as we wait on the Lord, we are to "do our very best living our best" living in **purity** and **peace** (vs. 14). The word for *purity* here is really capturing two Greek words, *aspilos*, meaning 'free from vice/unsullied'⁴, and *amōmētos*, which means 'blameless'⁵. The word for *peace* in this verse is the Greek word *eirēnē*, which in this verse means "the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is."⁶ This is the same word for *peace* that's found in Philippians 4:7, "Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus" (NLT).

Perhaps as Peter writes, you already know these things (vs. 17). And yet, as we wait on the Lord, amidst false teachers, trials, and tribulations, may we know and live this **purity** and **peace** in our lives, a freedom from evil and a tranquility that can only be found in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Respond

- 1) **Listen to this song**, "Your Peace Will Make Us One" by Audrey Assad (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTQWSfzY2mw>).

Lyrics:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
You are speaking truth to power, you are laying down our swords
Replanting every vineyard til a brand new wine is poured
Your peace will make us one
I've seen you in our home fires burning with a quiet light
You are mothering and feeding in the wee hours of the night
Your gentle love is patient, you will never fade or tire
Your peace will make us one*

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g784/nlt/mgnt/0-1/>

⁵ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g298/nlt/mgnt/0-1/>

⁶ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1515/nlt/mgnt/0-1/>

*Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Your peace will make us one
In the beauty of the lilies you were born across the sea
With a glory in your bosom that is still transfiguring
Dismantling our empires til each one of us is free
Your peace will make us one
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Your peace will make us one
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Your peace will make us one*

What stands out to you from this song? Is there a word or phrase that captures your attention? Why do you think that is?

- 2) **Pray from “Prayers for Peace in the World” resource** from World Relief:
<https://worldrelief.org/blog-prayers-for-peace-in-the-world/>

Which prayer(s) are you drawn to?

Rest

“Peace Prayer”⁷

*“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”
Amen.*

⁷ <https://worldrelief.org/blog-prayers-for-peace-in-the-world/>



About the Author

Emily is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) who serves in a co-vocational role in Sacramento, CA, both as an associate pastor at Common Ground Church and as a hospital chaplain student at Sutter Roseville Medical Center. Emily is also a trained coach in The C.O.A.C.H. Model through the ECC. Emily is passionate about becoming a better listener and cultivating spaces where people can show up as their full selves. Some of her favorite things include: listening to people's stories, being with her husband Ben and 20-month old daughter Isabel, and spending time in and around water.

Home for Christmas

A Reflection for Tuesday, December 3, 2024 by Rev. Bronwyn Murphy

Lectionary reading for 12/3/2024: [Psalm 90](#); [2 Samuel 7:18-29](#); [Revelation 22:12-16](#)

Selected passage for reflection: *Psalm 90*

Read

Psalm 90 NLT

1 Lord, through all the generations
you have been our home!
2 Before the mountains were born,
before you gave birth to the earth and
the world,
from beginning to end, you are God.
3 You turn people back to dust, saying,
“Return to dust, you mortals!”
4 For you, a thousand years are as a
passing day,
as brief as a few night hours.
5 You sweep people away like dreams
that disappear.
They are like grass that springs up in
the morning.
6 In the morning it blooms and flourishes,
but by evening it is dry and withered.
7 We wither beneath your anger;
we are overwhelmed by your fury.
8 You spread out our sins before you—
our secret sins—and you see them all.
9 We live our lives beneath your wrath,
ending our years with a groan.
10 Seventy years are given to us!
Some even live to eighty.
But even the best years are filled with

pain and trouble;
soon they disappear, and we fly away.

11 Who can comprehend the power of
your anger?
Your wrath is as awesome as the fear
you deserve.

12 Teach us to realize the brevity of life,
so that we may grow in wisdom.

13 O LORD, come back to us!
How long will you delay?

Take pity on your servants!

14 Satisfy us each morning with your
unfailing love,
so we may sing for joy to the end of our
lives.

15 Give us gladness in proportion to our
former misery!

Replace the evil years with good.

16 Let us, your servants, see you work
again;

let our children see your glory.

17 And may the Lord our God show us
his approval

and make our efforts successful.

Yes, make our efforts successful!

Reflection

I remember the first Christmas I spent away from “home”. I had been married for a few years and my husband and I were spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in a new place for the first time. In 25 years, I had never spent a Christmas Day away from my family, and I found the

whole experience to be disorienting. No sign of my grandma's Christmas pies on the counter, nor the lights that my grandpa had carefully hung on the awnings outside, nor a present under the tree that I knew without fail was a LifeSavers candy gift box from my aunt. In fact, I woke up not feeling like it was Christmas at all.

I wonder if that is how Moses and the Israelites felt in Psalm 90. These Israelites, who spent 40 years in the wilderness away from “home”, away from all they had ever known. The Israelites spent 40 years, almost two full generations, disoriented in a foreign land. They complained, despaired, and feared what was unknown and uncomfortable. The wandering Israelites lacked a place and space to claim as their own, a place to anchor their belongings and anchor their weary souls.

But Moses, the author of this Psalm, knew their anchor was not their presence in a particular physical space, but their anchor was God's presence with them. The Maker of Heaven and Earth had always been their home, though their ties to their physical home had been disrupted. The Creator God, who made the very land on which the Israelites wandered, had never ceased to be their home. In this home, Moses says there exists an unfailing love that will remain all the days of his life and will remain all the days of the lives of the wandering, disorienting Israelites.

Psalm 90 acknowledges that though the human lifespan is brief in comparison to the influence and power of the God who created the mountains and the flowers, God's unfailing love is present always, regardless of location or circumstance. God's love is always home, even when we wake up on Christmas morning and cannot seem to get our bearings. God's love is always home, from now until forever, even when we feel like sojourners in a foreign land.

Respond

Pause for a moment and close your eyes. Picture yourself in an open field. *Where do you see yourself in relation to God as you stand in that field? Does God feel particularly far away? Is He close? What colors do you see around you? What feelings might be stirring up inside of you?* Pay attention to how you are breathing at this moment and note if any muscles in your body feel particularly tight or tense. Take a few deep breaths and whisper “God, you are my anchor. God, you are my home”.

Rest

God, thank you that your unfailing love is always with me, no matter where I am. Thank you that you are my home, even when I feel like I am wandering and unsure of where to anchor. I pray that each day of my life, I will be reminded of the power of your endless and magnificent creation, and find joy in anchoring my soul in your great, unending love.

About the Author



Rev. Bronwyn Leigh Murphy is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church and serves in a variety of ministry settings in Northern California and within her denomination. Bronwyn is a frequent guest preacher, speaker, and writer and has been patiently waiting since 1995 for the San Francisco 49ers to win another Super Bowl.

Beyond the Comfort of Her Kingdom

A Reflection for Wednesday, December 4, 2024 by Leana Lopez

Lectionary reading for 12/4/2024: [Psalm 90: Isaiah 1:24-31: Luke 11:29-32](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 11:29-32

Read

Luke 11:29-32

29 As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.

30 For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.

31 The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here. 32 The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here.

Reflect

What would you be willing to leave behind to uncover wisdom that could change your life? In Luke 11:29-32, Jesus tells the people in this passage to do as the Queen of the South, Queen Sheba. Queen Sheba traveled from the ends of the earth to seek Solomon’s wisdom. This queen, a woman of immense power and influence, stepped away from her throne for years, entering another culture, to seek understanding and truth. Her story is a lesson in humility, excellence, and the courage to follow where faith leads—even when it’s uncomfortable or costs us something.

As I reflect on her journey, I can’t help but think of my own experiences as a social service administrator. For the last 10 years, I worked in downtown offices with carefully curated plans and strategies, confident in the systems we were building to support underserved communities. But the truth is, transformation doesn’t happen in an “ivory tower.” The real wisdom, the real change, lies with the leaders already embedded in the work—those community organizers, faith-rooted elders, and neighbors who know what it means to live out resilience and faith every day.

The Queen of Sheba’s journey challenges me. She left the safety of her status and her palace to walk into a different world, one where she would not be in control but instead would have to learn. Similarly, I must leave my comfort and status to enter into spaces where the answers

aren't neat or easy. My calling was to go back to the real work, to sit with community leaders, some that I didn't expect to learn from, the ones rooted in faith and living the work of justice and mercy. Their wisdom has stretched me, humbled me.

The Queen also inspires me with her spirit of excellence. She didn't approach Solomon casually or with half-measures. She prepared—bringing thoughtful questions and intentional gifts. She reminds me to bring my best to every encounter, to check and recheck what I'm responsible for, and to honor the work God is doing through others by being fully present and prepared.

But what moves me most about her story is her follow-through. She didn't just seek wisdom; she let it transform her. She returned home changed, her faith deepened by what she discovered. Her story is a call to action for all of us. We can't stop at admiring wisdom from afar or dabbling in faith when it's convenient. We're called to step out, to engage deeply, and to let God's truth shape how we live and lead.

Her story is also about trust—trusting that when we step out in faith, the journey will be worth it. Whether it's crossing cultural lines, engaging with unexpected leaders, or simply opening ourselves to be taught, this kind of humility can change everything. It's a reminder to me, and to all of us, to let go of what's comfortable, to pay attention to the details of what God is calling us to, and to follow through with faithfulness.

May we all have the courage of the Queen of Sheba to humble ourselves, seek wisdom, and follow where God is leading us, even when it requires sacrifice. Because when we do, we too can experience the transformative power of God's truth and the joy of living a life aligned with His purpose.

Respond

What would you be willing to leave behind to uncover wisdom that could change your life? Jesus tells us that something greater than Solomon is here. As the Queen of Sheba sought Solomon's wisdom, how much more should we seek Jesus, the embodiment of God's wisdom? And how often do we hesitate because it means leaving the comfort of our plans, our control, or even our status?

Rest

Lord, give us the courage to step outside our comfort zones, following your call to wisdom with humility and excellence, just as Queen Sheba did. May we trust You in the journey, and allow Your truth to transform us, leading us to faithfully follow where You lead. Amen.



About the Author

As a nonprofit and healthcare leader, I've dedicated my career to transforming behavioral health systems and advancing access to quality care for those who need it most. My journey has been shaped by a dedication to designing systems that serve vulnerable populations, ensuring that innovation and compassion intersect to improve lives. I have consistently driven meaningful change across diverse settings, from clinical operations to community health initiatives.

Today, as the Owner & CEO of Flex Therapy and Behavioral Health Services where I continue to focus on creating and consulting on innovative, collaborative approaches to care transformation. I work closely with communities and stakeholders to create culturally competent, data-driven solutions that improve outcomes for high-risk populations.

Beyond my work, I am passionate about creativity and its transformational power in both personal and professional life. I believe that creative thinking, whether through art, writing, or innovative problem-solving, can spark change, enhance well-being, and lead to breakthroughs in how we approach both challenges and opportunities.

What Matters

A Reflection for Thursday, December 5, 2024 by Rev. Shannon Webb

Lectionary reading for 12/5/2024: [Luke 1:68-79](#); [Malachi 3:5-12](#); [Philippians 1:12-18a](#)

Selected passage for reflection: *Philippians 1:12-18a*

Read

Philippians 1:12-18a *New International Version*

Now, I want you to know, brothers and sisters that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice.

Reflect

I am always intrigued by Paul's story, namely his ability to maintain heavenly perspective in all circumstances. Several times in his letters he rejoices his captivity, proclaims that his imprisonment is a blessing – and it, in fact, was. Paul's conversion story and attitude towards his trials offer hope to those of us who have felt the muck and mire of our personal rock-bottom.

Paul was a man that practiced what he preached: trust God in all things and be focused on the things of heaven, not here in our fallen world. In this passage, Paul offers us perspective, seeing joy in the opportunity, rather than the oppression of his chains. He recognized that his circumstances allowed outreach to those who otherwise may not have had access to the message (i.e. the palace guard). Additionally, he was not concerned with the more selfish motives of others, he recognized the truth, but also saw beyond to the greater picture: "in every way... Christ is preached."

We can view Paul's chains as metaphorical – captivity, silencing, bondage – an involuntary or undesired weight we carry that attempts to keep us isolated or marginalized. We may not find

ourselves in a physical prison, but certainly many have found themselves bound mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Here Paul calls attention to the divine order that even in our dire circumstances, God can use it for good things, to share his glory and shine the light of the divine into the darkest corners.

Paul did not hide his imprisonment – he wanted others to know, to understand where he was and why he was there. His admission offered hope to those struggling, to those also in chains, to those waiting for restoration, and gave courage to those still free to share the gospel message. His stance while in chains was of joyful proclamation in the promise of salvation as he encouraged others on the outside. While he was contained, Paul was a driving force in a chaotic world of uncertainty and persecution as he offered the redeeming message of Christ and inspired others to courageously do the same. Paul understood what mattered most.

Respond

Think about your community, your world. Where have you faced (or maybe still facing) imprisonment and bondage? Where can your faith in the face of such captivity offer hope to others to proclaim the gospel without fear or grow confident in the Lord?

Rest

Merciful Spirit, thank you for the promise of hope – even amid our hopeless circumstances. We rejoice that your word is the final say and that you use all things to bring about your glory, even our sufferings. We thank you for those who have inspired us and offered courage along this journey and ask that we may be that source for someone else. May your light shine through us so that we can share it with others. May we be refreshed and courageous to continue sharing your message of love with those around us during this Advent season, and every day. Amen.



About the Author

Shannon Webb lives in Valrico Florida and is a wife, mother, daughter, and serves as a hospital chaplain after being a nurse for nearly 15 years. She is a practitioner of Christian Druidry and enjoys seeking God in Creation through hiking, kayaking, and sitting under her “thinking tree”.

The God Who Sees

A Reflection for Friday, December 6, 2024 by Rev. Sandy De Jesus

Lectionary reading for 12/6/2024: Luke 1:68-79; Malachi 3:13-18; Philippians 1:18b-26;

Selected passage for reflection: Malachi 3:13-18

Read

Malachi 3:13-18 *Christian Standard Bible*

The Righteous and the Wicked

13 “Your words against me are harsh,” says the Lord.

Yet you ask, “What have we spoken against you?”

14 You have said, “It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping his requirements and walking mournfully before the Lord of Armies? 15 So now we consider the arrogant to be fortunate. Not only do those who commit wickedness prosper, they even test God and escape.”

16 At that time those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. The Lord took notice and listened. So a book of remembrance was written before him for those who feared the Lord and had high regard for his name. 17 “They will be mine,” says the Lord of Armies, “my own possession on the day I am preparing. I will have compassion on them as a man has compassion on his son who serves him. 18 So you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Reflect

A father sits at the hospital bed of his son, wondering how this horrific accident could have happened. Down the hall a young mother clings to life, the victim of a terrible crime. Families feel like their lives are being crushed even after they have strived to be faithful, and they ask: Why? What’s the use?

Words of frustration or despair expressed by the people to the prophet of God seem to echo through the years. We hear these words from a friend whose marriage is falling apart. We hear them from the individuals to whom we minister. Those words echo in our own thoughts when we see others being oppressed, dismissed, forgotten, while the oppressors continue to prosper. When justice feels in short supply, and when our efforts seem to bear no fruit.

It is in this advent season that we are reminded that God is a God of hope.

In this passage, the prophet Malachi describes how God responded to his followers, then and now:

- The Lord took notice and listened
- The Lord recorded their hurts
- The Lord reminded them of his care for them.

“They will be mine,” says the Lord of Armies, ‘my own possession on the day I am preparing. I will have compassion on them as a man has compassion on his son who serves him.’”

Malachi continues with the promise that there will be a reckoning, a time when wrongs are made right, and when our through God is realized.

“Oh God, help us
in our fear and confusion,
in our uncertainty and grief
in our despair and longing.

Infuse us with a hope that doesn’t make sense,
with a love that doesn’t add up,
and with joy enough
to endure the long, long nights,
as we wait in hope for thy kingdom come.”

-- Kate Bowler

Respond

Reflect on times when you have felt despair over ongoing injustice. Ask God to remind you of the hope you have through faith.

Questions for reflection or journaling:

- Where did you see God in the midst of your suffering?
- How did your time of suffering draw you closer to God and to others?
- How can you partner in ministry to ease the suffering of others?

Rest

God of compassion, help me see with your eyes as I look at the suffering around me. Thank you for your care in my life and for how you connect me to those around me through your love and grace. Amen.



About the Author

Sandra De Jesus is an ordained reverend with the [Federation of Christian Ministries](#). She currently works as a chaplain at a Level I trauma center in Phoenix, Arizona.

Thoughts on Dust and Houses

A Reflection for Saturday, December 7, 2024 by Rev. Jennifer Friedman

Lectionary reading for 12/7/2024: [Luke 1:68-79](#); [Malachi 4:1-6](#); [Luke 9:1-6](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 9:1-6

Read

Luke 9:1-6 (NRSVUE)

“Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He said to them, “Take nothing for your journey: no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” So they departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.”

Reflect

Our passage in Luke 9 implies a straightforward path of success when following Christ. Share good news and bring healing, don't do any “just in case” packing, and it will all work out! However, we know as we read on in the very same chapter, this type of healing ministry does not always work out. Sometimes, the type of healing we think another may need is not what they need (Luke 9:49-50). Sometimes, healing doesn't happen (Luke 9:40). Sometimes, people just flat out reject anything to do with healing and good news (Luke 9:53-55). And when it doesn't work out, this passage makes it seem Jesus leaves an “out” for us: “Shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Some have taken this verse as a means of drawing a line in the sand with others. “If my message is not welcomed, then forget you!” Or “If you don't believe and behave exactly the same way I do, or do exactly what I do in ministry, then you're lost.” Being from Florida, I've known others who have actually shaken the dust off of their sandals, and tried to effectively “hex” or “curse” those with whom they've disagreed.

However, I do not believe Jesus said this to invite the disciples to leave metaphorically sticking their tongues out at people they did not like (even if it may be how we feel when others insult us, reject us, or our shared humanity!). Jesus didn't give the disciples a “gotcha.” Instead he instructed his disciples to not take anything with them, including even the dust of rejection.

Jesus reminds us, even now, our mission is to bring healing. It is not ours to insist. It is not ours to force. It is not ours to continue to try to ration and reason and stamp our feet if it is not accepted. It is ours to bear witness and receive the goodness of God in our own lives, to share that goodness with others, and to keep doing it while also allowing the dust to settle as it may regardless.

This dust settling is not that of a passive or reactive nature. It is not to assume what you said was right, or what they said was right. It is to recognize it is not our job to be judge. It is not our job to “put people in their place.” It is not our job, as followers of Jesus, to make anyone do anything. It is everyone’s individual and collective choices to follow the Way, or not.

If Jesus did not give us the choice, Jesus would’ve just been forming another cult of the time. He wasn’t the only claimed “Messiah.” Furthermore, people were right then—and are right now—to be skeptical of something so wonderful as healing and new life when the testimony of real life around can be so miserable. Especially when those who were doing the sharing were quite imperfect people themselves.

However, the piece of this story we must not miss is the beauty of shared giving and receiving. The disciples were sent to give good news, but Jesus counted on others to also give good hospitality. It was a requirement for all involved to both give welcome to new life and to receive new ideas. To give an open home to those who would show them a new way, and for those showing a new way to experience what it is like to be a welcomed stranger.

It is common to read the story and think of yourself as the disciples going out to share and shaking off the dust of rejection. However, imagine yourself as the ones receiving not only strangers, but a strange new way and message—even one of good news and healing. Is your home open to provide hospitality to newness? Is your home and your heart open to receiving a message so different from your deeply held beliefs? Are you willing and prepared to welcome strange people and strange ideas that hold new life and healing? Are you open to good news of great joy for all people?

Respond

Jesus instructs us to be open and ready; to provide open hearts to receive as well as to give. Take a moment to center yourself in what is good today. Then, notice how you may or may not stay open to new ideas and experiences as we “prepare room” for Christ this season.

Rest

In this Advent and beyond, may the dust of rejection be shaken off from you, may you have everything you need for your journey, may healing be within you and flow forth from you, and may your heart remain open to receive good news just as much as to share it. Let it be so.



About the Author

Rev. Jennifer Friedman is a new resident of Savannah, GA, chaplain, enneagram enthusiast before it was cool, and loud laughter. She is also co-vice president of the Southeast region with the [Federation of Christian Ministries](#). You can find her these days spending time with her husband and two dogs practicing peace in the home, in the community, and wherever the Spirit may take her.

Sitting in Darkness

A Reflection for Sunday, December 8, 2024 by Rev. Jeannette Conver

Lectionary reading for 12/8/2024: [Luke 1:68-79](#), [Malachi 3:1-4](#), [Philippians 1:3-11](#), [Luke 3:1-6](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Luke 1:68-79

Read

Luke 1:68-79 New Living Translation

“Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago.

We will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant—the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.

“And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.

Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”

Reflect

Let’s focus on Luke 1:79 from The Song of Zechariah. I was challenged to read the above last paragraph substituting the plurals for singulars—making these words very personal. “Because of the tender mercy of *my* God, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon *me*, to give light to *me* as *I* sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide *me* into the path of peace.”

I don’t know about you, but I’ve been sitting in my own personal darkness of trauma recently. I went through grief with significant periods of anger and sadness and denial. And then the turmoil of our country’s political darkness, injustice, and uncertainty set in around me as well. It’s been anything but peaceful!

We may understand that we can’t rush our healing from the shadows of trauma, or grief, or death of a dream. But oh, how we’d like to jump immediately to the “everything works out for the best” part! We might be tempted to put on a happy face and pretend that all is well. But, if so, we cheat ourselves of the gifts God gives us in the slow, deep process of reflection, of being where we are.

Particularly in this season of Advent, of waiting to celebrate the light, it is good and right to lift up our heads from whatever literal or emotional darkness we might feel... to lift up our eyes and recognize that God's tender mercy continues to shine the light of Jesus presence and grace into the dark corners of our world and into the dark corners of our hearts. It isn't only something that God did in the past—each Advent is an opportunity to make a fresh start. We can relearn to allow God's tender mercy to guide us into the way of peace.

Respond

This week, I invite you daily to make time to read aloud the words of the Song of Zechariah personally. Whether in the morning, afternoon, or night remind yourself that your God promises healing, loving light will break through your darkness.

Rest

Our tender, loving God, thank you for the glorious light of your presence. In the northern hemisphere of short dark days, we remind ourselves of your light when we see a sunrise or sunset. Help us to walk in your way of justice and peace, even when we can't always see the way forward. Even in darkness, we faithfully await your light! Amen

About the Author



Jeannette is the mother of four amazing adults and two outstanding grandchildren. She lives in the Skagit Valley of Washington state-- near majestic mountains, restless ocean waves, and tulips. She loves the beauty of words and nature and finds joy in riotous color. A pastor, coach, and advocate for women, she's always ready for coffee and conversation, or a game of UNO with the grands.

Comfort My People

A Reflection for Monday, December 9, 2024 by Rev. Jennifer Andersson

Lectionary reading for 12/9/2024: [Psalm 126](#); [Isaiah 40:1-11](#); [Romans 8:22-25](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 40:1-11

Read

Isaiah 40:1-11 MSG

Prepare for God's Arrival

“Comfort, oh comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but also make it very clear that she has served her sentence, that her sin is taken care of - forgiven! She’s been punished enough and more than enough, and now it’s over and done with.”

Thunder in the desert! “Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God. Fill in the valleys, level off the hills, smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks. Then God’s bright glory will shine and everyone will see it. Yes. Just as God has said.”

A voice says, “Shout!” I said, “What shall I shout?” “These people are nothing but grass, their love fragile as wildflowers. The grass withers, the wildflowers fade, if God so much as puffs on the. Aren’t these people just so much grass? True, the grass withers and the wildflowers fade, but our God’s Word stands firm and forever.”

Climb a high mountain, Zion. You’re the preacher of good news. Raise you voice. Make it good and loud, Jerusalem. You’re the preacher of good news.

Reflect

I love the season of Advent and all that it can hold in the waiting and seeking of the anticipated Light. Isaiah 40 may be a familiar passage to you. It is often referred to during this season as an indication of how far in advance Jesus’ arrival was foretold as the *Word Made Flesh*. It also gives us encouragement of how we can prepare the way for the birth of Love and Hope. Perhaps you have sat with these words before as a way to prepare your heart to celebrate the arrival of Good News with Great Joy in your life and heart?

For me, this year, full disclosure...I am *weary, worn out, burnt out on religion* (Matthew 11:28). As the collective “us” of humanity, there is reason to feel such things. Look around and within. You can find Lament. Anger. Negativity. Divisiveness. War. Pain. Vitriol. Grief. Fear. Apathy. Numbness. As I read these verses *this* year, in *this* season, in the current climate of my heart and the world around me, I am especially drawn to the very first words Isaiah offers, *“Comfort, oh comfort my people. Speak softly and tenderly.”* We can often rush ourselves past that,

believing we need to hurry to the *Shout! Make straight and smooth! Fill in! Level off! Shout!* This year, I hear an invitation to stay with *Comfort* and *Speak softly and tenderly* for as long as I need. I will most certainly encounter the Spirit there. It is from that place that my weary heart can learn what it is for me *this year* to *shout, make smooth, and fill in*, in the Spirit's time, for me.

Respond

Take a long inhale through your nose. Exhale with equal care through your mouth. Repeat as many times as you need until you sense your own spirit acknowledging the Spirit of the Word Made Flesh.

Now ask your spirit, “How do you come today?” Be honest.

Next, read the passage again. *Slowly*. Stay in the spirit in which you come. Pause when prompted and ask yourself –

- What in me needs comfort? Who in my life also needs comfort?
- Who/what within me needs to hear, *Your sins are forgiven. You've been punished enough.*
- What in me needs the care and attention of the Spirit?
- What needs to be *smoothed? Cleared out? Leveled off? Filled in?* And how?
- Who/What within and around me needs to be allowed to *wither and fade* because it does not give life? What is the Word Made Flesh offering to heal?
- And what is the Good News you need right now?

Rest

Gracious and present Word, thank you that you have arrived in the flesh in new ways to me today, right where I am, however I am. Comfort. Guide. Help me to hear your words for me this day. May I sense our presence with one another in a way that offers healing. With your help, I will prepare a way for you to be welcomed, and find a renewed home in me, this day. Amen.

About the Author



In her work life, Jennifer finds expression as a spiritual director, retreat leader, pastor, clinical social worker, advocate, and most especially, beloved child of God. In April of 2023, Jennifer opened the “doors” of [Journey Center of Michigan](#) to make space for meeting people where they are on their spiritual journey, especially for those who don't or can't find expression in traditional settings. Through it all, she loves to discover and expand her understanding and experience of God through

relationship, creation, music, nature, and creative expression.

Everything We need

A Reflection for Tuesday, December 10, 2024 by Rev. Corenna Boucher Hoyt

Lectionary reading for 12/10/2024: [Psalm 126: Isaiah 19:18-25: 2 Peter 1:2-15](#)

Selected passage for reflection: 2 Peter 1:2-15

Read

2 Peter 1:2-15 NRSVUE

2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. **4** Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature. **5** For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with excellence, and excellence with knowledge, **6** and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, **7** and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. **8** For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** For anyone who lacks these things is blind, suffering from eye disease, forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. **10** Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. **11** For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

12 Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. **13** I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, **14** since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. **15** And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

Reflect

One of the things my first ministry mentor taught me is that it's OK, even necessary, to cry. Our tear ducts are (at least one of) our God-given pressure release valves. Because of this, it is common for me to be teary during worship. Despite the commonality of this, one time as I was navigating a crisis and my eyes filled with tears during worship, a worship leader sent me a note after church that said, "I wanted to reach out to you today as I saw tears in your eyes at service

today. I just wanted to let you know that you will be in my prayers tonight. Sending you much love!!!” Of the dozens, maybe hundreds, of people I interacted with that month, this one person, who only knew me in passing, noticed that I was not OK. I want to be like her! I want to be a person who is in touch with what God is doing and the things going on with the people around me, able to notice things others don’t see, and acting in mutual affection, love and effectiveness.

Growing up 2 Peter 1: 5-7 was often quoted to me, and I started to believe that how I became a person of God was by my own efforts to achieve goodness, knowledge, self-control etc. When I failed at one, all progress was lost. In this way, I was engaged in a constant revolving effort to achieve love and effectiveness. This worship leader modeled something different, something the entirety of this passage shows us.

Reading a Scripture repeatedly, emphasizing a different word lends insight. Read verse 3, “HIS divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life...” Friends, it is by God’s power, not by your own! You do not have to muster the power or fortitude to obtain goodness or knowledge or any other godly attribute.

“His DIVINE power...” This power is not human, it is beyond the scope of our imagination. On those days that the ability to get through one more hour is beyond comprehension, on the days we have no vision for what goodness or perseverance could possibly look like, it is DIVINE power that makes the next step possible.

“His divine power HAS given us...” “Has” is such a small and common verb, but it stopped me in my tracks. It’s done! You *already* have everything you need. You don’t earn or find or create what you need, it is right now being poured into you, often in places and ways you have yet to see. As tears filled my eyes in worship that morning, this was beyond my ability to conceive of, yet this deeper, unseen truth carried me through.

And still, my heart cries, “But how?!” How is it that I use this power? God does not leave us to wonder but shows us the next good step toward everything we need. “THROUGH our knowledge of him” (v3).

Today, the question this begs for me is, “How am I?” How am I developing my knowledge of God? Praying? Listening? Learning? This verse isn’t a slogan for stickers to help us feel better when times are rough. It is inviting us to take action *now* in preparation for those days when the tears come unbidden and the path ahead is blurred beyond recognition.

Respond

Take some time to day to read verses 3-4 repeatedly emphasizing a different word each time, considering what God is revealing to you. (Do not skip the seemingly inconsequential words.)

It is God’s “very great and precious PROMISES” through which we “may PARTICIPATE” (v. 4) in God’s divine nature. What promises of God are meaningful to you? What are those things that bring you life? Where do you most profoundly experience God? Create a plan to include these things in your life regularly as you grow in your knowledge of God.

Rest

Provider God, it may take time, a lot of time, to attune our lives to all you have already given us, and it will look different for each of us. Meet us as we walk in nature, listen to music, pray with art, read Scripture; meet us in short breath prayers and in our long diatribes. Attune our hearts to you with the assurance that you have given us everything we need so that we may engage in mutual affection and love in fruitful, reconciling ways as this worship leader so beautifully embodied.



About the Author

Rev. Corenna Boucher Hoyt is a pastor living in Smithfield, RI where she participates with her two teenage sons in outdoor activities and martial arts. With a life-long passion for justice, reconciliation, restoration and healing, she has served in a variety of vocational ministries, and specializes in empowering people through speaking, building community and teams, coaching, as well as equipping and visioning ministries.

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Be strong, Do not fear

A Reflection for Wednesday, December 11, 2024 by Rev. Alicia Vela Anderson

Lectionary reading for 12/11/2024: [Psalm 126](#); [Isaiah 35:3-7](#); [Luke 7:18-30](#);

Selected passage for reflection: *Isaiah 35:3-7*

Read

Isaiah 35:3-7 NRSVUE

Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for
joy.
For waters shall break forth in the
wilderness
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp;
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Reflect

At the very beginning of my journey of understanding God, I latched onto a verse in Hebrews that I stumbled upon by accident. Hebrews 12:12-13 says, “So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.” At the time, I didn’t really understand that these verses were in a broader section about God’s discipline. All I knew is that at my young age of 16, tired hands and weak knees described the chaotic world that I felt surrounded by. For a long time, that verse felt like an encouragement that, with God’s help, I could find a way to take a new grip with my tired hands, and strengthen my weak knees to be able to walk and lead others. That’s what these two verses, taken out of context, felt like they were saying to my young heart.

But as I grew in my understanding, I read the rest of the chapter and realized that the author of Hebrews is actually reminding the reader that sin is prevalent and we may find ourselves being disciplined by God because of our acceptance of sin. In our discipline, we are meant to take a new grip and strengthen our knees to lead others in God’s way, rather than in sinful ways.

Here in Isaiah, we read a similar phrase, but this one feels like a promise rather than a rebuke. This time, it’s the promise of the redeemed being spoken over us. As if the writer is saying, “I know this landscape feels scary and unknown, but your God will come.” The joy of the

redeemed comes from this promise, that the God of all ages, the God of deliverance is coming to bring healing, life, and light to this dry earth. Our job in the waiting is to strengthen our weak hands and steady our feeble knees, whispering words of hope to others who are fearful.

We know this task is hard, to continue to stand strong on the promise while it feels like everything around us is falling apart. I honestly think that's why the instructions include to "say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong, do not fear." I think God knows that the best place to work out this waiting is in community. That as you say these things to others, you're also saying them to yourself.

One phrase, two contexts, two different ways of seeing the same words. I believe there's a time and place for both. There will be days where we need to remember that we have to fight the sin that surrounds us. But I believe in this advent season, we are meant to wait on the promise, to find comfort in community, and prepare our hearts for God to come and dwell among us.

There are times I wish that 16 year old me would have found Isaiah 35 before Hebrews 12. But the beauty of our God and of our scriptures, is that they are alive. The Spirit protected my tender heart, allowed me to take the Isaiah redemptive promise from the Hebrews rebuke. Beloved friends, remember that the advent season is a season of waiting, of hoping, of finding peace in the quiet rest, even in the midst of chaos. It's okay to take a break and let the promises of God provide you and your community with encouragement.

Respond

May I suggest a mantra for this season? May we take the words of Isaiah 35:4 as our mantra, our kind word to ourselves and one another. "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God." Say it to yourself today in a moment of fear, say it to someone else who needs to hear it.

Rest

God of all Creation, as we sit in the waiting, remind us of your presence. Remind us to find rest and strength in your presence. Speak kindly to our fearful hearts, reminding us to slow down. Fill us up with your love for others, with your grace for ourselves. Illuminate the community where we can find your comfort with one another, grant us spaces of peace and understanding. Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Alicia Vela Anderson is a pastor who is passionate about leadership development, walking alongside those who are reconsidering church, and helping kids and youth discover their voices and gifts to impact the world. She's also a writer, speaker, and pop culture enthusiast. She lives in Chicago and loves exploring new neighborhoods with her husband Jed.

A Change of Perspective within our Inspection

A Reflection for Thursday, December 12, 2024 by Rev. Rebekah Bolin

Lectionary reading for 12/12/2024: [Isaiah 12:2-6](#); [Amos 6:1-8](#); [2 Corinthians 8:1-15](#)

Selected passage for reflection: *Isaiah 12:2-6*

Read

Isaiah 12:2-6

“Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The LORD, the LORD himself, is my
strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.”
With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

In that day you will say:

“Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he
has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.
Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious
things;
let this be known to all the world.
Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among
you.”

Reflect

When there is so much grief in this world in every direction,
I take a look around with an eye of inspection.
Famine, corruption, racism, floods, abuse, war, and cancer,
Where are you, Oh Lord, we need an answer!

People are overwhelmed with anger, anxiety, and fear,
Many want to crawl under a rock and disappear.
It is easy to become tired of it all, apathetic, and depressed,
Where are you, Oh Lord, we need restorative rest!

I want to scream, “Why is there so much dissension and hate?!?”
“Why is there so much pain and grief as of late?!?”
I frantically look from side to side, down and above,
Where are you, Oh Lord, we need your unconditional love!

In all my questions, I try hard to settle my heart in meditation,
Conjuring up my faith as I pray for others, myself, the world, and our nation.
I open up to Isaiah 12:2-6 and the words immediately speak to my concern,
There you are, Oh Lord, giving an answer for which I yearn!

We shall not live in fear or be afraid,
God is our salvation, as we prayed.
We have a heavenly strength and a strong defense so we do not have to weep,
There you are, Oh Lord, your relief is like a well, unending and deep!

If we readjust our perspective in every direction,
We will see a sparkling light within our inspection.
Glorious wonders and a miraculous joy that turns our hearts to praise,
There you are, Oh Lord, wrapping us in your love in all our days!

Respond

We are not to ignore our pains and the pains of the world as if they do not exist; however, we are called to a higher perspective. Once we truly understand that God is good, God is loving, and God truly does not want us to fear, our whole body will yearn to praise God. We are still called to fight for justice, but with a deep faith that God truly wants the best for us and our neighbors.

Think of one specific area that is causing you to worry. Politics? Health? Finances? The state of the world? Job? Violence? Natural disasters? Something else? Spend some time praying Isaiah 12:2-6 over that concern.

Rest

Dear God,

There is so much going on in the world and in our (my) personal lives. At times it feels debilitating. But you tell us not to fear, not to be afraid. Your Word says you provide us with defense. Help me to have a better understanding and a deeper faith in this truth. May I see your glory all around me and praise you for all the glorious things you have done in my life—from the big blessings to the everyday provisions. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.



About the Author

After growing up in Wisconsin, Rebekah graduated from Fuller Seminary and has lived in Los Angeles since 2006 (minus a year and a half of living on the Big Island of Hawaii). In 2018 she started and pastored a church in Downtown LA. The church has been on hold since covid, but the vision is still alive and well and she hopes to eventually start it back up. Until then she is out traveling as she works for a major U.S. airline. In her free time, she loves to travel, hike, put together jigsaw puzzles, try new food, play soccer, laugh around the dinner table with family and friends, and enjoy the adventures of life the Lord takes her on.

The Time is Now

A Reflection for Friday, December 13, 2024 by Jeanne Barnes

Lectionary reading for 12/13/2024: [Isaiah 12:2-6](#); [Amos 8:4-12](#); [2 Corinthians 9:1-15](#)

Selected passage for reflection: [Amos 8:4-12](#)

Read

Amos 8:4-12 NRSV

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, “When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel
great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver and the needy for a
pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who lives in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed
about and sink
again, like the Nile of Egypt?

On that day, says the Lord God,
I will make the sun go down at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning
and all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on all loins,
and baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,
and the end of it like a bitter day.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land; not a
famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord.
They shall wander from sea to sea, and from
north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking
the word of the Lord,
but they shall not find it.

Reflect

Here it is, a little less than two weeks until Christmas. If you're like me, your head is probably full of meal planning for guests, shopping trips for last minute gifts, and end-of-the year report filing. You wake up early to the sound of the local newscaster telling you of global, national and local events of the previous day. You catch up on the earthquakes, the floods, and the loss of life around you. You even watch the bottom ticker tape for a report on stocks you've invested in. The radio is blaring; your mind is racing. You buzz the drive-thru for coffee and hurry on with your day. Your life is loud.

This was pretty much the same for the people of Amos's time. They couldn't wait to get rich off the labor of the poor, to go on with their luxuriant lifestyle, to complete their ancient to-do list. The prophet shouted in the marketplace but no one answered. Their lives were loud and pleasurable. His voice was vague and annoying.

We read about the Israelites and convince ourselves that we don't exploit the poor. We give generously to all the causes that flood our mailboxes. But Amos's words still echo in our ears. What are we doing about income equality, universal health care, affordable housing, accessible childcare, racial fairness? Our answers are mere whispers in the noise of the world around us. We teeter between advocating for social justice and feeling overwhelmed and helpless. We know we should act, should do the hard work, but not just yet. Our comfortable life beckons us. We'll get to God's work when we have more time. We'll be the queen of filling the food banks, the king of organizing low-income housing. We'll answer Amos's call. Soon.

And that's not all we'll do. We won't tune God out anymore. We'll spend time with the Lord, turn to him and hear his voice. His words will resonate in all our thoughts and actions. We'll read. We'll meditate. We'll listen. We'll be a God-centered woman, a Spirit-filled man. Someday.

But time may be running out. Just as the people of Amos's time, we may have to act now to avoid the famine in our lives. Just as God proclaimed a famine on hearing his word to the people of Amos's time, the famine may be upon us. The season of our life is filled with loudness. We forget how to hear the still, small voice within us. We are spiritually hungry, but unable to find nourishment.

Like the people of Amos's time, we need to take a breather from our loud lives and listen for God's voice. We must do more than mail a check now and then. We are obligated to work for social justice. We are required to feed the hungry, and to feed our souls. We must commit to answering God's call. Now.

Respond

Turn off the TV, close the iPad, and open yourself to God's word. Ask for directions on the path to equality for all and the strength to walk it. Pray for a spirit-inspired lesson plan of social justice. Then listen.

Rest

O God of abundance and all good gifts, help us to listen to your words. Give us the courage to act for equality. And bless us with the overflowing goodness of your voice. Amen



About the author

Jeanne Barnes is a retired English teacher living in the small coastal town of Gulf Breeze, Florida. There she has been instrumental in organizing a weekly faith-sharing group for the past 30 years. She is also co-chair of the Foster Family Support Ministry, an organization advocating for safe and loving placement of foster children as well as providing financial support and respite care for the foster families.

God in the Midst

A Reflection for Saturday, December 14, 2024 by Dr. Erika “Erie” Burt

Lectionary reading for 12/14/2024: [Isaiah 12:2-6](#); [Amos 9:8-15](#); [Luke 1:57-66](#)

Selected passage for reflection: *Isaiah 12:2-6*

Read

Isaiah 12: 2-6, The New American Standard Bible (NASB)

2 Behold, God is my salvation,
I will trust and not be afraid;
For the Lord God is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation.”
3 Therefore you will joyously draw water
From the springs of salvation.
4 And on that day you will say,
“Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name.
Make known His deeds among the peoples;

Make them remember that His name is
exalted.”
5 Praise the Lord in song, for He has done
glorious things;
Let this be known throughout the earth.
6 Rejoice and shout for joy, you inhabitant
of Zion,
For great in your midst is the Holy One of
Israel.

Reflect

Where is God?!

Undoubtedly, during the time Isaiah 12 was written, the people of God wondered where God was. The Assyrian Empire was in control, and the people of God were living in fear and pain from the consequence of their rebellion. In the midst of this though, God brought them out of exile and gave them promises for the future. This hymn of praise from Isaiah 12 reflects the joy over God’s salvation and what God continued to do in their midst. Today, when we ask, “Where is God?” we can also answer and say, “God is dwelling in our midst”.

God dwells in our midst to recalibrate our hearts. Despite our sin and our ability to be harmful to ourselves and others, God chooses to stay close and redirect us as needed. As the Bruce Parham adlibs in the song Hide Me “...He kept me from my own silly self...”. Sometimes that is precisely what we need, to be kept from our own silly selves. God knows if left to our own devices we may choose to worship ourselves, things, the facades we project to others, or harmful habits that we often enjoy. Because God loves us He remains present and active not only to guarantee access to heaven through our faith in Jesus Christ, but to recalibrate our hearts and save us from ourselves. Perhaps this is why you and I might personalize verse 2 and say, “God is my salvation...”.

God dwells in our midst to rescue us. In verses 2 and 3, Isaiah says “God is my salvation”...and “God has become my salvation”. The use of these verbs suggests that when things knock the

wind out our sails, and we do not know what to do, God is working on our behalf. Therefore we also can say, “I trust and will not be afraid”. Imagine a woman who is starting to shake in her proverbial boots because of her circumstances, yet she makes a volitional choice to trust and not be afraid. When we know God is our salvation, we have a certain confidence in His ability and willingness to show up for us. When we contend with the lies and attacks from others, He is our defense. When we struggle with bills, worry about our kids, or have anxiety about our future, God is salvation. When we are exhausted from taking care of ailing loved ones, God is our strength. All we have to do is think back on what He has done, and we will know He will never fail us.

God dwells in our midst to make His name reverberate throughout the earth. Some preachers say God is a bridge over troubled water, and that sounds good, but maybe there is a better metaphor to explore here. Perhaps God isn't just a bridge over trouble water but a lifeboat in trouble water. It doesn't mean the boat won't toss and turn. It doesn't mean we won't get wet or even swallow some water, but it does mean we won't drown. As we reflect on this fact we can't help but praise Him! And as we sing God's praises, just as Isaiah writes in verses 4-6, we ensure His name is exalted throughout the earth.

Respond

Read Zephaniah 3: 17-20. Listen to the song [“The Lord Thy God” by Bishop Andrew Merritt](#). Take a few minutes to thank God for dwelling in your midst.

Rest

Lord, thank You for being in our midst as we navigate the now and the not yet. We will trust and not be afraid.



About the Author

Dr. Erika (Erie) Burt, Assistant Dean for a Chicagoland area university, is a change agent with a passion for advancing educational equity and access for across technology fields. She leads large scale projects aimed at increasing the academic success rates of underserved student populations and for helping organizations become high-tech, high-touch, high-impact centers of excellence. Erika also has a PhD in higher educational leadership from Concordia University, a MDiv from North Park Theological Seminary & a MAT in education from Chicago State University. She is a DEI workshop trainer and presenter and a published author with works in theological journals and magazines. Erika is from the south side of Chicago and is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.

Bearing the Fire Within

A Reflection for Sunday, December 15, 2024 by Grace Bala

Lectionary reading for 12/15/2024: [Isaiah 12:2-6](#), [Zephaniah 3:14-20](#), [Philippians 4:4-7](#), [Luke 3:7-18](#)
Selected passage for reflection: *Luke 3:7-18*

Read

Luke 3:7-18

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. **9** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

10 And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” **11** In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” **12** Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” **13** He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” **14** Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

15 As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[a] **16** John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with^[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

18 So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflect

John the Baptist doesn’t hold back. In our text, his words cut through excuses and complacency and land at the heart of the truth. He confronts the crowd head-on: their status, their traditions, their reliance on being part of the “chosen” people—it won’t protect them. Instead, they’re called to something deeper: a genuine transformation of the heart and life.

I imagine his message landing in different ways through the crowds. For those comfortable, it’s a jolt—a wake-up call that challenges their privilege. For those who’ve been pushed to the margins, John’s fiery tone might feel like hope. His promise is clear: God’s justice is coming, and it’s not business as usual.

I think about how often we look for safety in things that feel familiar—our routines, our affiliations, our sense of self. John’s words remind me that true faith isn’t about clinging to what we’ve always known. It’s about bearing fruit, living lives that reflect justice and love in tangible ways.

I resonate with John’s urgency in this text. His vision of justice doesn’t trickle down; it turns systems upside down. When the crowd asks what repentance looks like, John doesn’t offer abstract theology but practical equity: share your coat, share your food, and refuse to exploit.

There are also echoes of womanist theology in this passage. Womanist thought—rooted in the experiences of Black women—sees God’s justice as communal and embodied. It asks: How are we caring for the hungry? Clothing the naked? Dismantling systems that exploit? These questions, urgent in John’s day, are no less pressing now.

And then there’s fire. Fire that purifies, consumes, and refines. When John speaks of Jesus as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, I feel both awe and trepidation. Fire destroys, yes, but it also ignites. What flames are waiting to be kindled in our lives, our communities?

This passage pushes us to examine our own hearts. What parts of us are like those “vipers” John calls out—selfishness, fear, or the ways I avoid the hard work of change? And it also makes me think about the world we’re building. What systems need to be burned away so justice can flourish?

Respond

What’s one way you can “bear fruit” today? Maybe it’s sharing with someone in need, advocating for fairness in your community, or simply showing up for a friend with love and intention.

Rest

Holy One,

Light a fire in us for justice and love. Burn away the parts of us that hold back and help us live lives that reflect your vision for the world. Amen.



About the Author

Grace Bala (she/her) is a hospital chaplain in Eastern Pennsylvania. As a chaplain, a birth doula and a mother to an *almost* one year old, Meryem, Grace spends her days learning about herself, the world and most importantly, her daughter’s world. In her free time, Grace and her family enjoy adventuring outside and taking advantage of their location by enjoying lots of international food!

Following Jesus into the Wilderness

A Reflection for Monday, December 16, 2024 by Rev. Ellie VerGowe Highlands

Lectionary reading for 12/16/2024: [Isaiah 11:1-9](#), [Numbers 16:1-19](#), [Hebrews 13:7-17](#)

Selected Passage for Reflection: Hebrews 13:7-17

Read

Hebrews 13:7-17

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.”

Reflect

Few leaders can be found that are worth our confidence and submission. In our political climate and even in our work and worship spaces, a text like this one can feel grating at best and abusive at worst. What can this text possibly mean when we are led by powers that encourage and fund violence of entire people groups, uproot beloved people from their homes, deny rights to those who love someone of the same gender, and degrade the bodies and choices of women? Does our sacred text really ask that we submit to all leaders anywhere and everywhere?

In my work as a hospital chaplain, I meet with people for only a small moment on their journey. I like to imagine I get to hop on the train of someone’s life until the next stop when they leave the hospital. And sometimes, my job is to connect people with resources for the next leg of their

journey. I share a grief organization I used to work for to the new widow, and share the number of a rabbi friend with a man seeking to go deeper in his Jewish faith practice. I would never send a vulnerable person into the arms of a leader that I did not already trust.

I have to imagine the author of Hebrews had a similar practice. While the authorship of Hebrews is unknown, it was most certainly written to a group of people known to the author, and the author knew the leaders of the community. These were specific people this writer was talking about and who were worthy of imitation. They could be trusted.

This text invites us to re-examine who we follow. Do our leaders do anything to get to the top including stepping on other human beings? Or do our leaders value the ones pushed to the bottom and advocate for their thriving? Have our leaders earned our trust?

The author of this text also invites us to follow the leadership of Jesus. Throughout Hebrews, Jesus is held up as the high priest of the faith and the one to be emulated. But he is pushed outside into the wilderness in disgrace, and he was killed there in the wilderness outside of the city gates because he hung out with the “wrong people,” worked for liberation and did not submit to leaders anywhere and everywhere. Readers of this Hebrew text are invited to follow his leadership, work for the thriving of neighbors, and go into the wilderness outside of the city gates too.

As a backpacker, I know that the wilderness is not safe. I have to pack my own food, warm clothes and be prepared for bad weather. But I also know that being in the wilderness is where I feel the most home and it shows me more beauty than I ever thought possible.

Respond

What wilderness might God be inviting you into? What does it look like for you to welcome disgrace if it means the thriving of others? May we gather our courage and heed the invitation to set aside our holy spaces, rituals and what we have always done, to threaten our own standing in the community, to welcome disgrace and go beyond the city gates to the unknown of the wilderness. May we look around and see Jesus in the beloved and beautiful faces around us.

What wilderness do you already find yourself pushed to by the powers that be? If we find ourselves already pushed into the wilderness (whether by our own choice or not), may our spirits be soothed. May we be struck with wonder and awe, even here. There is nothing like beauty, wonder and awe to soothe the soul. May we remember that we are in good company as Jesus is here with us too.

Rest

Take a moment to close your eyes and breathe. Bring to mind a place in nature that is soothing for your spirit. Imagine Jesus with you there and pray with him beside you. Read the following prayer and take a moment in between each line to just listen to the sounds of the wilderness and to the voice of Jesus.

*Oh Jesus you are the same, yesterday, today and forever.
Soothe my spirit whether I find myself inside the city gates or out in the wilderness.
Give me eyes to see and ears to hear the beauty all around me.
Show me the path to follow you into the wilderness and out of the city gates.
Give me courage to follow your example of liberation and love.
Remind me as I am in the wilderness, that this is where I find you.
Oh Jesus, soothe and restore my soul.
Amen.*



About the Author

Ellie VerGowe Highlands is a hospital chaplain in Seattle. She primarily serves two ICU units and a bone marrow transplant cancer unit, as well as provides care for hospital staff. She feels honored to get to know, learn from and offer support to people who are in tough situations. To find joy and peace, Ellie gets outside, notices beauty and experiences awe/wonder, makes art (painting, poetry, singing) and spends time with loved ones. She is married to Aaron and they have a beloved dog named Fiona.

Balancing the Peaceful Kingdom

A Reflection for Tuesday, December 2024 by Amanda Munroe

Lectionary reading for 12/17/2024: [Isaiah 11:1-9](#); [Numbers 16:20-35](#); [Acts 28:23-31](#)

Selected Passage for Reflection: *Isaiah 11:1-9*

Read

Isaiah 11:1-9 NRSV

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow^[a] out of his roots.

²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the
LORD.

³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,

⁴but with righteousness he shall judge for the
poor

and decide with equity for the oppressed of
the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his
mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the
wicked.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his

waist

and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed^[b] together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the
asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the

LORD

as the waters cover the sea.

Reflect

Visual artist Joel Schoon-Tanis paints the animals from this passage in a motif that shows up like an easter egg across his body of work. One of my most treasured versions of this take, called [Balancing the Peaceful Kingdom](#), is a long and narrow bumper sticker in which the animals are stacked one on top of another like a pyramid of acrobats - cow, bear, lion, calf, leopard, kid, wolf, and the tiniest lamb - together, precarious and peaceful.

The image is powerful in that it makes no sense (a lion balancing atop a bear?), yet, rather than annoy in its absurdity, the pyramid delights in its playfulness (a hallmark of Tanis's), inviting the viewer into worlds of colorful possibility.

Like the bumper sticker, which I am tempted to paste all over, including most recently on a neighbor's political yard sign, Tanis has painted his take on the peaceful kingdom in some not-so-peaceful places around the world. I first discovered the image in the foreground of a painting of the Washington Monument, capturing the day in 2018 that thousands of

schoolchildren marched to demand freedom from gun violence. I later learned that Tanis had painted the kingdom on the concrete wall in the West Bank that separates Palestinians from Israelis. He has painted it on images of the U.S.-Mexico border. Sometimes it feels like it is painted as a dare.

Peace is possible. Peace Studies scholar-activists distinguish between “negative peace,” a truce, a ceasefire, or the absence of overt hostility, and “positive peace,” the presence of justice, wholeness, and balance; a place where it is safe to play and create. In this prophecy, Isaiah painted a peaceable picture that championed balance, equity, and justice for the poor. And he painted it during days of extreme violence: the Assyrian invasion had decimated the Northern Kingdom, and thousands of refugees were fleeing south to Jerusalem. Perhaps Isaiah was daring his listeners both to imagine and even to enact a world of positive peace as they grew accustomed to their new immigrant neighbors.

Our Messiah, too, spoke of a peaceful kingdom. He called it the Kingdom of Heaven, and he said it was like a mustard seed (Mt 13, Mk 4). He told his listeners something they already knew: that the ingredients for the largest, most expansive, and flourishing of plants were already present in the smallest speck of a seed.

Like Isaiah, we close out 2024 surrounded by suffocating violence. What would it take to dare, with Isaiah, with artists like Joel Schoon-Tanis, with Jesus, and with each other, to imagine our lives otherwise? What if all that we needed for peace were not somewhere else but in fact already here?



“Balancing the Peaceful Kingdom” : U.S. Border Wall ; West Bank. Images by permission of Joel Schoon-Tanis

Respond

Spend a moment in reflection today on times and places in your life when you experienced positive peace, and another moment remembering times and places where peace was absent. Can you identify what made those times and places so different? Write down one way you can contribute to a robust, vibrant, positive peace. (It is OK if it is small, so is a mustard seed).

Rest

Consider a centering prayer. Settle your body and mind, then imagine yourself in a place that is safe, comfortable, beautiful, and undisturbed. Select one or two words that help you connect to peace, like “peace/ful”, “whole/ness”, “here / now”, “be/still”, or words of your own choosing. Repeat them in your mind as you breathe in and out. Like this: breathing in: - peace - / breathing out: - ful- . Re-read the scripture passage to close your time in prayer.



About the Author

Amanda Munroe lives in the Hudson Valley and loves to hear crunching and sloshing sounds when they walk, whether it's through leaves, snow, or slush. She spends her days imagining a peaceful world and crafting strategies for how to get there in her job directing restorative practices at a small liberal arts college populated by as many trees as it is people.

Amanda holds an M.Div from Union Theological Seminary and an M.A. in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University. They enjoy guest preaching and offer one-to-one spiritual care. Reach out to Amanda at am5520@utsnyc.edu and <https://www.linkedin.com/in/amandamunroe123>.

A Reverent Reality

A Reflection for Wednesday, December 18, 2024 by Rev. Rosalyn Bates

Lectionary reading for 12/18/2024: [Isaiah 11:1-9](#); [Micah 4:8-13](#); [Luke 7:31-35](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Micah 4:8-13 (New Living Translation)

Read

Micah 4:8-13 (New Living Translation)

8 As for you, Jerusalem,
the citadel of God's people,[a]
your royal might and power
will come back to you again.

The kingship will be restored
to my precious Jerusalem.

9 But why are you now screaming in terror?
Have you no king to lead you?
Have your wise people all died?
Pain has gripped you like a woman in
childbirth.

10 Writhe and groan like a woman in labor,
you people of Jerusalem,[b]
for now you must leave this city
to live in the open country.

You will soon be sent in exile
to distant Babylon.
But the Lord will rescue you there;
he will redeem you from the grip of your
enemies.

11 Now many nations have gathered against
you.

“Let her be desecrated,” they say.

“Let us see the destruction of Jerusalem.[c]”

12 But they do not know the Lord's thoughts
or understand his plan.

These nations don't know

that he is gathering them together

to be beaten and trampled

like sheaves of grain on a threshing floor.

13 “Rise up and crush the nations, O
Jerusalem!”[d]

says the Lord.

“For I will give you iron horns and bronze
hooves,

so you can trample many nations to pieces.

You will present their stolen riches to the Lord,
their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.”

Reflect

We must face this reality; we are limited in how much we can predict our future. We cannot anticipate every outcome, no matter how much we plan. Does knowing what will happen in advance ease the pain of a difficult situation when it eventually manifests? This passage explores the overlap between God's sovereign, victorious purpose unfolding and our development amidst displacement, opposition and conflict. The prophetic outcry of Micah, a voice to the northern and southern regions of Israel, reminds us all that God has more than one dimension. In Micah's times, this meant that God is just and compassionate at the same time. Through Micah, the Sovereign God speaks to citizens of Jerusalem. The message in verse 8 starts with what will ultimately happen. The majestic and royal reign of the city will be restored. The city will be known once again as a place of strength rather than weakness or instability. The leadership will be established. God's message continues with a report of the current situation.

The people are now screaming and horrified, vulnerable and unprotected. They are lost because they have no king, no leader to rule, no wise successor among them to guide them forward.

Here's the backstory. The history of leadership for the Israelites has had its share of stellar and scary eras. The people of Judah thought that their kingdom would last forever. God is saying that their kingdom, the one that they imagined would stand forever, is ending. It is closing out. They must now drastically adjust their expectations. The pain of this life-altering shift is described as a woman who is in labor—sudden, sharp and with great pressure. Interestingly, this type of pain is similar to how many American citizens have responded to the 2024 election results.

The impact of exile in this text is devastating. In our times, exile looks like deportation, disconnection, and disenfranchisement. But God...will gather the lame, the exiles, and the grief-stricken. God will rescue them and redeem them from their enemies. God makes a nation of the outcasts and lowlifes. As much as God loves people, God equally hates the sin that entangles them. God deals with naysaying nations as only God can--by redirecting the calamity they plan for the Israelites back to them. God gathers the Israelites for restoration and yet gathers the opposing nations for the destruction that they wish on the Israelites.

To be candid, people need and desperately yearn for leadership. Yet they sometimes reject wholesome examples of it. Regardless of the government type, whether in a monarchy of ancient Bible times or in the democracy of our times, the Sovereign God takes issue with any and every interference to getting our highest allegiance—even if the interference is a human ruler. Corruption, injustice, idolatry and empty ritual do not escape the sight of God Whose eyes are in every place and Whose eyes see from every possible angle.

Respond

Examine where you have placed or misplaced your hopes and expectations. Grieve while renewing your trust in God. Ask God to continually align you so that your allegiance to God remains free of impurity.

Rest

Prayer: Lord, You are the Perfect and Eternal Ruler. I am anchored by Your sustaining love, Your keeping power, and Your purifying presence. Thank You for Your prevailing purpose that governs my life. In Jesus' Name, Amen.



About the Author

Rosalyn Bates is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, an ordained Staff Pastor, and founder of Rosgarden Productions, LLC. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Education and Social Policy from Northwestern University, a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology from Wheaton College, and a Master of Divinity degree from McCormick Theological Seminary.

Set Down This

A Reflection for Friday, December 19, 2024 by Melanie Marie Myatt

Lectionary reading for 12/19/2024: [Psalm 80:1-7](#); [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); [Hebrews 10:10-18](#)

Selected passage for reflection: [Hebrews 10.10-18](#)

Read

Hebrews 10.10-18 *New Living Translation*

10 For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.

11 Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. 12 But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand. 13 There he waits until his enemies are humbled and made a footstool under his feet. 14 For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.

15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies that this is so. For he says,

16 "This is the new covenant I will make
with my people on that day, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds."

17 Then he says,

"I will never again remember
their sins and lawless deeds."

18 And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.

Reflect

T.S. Eliot wrote a distinctive poem from the perspective of one of the magi that can often be found at this time of year. He begins with the observation:

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'

Obviously he shows us this was not exactly an ideal time to start a journey. He details many of the hardships of the journey and their desires to be instead to be in summer palaces being

served sherbet. In fact, he gives more details about the difficulty of the journey than of their arrival:

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

The picture is so much different than what we imagine, whether we imagine the wise men at the stable coming just after the shepherds, or if we imagine Jesus as a toddler and Mary and Joseph living in a house in Bethlehem. It was, he tells us, “satisfactory.”

But it is upon reflection of that memory that the significance has come to his mind:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Why do I bring this poem up when reflecting on Hebrews 10? I think that the Hebrews passage also reminds us that we are no longer part of an “old dispensation.” And if we find ourselves returning to the old ways of rules and regulations, of earning our salvation, of being a “good person” or, at least we hope, “good enough,” then we have gone back to the “old dispensation” and we have found ourselves “at ease here.” We then are in need of “another death,” but not the death of Jesus.

Hebrews reassures us, in no uncertain terms, that Jesus died “once for all time.” By Jesus’ one sacrifice “he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.”

We are forever made perfect. Forever. Because of what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. *And*, we are being made holy. Now. Every day. But notice we are *being made* holy. My English teacher would want me to change that passive verb. But that is the whole point: we are being made holy. Jesus does the work in us. The fact is our “sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.

My hardest time as a chaplain is when my residents are talking about what might happen after death. Every one of them tells me either they believe they are “good enough” or they hope they are “good enough” for life with Jesus after death.

The “death” we need this Advent season is the death of the idea that we can be “good enough” to have a life with Jesus. As we wait for the time when Jesus comes again, let us “set down / This set down / This”.

Respond

As you reflect on the Hebrews passage from today, hold your hands out before you to God, showing that you bring nothing with you. The gift of this season is the gift of forgiveness made complete and perfect. Listen for Jesus’ words for you today.

Rest

God, in the busyness of the holiday season, we often add the burden of being properly thoughtful and thankful for the “reason for the season.” But whenever we lay a burden on ourselves, we take away from the freedom and liberation that Jesus achieved for us through his sacrifice. Today, let us lay our burdens down. Help us put to death the anxiety and the responsibility for our own salvation. Let us truly accept the rest, peace, and grace that can only ever come perfectly from you.



About the Author

Melanie Myatt currently works as a chaplain at a retirement community in Glenview, Illinois and as program assistant for the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction. She is also a spiritual director, writer, mom of four, and master of the 15-minute nap. If you like her writing, you can also find her on [Substack](#).

Holiday Shrinkage

A Reflection for Friday, December 20, 2024 By Jillian Evans

Lectionary reading for 12/20/2024: [Psalm 80:1-7](#); [Isaiah 42:10-18](#); [Hebrews 10:32-39](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 10:32-39

Read

Hebrews 10:32-39 NIV

32 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. 34 You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. 35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. 37 For,

“In just a little while,
he who is coming will come
and will not delay.”

38 And,

“But my righteous[b] one will live by faith.
And I take no pleasure
in the one who shrinks back.”

39 But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

Reflect

On Sunday, March 7, 1965, known as Bloody Sunday, 25-year-old activist John Lewis led over 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama and faced brutal attacks by oncoming state troopers. These people had been enduring the effects of Jim Crow laws and other forms of racial discrimination their whole lives. But on this day, they showed up knowing that there was a real possibility of violence against them. But they kept the faith and did not shrink back. The violence that ensued was captured by television crews and shown to the entire nation. The outrage for the treatment of Black citizens fighting for the right to vote swept across

the nation. This event was followed by others that eventually led to Congress passing the Voters Rights Act. The protestors were publicly exposed to insult and persecution (v.33) but they did not shrink back.(v. 38-39) Instead, they persevered and received the reward they were fighting for in the end.

Preparing for the holidays can sometimes be difficult depending upon our situations. Have you ever felt that you were in a situation that hurt so much that it is difficult to see God's will? Maybe you thought that the people around you had turned their backs on you. You may have felt publicly exposed because of your circumstances and therefore decided not to celebrate the birth of Christ. Today's passage of scripture reminds us that our Christian walk does not make us immune to suffering. Instead, we are told to not shrink back and persevere using our faith. So if your situation is not ideal right now, don't shrink back. Hold your head up, keep the faith, and know that His promises are coming.

Respond

In a few days, we will be celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Rejoice and be glad! No matter what your circumstances dictate, enjoy the season in any way you can!

Rest

Dear God,

Thank you for creating me in your image. Thank you for giving the gift of Jesus. Thank you for the reminder that if we stay in Your will, your promises will come. Thank you for your grace and mercy as I walk through the tribulations of life. When I stumble and feel downtrodden, thank you Father for accepting me as I am and loving me always.

In Jesus Name, Amen



About the Author

Jillian Evans is a Spiritual Director in Chicago, Illinois. She is passionate about children's ministry and has spent over half her life in ministry to children and their families. She and her husband are enjoying life as they help their three young adult children navigate life around the globe.

God as the Ideal Mother

A Reflection for Saturday, December 21, 2024 by Susan Schaefer (she, her)

Lectionary reading for 12/21/2024: [Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 66:7-11; Luke 13:31-35](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 66:7-11

Read

Isaiah 66:7-11

“Before she was in labor she gave birth: before her pain came up, she delivered a son. Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be delivered in one moment? Yet as soon as Zion was in labor she delivered her children. Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the LORD; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God.

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her- that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

(In Isaiah, Zion is both a name for God and a name for Jerusalem.)

Reflect

Contextually, this passage prophesies the restoration of Jerusalem. It is a vision of hope. Just as Mary waited for the birth of Jesus, the Hebrew people, who were exiled in Babylon, waited for the (re)birth of their nation.

More broadly, this passage reflects one aspect of God’s Being- the feminine. Zion/God has a metaphorical womb. She delivers Jerusalem and her children. Once Jerusalem is restored, the Hebrew people may drink from her glorious bosom.

How delightful it is to imagine God as the ideal Mother!

Mary was the ideal mother for Jesus. She was a very young woman with great courage. According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary didn’t flee when approached by Gabriel, who must have been terrifying. (“Do not be afraid.”) She accepted her call to be the mother of the Son of God despite its physical impossibility. (“Here am I.”) She, no doubt, endured the judgment of others, including Joseph, prior to his own angelic visit. As she neared the end of her pregnancy, she traveled to Bethlehem, where she gave birth to Jesus, not with her mother and sisters at home, but with Joseph away from home. When Jesus was not yet two, the three of them escaped to Egypt. She raised a confident son who, as a young boy, remained in Jerusalem in the Temple after his parents journeyed towards home. Mary was accepting of Jesus’ dangerous mission,

and was present at his torturous death. Mary’s faith sustained her, but it was her courage that made her Jesus’ ideal mother.

It takes courage to re-imagine our image of God. Because the Bible reflects a patriarchal society, its portrayal of God is predominantly male. Classical Western writings and paintings (i.e. Michelangelo’s painting on the vault of the Sistine Chapel) reinforce God’s masculinity. Yet all of humankind was created in the image of God. The feminine stories and metaphors for God in the Bible, when combined with the masculine stories and metaphors, paradoxically remind us that God has no gender.

Respond

Experiment with language:

Begin the Lord’s Prayer with “Our Father and Mother.”

Use God as a pronoun, repeating it more than once.

Use feminine pronouns for God- She, Her, Hers.

Be even more bold- Use They, Them, Theirs (The Trinity)

We anthropomorphize God by imagining God as the ideal Father. Is it helpful to re-imagine God as the ideal Mother? Or are there ways to imagine God that go, not only beyond gender, but beyond humanity?

Rest

“After Annunciation” by Madeleine L’Engle

This is the irrational season

When love blooms bright and wild.

Had Mary been filled with reason

There’d have been no room for the child.



About the Author

Susan Schaefer, DMin, is ordained by LaSalle Street Church to a Ministry of Philanthropy and Service. Endorsed by the [Federation of Christian Ministries](#), she enjoys being the go-to minister for her friends’ kids’ weddings. She’s a good-enough mother to her amazing son (he, his) and loveable labradoodle (they, them).

Blessed is She Who Believed

A Reflection for Sunday, December 22, 2024 by Eileen Lundy

Lectionary reading for 12/21/2024: [Psalm 80:1-7; Isaiah 66:7-11; Luke 13:31-35](#)

Selected passage for reflection: [Isaiah 66:7-11](#)

Read

Luke 1:38-55 NIV

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors.”

Reflect

Just prior to where our passage in Luke 1 begins, Mary has had a surprise visit from an angel. The angel informs her that she will give birth to a son. This will be a divine conception and Mary is told she will give birth to the son of God. Mary has questions, she is a virgin, so how will this happen? The angel gives an answer and Mary consents. Mary says yes, may your word be fulfilled in me. In her body, Jesus the Word, is then conceived by the Holy Spirit. She says yes, despite the risk of Joseph not believing her and the risks of being rejected, ostracized from her community and considered crazy in claiming her child was conceived by God. Mary says yes. She submits as a servant to the Lord and says let it be according to your word.

Mary is not left alone in her yes, the angel also gives her the news that her relative Elizabeth who was unable to bear a child in her youth is now pregnant in her old age. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and the words Mary has received from the angel are reinforced by a physical response from the baby in Elizabeth's womb. Elizabeth, then filled by the Holy Spirit, offers words of blessing to Mary. The blessing ends with these words. "Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her"

In response to this blessing Mary gives a song of praise, known as the Magnificat, in which she magnifies what God has promised and glorifies the Lord for what he has done for her by choosing her in her humble state to be the mother of the long awaited Messiah. What she is asked to do will not be easy, but Mary said yes, because she believed the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

I am currently in a period of transition and uncertainty. Plans to retire and move back to my childhood home are in the works and will soon come to fruition. I have also just received a medical diagnosis that will impact my future. In Mary's yes, I find both an example and a challenge for myself to say yes. To say yes, to whatever the future holds both the good and the hard. To say yes and welcome with open hands whatever comes, believing that the Lord will fulfill his promise to be faithful and to never leave or forsake me. To believe that He who began a good work in me will complete it and to rest in the promise of God's steadfast love that never changes or fails.

Beloved of God, the same is true for you wherever you find yourself this Advent season. May you say yes to whatever God is calling you to and rest in knowing He will be faithful and fulfill what He has promised.

Respond

Spend time in silence reflecting on where you are right now. What are you longing for and want to say yes to? What are you being called to say yes to? What are you afraid to say yes to?

What does that yes feel like? Is it enthusiastic, ambivalent, forced, hard, costly, reluctant or just the right thing to do?

Spend some time in prayer talking with God about that yes and listen for his promise to you.

Is there a “song” that arises out of your prayer? Offer it to God and then rest in His love.

Rest

God our Father, you are for us. Lord Jesus, you are Immanuel, God with us. Holy Spirit, you are God dwelling within us. Triune God you are always with us. We put our trust in you knowing that you will equip us for whatever you are calling us to. We rest in your promise to never leave us nor forsake us and we say yes. Amen



About the Author

Eileen currently lives in Omaha NE. She is a Registered Nurse employed by Nebraska Cancer Specialists. Eileen has a Masters in Spiritual Formation, a Certificate in Spiritual Direction and is licensed by the Evangelical Covenant Church as Bi-Vocational Pastor and serves at Community Covenant Church as an Associate Pastor. She is married to Steve and has three adult children.

Praise Strategy

A Reflection for Monday, December 23, 2024 by Rev. leisha Hawley

Lectionary reading for 12/21/2024: [Psalm 113; Genesis 25:19-28; Colossians 1:15-20](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 113

Read

Psalm 113:1-3 (NIV)

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, you his servants; praise the name of the Lord. Let the name of the Lord be praised, both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised.

As we enter the season of Advent, a time of anticipation and preparation for the coming of Christ, Psalm 113 offers a beautiful reminder of the importance of praise. This psalm calls us to lift our voices in worship, acknowledging the greatness and holiness of God.

Reflect

Advent is a season of waiting and hope, a time when we prepare our hearts for the celebration of Jesus' birth. Psalm 113 invites us to focus on the majesty of God, who is worthy of our praise at all times. The psalmist encourages us to praise the Lord from the rising of the sun to its setting, symbolizing a continuous, daily act of worship.

In the busyness of the holiday season, it can be easy to get caught up in the hustle and bustle, losing sight of the true reason for our celebrations. Psalm 113 reminds us to pause and reflect on God's goodness and mercy. As we decorate our homes, buy gifts, and plan gatherings, let us also take time to praise God for His incredible gift of Jesus Christ.

Respond

Praise Strategy:

1. **Daily Praise:** Make it a habit to start and end your day with praise. Reflect on God's blessings and express your gratitude.
2. **Worship Together:** Join with others in worship, whether in church services or small groups. Sharing in praise can strengthen our faith and community.
3. **Focus on Christ:** Amidst the preparations, keep Christ at the center. Remember that Advent is about celebrating His coming and the hope He brings.

Rest

Gracious God, as we enter this Advent season, help us to keep our focus on You. May our hearts be filled with praise and gratitude for Your love and the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Guide us to live each day in worship, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Amen.

May this Advent season be a time of deep reflection, joyful anticipation, and heartfelt praise.



About the Author

Rev. Leisha Hawley is the Director of Evangelism for the Evangelical Covenant Church. Leisha's extensive career in ministry and experience serving as pastor, prison chaplain, and coach has prepared her to work with regional conferences and local congregations throughout the Covenant.

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Hopeful Expectancy

A Reflection for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2024 by Kim Delp

Lectionary Reading for 12/24/24: [Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14, \(15-20\)](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Titus 2:11-14

Read

Titus 2:11-14 New Living Translation

¹¹ For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. ¹² And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God, ¹³ while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed. ¹⁴ He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds.

Reflect

We often look at Christmas with expectancy! Why wouldn't we? It's the perfect redemption story that everyone wants to love with a surprise ending. The perfect unexpected answer to the Messiah; Jesus coming in a manger, lowly and humble to save us all. Not with pomp and circumstance, as was expected. When it was prophesied in Scripture that the Messiah would come from the line of King David, during political turmoil and injustice (not unlike today) everyone waited with expectancy. But when people prayed and anticipated a Messiah, the last thing they may have considered was a baby in a manger. We also see that there is expectation in waiting for the cross! (v14). How often do we think about THAT? Expectancy in the cross sounds a little dark, I'll be honest. Expectancy of pain and death, devastation and seeming disaster? Maybe not so much. But expectancy in redemption? In resurrection? In restoration? I can get on board with that! We can't have one without the other.

The kind of life goals talked about in verse 12 are lofty, right?

“And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God.”

That is not something that happens overnight. Just as any transformation takes time, maturity in Christ is not immediate. It takes training and work. Failure and getting back up again, but this is the Biblical and Spiritual maturity that comes with wisdom. I love the NLT that says *to live in this evil world with wisdom* (v12). Do you know how hard that is? The great thing is that we are not just told these things of living a right life and then expected to figure it out ourselves. We have words from Titus, a roadmap and perfect example in Jesus of how to live, and the gift of grace in His death, resurrection and then the expectant hope of His return. How do we live in this evil world with wisdom? Knowing and living in expectancy that this evil world isn't the end. We have the hope and redemption of Jesus, embodied as “God with us,” Emmanuel.

Verse 13 says to “look forward with hope.” In the looking forward, we see a wholly reconciled kingdom and Emmanuel, God with us! Friends, the story isn’t over! We can live in the present world with the expectancy of the manifestation of the living God after this world. There is more to come, and we can endure all the mess of this world, knowing and believing and living in expectancy of the world to come in communion with Jesus.

We strive to live these lives of spiritual maturity as a response to the gift God has given us, not out of obligation, but out of the overflow that grace, mercy and redemption brings. We remember that Jesus came and died to reconcile everything, to bring justice and peace and wholeness. We are called to do the same on earth while we are here. The strive to live as Jesus did, a life of walking with sinners, dining with outcasts, reaching out and holding up people on the margins and loving the people in the world He died to save. Those aren’t just a special, select group, verse 11 says, “it is for all people” and as Luke 2:10 says, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” Our call from Titus and in turn Jesus Himself is to live lives as He did while we are here. Holding in tension the joy of the manger, the weight of the cross, and hopeful expectancy for the life with Jesus to come. While we wait, may we be people who bring peace, seek justice, and live in the hope of reconciliation and redemption.

Respond

As you enter into a time to respond and take in what you have read, holding the tension of the birth and death of Jesus as well as the expectant hope of His return, I want you to think on the 3 gifts that were brought to Jesus. As you think of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, it is a way to tie all of these things we hold at Christmas together. Do this when you have at least 5 to 10 minutes of uninterrupted time. Create a quiet place. Take a minute or two to calm your breathing, then take a minute to go head to toe and relax your body. Let go of the stress and weight you are carrying for a few minutes and focus on these 3 things. Take a couple of minutes to think of these different gifts that were given at the birth of Jesus and how you can bring the significance of them into your quiet space right now with Jesus. Take it a step further, maybe you have gold, or essential oils of Frankincense and Myrrh.

Gold: Reminds us of the value of our King. The King who is divine sees your value as well. He cared enough for you to create, redeem and give grace. Remind yourself of this beautiful gift you have received.

Frankincense – Temple worship always included this fragrant oil. Today, we are the temple, and the most important holiday preparation is cleansing our hearts so that His spirit can burn brightly in us! Jesus-centered hearts bring the scent of Heaven to earth. What beauty is there in engaging with His created beings to share Him (adapted from *Inspiration Ministries*)

Myrrh – Myrrh was an oil used in burial preparations after death. As believers, we have been buried with Christ and now live in His resurrection power. Myrrh reminds us that our earthly lives have eternal purposes. We endure and live in a broken world, but Jesus has overcome and reconciled it all and we have hope through His death.

Rest

CHRISTMAS PRAYER The Book of Common Prayer (BCP) p. 213

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen



About the Author

Kim Delp is a wife to Joel, mom to Simeon (14), Esther (10), and Ephraim (9) and serves in Ecuador, South America as a missionary. She is a Family Nurse Practitioner and the Co-Founder of the Santiago Partnership which partners in Ecuador to start medical clinics, Homes for At-Risk Children, different community-based programs with the goal of working herself out of a job. Her passion is empowering women to see

their value and worth and to use their passions to experience both things. She has only realized recently that writing is something that shows her identity and worth in Jesus. She is a lover of coffee, experiencing nature and being with people in authentic ways. Learn more about the Santiago Partnership at <https://www.santiagopartnership.org/>

The Light Amidst Darkness

A Reflection for Christmas Day, December 25, 2024 by Alexandra
Gee-Lewis

Lectionary Reading for 12/25/24: [Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-4, \(5-12\), John 1:1-14](#)
Selected passage for reflection: *John 1:1-14*

Read

Verse John 1:14 *Translation NIV*

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Reflect

John 1:14 has never been so colorful in a place full of darkness

Jesus

Chose to be birthed into this World

through the same vaginal canal

you and I entered through.

He chose

To be the one
who

Would save us from death
He was a fresh breath
Of air

A breath of hope
A breath of joy

Dwelling amongst us
Giving us

The opportunity to taste
And see
God's goodness

The fullness
Of the promise

Lying there, covered and crying

They praised

the only risen son

They praised The

one who

formed them

from

The same dirt

Jesus laid his head on in the

Manger

His presence was peace

In the face of danger

He laid

In That same dirt he would one

Day

mix with spit

to heal the blind man....

Glory, glory, glory

Immanuel

God with us

God was finally *with* us

For us

Saving us

from the punishment of sin

By his loving-favor

John the Baptist was the

Paver for

Yeshua

Our alpha and omega

The King of the Jews

The Good News

In Flesh

Thank you Father

For your strategy

For your love for me

And you, and him and her

For your grace and mercy

We were thirsty

For truth

Thirsty for

A Savior

That would be the light

In darkness

The order in chaos

The harness

That would lift us

Gift us

With his love

Lord,

Help us to love like you

To pray like you

To obey like you

Surrendering to your will

As you did

As you made your way into

The earth

Your birth

Was A breath of justice

A breath of joy

You dwelled among us

Ate with us

Prayed with us

For us

You were the way

And showed the way

Thank you,

Yahweh

Respond

You can respond to this passage by really pondering on the words of John 1:14 and the words of this spoken Word and allow the Holy Spirit to lead you towards action. I implore you to be open and obedient to what may come up. I ask you to surrender as Jesus surrendered, to love like Jesus loved and to be a light like Jesus was a light.



About the Author

My name is Alexandra Gee-Lewis. I am a fourth-generation minister in Madison, WI and the Director of Leadership Initiatives at Nehemiah, a local non-profit serving the Black Community. Outside of my professional life - I enjoy reading, hanging with my dogs, traveling, playing sports, spending time with loved ones, and exploring new restaurants.

May this book of prayerful reflection be a blessing to all who wrote it and all who read it.

When there is darkness, let your light shine.

-J.S.