





Phillips Theological Seminary is once again providing this Advent Devotional for you and congregations. We continue to be blessed by the response to the booklet and the way that it is used. Many have shared that you use the booklet to assist with sermon preparation, in church small groups and Sunday school classes, as a daily congregation-wide devotion, and for personal and family devotion time.

We have organized the 2024 Avent Devotional a bit differently. Instead of a different writer every day, we have asked four writers to write on the theme for each week of Advent. The writers are:

Week One, HOPE: Kurt Gwartney, Senior Director of Communications, Center for Ministry and Lay Training Instructor, and Alumni (1999)

Week Two, PEACE: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison, Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean, Johnny Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible

Week Three, JOY: Rev. Dr. Andrea Clark Chambers, Pastor at Restoration Community Church and Alumni Board Member (2010/2021)

Week Four, LOVE: Rev. Dr. Warren Carter, LaDonna Kramer Meinders Professor of New Testament.

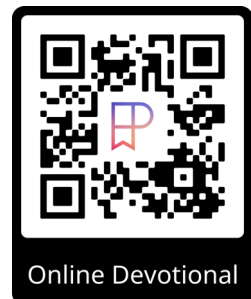
We have hope in the unchanging, sacrificial love of God, love of each other, our congregations and the love that fosters equality and justice in the world through the life of Jesus. We hope that as you read this booklet you are inspired to deepen your faith, restore your joy, and renew your hope.

We are grateful that you choose to join us in this season of reflection and thoughtfulness by reading the Advent Devotional.

In Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malisa Pierce". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Malisa Pierce
Assistance Vice President of Advancement



ptstulsa.edu/devotionals

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 1

Kurt Gwartney

Hope Amid Injustice

Luke 23:1-5

Jesus stands accused before Pilate, the wielder of systemic power. This moment mirrors stories of oppression experienced by many around the globe today. Pilate, driven by fear and the desire for control, manipulates truth, while Jesus remains centered in the presence of this injustice with stillness as a profound resistance, rooted in hope.

Hope here is a force of resilience. It doesn't wait for a better future instead confronting power structures with quiet strength. In the face of violence, exploitation, and inequality, we too are called to embody hope, not by waiting for change, but by believing that, with strategic actions, change is possible and, yes, even necessary. The Advent season reminds us that God's justice is always in motion, even when oppression seems ubiquitously overwhelming.

This passage asks us to recognize the systems that perpetuate injustice in the world and respond with unwavering trust in the liberating presence of the Divine. As Jesus stands before Pilate, hope stands with him – not as passive optimism but as a radical commitment to transformation. During Advent, let us embody this active hope, creating space for the Holy's justice in every act of resistance against oppression and inequality.

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 2

Kurt Gwartney

Hope in the Lions' Den

Daniel 6:6-27

Hope can empower each of us to stand firm in times of trial. Daniel's courage to remain faithful, even when thrown into a den of lions, demonstrates that. Hope is more than a feeling – it is a choice to trust in the goodness of God, even when surrounded by danger. Daniel could have chosen fear, yet he relied on a divine promise of protection and justice, trusting that God's love transcends even the most menacing of threats.

In today's world, we don't have to worry much about finding, let alone being thrown into, a lions' den. But we can experience dens of systemic injustice, societal fears, or personal crises. Like Daniel, we are called to live with conviction, trusting that God's justice and peace will ultimately prevail. Living this way isn't about escaping the danger but about transforming how we courageously engage it.

Advent invites us to strengthen our resolve in the face of trials. Like Daniel, we are not alone in the lions' den. The Divine's presence is with us, sustaining us, and calling us to live boldly for justice and love. This season, we are reminded that hope can grow stronger in adversity, calling us to remain faithful, not because the world is easy, but because God is with us.

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 3

Kurt Gwartney

Hope in Divine Action

Isaiah 64:1-2

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” This is a plea for Divine intervention in a world where suffering abounds. It’s an expression of yearning, an insistence that God’s presence is needed to disrupt injustice and transform the world. Isaiah’s hope is a cry for powerful action, but it also reminds us this response is not distant or abstract.

Reflecting on this text during Advent, we remember that God’s transformative power is not only a future promise but also a present reality. We are called to be the incarnation of that transformation. We are inspired to challenge systems designed out of privilege to help restore a just world. Hope is not simply waiting for Divine action. It is stepping into the work of justice ourselves, knowing that God moves within us.

May this prayer in Isaiah inspire us to act. We may not see torn-open heavens literally, but through acts of love, solidarity, and justice, we will participate in God’s ongoing work of transformation. Hope is the force that moves us to bridge the gap between our longing for justice and our active participation in making it a reality.

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 4

Kurt Gwartney

Hope in Things Unseen

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. (Heb. 11:1-3 NRSV)

This is a powerful reflection on faith, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” This passage reminds us that hope is not confined to what is immediately visible or achievable. Instead, it invites us into a deeper trust – believing for justice, peace, and love, even when those things seem far away.

Advent is a season that invites us to live into this unseen hope in a time when much feels broken. In the constant awareness of injustice and suffering, we are reminded that the work of the Divine continues beyond our perception. Hope can become a lens through which we see the world not just as it is but as it could be.

This trust in God’s unseen work challenges us to move forward, especially when the path is unclear. We don’t have to wait passively for change. We can act as though the future we hope for is already unfolding, waiting for a helpful tug. Advent invites us to trust in the fabric of justice woven by many, knowing the beauty of the design is far greater than one of us can imagine. Our role is to be weavers of that unseen hope, making space for God’s promises to flourish in our lives and in the world around us.

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 5

Kurt Gwartney

Hope in a Peace-full Future

Micah 4:3-4

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (“...but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.” Mic. 4:3-4 NRSV).

Here we catch a glimpse of God’s vision for the world – swords turned into plowshares and nations no longer preparing for war. This image of peace, which goes farther than a lack of conflict, is not a distant ideal but a tangible reality that we are called to live toward. The promise of peace in this passage is grounded in justice, where people can live without fear, under their own vines and fig trees.

During Advent, we are invited to participate in making this peace a reality. Hope, in this context, is not just an expectation that peace will come, but it is also the motivation that drives us to create communities of God’s all-encompassing peace in the here and now. Micah’s prophecy encourages us to actively reshape our world, challenging that which thrives on killing hope.

The Micah text demands us to imagine and build a future where peace is not simply the absence of war but the flourishing of life for all. Advent reminds us that living in a way that transforms swords into plowshares begins with us – with how we live, love, and act in the world. Hope becomes the force that compels us to live out this vision, trusting that peace is possible through our shared efforts and God’s guiding promises to be with us.

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 6

Kurt Gwartney

Hope in Tears

Luke 19:41-42

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Lk. 19:41-42 NRSV)

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, lamenting that the city has failed to recognize “the things that make for peace.” His tears reveal both grief and hope – grief for what could have been and hope for what still might be. Jesus’ lamentation reminds us that true hope does not ignore the pain of the world. Instead, it acknowledges the hurt and seeks transformation.

The Divine invites us to sit with both sorrow and hope. As we examine the injustice, division, and suffering around us, it is easy to become discouraged. Yet, the tears of Jesus are an invitation to embrace the world as it is, not as a way of giving up on it, but as a renewal of our commitment to the bringing of healing to wholeness.

Hope calls us to believe that transformation is possible, even through our tears. Jesus’ lament is not the end of the story – it is a doorway into deeper action. These sacred tears invite us to reimagine a hopeful future of inclusive love and a peace beyond understanding.

ADVENT WEEK ONE: HOPE

December 7

Kurt Gwartney

Hope and Resistance

Daniel 6:6-27 (Revisited)

Coming back to the story of Daniel, we see an image of resistance grounded in hope. Thrown into the lions' den for his refusal to worship the king, Daniel embodies a trust in the Divine that transcends fear. His hope is an opposition to unjust power. He resists the demands of empire, trusting that God's justice will be sustaining.

The Star Trek fan may recall, "Resistance is futile." Yet actively challenging systems of oppression, especially when the hope for change seems slim, is an Advent way of renewing our communities. This is not only an expectation for a better future, but it is the energy that propels us to act now because it comes from knowing that God keeps God's promises. We know our calling is to increase human flourishing and dignity.

Daniel's story encourages us to see our Advent hope as a form of resistance – insisting that God's vision for love and peace is worth living for. We can learn to embody this kind of hope, one that refuses to give in to despair, even when surrounded by "lions." Like Daniel, we resist not because we will get what we want in the short term but because we believe that Divine justice is inevitable. Hope, in this way, is our courage to act, trusting that God is with us in every liberative cause.

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 8

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

God's Shalom: Here & Now

Isaiah 61:1-11

For decades, the exiles in Babylon had dreamed about finally being allowed to return home to Jerusalem. Prophetic voices had promised them a glorious return, painting pictures of dry bones coming to life and a great highway leading them home. But when Cyrus of Persia issued the edict that freed them from exile, what they found in the city was anything but glorious. They had no land and their jobs were gone. Worst of all, their place of worship, the beloved Temple, lay in ruins. Instead of a wonderful homecoming celebration, they were faced with desolation.

With the remains of the once great city of Jerusalem at their feet, all they could think about was the work that needed to be done. They had to rebuild the Temple and the city walls. Not only was their city in shambles but so was the community. There were divisions among them, arguments about how to start and who would be in charge. It seemed utterly hopeless.

Out of the laments of mourning and despair, a voice declared: "The spirit of the LORD God is upon me!" A prophet stepped out from among the people and proclaimed words of encouragement. Without denying their pain and disillusionment, this messenger of God was called to preach release, freedom, healing, and hope. These promises of God, spoken by the prophet, were indeed good news. But the prophet not only proclaimed restoration of property but also restoration of responsibility. Like strong trees, this new community would stand as a testament to the God whom they worshiped and served, so that one day, in the near future, all other nations would look to them and to their future generations and recognize that they were a people blessed by God, that through them others would be blessed. This was just the motivation the people needed to begin the process of rebuilding their city and their lives. But the impact of these words would not end there. For this mission was not for the prophet alone. The spirit of God also had anointed the whole community to fulfill this call to make the messages of release, healing, freedom, and hope a reality.

The words of Isa. 61 call us to action and faith. The prophet's message was not a call to grasp at security or to embrace complacency. These were words of challenge, risk, and service. During this time of Advent, when we wait to see how Immanuel ("God with us") will be made manifest this year, the challenge of Isa 61 reminds us that we are called to do more than just wait. It is our task to make Immanuel obvious in the lives of those who need God the most. We are the messengers called by God to proclaim the Divine Favor and work for God's shalom to be experienced by all here and now.

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 9

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

God's Desire: Wholeness

Isaiah 2:1-5

During the 8th century BCE, Judah enjoyed a time of economic prosperity, but the riches were not shared with everyone. Those in power, both political and religious, allowed the worship of other gods in Judah; some even encouraged this practice. Such behavior was a breach of the covenant that God had made with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

As the prophet Isaiah observed the people's unfaithfulness and the desecration of the Temple, he shared God's disappointment and anger. It seemed that there was no hope, that the Temple was doomed to be controlled by foreign influences. As the capital city, Jerusalem was the place where decisions were made that affected the lives of all the citizens of Judah. The current economic situation was also contrary to God's desires for God's people. The rich were getting richer off the sufferings of the poor. Whereas Solomon had envisioned the Temple and Jerusalem as shining ideals of all that Israel's God wanted (1 Kgs 8), the center of Judah's worship and political power was a seat of corruption.

In this scene of despair, Isaiah dared to speak a word of hope and encouragement. There would come a day when "the mountain of the LORD" would once again be a beacon of justice and peace. Instead of oppressive decrees coming from Jerusalem, God's commandments would be proclaimed. The city would be an example of what the LORD envisioned for all of creation: shalom (wholeness). So amazing was this prophetic vision that Isaiah's words suggested the impossible; God would do something that was beyond human imagination. Justice would reign for all people (v 4a). Weapons of destruction would be converted into tools of production (v 4b). Peace would settle over the nations, and all would live in harmony (v 4c).

As we move through the 2024 Advent season, can these words offer us hope? Do we not need an assurance that the current situation (e.g., high unemployment, economic instability, wars, and rumors of wars, etc.) is not the final word nor God's desires? What can we do to help further God's desires for the world to become a place filled with justice, peace, and wholeness?

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 10

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Shalom: Peace with Justice

Psalm 146

“Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!” (v1) In this prayer, we are reminded of the Divine’s actions that seek a world of “shalom.” The Holy “executes justice for the oppressed; gives food to the hungry. . . sets the prisoners free; opens the eyes of the blind. . . lifts up those who are bowed down; loves the righteous. . . watches over the strangers; and upholds the orphan and the widow.” This description teaches us that the best way to praise the Holy is by working with the Divine to create a world in which “shalom” becomes a reality.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is consistently portrayed as requiring justice (e.g., Deut 10:18; etc.). Showing concern for the oppressed, the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is a common theme among the commandments found in the Torah. Israel is taught to take care of the most vulnerable because that is what God did for them in the Exodus and because that is how they will image God to the world (Gen 1:26-27) and be a “blessing” to others (Gen 12:2-3).

The word “shalom” in Hebrew means much more than just peace; it has a greater sense of wholeness. Shalom seeks the well-being of all. Shalom embraces justice, reconciliation and nonviolence. Shalom is the experience of being in right relationship with God, which would mean that you see yourself, your neighbors, and all of creation as God does – inherently good and worthy of respect.

This psalm and other biblical texts teach us that, when there is brokenness anywhere within the human family, no one can know wholeness. As those made in the Holy’s image, we are called to be agents of this divine shalom in the world, creating peace with justice for all.

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 11

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Steadfast Love

Joel 2:12-13 and 28-29

This passage contains the words of Joel with which most people in the pews are familiar: “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit” (vv 28-29). The first chapter of Joel describes the destruction wrought upon Judah by the locusts, God’s “great army” (v 25b), and the prophet’s call to repentance, which continues into the second chapter. In this section, the idea is put forth that it is not too late for God to have a change of heart (v 14), based on the prophet’s reminder to the people of God’s nature: “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (v 13). The Holy desires shalom not suffering.

Our reading is found amid God’s promise of future restoration for the people. When God decides to bring an end to their suffering, all that the locusts have taken away God will replace, making the land green and fruitful again (v 22). Beginning in the 23rd verse, the prophet calls the people of Zion to celebrate how God has brought them back to life with refreshing rain and abundant grain. Once these wondrous things have taken place, Judah will no longer “be put to shame” (v 26b), in the presence of their friends and enemies. God proclaims that this should prove, without a doubt, that God is “in the midst of Israel” and that there is no other god besides the LORD (v 27).

We must use great care when interpreting a text like Joel for a 21st century audience. While some of the images in this week’s reading are empowering and hopeful, there are also some very disturbing ones, which could easily be used to support an “us vs them” theology. Many people today may want to see the world judged and punished by God, but we are not free to take those matters into our own hands. That is God’s job. If, as this text describes, one day every person will be the recipient of God’s emboldening spirit, then perhaps there will not be anyone who does not “call on the name of the LORD”; all will be saved. With humility and awe, we would be wise to examine our own lives to make certain that we are not the ones who contradict the image of a God that is “gracious and merciful . . . abounding in steadfast love” (v 13). We must work for shalom in a broken world.

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 12

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Unprecedented Peace

Isaiah 11:1-10

This reading comes from an 8th century (BCE) prophet, Isaiah, whose mission was to the southern kingdom of Judah. The beginning of the 8th century BCE had been a time of prosperity for Judah, but everyone did not share this wealth. While the powerful were enjoying a life of luxury, most of the citizenry of Judah was struggling to survive. The ruling class imposed heavy tax burdens on them and required forced labor and military service. Survival was all that the people could hope to do.

The prophetic vision, found in Isa 11:1-10, echoes the dreams of people desperate for a better life. Since the fate of the nation of Judah was controlled by their human ruler and their relationship with God, the best hope that Isaiah could offer was a promise of a time when a just and righteous ruler would be in charge (vv 3 & 5), one who would “decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (v 4a). All the suffering of the poor would end, and their oppressors would be punished (v 4b). This new ruler would usher in a time of unprecedented peace, reflected not only in nature (vv 6-7) but also in the political realm (vv 9-10).

This vision of the “peaceful realm” (particularly vv 6-7 & 9) is also found in Isa 2:4, Isa 11:6, and Micah 4:3. The dream of a restored “Israel” was still incomplete; they remained under foreign control with no hope of self-governing. The “root of Jesse” was intended metaphorically, not restricted to a person of Davidic lineage, but rather a ruler who embodied the characteristics attributed to David and other “good” kings in Israel’s history. This could even be a foreign ruler/power. Most important was the vision of a world in which natural enemies worked in mutuality for the common good, and everyone knew a life of wholeness (shalom) that only came from God (v 9). What would it take for you to experience the kind of wholeness described in Isa 11:6-9 (and other places in the bible)? How do we live in right relationship with God and with all of Creation? Is that even possible in this 21st-century world? Is Advent about envisioning the “impossible” – shalom – and then working to make it a reality?

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 13

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Faithful Response

Jeremiah 33:1-16

Scholars typically date the book of Jeremiah to a time of great upheaval in the history of the people of Israel, usually during the waning days of the 7th century and up to (or even after) 586 BCE. Thus, Jeremiah can be understood as both a pre-exilic and an exilic prophet. The words attributed to him were first addressed to those living in Jerusalem before the Babylonian invasion and destruction of the city and Temple. Then, he prophesied to the exiles in Babylon.

Our reading is part of a larger oracle of hope/restoration (vv 10-16) amid Jerusalem's despair over the threat of the Babylonians. With confidence, Jeremiah proclaims that people will once again bring thanksgiving offerings to the LORD at the Temple; they will sing their praises with these familiar words: "Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for LORD's steadfast love endures forever" (v 11b)! The LORD promises that the desolation found in the land will be transformed into a "pasture for shepherds resting their flocks" (v 12b).

Perhaps the promise God is making to the people is not about a political change or returning to the way things were. Rather, it is a way of reminding the people of Jerusalem that they can make this new vision a reality. If they live by the Torah, loving God, neighbor, and self, they will ensure that the land is filled with "justice and righteousness."

In the USA, many feel a comparable sense of despair. Fears about the weak economy, unemployment, the national debt, wars and rumblings of war around the globe, and environmental destruction make it feel like we are under attack. Some religious voices prey upon fears and tell them who is to blame for these "attacks" as a way to enforce their moral views and to secure their positions of power. In these tumultuous times, we can also find words of hope in Jer 33:14-16. A faithful response to the fears and angst many feel is not to blame, deny, or give up; a faithful response is to remember that we have the power to create societies of "justice and righteousness." How we live our lives (as individuals and as communities) can help God's desire for restoration and wholeness to become a reality. With our words and actions, we can proclaim that the "LORD's steadfast love endures forever!"

ADVENT WEEK TWO: PEACE

December 14

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Divine Peace for All

Isaiah 40:1-11

This passage from Isaiah is found among the chapters attributed to Isaiah of the Exile, who comforted the exiles living in Babylon (circa 587-538). When the Babylonians conquered Judah, they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and forcibly relocated part of the Israelite community (primarily leaders and power brokers). After losing both the land that God had promised to their ancestors (Abraham and Sarah) and the Temple, the exiles began to wonder if God had forgotten or abandoned them. How would they survive? Would they ever return to Jerusalem?

Out of the despair, the Divine called a prophet to “comfort, comfort my people” (v 1a) and to deliver those words of hope. God had not abandoned them; there would be a future for their descendants and a return to the land promised to their ancestors. The prophet declares that a highway should be prepared for God “in the wilderness” to lead the exiles back to their homes. Where the exiles only saw impossible obstacles to a new future, God would make a way. Mountains will seem like small bumps in the road, and chasms will become bridges to the future (v 4a). There will be no stumbling along God’s highway; everyone will be able to travel the road safely (v 4b). Human powers and efforts to oppress others will fail when God’s word and justice become a reality (vv 6-8).

Today, with chaotic and ultrafast changes, many people experience being in “exile” even though their location has not changed. While many may not be seeking a physical return to a tangible location/geography, everyone who knows some form of exile wonders about God’s presence and longs for the assurance of a future filled with Divine compassion and comfort. The prophetic words of this unknown voice offer a vision of what God wants for them. Their “return” may be a “coming home” to God, to the safety known by a baby in their mother’s arms. Their return may be a liberation from what has been holding them back. Their return may be a restoration of dignity that comes with no longer begging for what others take for granted. People still yearn to hear words of “comfort” and to be reminded of God’s concern for all of creation, even the “least of these.” We must work for a time when: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace (shalom) will kiss each other” (Ps 85:10).

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 15

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Spiritual & Social Transformation

Luke 4:16b-19

Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:16b-19)

Luke 4:18-19 was the only scripture that we had to memorize in our Intro to Theology course in seminary. On the first day of class, our professor declared to us newly initiated students that this Lukan text, if we were truly seeking to understand the depth and breadth of Jesus’ life, encapsulated not only who Jesus was but also his mission in the world.

This text, taken from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, revealed that Jesus had not come only to bring a spiritual salvation as many of us had been taught. Jesus proclaimed that he had come to bring a social salvation that was to be embodied, practiced, and lived faithfully in the here and now.

He had not come to save them only from their spiritual sins in the great by and by but to save them from a society that saw their poverty, their conditions, their imprisonment, and their oppression as sin. He had come to disrupt systems and dismantle structures that threatened their wellbeing and flourishing here on earth. It was personal – it was political – and it was prophetic.

In his mission and ministry, no one was to be excluded. Everybody was included. As we enter into this Advent week of joy, Jesus invites us to join him on his mission to all that calls for both a spiritual and a social transformation. For as the text in Isaiah announces, those who do that will receive an everlasting joy.

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 16

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Joy for All

Luke 2:10

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” (Luke 2:10 NRSV)

I don't know about you but every time I see the words “fear not” in scripture, I immediately start to fear! Some suggest that it was the sudden appearance of an angel while going about their daily business that alarmed them; others believe that it was the glory of the Lord that frightened them, and still others maintain that it was likely the pronouncement itself that terrified them. But the truth is it's all speculation because any or all of these things could be the reason that the shepherds were afraid.

What I do know is that there is so much to fear in this world. Fear of violence and war. Fear of the loss of basic civil liberties and protections. Fear of poverty. Fear of deportation. Fear of climate change. Unfortunately, even fear of our differences. Sometimes it feels like there is no safe place to run to for shelter in this world without the threat of fear.

Yet the angel says, “Do not fear, I bring good news of great joy for all people.” The angel didn't come to bring fear or further insecurity. It said, “I've come with good news, and it's for all people.” Not for *some* of us. But for *all* of us.

Regardless of our nationality, gender, orientation, economic status, age, or religious affiliation, it's for all. That's the beauty of the good news – it's not limited and includes *all* of God's creation. So as we wait with eager expectation this Advent season, let's work toward a world where all of God's people will be free from fear and benefit from these good tidings of joy. For as the great Ella Baker proclaimed, “We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it happens.”

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 17

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Pause in Joy

Nehemiah 8:9-10

I wonder what would happen if we set aside a day – stopped for a moment – paused to take a few cleansing breaths today to rest in the joy of the Lord? What if we lingered for a while to enjoy the moment, to eat good food, to sip our favorite drink, to take some time to take care of each other?

What if *that* is the strength we need to get beyond this present moment? To be fulfilled, to be watered, to be nourished and refreshed together? To be buoyed, to be uplifted, to be sustained for the journey ahead? What if we tarried for a little while longer and clung to the words of Qoheleth that there is a time for everything under the sun?

Nehemiah didn't say that there wasn't anything to mourn about. He didn't say don't ever mourn or grieve. He didn't scold them or gaslight them into believing there was not good reason to weep and grieve for many things that they had lost. There was probably much that they heard in the words of the Law that they didn't see in their community, their world, or within themselves. But that was not the day to mourn or weep.

There may be some that are in despair with the results of recent elections. Some may be disappointed that life's circumstances didn't turn out as you had hoped. Some are disheartened because the world continues to be divided, disparate, despondent, and in seemingly utter disrepair.

There will certainly come a time to mourn for all that we have lost. But that's not today. What brings you joy today? Pursue it. Cultivate it today. Maybe God is calling us today to pause for a moment of joy and celebration as we remember where our strength really comes from.

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 18, 2024

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Joy Is...

Psalm 30:5

For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5 NRSV)

As a child growing up in the Baptist church, I heard this scripture quoted all the time. It was a familiar refrain that rang out in times of trouble, hardship, and uncertainty. But it didn't make sense to me.

Historically, African Americans and Africans in the diaspora have had to endure many painful atrocities and suffered through agonizing adversities, yet we continue to put our hope and trust in a God whom we believe will eventually deliver us. Sunday after Sunday, I'd hear the lyrics of *Amazing Grace*: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." But I couldn't understand: Why was God mad at *us* – and just when was this morning supposed to come?

I'm no longer a child, but still I wonder sometimes when will this long night end and the morning begin?

Is God angry with us because there is still a lot to weep about these days. From child hunger to wars raging to rising incarceration rates to senseless violence, we have much to weep about. But I realize now that biblical joy doesn't ensure a quick fix or an easy answer to these questions.

Often the joy attested to in much of the biblical witness is a joy that sustains and stabilizes you throughout life's ups and downs. It doesn't promise to remove life's challenges, but joy is a steadfast confidence and steady companion along life's journey that reminds you that God is with you. Joy is grounded in a faith that deeply believes that in time morning will come. In this Advent season, let us rest in the assurance that the Psalmist gives that joy will come in the morning and work to make it happen for all.

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 19

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Dancing with Joy

Zephaniah 3:17-18a

The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. (Zephaniah 3:17-18a NRSV)

Have you ever watched people dance? I love watching a good half time show, line dance at a wedding, or dance routine at a concert. It doesn't matter if it's ballet, swing, hip hop, salsa, or tap dancing, I'm intrigued by it all. But lately I've been mesmerized with watching my son and his friends dance.

These children have found the secret to the good life and longevity. They know how to play and have fun. They know how to float and glide, slip and slide. They know about soaring and dipping, shaking and flipping. They know how to levitate, prance on air, and be whisked away to another world without a care or concern in the world. I've never seen a child (or anyone) dancing that looks like they would rather be somewhere else. Instead, they appear light, playful, and free. They appear joyful.

This verse brings tears to my eyes every time I encounter it. To envision a God that's not angry or vengeful, judgmental or resentful, but a God whose endless expression of love is so lavish and abundant that it erupts in exuberant dancing. Zephaniah gives us a glimpse of a God who celebrates their love for Israel through joyful singing, dancing, and rejoicing. God was back in their midst, defeated their enemies, and returned to reclaim beloved Zion not in judgment but with joy.

Can you imagine God waltzing and foxtrotting over us with gladness? Can you envision God prancing and frolicking like raindrops on fresh cut grass? Can you visualize God delighting in us so much that they twist and twirl like children parading around the playground? This Advent season let us reclaim and recover this God who enjoys being in our midst and dances with joy.

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 20

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Rejoice Together – Weep Together

Romans 12:15

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15 NRSV)

Expressing joy has never been a problem for me. I like to dance. I love to laugh. I enjoy spending time with family and friends. If you invite me to the party, I can celebrate with the best of them. But crying is another story.

As a child, I would cry at the drop of a hat. Whether mad or sad, upset or confused, I wasn't afraid to express my emotions because I saw my family freely express theirs. But over time, as I grew into adulthood, I began to suppress my feelings of anger, frustration, and disappointment for fear that I wouldn't be able to control it. I was afraid that if I started crying, I may never stop.

Even now when asked to walk with people as they experience intense loss, endure excruciating pain, and suffer horrific tragedies, at times I'm tempted to retreat because I'm not sure if I can handle the unknown, the questions, the pain. But then I'm reminded of this verse that shows us that there is no prescription for these moments.

There is no patch or magic potion that will fit every situation. I remember that I don't have to have all the answers. We are just called to be *with* those who rejoice and those who weep – to be *with* them as God came and still comes to be *with* us. This verse reminds us that we are to be *with* them in whatever season they're in and gently remind them that it's OK to be human.

It's OK to experience the full range of emotions – that we're with them as they sit with the hurt, the anger, the questions, and even the silence. We're better together in the good times and the bad. Joy comes with knowing you have a community to do life with, and you're not in it alone.

ADVENT WEEK THREE: JOY

December 21

Rev. Dr. Andea Clark Chambers

Joy in Surviving

Psalm 16:9-11

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:9-11 NRSV)

Many of us can probably attest to the pits and pitfalls in life that have tried to swallow us alive. Some pits were natural indents in the road, some were dug for us, and others we unknowingly, dug for ourselves.

No matter what walk of life we come from, we have had to overcome something that made us who we are and brought us to our present place. For sure, those living and trying to survive in a world that is not always friendly to women, children, people of color, queer siblings, poor, and others on the margins have never been easy.

But I love the words of the prophet and poet Lucille Clifton who proclaimed, “come celebrate with me that everyday something has tried to kill me and has failed.”

Although we’ve all had challenges in life and encountered things that threatened to kill us, we survived. Despite the schemes, structures, and interlocking systems designed for our downfall, God has been present with us through it all and kept us from falling prey to the traps set before us.

As the Psalmist says, “Therefore, my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.” This Advent, celebrate with jubilant joy and endless gratitude that you are still here. All that tried to kill you has failed. So, live today.

ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 22 *Dr. Warren Carter*

Jesus' Conception and Birth

Luke 1:26-45; 2:9-11

It's Christmas week. Conception leads to birth. Angels are prominent.

Several contrasts mark the angel's announcement to Mary about her pregnancy and the angel's announcement to the shepherds about Jesus' birth. While an angel and shepherds greet Jesus' birth with joy (2:10), that emotion is missing from the conception story. Mary is perplexed not joyful (1:29, 34), submissive not celebratory, meditative not exuberant (1:38).

An unplanned pregnancy for an unmarried young woman in a culture where virginity was expected until marriage hardly merits joy. It does not seem like divine favor (1:28, 30). Mary rightly protests in naming the obvious obstacle (1:34). At Jesus' birth, the angel identifies him as "Savior, who is Christ/Messiah, the Lord" (2:11). Talk of a Messiah is missing from the angel's conception announcement. This absence is not surprising since expectations for a Messiah were neither universal nor univocal among first-century Jewish folks.

Rather, in announcing Mary's pregnancy, the angel locates Jesus in relation to God (son or agent) and to David (1:33-34). The angel declares that God has anointed or commissioned Jesus to be the agent of God's purposes. Jesus is presented as another figure entrusted with the tasks that God has committed to David. These tasks include ensuring justice for all, especially for the poor and needy. He is to destroy oppressors, protect against the violent, and ensure peace and food security (Psalm 72). Mary will elaborate these tasks in her Magnificat (1:46-56).

As followers of Jesus committed to living the ways of Jesus, we inherit these tasks. In our frequently broken world, damaged by exploitation, hostility, division, unequal access to resources, and selfishness (to name just a few of our challenges), we inherit these roles. And there is no shortage of opportunities for us to work for the world of justice and good life for all.

ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 23

Dr. Warren Carter

Mary: From Puzzlement to Praise

Luke 1:39-56

What is God doing in the world, if anything? Has God given up on us? Does our human sinfulness thwart God's power and purposes (Rom 3:1-3)? Being committed to the ways of Jesus can be perplexing. Mary is perplexed, yet reassured by the angel to embrace the divine purposes. She identifies herself as God's "slave" and aligns with God's word (1:38).

The scene with Elizabeth also foregrounds the divine word (1:39-45). The angel's declarations have come into being. Elizabeth is pregnant just as Gabriel had declared to Zechariah (1:8-25). Mary is also pregnant, though Luke's narrative does not elaborate how this has happened (1:42).

Elizabeth adds her witness to Mary as mother and faithful believer in "what was spoken to her by the Lord" (1:42, 45). God's word is presented as efficacious, powerful, and trustworthy.

These events show God at work in the world, actively accomplishing the divine purposes. Luke's Gospel begins by addressing Theophilus. The opening prologue assures him that the Gospel account provides security or certainty that God is faithfully carrying out God's purposes in the midst of the destructive power structures of the Roman empire.

Mary responds with praise (1:46-56). The hymn stops the story's forward movement to reflect on what has happened. Verses 47-50 celebrate God's favor or mercy to Mary, even though the divine word has landed her in a difficult societal location.

Verses 51-55 broaden the focus to God's actions among people. God is constructed as delivering the powerless from the exploitative powerful, and providing for the hungry and needy.

These actions express God's faithfulness to the word spoken to Abraham to "bless all the nations of the earth" (1:55; Gen 12:3). If we are to "keep Christmas with you all through the year" as a song puts it, we are to live out this commitment to good life for all. We do so – according to these opening chapters of Luke's Gospel – with the assurance that God is working for these ends and that we are to live as partners with God in this task.

ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 24, 2024

Dr. Warren Carter

Giving Birth in a World Out of Joint

Luke 2:1-8

We often celebrate Jesus' birth in very individualistic and spiritual terms. Jesus has come to forgive my sins or be my friend or help me when things get tough.

Interestingly, these are not the emphases of these verses. Here the focus is on visions of a different world.

Jesus' birth occurs in the context of an imperially exploitative act (2:1-3). Emperor Augustus orders a worldwide census. This counting of residents asserts power and political control to secure a world that benefits only elites at the expense of the rest. Emperors counted people in order to tax them. That was a means of transferring wealth and resources to elite control.

The reference to the census encapsulates the unjust Roman imperial world into which Jesus is born. Joseph and Mary are subjected to and cooperate with the Emperor Augustus' decree.

While the census asserts the emperor's control over people's lives, something subversive happens in the midst. The divine purposes send Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, David's city (2:4-6). Recall the angel's words of 1:32-33 that Jesus will inherit David's forever reign in the midst of Rome's rule. According to Psalm 72, that reign is about justice for all, especially for the poor and needy. It resists oppressors, protects against those who use violence, and ensures peace and food security for all (Psalm 72).

That's the gift of Christmas. It offers a vision of a different world, a transformed world of just living for all. The vision also functions as a summons to work for such a world.

ADVENT WEEK FOUR: LOVE

December 25, 2024

Dr. Warren Carter

Preaching and Praise

Luke 2:8-20

Angels and shepherds occupy center stage on this Christmas day. They provide interpretations of and model responses to Jesus' birth.

The stage is not the emperor's palace nor the Jerusalem temple. It is a "nothing-place," fields "in the region" of Bethlehem (2:8). Shepherds were of low social status. They had no social prestige or power. They were suspected of being dishonest in letting flocks graze in fields belonging to other people.

An angel preaches the first Christmas sermon that announces good news of a savior born in David's city, Christ/Messiah the Lord (2:9-11). The language of "good news" and "savior" was used for emperors and their actions. But in the midst of the empire, in David's city, another "savior" is born. Jesus is "anointed" to carry on David's agenda to transform the unjust status quo.

A host of angels praises God, and announces divine favor and peace (2:14). The Roman empire declared it brought peace through conquest. Angels pronounce a different peace comprising just societal structures and access to resources.

The shepherds respond by becoming godly disciples. They discern a word from God (2:15). They go to Bethlehem. Like missionaries, they bear witness to what the angels have told them (2:17-18). They praise God and celebrate the word about Jesus (2:20).

That's a Christmas celebration comprising proclamation of God's justice-working actions and a celebration of what God is doing.

NOTES

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Cover Artist's Statement

As I developed the 2024 Advent devotional cover, my intention was to keep it simple and unlike anything Phillips had done previously. In doing so, I chose a lamb as the primary subject of the illustration.

Not only does the lamb serve as a symbol of newness, but it also holds significance throughout the Bible as a representation of Jesus: a reminder of the birth and sacrifice that bookends his life. In this Advent time, may we be reminded of the lamb in moments of uncertainty, temporary as they are. May we strive to follow the lamb's example in our daily walk.

Placed above the lamb is an array of stars, including a prominent one reminiscent of the star that guided the Magi to Bethlehem. We also find that the star holds symbolism for signs and seasons.

Even in the darkest of nights, we can look toward the stars as a light – a source of hope. As the stars were created to separate night from day, may we not lose sight of the dawn that awaits us. May we reach for the joy brought forth by the morning.

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