

An Advent Devotional

by and for the communities of
Westminster Presbyterian
and First Congregational
Churches of Fresno

DECEMBER 3-25, 2017

Welcome to a word from your people;

family, friends, pastors,
sisters and brothers in Christ.

Take a few moments each day of this most beautiful season and ponder.

Engage with the text of the day. Enter into conversation with mediation provided by the author of the day. And pray for clear vision that you may experience fully the Incarnation of our God.

May you have a sense of peace, of calm and of fulfillment during a time that has become one of great stress: a time when one's loss is accentuated, the lonely feel lonelier, the hungry hungrier, the poor poorer.

At least once a day, we the people of faith, are reminded of the blessing received in the newborn babe. It is best outcome from our season of preparation.

Peace,

Pastors Pat Sheahan and Ara Guekguezian

Note: Great thanks to Kimberly Williams for her patience and excellence expressed in this work.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

The Promise for the Forsakers

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Isaiah 2:1-5

"Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Here in Isaiah and in Micah 4, we hear the reason why the Promise is necessary.

A judgement is coming because God's people have not participated fully in the covenant established between Yahweh and Yahweh's people. I am painfully aware of and very uneasy in pointing out the chief complaint against the people: pride, haughtiness. The Lord has a day against all that is proud and lofty (*Isaiah 2:12*). Sounds too much like me.

We are like the healthy child who claims, while wearing diapers, "I can do it by myself."

The period of coping with the consequences of the judgement of the Lord will be convulsive, but it will lead to a very different age, a period of peace and growth. The people will flourish, all the people.

The children of the covenant will have to walk the path to this place of peace first. The call is issued, O house of Jacob, come walk in the light of the Lord!

This is the season of Light coming into the darkness of winter, the darkness of sin and selfishness, the darkness of pride, of greed, of gluttony, of lust, of apathy. As much as the reason for judgement strikes close to our heart in our day, so may the Promise.

Prayer: May we hear both judgement and Promise in the words of this season. As we turn to you, O Lord, May we be guided by the Light that is Jesus to humbly walk on the path of justice and peace. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

From Kim Williams
First Congregational Church
Hosea 11:1–7

"I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love."

When you look at today's reading, the title glares back at you, "God's Compassion Despite Israel's Ingratitude". Ouch.

In this passage in Hosea, we see a God who knows that humans are easily distracted. I mean, this is the pattern, isn't it? God provides and the people are like, "FINALLY. It's about time, Lord!" and then within minutes they're back to taping posters of Baal up in their gym lockers. We're a juvenile bunch, us humans. But here's the best part, God keeps on. A good chunk of the time we don't even realize that its God working the miracles (or just untangling the knots we've made) behind the scenes. But there are those moments when everything is terrible and it's impossible to find a solution that won't make things worse—we all know those moments. Then one factor will change, and suddenly there's a light at the end of the tunnel. A rope ladder has been dropped into our pit of despair. We are able to fumble our way out following some basic, intrinsic guidance that we feel in our gut.

Prayer: And if we don't thank you enough, Lord (we probably don't), thank you for the small, silent ways you care for us.

Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Righteous Leadership!

Really? In this day and age and place?

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Jeremiah 23:5-6

We think it has never been this bad, this hard, this challenging. Jeremiah and his situation ought to resonate with us. The abuse of power is no new thing. It keeps happening over and over again, in place after place, nations, churches, schools, families. It seems it occurs wherever two or three are gathered, often even in Jesus' name.

In the midst of a hopeless time as a nation continues to crumble, initially from decay within, then attack from without, a word comes. Jeremiah speaks the word of the Lord over 52 chapters. It is an indictment of the nation as well as a powerful word, accompanied by action, of hope and Promise.

Hearing the phrase, "the days are surely coming" strikes either fear or offers hope. A new leader will be raised up. One who rules with righteousness and wisdom. The leader will execute justice and righteousness in the land. The implication is that the present leadership is lacking in these qualities. For most in Judah and Israel, life stinks. The reality that there is both a Judah and Israel is an indictment of failure in both leaders, political and religious, and the entire people.

The Promise is that in the righteous leader's days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. The name of the leader? The Lord is our righteousness.

In our time and place, we have the responsibility for selecting our leaders. Our criteria include smart, effective, good for business, good for the xxxxx class (my class of folk), Democratic, Republican, experienced, untainted by the muck and more of political experience. Jeremiah offers the one criterion, righteousness. Receive the gift offered. May the righteous Lord reign in you.

Prayer: Lord, I humbly ask that You reign in my mind, my heart, my life. That I may be yours now and forever. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

From Pat Sheahan
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Micah 5:2-5

Here is a Christmas promise for you from Micah, chapter 5, verse 5: "And this shall be peace, when the Assyrian comes into our land and treads upon our soil (Some manuscripts read "palaces"), that we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men."

That's what I want for Christmas — seven shepherds and eight princes of men! I have learned that sometimes things don't translate well from original languages to English.

Let's give translator Dr. Eugene Peterson a try: "And if some bullying Assyrian shows up, invades and violates our land, don't worry. We'll put him in his place, send him packing, and watch his every move. Shepherd-rule will extend as far as needed, to Assyria and all other Nimrod-bullies. Our Shepherd-ruler will save us from old or new enemies, from anyone who invades or violates our land."

Nimrod is synonymous with Assyria. Sometimes Bible writers say the same thing twice in different ways. It is a way of making poetic impact. Reminds me of the Nashville Predators. Not the "poetic" part, but the "impact".

I'm a hockey fan. My team is the Chicago Blackhawks. Last year we got knocked out of the playoffs in the first round. The big reason was that while we were fast and skilled, we were pounded into submission by a team that had brawn. Our skaters had a hard time in a seven game series holding up to the relentless nimrods from Nashville.

But this year will be different. We made some roster moves. We got a little younger. We got a little bigger without compromising speed. And we found a few players who like to bang in the boards. While not a messianic fulfillment, hope springs eternal and fortunes do reverse — just ask Micah.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me not to feel down-hearted and defeated when forces that are big, strong and intimidating come against me, my family and my friends. Thank you for promising to send a shepherd-ruler. I believe that your son Jesus can both love and care for me and also keep a watchful eye out for those that seek to do harm. I really appreciate that. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

Eternal Promise

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
2 Samuel 5:1-2; 7:15-17

“But I will not take my steadfast love from him,”

Job security for David the new king, not like the old king. As we prepare to again celebrate the eternal fulfillment of the Promise in the birth of Jesus, it is essential for us to hear of the full promise concerning David. The Davidic covenant is an eternal one, a dynasty forever. Jesus is the fulfillment of this covenant as he sits on the throne of David. Check the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. No matter what David does, he will not be removed and replaced as Saul was. Free to act, sure. David had shown himself to be a righteous one. He is faithful, courageous, strong, upright. But are there any standards or boundaries for David?

In the fourteenth verse of chapter 7 we read that God states that when (not if) David commits iniquity, God will punish, but not remove. A few chapters later we read about David's moment with Bathsheba and further on we read about the consequences of David's iniquity.

The steadfast love of God endures forever. The Holy Spirit is present always. Jesus' work endures eternally. We are free. Free to act, Righteously.

Our world is full of the negative consequences of unrighteous action, but the steadfast love of God endures. This is what we are preparing to celebrate.

Prayer: We are grateful for the enduring promise of your covenant with David. May we live faithfully within your Promise always. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

The Hope of a New Age

From Ara Guekuezian
First Congregational Church
Isaiah 9:1-7

"For a child has been born for us,"

The birth of a child, any child, brings a spark of hope. The birth of the heir to the throne, the ruler, starts a fire of hope in an entire people. This poem of Isaiah sings of this hope in the birth of the heir to the throne of David. It underscores the Promise of the Davidic covenant for a despondent people. "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish." The poet has my attention.

Every winter, as the nights lengthen, the light shining from this great word brightens my world. The lights of the Church shine brighter through the month of December. More evening activity, especially more special worship throughout the season of Advent.

Life is sweeter in just hearing these words, before any one of them is fulfilled. All the bad things are destroyed, consumed by fire. And every good thing will be ushered in with the new ruler, once the ruler grows into the role. Power, Justice, Peace Forever! For a moment it is all good.

Christmas allows us an extended moment of relief for the ordinary stresses of our lives. As we celebrate the fulfillment of this promise during the extended season of Advent, our trust in the new Promise of the end of the age with the return of Jesus is strengthened.

Prayer: it has been awhile, O God of the Covenant. There are moments when our hope ebbs, when the promise seems false. The gloom settles in, because the reality before gives rise to anguish. May the Spirit renew in us trust in the Promise of the new age ushered in the birth of Jesus. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

From Kim Williams
First Congregational Church
Isaiah 11:1–10

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them....and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

This passage from Isaiah starts out with the prophecy that the messiah will come from the branch of Jesse. The Messiah will judge using righteousness alone, and he will kill the wicked. Harsh punishment, but they're *the wicked*. This is exactly what we're hoping to hear that our deliverer-from-evil will do for us. But what about after the wicked are all gone? The rest of the passage goes to talk about the harmony this child of God will lead the righteous into. Which is awesome, but people will still be people, differing opinions and all. Even among the righteous, there's gonna be dissent.

There's a drastic shift from "he shall kill the wicked." to "the leopard shall lie down with the kid". What happens in the middle while the righteous, but not quite compatible, settle into their new roles as pals? I mean, the wolf and the lamb, the lion eating straw — at one point the lion has to say "Okay. I can do this. I will go against my nature in the name of peace. Pass the Tofurkey." The lamb, sitting next to his new #bff the wolf, and not wanting to damage their newfound friendship, has to somehow, be less delicious. (Just kidding, Wolf. The onus is on you for this one, no matter how much mint jelly the lamb is wearing). The key to this transition is mutual compromise.

Christmas itself requires compromise — just ask any couple trying to navigate whose mom's house they'll be spending Christmas dinner with, and which one gets Christmas Eve — or the dreaded weekend after. Figgy pudding isn't really a thing anymore, so the raucous bunch of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" fame have to compromise and either accept pumpkin pie and sugar cookies as a suitable replacement, or they'll have to go before they get some.

Without our understanding that it'll take discipline on both sides not to hurt or destroy one another, there is no possibility of us allowing ourselves to be led by a child to sit at the table with those who we don't like, no matter how righteous they are.

Prayer: God of the in between, help us to find peace within the middle-ground, so that our demands are not unreasonable (Figgy pudding, come on!), and so that we are open to the humanity of those we don't have much in common with, knowing that if we are capable of attempting to coexist, they're capable of it too. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10

From Elsie Taylor
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:57–68

- I. John's parents said "No" to circumcision
- II. I remember the word "circumcision" when I was in my younger years. At that time the medical field said "one must be circumcised for health reasons" (1940s?)
- III. At this time (1949 and on) our youth programs changed within the church and out of the church
- IV. Gradually our churches also changed from
 - a) Meeting in the foyer of the church
 - b) One entered quietly and read the Bible or just prepared for the sermon (no talking)
 - c) Minister and choir entered down the center aisle
- V. A few years back, at our present time, I saw an excellent movie on television around Easter

*Christ and John were in a boat on their way to an island,
when they landed and found a place to sit. "
Jesus" said to "John", "You are to write the whole bible."
and Jesus left.*

- VI. At the present time we have several new writings of the Bible. Why go to church? It is almost like regular school. All we have to do is pick up a Bible we understand.

Our recreation and gatherings are held in schools, house gatherings, and several organization places—

the crucial question is "how does one learn the true basics of our churches?" and the urgent one to learn presently,

"Thou shalt not kill."

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

The Juxtaposition

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Amos 7:1-9 versus Psalm 122

The song of Hope sung as the 122nd psalm. Beautiful and hopeful! This is who we are as God's people. I imagine it being sung with great joy in the temple during the first half of the eighth century before Jesus' birth. It was the time of great peace and prosperity under the rule of Jeroboam II. The expectation was of continued good times.

Amos speaks the word of the Lord during this heady time. He is not proclaiming an affirmation of Psalm 122. The Expectation is one of abandonment by God, who is angry and ready to punish and re-establish righteousness.

Hopes and Expectations: what is the problem, O Lord? The market is up. Sales high. GDP climbing. Unemployment low. No nation foolish enough to attack. What's up? Why the harsh tone? Amos, have you lost your mind?

The prosperity of the nation led to gross inequities between urban elites and the poor. Even the smallest debt was used to separate small landowners and farmers from the land that was their legacy and their liberty.

That was then, 780 ish to 740ish BCE.

NOW,...

Prayer: God of justice and mercy, be merciful on us. Help us to receive the whole of the gift of Christmas. The prince of peace reign in our lives, as we endeavor to establish justice, make peace, act with compassion and kindness, living in the Truth. Amen.

Pastor Ara

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Hope for the Best, Expect...

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Psalm 95

This Psalm captures the truth in the familiar phrase: Hope for the best, Expect the worst.

The Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all is to be praised with joy and humility.

The Holy One is to be heard and followed. The goodness of Lord is not to be tested.

Bad things happens to those who do not do the above.

Hope in the Lord! Place your trust elsewhere? Woe to you!

A new song was sung in sky above the field where the shepherds tended their flock:

Do not be afraid...

and the response is Glory to God in the highest heaven.

Hope for the best and Expect the best. The new catch phrase of the shepherds and all who witness God in flesh appearing.

Prayer: Thank you for coming and allowing us to see you with us. That our hope and expectation is one in Jesus.

Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

Do as They Say, Not as They Do

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Matthew 23:1-12

We have high expectations of our leaders, even, *especially* in the church. We hate hypocrisy especially in those that may have an influence on how we live. The Pharisees were just such folk. Jesus implores us not to dismiss their teaching, nor to incorporate their teaching in their way.

Most days as a pastor, I am convicted by this passage. There are days that my hearts breaks as I see my sisters and brothers who know better walk like a Pharisee. I cringe each time a proclaiming Christian speaks and acts like 'opposite Jesus'.

Each moment I proclaim or testify, I hope I am strong enough, wise enough, and courageous enough to follow through on my speech and my understanding of the Word that is Jesus.

My expectation is frequent failure. My trust is in the unbounded, unlimited, ever available grace of God revealed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Christ.

Peace. It is indeed a peace that passes all understanding.

Prayer: Grant me the wisdom and courage to live as I preach,
○ Lord.

Pastor Ara

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

From Rev. David Klingensmith
First Congregational Church
Psalm 126

California has been in a drought for the past several years. During those years I imagine that many farmers planted their seeds in tears, as the Psalm says, wondering if they would get water allocations or would see their plants wither and die. They hoped to harvest bountiful crops but a lot is left up to Mother Nature. Farming is filled with a lot of emotions when you live in an arid area like the Central Valley. You look to the past and know that you got through the tough times. That gives you hope you will get through future challenges as well.

Those who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem recalled God's past acts of restoration, chiefly the return from Babylonian exile. They said, "The Lord has done great things for us" and they were glad. Even their neighboring nations were in awe.

As we go through our Advent journey may we, too, recall God's restorative acts in the past.

May we know that God in Christ Jesus can restore us when we are going through personal crises or crises of spiritual drought.

May we remember and reflect on God's goodness and know joy, even as we know there will be countless other instances where we will need God's continued restoration.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

From Kim Williams
First Congregational Church
Haggai 1:1-15

"My house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses."

The scene: Christmas Morning with four children under 10 years of age. Glittery Santa Claus wrapping paper wadded up around the living room, gift boxes flung haphazardly in all directions, a mom frantically searching for scissors or a knife, and finally resorting to teeth—anything to swiftly cut the various ties binding a Lalaloopsie doll to her cardboard and plastic prison, while a gift-drunk toddler sits nearby on the verge of tears, eager to have the toy she saw on YouTube Kids in her hands. The other three children have mysteriously vanished, leaving behind only a trail of toy packaging and faint echoes of "No! That's my Nintendo Switch! Hands off!"

It's easy for us to imagine a destroyed house during the Holidays.

God is pretty straightforward about the trashed state of the temple with the prophet Haggai. Things have been left in disarray, justified away by a consensus among the people that it's not quite time for clean-up just yet. Haggai is sent to deliver the message to both the governor of Judah and the high priest's son, a stern and parental message that also sounds very familiar to us — "You'd better clean up this mess before you do anything else, or you'll be grounded." With the warning that the people should tend to the temple before they move on to their own home improvements, God also had Haggai tell the people, "I am with you." And then, knowing the Lord wouldn't abandon them over the mess they'd left behind, they took to the task of working on the house of the Lord.

Lord, sometimes we are so busy with our own priorities and concerns – and Paw Patrol playsets– that we forget to take care of the things you've entrusted to us.

Help us remember to care for your temple, and maybe even offer to pick up the wrapping paper after we're done unwrapping the gifts, before we move on to playtime.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

The Coming of the End (Not what you think); The Hopes and Expectations of Advent

From Charles and Sean Barrett
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Matthew 24:1-14

“...the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said,
‘when will this happen, and what will be the sign of
your coming and of the end of the age?’”

The destruction of the Temple! This was, apparently, a remarkable thing for Jesus to forecast with certainty. The temple and the structures associated with it were built, after all, with permanence in mind. They must have been far more substantial than the ordinary shops and dwelling houses of the city. Here was the legacy of Solomon, the pride of Herod, and the heart of Israel built, this time, to last. Then Jesus tells his followers that it is all going to come down — so far down that you can't find two rocks still stacked. That is as flat as it gets! To these people, that must have seemed as bad as it can be for this nation, because the temple was apparently the beating heart and breathing soul of its people. The disciples want to know when this is going to happen and how much time, exactly, have they got left. But Jesus tells them that even after the prime symbol of the nation is cast down, it will get worse! War, riots, famine, earthquakes, deception, hatred, persecution, and death will await mankind. Oh, great! Not exactly what anyone wanted to hear. Not exactly what was hoped for or expected.

It's not what we want to hear either. None of us wish to live through the rise of “false prophets who deceive many people” (verse 11), or face persecution and death for His sake (verse 9). But the Lord goes on to tell us in verse 13 that “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” This was not what the people hoped for. Not what they expected. They expected triumph over enemies. They hoped for the safety that comes from conquest. They desired a powerful leader to make it come about by force. Instead they got someone who told them to renounce living by the sword, and actually love their enemies. And, as we read in verse 14, this gospel is preached in the entire world the end will come. That will be the reunion with God. The final reconciliation with Him. That will be the universal reign of the Prince of Peace.

Prayer: Oh God of all, grant that we may have the strength to endure, the wisdom to discern deception, and the courage to stand firm. You are our fortress! You are our refuge! You are our strength! As our newborn King is with us, give us the will to stand with him. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17

Behind the Dumpster (Lost in Translation)

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Luke 2:1-7

“...and laid him in a manger,
because there was no place for them in the inn.”

In a manger? What is a manger? Misspelling? Why didn't autocorrect catch the error? In our urban world, even in places like Fresno, a manger is unknown. Wait a minute, I know what a manger and a stable are. I have seen them in and outside of churches throughout the Valley. And yet, you do not know the smell, the filth, the meaning of being born in a stable and placed in a manger. But I've been to the petting zoo. For an overwhelming majority of us, we do not understand. And we must understand if we are to tell the story in all its power (not glory, stables are not glorious). For glory, reference the choir of angels and the shepherds (again, foreign images to most of us).

If we were to tell the story today, where would the Christ child be born to make the same point? My vision: Mary and Joseph arrive in Fresno on the night of a huge football game. Every hotel room in town is booked. Tens of thousands have descended upon Bulldog Stadium from elsewhere. Bad hotdogs at the game have caused great distress among hundreds, so the hospitals are full also. Mary goes into labor. They are by a nice hotel. Joseph enters the lobby and is informed there is no room available anywhere in a fifty-mile radius. But there is a safe, quiet, sheltered space where the dumpsters are kept. So Joseph goes outside, rolls one dumpster out a few feet and Mary settles in for the delivery. The newborn babe is placed in a clean box from the Recycling dumpster, cushioned with bubble wrap. Ahhh yes! Now we have the requisite isolation, degradation, and **smell** that evokes stable-manger situation. God comes to us in the flesh in the humblest circumstance. That we may approach without any impediment except our own pride.

Prayer: God of all, all people and all knowledge,
grant us the requisite imagination and intelligence to tell
the old, old story in the language of the hearer. That they
may know and believe and receive the newborn king.

In Jesus' name. Amen

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

From Kim Williams
First Congregational Church
Psalm 125

When the weather cools, for whatever reason, I'm never quite prepared for it. It happens exactly the same way every year here in Fresno—we'll be cruising along at a flip-flops-and-light-sweater 72°, and then it'll drop 15° overnight.

This is the time of year that I instinctively begin buying hot cocoa packets, and I make sure my Snuggie is always within arm's reach in case I need a blanket—with sleeves! Even though the adjustment to wearing real shoes is rough, this is still my favorite part of all of the seasonal transitions. Every sip of tea is a little more warming, every warm cat that finds a lap is a little more appreciated, and every embrace becomes a human fortress against the chill.

In Psalm 125, God's people are cared for, and it's prayer asking that God will continue to do good to those who are good at heart. The imagery of the mountains that surround Jerusalem as an allegory for the way the Lord embraces and shields the faithful. Think about us here, in the San Joaquin Valley, mountains hugging us from every angle. On these foggy December mornings we can't see the Sierra Nevadas, but we know they haven't moved away from us. They are here, and they've always been here*. Same thing with the Lord. And just like the warmth and comfort we feel from our favorite hoodie sweatshirts, we are able to take that comfort in knowing that God is here with us. Always.

*So the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on
and forevermore. Amen!*

*Okay, so they've always been here as of like, 4 million years ago. We're not gonna let a little science ruin the metaphor though, right?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

From Kim Williams
First Congregational Church
2 Kings 2:9–22

Today's story from 2 Kings is of Elijah's ascent to heaven, his friend and successor Elisha beside him as it happens. Elisha, knowing that his time with Elijah is drawing to a close, asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit.

"You have asked a hard thing..."

It's not an easy task to give 100% of ourselves, but it's possible. I suspect that even when we say we're giving 100%, it's still maybe, 75% tops. We have to stop and eat or rest if a task is lengthy or strenuous. In situations where the fight-or-flight part of our brain kicks in, we probably raise that up to 92%. Elisha is asking for double. Math has never been a strength of mine, but even I know you can only give 100% of anything.

"You have asked a hard thing; yet..."

Elijah, knowing what Elisha will have to take on, finds a way. All he asks is that his friend watch him as he is taken, until he can see him no longer.

Elisha, the faithful friend, watches to the end as his beloved Elijah is whisked up into the heavens in a chariot of fire. As the grief of loss settles in on him, wondrously, so does the mantle of Elijah. Both faithful in their promises to one another, Elisha is ready to accept his role as prophet.

Lord of the double-share and the improbable 200%, help us to serve you as faithfully as your prophets Elijah and Elisha did. When we find ourselves nearing our 92% threshold – especially when we are experiencing grief or loss, strengthen our spirits.

Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20

From Peter Wall
First Congregational Church
Malachi 3:16–4:6

Advent is a season of expectant waiting. But for what? What should I expect? What momentous event is supposed to occur when the time is full and the waiting is done? The Christmas reversal, when our image of God changes from parent to child, is certainly astounding (and deserves more consideration in this age of "helicopter parents"). So too that aspect of the story that we call "incarnation".

But nobody really hopes on these moments just for the spiritual challenge or the intellectual pleasure of the poetic paradox. The Nativity has always been loaded with a moral and political warhead: the arrival of the Messiah, and the enfleshment of that mysterious "I Am that I Am," is supposed to change the face of the human world.

"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy," says the famous messenger. And exhortations of peace and goodwill echo across the land. The crooked shall be made straight, every valley filled, and every mountain brought low. Radical justice will prevail!

But Malachi in the reading for today makes a different kind of proclamation. It's one that bothers me, especially in our politically polarized age. After long and patient suffering, Malachi's "righteous" are claimed and remembered, but the "arrogant" and the "evildoers" are incinerated, reduced to ashes, tread underfoot by the "righteous." What Malachi expects and hopes for is vindication. And he does it with language that some of us today might condemn as "eliminationist": not reconciling or understanding, but simply eliminating those others, who are irredeemably evil.

So vindication reveals the dark side of hope and expectation. Filling valleys and leveling mountains is violent, destructive work. An incarnation that packs a moral and political wallop is dangerous. In the words of Jesus, "I did not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword!" Is that what Advent is about? Hoping for vindication? The destruction of enemies, so that good people like me can finally thrive? Something seems wrong about that. Is there a different way to hope?

Fortunately, Malachi describes a path to reprieve from the fire: return to lawfulness, heed the criticism of the prophet, and restore relationships. That sounds to me like a different way to hope. Like maybe the "arrogant" category includes people who just assume without examination that they are not among the lawless, oblivious, individualistic "evildoers." (And I think of the words of Paul to the Romans: "None is righteous, no, not one.")

Even the "bad guys" think they are the "good guys." Malachi's uncomfortable proclamation tells me to remember that. The sword-work of Jesus does the same thing. This persistent hope for the leveling justice of vindication is dangerous. If I want evil people to be flattened, it should prompt me to ask whether I am one of them, too. I might not like what I find.

Advent is not about the passive hope for vindication, but the participatory hope of reconciliation.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

From Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell
First Congregational Church
2 Samuel 6:1-19

Today our key passage is looking at a celebration that King David had. He was told, 'The Lord has blessed the house of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.' So David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing.

David, danced before the Lord with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark with shouts and the sound of trumpets.

Celebrations are great aren't they? Here's the question, when's the last time that you celebrated something? What was it? I bet you remember. Our lives should be marked by celebrations. Is your life marked by an attitude of celebration? Think of all that you have to celebrate. The God of the universe loves you, and paid the price so that you can live life empowered by Him. That's the best thing in the world. If He's in your life there are going to be things that you can celebrate.

We're thinking today about celebration and we're looking at one of the greatest times of celebration in the life of David. He has become the king of Israel, he has united the kingdom and made the borders secure. He has been able to take control of Jerusalem and establish his capital there. Life is good. He is thankful for all that God has done, so he decides that he wants to honor God and to do this he wants to bring the Ark of the Lord home, he wants to bring it back to Jerusalem. He wants to do this to honor all that God has done and show that it is God who has done it.

Think about it, at Christmas time have you ever spent a lot of time thinking of the perfect gift for someone. Then you go and get it, it's something that took some effort. But you're so excited because you know they'll love it and they go. "Oh, that's nice." and just move to the next thing like it's no big deal. I mean we hate that. We're thinking, "Man see what you get next year. How's a tie sound?" But then we treat God the same way. God moves and we're just like, "Oh, that's nice." What? When the creator of the universe moves in our lives we should get a little excited about it, think about who God is. When we get to come and worship we should come excited about it. Why? Because the choir is good? No! Because we like whoever is preaching? No! Because we're having lunch after? No! We should get excited because God is going to be here. And when the people of God come to worship, to celebrate all that God is, it doesn't matter if the choir isn't very good or if the sermon is so boring that everyone is sleeping through it, when we come excited to worship God, He will show up at our celebration, whether it is in our church, or around our Christmas tree in the living room.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22

Who is he to come in here like he owns the place?

From Kim Williams
First Congregational Church
Hebrews 1:1-14

How often has that phrase come up? I know I've said it at some of my favorite restaurants as they're changing ownership and my favorite items are no longer available, and I've definitely heard it when friends who have been in a position for ages are suddenly reporting to a superior who has less real world experience, is younger, and is now a pay grade above them.

Imagine this scene: God, who is timeless, and who isn't stuck in a linear timeline like we are, is with the Angels, who have been there, and have been serving faithfully for every conversation with prophets, every revelation relayed to humankind. They're the old guard. The tenured staff. God sits down one day in the weekly production meeting and says "Okay, so I need an angel to send to find this young girl named Mary. What does your week look like, Gabriel? See me afterward, we've got some exciting changes coming."

Can you imagine the water cooler discussions if this happened in one of our earthly conference rooms? The tension of wondering who will be getting fired would be extreme.

The next bit though would send any of us over the edge — especially if we were next in line for a promotion. God's big news is a birth announcement! Not only will this child be born a human, but because he's God's own son, he will be superior to the angels. The angels will worship him, even!

Thank goodness Angels are better at receiving such news than people. It's right there in their job description, "Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?"

God, we are thankful for your angels, who have a clear understanding of their purpose, and with grace, accept the call to serve your son. Thank you for sending Jesus to us; we needed – and still need – him to be better able to navigate similar, sudden changes in our own lives.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

From Kenny Schoelen
First Congregational Church
John 7:40-52

When they heard these words, some in the crowd said,
'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.'
But some asked,
'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?'

I think this may be the earliest mention of profiling. We have a large group of people that seem to be a little different than the other people, and the unspoken implication here is that nothing good is gonna come out of Galilee.

Jesus had a way with words that no one was ready for. He spoke the truth with the ways of a prophet, while the rulers of this time were afraid of saying the wrong thing. It didn't matter whether it was the truth, it mattered only that it would keep them in their position of power. Kind of like today's politicians.

The facts seem to be a little mixed up once we make it to the birth of Christ. Jesus did come from Galilee, but was born in the little town of Bethlehem (do you see the light).

But before you rush to say, "It looks as if nothing good has ever come out of Galilee!" just because you can spin the facts that the Messiah *actually* came from Bethlehem, remember:

Don't overthink stuff until you know all the facts.

Don't let people influence you; make up your own mind. You never know which neighborhood, city, side-street, suburb, or small town great Kings may come from.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

RePresentations: An Advent Meditation

From Ara Guekguezian
First Congregational Church
Matthew 1:18–25

In a broken world, we hunger for wholeness, for unity, for shalom. We pursue it with varying degrees of passion and commitment. It remains elusive. Why, in spite of our "best" efforts? We, in the United States, are reminded about this every two years though our election process. "Let us put all the acrimony of the campaign aside and work together." "After what you said about my mother? When Hell freezes over!"

The relationship, if there is one, is broken. There is a call from the one in power to let bygones be bygones. There is an invitation to come into my tent. But all the good seats are taken. Even among the gracious, there is pain and hostility lingering under the surface that breaks through at the slightest provocation, continuing to remind all of the space between. Sometimes the distance is small, just across the aisle. Other times the chasm is so wide we cannot see the other side.

We suffer as families, in neighborhoods, in our province or state, in our nation, in our world, and even in our congregations, denominations, and the Church.

In this space comes out God. The One who calls us to repent, to turn back to the source of all being, our being, COMES to us. We have heard, "come to me all who are heavy laden...", and yet if we witness what has happened and what is happening, what is done, we see that God has come in the flesh to all those who are heavy laden. In the person and work of Jesus, beginning with the incarnation, the birth of the child to Mary and Joseph, God has come to us. To repent, to turn back, to go across the aisle, to get across the chasm, we just have to turn around, and there is the healing, the bridge, the Source, our God.

After the turn, then we see, hear, and are called to "Follow Me". The ones who have turned, now have the joyful and challenging call to be the re-Presentation of Jesus, Emmanuel (God is with us) to the broken ones in this broken world. We are not to invite people into the tent from our seat at the table, but we are to go outside, cross the aisle from our position of comfort, of wealth, of power, to the ones who are in need, in pain, grieving, imprisoned, addicted, enslaved, broken, and walk with them as they turn to the Light and start on the Way.

As faithful followers there are signposts on the way, not only a well-worn checkbook or a worn out donate key on the computer, but a passport in need of additional pages. During this Advent season, as we prepare to receive the Christ child anew, step out of our glorious settings at home and in the Sanctuary of the Lord, and be a representative of the One who comes in the flesh.

Prayer: Holy Lord, as You have come into this dirty, disordered, and broken world, fill us with the Holy Spirit that we may have the courage and will to come into the places where Your children need to see You again. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

From Charles Ray Barrett
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Luke 2:15-20

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth,
peace to men upon whom his favor rests."

Advent!

There was a time, before cell phones, when I was with my Reconnaissance Platoon (First Battalion, Thirty-Fifth Infantry, Fourth Infantry Division,) in Vietnam's western Plieku Provence. My guys and I were following some enemy unit trying to figure out where they were going, and how many there were.

The night of October 26-27, 1969, was still and a little tense as we went into the perimeter defense in two locations per standard operation procedures. We did not know how far we were behind them, and, therefore, how close or far they were from us.

My shift with the radio ended about 2 am. I gave the good old A/N PRC 25 radio to Platoon Sergeant Homala for his shift, and stretched out right next to my "slit trench" foxhole for my turn at "shut-eye." My wife Midge and son Mark were half a world away. She was near term with our second pregnancy. (That pregnancy was my family "DNA Insurance Policy" in case I was "greased" in the field. I had suggested the name "Sean" in a letter to her recently.)

Somewhere between 0400 and 0500 hrs. Homala shook me awake and handed me the handset with a terse, "Hey, LT! Battalion wants to talk to you," and he puts the handset right in my hand. Through the fog I exchange groggy call-signs and hear, "Stand by for groups." This meant that the boys in the Tactical Operations Center at the "Firebase" are going to transmit an encoded message in the nighttime to a lowly Platoon Leader in a lonely but quiet ridge in the jungle.

It also meant that I had to slide into that fox-hole, find my poncho to cover up, then rummage the bottom of my rucksack to find my green, right angle GI flashlight, and see if I still had a red filter for the stupid thing as I wondered, "Whose stupid idea is this?"

That was not all! I had to find that dumb little notebook and that pencil! I know that I still have a pencil! "Where is that pencil? I got a pencil! I know it."

Found it!

Must be pretty important. This was so unusual, that I was a bit frightened by the implications.

"One Three, this is Five-Three! Send your groups!" ("This" I thought, "better be a pretty important message.") IT WAS!

When unscrambled, the message read "The American Red Cross is pleased to inform

Lieutenant Charles R. Barrett, United States Army, that on October 25th at 8:30 AM in Fresno California his wife Margaret Barrett, gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Mother and child are doing well. Congratulations”

DNA Insurance!

Now we were not exactly watching for sheep out there, but there was another time in Palestine where some other men were in another field doing just that.

Luke 2:3-14 describes the Angel of the Lord appeared to some other fellas in the field. Those guys were also scared. They didn't know what to expect either.

They did not need to be scared. The message was all good. The message is still good – in fact, it's the best!

The message to those fellas on that starry night was: “Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.”

This scared them at first, just like that message from headquarters coming at night and in code scared me, at first. But both messages, as it turned out, wound up being very good. Very good indeed!

Eternal Life Insurance!

