

Advent

-and-

Christmas

Devotional and Journal

2019

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Introduction

This devotional you have in your hands is a collaborative publication of First Congregational Church of Fresno and Community United Church of Christ.

Members and clergy of both congregations have contributed heartfelt meditations for you to take with you all season long.

It is my hope that all of the voices represented in this little book deepen your prayer experience this Advent.

In peace,

Kim Williams

Editor

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Many thanks to the writers without whom this Advent Devotional would not have been possible.

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Sunday, December 1

Written by Rev. Raygan Baker
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Matthew 24:4-13

Many people have said it before, but the Drag Queen Chi Chi Devayne says it with the most conviction: "I don't *get* ready, I *stay* ready." While the season of Christmas Consumerism may keep triumphantly entering the economy earlier and earlier, but it is only now that Advent quietly arrives. And just because we busy ourselves with many Christmas preparations and celebrations doesn't mean we are actually observing Advent. Sometimes we emphasize the anticipation that Advent brings as primarily calling us to patiently wait for Christ's birth. But Advent isn't just about waiting, it is about "arriving:" the literal* definition of Advent. We don't need to do anything to make Christmas happen. It is already arriving, whether we are ready or not.

Sometimes we enter into the Advent and Christmas season by looking backward: to the prophets and the promises from so long ago, the Christmas plays and pageants that take our imaginations to first-century Israel (or at least how think it may have looked), and our own treasured church and family memories, but Jesus won't let us confine the good news of great joy to the past. Instead, we begin Advent with the promise of Christ's return. This is the Good News: God is not done with us yet. The promise of God's relentless presence with us still stands, and invites us into a very active vision of hope. The vigilance Jesus calls his disciples to is an invitation to live fully into the world now.

As you take a sacred moment to pause this season, where do you see the Good News arriving around you? Where do you see that Good News is most needed? Ready or not, I pray that this Advent and Christmas surprise you.

* And by "literally" I actually mean "literally."

Monday, December 2

Written by Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel for Jews and Gentiles Alike

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name’;
and again he says,
‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’;
and again,
‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him’;
and again Isaiah says,
‘The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.’

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A colleague of mine tells of a time she was offering a mid-week Advent service at a retirement home. During the service, which drew on this particular passage, one woman quietly repeated over and over, while staring into space, "I love you and you love me. I love you and you love me." My colleague thought this was a lovely and appropriate refrain for our worship.

But suddenly they were interrupted by another resident, who stood up and said loudly and angrily, "I have a lot of questions." This stopped my colleague in mid-sentence who answered, "I have a lot of questions too. What are your questions?" She shot right back, "God made all these promises to the Jews. What happened?" Furthermore, she revealed that she was dying of cancer. She needed to know whether God could be trusted in the face of a terrible present and an uncertain future. She needed hope. So do we all - not sentimental optimism about the future, but a strong confidence in the sovereignty and goodness of God, even and especially in the midst of tragedy.

Today's passage, arguably the climax of Paul's letter to the Romans, begins and ends with hope, and it gives the character of God as the basis for that hope. In v. 5, "the God of steadfastness and encouragement," to whom scripture witnesses, gives hope. In v. 12 the Gentiles hope is in the Messiah from the line of David (God's promise to the Jews), and in v. 13, the final and familiar blessing sums up the passage, and indeed, the letter as a whole: "May the God of hope fill you will all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." So let it be for us all.

Tuesday, December 3

Written by Rev. David Klingensmith
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Isaiah 2:1-5

Hope is a strong force within us, stronger even than emotion. Children hope for Santa to come, people coming to the US in caravans hope for a brighter future, gay and trans people hope for equality, persons diagnosed with cancer or other serious illnesses hope for a cure.

Hope can cause us to endure more than we ever thought we could imagine. People go through chemotherapy and radiation sustained by hope. Jews in concentration camps persisted in hope that they would be liberated.

The picture that Isaiah painted showed a place where swords would be beaten into plows, spears into pruning hooks, a place where there would be no more wars, only peace would prevail. Everyone would seek to walk in God's way.

When we look at our world that is filled with war and hate, discrimination and disease, do we have hope, too, that one day all will be peace, health and equality? It is easy to become discouraged and cynical. But hope can also be a great motivator. We can work for peace, healing and equality in our communities and beyond.

In this Advent season, may we be open to the ways God teaches us and may we walk in hope the path God sets for us.

Wednesday, December 4

Written by Kim Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Mark 13:33-37

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

What does keeping awake mean in an age of 5-Hour-Energy shots? How can we stomach staying alert and filled with anticipation when we're not given a tracking number, nor can we watch the progress of the coming of our God on an app on our phones—Oh Good! Just 4 stops away!

The work of alertness has been conquered, commodified, by our packed schedules, tight deadlines, and quad shot espressos. The earnest discomfort in sitting with what feels like a perpetual wait is difficult for us to access because it is, well, uncomfortable. To think about always being on because God might be around the corner, showing up without so much as a courtesy text so I can vacuum up the pet hair from my sofa, is a disruption to the semi-carefully curated “I've totally got my stuff together” lifestyle I depict. But that's the point.

Staying alert is a practice that takes practice, and keeping our hopes up when it feels like we're waiting in perpetuity is counter-intuitive. It is our task to live our lives in the most loving way we are able, and to stay vigilant. Because this wait is worth it, even if there's no app to tell us how much longer.

Thursday, December 5

Journal

Micah 5:2-5

The Ruler from Bethlehem

But you, O Bethlehem
of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the
time
 when she who is in labor has brought
forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
 to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in
the strength of the Lord,
 in the majesty of the name of
the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall
be great
 to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

If the Assyrians come into our land
and tread upon our soil,
we will raise against them seven
shepherds
 and eight installed as rulers.

Read the above text from Micah 5:2-5. What stands out to you? What questions do you have? Do you find hope within the text? What other feelings do you experience?

Friday, December 6

Written by Christopher Williams
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Romans 13:11-14

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

In this passage Paul is giving Christians a “wake up call”, telling us that the long night is over and that the morning approaches. Paul is speaking figuratively and not suggesting that Christians must become morning people (much to the relief of several Christian friends I know). Paul is saying that as Christians we need to set aside the things that make our spirit unclean, literally calling out the sins of drunkenness and sexual immorality. If we are to make a better world or a paradise as the one that Christ has promised us then we must work towards purity of spirit. God sent humanity His son as an example of what each of us is capable of achieving. To hear the gospel, ignore it, and wonder why God hasn’t given us a shiny new planet to live on is pure folly.

When Paul says “the night is nearly over; the day is almost here”, he isn’t referring to humanity being whisked off to some kingdom in the clouds but is instead giving humanity the instructions on how to create such a world here on earth. If we clothe ourselves “with the Lord Jesus Christ” and perform His works rather than those of a malevolent nature then we will only bring about our salvation and the salvation of humanity.

Saturday, December 7

Written by Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Isaiah 8:17

"I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him." —Isaiah 8:17

As a child, having been taught that God is everywhere, and that God loves everyone, it would have scared me to think that God might hide. As an adolescent straining to break free from the burdens of tradition, I would have reveled in a hiding God as license to challenge the people who claimed to speak for God. As a younger adult with a demand that be God subordinated to logic, the hiddenness of God would have been evidence to me that God was either malicious (and therefore unworthy of devotion), or incoherent (and therefore nonexistent).

Now, at whatever age I am, I think of the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

And I recognize the words of the prophet Isaiah for the poetry that they are.

The light changes. What seemed certain a moment ago is hazy now. But here we still are, passing through the gloam, unable to see, and remaining on the journey, even when the pathway is lost. How? By hope, which is not mere optimism, or sheer determination to put one foot in front of the other. Hope is more rigorous than that:

"Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion ... hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question." (Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2nd ed.), p. 65.)

Hope like that can change the world.

Sunday, December 8

Journal

Matthew 3:1-12

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers!

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Read the above text from Matthew 3:1-12. There is strong, graphic imagery in this passage. What is your initial reaction to it? Write down your gut reaction. Read it again. Did anything change upon a second reading? Were your initial feelings strengthened? Read it one more time, and journal any insights that this story about John the Baptist might have revealed.

Monday, December 9

Written by Rev. Ara Guekguezian
Community United Church of Christ
Isaiah 11:1-10

Hearing that the wolf shall live with the lamb...and the lion shall eat straw like the ox is a bit unnerving. These few words reflect a complete transformation of the created order. How will we be able to function or dwell in a completely different universe? The passage concludes with 'and his dwelling shall be glorious.' But you and I are normal (ish) human beings.

The restoration, the wholeness, the shalom of this eleventh chapter of Isaiah begins with the very usual way: the salvific act and person comes naturally. New life comes directly from a healthy root. The Messiah is not a superhero alien coming from another part of the universe, but from our forebears. And we follow directly from that stump, that root. The one who is the fulfillment of these words, uttered a few of his own: I am the vine and you are the branches.

As we wait, we also prepare to participate in the transformational acts that make peace and establish justice.

Tuesday, December 10

Written by Lisa Boyles

Community United Church of Christ

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are all struggling with something, all the time – anger, deadlines, anxiety, pain, illness, grief. These things roil our insides, wake us in the dead of night, disrupt our peace. It is hard to move past them. But maybe we don't have to.

It is all part of who we are; every part adds up to the sum of the whole that is our life.

Our faith can bring us peace, if we let it, if we are open to the calming force of our Lord's presence in our life. It is all part of who we are – we can allow balance between the difficult shards and the soothing grace of God.

Both are real and valid.

Don't try to bury the hurt. Sit with the pain. Breathe deeply. As you inhale, feel the peace from our Father, our Mother. Let gratitude fill you, for feeling this, for the gift of life, in all its grief and joy.

Every day can hold ugliness and hurt. But each day is also sacred. Don't block out the pain, for in doing so, you will also obliterate what is good.

As you wait for peace, cultivate the soil of your spirit to allow it in. And when it fills you up, take it back into the world to help lift those around you out of their despair.

Grace to you.

Wednesday, December 11

Journal

Isaiah 40: 1-11

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of
the Lord,

make straight in the desert a highway for
our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall

be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Read the above excerpt from Isaiah 40:1-11. In what ways are you preparing the way of the Lord? Do these ways extend into your family life? Into the community? Keeping the theme of this section, "Waiting for Peace" in mind, how does that inform your understanding of what the work of preparation entails?

Thursday, December 12

Written by Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Psalm 122

Devotional: Images flood our minds of the sorrows of this world: tent cities hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees; children so undernourished that eight-month-olds are mistaken for newborns; young black sons found dead in the streets; a political process so deceptive that a “Pinocchio Scale” is devised to see who tells the biggest lies. Where is peace? Where is true shalom—peace that is not just absence from violence but holistic rest—encompassing internal and external peace with God and neighbor and earth and self? Advent, the season of waiting for Christ to come, is a time to remember how very good it is to go to the house of the Lord. We go to the house of the Lord not to forget the troubles of the world, not to hide our eyes from the suffering, but to acknowledge them. For we remember that God does not stand far off, does not ignore suffering and sin, but God enters in. God took on human flesh, felt hunger and thirst and pain. Our Lord Jesus Christ defeated sin and death. So we await Christ's coming again when True Shalom will reign. We do not hide from sorrow, but we confess our sins, what we have done and what we have left undone, our individual sins and our collective sins. And we pray for peace while believing in the one who was and is and is to come, our Prince of Peace.

Prayer: Almighty God, it is truly good to spend time in your house praising your name. We give you thanks that you do not stand far off, but that you enter into our suffering. Teach us to be advocates for peace in this restless world, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 13

Written by Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Luke 2:25-33

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

The narrative begins eight days after the birth of Jesus and the visit from the shepherds. The baby is named and circumcised – a rite that marks Jesus as Jewish, as part of the people that God has called. Jesus is firmly located within the people with whom God has kept covenant for hundreds of years. In Luke 2:21 we also have the fulfillment of the angel's instruction in 1:31 to name the baby "Jesus," a name that means "God saves."

Simeon is a man under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and it is the Holy Spirit who brings Simeon to the temple at the right time. This continues an emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit that began in Luke 1 and continues throughout. It will be the Holy Spirit that rests on Jesus and enables his ministry (4:1-18) and who will give power for witness and growth to the church (Acts 1:8). When Simeon lifts up Jesus, he makes an amazing declaration about this baby.

This baby is the one who will be the salvation of the whole world – not just Jews but also Gentiles. But immediately after this declaration of salvation, Simeon turns to Mary and tells her that this salvation will not come easy. Jesus will be the source of rising and falling for people in Israel. Joel Green notes that "we gain sight of an ominous cloud, the first explicit manifestation of the reality that God's purpose will not be universally supported, and the first candid portent that the narrative to follow will be a story of conflict."

Yet this segment offers a startling sense of peace- perhaps in the hope of an old man cradling an infant, each now in the capture of the Holy Spirit.

Saturday, December 14

Written by Kim Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Psalm 27:1-4

*The Lord is my light and my
salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.*

*One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.*

My daughter Dorothy is five years old, and she has some very stereotypical five-year-old habits. One of those habits is being absolutely terrified of the dark. There's something very unsettling about bedtime, and we have to ritualize our routine in order to get her down for the night. Neon roller skate light turned on, her door left ajar so she feels connected to us, our door left ajar so she doesn't feel shut out, the blankets arranged around her tiny frame like a hug, and our goodnight prayer which we sing. When we skip steps, we end up with her in our room before 10:00.

I think the psalmist must have known a kindergartener, because this verse speaks to that uneasy relationship with the unknown that her fear of the dark seems to stem from. Even in our times of deep fear and uncertainty when we don't know the next step, God is there to tuck us in tightly and keep our nightlight lit throughout the night.

Sunday, December 15

Journal

Matthew 11:2-11

Messengers from John the Baptist

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

Jesus Praises John the Baptist

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

On December 8th we journaled about John the Baptist's proclamation of the coming of Jesus. Today we witness an interaction between Jesus and the messengers of John the Baptist, and then Jesus addresses the crowd about John. Compare the two readings, what through-lines can you draw? How does the first reading help you understand the reading today. What questions are left? The theme of this section is "Waiting for Joy." Do you draw any connections with this text and the theme? Why or why not?

Monday, December 16

Written by Rev. Raygan Baker
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Isaiah 35:1-10

One of our most potent metaphors for the life of faith is that of a journey, or path; a metaphor that Isaiah squeezes everything he/they can draw from it. This journey is no easy one day family hike along a well-maintained trail, nor is it paved, yet. In our spiritual seeking, searching, and direction-discerning, there is much more at stake. This is a fraught and dangerous journey through unmapped territory, a journey that we really can't prepare for, and demands our vulnerability as we confront the most dangerous realities of our lives.

The good news is that we are not left to find our way alone. If we understand that this journey is a path we take, I think that rather than leading us toward an unknown destination, this vision of the journey is more of an orbit around one central claim: that it is God who saves. The path in this passage starts in the desert; which is not an ideal place to start. Except, unexpectedly, the desert around us blooms, transforms, and bursts with flourishing life. Then our very own tired, oppressed, pain-inducing bodies will be restored and open our eyes to God's saving action. Then our bodies are transformed and made whole, and the journey itself has been expunged of every barrier toward embracing the Divine. The prophet moves from creation to our bodies, to the central claim that God saves, back to our corporeal transformation, and finally back out to all of creation. The road will no longer be dangerous, and none of us will be lost. This is God's action, not our own. Where do you need to admit you are lost, and not in control?

Tuesday, December 17

Written by Rev. David Klingensmith
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Luke 1:46b-55

We often think of Mary as just a humble young girl from a poor class of folks who, when told by the angel that she was to bear God's Son, said very humbly, "May it be to me according to your word."

But there is also something else about her. According to Luke's account, she was strong enough to question how this could happen when she had not been with a man. And in these words that are usually referred to as the Song of Mary or the Magnificat, she virtually becomes a prophet.

Rev. Judith Jones says, "Mary sings about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God's redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary's Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty."

During this Advent season, may we reflect on how we can be signs of God's inbreaking presence, and how we can be part of God's redemptive work in our community and the world.

Wednesday, December 18

Written by Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Psalm 146:5-10

Devotional: As we prepare to greet and celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, let us approach each day with our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to finding glimpses of Christ in all our daily encounters. Let us start each day observing and appreciating each member of our household. Move on to those we meet regularly at our work and study places.

Remember to observe those who serve us by bringing mail, tending our stores, repairing our roads. Keep in mind many whom we do not see who are suffering from infirmities, lost or fighting in desperate situations, some even oblivious to their surroundings. These souls are all children of God, and Christ looks to us to be one with them as we expectantly approach the gift of the Holy Babe in Bethlehem.

Prayer: Dear Lord, guide and lead us as we seek each day to recognize your presence in our midst. Help us to be sensitized to your love for all humanity and humbly accept all people of your creation as our sisters and brothers. Amen.

Thursday, December 19

Written by Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The words of Isaiah 9, immortalized by the great George Frideric Handel, are linked forever for most Americans to the holiday of Christmas. But the theme of great light and Wonderful Counselor carry resonances that reverberate throughout Israelite history in a profoundly different context. In Isaiah 7, God offers to all of Israel a prophetic sign of peace in the face of imminent political disaster from conquering nations. This sign is the birth and name of an actual child, Immanuel, meant to be a physical sign of God's intimate presence and an assurance that no disaster will befall Jerusalem. But the frightened and faithless king ultimately rejects it, and with it, God's saving help. The people are instead rousing dead spirits to ask them for help. Isaiah 8 seems determined to shove any hope of redemption into the dimmest corner of possibility.

But then, Isaiah 9 – floodlights: “The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). The nation which caused divine revulsion in Isaiah 8 is showered with joy – big joy – REALLY big joy – in Isaiah 9:2.

Over the centuries, empires came and went, but their oppressive practices remained the same, up to and including empires of today. As Christians, we read this text at Christmas in defiance of the decrees of Emperors, past, present, and future. We read this text in rejection of those who seek to count, to categorize, to control, in the vein of Emperor Augustus. We read this text in the hope of a child, a child who will break the oppressive bars of terrorists and of tyrants; a child who will rule with justice and righteousness from this time on and forevermore. Joy, joy, joy!

Friday, December 20

Written by Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Psalm 33

Devotional: Yes, our lives are busy, and during this holiday season they seem to reel even more out of control. God's power and dominion loom so much larger in our lives than any chore we have to do at Christmas. During this season of anticipation, we take time to stand in awe of God as we wait in joyful hope for the Incarnation. God is about to do a new thing this season, and we must stand in attention. The Psalmist points to God's omnipotence while also saying that His word is perfect. He speaks and it happens.

Knowing this, our souls wait for Him because we need Him, we trust Him, we can't live without Him. Without His word and love, we have no hope. We immerse ourselves in the expectation of His inbreaking because the life-giving breath of God is about to be birthed in us. And that is the best gift we could receive this Christmas.

Prayer: Precious Lord, it is with great humility that we turn our attention from the demands of this season to focus on you. We need you, we trust you, we hope in you. Let your steadfast love be upon us. It is in your most holy name that we pray these words. You, the Alpha and the Omega, from ages unto ages.

Saturday, December 21

Written by Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Jeremiah 33:14-16

*And the "righteous branch ... shall execute justice
and righteousness in the land."*

Reading these words of Jeremiah through a Christian lens (which is not the only way to read them), I think of the long "farewell discourse" of Jesus in the gospel according to John, especially this part:

I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every branch that bears fruit he trims clean so that it might bear more fruit. ... Remain in me—and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit from itself unless it remain in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. *

Radical hope is not about waiting. It is about seeing subversively and recognizing the more challenging truth. And I submit to you that the challenge here stems from this: that Jesus did not "execute justice and righteousness in the land"; rather, the Christ entered the world as the root of the vine, and we are the branches, charged with bearing the fruits of justice and righteousness.

The hope of Advent is not a passive waiting for a divine skyhook. The hope of Advent is an active practice of growing into, and trimming clean, the righteous branches that shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

How will you execute justice and righteousness in the land today?

* Look up John 15 to read more. The excerpt above is from the recent translation of the New Testament by David Bentley Hart.

Sunday, December 22

Written by Christopher Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Matthew 1:18-25

One cannot help but sympathize with Joseph. There he is on the threshold of marrying the woman of his dreams and then quite suddenly she becomes laden with child. A child that he knows is not his. The world is not kind to an unwedded mother and it was especially dangerous to be so back then. Still Joseph was a standup guy, and had decided to leave Mary quietly rather than publicly disgrace her. She was not his wife yet, the child was not his, and no one would have blamed him. Then an Angel of the Lord appears to him and says to marry Mary anyhow, because the child in question is conceived of the Holy Spirit.

One can bet that this is not what Joseph had envisioned when he had planned out his life. He had wanted to get married and settle down with a nice gal and start a family all by himself but God went and threw a "wrench in the cogs." Joseph now finds himself a stepfather to the Son of Man. Rather than planning an expeditious escape, the message from the angel soothes Joseph's anxiety and he does take on the responsibility, never faltering to provide for both Mary and Jesus. Joseph gets to experience the rewards and challenges that many stepparents embrace.

This passage isn't just about being a stepfather, but also about embracing the path that God sets before us. Our lives never go the way that we picture them in our youth, but if we embrace these changes rather than bemoan them then things will go according to a plan. It may not be our plan, but that doesn't make it the wrong one.

Monday, December 23

Journal

Luke 3:1-6

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Ananias and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the

words of the prophet Isaiah,
'The voice of one crying out in
the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be
made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of
God."'

John the Baptist comes up again in the above reading from Luke. After reading it once, flip back to December 11th and reread the Isaiah text. Think about your insights from that day, and read this text. With the theme of "Waiting for Love" in mind, how do the two texts shape up? To quote Tina Turner, "What's love got to do with it?"

Tuesday, December 24

Written by Kim Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Luke 2:1-20

A common theme we will see in Jesus' life is that he doesn't choose the powerful and influential folks to be part of his work, instead he seeks out the people who are lower on the social ladder. This preference towards the lowest and the least can be seen as early as the story of the shepherds on the day of his birth. There they are, just tending their flock. Its night and they're probably not anticipating too much excitement, save for a wild animal they might have to shoo away. Can you imagine how startling it would have been to suddenly have an angel show up? The text from Luke uses the word "terrified" and I'm not even sure that's strong enough! What's spectacular though, is that the birth announcement went out first to the shepherds. Jesus' initial PR campaign didn't include a press release or involving the first-century version of Instagram influencers. Instead, the working class shepherds were chosen to be in the know and became among the first to see this heavenly newborn.

Jesus came into the world and immediately began challenging social norms and giving hope to those on the margins. As we celebrate his birth, we acknowledge with gratitude a savior who sees all of us, including and especially those who are often unseen.

Wednesday, December 25

Written by Rev. Raygan Baker
First Congregational Church of Fresno
John 1:1-14

I have refused to live
locked in the orderly house of
 reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in
is wider than that. And anyway,
 what's wrong with Maybe?
You wouldn't believe what once or
twice I have seen. I'll just
 tell you this:
only if there are angels in your head will you
 ever, possibly, see one.

Mary Oliver

The creative word of God took on our flesh, and revealed to us what it might look like for we mere humans to more fully participate in the Divine, even with our own flesh. The re-creation of humanity in the body of Jesus Christ is a new invitation into our truest, most free and authentic selves within the creativity of God. A new way of life is still being birthed today. Today, sit with the wonder and mystery. There is no need for certainty today. In fact, we may discover so much more if we do not resist that uncertainty.

Enjoy this blessing today,
Pastor Raygan

Thursday, December 26

Journal

Isaiah 60:1-3

The Ingathering of the Dispersed

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Write a prayer inspired by the above text from Isaiah.

Friday, December 27

Journal

Titus 2:11-15

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

Our gift exchanges, only a few days in our past creates a tension with the "training" we are receiving in the above text from Titus. Wrestle with the concept of renouncing impiety and worldly possessions in today's journal.

Saturday, December 28

Journal

Psalm 98

O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvellous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gained him victory.
The Lord has made known his
victory;

he has revealed his vindication in the sight
of the nations.

He has remembered his steadfast love and
faithfulness

to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the
earth;

break forth into joyous song and sing

praises.

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.

With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King,
the Lord.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.

Let the floods clap their hands;

let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for he is com-
ing

to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with
righteousness,

and the peoples with equity.

Psalm 98 is the inspiration for a favorite Christmas carol—can you spot it? What joyous imagery is evoked for you as you read it? If you were to write a Christmas song, what would you use as inspiration from this psalm?

Sunday, December 29

Journal

Matthew 2:13-23



**THIS CHRISTMAS,
WE REMEMBER
THAT JESUS WAS
A REFUGEE...**

MATTHEW 2:13-14

#WELCOMEREFUGEES
#WELCOMEASYLUMSEEKERS
#WELCOMECHRIST



Write a reflection on the above image.

Monday, December 30

Written by Kymberly Lindsey

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Psalm 148

Psalm 148 Re-Imagined (God Did! 2015)

Who made the mountains sprout from the earth? Who made the oceans go back and forth? Who covered the ground with flowers and dirt? Our Lord and Master, God did!

Sing hallelujah, Praise His name; Sing hallelujah, for what God did!

Who dotted the sky with planets and moons? Who created the sun not to rise too soon? Who blasted the dark with millions of stars? Our Lord and Master, God did!

Sing hallelujah, Praise His name; Sing hallelujah, for what God did!

Who gave us His son, to die on the cross, to forgive our sins, without Jesus we're lost. Who loves us and gave us everlasting life? Our Lord and Master, God did!

Sing hallelujah, Praise His name; Sing hallelujah, for what God did!

Who gave me the voice, to sing to you? Who gave me the words and blessed me too? Who lifted me up and helped me to see? Our Lord and Master, God did!

Sing hallelujah, Praise His name; Sing hallelujah, for what God did!

When I quiet my thoughts to a whisper, I can hear God sing!

Praise ye the Lord!

Tuesday, December 31

Journal

Isaiah 63:7-9

God's Mercy Remembered

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
because of all that the Lord has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
For he said, 'Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely';
and he became their savior
in all their distress.
It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

It's New Year's Eve. How can this reading from Isaiah help you to set an intention for the year ahead?

Wednesday, January 1

Journal

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Revelation 21:1-6a

The New Heaven and the New Earth

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

In what ways is God making things new in your life?

Thursday, January 2

Written by Rev Ara Guekuegian
Community United Church of Christ
Psalm 8

So small am I. I recall, bemused, when my first born, says to his mother, Dad is so big, he can crush me. Now that he is a father, he knows to the core of his being that is an action that would never occur.

But

As I am dwarfed by the heavens, I recognize my weakness. Do I matter in any significant way? Do I have agency?

In the old, and maybe familiar language, we are in the midst of the celebration of this song. For God so loved the world, that he sent his son... I, among we all, do matter. The one, so great, that They are above the heavens, is mindful of us and cares for us. This is the very heart of the matter. And has endowed us with agency (and responsibility).

So loved am I, so loved are we, that we get to act in ways that influence one another and the world. I pray that I am a good and faithful actor.

Friday, January 3

Journal

Hebrews 1:1-12

God Has Spoken by His Son (vs1-4)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

This is the introduction to The Letter to the Hebrews. What does it stir up for you?

Saturday, January 4

Written by Rev. Raygan Baker
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Isaiah 60:1-6

"Arise! Shine: your light has come, and the Lord's glory has shone upon you."

This promise sounds wonderful, except then the prophet goes on to admit that we can still see much of the darkness that we are much more familiar with. But even with this deep truth, the prophet lift our chins up to see the far brighter glory God is bringing into the world.

144 years ago today (1875), the German-language poet Rainer Maria Rilke was born. His birth not technically the what we celebrate during the Christmas season, but Rilke can be an especially helpful companion with us. Rilke's conviction was that one of our deepest purposes as human beings is to find the beauty in everyday things. In a letter to his protégée, Franz Xaver Kappus, Rilke famously wrote: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

What are you willing to sit with, to not give into isolating darkness, in order to more fully see the emerging beauty?

Sunday, January 5

Journal

John 1:10-18

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his

glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Today is the last day of Christmas, but rather than drummers drumming, we are confronted with the word made flesh. What does it mean to you personally that God has become knowable through the human birth and life of Jesus?

Monday, January 6

Written by Corvin Wayne Brown
First Congregational Church of Fresno
Matthew 2:1-12

O Magi, I stand outside in autumn haze,
Of night lights, dust, and dark, talking to you,
And long I've wondered what struck you as new.
What star was born that night

that whispered winds commanding you to follow
the spire of fire from Persia to Palestine
and bear the gifts fit for a Jew and King,
treasures that prove you knew what you'd see.

Zoroastrians, I confess, a wild star
led me to believe in shortcut songs and
nativities with you kneeled on the day of birth.
I've been wrapped in tangles of front-yard truth,

my keystone missing — you three wise men
yet to arrive. My insight tonight: you. So now,
it's your turn to tell me what startled you.
In the crib, did you see a better world

to come? or a new chart for all time?
or future blame heaped on him? Was myrrh
to anoint or embalm? Please tell me your epiphany
that would make you drop down to your knee.

Your insight had to be new and fresh—
as fresh as a bright born babe.

