



Advent Devotional

- 2020 -

**Written by members of the Sequoia Association
of the Northern California Nevada Conference,
United Church of Christ**

In loving memory of Rev. Dr. Garner Scott Odell

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Introduction

Most of our liturgical seasons this year have been observed under the massive and unwieldy umbrella of pandemic. Remember way back in Lent when we thought that we'd back to normal by Pentecost? Yet here we are, entering into the start of a new liturgical year, stepping into Advent—a season when we are told to wait, and yet it feels like that's all we've done since the third Sunday in Lent. How much more waiting can we do? This year presents special challenges and unexpected insight into our traditions, and I invite you to come into this season of Advent holding all of the deep complexities we are steeped in, not trying to bypass the realities of the grief, anxiety, and longing we've experienced, but honoring the ways these elements are woven into our journey with God.

This devotional has been lovingly prepared for you with the words and reflections from 15 individuals in the Sequoia Association of the Northern California Nevada Conference (as well as a few folks who are friends of the Sequoia Association). It is a uniquely 2020 devotional, it honors the tension of living through a pandemic in a time of social turbulence while looking, waiting, and expecting the hope and joy that comes to us at Christmas.

It is organized into four sections: Dreaming, Longing, Imagining, Discovering. Each day has a Biblical text to accompany the devotional selection. It is my sincerest hope that this devotional will offer you a deeper connection to the Divine, and with words written by members in our own communities of faith, that it will also foster a connection to one another.

This has been a long, difficult, and isolating time, and yet we are connected by our faith in Jesus Christ.

May you have a blessed Advent and Christmas.

Warmly,

Kim Williams—Editor
Lay Minister, Grace Community Church

Dreaming

Sunday, November 29

Isaiah 40:1-11

Rev. Ara Guekguezian

Harvest Community Church PC(USA)

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass,

This could have been uttered and written this morning, not two and a half millennia ago. We keep hearing about unprecedented times, but history tells us that these times are like most times. The human condition is one of struggle, and the world that we inhabit usually seems hostile to easy living. It is only recently that our expectations are of easy living. In the midst of isolation because of pandemic, fresh foodstuffs are readily available. Health care systems continue to function. And yet, we are stressed, anxious, even scared, of what the new day might bring into our lives. Our dreams have turned into nightmares.

As we prepare to receive the Incarnate Word, I confess that lately my dreams and hopes have a darkness to them. Troubled and troubling. A voice cries out...

Dare to listen and hear. 'Comfort, O comfort my people.'

Why? What is going to happen to offer comfort?

Straight paths, valleys lifted up, mountains made low,

All things level and smooth.

Transformation, change is coming. Our usual human response is anxiety. But the word in Isaiah promises comfort in the person of the Shepherd.

'Here is your God!'

God will feed their flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in their arms and carry and lead them gently.

Dare to dream and dare to live in this new reality.

O my God, grant me the slumber in this season to dream, to hope. That I may rise rested and ready to live out this brief moment of life fully, joyfully, selflessly and lovingly.

Amen.

Monday, November 30

Malachi 3:1-4

Kenny Schoelen

First Congregational Church of Fresno

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

Even when people tell you a message that is a quote directly from a prophet—an expert in the field of transmitting God’s Word and will to the people—people still won’t believe it.

In our time, we have messages coming to us too, and what messages are we listening to? We need to be listening to the word of those who are the experts in their field.

During the time of Advent, we’ve had the message given to us that the savior is coming, and now in *this* time of *COVID Advent* we have the message that we can save one another’s lives by listening to the messages coming to us to care for our neighbors. In Advent, we wait. It is part of the game; we wait and that is what brings us salvation. The time and patience we put into the salvation of making it through a pandemic by following the advice of the professionals is a good practice for this season of Advent.

Tuesday, December 1

Micah 5:2-5a

Carol Visitacion

Japanese United Christian Church

"But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler 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 travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty in the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And this shall be peace, when the Assyrian comes into our land and treads upon our soil. (Greek: Hebrew in our palaces) that we shall raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men."

Communicate and Motivate. The Word.

Micah is considered the sixth of the twelve minor prophets. So many miracles around the birth of Jesus, the foretelling seven hundred years before his birth, the telling afterward by Luke looking back to Micah.

The internet says Luke may have mistaken Bethlehem, the city (and there are two) for Bethlehem, the clan. The larger, better known Bethlehem is ten miles north of Jerusalem, and the site of the Church of the Nativity, long thought from the 2nd Century A.D. the site where Jesus was born.

Bethlehem means "fruitful," in Hebrew. "Beth" means house and "Lethem" means bread. It is said the family moved north to Nazareth later.

This is all under the Google search for "Micah, Eph'rathah, Bethlehem."

Thank you, LORD for the gifts of sight, memory, thought, and language, spoken and written. In the movie, "Shepherd on the Hill" a woman received back the gift of sight. She shouts, "Thank you God for the sight of dirt."

How much richer is the ability to see and hear the word of God from almost 3000 years ago through Micah letting us know a miracle is coming and then the words from the New Testament and Luke that the prophecy is fulfilled 2000 years ago. Thank you LORD for the ability to read, remember and pass on the wonderful Gospel of Jesus, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Mercies.

Wednesday, December 2

Luke 1:5-25

Rev. Akiko Miyake-Stoner

United Japanese Christian Church

“Left Speechless”

It’s interesting how Zechariah’s speechlessness is both a punishment from the angel Gabriel for not believing and also a symbol of his awe. And I’m sure this wasn’t the only time Zechariah would be left speechless by his son, John the Baptist. I’m trying to imagine what this father thought of his son; on one hand, we have a traditional and rationally-minded man, a priest who served in the temple. On the other, we have a son who lived in the wilderness, wore camel hair clothes, ate locusts and honey, and wasn’t afraid to call seemingly decent people a “brood of vipers!” Talk about generational differences...!

And yet, we can’t help but think of all the ways Zechariah also stood in awe of his son throughout his ministry: that he preached so powerfully to the many people who followed him, that he not only was Jesus’ partner in ministry, but was the one to baptize the Son of God. And that he did this all guided by the Holy Spirit and with such a spirit of humility?! Surely, Zechariah was very proud of John. Talk about learning from our children...!

The old and new ways of doing things that these two men represent certainly hit close to home for us in this time of pandemic. There are many things we used to take for granted and there’s a lot of speculation about how the world will change post-pandemic (whenever that will be!). Yes, there’s a lot of uncertainty about the future. In this holy season of Advent, I wonder what lessons we can learn from the relationship of this father and son? How do we harness Zechariah’s awe and John the Baptist’s spunk—and both of their humility—as we remain present in this time and also look towards the future? How do we remain hopeful as we await the coming of the Christ child?

Thursday, December 3

Matthew 1:18-25

Lisa Boyles Bell

Community UCC

I've had dreams that felt very real. Have you? So real that when you woke up, you could still remember how it made you feel? But I don't think I've ever had one that guided my life or actions the way Joseph followed what this one told him.

After an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, Joseph went against every instinct he had and stayed with Mary, acting as earthly father to Jesus. What faith and courage it must have taken for him to do that.

Through his decision to follow the guidance he was given in his dream, he is following the will of God and showing compassion to Mary, in the face of what society of that time would deem a sin.

In Sue Monk Kidd's "Dance of the Dissident Daughter," she draws deep meaning from many vivid dreams she had while on her spiritual journey toward the awakening of the Spiritual Feminine.

I think most of us pay little heed to what our dreams tell us. As we wake and rush into our next busy day, wisps of nocturnal storytelling drift quickly away like smoke.

As we enter this holy season, let us set aside a few moments upon awakening each day to ponder what our dreams have said and shown us as we slept. Lay still, embrace the quiet, listen to what your spirit – or maybe a Holy Spirit – is nudging us toward.

Friday, December 4

Revelation 21:1–6

Norma Uragami

United Japanese Christian Church

I often wondered what heaven would be like. Aging into senior years, thoughts of my existence comes to mind. The final grim reality part of living used to scare me. Everyone has to go through it whether you want to or not.

Part of my "growing up" acceptance of death and dying is due to the fact of what a particular passage in the Bible states. In Revelations 21:1-6, God promises us through faith and understanding, we're all destined to enter the kingdom of heaven when we die. He extends that same mysterious promise to all creation...not being abandoned, discarded, or allowed to go to hell for our sins.

It was a solemn event when God's beloved Son Jesus Christ was sacrificed for all our sins and crucified. As He took His last breaths and said, "It is done", the earth shook! We were given an angelic promise of everlasting life. What an extreme sacrifice of love can anyone endure for our earthly existence.

I thank the Lord daily for life and all the wonderful blessings He has provided. Inevitably everyone born must die. No one knows how long one's life will last, whether an illness, tragic death, or just fall asleep and never wake up... rest assured our mighty Father God in heaven has a new place reserved for us as Christian believers.

God will wipe away all the painful tears shed during our earthly life. Our entry into heaven's holy city "new Jerusalem," hypothetically described in Revelation 21:2 as a feeling of a bride adorned at the altar for her husband. How beautiful is that! It's like a joyful paradise, free of earthly impairments, quenching our thirst so no longer will we have desires. Things don't seem so bad in this glorious place, "heaven" where we see our blessed Jesus face to face...and our loved ones who've gone before us.

As we enter this holy season of Advent, let's all reflect "the reason for the season," and remember the profound sacrifice God made by giving us part of Him, baby Jesus, on Christmas day. What greater joy than to celebrate His wondrous birthday. Thanks be to God... for our life now and His promise of eternal life with Him. Life's far brighter just knowing that God is in control. Be comforted He hears our prayers and is pleased when we depend on Him for guidance and love.

Saturday, December 5

Mark 1:1-8

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Beginnings are important. They set the tone for what is to come. They clue us in on what to expect. The beginning of Mark's Gospel is like no other. Consider the beginnings of each of the Gospels. Matthew: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Luke: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us..." John: "In the beginning...". These are really different beginnings for very different theological reasons. How is Mark's beginning different and what difference does this make?

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," are Mark's first words out of the gate. Mark does not begin with the "story" of Jesus Christ or some sort of doctrinal claim that insists "this is what you need to know" about Jesus. Rather, he situates his story of Jesus in both the continuity and newness of God. Behind the "good news" of Mark's interpretation of what God is up to in Jesus is what God has been about all along – good news.

Beginnings also make us consider endings and one cannot consider the beginning of Mark without thinking of its ending. "They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid..." The real ending of Mark is not really the ending at all. "He is not here," is perhaps the best "good news" of all. Not even a tomb can hold God, not even death.

We might ask ourselves to what extent a season of preparation demands a certain disoriented expectancy? Anything for which we wait, everything in which we hope rarely turns out to be what we imagined. As we anticipate other gospel writers' words from the angels in heaven, Mark asks us to view God's good news in a different way. We find God's good news not in Jerusalem but in the wilderness where the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem that were going out to meet John the Baptist. In only eight verses, we not only hear the words of Isaiah spoken for a new day but also learn of a new purpose and presence for the Holy Spirit. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ reaches back to the promises of God and helps us imagine God-filled realities, both now and in our future life with God.

The opening of Mark's Gospel reminds us of the de-centering of God's good news which is found on the edge...of everything. Mark goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be. The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there. God's good news of grace announces God's presence on the fringe, God's love that goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, and God's promise that there is no place on earth God will not go or be for us.

Longing

Sunday, December 6

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Christopher Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno

In Isaiah 61 we have a servant of God presenting glad tidings. The Israelites had been having a rough year. The Babylonians whose rule they had suffered under had experienced defeat at the hands of the Persians and even though the Israelites had been allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple, local resistance was making that goal nearly an impossibility.

The Israelites had almost everything taken from them and were bound to feel a crisis of faith but then they hear from this not-identified servant of God who proclaims that their suffering will soon be at an end. Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that there will be "oil of gladness instead of ashes" and so on. The downcast Israelites have a reason to look forward to the future. God has sent a messenger to tell them that they will rebuild and rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

This has been a particularly trying year for many. It's easy to give up and give in but the Lord our God that resides in Heaven is aware of our suffering and sends a message of hope that our suffering is coming to an end.

Thanks be to God!

Monday, December 7

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

The restatement of promise in Jeremiah's prophecy has a context. Babylon has besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah has condemned the failures of his own people and prophesied the downfall of their king. Nothing is going their way.

"You have all rebelled against me, says the LORD. In vain I have struck down your children; they accepted no correction." (Jer. 2:29-30.) "Woe to us, for the day declines, the shadows of evening lengthen!" (Jer. 6:4.)

But Jeremiah has two minds. He also prophesies hope—which is not just expectation, and not just optimism. "If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods in your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place." (Jer. 7:5-7.)

The promise of the righteous branch that springs up from David is not a promise that things will magically turn around. For Jeremiah's people, things got much, much worse before they got better.

When will justice and righteousness be executed throughout our land? When will God dwell with us in this place?

Tuesday, December 8

Isaiah 11:1-10

Rev. Raygan Baker

First Congregational Church of Fresno

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth”

Living in harmonious relationship (“righteousness”) where everyone has access to the resources to have their needs met (“equity”) are not facts or matters that our eyes and ears can settle. It’s as if Isaiah knows that our hopes, dreams, fears, desires, and so much more are always shaping and reshaping our perceptions and choices, and that this makes what is right, just, correct, and true more around than what our senses can grasp. The prophet knows that we often do not see the whole picture, or hear every undertone that shapes a symphony of sound.

This means that imagination is not just a low-cost playtime activity for children; it’s actually a critical tool in the toolbox of faith, and one that must be learned and practiced. The peaceful vision that follows the above description of the One-who-comes-to-save aims to lead us in this work. This is not just a peaceful vision that in some way makes us hopeful for a renewed and healed world. It is an invitation into the work of Christian Imagination.

If the wolf and lamb live together, the leopard and the baby goat lie down together, a young child leads animals that would normally see each other as prey and predator, and even infants can play with snakes and not be hurt, what are the people doing? Who lives next to, works with, and creates community with whom? What would that look like?

For meditation and prayer:

Let your imagination run wild with Isaiah’s vision. What do you see? What do you hear?

Wednesday, December 9

Luke 1:26-45

Ellie Dote

City Church of Long Beach

If I were to be honest, Christmas to me feels more insane each year as opposed to the peaceful scene we see on the front of the Christmas cards. Every year, for as long as I can remember, Christmas was a harried mess, and between school, church, shopping, cleaning, and then delivering presents, there was no downtime. I remember having to sit in the department stores with books while my parents tried to cross presents for the relatives off of the shopping list. I remember driving all over Los Angeles delivering presents to people I only saw once a year, waiting patiently at each place while my parents talked and caught up on the past year with their friends. I remember rehearsing for and getting ready for the various Christmas Eve and Christmas Day liturgies I was involved in. For me, Christmas was a hectic time. The sense of peace that resonates with "Silent Night" is looked at with incredible disbelief. "All is calm?" Ha. Not in my life.

I have to remember that in the time when Jesus was born, people weren't looking for a savior, not to mention that their messiah would be born as a baby to an unwed mother. But the Christmas story isn't pretty. It isn't fun. To some, it's absolutely humiliating—that this is how we would welcome the Son of God to this earth. Being born in a stable because nobody else could make room for Him.

As I've traveled from church to church in our city, looking for a community to call home, I'm brought back to the Christmas story. And for the first time, I began to see the story through the eyes of God, whose presence was just that—uncomfortable. And because His presence made people uncomfortable, they couldn't be inconvenienced to make room for Him in the routine of their own lives and homes. In the same way, I know and understand that my presence as a trans woman isn't comfortable in many houses of worship. And yet I seek God, and I'm not alone. If we're truly honest with ourselves, we all have people in our lives that make us uncomfortable. I wonder who they are? Who would make you uncomfortable to sit next to in the restaurant? In the waiting room at the Doctor's office? In church? What if it was a gay couple? A transgender person? An immigrant? A Muslim? A person of color? A Trump supporter? A Democrat? What about an ICE agent? A cop? Maybe it's someone from your past that's hurt you. Each of us in every area of our life—including me—have people who make us uncomfortable, and even the thought of spending any time with them makes you feel uneasy.

I wonder if you would join me in asking God to reveal His birth in the lives around us this season. It's so easy to scoff at that, and say, "sorry, I don't have time." Or, even more dangerous, "I don't think God would call me to love *them*." Yet those are the people God IS calling us to. It's taken me so many years to recognize that. But that thought—that hope—is what is making a difference this Christmas season as we light another candle on the road to Christmas Day and beyond. It's my prayer that as we do so, we would experience Christmas in a way we have never experienced it before as we see Christ born to us in a whole new way.

Thursday, December 10

Isaiah 2:1-5

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Isaiah 2 begins: "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." We don't talk that way. We would say, "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, *heard*..."

What does it mean to see a word? I doubt that this was an early reference to texting or tweeting!

Maybe we've seen a bold word on a bulletin cover with a picture of this—or some similar Isaiah text? Or do what is often do for children's sermons—make an object visible to help children "see" the point?

The word that Isaiah saw concerned Judah and Jerusalem. In chapter 1 Isaiah graphically laid out what he had seen: violence, bribery, unfaithfulness, desolation, trampling on the poor. There are brief interruptions as God calls for repentance and offers glimpses of hope, but they are drowned out by these pictures of violence and rebellion.

Then Chapter 2 opens as though Isaiah is starting all over again – or God is. What Isaiah sees is not taking place now, but "in the days to come." People of every nation will stream to Mt. Zion, including those who were enemies of Israel and Judah. God's instruction will go forth from Jerusalem; God will judge between the nations. The people will be transformed by this teaching. Can you see it? They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Who can see, yet believe that? Isaiah's words are carved into the wall across from the United Nations building. Who believes these words across the street in the General Assembly as they debate the great international challenges of the day?

Like almost all the images we will see during this Advent season, Isaiah's picture of swords turned to plowshares seems absurd. Yet, Isaiah isn't naïve. He is not a Pollyanna prophet. This vision of weapons of war turned into agricultural tools, images of death-dealing turned into food-producing is a promise for "the days to come." But biblical visions in both testaments come to us from the future, longing to shape the days in which we are currently living.

What can we help people see? This is the open-ended question for those of us to answer as part of the Sequoia Association, the Northern California Nevada Conference-UCC, as local congregations, and as individuals. What word shall we see?

Friday, December 11

Psalm 72

Carol Swezey

United Japanese Christian Church

In Psalm 72, a prayer for guidance and support for the King of Solomon, I have sought solace for these troubling times. To me, it's a natural link to Isaiah 6, where Isaiah hears the voice of God, asking who shall I send?

Like many, these past nine months of this pandemic, I have lived my life in limbo. Not really knowing where to go or what to do. Fearful at every physical ailment, mournful at the loss of normalcy and the many things I've lost. After hibernating and cocooning for much of that time, I decided to control what I could and leave the rest to God. I try to go on early morning walks, often being rewarded by a Heaven full of diminishing stars. Other days, the scarlet rays of a bright new day greet me as I stride forward. Some days, it's just one foot in front of another as I just try to make it through a walk that I neither have the energy or the inclination to complete.

My new inspiration has been to follow my walks with a quick gratitude prayer amid requests for transformational blessings for those who are suffering. I often have Alexa (my new found Digital friend) play John Michael Talbot's version of "Here I am, Lord." It has become my mantra.

I, the Lord of sea and sky
I have heard my people cry
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save

I who made the stars of night
I will make their darkness bright
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night
I will go, Lord
If You lead me
I will hold Your people in my heart

I realize that most of all during this pandemic, I miss doing meaningful work, making a difference, relieving what anguish I can. I've reworked our family budget so we are giving until it hurts. I volunteered for an election phone bank for the first time in my 68 years of life. I'm packing Christmas shoe boxes for tiny souls I will never meet. For my monthly dinner friends who I have not communed with for eight months, I packed baskets of blessings with homemade bread to symbolize their nourishing friendship, a jar of inspirational quotes they can pull from daily, and a prayer of grateful Thanksgiving.

And somehow that keeps me going. Although my light flickers and nears extinction, I can still share its glow until it rages back to life. I will go, Lord, I will hold your people in my heart.

Saturday, December 12

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent
First Congregational Church of Fresno

Unlike the synoptic gospels, John's gospel portrays John the Baptist as one who precedes Jesus. Thus, in the fourth gospel, although John does baptize, "the Baptist" will never be a title you hear for the man, John. John has a very focused role – John witnesses to Jesus.

Picture John on the witness stand (in a way John's gospel maintains a judicial dimension from beginning to end) being interrogated. The leader of the religious establishment sidles up to him and asks three times (the first time is implied), "Who are you?" John answers truthfully, but differently, each time. Trying to be clear about his identity, John answers in these ways:

- Clarifies who he is not (for example he is not the Christ, not Elijah...)
- References a Hebrew Bible text that discloses something of his vocation ("the voice of one crying out in the wilderness")
- Owns (the limitations of) his actions ("I baptize with water" and there is another immanently more worthy)

In order to witness to Jesus, John has to know who he is not, who he is, and what he does. Can this similar method help us claim our identity within our personal settings as UCC-identifying faithful, to imagine how to bear witness to Jesus?

- "I am not _____.
- If you want to really know what I'm about, you'd have to know that I do this:
_____.

In John's gospel, witness is the beginning of faith—bearing witness to the Word, Jesus Christ, as our foundation for the emergence of human faith in God. Testimony is a true, first-person account of an experience. Testimony is a practice in which anyone in the congregation can participate. Any member of the congregation can discern where one's personal story overlaps with a larger, communally-held story. It's embedded in our whole Advent journey—giving witness by way of our stories as to what we have experienced to be true in our lives.

Harvard professor and community organizer Marshall Ganz says, "Stories not only teach us how to act – they inspire us to act. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we feel – our hopes, our cares, our obligations – not simply what we know, that can inspire us with the courage to act." What is the story to which you might bear witness as you make this 2020 Advent journey toward the story of God's incredible incarnation?

Imagining

Sunday, December 13

Isaiah 9:1-7

Kim Williams

Grace Community Church

We are not so far removed, it feels, from people who are living in a land of deep darkness. Show of hands—who has felt like this year has been one of walking in darkness? Or at least like wading through shoulder-high pea soup, right? It's been a slog fraught with discord, fear, grief, anxiety, and even a second wave of toilet paper shortages!

The burden has been heavy, and we are yoked to it and to one another as we wait and pray and wash hands and wait and pray. It can get to be too much to bear if we cannot imagine life beyond Shelter in Place and curfews and masks and missing each other so much it physically aches in our atrophied hugging arms.

Isaiah invites us to imagine beyond our own obscured view of the light, to envision the peace and justice and joy—**JOY!**—that are coming.

Monday, December 14

Isaiah 62:6-12

Barbara Colliander

Grace Community Church

This reading seems odd for Advent...at first glance. Some historical perspective is helpful. The people have returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian Exile and see the city in ruin, with a destroyed temple and life in chaos. People feel hopeless and are in despair. They want God to restore Jerusalem and have posted watchmen (possibly prophets) to pray to God (pester God "all day and all night") until the restoration is complete.

However, we then read of the promise that "your salvation comes". This can translate as "your savior comes", thus making this a good companion reading for Advent. God wants to save the city, but we must do our part. We must prepare the way...build up...clear the path. This is not a call for missionary work, but rather, we must make our own space welcome. Inclusivity is a key action. Christmas is not just about "remembering," but rather it is about resolving to live in Covenant with God and each other.

I see this call to action as a mutual relationship...a reciprocal mandate: God keeps his promises. We must keep our promises to follow and proclaim the Good News. This is tough to do in this time of a pandemic, but we must still "prepare the way" for the time we will be back together in a new normal. We must be welcoming to all, stay connected, look forward to old and new ways of serving God and our communities.

Tuesday, December 15

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

Ellie Dote

City Church of Long Beach

Following my divorce and move to Southern California, I started trying to find a place to heal – a search that led me to a couple of Evangelical church ministries catering to divorced people. Now, keep in mind that I'm queer and transgender – and that part of my divorce was predicated on the fact that I had cheated on my wife and in doing so had contracted AIDS. So when I approached these ministries seeking healing and help in processing my divorce, my requests were taken with a bit of skepticism, to say the least.

I can only imagine that this is where people were when they were hearing reports of a man from Nazareth who was changing hearts and lives everywhere he went. Nevermind that this man was born to a woman who wasn't married at the time. So, when this man started speaking and teaching about what God had to say, I can only imagine that his words were received with a very similar reaction to when I would try and share about my own marriage and subsequent divorce in the support groups.

"Who is this person to try and tell us how to live?"

It's easy for us to look back and answer that question with a bit of sarcasm, knowing that they were listening to Jesus, the Son of God. But at the moment? That was lost on them because they were only going off of what they knew. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20. (And not the year, because... well, you all know why.)

We've had a full year of hearing from prophets. People who have called, in various ways, for the recognition of God's incarnation in the midst of cries for racial injustice. In the children torn from their parents' arms at the border. In the children calling for a better future for the planet they're living on.

The people living in Jesus' day didn't have the benefit of hindsight. It makes me wonder if they regretted it after the fact. It makes me wonder if we'll regret it after the fact.

Jesus is being born again to us each and every day in our lives. Those who see it marvel and sing God's praises. Will you be one of them?

Wednesday, December 16

Matthew 2:13-23

Christopher Williams

First Congregational Church of Fresno

This story describes an urgent flight from a hostile land under dire circumstances. Were this a television show, this would be the season finale and an exciting one at that. Jesus has been born, Gloria in Excelsis Deo! But immediately the Christ-infant's life is in danger as King Herod has been warned of his coming and seeks to destroy Jesus before he can deliver his message of Peace to the world.

Joseph is warned to take his family and flee to Egypt until it can be safe while Herod goes down in history as a mass murdering child killer. While both Egypt and Jerusalem were part of the Roman Empire, make no mistake that Holy Family were refugees and even meet the United Nations definition of refugees as "-someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence".

Egypt was a logical choice because it was out of Herod's jurisdiction but still a part of the Empire. For the two or so years that the Holy Family resided in Egypt, we know almost nothing about their stay which indicates it was uneventful. There were no stories of the Holy Family applying for refugee status or being stopped at the border, mostly because these things did not likely exist. But even if the Holy Family does not meet what our modern day definition of refugees or immigrants, it is important that we prepare room for these groups, if for no other reason than there is nothing more Christian than taking care of strangers. The Bible is littered with hundreds of passages throughout the old and new testament about caring for the immigrant and refugee as we would care and love for our own. Beyond the Bible, many ancient cultures have expressed similar sentiments regarding the care of strangers or "sojourners" because its not just the Christian thing to do, but the right thing to do. This year has been a struggle for many, so when we ask our Heavenly Father for strength let us pause and remember those that come to our shores for safety from violence, oppression, and persecution and make room for them in our hearts.

Thanks be to God!

Thursday, December 17

Mark 13:24-37

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

A helpful entry point into this challenging text might begin with the literary context. At the beginning of chapter 13, the disciples are enamored by the scale and beauty of the Jerusalem temple and have a "Little Red Riding Hood" moment, exclaiming, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13:1). Jesus' response is to teach about the temple's coming destruction (13:2).

A "desolating sacrilege" will profane the temple along with many tribulations, including false messiahs and false prophets (13:14-23). The theological inference is that the temple will no longer be the location of God. This makes of Mark's theology one that asks, "Where do we find God?" The answer, of course, is not in the glorious temple, but on the cross. Not in the city proper, but outside the city walls. Not in the center of power and authority, but in the wilderness. Mark's primary theological question makes for a good Advent question. Where will we look for God this Advent season...and beyond?

Where you find God might depend on what you are looking for. Jesus warns his disciples to be watchful for those who would look to false Messiahs and false prophets who are capable of the same works as he (13:21-22). That which is false, which is evil, that could lead us astray, can all too often have an appearance of what is good. This is why the disciples need a reality check, and so do we. "Be alert" (13:23), "keep awake" (13:37) is more than stating God's time is not our time. It is to be watchful, discerning, especially when chaos abounds and be alert to know what you are looking for.

While we could easily digress into some sort of "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" here, there's more at stake. It points to the reality of the incarnation. If God becomes human, it becomes all too easy to make God like us; to look for God in human ways and human forms; to hold God to our standards. "Keep alert" for all the ways we could now think that we might finally "get" God.

At the heart of all this seemingly depressive instruction by Jesus is encouragement and hope. To some extent, this is Jesus at his pastoral best: that which looks like devastation and defeat will be God's victory; out of the turmoil and confusion surrounding the destruction of the temple will be a new presence of God. Out of the suffering and death of their Messiah will be new life. God's new way of being in the world will turn a cross into resurrection, and a baby in a manger into salvation for the world.

This incredible event, for which we wait, of course, is our God choosing to enter into all that decays, into all that will die, and to know it with us. To find God in everything means to be human, even in death. No longer will God remain a mythic figure in the heavens or behind a curtain high up on a hill. Advent gives us the time and space once again to believe in and live out this hope becoming reality.

Friday, December 18

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Rev. Raygan Baker

First Congregational Church of Fresno

"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

The word translated as "law" here doesn't do the term ("*Torah*") justice (pun fully intended). A dedicated legal scholar may disagree (as they are trained and hired to do), but we don't tuck laws deep within ourselves next to the things we hold most dear, and laws are not written on our hearts. We don't write love letters and poems to laws and statutes. Laws are often bent and broken, not with love, but more likely because we see them as restrictions, prohibitions, and barriers. Most laws are inspired not by devotion, but rather written down and codified because somewhere, at some time, somebody did something that the lawmaker wants to stop from being repeated.

Instructions, however, whether from stories, teaching, or treasured collections of art, thought, and wisdom are the kind of things we do hold so close to ourselves that they eventually become a part of who we are. Instructions are a much better and more accurate word, though no English word fully captures the fullness of "*Torah*." Instructions can be written on, and even recited from our hearts. We hold on to sacred instruction like a beloved family recipe, one that reminds you of the one who passed you the recipe every time you prepare the dish. They didn't just pass us a recipe card, they prepared food for us; food that had multiple stories and memories behind it, a taste that showed their love for us, and nourishment for our bodies and souls. They also showed us the tips, tricks, and techniques that just couldn't be fully captured in the steps that were written down.

In these instructions we claim and are claimed, we are welcomed and extend hospitality, we are no longer isolated individuals, but close-knit community gathered in to the presence of God.

Question for the day: What had God written on your heart? What do you hold close in the way that God holds you?

Saturday, December 19

Isaiah 35:1-10

Lisa Boyles Bell

Community UCC

This has sure been a year for imagining, hasn't it?

So much of normal life has been disrupted, upended by the pandemic. Instead of wandering in the wilderness and desert, we have spent much of this past year banished to the wilderness of our homes, our worlds made smaller as we await the flattening of the curve, the end of lockdown, vaccines.

But this too shall pass. Through our faith, we can have confidence that we'll come out stronger on the other side of this dark year.

"Be strong, do not fear!"

Spring will come. New life will spring forth. We will move into a new normal.

We will arrive there changed, after all we have been through.

But even in this time apart, these long months away from work, school and our cherished church families, we have forged new ways to be together in spirit, if not in body.

Let us imagine the time soon when we can be glad, when we can rejoice with joy and come to Zion with singing.

We will get there soon.

Discovering

Sunday, December 20

Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent

First Congregational Church of Fresno

The Annunciation to Mary is a remarkable text. God has looked with favor on her, thereby on us. God has regarded us.

It is no small thing to be regarded, to be favored, especially when you are sometimes made aware that you should not be. Going into the final Advent days before Christmas, in the midst of everything that is the season (fill in the blanks here), what it would be like to experience, to know, that God favors you? I wonder how many of us need to hear these words, now, not later, and not after Christmas? So much of the season is focused outside of oneself, the shopping, the gatherings, the giving. Much of that, of course, is changed in 2020 given our need to adhere to “stay at home” and mandatory mask advisories. To hear that God favors you, well, that kind of claim really brings the incarnation home in a dramatically new way this year. It might even feel impossible, given our history of sentimentalizing Christmas.

This story of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is surrounded by the impossible. Elizabeth’s story brackets Mary’s. This impossibility demands that we hear Mary’s story as equally incredulous as Elizabeth’s. The angel’s confession finds its deepest meaning in that where seeming impossibility abounds; that a barren, elderly woman is pregnant, that a young teenage girl from a nothing town is now favored. Once again, our set imaginations that might idealize the Christmas story are turned upside down. This just does not happen.

Mary herself acknowledges the impossible possibility of God with her first response to Gabriel.

Why is Mary bewildered? To call attention to Mary’s response to the angel’s first words is to emphasize to what extent Mary cannot even believe this impossible possibility. Me? Who am I? Why am I favored? How can the Lord be with me? She knows her place. She knows who she is. And this should not be happening. She’s a she, a teenager, and from the wrong side of the tracks. Gabriel then tells her the big news that she’s going to be pregnant with a son, but not just any son. What? “How can this be?”

Mary’s story moves us all from who we think we are to what God has called us to be. This story demands that we acknowledge the very transformation of God. It is no small journey to go from our comfortable perceptions of God to God in the manger, vulnerable, helpless, dependent. Yet, this is the promise of Christmas.

Monday, December 21

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rev. David Klingensmith

First Congregational Church of Fresno

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

In the months of this raging pandemic it seems incredibly challenging to rejoice about much of anything. The idea of giving thanks in all circumstances sounds somewhat ridiculous. And if most of us are praying without ceasing, the prayer is probably that we can get back to living somewhat “normal” lives. Many in the media are talking of “COVID fatigue” that has overtaken our population as we deal with restrictions and changes to routines. And for individuals or families who have been ill with COVID or who have lost a loved one to COVID, the idea that it is a “blessing” to have had it is laughable.

So how then are we to understand these words of Scripture?

Those early followers of Christ were expecting that he would return soon to establish his rule. They were also facing persecution for their faith. They were having their internal squabbles and issues. And Paul reminds them in words just before this passage that the day of the Lord will come when they least expect it. Just when they say, “We have peace and security,” destruction will come. It almost seems to reflect what has been happening to us. The economy was doing well, we were enjoying our lives, and then COVID hit with a vengeance.

What Paul told the Thessalonians was to remember that God is faithful, that God promised to be with them throughout all that was happening to them. We ought to take this to heart as well. Even in the midst of this pandemic, many of us have discovered new things about ourselves and our communal lives that can cause us to rejoice. Many of us have found new ways of praying - Zoom, anyone? - and have had new experiences of the Holy. When longstanding traditions have been up ended, we discover new ways of celebrating. And even when death occurs in our midst, we can celebrate lives lived, knowing that God is with us because Jesus entered human history. May we continue to discover and experience the Holy anew this Advent.

Tuesday, December 22

Matthew 2:1-12

Peter Wall

First Congregational Church of Fresno

Have you ever spent much time thinking about how the Magi just go back home? The last thing we hear about the Magi from Matthew's gospel is that "they left for their own country," having fulfilled their mission of paying homage to this infant "king of the Jews."

Somehow these foreigners "from the East" recognize the Christ better than anyone. Nobody in Jerusalem sees the star. Herod only sees a provincial political threat. The chief priests and scribes only see their scriptures. But the Magi see "the child who has been born king of the Jews." Which is a strange way to characterize Jesus, if his coming marks a cosmic shift in the structure of the world. It's especially strange when you're tuned into things like a magical star that guides your path. Why do they call him "king of the Jews," and not "savior of the world"?

The Magi see what is happening right here and right now: a child born king. They are overwhelmed with joy, they pay homage, and they give gifts. And then they go back home. They don't stick around to hitch their fortunes to this Jesus and his rising star. They don't sidle in and set themselves up as regents for this infant king. They don't take advantage of their astral foresight to seize their own special place at his side. They just go home.

I think the Magi understood the Christ better than his own followers. They understood that the divine incarnation is visible from anywhere, and ought to be enjoyed and honored wherever it is found. But instead of holding onto it, you have to keep moving. You might as well go home. That's what the Magi did. And, if you skip to the end of Matthew's gospel, it turns out to be what Jesus did, too.

The Magi followed the divine light, but they didn't try to bottle it. There will always be more.

Wednesday, December 23

Psalm 8

Kim Williams

Grace Community Church

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? *Psalm 8:3-4*

When was the last time you allowed yourself to be completely consumed by wonder? In my *Busy Adult Life*™ I will have fleeting moments of awe, or questions will arise that I'll want to follow down the rabbit trail, but then the pressing needs of whatever is "more important" at the time will push those moments out of my mind, and I'll lose them as quickly as I had them.

So here we are, just a few days away from Christmas, and I am asking you, have you allowed yourself to wonder yet in this season of Advent?

We've gotten to be professionals at waiting, at holding tight to hope, at looking ahead to the glorious coming of the Christ child, but have you let yourself breathe deeply and watch the cold air puff out of your mouth on a chilly morning? Have you shivered as you've gazed at the stars when you've walked out in your fuzzy robe and slippers, only intending to drag the recycling bin to the curb, but finding yourself drawn in by the cosmos displayed brilliantly above you, seeing the clear winter sky anew? Have you gotten out of bed on a rainy morning, knowing the weather had changed by the way your body responded by stiffening up your knees—all before you even looked out the window? Did you marvel at how connected we are physically to the rest of creation—as inconvenient and uncomfortable as it may be at times.

I can almost guarantee that even though I am the one writing this, I'll get to this page and go "Oh! Right, I meant to really revel in wonder this season!" and realize that I had let the hectic pace of December do its distracting work. And I hope that today you will join me in rediscovering the joy of wonder at God's glorious creation.

Thursday, December 24 | Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Ara Guekuezian

Harvest Community Church PC(USA)

This has been an extended season of introspection for me. My ongoing response to the pandemic: Am I being safe enough? Am I connecting with enough folk who need a personal (but not physical contact)? As I am called to the bedside of someone on the last moment of their journey: Do I hold their hand ungloved? Then what do I do when I get home? Is this enough sanitizer in my hand? Will the glob that fell on to my pants leave a noticeable stain?

Before I can look up, I start thinking of Armenia: Will I ever see my dear friends again? What kind of nation will it be within a year? A vassal state, again?

Tears cloud my vision. I cannot see a thing. Discovery? Impossible.

Thanks be to God that I have read the second chapter of Luke every year. And every year, I hear something new. This year, I am grabbed by the lapels and shaken.

LOOK UP! Look around! Go outside at 3 in the morning and listen. The time when the cries of the days are stifled by the night. They will be there again at sunrise.

Look up and see the stars. Look up and see the choir of angels. Listen and hear the song: I am here, now look down and see a little bit of ME in you. And in the morning, reflect that bit to every one of the people that bent your head down.

Introspection is not a bad thing. A well considered life is to be encouraged. But more often, lift up your head and see (and hear) as the shepherds did. And may you and I, we, be blessed with a new vision, a greater hope, and a loving kindness toward it all.

Amen and Christmas blessings.

Friday, December 25

John 1:1-14

Rev. Raygan Baker

First Congregational Church of Fresno

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory”

The one from whom we were created and spoken into being also became one of us, in a particularly humble and vulnerable body, location, and moment. There is no greater intimacy, and no deeper way of knowing, than the way in which God comes to be with us.

This is not an event from history for us to just remember. It actually reaches out to the furthest corners of creation and eternity, and wraps all of it, and all of us, up together with the Divine. Today, there is nothing for us to do with this miracle. The holiness of today comes from just letting it be. Today is the day we just watch, not with anything like urgency, but instead with curiosity and wonder. Today we watch again for Christ being born into this very moment.

For many of us, today will not have gone “how it always did before: or how we had planned and hoped, but the miracle of today is that God is simply with us; here, now, anyway.

For meditation and prayer: We don't have the words to pray today. Today the words are all God's, to whom all the words belong anyway. Sometime today, or soon, find or take a quiet moment, and find or light a light that shines in darkness (such as a candle, or a walk outside to see the stars), and simply let the miracle of today “be.”

