



*The 2022 Advent Devotional of the  
Alaska Synod (ELCA)*

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# *A Future with Hope*

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Scripture references, unless indicated, are from  
the New Revised Standard Version.

Cover photo credit: Robin Roberts

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# **A Future with Hope – Welcome!**

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”  
(Jeremiah 29:11).

I remember hearing this verse as a teenager and marveling that it had a message for me. The deeper, broader truth is that this verse is part of a letter written more than five hundred years before Jesus was born, to a community held hostage in Babylon more than 900 miles away from home, in a land whose language, food, and customs they neither knew nor desired to learn. They were broken-hearted and could not even figure out how to sing in such a strange land so far from what they held sacred, dear, and of comfort.

This chapter dispenses wisdom regarding how to respond to the face of war, defeat and exile. This letter is about living with painful circumstances, rather than alleviating them. The writer doesn't go along with quick or cheap comfort. Seventy years of exile are predicted, not the two years others are promoting. Some will not live to return to Jerusalem; perhaps their children will return, more likely their grandchildren will see Jerusalem for the first time.

Jeremiah teaches of faith during struggle. Faith in God whose love is stubborn and not defined by their comfort or lack of it.

In the season of Advent, we collectively yearn for what is not yet: the fullness of God's reign on earth, the return of our Messiah we know as Jesus, the fullness of a future with hope. This devotional booklet witnesses to that hope through the stories and insights of writers from across the state, from Ketchikan to Shishmaref and points in between.

Thank you to our writers who have shared a glimpse of the faith that guides them. Thank you to Pastors Lisa Smith Fiegel and Liz Lowry for their work in recruiting this year's writers and editing. Thank you to Robin Roberts for her photo on the cover. Thank you to you, dear partners, for reading and praying together as a synod during this season as we prepare for our Lord's return. Come, Lord Jesus.

Rev. Shelley Wickstrom – Bishop of the Alaska Synod

## **Acknowledgement from the editors:**

We offer our deepest gratitude to the writers who offered their time and talents to this project. Your stories and insights give us hope for God's future. Thank you.

With you on this Advent journey,

Lisa and Liz

*The Alaska Synod is one of 65 synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The synod is comprised of 30 congregations and 3 new ministries.*

**Sunday, November 27**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

## **Advent Awakening**

Many of us sleepwalk our way through the Advent season. We prepare our homes and churches for the Christmas celebration. Families exchange gifts, decorate a tree and make special foods. Schedules become increasingly hectic as Christmas draws near. Does this focus on activity induce a spiritual lethargy? How do we awaken our weary souls?

I experienced an “awakening” a few years ago. My task was to peel the bark from about a dozen twelve-foot-long beetle-infested spruce planks before the spring hatch. Once I learned the technique, the task became tedious, and I was feeling complacent. I was scraping and pulling off bark, over and over again.

A few hours into this routine, I pulled back yet another strip of bark. I noticed two marks on the edge of the wood. Looking closely, I saw that those two marks formed a perfect cross. I paused to ponder the meaning of this deeply spiritual moment, realizing how easily I could have missed seeing the cross.

This scripture passage urges us to be observant. What do we “see” this Advent season? Do we see homeless people begging on the street corner? Or do we see children of God who are in need? Do we see immigrants in unique garb from a foreign country at the grocery store? Or do we see our neighbors who need help as they re-settle into a new country? When we hear the angry rhetoric of political foes, do we see them as enemies, or do we listen more carefully?

Let us awaken our hearts this Advent. Maybe that means deepening our faith through Bible study or prayer. Or perhaps listening more carefully to those whose views differ from ours. Maybe it’s befriending someone in need. Stay awake! Look around and look forward with hope to Christ’s coming this Advent season.

*Holy One, you see and know us in all our joys and sorrows. Help us to see You this season, especially in unexpected people and places, with eyes and hearts open. Amen.*

Betty Hedstrand – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

**Monday, November 28**

**Romans 6:1-11**

## **Enslaved no More**

“We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6).

As I reflect on my life, I think of a time when I did not have God as a priority in my life. I was young and I lived without much purpose. At that time, my priority was to have a good time and live frivolously. Eventually, I erred. The mistakes that I made caused me to feel many unhealthy feelings about myself, feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and doubt. During a time of despair and possibly the lowest time in my life, an act of kindness from a stranger gave me that glimmer of hope that I sorely needed.

Considering Romans 6:6, I ask this question: How can we live a free and enjoyable and gratifying life while we feel enslaved because of our sins? The answer that matters for me: The fact that God loves us – just as a father loves his son – is enough.

God loved the people of Israel even in the midst of their sin. God already knew what the outcome would be for God’s people. God knows each and every one of us and who we are. When we accept God into our lives and trust in His ways, God will guide us in the best direction for us to go. By God’s love and forgiveness, we are made new every day.

As each day goes by, there will be times when feelings of doubt, fear, loneliness, and anger creep into our lives. Since we are made new by the grace of God, those feelings will not control the outcome of our lives. God gives us a new hope through the power of forgiveness and through God’s everlasting love.

*Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for making me a new person each and every day. I pray that you help me to become a more disciplined person in my walk with You. I ask for your guidance and love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Archie Kiyutelluk – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

**Tuesday, November 29**

**Genesis 9:1-17**

## **Steadfast Love in Brokenness**

The Noah story opens in a dark place. Evil abounds, both in the inclination of the human heart and in the violence and injustice of the societies they've created; apparently even wild and domestic animals are implicated. God's heart is broken about it all and He's ready to call it quits – to “blot out” every living thing from the face of the earth. The Hebrew word *maHA* literally means “rub away.” God, it seems, wants to forget the whole business, and start again.

But God can't quite go all the way, apparently. As in God's response to the disobedience of Eve and Adam in the Eden story, and as it will be time after time in the biblical stories that follow, Yahweh's deadly serious wrath is ultimately overcome by the creator's more powerful inclination toward salvation. At the heart of the Bible's witness is a God who, no matter how grieved and angry, is in love with the universe and its creatures, particularly those bipeds who somehow share God's image.

As we enter this season of Advent, we are blessed with the assurance that God gave to Noah and his family that God would never forget His promise of unconditional love for the world God created “good.” God's covenant, revealed first by a bow in the clouds, was sealed by the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus and continues from generation to generation.

*Loving and forgiving God, because of your great love for us and the world you made, you grieve. You get angry. You show mercy. You rejoice. Even in our brokenness, you remain steadfast in your love, and you will never forsake us or turn your back on the world. For that, we offer our unending praise. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Rev. Carol George – St. Mark Lutheran, Anchorage

## God's plans

As an octogenarian, I can look back and connect the dots of God's plan for me as easily as I can look to the sky and connect the dots that form the Big Dipper. When I listen to God for God's plan, it gives me comfort and peace. When I am stubborn and do my own plan, my life gets messy.

One of my fellow members at First Lutheran in Ketchikan is known for what she calls her "nudges." She acts upon these nudges immediately and does not question them. As a result, incredible things happen; some are close to miracles. She calls it a "God thing." Through her, I see God's plan at work.

For over 50 years, I have done nearly everything there is to do in a church. It's time for others to step up, correct? But what about God's plan? The church needed council members. I found myself saying I could be on the council for a year. During that time, our pastor retired, and the pandemic happened. In assessing the needs of the physical church and the spiritual needs, the congregation decided to hire short-term spiritual leaders and call a more permanent pastor later. And meanwhile, I find myself in a leadership role as the council president. I truly believe this is God's plan.

God's plan is simple and yet sometimes complex: love the Lord your God with all your heart, strength, mind, soul, and body, and to love your neighbor as yourself, to paraphrase Matthew 22: 37, 39. This love is the beginning of a relationship with our Lord and Savior. Through this relationship, God can use us in myriad ways. This Advent, let us be ready and able to do God's plan, wherever and whenever God needs us!

*God, you have given us a future with hope. Help us to listen and respond to your invitation to be part of your plans for peace, joy and love in this world. Amen.*

Virginia Klepser – First Lutheran Church, Ketchikan

Thursday, December 1

Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19

## The Light of Judgement

The psalmist, while pleading for righteous judgment, mentions the moon twice in this portion of Psalm 72. The glow of moonlight is equally available to people all over the world, the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Today, social media assures us we see the same phases wherever we are.

The moon is a great metaphor for God as God shines in our lives, not in the least because it is reflected light. We cannot see God, but we see God reflected in other people and in the natural order of things. We are called to mirror God’s light and love into the world.

God judges us. Judgment can seem scary like that in a court of law or on Judgment Day. But we can also judge something to be wonderful! There are juried art exhibits where we judge expertise and artistry, and we judge vegetables and animals at the fair as to their excellence. If we think about God as judge, we can imagine standing nervously next to our greatest achievement and hoping it will be judged as meeting the standard...not perfect, but perhaps commendable. God sees us and judges us from a perspective of love, as would a parent looking at refrigerator art by a toddler (wonderful!) or attending a pre-teen’s recital that is slightly off-tempo (splendid!).

Consider a time when you felt a warm blast of “well done, kid” from a teacher, coach, or parent, and magnify that in thinking of God’s judgment. No one would be so compassionate to our shortcomings, so aware of our true effort, or so even-handed in judging what is good or lacking. Glow in God’s basking moonlight of judgment. We are so lucky in our heavenly parentage!

*Compassionate God, when we see the moon in its various phases, help us to remember that your love for us is constant, just as the light originating from the sun is constant. Helps us trust in this light, even in the dark!  
Amen.*

Chris Terry – Lutheran Church of Hope, Anchorage

**Friday, December 2**

**Isaiah 30:19-26**

## **God Hears our Cries**

It is truly amazing that our God is moved by how we feel. If we are sad, God is sad with us. If we are happy, God is happy with us. What's more is that God does more than just feel with us, God acts on those feelings. Particularly, God is moved to action by the cries of people in their suffering.

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, God heard their cry and delivered them out of bondage. In this passage from Isaiah, the prophet describes a time when the Israelites are being bullied by their neighbors and are feeling the pressure. Having turned to various idols, the land has degraded as a result. The pressure breaks and the people cry out to God.

God is not one to hold a grudge. God proverbially runs to God's people and is gracious at the sound of their cry. God promises to restore the land and make it plentiful, and to "bind up the injuries of his people, and heal the wounds inflicted" (Isaiah 30:26).

Centuries later, humanity cried out to God, and God heard our cry, and sent Christ Jesus to reconcile humanity to God. In the future, God has promised us all a restored and plentiful land, where our injuries and wounds will be no more.

*Loving God, you are with us in all our emotions – fear, hope, joy, sadness and more. Hear the cries of our hearts today for the peoples and lands that are hurting. Help us trust in your final healing, in Jesus, Amen.*

Rev. Aaron Silco – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

Saturday, December 3

Isaiah 40:1-11

## Prepare? Cry out? Comfort?

Prepare the way of the Lord! Advent is a time of preparation, doing and perhaps waiting. What does your “to do” list look like for Advent? Handbell practice? Decorating? Mission work? Planning and cooking meals? Travel? Guests? Shopping? Wrapping? Cleaning? Eternal paperwork (you know who you are)? There’s more. Much more.

At first glance, that’s what Isaiah tells us. Prepare! Cry out! Make a highway for the Lord! However, would you, in your active frenzy, notice if God walked across your living room floor? Are we *all* too busy with preparations to notice the beginning and the end of this passage – “Comfort, O comfort my people,” “carry them in his bosom,” and “gently lead the mother sheep”? This portion of the Isaiah passage has special meaning to me – today would have been my mother’s 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

Who are these people that we should comfort? Yes, we are here to serve others, but have you ever considered that YOU are God’s people, too? “For you were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). You can take time to comfort YOU! Listen for God’s voice as Elijah did in the “sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). Look up! Listen! Take a moment to seek God’s will. Breathe. Listen. Relax your shoulders. Rest your brain. And love yourself. Right now.

Then, perhaps, you can find the comfort of being carried in a mother’s arms. God’s arms are so much better!

*Lord, please help me to take a moment to listen to your will and comfort myself with your abiding love. I want to do what is most pleasing to You today. What would you have me do? In Jesus, Amen.*

Ginger Brown – Faith Lutheran/Delta Presbyterian, Delta Junction

**Sunday, December 4**

**Matthew 3: 1-12**

## **What Chance?**

Three years ago, I started my application for the ELCA's Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program, which places young adults from the United States in partner organizations, communities and churches around the world to volunteer for up to a year. Three years is a long time to think about something. There is a lot of time to flip between "This is what I really want to do," and "Is this really what I want to do?" Even as I write this while on my YAGM year of service, I have moments of "What in the heck am I doing, halfway around the world, some 4000 miles from 'home'?" Yet, here I am, fears and confidence in all.

I am not saying that John the Baptist had the imposter syndrome that we sometimes encounter. Quite the opposite, in fact. John the Baptist seemingly so believed in the coming of the Messiah that he lived his entire life as a herald to that arrival, abandoning all of the comforts of a "normal" life for one of a man in the desert, wearing garments made from camel's hair, his food locusts and wild honey. If that devout of a man says that even he is "not worth to carry (Jesus') sandal" (Matthew 3:11), what chance do we have to live up to anything in the eyes of God? What chance do I have? What chance do any of us have?

But that's the point, isn't it? We have no way but through and with our Lord. Yes, he will burn the chaff "with unquenchable fire," but He will first gather his wheat (Matthew 3:12). We have every chance, thanks to God's mercy and love.

*Lord, let us live our lives as wheat. As we wait for the celebration of Christmas, may we remember that, in your eyes, we need not worry about being worthy of the glories of heaven. May we instead seek to live them out in our lives on Earth. Amen.*

John Christensen – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage  
Currently an ELCA Young Adult in Global Mission volunteer at Lea Rd.  
United Reformed Church, Wolverhampton, UK

Monday, December 5

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

## Following Jesus, Anywhere

There is the thing that we want to do because it has always been done. Because it benefits us to do it that way. Because it gives a certain sense of stature over others. Then there is the right thing to do because it is how followers of Christ are called to live in the world. Yet it can feel hard to do the right thing. We know what is supposed to be done but sometimes just don't want to.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes, “For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus” (4:2). Jesus’ instructions were not so much a system of beliefs, but a way of being in the world. This way of being has been ingrained in many followers so deeply that one might not be able to see it or name it.

Recently, I was talking with a friend who said that the church needs to move from doing activities to showing people how to live in the world as Christians. What if we named all the places where we are acting on behalf of Christ in the world? What if we, as we met new people, said not just our names and other pertinent information, but also added: “I go to ‘Alaska’ Lutheran Church?” In telling others what church we are part of, we show that we follow Jesus.

As you go about your life today, consider where and how you are following Jesus – perhaps without even realizing it. So often, we do the right things because it is how God has called us to live. We can also name this for others, so they might come to see the goodness that God has in store for them, too.

*Living God, help us to identify all the places where we follow you. Give us courage to name our love for You and our desire to follow You when we meet others. Amen*

Rev. Dustin Lenz – Christ Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

**Tuesday, December 6**

**Isaiah 41:14-20**

## **God in the Stress**

As I stood in the middle of my unfinished and “war-torn” kitchen that I took apart in hopes of touching up and repainting, I couldn’t help but think to myself about the million and one things that I needed to do before getting on a flight to see family and friends. Vacation and deadlines always seem to do this to me.

Despite my best intentions, waves of anxiety kept crashing in on all the plans that I made, and my mind was filled with more and more stress. Each wave of life-stealing stress took me further from my comforting shore of the “every day” and made me feel like the water would cover my head. I felt helpless, stressed out and inundated with despair. I imagined every scenario of what could go wrong before I was to board my flight. What if my house-sitter fell through? What if I couldn’t finish counting inventory before I needed to get to the airport? What if I didn’t finish that report? What if I didn’t get my bag packed? What if I missed my Lyft? What if...?

But then I remember God’s promises. When we come to God with our problems, God answers with “Do not fear...I will help you” (Isaiah 41:10). Better yet, in Isaiah 41:14-20, we are assured that God makes us new, and conquerors of the mountains in our lives. God will not forsake us in our wilderness. God makes springs of water in dry lands; I knew God would help me rise above the waves of despair that flooded my life even when they hit me with tsunami force. God promises this help and renewal of the spirit that only God can give, as we wait for the day when despair and stress is no more.

*Lord, when we feel like a sea of stress is swallowing us, help us to remember your promises and that You will help us to be conquerors of our problems when we ask for your help.*

Connie Reyes – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

## God's Covenant with Abram

“When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.” (Charles A. Beard)

What is a covenant? Is it a contract, a legal document? Is it simply a promise? Is God simply cutting a deal with Abram to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky? Or is it more? Perhaps a covenant is better understood as a relationship or partnership where two parties work together to accomplish something they can't do on their own. As a relationship, a covenant is alive, dynamic and ever-growing. Through covenants, God offers the opportunity to build a relationship with God, to work together to accomplish things beyond our comprehension – like the number of stars in the night sky. This relationship requires not just faith in God, but more importantly trust in God. Trust includes believing that God has our best interests at heart.

Advent is a time of increasing darkness. In Alaska, the night skies return, and we can see the stars and delight in the majesty of the northern lights. In Genesis 15, we continue to see a relationship between God and Abram develop – God showed him that Alaskan night sky: “Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then God said to him, “So shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5).

Is this an exercise in accounting or a reminder of what is possible together, when we continue to build our relationship with God, trusting in what can be done together?

Advent is a time when we can stop, see the stars, and renew our covenant to continue to build our relationship with God, knowing that with God all things are possible.

*Abba, thank you for trusting us even though we do not always trust you. In times of twilight, help us look at the stars and know that you are there. In times of darkness, let us see the bright star that is Jesus, the new covenant for us and all people, and give us the strength to trust in you as we work with you to fulfill your covenant. Amen*

Jim Hemsath – Joy Lutheran Church, Eagle River

**Thursday, December 8**

**Ruth 1:6-18**

## **Loving and Kind**

In Jewish tradition, the Book of Ruth is also called The Book of Lovingkindness. It is a story of people being loving and kind, of supporting and encouraging one another; a story of courage in the midst of adversity and hope in the face of hopelessness; a story where all that is bleak and empty becomes suffused with comfort and joy.

The Book of Lovingkindness is so delightful we tend to read over just how fraught it is. But pay attention. See how insecure the life of a woman becomes when she is widowed. Consider how homecoming for one is a move to a new land for another, who must learn new customs, a new culture, maybe a new language, and certainly a new faith. Reflect on the limitations of aging – to be too old to do the hot, dusty work of bending and gathering, to have to depend on someone else for food. Notice the vulnerability of a pretty young foreign woman in the field, and the frank possibility of rape.

The Book of Lovingkindness does not hide the realities and the challenges of lives lived. But because of good and generous actions of people through this story, tragedy upon tragedy is averted. These loving and kind people are celebrated as ancestors of Jesus in Matthew's genealogy.

Lovingkindness is part of Jesus' DNA. Here is good news: He comes to us as our brother; we share that DNA! May lovingkindness be your blessing, given and received, this Advent day and unto the ages.

*Gracious God, thank you for those who fill my life with your lovingkindness. Help me to reflect that lovingkindness to all, with generosity and delight. Amen.*

Rev. Sue Bahleda – Island of Faith, Wrangell

**Friday, December 9**

**2 Peter 3:1-10**

## **God's Time**

As a hospital chaplain, I've often sat with people through moments that feel like a thousand years – waiting for test results, holding vigil, anticipating the next meeting with the doctor. And there are other times where the time flies by, perhaps too quickly.

We're reminded that with God, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. This may not always feel like good news. So often when time seems to be going slowly, we want it to go faster, and when it goes too quickly, we want it to slow down, to savor precious moments.

The writer of 2 Peter wanted to remind this community that was anxious for Christ's return that the ways we understand time are not the ways that God necessarily works. The writer reminds them that God is patient. But perhaps what is even more important is not so much *how* God works, but who God *is*. God is patient with us. God sees us as beloved. And while there are threats of destruction throughout this reading, most important is that God does not want any to perish.

We are understandably anxious at times for Christ's return and for the coming of God's kin-dom and new creation. But might we also find gifts in the waiting? Waiting can be agonizing, but sometimes it also reveals important truths. Sometimes we may discover what is truly important during the most difficult times – who cares for us, what we truly value, and what we really want to prioritize in the living of our days.

*Dear God, there is so much that we do not understand about your ways. Help us stay confident of your love and your hope for us. Help us to be fully present in holy moments of relationship, of beauty, of joy. In heartbreaking moments and times of suffering, sustain us with your love and your promises. Amen.*

Rev. Susan Halvor – Manager, Spiritual Care, Providence Alaska Medical Center, Anchorage

Saturday, December 10

1 Samuel 2:1-8

## Entrusting our Lives to God

Hannah was a person of exemplary faith. She had prayed without ceasing for her son, Samuel, but after he was born and old enough to be weaned, she dedicated him to God as she had promised.

Hannah was able to see beyond her own needs and desires, and thus, place her child and trust in God despite her long-anguished wait to become a parent. Her faith was so unwavering that even her husband understood how important it was to honor her vow to God. Hannah and her spouse were both selfless in their love for God to the point of being willing to sacrifice their personal happiness for the good of the people of Israel.

This brings to mind another parent whose faith enabled her to entrust her child into God's care. As Hannah offered up her son to serve God's greater purpose, so would Mary, the mother of Jesus. May we all have the faith and trust of Hannah and believe that God will answer our prayers.

*Dear God, Parent of us all, let us reach outward from our individual selves and engage in the community of loving our neighbors and your creation. Amen.*

Kim Michaud – Epiphany Lutheran Episcopal, Valdez

**Sunday, December 11**

**James 5:7-10**

## **Patiently Waiting**

I've been visiting a dear friend who's battling cancer. After every test or scan, he endures that horrible wait to hear the results – will it be good news, or will it be bad? Will he have to undergo more treatments and indignities? Is the current treatment working, or will he have to try a different one, with a new set of side effects to bear?

At times like this, rest seems impossible as grim possibilities scroll through our exhausted minds. This cycle plays out over weeks, months, and years, a roller coaster ride of suffering and struggle. Why must we always wait and wait for answers? Being a “patient” means that we often need to be patient, and that can be so hard to do.

Those of us who are family and friends of a person with cancer or in a difficult situation also carry their burden. Their good news is our good news; their bad news is ours to accept as well. While we cannot take away their pain and suffering, we can make the journey with them – patiently staying by their side through the ups and the downs, sometimes just sitting quietly with them as they bear their burden of treatments, pain, uncertainty, and fear.

Sadly, some people have no one to sit by their side through a difficult experience, or to share their joy. But no matter what, God is always with each of us. In times of turmoil, Jesus suffers with us, and the Holy Spirit comforts us. God sits quietly by our side during chemo treatments, and God is with us when our hearts are full of joy. God is with us every step of our journey through life – through all the ups and downs as we patiently await Jesus' coming again.

*Good and gracious God, help us to remember that You are always by our side, sharing our joys and helping us bear our burdens on this earth. Strengthen our faith to endure difficult days, and to patiently await the glorious day when we are gathered together in your Kingdom. Amen.*

Robin Roberts – Petersburg Lutheran Church, Petersburg

## God in the Gaps

“The season of Advent,” writes Fleming Rutledge, “is not for the faint of heart.”

Psalm 42, like the season of Advent, begins in the dark. There is a recognition in both the psalm and the season of Advent of the brokenness of this world; the gap between what is and what should be. Certainly, we too, like the Psalmist, know what it is to live in the shadow of worry, mournfulness, grief, uncertainty, and reminiscences of happier times past. But, like the Psalmist, we have confident hope that, one day, God will make good on God’s promise to take every broken thing in our life and in our world and make it whole.

The central drama of the Advent season is the promised coming of Jesus both as the babe of Bethlehem and the future Lord and judge of all creation. This psalm calls to mind light in the midst of darkness, a darkness overcome by the unbreakable promise of God made known to us in the birth of Jesus so long ago, and in the second coming of Jesus that we await.

*God of all time, you meet us in all the gaps of our lives, in places of waiting, uncertainty and sorrow. We take comfort from your presence today and your promise to be with us and for us, always. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

Rev. Jeff Hackler – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

**Tuesday, December 13**

**Zechariah 8:1-17**

## **Choose Wisely**

In this reading from Zechariah, the Lord declares the intention of reclaiming Jerusalem as the holy city and restoring greatness to the land and people. It's not an easy and magical transformation, but rather will require people of God to choose wisely in order for the society and countryside to be restored as God intends.

The message to Zechariah was clear and involved stark choices: turn from curses to blessings, from fear to courage, from lying to truth, and from violence to peace. The people would need to actively choose a lifestyle that reflected these directives.

Many of us have probably heard the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," and – although this saying is not in Scripture – to some degree this was the message to the people. Their restoration required their active and positive participation *with* God, to create the community and world that God had in mind.

As I reflect on this text from Zechariah, I am reminded that every day I also have the opportunity to do the same: to choose blessings, courage, truth, and peace, not just for my own flourishing, but for restoration and justice for all in my community and world.

*Lord, I ask for your continued loving guidance on my heart and hands. Help me to live each day with courage, truth and peace, so that all people might know restoration and justice. Amen.*

Eileen Hosey – Shepherd of the Valley, Juneau

Wednesday, December 14

Matthew 8:14-17; 28-34

## Come, Lord Jesus

During Advent, many churches sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” It is often a beloved favorite and captures the theme of Advent. “Come, Lord Jesus,” we pray. Because with Christ, we have a “future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Or so we say...

But often I am like the people in this passage from Matthew who saw Jesus and immediately asked him to leave their neighborhood. And why shouldn't they? The swineherds lost their livelihoods when their demon-possessed pigs jumped into the sea. I imagine this sudden loss would rock the entire community. This powerful display of authority would be terrifying. After all, it was not just two people possessed with demons whose lives were changed. It never is. When one of us experiences healing or liberation or transformation, our entire community is now different.

Perhaps they were asking: What else will you do, Jesus? What else will you change? What else might we lose? Maybe it is better to just keep things the way they always were.

It is so hard to let go. And yet, to receive a future with hope, I must let go of what I cling to in the past, and all that I am used to and comfortable with in the present. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is not a comfortable prayer, but it is a life-changing one.

*O Come, Emmanuel, and dwell with me where I live. Help me to let go of what is no longer mine to keep and receive the healing and hope You bring. I ask this not just for me, but for all those around me. Amen.*

Rev. Liz Lowry – Lutheran Church of Hope, Anchorage

**Thursday, December 15**

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

## **When We Feel Unheard**

In this psalm, I get the feeling that the writer is angry with God or feeling as if they are not being heard in their prayers. They are left hungry, mocked and without a home. I imagine them out in the desert, waiting to go back to Israel. And that the writer, although angry, still has hope and faith that God will shine God's face upon them, help them out of the desert, give them food to eat and water to drink, and save them from their enemies.

Lately I have been praying a lot and feeling discouraged when it seems God hasn't been hearing my prayers. A mentor/friend taught me to pray this way: giving thanks for a loved one and asking God to bless them and the situation, rather than asking for specific outcomes. When I was given this passage to write this Advent devotional, I couldn't believe it – this passage speaks so much to me right now. I can relate to the writer's anger and frustration of feeling unheard.

Yet, in this passage and in my life, I still sense some hope in the request to "let your face shine upon us" (Psalm 80:19) and that we can repent and maybe even bargain with God, asking for what we need: "then we will never turn our back to you, give us life, and we will call on your name" (Psalm 80:18). As we move forward with Advent, let us sense God's presence and desire to restore us, with hope for a brighter future.

*Lord, sometimes I am frustrated when I cannot tell if You have heard my prayers. Give me a sense of your presence and help me trust that You are always listening. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

Shannon Klescewski – Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Nome

**Friday, December 16**

**2 Samuel 7:1-17**

## **God's House**

God gave explicit directions to the Israelites for building the Tabernacle in Exodus 15-30. The Tabernacle, revered by the Israelites as the place where God dwelled, was designed to be very portable to accompany the Israelites on their journey to the promised land.

Many years later, the Israelites were in the promised land under the rule of King David. David approached the prophet Nathan with his idea of building a permanent home for God rather than a tent which was easily moved. Nathan agreed, but God said God would make a house *of* David. David was not to build a house for God but was promised a descendant who would rule forever.

During Advent, we remember that Jesus was that Promised One for whom the Israelites waited. Although David was remembered as a great earthly king, Jesus brought salvation through his life, death and resurrection. God promised to always be with Jesus. It was Jesus who would build a house for God. God's love through Jesus is a promise that lasts forever – a house for everyone, anywhere.

Jesus brought the message of love for humans from God. In Jesus' life and teachings, we learn how we are to treat others with love. God uses us to show God's love for all people. By ourselves we cannot do this, but with the Holy Spirit's guidance, we reach out to all people with the good news of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

*Lord Jesus, your love is a home for us all. Help us share your good news so that others might find a home in You, too. Amen.*

Darlene Larson Matz – Lord of Life, North Pole

Saturday, December 17

Galatians 3:23-29

## All Are One in Christ

At this time of year, family traditions seem to be especially important. I am three generations away from the family members who came to the Americas from Denmark and Norway. Over the years, I have created new traditions for our family celebration, but every December I still make lefse, krumkake and Norwegian coffee buns to honor my Scandinavian heritage. That is part of my identity.

In Galatians, Paul affirms that we are no longer defined by race, social class or gender. We are all children of God through faith. In a time when there seems to be much division among us, it can seem as though there is no hope of coming together. In the carol, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow despaired that, “there is no peace on earth, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth good will to all.”

Yet through the love of Christ, we are made one as God’s children. There is hope for now and the future. This gift of grace and love is given to us by the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior. We are joined together with Christ as God’s beloved children. So let us joyfully bring our traditions, races, genders and cultures together to celebrate this gift of grace. For now, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

*Holy and loving God, you created us to be your children. May we rejoice in the gift of your Son who comes to make us one through faith. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Linda Bender – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

## **Got Problems?**

We all have problems. Long ago, the prophet Isaiah met with King Ahaz as an enemy nation gathered outside the walls to invade. God sent Isaiah with a message that would help the king with his problems: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Immanuel means “God with us.” This was the solution to the king’s problems – God was with him in the midst of them.

A few centuries later, Joseph and Mary had big problems. Mary was pregnant and not “officially Joe’s wife.” Joe loves Mary and does not want her to be shamed or, worse yet, stoned to death. The angel suggests marrying the girl anyway. Then, more problems come: the government demands a census and there is nowhere to give birth in Bethlehem.

Much of life is about solving problems. In an interview, songwriter and artist John Mellencamp said about painting: “You walk up to a canvas and it’s you. You know you have a problem. See, everything to me is a problem.” For me, the art of problem solving is found in life – carpentry, gardening, raising sled dogs, or raising kids with a wonderful wife.

When problems are solved, there is creativity and life. Problem solving involves trust – in God, yourself and your creative spark. Consider God’s creative spark at creation. Was God solving a problem in the divine brain? An empty canvas in the universe? The Holy Spirit now gives us problem-solving abilities. Everyone can solve problems; we do it in diverse ways. I heard a local TV news story about a new program to train young carpenters, plumbers, and electricians. A participant in the program said, “Trades people are not stupid like some people think. Sometimes we must think better than those who have gone to school to get degrees. Every action in building a house is solving a problem.”

So, solve a problem, and build a house for the Lord in your soul.

*Wise God, help us come to you with all our problems. Give us wisdom to solve those that we can and nudge us to seek help for those we cannot, trusting that you are with us through it all. Amen.*

Rev. Rick Cavens – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Wasilla

**Monday, December 19**

**Genesis 17:15-22**

## **Named and Called by God**

A child is to be born to a centenarian and a nonagenarian and later a virgin?! Say what?! While Abraham fell on his face laughing at the thought, he also obeyed God, which blessed not only himself but those around him. In this Advent season as we await the miraculous and journey toward the manger, let us say YES to God's call on our lives. No matter how ridiculous it may seem to our human ways, let us trust in God's perfect ways. Obedience to God bears abundant fruit.

At AK Child & Family, we have a tradition of giving our students cards with the meaning of their names on them. Their faces brighten when they receive them; we are reminded of the power of being called by name. This gift allows us to feel seen and that we matter. In today's scripture, the nuance in the name God gives to Sarai (Sarah) helps to clarify God's truth in transforming what was into what is to be.

In Ann Weems' book, "Kneeling in Bethlehem," she writes: "In each heart lies a Bethlehem, an inn where we must ultimately answer whether there is room or not..." I know that some congregations use this beautiful saying: "all kids are our kids." As we approach the Babe in the manger, let us celebrate, embrace and care for the multitudes God has called into being.

Meister Eckhart urged us to "be ready at all times for the gift of God." Let us make room for the Babe. Let us be obedient at all times to give of ourselves to those in need and to receive the Love among us all year long. There is power in a name. Emmanuel. Peace and blessings to you during these Advent days and always.

*Creator of miracles that can seem ridiculous to us, stir our hearts to make room for the children in our midst. We pray for those who need a foster home, those receiving care away from home and those seeking a home. May we all find a home in and through You. Amen.*

Kelli Williams – Director of Spiritual Life, AK Child & Family

**Tuesday, December 20**

**Genesis 21:1-21**

## **Plans for a Future, Hope**

The overall theme for this Advent devotional booklet is from the prophet Jeremiah: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:11). It is a good theme and a good passage. Unfortunately, we often hear an echo of this scripture when we are in distress or grief. “God has a plan” is what people say when they don’t know what to say in the face of loss. It is meant to be a comfort and the speaker is sincere, but sometimes it is not a comfort.

In Genesis 21, Hagar has been tossed out of the family camp of Abraham and Sarah because Sarah is jealous for her own newborn son, Isaac. In her mind, there is not enough room in God’s promise for both of Abraham’s sons, Ishmael and Isaac. For Hagar, this is a tragedy. She hears nothing about God’s plan for her or Ishmael as she is led to the edge of the camp and cast out. Even if Abraham had shared with Hagar that “God had a plan” for her son I do not think she would be comforted. She is wandering in the wilderness, the bread was eaten long ago, the water has run out. What kind of plan is that?

Sometimes God has to be reminded that God has a plan. God hears Ishmael’s cries and is reminded of the promise spoken through his prophet long ago. The plan is that everybody is to have a “future with hope.” We have all experienced sadness, joy, hardship, liveliness, wealth and need. Through it all, God’s plan is that we have a future with hope – Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, Ishmael, you, and me.

*God of blessing, thank you for a future, thank you for hope. May I rest on that promise both in times of joy and in times of distress. Amen*

Rev. Sandra Rudd – Sitka Lutheran Church, Sitka

**Wednesday, December 21**

**Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20**

## **Soon...Soon**

“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Revelation 22:7).

Soon...soon. I am reminded of nap times a few years ago while babysitting my granddaughter. She was in the midst of the “terrible twos” and definitely developing a mind of her own. Her response to the suggestion of a nap was always “soon.... soon.” We were never exactly sure when soon would be, but it was a statement of acceptance, anticipation and preparation for her. For us it usually produced feelings of hope and relief. After all, she hadn’t screamed “no nap” in response to our request. And soon, given a little time to prepare, she sweetly accepted the hand that walked her to her room and put her in bed, arranging her stuffed animals and blanket just so.

Jesus’ declaration of “see I’m coming soon” may bring mixed emotions. Some want to figure out the exact moment, though Scripture tells us that no one knows the day or hour. Others feel fear. Recent movies and media portray horrific events surrounding the second coming of Jesus. Yet Revelation points us to a more peaceful place. A tree with leaves for the healing of the nations. A river flowing through the city. Open gates and justice for all.

While we wait for the time described in Revelation, we are called to be a healing, nourishing and reconciling child of God in our sphere, however large or small that may be. And as we prepare for the coming of the Christ child this Christmas, we are wise to remember the words “I am with you always. Even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). We are not alone. The Lamb is with us, and soon...soon we will know the loving comfort of that warm embrace.

*Abiding One, help us feel and know your presence in this world as we go about our calling to love God by loving others. Amen, come Lord Jesus! Soon...soon.*

Rev. Dan Bollerud – Retired, member at Lutheran Church of Hope, Anchorage

**Thursday, December 22**

**Luke 1:46b-55**

## **Magnified**

At our congregation's weekly food pantry, I run a coffee, snacks, and sundries station at the end of the distribution line. Two weeks ago, a patron pointed and excitedly asked, "Are those reading glasses?" He was trying to choose from the small selection donated. Neither of us could read the print identifying the magnification level, so we got help from a 17-year-old new volunteer. Before leaving that day, the patron came back and, clutching the glasses to his chest, mouthed a "thank you" as he held back tears. He could now read.

God was magnified in us that day. God looked on our lowliness and filled us with joy through that one humble gift. Aside from the obvious "magnification" provided by the glasses, the gift of love was magnified as it was shared through the original giver, my sundries display, the patron who couldn't afford glasses, and the teen who could see the tiny print. Literally clearer sight makes an enormous difference in the life of someone experiencing food insecurity (maybe homelessness). Think of every label, every form, every icon, every book you look at every day. Many of us reach for a pair of reading glasses to complete tasks of convenience or to make decisions affecting our well-being. It is humbling to imagine this man trying to survive each day without that ability.

God gave us clearer vision in that moment. We got to see God's mercy working to fill a person's heart as well as his hunger for food. We got to see our own abundance, including multiple generations of relationships helping to ensure the gift was a good match. We got to see our place in the years of service that evolved into the current pantry. We rejoiced that someone passed a pair of outgrown glasses to a stranger in need.

How is the LORD magnified in you?

*Magnificent One, we wait for You. Thank you for Mary and all the blessed generations who remember your mercy and are heirs of the promises you have made. May you come, be magnified in us today. Amen.*

Rev. Karen Perkins – Resurrection Lutheran Church, Juneau

**Friday, December 23**

**Galatians 3:6-14**

## **Resting in Faith**

Faith rests. Fundamentally, faith rests—it does not work, it does not strive, it doesn't really stretch. Faith simply rests. Martin Luther writes of faith receiving things like baptism or the promises of the gospel, which again shows how restful faith is: faith does not even need to reach for baptism or communion, faith just receives the grace of God.

Abraham, when he heard the gospel promise that all the gentiles would be blessed through him, seemed to receive this promise with a simple, rest-filled faith. Sure, he did big and bold things (like almost sacrifice his only son!), but he did it by simply hearing the word of the Lord. His obedience was fundamentally centered in God's rest-filled faith. God said, "believe me," and everything was done for Abraham. All he needed to do was let his faith rest and receive.

Jesus embodied faith-as-rest, and he did so especially when he went to the cross. I believe that the cross allowed him to truly rest. His final words were those of one about to rest easy: "It is finished!" He had faith that God would do something, so he rested. It did not matter that he was now a cursed, shamed individual of whom the Romans made an example: faith receives the curse. Faith also receives the resurrection.

If Jesus the Christ can rest on the cross as a cursed human, we can rest, too. Paul writes that "the law does not rest on faith" (Galatians 3:12), because the law does not rest at all. There is always more to do; there is always more need for justice. So, rest. Receive what God gives you. You do not need to build an altar to receive God's graces; you don't have to do anything at all. Just rest, be borne by the Spirit, and let your faith rest on the child born in Bethlehem.

*Jesus, the law says do this, and it is never done in me. My faith says "rest, rest" and you have accomplished it all in me. Amen.*

Rev. Ollie Bergh – Fairbanks Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

**Saturday, December 24**

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

## **A Child Has Been Born for Us**

Advent, this time of waiting, now comes to a close. Christmas Eve, when we celebrate the arrival of a child born for us, is here. The prophet Isaiah reminds us of what we have been waiting for these past weeks: “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” (Isaiah 9:6).

When I hear this scripture, I actually hear it read in a young child’s voice. In fact, at first, I thought this was the scripture Linus recites in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*; it was not, that was from Luke. But last year at our Christmas Eve children’s program in Shishmaref, this text was split up into many parts with a different child reading each part. I remember the wonder as a different voice read each name “Wonderful Counselor” “Mighty God” “Everlasting Father” and “Prince of Peace.”

There is beauty in hearing this scripture proclaimed from the youngest in our congregations. These scriptures that are so old – and yet proclaimed each year – hold hope and meaning of what God has done and what God continues to do. God is our counselor, our parent, and brings us everlasting peace.

We can truly live into a future with hope, knowing that a child has been born for us this day. May we celebrate this joy with children, proclaimed by children, for all God’s children – and live into that hope this Christmas season.

*God our Mother and Father, we thank you for sending your Son to us this season and always. Help us feel your sustaining love, presence and peace as we celebrate this season of hope. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

Rev. Anna Silco – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

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