



Overflowing with Hope

*The 2020 Advent Devotional of
the Alaska Synod (ELCA)*

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Editors

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the New Revised Standard Version.

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Overflowing with Hope

A Welcome to the Season of Advent

Rev. Shelley Wickstrom, Bishop of the Alaska Synod (ELCA)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Advent has us on our tiptoes yearning for what is yet to come. We await the return of Jesus in the fullness of time. We await the fulfillment of the promise that the hungry will be fed, the lame leap and the blind see. We await justice flowing down like rushing waters; the lion and the lamb snuggled together. We await the fullness of God's reign on this earth.

When Jesus returns, God won't use a magic wand to make this happen. The Holy Spirit's WD-40 loosens us up from bad habits, destructive attitudes, lack of imagination. God chooses to work in and through us. That's pretty risky but so was becoming human flesh in the first place. You know where that ended up...with resurrection!

This booklet combines the thoughtful work of Alaskans from across our synod. Together we are young and old and in-between. We are from the far northwest and southeast and in-between. We're married, single, young and elders, parents or not. Our life experiences are varied and rich. God has been at work in and through us.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we overflow with hope because God chooses to give us this stubborn gift. Hope won't let us go. Hope doesn't depend on success or comfort. We can't control it. A little bit of hope is a trickle until it gushes forth like every stream in spring choosing its path.

May your reading and prayer during this Advent Season prepare you for what God is yet to do in this world God loves and in you.

The Alaska Synod is one of 65 synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The synod is comprised of 30 congregations and 4 new ministries.

Acknowledgement

To the writers: we offer heartfelt thanks to everyone who wrote devotions for this project. Your words have deepened our imaginations to see God at work in the world and increased our hope as we prepare for this Advent season. We know this devotion will be a blessing to many because of your words, as it has already been to us.

To the readers: your own insights on the scriptures and the season are important. You'll find space at the back of this booklet for jotting down thoughts, ideas and prayers that arise.

*Overflowing with gratitude,
Lisa and Tim*

Sunday, November 29

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Restoration

Several years ago, when I lived in Nome, a group of people captured my imagination. They came from Michigan to find a treasure and bring it back, piece by piece. What was that treasure? A B-25 Mitchell airplane which crashed just short of a now-defunct runway during World War II. It ran out of fuel and lie for over 70 years, forgotten, becoming part of the earth, covered with overgrowth. While describing their mission and the toil of digging out the B-25, this group was filled with excitement. What appeared as mere mangled metal, was a prized, one-of-a-kind gem to these aviation mechanics. They planned teach young apprentices how to re-build this magnificent flying machine. They would restore it, and that plane would soar again.

God, too, is in the restoration business. As passionate as these aviation mechanics were, God's passion for humanity is even greater. Israel waited in exile in a far-flung place called Babylon, longing for restoration. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls Psalm 80 a psalm of "communal disorientation and lament." Seemingly forgotten, the Psalmist cries out on behalf of Israel: *How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, you make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.* And then a plea arises three times, an echo within the Psalm: *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

Israel's plea resonates with us. We, too, ache for healing, restoration, a new day. Our lives, our relationships are not what they should be. Our world seems to be unravelling. We long for new possibilities. We hope for God's face to shine upon us and God's promises to be fulfilled. This prayer is fitting for the onset of this Advent season. "Restore us, O God," echoes not only in this Psalm, but through the ages. Like Israel, we wait.

Advent is a season of hope. We hear the scriptural promises: God has come, is coming, and will come again. God has a plan to make all things new, even us. Jesus, sent from the highest of heavens, is born to dwell with us in our mangled lives. In Him, we see God's face shine upon us.

Restore us, O God. Let us trust that your face shines, that we may be saved. Amen.

Rev. Karen Sonray – Joy Lutheran Church, Eagle River

Monday, November 30

Micah 4:1-5

Gazing Upward

In Alaska it is not difficult to visualize the Lord's house in the highest of mountains. Many of us can look up to majestic peaks on a regular basis. What is more challenging in these times is visualizing all nations sitting under their own vines peacefully without need of the implements of war. I fear for the division in just our nation alone. What then can be done about it?

Our text shows us a clear way: "Let us go up to the mountain of the LORD... that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths." Turning our attention away from our screens, opening our Bibles, and engaging in scripture is the antidote to the anxiety and hatred that is blasting from the news and social media. It is balm for our beleaguered souls.

My mood is always lightened when I pause to notice the snow-capped beauty of our mountains. It is good to lift our eyes upward, whether to mountains, hills or skies, and take respite from the anxious times that consume us. This time of year, as the shadows lengthen and our daylight transitions into darkness, we need to be intentional about taking a moment to lift our gaze upward. The shortened days slow down our pace and provide more space for reflection. When I take the time each day to be still, read, and contemplate scripture, it calms me, and I am kinder and more empathetic for it. It is the best resource we have to work toward world peace.

Teaching God, help us learn your ways so that we may walk in your paths to better love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen

Kim Michaud – Epiphany Lutheran-Episcopal Church, Valdez

Tuesday, December 1

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Grieving with Hope

On a rainy, gray day in late November, I stood at the bedside of a dear saint as she slipped from this life to the arms of her Lord. I was blessed to be invited into this holy moment with her family who had faithfully supported and cared for her as an aggressive cancer consumed more and more of her healthy tissue, stole her vitality, and finally her bodily life itself. Without a doubt there was, around that bed, profound grief. There was also profound hope.

The words of the apostle Paul, speaking to Christ's followers in Thessalonica, require a careful reading, as it may sound, in a cursory reading, that he is saying "you may not grieve" – full stop. Yet, it is vital that we read this imperative in its full context. Paul insists that we "may not grieve *as others do who have no hope.*" As Christians, our grief is bathed in the sure and certain hope that as Christ was raised from the dead, we too will be raised to life eternal when Christ returns in glory to fulfill the promise of God to restore all things in heaven and earth. This sure and certain hope, Paul insists, does not arise simply from our own desire, but is based on nothing less than the "Word of the Lord."

Therefore we "encourage one another" by continuing to share God's Word. It is God's Living Word, incarnate in Jesus Christ, that can lift people from despair when they experience grief and loss. When we lose those we love, grief – deep, painful, profound grief – is to be expected. Thanks be to God that, through God's Living Word, we are not crushed or defeated but encouraged and uplifted by hope.

Gracious God, by your grace, may we live secure in the hope of the resurrection as we face the losses and grief that will surely come to us in this life. Amen

Rev. Carol George – St. Mark Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Fatigue

We've added a new word to our vocabulary: 'COVID-fatigue.' It has been nearly a year since the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in China, nearly ten months since the first confirmed case in the U.S., and seven months since the first confirmed case in Alaska. Months of travel restrictions, mask-wearing and social-distancing. Months spent working, shopping, schooling, and worshipping from home. It might be called the 'new normal,' but after months of it, we are exhausted.

COVID-19 isn't the only destabilizing factor of 2020. Racial tension and outrage that have been bubbling near the surface for years have again spilled into the streets as people cry out against racism and police brutality. Record-setting wildfires burned huge swaths of the West. The economy seems to be in a nose-dive. And 2020 was an election year!

When verse 36 calls us to "be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place," I'll be honest, it sounds exhausting. We're supposed to "be on guard that your hearts are not weighed down" (v.34). How? Like COVID-fatigue, we are also prone to what I'll call Kingdom-fatigue – giving up on God, giving in to the ways of this world, and straying from the path.

Look again at verse 36: "Be on alert at all times, **praying** that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place," (*emphasis added*). We are not asked to simply pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Too often we believe we're supposed to find the strength to do all things on our own. Compound that with isolation and social-distancing, and it's no wonder we are COVID-fatigued. Compound it with the temptations of doubt and sin, and it's no wonder we are Kingdom-fatigued. But Philippians 4:13 reminds us that "(we) can do all things **through** him who strengthens (us)."

We are not alone. We are called not to power through in the name of God, but to ask for help when times get hard. May we know that amongst the sick, the afraid, and the broken – that is where we find God. May we remain alert for Christ, with vigilant practice in these uncertain times.

Lord God, we are tired. Remind us that we are never truly alone. Amen.

John Christensen – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Thursday, December 3

Psalm 30:5

Morning Has Broken

*Morning has broken, like the first morning.
Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.
Praise for the singing, Praise for the morning.
Praise for them springing fresh from the Word.*
– Cat Stevens

The theological concepts of darkness and light are familiar to Christians. Advent is a season of preparation for God's gift of Jesus, the light of the world. When we feel lost in darkness, we are drawn to the light of God's love, the light of God's Word, the light of hope, and of new insights. For me, these ideas coalesce in the song *Morning Has Broken*.

I first heard and learned the song in my church's choir. It was love at first verse. Every choir member reflected that joy. One older tenor, Ole Larson, particularly loved this song. The most meaningful delivery of this song was outside Ole's open bedroom window, as he lay dying.

A few years later, my husband and I left the Central Coast of California and moved to Alaska. We left extended family and friendships built over many years and took with us two angry teenage daughters who cried throughout the flight from sunny California to wintry Alaska. The day after arriving, I drove my husband to his new job. It was an *intensely* dark morning in early January with subzero temperatures, icy roads and dirty snow. On my way back, I made a wrong turn and got lost. I was tearful as I wondered if our lives had also taken a dark, wrong turn. Then, *Morning Has Broken* played on the radio. God was with me.

Years later, I left university teaching and purchased an independent retail store. I was naive. Experiencing an avalanche of new information and business practices, I went to a trade show. Overwhelmed and full of doubt as I entered, I heard a pianist in the atrium playing *Morning Has Broken*. God was with me.

God is with me in fearful times. God is with me in my doubts. God is with me in darkness, promising light. God re-creates a new day.

Lord, I praise you for each morning's light, and for the light of your presence. Amen

Lori Atrops – Joy Lutheran Church, Eagle River

Friday, December 4

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Hiding with God

As a kid, I felt like nothing could get me when I hid inside a blanket fort, which is why I made them whenever I messed up. It felt like, in a fort, I could hide away from my brokenness.

God knows we screw up and want to hide. So, God told Israel through Jeremiah to do just that: *flee for safety, do not delay! Go into the fortified cities!* God was mad at the Jerusalemites because they were unjust and greedy. God wanted them to *return* to justice, so God mysteriously brought *evil from the north*. That evil from the north forced them to hide in their fortified city, Jerusalem, where the temple of God was hiding with them. Indeed, hiding from God and the *sword at the throat*, paradoxically brought them closer to God. Hiding in their fort helped them to really hear the promise of God: *It shall be well with you*. That promise helped them let down the walls around their heart, so they could return to God *in truth, in justice, and in uprightness*.

Advent is all about God's promise to come again. That promise is reason to hope, but it's also reason to repent. God says, *flee for safety!* Jesus is coming! Run away from sin, do justice, make a blanket fort! Hide from evil in the waters of your baptism, and you will find another hidden with you: the most holy and blessed Trinity. You can rest assured that there, with God, you will find refuge from everything that is broken.

Good God, give me your arms to hide in, that I might escape my sin through your son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Intern Pastor Ollie Bergh – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Saturday, December 5

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Waiting and Preparing

Waiting. At this time in 2020, we are used to waiting. We have been waiting at home now for months, although at times it has felt like years. We wait for updates and news on the pandemic, we wait for a vaccine, we wait for election results, we waited for our COVID-19 gardens to grow vegetables. While 2020 is a time of unprecedented waiting, we are familiar with the waiting involved in Advent.

Christ's birth is a joyous time and with it comes promises. In Ezekiel 36:24-28, we hear about receiving a heart of flesh, one that replaces our hearts of stone. After enduring a stressful year, this is a wonderful reminder that we are given a heart of flesh and it is one that can feel joy and great love for God. We are also promised to be cleansed with clean water and given a new spirit. After enduring the hardships that this time has brought us, it is refreshing to know we will be made clean and have a renewed spirit.

Advent is not just a time of waiting but also a time for preparation. We prepare ourselves to receive these gifts from God, and at the same time, we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ so that we may have eternal life. In Ezekiel 36:27, we hear about following God's statutes and observing ordinances. Following statutes and ordinances is something that we understand better than ever this year, with public health mandates abounding. One of God's "ordinances" is that we have faith. We are reminded of the importance of having faith often in the Bible. In this time of waiting and preparing for the arrival of Jesus Christ, remember to have faith. God promises to help us have faith, and will create in us a new heart, cleanse us and renew our spirit. In this time of darkness, of much despair, of what feels like endless waiting – hold onto hope. With faith and hope, we know that God is promising us a heart of flesh, a renewed spirit and everlasting life.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the promise of a renewed spirit. Remind us of your promises and your ordinances, and that our prayers are answered in your time. We give you thanks for the time to slow down, reflect, wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.

Abra Patkotak – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Sunday, December 6

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort and Hope

I cannot read this passage without bouncing on the balls of my feet and singing! Handel took this verse, inspired by the hope and joy contained within, and created an oratorio that is known throughout the world.

During the time of the 40th chapter of Isaiah, the children of God have been in exile for 40 years. Their lives, their identity, their families, their faith – all are broken and in despair. Nothing is right, nothing feels right. In this chaos, God’s people hear, “Comfort ye, Comfort ye, my people.” It strikes a chord within us and fills our hearts and minds with hope.

Hope is the theme of these Advent devotions. Hope, looking forward to a time when light returns even while the days get shorter and darker. We are in a time of darkness. The pandemic, coupled with divisive politics, has created chaos for all. Nothing is right, nothing feels right – how will it all end? Where will we find our light?

Hope, along with gratitude, are the two most positive emotions that we have as shared humanity. It engages both our brain and our soul. With hope we grow, with hope we create, with hope we rise above the chaos and build. Hope is Advent.

Isaiah creates a word picture of what is possible with the Lord: the leveling of the roads, the heralding of good tidings. While we may feel like grass moving as wind blows us around, withering without nourishment, the constancy of the Lord lifts us up out of our chaos. This is the promise of Advent, the promise of hope. This is our highway out of the darkness.

Hope does not live in the might of the Lord; it is not about force. Hope, that most positive emotion, is best described by the closing lines of this reading – this is where hope lives: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.”

Dear Lord, in this time of darkness, fill us with your song, fill us with your hope. Lift our eyes to the stars in the night sky. Embraced in your arms, filled with your comfort, we are calmed and inspired to open our arms to others. In Jesus’ name, the promise and hope for us all. Amen.

Jim Hemsath – Joy Lutheran Church, Eagle River

Monday, December 7

Psalm 27

A New Advent

In these trying, troubling, unfamiliar times, verses 13-14 speak boldly to my heart: *“I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”*

In the dictionary, the word *advent* means “the arrival of a person, thing or event.” Could we be living in our very own advent – the arrival of a new way of living, a new way of worshiping, new ways of seeing God at work in His world?

We are stressed and distressed by the negative events and news bombarding us daily; sometimes we cannot see the good surrounding us. But I am heartened when I see the small, good things coming out of this advent: the uptick in people watching virtual worship, the organizations and individuals stepping up to say, “we/I can do that,” and then making positive changes happen. We are reaching out in small and big ways to help each other. This is our own advent: stepping out of our comfort zones and making all kinds of positive changes. We are creating a new way of being. We can be paralyzed by fear and nostalgic, yet we can also boldly face what is to come knowing that God is with us.

So, what are you waiting for? Advent is here and the time is now to grab God’s promise and act. This time of uncertainty and distress will end, and we will come through this stronger and more in tune with living as Jesus would have us live.

How are you seeing a new advent as we await the timeless birth of our Savior?

God, empower us for loving service this Advent. Give us courage to act boldly. Amen.

Lucinda Wright – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Tuesday, December 8

Acts 11:1-18

Insiders and Outsiders

During these days of COVID, eating out has new meaning and new challenges. The health risks of meals other than home cooking may help us better understand Old Testament laws regarding food that is fit or unfit, safe or unsafe, to eat. Maybe we can see why God used this vision of the Great Tablecloth from Heaven to make a point. For Peter, one must first become a faithful Jew to be saved. It took a few attempts for God to change Peter's mind.

I struggled to fit this text into this season of Advent, this season of anticipating the delivery and return of the Christ into the world. So, I decided to anticipate a bit of the saving feast that is to come!

With whom do you identify in this text? We may identify with the Gentiles if we're not Jewish. But look more closely. Are you or do you prefer to be on the Inside? Or are you welcoming, open to all the possibilities Outsiders can bring?

I recall a meal in Shishmaref, at the annual beach picnic hosted by the health clinic. Nothing was "profane" or "unclean," but it was new to this Wisconsin-Alaskan-Air Force transplant. After chewing muktuk for a bit, I was asked by a kind elder, "How do you like it?" The best I could mumble was that old cliché, "Well, I guess it's an acquired taste." She was happy to take all my leftovers. Then I tried a salad with a dark, vinaigrette-looking dressing. One bite told me otherwise. Before I could speak, the elder said to a child, "Boy! Get Pastor a hot dog to get the taste of that seal oil out of his mouth!" Get me something familiar, something safe, something expected! I'd often rather stay safely inside my comfort zone, bundled up or hunkered down.

Do you prefer to be safely on the Inside, or are you open to all the possibilities Outsiders can bring? This Advent, let us be open to the surprising possibilities our Lord God can bring into our lives and into this world that is longing for God's word of overflowing hope!

God of all, your love erases the dividing lines we draw. Keep us open to your inclusive grace. Amen.

Rev. Keith Muschinske (retired Air Force chaplain) –
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Wasilla

Wednesday, December 9

Luke 1:5-17

Little Prayers

Have you ever said a “little” prayer to yourself, thinking it really wasn’t all that important to deserve a “real” prayer?

I have; I do it all the time. And sometimes it comes back in scary ways (wink, wink). Some time ago, my pastor asked me to write a devotion and I tried to say no. But when it was done, I thought, “Well that wasn’t so bad, I learned a lot and I could do it again.” BAM, and here we are. I panicked, I questioned, I doubted, but now I’m writing again (insert eye roll).

I can imagine Zechariah was thinking something similar. He and Elizabeth had been praying for a child, but they remained childless for a very long time. Now they are an older couple, and so much is going on: Zechariah has been given the priestly honor of being chosen to burn incense while all the others are outside, perhaps praying for Israel’s redemption. I imagine the couple thought they had done all they could be doing by living a faithful life and following God’s commands. But in the back of their thoughts, perhaps they were still saying a “little” prayer for a child. And in steps God. When we least expect it, God answers our prayers – whether they’re “little” or “real” – in God’s own time and place. Doubt filled Zechariah, questioning the angel sent by God. He even gave reasons why this prayer couldn’t come true.

Do I sometimes doubt God? Ummm... yes, but God proves me wrong. All. The. Time. It’s easy to look back on my “little” prayers and see all the wonderful things God has done in my life. It’s the proof that prayers do come true, that God has a plan, and timing is everything.

Surprising God, help us learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth to live life as You would have us, with less doubt and more trust. Amen.

Myrna Dahl – Epiphany Lutheran-Episcopal Church, Valdez

Thursday, December 10

Habakkuk 2:1-5

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

COVID, unemployment, businesses closing, abuse, children starving and discrimination! “When will it end?” “If He was a loving God, why does He not do something?” The cries of frustration and exasperation expressed in Habakkuk 2:1-5 are similar to those uttered today. Is it that society only likes “free will” when it benefits us and blames God when it does not? Have we forgot that two forces are at work? Perhaps the frustration stems from people wanting God to fix it, instead of using God as our pillar of strength and guide, to fix it? Are the “woes” expressed in this reading really any different from ours today?

The lessons being taught in these five verses, are those expressed throughout Old and New Testaments of the Bible and stand true today. The messages are simple and ageless:

“Call upon God for the answers.”

“Because He is God, anticipate an answer.”

“Be patient, because God will answer.”

We are reminded that the truth has been written for all to see throughout time, so we do not forget!

As we enter the season of Advent, one of hope and anticipation, we hear the music and words of this song rise to the heavens, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” May the words change our hearts and provide the hope that God has promised!

God our Father, we pray that your written word becomes solidified in our heart, that the answer to the question, “To whom shall we go?” is pronounced without hesitancy: GOD, our hope for the ages! Amen.

Deena Stacy-Taylor –

Prince of Wales Lutheran Ministry, Prince of Wales Island

Sing to the Lord

This Bible passage reminds me of songs we sing during Christmas, such as *What Child is This?* and *Oh Holy Night*. During the time of Advent, I love looking up to the stars on a clear, winter night, looking for Orion's belt, to see the stars that symbolize the three wisemen. I think of this verse: "So bring him incense, gold and myrrh; come, peasant, king to own him." Or maybe vice-versa! When singing these songs, I imagine the stars.

I also think to myself how lucky I am. Jesus was born for our sins and transgressions. He came with purpose and to restore hope and future within us. One day we will rejoice with him and all our loved ones, one glad glory day.

I also like this Psalm because during times of mourning and/or tribulation, my congregation and family loves to sing. It brings us comfort and joy. I've noticed that before a time of tribulation I have a yearning to sing songs of praise, even in the shower or at work. When a family member went missing, I sang a lot and asked for music to be shared. We also sang when we found out a family friend had to have a very risky surgery. I will often be singing a lot and won't notice it until I've walked through the rough patch. However, looking back and reflecting on it, I recall how much I was singing and worshipping the Lord. And I think to myself, "Wow, you were preparing me and bringing me closer to you, so that you can help me in any time of need."

Advent is a time to prepare for the arrival of the King. We tend to get so busy and caught up with things that won't matter and may forget the reason why we are preparing. I invite you to stop and worship the Lord, perhaps by sing an Advent song. If you haven't already, put an advent wreath in your home and light it, sharing a passage, reading or maybe another song. Singing helps us prepare.

God, we thank you for the gift of music. Help us to praise you in words and song and notice how they prepare us for your coming among us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Shannon Klescewski – Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Nome

Saturday, December 12

Philippians 3:7-11

Much to Gain

When I was a boy, our village general store would sell bows and colorful arrows around every spring season. Many of us boys wished that our parents would buy some for us before they were all gone. I remember thinking that if I helped my mom or dad with something, maybe they would buy some for me. I would try to be a good boy, hoping to get rewarded.

As I got older, I was willing to help at our church, maybe help a pastor if they needed something done. Maybe if I helped more often, I would be closer to God and he would like me more. I understood who Jesus was, but I didn't really take to heart or fully understand what it meant to be a Christian.

Eventually as years passed by, I started to learn about God. I started to understand what it meant to have God in my life and that he loved me. He loved me enough that he sent Jesus his Son, who suffered, died, and rose from the dead so that our sins may be forgiven. And he promises us eternal and everlasting life.

In today's reading, Paul reminds us how Jesus can transform our lives and what it means to give all of yourself to him. All the material things we gain in our lives really are not that important anymore. We have much to gain by believing in Jesus.

We are granted grace, where we view the world differently. The amazing thing about it is that it was always there for us. And all it takes for us to receive this wonderful gift is to believe in Christ Jesus. We live on with Jesus by our side; he is guiding and supporting us in our daily walk.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us life, a life where we can know that you are there for us and with us. Thank you for putting Jesus in our lives to transform us, trusting in all things that are good and holy. Amen

Archie Kiyutelluk – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

Sunday, December 13

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Things Are A Mess

How does the world look to you today? As we look around, read the news, watch TV, or go through different social media sites, things aren't looking so good. The world is so full of anger and distrust; the news is always headlined by some disaster or horrific human tragedy. It seems as if no two countries can agree on anything without them threatening each other.

In our own country there is turmoil every day. This year's political campaigns became nasty, the country is fighting COVID-19, crime is rampant, fires are destroying entire cities, hurricanes are devastating coastal regions, and the poor are getting poorer while the wealthy get wealthier. Mental health suffers, too, as depression and suicide rates rise.

The world Isaiah lived in had similar issues. When the captives returned from Babylon, they dealt with political pressures from neighboring kingdoms. Idolatry was present throughout the land. The rich became wealthy by abusing the poor. Crime became a way of life for many. This is where Isaiah gives hope to both Jews and Gentiles. Isaiah relays hope and promise, and proclaims God's covenant. To those who are miserable and hopeless, God will provide good things to the poor, healing for broken-hearted, release from the bondage of sin and comfort for all who mourn.

God will restore that which is broken down. God's people will rejoice. There will be no more shame, just joy everlasting. Covered in the robes of righteousness, the Lord will bring righteousness to all nations. Despite the struggles in the world, this is God's covenant, forever.

Steadfast God, you stand for justice when injustice fills the land. Help us trust in your promise to be faithful as we work for justice in your world. Amen.

Allen Griswold – Lord of Life Lutheran Church, North Pole

Monday, December 14

Ephesians 6:10-17

Clothed in Hope

My heart is heavy with sorrow for those directly impacted by Covid-19, wildfires, hurricanes, political divisions, and racial unrest. Life in 2020 seems like a raging blizzard blowing hard against our weary spirits.

Sanctuary seats have sat empty on Sundays for months at Amazing Grace. I miss hugs and chats, sounds of children, and the voices of our choir. Lutheran life is rooted in singing, fellowship, and food, all off-limits during the pandemic. It feels like a spiritual desert. Home has become sanctuary, where I connect to online worship. I've grown to appreciate the casual intimacy of these sermons. From my couch, I read or visit by phone with friends and family across the country.

No more zipping out the door to visit friends. Now I take time to gather protective items: mask, eyeglasses, and gloves. I social distance with friends who now also carry bottles of sanitizer along with water. I look forward to social outings, like long walks or parking lot communion, to break the monotony. As daylight wanes, I dread the long winter ahead. I dust off the treadmill and pull out cross-country skis. I'm determined to continue socializing outside, hoping exercise will stave off winter doldrums. Staying warm might be a challenge so I look inside my coat closet. Down jackets, hats and mittens offer physical protection from the elements. Yet nothing in there provides hope for a dwindling spirit. So, this winter as I dress to go outside, I add some layers of protection.

As I dress to face the cold of winter, this scripture fortifies my soul. Putting on snow boots reminds me to step forward in *peace* with family and friends. My down jacket enfolds me in warmth as I remember to seek *righteousness and truth*. I slip hands that *pray and search God's word* into gloves. Pulling on my hat, I remember a *gracious God above who saved me from sin*. Finally, my scarf around my neck reminds me to place my *faith* in Him. Fully dressed in hope and confidence, I know that the full armor of God will guide and protect me. Whether I step into a blizzard or not, my spirit has been strengthened to weather the challenge.

God, clothe us with your full armor so that we are equipped for our spiritual journey. Let us remember the physical needs of the homeless this winter. Open our hearts to share with them. In Jesus, Amen.

Betty Hedstrand – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Tuesday, December 15

2 Kings 2:9-22

Mentors in Our Lives

We all have had teachers, coaches, instructors, and friends, but who in your life has truly been a mentor? A mentor is someone who teaches us how to “be.” We know that they are not perfect, but we hope that we can emulate some of their qualities as we move forward in our lives. They aren’t simply passing down knowledge or skills, although that might be part of their role; rather, through their words and actions, they are showing us how to carry ourselves and treat others.

Our mentors might not depart this world in the same fashion Elijah did, but our mentors will often leave our lives before we feel we are ready for them to go. Then, we need to figure out how to carry on. We can only imagine the emotions that Elisha is feeling in this text: grief, amazement, pressure, fear, anger, and more. All these emotions come from a place of love and respect, the deep love and respect that we have for those who have had such an impact on our lives.

Who is or has been a mentor in your life? Who has guided you and taught you the ways of the world? Take a moment to thank God for these people and appreciate all that they have given you and this world.

We thank you, God, for the mentors in our lives. Keep us open to how we may serve as mentors to others in their walk of faith. We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Rev. Lou Peters – Fairbanks Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

Wednesday, December 16

Psalm 125

God in View

When looking to buy a house these days, many people begin their search online – typing in how many bedrooms, how many bathrooms, whether one wants a garage – and up pop the options. There is one more selection you can make: your view. What do you want to see when you look out your window – water, tundra, hills, mountains or something else?

I can imagine the person who wrote Psalm 125 sitting down in Jerusalem some place and looking out his or her window. Out that window they saw what they called mountains, what we in certain parts of Alaska might call hills. When they looked at those hills, what they saw was their beauty in all the different shapes and forms and colors. They also saw protection. They saw God's strength in all those different shapes and forms and colors, and it reminded them of how God surrounds us no matter where we are and no matter if there are mountains around us or not. God surrounds us with protective layers of hope, and love, and peace always.

Where do you go when you need to be reminded of God's hope, love, grace, and peace? Is it the mountains? Perhaps just looking at them is enough, or perhaps it is in hiking into those mountains that you feel God's protection. When you gaze across the tundra and you remember the abundance of life that is out there, do you feel the love God has for you? Fishing by the river or hauling the nets in, do you feel the peace of God? Alaska is overflowing with "views." What view do you need to feel those layers of God's protection, love, hope, and peace?

God who creates, saves, and sustains me: In this Advent season, help me to see you wherever I look – up to the mountain, out to the water, over the tundra, in the face of the Child of hope. Amen

Rev. Sandra Rudd – Sitka Lutheran Church, Sitka

Thursday, December 17

Hebrews 4:1-4

Messianic Hope: Expectations and Wonder

In 1966, I was assigned a 590-mile reconnaissance of the Alaska Highway from Fairbanks, AK, to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, to assess the condition and capability of the road and bridges. Having travelled the highway previously and after review of the construction history, I had an expectation of what I would find – twenty-four-year-old wooden bridges, quickly constructed during wartime to open the access road to Alaska, bridges that likely did not meet current construction standards and might be in poor repair. However, the on-the-ground assessment shattered all my expectations as I surveyed bridge after bridge constructed to specifications that far exceeded the military need at the time and far into the future. I marvel to this day at those construction wonders.

Such is the never-ending amazement with the Son whom God chose to send into the world, foretold by Old Testament prophets. Those expectations for a messianic king, who would rule in the Davidic line and restore Israel to its former greatness, were also shattered. A child born of the Virgin Mary and the carpenter Joseph, poor working folks from Nazareth, was recognized by many Jews and Gentiles as the Christ. He was crucified, died, was buried, after three days rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. He is the Messiah – a complete opposite of the king expected, a king meeting heavenly expectation, not human expectations, a king anointed by God who is superior to earthly kings, presidents, and even the angels. This King is for all people – poor or rich, Jew or Gentile, irrespective of gender, race, color, creed, or relationship.

Some two thousand years later, and on the heels of a divisive political process, national unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic, we may lose sight of both the meaning of this Advent season and of our ascended king. But if we peel away our assumptions – like expecting to find those old Alaska Highway bridges in disrepair – we may find our expectations shattered, because God’s Word is still present, strong, and ready to bear the burdens of our journey with our Lord and Savior.

Dear God, we pray that in these times of turmoil you will give us the vision to see beyond our earthly wants, needs, and expectations. Help us to understand that Christ brings peace, wisdom, and strength. Amen.

Rev. Richard Mauer – Faith Lutheran/Delta Presbyterian, Delta Junction

Thursday, December 18

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Forever Love

It was a bright Friday morning in October as I headed into the grocery store wearing my Luther rose face mask, keeping the recommended distance from other shoppers. Grocery shopping was the one activity that still felt somewhat normal. As I turned down the cereal aisle, I realized that all the shelves had been rearranged. The cereal was nowhere to be found. It took me an extra half hour to locate all the items on my list. The comfort of knowing where each item was located was gone. Everything in life had been so disrupted by the pandemic that rearranging the store seemed like one change too many.

We all feel the fear and uncertainty around us. We wonder if anything will ever be the same. Can we trust that our lives will ever return to what we knew? The psalmist reaches out and reassures us that we can always count on God's love and faithfulness. The writer is so convinced of this truth that he uses the word "forever" three times in the first four verses. God promised the people of Israel that He would be faithful to the covenant He made with them and that a descendant of the house of David would rule forever.

During Advent, we wait once again for the coming of the son of David, the Prince of Peace, God with us. For so great is God's love, He sent His only Son, Jesus, who would fulfill the covenant and redeem us with His blood. We are forever loved!

This Advent may be different from the past and the road uncertain. Let us wrap ourselves in the "forever" love and faithfulness that God gives to God's people as revealed to us in His Son, Jesus. Let us know that nothing will ever keep us from the love of Christ Jesus. Let us lift our voices and "sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever."

Eternal God, we thank you for the forever love you give us through Christ our Lord. As we wait for His coming this blessed season, open our hearts to the joy of your faithfulness. Amen

Linda Bender – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Saturday, December 19

Luke 1:26-38

Hanging On

The angel speaks with such certainty about the child that Mary will birth into a world in need of hope: he will be great, will be called Son of the Most High; he will reign, and his kingdom will have no end. Within her body will be the fulfillment of God's long-ago promises.

But Mary isn't ready to grasp that just yet. There are plenty of reasons the angel's message seems impossible, the first being Mary herself. She's thinking in concrete terms: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Gabriel gives an abstract answer about God's overshadowing power but also meets Mary with a real-world example of the hope that breaks into our lives. Her relative, Elizabeth – the one who was barren – is also with child!

The questions haven't all been answered, the next steps aren't clear, the future won't be easy, but Mary gives herself to the mystery, trusting that "nothing will be impossible with God."

When we're overwhelmed, exhausted, or when chaos is all around and within us, abstract hope can seem impossible to grasp. God's message to us is not "just hang in there." God gives us what we can hang on to: the kindness of others, a new day to try again, a doctor who finds meds that work, or wise and encouraging words from an elder. But above all, we find our hope in the God who hangs on to us through all things, the God for whom nothing is impossible.

God, when we look around, there often seems little space for hope. Help us see and be reasons for hope in this weary world, and give us certainty in your promise to hang on to us, through Christ our Lord. Amen

Rev. Amanda Kempthorne – Lord of Life Lutheran Church, North Pole

Sunday, December 20

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Where God Dwells

“I have been with you wherever you have gone.”

This summer my wife and I purchased a new tent to get out and see Alaska without taking any undue health risks. We traveled around the state for two weeks: north to Coldfoot and the endless day; south to McCarthy, the mine, and glacier; and down to Valdez for sea-kayaking in the sound. We finished the summer with what has become our annual trek crossing the Denali Highway. The beauty of tent life in Alaska is that you can always find a place to stop and dwell. Each night we sat and marveled at where we were, soaking it all in. While the places were ever-changing, we always knew we would set up our four walls, have our own bedding and pillow, and awaken to the familiar and seemingly safe. The tent is our place and allows us to be fully present, to sit and dwell.

While to many the idea of long-term dwelling in a tent might feel uncomfortable – it has to be packed and unpacked every time we move, the kitchen is never just ready, is this a safe place, where is home (these are my wife’s arguments against my proposal to live out of a tent long-term) – the idea of God being comfortable in a tent is appealing. God being in a constantly moving tent shows that God is not confined to any one place but dwells in all places easily, that God can be trusted to be among the people at any moment and need not be locked into a singular place like a temple. In this time of COVID when many congregations are dispersed, God’s moveable tent-dwelling presence is reassuring. It reminds us that God is with us even if we are not able to get into the building for worship, that God is at the table when friends and family are gathered.

In this season of Advent, we celebrate the promise of Immanuel, God-with-us. It is a promise that wherever you are, God is there amid all the struggle, the achievements, the troubles, the joys and even any camping you are doing. Jesus the Christ Child is a reminder that God has been and is present with you wherever you have gone, that God is not confined to a single space but lives in you (and is more comfortable in you than in any tent or permanent dwelling place). May you take a moment in each place where you stop to dwell to experience God’s presence.

God-with-us, thank you for making your home in our hearts. Amen.

Rev. Dustin Lenz – Christ Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

Monday, December 21

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 9:7-10

Overwhelmed by What?!

Being asked to write on “Overflowing with Hope” seems like Christopher Robin asking Eeyore to elucidate him on optimism. I can’t recall hope overflowing, let alone overwhelming me. I chose to write on Ecclesiastes: “Everything is meaningless, and a chasing after the wind.”

My spiritual director thinks Ecclesiastes needs medication. I think he has a dark sense of humor, grappling with life’s toughest questions and struggling to find hope. He describes his frustration over seeing a person work hard, only to end in nothing. We all die. “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (Ecc. 1:18). In the writer’s day, the concept of afterlife is muddy. “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” (Ecc. 3:21) The pursuit of wisdom, wealth, honor, and even justice seem fruitless. It’s all meaningless, it’s chasing after the wind.

Everything may be meaningless, yet Ecclesiastes’ author writes, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also I saw is from the hand of God” (Ecc. 2:24). And also, “Go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your meaningless life that he has given you” (Ecc. 9:7-9). Despite his dark humor, the writer urges us to enjoy food, drink, family, and toil, even when we can’t see the value.

It has been a difficult year. “Social distancing” has taken its toll. We have seen race riots, natural disasters, and political unrest. People wonder, will Christmas be another 2020 disappointment?

Author John Ortberg writes, “Joy in this world is always joy ‘in spite of’ something. Joy is... a ‘defiant nevertheless’ set at full stop against bitterness and resentment.” We have permission take ourselves and our work less seriously. We’re free to grieve hopes that may not be fulfilled. We can enjoy life with loved ones, and with God’s help, find joy in toil.

God, be with us when all seems meaningless. Be our rest and joy. Amen.

Rev. Ben Bohart – Resurrection Lutheran Church, Seward

Tuesday, December 22

Luke 1:46b-55

Magnify

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (verses 46b-47). To “magnify” is to make something appear larger than it is, or to extol, to glorify. What do our souls magnify? What fills our vision?

Mary, a young unmarried woman, has learned that she will give birth to and raise the Son of God, who will have an unending kingdom, reigning over the house of Jacob forever. That’s a lot to take in. Mary’s familiar song, the Magnificat, speaks of social upheaval, with good news for those who are poor and hungry, and a loss of power to the rich. Mary fills her vision with God. Not with stress or fear or uncertainty, though those questions and worries must also have been with her.

We have also become more familiar with social upheaval in 2020, living in a pandemic, challenging politics and economic realities, and the raised voices of those experiencing oppression. We have likely experienced stress, fear and uncertainty in different measures, but what fills our vision? What do we magnify in these times? What is the focus for our souls?

To fill our vision with the Holy, with the One who is our Hope, is a powerful way to navigate uncertain times. It may not bring answers to our urgent, day-to-day questions, but it changes our approach. Many practices can help us shift our focus: gathering with community – even virtually; spending time in prayer or meditation; reading scripture, poetry or words that connect you more deeply to the One who created and leads you; moving your body in a mindful way; observing the world, people and creatures around you with the awareness-lens that all this has been created by God, and that we are all connected; being creative – writing, making art, cooking, beading, sewing, repairing. These practices can draw us closer to the One who is our strength and hope, even and especially in uncertain times.

Mighty One, help us to magnify you and keep you the focus of our vision, especially during challenging times, that like Mary, our spirits can rejoice in you, even and especially in times of uncertainty.

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

Wednesday, December 23

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Restored and Transformed

My seven-year-old son had been saving for months. He held on to some birthday money and then did extra chores to slowly earn enough to buy the prize: a remote-control car. We sat at my laptop to order it online; he carefully counted his money and presented it to me. I took the cash, entered my credit card number and pressed “buy now.” My son beamed with pride. Then he ran off to the utility closet and grabbed a broom. Puzzled, I asked him what he was doing. I need to do more chores, he said, to replace all that.

The prophet Zephaniah imagines a world where a judgment has been rendered against Judah (the southern Kingdom of ancient Israel) and a humble remnant returns, saved by God, their fortunes restored. When we think of having our fortunes restored after a difficult time, we may imagine it like my son, a replacement of what once was. We may imagine it like Zephaniah, where enemies are turned away and victory is ours. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we may dream of having our lives restored to what they once were. After any change or loss, it’s normal to want to put life back together, just as it was. Yet Advent invites us into a new way of seeing restoration.

Hear the echoes of Mary’s song in Zephaniah’s words: “I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise.” Restoration includes transformation. Through restoration, we, too, are changed, through the power of Jesus, who comes into our midst.

I love the increasingly popular trend of reclaiming and upcycling items. A broken window becomes a useful message board, a pair of ripped jeans is transformed into a trendy purse. I think of restoration as more like this than refilling my piggy bank or returning to some “good old day.” God is in the restoration business, at work in our lives, not simply to restore but to transform. A baby becomes the Savior of the world! A wooden cross reveals new life! What other wonders might we see as God restores this world?

Creating God, restore our hearts and minds with your love. Help us see how you transform ourselves and your beloved world. Amen.

Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel – Alaska Synod Director for Evangelical Mission

Thursday, December 24

Luke 2:1-20

To You This Day is Born a Savior

This year, we as citizens of the United States got to participate in an amazing thing – a census! Censuses are an important and ancient civic duty. So ancient, that even Mary and Joseph participated in one. Today, the census comes to us: by mail, online or by census workers knocking on our doors. In Mary and Joseph’s day, they had to go to Joseph’s hometown, Bethlehem, so they could participate – they had to go to the census, and it was in *that* moment that Jesus was born.

To be born during a census shows us how regular, mundane, and boring Jesus’s birthday was. Just imagine it: being pregnant is a mixed bag. Mary was carrying a new life in her, but that beautiful new life was probably kicking her in the ribs every hour or so, she couldn’t get a good night’s sleep for days on end, and sometimes she probably had to use the bathroom again before she even finished washing her hands. While Mary was feeling all of this, a census worker knocked on her door. Being too pregnant to talk to anyone right then, she made Joseph talk to them. As she put some Icy Hot on her back, Joseph let her know it was a census worker, and that they’d just done their civic duty and been counted. They quickly forget the census worker at the door because something more important was happening: a baby was actively coming.

God’s birthday was ordinary. But what makes it extraordinary is *who* God’s birthday is *for*. Look at Luke 2:11: **to you is born this day a Savior!** “To you!” Our birthdays are about us: gifts, cake, blowing out the candles, another orbit around the sun.... But God’s birthday isn’t about Godself, it’s about us. That’s how generous God is. Just by being born, Jesus was becoming flesh, and living with us, *for* us. It’s not just *who* God is that makes Jesus’s birth special but rather also, *who* God’s birth is *for*. For us! God was born for us in the midst of a census because something as ordinary as a modern birthday cake – or a constitutionally mandated census – is *exactly* how God likes to show up: for us, with a knock on the door or a kick in the ribs, God shows up for us to be with us.

God, help us to see you in ordinary things, so that we might know how extraordinary you are in Jesus’s name. Amen.

Rev. Erika Bergh – Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Advent is a season of overflowing hope! Use this space for prayers, hopes, dreams or insights during this season.

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