



Behold, I make all things new!

*The 2021 Advent Devotional of the
Alaska Synod (ELCA)*

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Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel

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Rev. Liz Lowry

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

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Behold, I am making all things new!

Welcome to the Season of Advent

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:4-5)

The photography instructor had the students out in the field using all the skills he had tried to teach them. My sister said that the sunset was spectacular that night. Then he told them, "It is easy to be distracted by the light in front of you. Always turn around and look behind you for the really good photos. That's where the light is playing."

The word "behold" is used 1154 times in scripture. Some versions translate behold as *See! Look here! Perceive! Check it out!* Observing isn't enough. To behold something is to be taken into the beauty, the power of what is before you. You are changed by it. *Behold* is often used in scripture when the scene is changing, when God is revealing the unexpected. It is where the light of Christ is playing.

God has been doing new things all along. When we recognize it, we call it imagination, insight, hindsight, and maturing. God works in and through the ups and downs of daily life. Very few of us grow in faith when things are going smoothly. It is too easy then to think that our immense talent or skills or family pedigree are responsible for things going so well. When things change, we even blame God.

That just doesn't add up in our life of faith. Have you read one story in scripture of a person whose life had no challenge? Do you know of one story where the person sailed through life making a difference without being immersed in the reality of grief or injustice or disappointment? I don't know of any. If you are tired, rest. Do not lose sight that God is at work; Jesus is the Messiah, you are not. Turn around and see where the light of Christ is playing.

The Creator of the universe loves you every day and in every way, and is not about to leave any of us to our own habits and prejudices. God is at work in and through you, beloved. Recognize God's abiding love for you and all of creation. Death, despair, injustice, disorientation will not have the last word. God has spoken in the risen Jesus Christ. God is making all things new. We do not have to know the final end to trust God's presence in the journey. Look behind you. Look around you. Behold what God is doing around you. It is the light of Christ that is playing.

Thank you to all the writers, editor Pastor Lisa Smith Fiegel and content editor Pastor Liz Lowry for the light you shine through this devotional book. In this Advent season, as we read and pray with kin in Christ across this synod, may we see where the light of Christ is playing. May we prepare for Christ's return and may God be praised!

Rev. Shelley Wickstrom – Bishop of the Alaska Synod

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 from the editors:

We offer heartfelt thanks to everyone who wrote devotions for this project. Your words have helped us to see God's presence in this world. Your insights show how God is making all things new. Thank you.

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.

With you on this Advent journey,

Lisa and Liz

Sunday, November 28

Luke 21:25-36

More Than Enough

This year has been particularly trying. With COVID-19 in its second year, everyday life seems to be extra demanding. We have all experienced, one time or another, the stress of living through a pandemic.

Sometimes we have more than enough to bear, more than we think we can. This year has been one of the “more than enough” years for me. But through it all I am reminded to lean even closer to God’s words and promises.

One day this summer, I answered my phone and thought I would hear the familiar voice of my brother Brian. I was in Nome, and the day before we had held my sister Laura’s funeral there – she had passed unexpectedly two months earlier. My brother Brian was in Anchorage in an assisted living home. Before I left for Nome for Laura’s funeral, I told Brian to call me if he needed me, for I knew he had become accustomed to my daily visits. Brian’s battle with cancer was nearing an end, yet he remained steadfast in his faith. He knew that no matter what happened, he would be safe in the arms of our Lord.

But when I answered my phone that day, it was not Brian. I received the news that Brian had just died. Although it was inevitable, it was still such sad news.

In Luke 21:33 we read “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” God’s promises are enough.

Life has a way of making us turn inward and often that journey leads us closer to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. God’s word has sustained me throughout my grief. His promises have been my bedrock. One day we will all be reunited. Until then, I will lean upon the words that bring comfort and hope.

Lord of comfort, sustain us through our trials, and remind us that you walk with us through our grief. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Sue Delgado – Alaska Native Lutheran Church, Anchorage

While We Wait

These words stood out to me from this reading: will, come, promise, looking, hastening, look, forward, consider, beware, fall and grow.

God is ever-present in all things. As believers in Christ, we can continually ask for God's guidance and try to better our way of living, which starts with repentance. We look for God's presence in our daily lives. While we do this, we are told to wait for his coming. Waiting can be difficult at times. Here are a couple ways that we handle wait:

1. We expect something to appear quickly or instantly. We may become impatient when it doesn't arrive soon enough.
2. We sit patiently, knowing that whatever we are expecting will eventually show up. When it arrives, we are grateful and thus continue with our lives.

To wait for something means that we are lacking something. There is a feeling of want or wanting. To be honest, there have been many times in my life when I have not been happy waiting. The anticipation builds. When it takes long, I may question if it is ever going to come.

In the spiritual waiting we hear about today, we are reminded of God's promises. The feeling of lacking seems to go away when God is present in our thoughts and actions. Today's promise is of a new heaven, a new earth, and a place where righteousness dwells. We are also reminded of God's continued presence, everywhere and in all things.

While we wait for God's coming, we have an opportunity to strengthen our faith. We have time to study His word to better understand what He wants us to be. With God in our lives, we do not have to feel that we are lacking, instead we can feel that we are blessed and filled. This Advent, let us await the coming of Jesus and be witnesses to God's promises.

Heavenly Father, we pray today for the anticipation of the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please help us to prepare for that glorious day and look forward to that place of righteousness. Amen.

Archie Kiyutelluk – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

Tuesday, November 30

2 Samuel 7:18-29

Who Am I?

I must confess that I have uttered the sentiment of David, “Who am I, sovereign Lord, and who is my family, that you have brought me thus far?” It is as if David knows the prayers of my own heart in seeking identity, direction and place in the world. Maybe you have uttered these words, longing to know who you are.

A friend was reflecting on the interesting dynamics of living in a place with a pace of life free from the busyness of other communities they had lived. In their current context they have the space to think, to ponder and to wonder. Their observation summed up the deep wrestling of identity many have, stating “in this community you have to be okay with who you are.” Some shy away from this question of who they are, preferring to cover it up with doing something. David determines to use the time to pray about it and lift his concern up to God.

In the space to think, to ponder and to wonder, David has a conversation with God. It almost feels like a private conversation that you are not quite sure you should hear. It is an honest conversation where David speaks what is truly on his heart, his longing for identity and belonging. He prays that his efforts are not in vain but will persist. It is a conversation because as David speaks, he hears God’s response. David hears God’s promises and learns his identity. David becomes okay with who he is.

The season of Advent gives us time and space to slow down and wonder at the question of, “who am I.” It is a gift to pause and remember what God has done for you in the past and to listen to how God will use you in the future. It is in this time of quiet reflection and listening that we become more comfortable with who we are as children of God.

All-knowing God, you love us as we are and give us an identity in You. Give us courage to live as we are called. In Jesus, Amen.

Rev. Dustin Lenz – Christ Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

Wednesday, December 1

Psalm 90

Counting Our Days

This is the only Psalm directly attributed to Moses and is most likely the oldest psalm of all. Psalm 90 gives us the idea that “God’s time” is not the same as “our time.” 1000 years is nothing in God’s time, but it is a long time for us. Even if we count in dog years! Our time on earth is short. What do we do with that information?

Verse 12 suggests one idea: “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” In this season of the year, we find ourselves counting days – the number of shopping days before Christmas, the number of school days before Christmas vacation, the number of days until payday.

Psalm 90 invites us to count our days. Perhaps turning that phrase around might make more sense for us. What would it mean for us to make every day of our lives count? What makes something “count” in the long run?

Think about your own life. It isn’t a major accomplishment that makes our lives count. Rather, it’s the little pieces of daily faithfulness that make the most difference. The same is true when loved ones die. We tend to remember the little things, not necessarily their major accomplishments. A comment here. A conversation there. A new idea. Simply showing up.

In the end, “counting our days” and “making our days count” come together when we focus, not on the past that we can’t change or the future that lies only in God’s hands, but on the present. On today. On now. On the next right thing. The next right step. On the God who holds our hands along the way. Maybe this is the only wisdom we need. Maybe this is why today – within the broader gift of God that we call “life” – is called the “present.”

God, we come to you this moment to ask for freedom from the past that we cannot change, for hope in the future that we cannot see and for love to live this moment well. Amen.

Rev, Bill Ottum – River of Life, Chugiak

Thursday, December 2

Luke 1:68-79

Serving Without Fear

Fear and I have become better acquainted during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have felt afraid that my children will get COVID, particularly my new baby. I have felt afraid for my aging parents' health. I have felt afraid about overwhelmed hospital systems. I have felt afraid of increasingly polarized and uncivil behaviors in our city and nation.

Fear is paralyzing. Fear can be all consuming. Fear devours. Fear can be helpful: it gets our attention and keeps us safe. But fear serves best as a temporary way station – our ancestors used it to outrun predators – not a place to dwell.

This passage from Luke is the song of Zechariah, who had plenty to fear. His wife of advanced age had just birthed a son, foretold by an angel who made Zechariah mute when Zechariah laughed at the news. When the son – John the Baptist – is born, Zechariah's voice is restored, and he praises God. But the neighbors are afraid (Luke 1:65) and Zechariah's son John will later be executed by a Roman ruler. There is much to fear.

Yet Zechariah says we are to serve God without fear. Without fear? What does that mean? What would that look like in our lives? How can we serve God without fear when we live in a scary time?

A pastor friend has memorized the song of Zechariah, and recites it on his daily morning run, usually at dawn. He has recited Luke 1:68-79 on run after run, year after year, through joys and heartbreaks. Dwelling in the word of God, even when he's afraid, has made the difference.

I can't end this pandemic or outrun all my fears. But I can pick up a children's Bible and read stories to my children. I can open a devotional app on my phone and dwell in God's word. I can share my struggles with a friend, and we can pray for each other. When we live in God's word, we dwell more in Christ and less in fear. We are then freed to serve.

God, cover us with your life-giving word. Sheltered there, let us serve You without fear. Amen.

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

Friday, December 3

Malachi 3:5-12

Messengers

“Malachi” is Hebrew for “my messenger.” Scripture is filled with messengers, often ordinary go-betweens. They are also prophets, and they may be angels.

Angels bring many life-giving messages, but there is one particular message that is repeated throughout our stories – an angel tells Abraham that he would have a son: Isaac. An angel assures an Egyptian slave that she will bear a son, who would become a great nation: Ishmael. An angel tells an unnamed woman that she will bear a son, set apart to begin the deliverance of Israel: Samson. An angel tells an aged priest that his wife will bear a son, whose own vocation as a *malek*, a messenger, will prepare people for the Lord: John. An angel tells a young, unmarried woman that she has found favor with the Lord, and will bear a son of the Most High, who will rule all nations: Jesus.

The announcement of new life is joy; but the living of those lives is hard. Malachi, the messenger prophet, brings us words that reflect both. Have you ever seen a piece of jewelry that is all black, but for a single band of gold running through it? That is an image that comes to mind for the prophets’ discomfiting words highlighted by a word of hope. The gold vein is so striking because it is surrounded by contrast, a beautiful bright line that makes what surrounds it beautiful in a different way.

Malachi names the hard, dark truths of the people of God: we have become comfortable, lax, selfish. We have been unfaithful in small and large ways. We have not loved God and our neighbor with our whole heart, but only with the portion that is convenient or obligatory. There is a beauty in these judgments, these callings-to-account that are not meant to make us feel hopeless and guilty, but to direct us to the gold thread that declares ‘Repent; for I am the Giver of Life, in all its joys and all its struggles. In my love and forgiveness, I make all things new!’

God, open our hearts this Advent to your messengers. Help us respond with repentance, love and the willingness to share your message. Amen.

Rev. Sue Bahleda – Island of Faith, Wrangell

Saturday, December 4

Philippians 1:3-11

Love Changes Us

I recently had the pleasure of being with my brother and sister at our favorite childhood vacation spot – Rockport, Texas. Our grandparents had a small fishing cottage on the bay. My siblings and I had not had spent time together, just us three, in a long time. We talked about our lives now, our kids, our significant others and our jobs. We talked about our various struggles and accomplishments in our adult lives. It is fascinating to look back on the journey of our lives, recalling what kind of people we were when we were kids playing at the beach and fishing with our family and seeing where we are now.

Paul's letter begins by telling the Philippians how proud and confident he is because of their faithfulness and how he continues to pray for them. Paul wants their love to continue to overflow, to come to knowledge and full insight.

Love brings knowledge and insight to determine what is best. Throughout our lives, we need to pick love to grow in wisdom. Picking love every day in every situation is incredibly difficult. The more we can pick love, the more knowledge and insight that we can learn, which makes picking love easier. As I talked with my siblings and watched the sunrise and sunset on the bay in Rockport, I realized how much of my own growth I had forgotten about. I saw my brother and sister and could clearly see them as little kids and the wonderful adults they are now.

It is easy to look only at today, which can hinder us from looking at the end goal that God has set for us. God has changed me through Jesus Christ from when I was a boy. I certainly have much to learn about how to give love every day. The end goal is producing the harvest of righteousness through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

This Advent, we can take time to think about how love has changed us and given us knowledge and insight throughout our journey. We can also accept the love from Jesus Christ today and in the future!

God of the ages, you have been our hope from generation to generation. Teach us to live and love in You. Amen.

David Ingram – Fairbanks Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

Sunday, December 5

Luke 9:1-6

Take Only What You Need

Sometimes it is still hard for me, after all these months at home, to venture out into the world. It is even harder to imagine doing so with just the clothes on my back. Yet in this passage, that is exactly what Jesus calls the disciples to do. Like Martin Luther, we ask, “What does this mean for us today?”

I’m sure I’m not the only one familiar with the “Wallet, keys, phone, (and in recent months, mask)” routine prior to leaving the house. Just the essentials, right? Phone to communicate with family or friends or pull up a map. Keys to drive your car and/or get back into your home. Wallet for identification or when you need to buy something.

Yet when Jesus calls disciples the first time, “they pulled their boats up on the shore, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11). Here again, “He said to them, ‘Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic’” (Luke 9:3). Nothing to keep in touch with family or friends. No map app to guide them. No key to get back into their old place. No identification. No money. Nothing but the clothes on their back.

Surely, this doesn’t mean we should leave our wallet, keys, and phone (and again, recently, mask) at home from now on, right? No, I don’t think it does. But perhaps we need to put our devices down a bit more, spend a bit less money (or at least spend it more intentionally) and pay a bit more attention to the world around us.

Look at what the disciples *are* given for their journey: power, authority, and the good news of Jesus Christ. Those are not given only to Jesus’ friends way back when. God does the same for us here and now.

This Advent, as we again anticipate the birth of Christ, reflect on all that God has given you. Find what is truly important. Cherish it. Pray about it. Then, with that, go out – for we are sent to do God’s work every day.

God, with you, we will go out, trusting that You go with us and give us what we need. Amen.

John Christensen – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Monday, December 6

Isaiah 40:1-11

Making a Path

Advent is and always has been one of my very favorite times. Candlelit vigils, snowy days, gathering with loved ones, soup suppers and preparing for Christ – it is all so heartwarming! This year, it feels a little more difficult to look forward to Advent. As the world copes with the ongoing global pandemic and our healthcare systems (and all systems, really) are strained, we are living in a time where most can relate to feeling weary.

Turning to God’s word, we are comforted. From the mountaintops, a message of good tidings is shared: “Here is your God!” Not only is God here, but also, we will be fed like a flock, we will be carried and gently led. We are not alone in this time no matter how desperate it may feel. Another helpful message when times are hard is right here in Isaiah 40:8: “the word of our God will stand forever.”

We are reminded to prepare a way for the Lord. When reflecting on this, I think about small actions I can make in my daily life. How can I lift up the valleys, make the mountains low and level the uneven ground? How can I do those things for my family members, my neighbors and my community? Creating space for God in our daily lives and removing obstacles from our paths are simple ways. Being that patient family member and good neighbor are great actions to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Yes, we have endured great trials and tribulations this year but today, we remember that creating a path for our Lord and shouting the good tidings from the mountaintops will pay off. We will be comforted.

God Creator, in this time of Advent and as we make a path for the Lord, help us to remove all obstacles that keep us from You. Remind us of the comfort in your love and help us extend this comfort and message of good tidings to our loved ones and neighbors. Amen.

Abra Patkotak – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Tuesday, December 7

Psalm 126

A New Creation

How often over the last year have I heard the plea “if only things would get back to normal”? Just as the exiled people of Israel prayed for God to restore their fortunes and land, we want to go back to life as it was before COVID-19. But do we really want the old normal or are we praying for something better?

God has promised to make all things new. What we weep over now will be shouts of joy in God’s new creation. The seeds we plant will be an abundant harvest. There will be laughter and singing. What a wondrous promise!

Yet sometimes it seems that fulfillment of the promise is a long way away. It is winter. There are no seeds in the ground. Anger, hatred, disease and violence divide us. When will this new creation appear? Yet God has promised us, and we will come through the night of weeping into a morning of song.

Soon we will look once again to the eastern sky and see the shining star of Bethlehem. God’s promise of a new creation is being fulfilled in the birth of His son. Like the angels, we will sing our songs of joy. So hold on, our old normal is about to change. For God, through Jesus, brings us to His new creation. Our night of weeping has become a morning of song!

Lord, stay with us through the night, that we may come to the morning with new hope and live in your promise of joy.

Linda Bender – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Strength to Endure

Labor pains. There really isn't anything quite like them. One comedian said it's like taking hold of your lower lip and pulling it out as far as you can and then stretching it over your head. Yep, pretty much sums it up.

It seems odd that the Apostle Paul, a single man without children, would use the metaphor of labor to describe the situation in which we (and the entire cosmos) find ourselves. But it is, indeed, a perfect metaphor. For the pain of labor is all but forgotten in the incredible joy of new birth. The expectation of what will be gives fortitude to push through the pain.

Mary waited with hope, as all expectant parents do, that her son would be born healthy and strong. But her hope, as we read in Luke 1:46-55, known as the *Magnificat*, was also for the redemption of the world. The "Mighty One" would send a Savior for the entire world through this humble, obedient servant. We wait, this Advent season, in the sure and certain hope that just as God redeemed a fallen humanity from the power of sin and death through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, God will redeem and restore the entire cosmos when Jesus, the Christ, comes again in glory.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible translates the end of verse 25, "we wait for it with patience," but the Greek is *hypomonēs*, "endurance" — we wait with endurance. And just as the incomparable joy of childbirth gives a mother the necessary strength to endure her labor, the promise of our new life as heirs of God's kingdom gives us the strength to endure the inevitable struggles and hardships of our daily lives. And we have a birthing coach to help us breathe through the pain: the ever-present Holy Spirit!

Holy Spirit, breathe joy into our sadness, hope into our longing, peace into our pain as we wait patiently for the day we will gather in the Kingdom with all God's beloved and redeemed children. Amen.

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

Thursday, December 9

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

The Gifts of Advent

Advent: a time to prepare, a time of darkness as the days get shorter.
Advent: a time of contemplation, a time to prepare ourselves once again to welcome the Christ child into our lives. Advent: a time of peace.

We have 15 shopping days left until Christmas, with presents to buy, packages to wrap, cookies to bake, school events to attend. COVID rages around us. Do we vaccinate, do we wear masks? There are supply shortages and shipping snarls. Will our presents get here or get there? Advent: a time to panic, to be short tempered, to be stressed.

Paul in Second Corinthians writes about giving more when really all we want is to do less, to gather ourselves and our family together and be still. Can't we, just this once Jesus, do less?

To which Jesus would answer, softly and quietly: Be still and know that I am. Breathe. I know things are hard and complicated. "The gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you" (verses 12-13).

Advent: a time to prepare for the gift that matters most, the gift of Jesus that begins at Christmas and is fully unwrapped at Easter. The gift of grace, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of everlasting love.

We may believe that to be a good Christian is to give, and during this time we hear that call to give even more. But perhaps it isn't just about the giving. Maybe it is about truly appreciating the abundance that we have, regardless of our circumstance. Perhaps the message is to trust. Trust in the Lord that we have all that we need. After all, as it is written: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (verse 15).

Lord, thank you for your love, generosity, abundance, grace and peace. Help us share these gifts. Help us to be truly generous in spirit, to care for the vulnerable and love our neighbors, trusting in you. Amen.

Jim Hemseth – Joy Lutheran Church, Eagle River

Friday, December 10

Isaiah 12:1-6

Pebbles of Faith

“I will trust and will not be afraid.” (Isaiah 12:2)

How do I trust in God when the giant of fear has consumed my mind, my emotions and my heart? Fear is dwelling within my very being. How do I defeat this giant?

Get alone with God and preach the word into your mind until your heart can sing. What do I preach? How do I preach? The words are right here in Isaiah 12.

- *Declare the Lord is my strength and my might
- *Affirm the unfathomable salvation given to me through Jesus Christ
- *Proclaim aloud praises to my God
- *Recount God’s deeds
- *Call forth the names of God—Shepherd, Deliverer, Creator, Healer, Counselor, Savior, Redeemer, Living Water
- *Cry out, shout, for great is the Holy One in our midst

Preach the word to your mind until your heart sings with joy and the pebble of your faith fells the giant of fear.

God, I love you. You know the giant of fear that engulfs me, and You have given to me, in your word, “fear not” pebbles to use when the giant rears its ugly head. May I feed on the truth of your word until it becomes a part of my inmost being and my heart sings for joy. Amen

Marilyn Anderson – Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Shaken

When Amos, prophet and shepherd, steps out with a message from the Lord, it is both good news and terrifying news. Israel has grown in prosperity, but it has done so with great inequality, neglecting the needs of the poor and vulnerable. The Lord will shake the house. The Lord will sift out what is unjust and unrighteous. As anyone who has been through an earthquake knows, the violent shaking is often terrifying. When the Lord promises to dismantle our unjust and unrighteous ways of living, we can prepare ourselves for the scary feeling of being shaken.

I recently heard Bishop Yvette Flunder of the United Church of Christ describe the pandemic as a period in which the church, like the rest of society, is being shaken. She, too, compared the experience to an earthquake. In a large enough earthquake, Flunder said, we discover what structures were built with strong foundations and “good bones.” The extra stuff on the building – the materials used to beautify or dress up or even cover up – those fall away. What is left standing is what was most important, most central, to begin with. Did the building collapse? Its problems began in the foundation.

What has the shaking of the last two years revealed to you? What has been shaken loose, shown to be unhealthy, unjust or unrighteous? What has been shaken loose in our churches that we thought was so important, but turns out it wasn't? What has been shaken loose in our communities that reveal to us God's call to “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24)?

The shaking is scary. I have felt it. I am guessing you have felt it, too. But when the structure (our life, our congregation, our community) is shaken down to its bare bones, down to what matters, we discover a God who also promises to “repair its breaches and raise up its ruins and rebuild” (verse 11).

Holy God, in the midst of being shaken, help us to discover what you are sifting from our lives. In turning away from those things, help us to turn to you with trust and hope, and be raised up. Amen.

Rev. Liz Lowry - Lutheran Church of Hope, Anchorage

Sunday, December 12

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Scattered People, Gathered People

In the scripture for today, the people of Israel are in exile. They have been scattered like chaff to the wind, and no longer reside in their homeland. Into this seemingly broken and hopeless situation, separated from community and roots, done with the intention of destroying both, the people of Israel receive a promise of redemption from God: that God will gather together this scattered people, and bring them home. God speaks into that time of hopelessness and speaks words of hope. God speaks into times of darkness and speaks words of light.

It is not unlike the continuing revelations about assimilation attempts of Native people on this continent, particularly with the separation of children from their communities and roots, with the intention of destroying both. God's promise to the people of Israel continues to speak today: God is gathering together all who have been scattered, grounding communities with rich cultural practices and meaningful roots. When all seems lost or broken, God's promise is to find and restore.

During this Advent season and time in history, we wait, but God's promise will hold true, to gather together a scattered people, and bring us home.

God of restoration, when we lack hope, give us courage and peace to trust in your promises of restoration. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Aaron Silco, Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

Monday, December 13

Hebrews 13:7-17

Nothing but Jesus

If you want to follow Christ, you must come to terms with nothingness. We don't like nothing. We prefer something. Truthfully, we seem to be steeped in somethings—air, ground, chairs, computers, people, *things*—things that, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, would be called our city. But life as a Christian begins when we admit that, outside of Jesus, nothingness is all there is. We try to build great towers to heaven, successful careers, wealthy companies, beautiful cities—the problem is, it is *we* who are trying to do these things. Everything we build is like sand that crumbles at the smallest tide. Jesus, on the other hand, is eternal and mighty. What He makes is of a different sort.

The author of Hebrews writes, “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city to come.” (Verse 14). With this mindset, we find ourselves living with and as the outsiders – outside the camp – who seem to have nothing. The insiders have food, security, and fancy temples. Yet it is with these who live outside the city gate, so to speak, the ones who have nothing, that Jesus chose to build the city to come.

Nothing is a great thing to be. Jesus makes something out of nothing, and He is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not try to build a life for yourself, for it will pass. Let Jesus do the work. You will forget and start laying city walls that the Holy Spirit will have to knock down, but don't worry: it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace (verse 9). When you forget that you are God's beautiful nothingness, remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you (verse 7), and seek the forgiving community of Beloved nobodies. With them you will begin to see the city to come, the city Jesus sees.

God of all things, turn us toward you when we are tempted to build our lives alone. Orient us to your loving and steadfast foundation. Amen.

Seminarian Ollie Bergh – Associate Chaplain, Providence Alaska
Medical Center, Anchorage

Tuesday, December 14

Isaiah 11:1-9

Peaceable Kingdom

It's Advent. Wait. Isaiah was a prophet who predicted the coming of the Messiah, nearly 700 years before Jesus was born. Calmness and peace would be in God's future kingdom. Creatures on earth would live and work together in harmony. Wait.

Isaiah's images had me digging a little deeper in my memory. I reflected on my high school choir when we performed "The Peaceable Kingdom" by Randall Thompson. We rode in a school bus to a studio and recorded it! The sheet music cover had a dark green background with everything printed in white: gentle lion, goat, lamb-type animals, and a little cherub child with its arm around a tiger.

Isaiah had me digging a little deeper online. Artist Edward Hicks painted over 60 different versions of *Peaceable Kingdom*, continually changing them, showing what Christ came to teach us. Born in 1780, during the American Revolution, he became a Quaker minister, sign painter and artist. Hicks' paintings included nature-defying animals: leopard and goat kid, cow and bear, human babies and snakes, all being gentle and kind to each other. A child was holding a branch representing the family tree that would lead to Jesus.

Isaiah made me think about Alaska. In this vision, animals shall share common grazing grounds. Grizzly and black bear shall lie down with the moose calf, walrus with the orcas, wolverine with the ground squirrels. A child in a fur parka shall lead us.

How would a peaceable kingdom look in our homes and communities?
Shall we dig a little deeper?

Creator God, surround us with your love. Guide us in peaceful conversations. Enliven us to work for peace in our communities. Amen

Marilyn Rosene – Dillingham Trinity Lutheran Church, Dillingham

God of the Vulnerable

One afternoon, while walking along a familiar wooded trail, I noticed several unhoused persons living in makeshift shelters along the path. In proximity to the structures, I suddenly felt fearful because I was walking alone, so I passed by briskly. Later that evening, I had a warm meal and was in my comfortable bed, while my thoughts wandered back to my unhoused neighbors. It was dark and uncomfortably cold outside. I felt a sense of shame as I considered the magnitude of their vulnerability.

I wondered how many people had reported their camp. I wondered what it would be like to live under constant threat of eviction – pushed to the margins by systems that favored privilege at the expense of the vulnerable. For many of God’s children – particularly those who suffer from injustice, violence, neglect, poverty, mental illness, and addiction – the world is not safe. Vulnerability is the price of simply *existing*.

Language has the power to make someone feel vulnerable. Language has the power to heal or wound, include or exclude, normalize or stigmatize. It has the power to make us feel safe or trigger our self-protective mechanisms. Perhaps this is why I wrestle with Old Testament texts that polarize female characters as villain, victim or virtuous. Micah’s prose is no exception. It pairs the feminine personification of Israel with images of pain, vulnerability, exploitation, and divine strength.

While this is a lot to hold in tension, Micah’s prophecy reveals a powerful truth about who God is. God is a faithful shepherd who laments the exploitation of the vulnerable, walks with the vulnerable and redeems the vulnerable. In vulnerability, God creates something new.

After all, the Messiah who would one day restore the kingdom of David – whose greatness would reach to the ends of the earth – would enter this world in the most vulnerable of forms: as a tender infant, to a family of unhoused parents who found temporary refuge in a Bethlehem stable.

Merciful God, we pray for our vulnerable neighbors, even as we wrestle with systems of injustice. Lead us to acts of mercy and justice. Amen.

Seminary graduate Mel Vesco – St. Mark Lutheran, Anchorage; USAF Religious Affairs Airman

Thursday, December 16

Jeremiah 31: 31-35

A New Covenant

A new covenant? What about past promises and covenants that seemed to end up as failures? Instead of getting more complicated, God revealed an encompassing and inclusive new idea of unconditional love and forgiveness: “for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more,” (verse 34b). Simple but profound words that remind me of an old saying, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

I struggled through this reading and re-read it several times. I realized that we are offered a clean slate – the slate was clean and would stay that way. All who seek to be one with God are offered this redemptive and dynamic relationship. We are enough just the way we are. Our innate worth is sufficient. If we accept this offer of a new beginning, we are freed from self-doubts, worries and dread.

Maybe God is like a celestial Mr. Rogers, who famously told children he loved them just the way they were. What a wonderful message – no pretense, no rivalry, no fear of not measuring up. This Advent season we are free and welcome to accept this invitation and enter into the new covenant.

Lord, open my heart to your love and the freedom to live in this new covenant with you. Help me to be a candle in the darkness and a light to others.

Eileen Hosey – Shepherd of the Valley, Juneau

Friday, December 17

Psalm 80:1-7

Faithful Lament

I haven't put much time and thought into the Psalms. I have viewed them as a glimpse into the lives of those poor, beleaguered people of Israel who could not catch a break. I could sometimes muster some sympathy but mostly I felt pity because they seemed to have more than their fair share of misfortune.

What I missed was how faithful these ancient people were, despite the misfortune they encountered. It has taken several months of my daily life being disrupted in inconvenient and sometimes frightening ways during the pandemic to cause a change in how I read the Psalms. The New Interpreter's Study Bible notes under verses 1-7: "A lament of the community follows a national calamity." I think we can all relate to that!

The verses take on a more literal meaning when considered within the context of our present circumstances. "Given them tears to drink in full measure" (verse 5) brings to mind the hundreds of thousands of souls lost to COVID. "Make us the scorn of our neighbors" (verse 6) is being played out over social media with polarization over vaccinations and masks. I cannot read these verses with detachment. They inspire feelings of fear, loss and empathy.

What will save us is exactly what the people of Israel turned to so long ago: faith in God. "Stir up your might and come save us! Restore us O God; let your face shine that we may be saved" (verse 2). May we have the faith of the people of Israel and look to the shining face of God for restoration.

Stir up your power, God, and come! Give us the gift of faith for the challenges in our lives and world. Amen.

Kim Michaud – Epiphany Lutheran Church, Valdez

Saturday, December 18

Luke 13:31-35

Fixer Uppers

Thank goodness our God is a God of restoration and not one that is quick to toss and replace. Remember, the toss and replace strategy was attempted once, with the flood in Genesis. God wasn't a big fan of that method and promised us that it would never happen again.

In this reading from Luke's gospel, I get the impression that Jesus saw Jerusalem as a bit of a "fixer-upper." The city was once great, shiny and new, but time, corruption and greed had not been kind to it. Once the center of worship and holiness, Jerusalem over time has developed a bit of a record for being intolerant and dangerous to those who speak on God's behalf. God waits patiently to "gather her brood under her wings."

As I said, I'm glad God is a God of restoration. Personally, I find much more joy and satisfaction in restoring and fixing something that has been neglected and worn down by time and the elements than I do by simply buying something new from the nearest mega-store. There is more history, more character to something that has been around for a few decades.

Like Jerusalem, we might be a bit of a fixer-upper, but we are *restored* by God. We aren't discarded and replaced by a better, shinier version of ourselves. We still carry the scars and marks of time, but we are given another chance. Another opportunity to serve. We are given new life and purpose.

Forgiving God, we thank you for restoring us. Be with us as we work to restore brokenness in our world. Amen.

Rev. Lou Peters – Fairbanks Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

Filled with Joy

Pregnant Mary comes to visit, and like so many of us want to do when we see a pregnant friend, Elizabeth reaches out her hand and lays it on Mary's belly. I recently was permitted to lay my hand on my pregnant daughter's belly. Joy, love and hope filled me as the baby moved. Whatever the future brings, I look forward to that child being a part of it.

How amazing and overwhelming it must have been for Elizabeth to realize that the child she felt move inside Mary was the Son of God, who comes to save and make whole! Elizabeth's baby, an unanticipated child, leaps for joy within her! Love and hope must have flooded her being. Everything around her is suddenly full of blessing. She is filled with wonder as she touches God's promise.

Elizabeth's world had recently been turned upside down when her husband came home from the temple in Jerusalem unable to speak. Then she became pregnant long past her time. She has been living with the unknown and the unexpected with nothing but uncertainty ahead. Welcoming Mary and encountering the Messiah, even unborn, brings joy, hope and blessing.

Life is always filled with the unexpected, and the future is rarely certain. As we wait during this Advent season for the Messiah to return and make all things new, may we touch each other's lives with hope, joy and love. Then like Elizabeth, may we see the blessings all around us despite the unexpectedness and the uncertainty of life.

God of life, thank you for all the babies being born in this Advent season. Bless their lives with love, joy and hope. We pray also for those who wish to be parents and parents who are grieving loss. Help us to experience your love amid uncertainty and to share that love with our families, friends and neighbors. Amen

Rev. Diane Krauszer – Trinity Lutheran Church, Palmer

A Psalm for Everyone

This psalm has a word for everyone. For those experiencing the fullness of God's goodness, this psalm connects them with others experiencing the same. By reading this psalm, we know we are not alone in our delight. God has touched many people, and through the psalm people can rejoice and praise God together. For those who are struggling, this psalm reminds them that God has not abandoned them but embraced them. It's a promise that God can and does lift up the struggling.

Who God is, the Psalmist declares, is made known in what God does. God is the one who does wonderful things on behalf of the poor and needy. God is the one who meets us, not where we should be, but where we are, shining light in the dark places of our lives. God is the one who comes to us as a child reminding us that the God we praise is the one who looks down, reaches down, and raises up.

Prepare our hearts, gracious God, for the newness that is coming into the world. Teach us to praise you for your goodness, and to give thanks for your mercy to the poor and lowly made known to us through our coming Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Rev. Jeff Hackler – Central Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Tuesday, December 21

Romans 8:18-30

Fierce Holy Spirit

Autumnal wonders. Geese skidding onto a still neighborhood lake on a sunny day, then wildly splashing, fluffing feathers and honking. My friend and I sat on the lakeside bench watching and listening, reminded of our fall Bible study from *Gather* magazine. The Bible study author Sara Olson-Smith likens the wild geese to the Holy Spirit: untamed, loud, fierce and perfectly free. Oh, the joy and wonder of that holy moment!

We needed that moment of relief from COVID-19, the pandemic that has dominated our lives and wearied our souls for nearly two years. It has robbed us of loved ones, restricted our routines and ruined businesses. Vaccinations and mask mandates, meant to save lives, have instead become a political flash point. Deeply divided, many of our relationships are strained or have broken under the tension. These entrenched divisions within our families, churches and community have led to feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

In the depths of our weakness, this wild and fierce Holy Spirit meets us. Like the boisterous geese, this spirit is busy. Interceding for us when we have no words, our hearts too broken from the suffering and division. Connecting us to our Heavenly Father for healing and comfort. Leading us to truth during these turbulent times. Promising us hope of what is to come.

The joy and wonder that we experienced on that autumn day are just a foretaste of the glory that lies ahead. As we are guided by the Holy Spirit through days of pain and suffering on earth, we eagerly await the birth of Jesus Christ, our hope eternal.

God, we lift up the physicians, nurses and medical teams who have been treating COVID-19 patients throughout the pandemic. Strengthen, encourage and bless them in their tireless efforts to be healers in our community.

Betty Hedstrand – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Wednesday, December 22

Micah 4:1-5

Love in Action

Writer and activist bell hooks reminds us that “Just as cultivating a garden requires turning over the ground, pulling weeds, planting, and watering, doing the work of love is all about taking action.”

The prophet Micah sets forward a vision of peaceful action – peoples streaming to the Lord’s mountain to learn God’s ways and walk in God’s paths. In this world, those who have focused on war now beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, creating an environment where “they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid,” (verse 4).

There are many ways that our actions do the work of our love, of God’s love – planting seeds, tending plants, harvesting ripe fruit and vegetables. Picking berries, catching and preserving fish. Preparing a meal. Shoveling snow. Repairing what is broken.

As a hospital chaplain, I regularly witness other actions that show love – changing the dressing on a wound, comforting frightened or worried patients, cleaning hospital floors or sanitizing equipment, adjusting ventilator settings or providing a breathing treatment, ensuring that someone gets the proper dose of medication. There are so many ways that our actions demonstrate love, and that love requires action.

But another part of loving is to stop and rest, to savor all that is good. To “sit under their own vines and ... their own fig trees.” To appreciate relationships and beauty and healing.

As Christmas approaches, we remember God’s tremendous and unexpected action in the service of love – the birth of a tiny and vulnerable baby, Jesus Christ, love incarnate, God with us. That birth, that action born of love, makes a new world possible.

God, you are the source of all love. In Jesus’ birth, you revealed your love and presence among us. Guide us along your paths and inspire our actions, that we too may reveal your love. Amen.

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

Thursday, December 23

Luke 1:46b-55

Filled Up

Mary listened to God's messenger, responded with wonder and joy, and accepted what could have sounded like disastrous news as blessing. She was filled up and confident. She sought out family to share the experience. She beamed!

I felt that beaming spirit when I was expecting a baby. I felt the wonder and joy and miracle of it all. Where did that "anything-is-possible-and-won't-it-be-wonderful-when-it-happens" mindset go? It was here, not so long ago, inside of me. Lord, restore that spirit of hopefulness and joy.

I set a new prayer on my heart at church on a recent Sunday and wrote it to read throughout the day: "Grant me calm, confidence, creativity and joy in my job and in my life." I pointed it out to co-workers and e-mailed it to friends. With this ask, I am responding to the yearning of my heart, my need for God to fill me. It has begun to change my spirit.

Instead of being driven to do everything demanded of me and feel a failure, I consider my resources and act with what I have on hand to be and do my best. I have come to a healthier, happier place just by this act of prayer. I am seeing my job and my life as places where God's goodness will interact with my spirit and bring joy. Hallelujah!

When we are presented with overwhelming news – an unmarried young woman learning she is pregnant would certainly qualify – we can be beaten down by "what-if's" and "why me?" and "what will everyone think of me?" and "how can I do all that will be required of me?" Or we can take a deep breath, breathing with God, breathing in God's grace and mercy, breathing through our terror and anxiety and fretfulness and self-consciousness and breathing out "wow!"

God, I am hungry to be filled with good things. I need your strength and mercy. I am low in spirit, empty. The battering of life has worn me down. I reach out to your promise, God, and I accept with gratitude your plenty.

Chris Terry – Lutheran Church of Hope, Anchorage

Friday, December 24

Isaiah 9:2-7

God With Us

After this long period of waiting throughout Advent, we have made it to Christmas Eve! On this day, this text from Isaiah celebrates with us the beauty of God with us, Immanuel. On this day, the rod of the oppressor is broken, there is joy, peace, justice, righteousness, and light shines in the darkness. Breathe it in!

I moved to Alaska a few months ago, so I am still getting used to how dark it is up here in the winter. Just three days ago, it was the darkest day of the year. And yet, three days later, we gather together for Christmas Eve. We reflect together on the light that shines in the darkness, of God with us, who brightens the darkest days. Where full-lit Advent wreathes shine bright, or perhaps, candle-light services illumine the faces of community around you. Where we gather together to proclaim the good news of God who is making all things new, of God who is with us, of light that shines in the darkness.

May we breathe it in and be filled up with the promise and presence of God. May we not lose hope, knowing the power of what God can do in three days! May we be transformed, being a beacon of light to all around us, radiating God's light and love into the world. May we be blessed with eyes to see Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, shining among us this day and the days to come.

God, you illumine our lives and hearts. Help us see what really matters as we move from the Advent to the Christmas season – your love and presence in our lives and the way we shine that outward. In the name of your newborn Son we pray, Amen.

Rev. Anna Silco, Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

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

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