

**CHRIST CHURCH
COMMUNITY
2020
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL**

Greetings to You in Christ's Name!

This year has been full of grief in the life of the Church and the world in general. The COVID-19 pandemic, like death, has one power. It has an insatiable appetite for taking things away. It has taken memories, opportunities, resources, traditions, and in the case of 250,000+ Americans, life itself. The pandemic has caused us to part with many beloved rituals and meaningful practices.

This year members of Christ Church and our friends have collaborated to create a new tradition that cannot be taken away from us. Our collective work has resulted in a community crowdsourced advent devotional. These writings are the sacred fruits of our labor. They include reflections on scriptures from people of diverse faith backgrounds and walks of life.

It is my prayer that you find hope, peace, joy, and love in these reflections. May the Spirit that surpasses all understanding be with you this advent season and prepare you for the birth of the Christ-Child.

With gratitude for you,

Rev. Dan Stark,
Pastor, Christ Church UCC, Milwaukee, WI.

A photograph of a sunset or sunrise over a body of water. The sky is a deep blue with scattered, soft orange and yellow clouds. The water in the foreground is dark blue with gentle, concentric ripples that reflect the light from the sky. The overall mood is serene and peaceful.

WEEK THREE

JOY

JOY | Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

As we decorated the Church Art Gallery for advent and I placed the baby Jesus in the hay filled manger, it gave me pause to think. We all exchange gifts at Christmas. Those gifts to me always signified the gifts brought to Jesus by the Wise Men. I thought the greatest gift of Christmas is Jesus.

I reflected on the Bible verse I read: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." We were given *two* very precious gifts. Elizabeth, far beyond childbearing, was pregnant with John, who we know as John the Baptist. Then Mary, was blessed by the Holy Spirit, and was with child, Jesus our Savior.

Mary took time to travel to see Elizabeth. I believe Mary went to see Elizabeth because they had two amazing miracles to share. As the Bible states that upon seeing each other "the baby leaped in her womb."

These two women carried great men who would shape our Christianity and faith. John would go before Jesus spreading the word of our savior and baptizing all who believed. Jesus, God's son would give us the gift of everlasting life. Both men were wonderful gifts to all people.

These two courageous women who brought these men into the world would also have to experience the deaths of their sons. John for his devotion, faith and conveying the coming of Christ. Jesus died to save all believers through the promise of life after death.

As Advent has arrived, let us remember and give thanks for the true gifts given to us by God.

STAR
A STABLE
WITH A BABE
LAYING IN A MANGER
MADE OF A BED OF HAY
SHEPHERDS, WISE MEN WITH GIFTS
CAME TO SEE OF THE ANGELIC BIRTH
BORN TO US UPON THAT NIGHT
THE SAVIOR
JESUS

MAGNIFY | Luke 1:46-49

*And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

There's a children's book that my wife and I got shortly after our daughter was born, called *Wherever You are My Love will Find You* by Nancy Tillman. Do yourself a favor and go out and get a copy of it. I've read it for Confirmation services, funerals, and weddings. I've given it away as parting gifts, for birthdays and graduation presents. I do this because it talks about love and being beloved – no matter who you are and where you go in this life. There's just something about the refrain in this book, "*You are loved, you are loved, you are loved,*" that makes me think about Luke 1:46-49. This scripture, known as the Magnificat, is a revolutionary song of salvation. It has political, economic, and social dimensions to it, but it is also a song of great hope and promise. Out of Mary's mouth we hear that God has named and favored her, of *all* people, to bring God's child into the world.

Being asked to bear someone's child as a surrogate is an incredible thing but being chosen to bear the light of the world, is an even bigger deal. What makes God's choice of Mary even more amazing is that it mirrors the Kingdom of God itself. God did not choose a rich and powerful person to bear God's Son. God chose a teenage girl who was socially irrelevant, powerless, close to penniless, and probably scared out of her mind to bear the light of the world. Despite all this, the angels of God say, "Do not be afraid." Mary was assured everything would be OK. "*You are loved, you are loved, you are loved.*"

Mary's song is not just a song about Mary. It names and claims those who find themselves like Mary did back in the day as God's front and center focus now. These are the ones whom God calls beloved. These are the ones who have the most important job of all. The Magnificat tells us the kind of person that God uses to bring God's light into the world – not extraordinary, but ordinary people. God chooses Mary and Joseph over presidents and monarchs. For each of us this advent season, this is a word of hope about God's love. Each of us is named worthy of bringing the light of God into the world. *You are loved, you are loved, you are loved.*

*God of Mary and Joseph,
Remind us this advent that you name and claim us also,
To be your light-bearers in this world,
Amen.*

-Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church

SURPRISE | Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn...

I can practically hear the nasal voice of Linus from the 1965 *A Charlie Brown Christmas* narrating chapter two of Luke's Gospel. Yeah, I know he reads Matthew's Gospel, but I still can't help but hear it in his voice. If you're anything like me, you've probably heard the opening of Luke's Christmas story in the past and sort of mentally skipped over it without giving it much of a second thought. After all, at first blush it seems kind of like an obstacle standing between us and the birth of Jesus in the text. But the thing is, there's something really powerful happening in these first few verses. We just took a 2020 census as a nation. That's what the Emperor in Luke's Gospel decrees for his people to do - to be registered. What's so striking about it is that the events Luke describes immediately following the mention of the census seems so miniscule compared to what's happening in the world at that moment. In one breath we hear about the political agenda of the Roman Emperor Augustus and the complex geopolitical reality of the world when Luke name-drops the Syrian Governor Quirinius. In the next breath we hear about some guy named Joseph and his pregnant teen fiancé, Mary, traveling through the countryside to get registered.

Compared to the Emperor and Governor, the lives of everybody else seems so incredibly insignificant and small. But when Luke shares about Augustus and Quirinius and then immediately shifts our attention to the birth of Jesus, he tells us that whether these powerful rulers care or even notice, the event that is about to take place is going to change the world forever. A baby born in the barn of some dinky little town matters more than their political agendas and deserves more ink on the page. In fact, this child's birth will be the most important thing to happen in the history of the world. That in essence is the promise of the Gospel. God is surprising and God regularly shows up in places and spaces where we do not expect God to be. God does not show up in the mighty and powerful. God does not show up in the emperor or governor. God shows up in a barn to an unwed teenage mom and her small-town fiancé.

*God of the skip-over verses,
Give us the second thought,
To see you and hear you this advent,
And to be surprised where and in whom you can show up.
Amen.*

-Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church

BLESSED | Luke 1:41-42

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Like many Americans who travel to follow employment, I don't get to see family and friends as often as I'd like. COVID has compounded the problem. On the occasions when we can connect something deep within me leaps with joy. It's like that feeling at that point when the rest of the Avengers appear during the final battle in Infinity Wars. I suddenly feel stronger and ready to face whatever challenges are before me.

That joy is at the heart of this text. Elizabeth is excited to see her cousin Mary. (Apparently, John the Baptizer, still in utero, was happy too!) The divine in Elizabeth called out to the divine in Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is called *Theotokas*, the God bearer, by the Orthodox. Mary is the one who delivers God in human flesh to the world.

Who are the people you know that that bear Christ to you, to others? Take a moment to thank God for them for blessed are they among people, and blessed is the fruit of their labor.

As Elizabeth carried John, who pointed toward Christ, take a moment to look within. Where do you bear Christ to others? You are no less than the image of God, you too are blessed among people, and blessed is the fruit of your labor.

Living God, help me to follow the example of Elizabeth and Mary. Help me to extend the joy of Christ in the world. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Bob Gross, Waukesha Evangelical Reformed Church, Waukesha, WI

DELIVER | Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion –
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations. For I*

*the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring
up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

For months now, we have heard this time described as unprecedented. Indeed, it is an unprecedented time. The COVID-19 virus is making its second surge, and, in some places its third surge, infecting people at alarming rates. In our state over the last week we have seen record numbers of new infections, almost 8,000 people a day, four times what it was in March.

We have all needed to adapt and adopt to new ways of living to protect ourselves and those we love. We are connecting with family and friends in ways that seem distant and artificial, although we are so glad to be able to at least see one another and hear one another's voices across computer screens. We are greeting our neighbors differently, smiling with our eyes through masks and shields, waving to them from afar across the driveway. We find ourselves restraining our natural inclination to offer a handshake or a hug when we see our family or friends. We are mourning the losses of our loved ones, finding ourselves in the strange and painful place of not being able to hold their hand or stroke their brow as they lay dying. We can't even gather in person with our family and friends to celebrate their lives, by sharing their life stories, and sharing a meal together. Our hearts are broken!

Our way of life has been radically altered. Many of us spend our days trying to manage virtual learning for our children while tending to our job responsibilities. We do so sharing space that was never intended to meet the diverse needs of each. Others of us have jobs that take us outside our homes, where we are seeing other people face to face. Some of us have spouses or partners who are on the front lines caring for those who are infected. In all of it, there is the constant concern about whether or not, today will be the day that I get the virus and unwittingly infect my family members. We worry whether we or our loved ones will be ones who get a mild case or will we be the one who suffer the devastating symptoms associated with this virus and be able to survive.

Then there are family, friends, congregants who have been furloughed or lost their jobs. Some of us, too, have lost our call. All who have experienced this loss wonder and worry if they'll ever find another job in this economic downturn, worrying and wondering if they will be able to support themselves and their family.

All of this has gone on for longer than we ever could have imagined. We know that we still have many more months to go before a vaccine is developed, determined to be safe, and dispersed widely enough to make a significant difference in our lives. We have been house bound and it feels like we have been bound up, held captive, by this pandemic forever.

Indeed, this is an unprecedented time we are living in. But, Jesus came into the world in an unprecedented time. The world into which he was born was filled with strife and suffering. Illness and disease were rampant. Access to care was minimal and basic human care was withheld as those who suffered afflictions were looked upon as being out of favor with God. Their disease caused great dis-ease.

The economy during the Roman Empire benefited those in positions of privilege, power and prestige. The majority of ordinary people were burdened by a bastion of taxation that reduced daily living to finding ways to just survive, not thrive. First century world was also known for having an epidemic of oppression. Not only were classes, ethnicities, races, and religious sects of people pitted against one another, but families and communities that were once united, were now set dead against one another.

Living in first century Palestine was an unprecedented time. It is into this world that the messiah, the savior, Jesus is born, to the most ordinary people, Mary and Joseph, in the most humble of places, a stable in Bethlehem. It seems unprecedented this ordinary child holds the promise of hope, love, joy and peace-holds the promise of new life. Jesus, God's own son, God's own word made flesh is brought to life in an unprecedented time, place and space. Yet this child will be life-giving. This Christ-child will be life-giving in all time, and place. His life, will transform the lives of those who have known strife and suffering, offering them comfort, healing and hope. His life will transform how people think and act toward one another, offering love and grace, in a world filled with hardship and hate. His life will challenge and right the injustices of the world, offering redemption and reconciliation that even the last and least in this life will come first and sit at the head of the table to feast at God's banquet. His life will unbind the captive and set the prisoners free. His is a life that offers new life to all whom he will meet and greet.

Jesus' life is the manifestation of the power of God's love, born anew in us each day as we continue to be a beacon of the light of God's love and grace. We can offer healing, comfort, hope as we continue to let our lives shine the light of love and grace in the world. My prayer is that we will continue, continue to let the light of love shine into the darkest corners of this broken world and offer comfort, healing and hope.

Rev. Jane Anderson, South East Association Minister, Wisconsin Conference UCC

REJOICE | 1 Thessalonians

5:16-24

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

Rejoice always...really? In this season of Covid-19 when nothing seems normal; when we think of friends and loved ones who have personally battled this illness; when we consider we will probably be gathering with our families for Christmas via Zoom rather than in person we are being called to rejoice always! Again I say, *really?*

And yet, why not? Oh, I know it sounds kind of Pollyannaish to think that by being cheerful everything will be okay. But if we can embrace a positive state of mind, it will be that much harder for negativity to grab hold of us. I saw a Facebook post recently that speaks to this very thing. It said, "If you refuse to find joy in the snow at the end of the day you will have less joy but the same amount of snow!"

Paul gives us so much good advice in this passage. For example, "pray without ceasing." Some translations have this as "pray always" but many years ago I heard someone give that a little twist. This person called us to "pray all ways" and for me that expression gave me great freedom to approach God in a multitude of ways, every one as worthy as the next.

There is enough in this passage for a dozen devotions but I want to highlight one more of Paul's instructions for us..."hold fast to what is good." We all know what those things are; love, truth, family, friends, compassion, mercy, etc. As we enter into this coming "winter of our discontent" it is vital that we do hold fast to those things because they are what will carry us through. Never forget that "in the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Sharing the "Five Finger Prayer." This is one of the ways I've prayed and it's great to use with children. We begin with our thumb because it is nearest to us. Hence we use that finger to remind us of those closest to us. Next is the index, or pointing finger. We use this to remind us to pray for those who point the way for us. Next is our middle finger which is also our tallest finger. This reminds us to pray for our leaders. Our ring finger is actually our weakest so we use this to remember those who are hurting. Finally we come to our little finger. We use this to pray for ourselves.

Rev. Andy Oren, Christ Church