Advent Devotions 2023
## 2023 Advent Devotions

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As this Advent meditational and devotional booklet is being prepared, one of the most egregious, non-human responses to the Christmas message is being carried out on the soil where Jesus was born. The Zionist settler colonialism project is killing babies at an unprecedented number! Since October 7, more than 6,000 Palestinian babies have been killed by the Israeli Defense Force, supposedly in defense of their right to exist!

How many of those Palestinian babies belonged to Hamas? If you guessed “none,” you would be right; but Netanyahu is not concerned with wiping out Hamas. He wants to kill all Palestinians: male, female, senior citizens, toddlers, and infants. All this is going on as we prepare for Christmas!

As you read this Advent meditational, at least 100 more babies are being killed. How does God respond to this non-human madness?

I call it non-human because no human being made in the image of God would kill another human being in the name of God. Incidentally, Netanyahu calls all Palestinians animals. He says Palestinians are not human. What is God’s response to this kind of murderer?

That question is not so far-fetched in terms of today’s scripture. Our focus in the scripture is on Bethlehem, but doing so without remembering that the Roman Empire controlled the territory in which Palestine sat. Does that sound familiar? What is God’s response to military might?

Let me say this to you: the scripture teaches us God’s response to the military is a manger. God’s response to bombs and brutality is a birth, a baby, and a barn!

Birth

In response to the Roman Empire’s murdering of Palestinian babies and a response to Zionist settler colonialism action of bombing Gaza and occupying Palestinian land illegally is the birth of more and more Palestinian babies. Death is not stronger than life. Seventy-five years of occupation, but Zionist settler colonialists project in the land of Palestine does not stop Palestinian babies from being born. The murder and attempted genocide of innocent Palestinian babies does not stop God. From the birth of the brown baby boy whom the angel called “Savior” in response to the deaths of the Empire’s slaughter, to the births of countless black and brown baby boys, the lesson is the same. The text says, “For unto you is born this day….” God responds to death with life.
The great African American theologian Robin Harris puts it this way, “We don’t die, we multiply!” Killing the dreamer does not kill the dream. Killing babies does not stop God or the plans of God!

**Baby**

The text says, “And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes…” God’s response to the mayhem and murder of the Empire is a baby. This is no ordinary birth. This is the birth of a “savior,” which is Christ the Lord! God’s response is not the response that meets the expectations of the emperor, whether his name is Caesar or Netanyahu. God’s response is an infant, a baby, a newborn whose name is Jesus!

**A Barn**

God’s response to the powerful and to those whom the world considers mighty is the same message throughout scripture. God responds on the side of the poor.

The Savior is not born wrapped in sable. The Savior is born in a barn wrapped in rags!

Christ is not born in a mansion or the governor’s palace. Christ the Savior is born in a barn. Jesus is born in a place that does not reek of French perfumes and cologne like Givenchy. Jesus is born in an atmosphere rank with the smell of cow dung and sheep manure. A manger is a drinking trough for wild animals. All these are signs of poverty as those from society deem “the least of these.” God’s response is on the side of the least of these. God’s response is on the side of the Palestinians in the first century and God’s response is on the side of the Palestinians in the twenty-first century.

Let us turn to what the shepherds said. “Oh, come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord,” born a tiny baby in a raggedy barn whether in Ramallah, Gaza, or Roseland, whether a barn in Bethlehem or in Bronzeville. He is Lord!

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.
Pastor Emeritus
While Waiting
Isaiah 64:1-9
Deacon Jared Deane

Our scripture lesson for the day begins with the Israelites' request that God come down from heaven and make their adversaries know who God is. They wanted God to scare their enemies. They had an “us” versus “them” mentality. They are bad and we are good. They wanted God to come down from heaven to scare the enemy because it would prove God cared more for them because of their good works. This led to them praising God because God worked for those who waited for God. They assumed God would grant them divine attention because of their self-proclaimed righteousness.

There was a quick switch from self-righteousness to confession, but not total confession. The Israelites blamed God for their sin. Yes, God. They attributed their sin to the notion that God was absent, which caused their sin. They asked that God’s anger and memory of their guilt not last forever.

We see how the Israelites acted while they waited on God. They wanted God to scare their enemies. They confessed to their sin but blamed God because, in their minds, they thought He was not present. These actions were a waste of their time.

During Advent, we celebrate the coming of our Lord and Savior. Part of the coming is the wait. What we do while we wait is just as important as what we do when the arrival occurs. Instead of being like the Israelites, use your time to self-reflect, be accountable, and self-correct. And know that God is not hiding. God is ever-present and able to aid you.

**Prayer:** Oh great and wonderful God, while we wait on You, please speak to our bodies, minds, and spirits so that we can take a genuine look at the changes that need to occur in our lives. Grant us the wisdom, power, and boldness to make those changes that may be difficult for us but ultimately will allow us to serve You better and praise Your name. We ask this in Your name. Amen.

**Thought of the Day:** Have an honest conversation with yourself. What things do you need to change in preparation for what God is about to gift you?
One of my favorite hymns is “I Need Thee Every Hour,” written by Annie Sherwood Hawks in 1872.

I need Thee every hour
Most gracious Lord
No tender voice like Thine
Can peace afford
I need Thee, O I need Thee
Every hour I need Thee
O bless me now, my Savior
I come to Thee

This psalm is a lament from the nation of Israel; they were in distress and feeling abandoned by God. Have you ever felt like God’s presence had left you? Have you had your prayers go unanswered? Have you ever felt left all alone? Well, this is what the people of Israel was experiencing. They were in distress, filled with anxiety and pleading with God to restore them, by God returning to them.

Most of us have lived through trauma whether physical, psychological, or spiritual. Often, we face two or three stressful issues at the same time. We are living in a time where there are wars and rumors of wars, drugs continue to choke the life out of our young people, violence has taken up residence in our homes, community and world. When we listen to the news, many of us—just as Israel did—plead with God to show up. We pray for God to provide light in the darkness, peace where there is war, and clarity where there is confusion.

God has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. God said the weapons would form but not prosper. As we enter the Advent season, celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior, we are reminded that Emmanuel, which means “God with us,” is a whisper away. God is always with us even in our darkest moments. God is a very present help in times of trouble, so you are never alone—and there is nothing too hard for the Lord!

Psalm 80 ends with this: “Israel will be restored, God will smile favorably on His people and they shall be saved.” So too shall we be saved from hate, racism, violence, and …

Prayer: Emmanuel, we love You and trust that You will fulfill Your promise to be with us even until the end of time. Help us to be present with You as You are with us in our daily walk. Shine the light from heaven on us, and keep us in Your loving care.

Thought for the Day: When you need Him, you need only call His name, Jesus.
In 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Paul begins his letter by thanking God for the rich grace and fellowship bestowed upon the Corinthians through Jesus Christ. These verses sum up the essential elements of the Christian journey—grace and peace found in Christ—and serve as a reminder of the unique relationship we as believers share with our Lord. Paul speaks divine blessings upon the Corinthians, acknowledging that grace and peace are not mere formalities but a major part of our Christian experience. Grace, as God's unmerited favor, and inner peace found in our relationship with Christ, form the foundation of our lives. Paul expresses gratitude for the Corinthians' enrichment in Christ. Through their faith, they receive spiritual gifts and knowledge and continuously experience God's inexhaustible grace.

As we reflect during Advent, we acknowledge that we are the children of God. We are sanctified through Christ Jesus. We are set apart; we are different from the world. Our love ought to be real and authentic toward God and our neighbor. God has gifted us as it has pleased God. We should be using our gifts to glorify God but also to edify the people of God.

Paul emphasizes the Corinthians' eager anticipation of Christ's return. As we await His return, our faith in God should grow stronger as we walk in fellowship with God and utilize the spiritual gifts entrusted to us.

Paul points out God’s unwavering faith as he concludes by highlighting God's unwavering faithfulness. In this Advent season, we meditate on God's faithfulness and the privilege of our fellowship with Jesus Christ, finding assurance, strength, and the promise of eternal life.

**Prayer:** Gracious God our Father, we thank You for Your abundant grace and our personal relationship with Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us patiently and eagerly await Your return, walking confidently in the assurance of Your unwavering faithfulness. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**Thought for the Day:** As God so freely bestows grace upon us, we ought to do the same toward one another. We should grant grace not because it is deserved but simply because we can.
Traditionally, the texts for the first Sunday of Advent are focused on the Second Coming of Jesus instead of the birth of Jesus. The text calls attention to the fulfillment of God’s intention and purpose of creation, yielding a new heaven and earth. It is a time of hope that makes one yearn with great expectation for what will come.

This scripture is somewhat different from most Advent scriptures as it speaks to suffering and an uphill journey leading to what we know as the end of the world. It isn’t to frighten you but to comfort you. The critical focus is staying alert, attentive, and ready.

This season is our “get ready for something new period.” You will see God's hand in the preparation and waiting. The message to the disciples about staying alert is for all of us. Jesus had to occasionally watch and wake up the disciples when they were in the Garden of Gethsemane. He warned them, “Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Your faith as a Christian increases as you draw closer to God daily through studying and applying the Word of God and prayer. Life’s circumstances can test your belief in God, but the actual substance combined with confidence, assurance, obedience, trust, and faith in God re-centers you as you lean not on your own understanding but on the Word of God.

We are on posts that require faithfulness and trust, even when we don’t see the outcome. Verses 32-37 remind us to focus on how we live and to be ready, for there is no room to let down our guard. What will Jesus find when He returns? If we are not prepared, we will be held responsible. This season of Advent gives us, the church, the amazing chance to stand in the gap and proclaim the goodness of Jesus Christ based on word and deed. To walk the talk.

Our faith will be rewarded with the extraordinary gift of salvation. As you prepare for God’s return, thank God at every opportunity possible, serve God in spirit and truth, and share God’s love with family, friends, and loved ones. As you do the things required, you will be rewarded with joy, peace, happiness, and contentment as you wait, for you will be ready for God’s return.

This is the joy of the Advent season!

**Prayer:** Eternal God, thank You for another Advent season. Help us to stay awake and focused on the fullness of Your love. In Jesus’ name, amen.

**Thought of the Day:** Be encouraged, for one day, Jesus will return and find you living in the Advent of that time.
In Isaiah 40:1-11 we encounter God’s profound message of comfort and hope echoing through the corridors of time to reach us today. The prophet Isaiah becomes the conduit of divine compassion, speaking to a people entrenched in trials and exile.

The passage opens with a resounding call: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). This divine assurance echoes through the ages, reminding us that amidst life's struggles, God sees and offers unwavering solace.

Isaiah illustrates a scene of preparation and restoration, leveling the ground for the Lord’s arrival (Isaiah 40:3-5). Just as paths were readied in ancient times, God calls us to prepare our hearts for God’s presence. God pledges renewal and restoration for those awaiting His arrival.

The enduring nature of God’s Word is spotlighted: "Surely the people are grass... but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8). In a transient world, God's Word stands unwavering, a beacon of eternal truth amid life's uncertainties.

Isaiah portrays God as a tender shepherd, guiding and caring for God's flock (Isaiah 40:10-11). This imagery speaks of intimate guidance, protection, and love. We find assurance in God’s care as we navigate the intricacies of life’s journeys.

As we reflect on these words, we’re invited to prepare our hearts for God's presence and trust in God’s guidance as our Shepherd. Through prayer and reflection, we seek to anchor ourselves in the enduring truth of God’s Word.

Isaiah 40:1-11 extends a timeless invitation—a divine call to find solace in God's everlasting comfort, to prepare our hearts for God's arrival, and to trust in God's unwavering guidance as our Shepherd.

**Prayer:** Lord, as we encounter the trials of this day, may we be mindful of the ways You have caused us to triumph over the troubles of the past. Give us sight beyond our current situation and infuse our hearts with the hope and faith that moves mountains. In the name of Jesus, amen.

**Thought for today:** Embrace God’s promise of hope and peace, for even amidst chaos, God’s perfect plan of restoration unfolds.
In Spite of...What God Sees
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 (MSG)
Deacon Denise A. Hunter

Every morning I start my day listening to gospel music. I try to hone in on a few lines to help guide me throughout the day. My practice paid off recently. I was accused of committing an act that turned out to be a simple misunderstanding by the accuser. When the accusation first came, I did not panic or get angry. I was immediately calmed by a verse from the song “Marvelous” by Walter Hawkins.

Some folks see my faults,
Lord, You see my accomplishments,
even the good work you have begun in me,
You also see my finish,
No, not half done,
every battle already won.

In this day and age, when fiction is often confused with fact, Psalm 85:10a (MSG) reminds us that “Love and Truth meet in the street.” We know that the streets do talk. On my block, we know that in spite of what the devil means for evil, God sees what’s good.

If I am honest with myself, this did not come easy for me. There was a time when I got bent out of shape when faced with adversity, intentional or not. To borrow words from the title of one of my other favorite gospel songs, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” I can only think about the peace I forfeited because I did not take it to God in prayer.

Making space for God has proven to be life-changing for me. In this Advent season, I highly recommend you start your morning by doing the same. Peace and righteousness are waiting to embrace you—will you reach out to receive them?

Prayer: Most gracious and eternal Father, thank You for loving me in spite of me. Thank You for allowing me to hear and see You in song. Thank You for seeing the best in me. Thank You for helping me to see the best in others. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen and Ase.

Thought for the day: Let’s see each other through God’s eyes.
It is difficult to wait. Even when we know that God has promised that something “good” is coming, we still get impatient because we want the “good” to happen right now. If it doesn’t, we give in to our impatient spirit and move ahead without God, only to realize that our impatience has cost us more than we agreed to pay. We slowly and painfully learn that we simply must learn to wait. So the question is “What can we do while we are waiting in order to avoid slipping back into a spirit of impatience, and making costly mistakes?”

Today’s text teaches us that while waiting for God to show up, we must intentionally take the time to “remember.” Peter assures his readers that the second coming of Jesus will surely happen. But seeing no evidence of Jesus’ second coming, Peter’s listeners were in danger of slipping back into unholy behaviors. Therefore, the first warning Peter gives them in v 8 (NIV) begins with these words: “...don’t forget...” In other words, during their time of waiting, they needed to remember who the Lord is and how the Lord works. I like the definition of the word “remember” in Hebrew—it is the word zakar. Zakar (“to remember”) does not mean to just think about what the Lord has done; it means to be ready to do something about what you are thinking about. It’s the difference between the mental awareness that God exists and the blessed assurance that God is.

There is a difference between thinking about GOD and remembering GOD. Let me put it this way—when I think about God, it’ll make me come to church; but when I remember God, it’ll make me BE the church. When I think about GOD, it’ll make me shout in the sanctuary; but when I remember GOD, it’ll make me serve in the streets. When you remember who God is, you will trust God’s timing. God has a reason for working out your “good” in God’s own timing (v 9-15).

During this season of Advent, while you are waiting and expecting the coming of JESUS, do some “remembering” whenever you find yourself becoming impatient. Like a thief in the night, God will fulfill God’s promise to you when you least expect it. Learn how to wait.

Prayer: Lord, during this season of Advent, remind me to be grateful while I wait, to serve someone else in “the wait,” and to sincerely trust You no matter how long the wait.

Thought for the Day: Patience is more than a virtue; it is preparing me for my greater good!
As we begin our Advent journey, let us reflect on the words of Mark 1:1-8. In these verses, we are introduced to John the Baptist, a messenger sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. John's message is one of repentance and baptism, a call to turn away from sin and make a path for the arrival of the Messiah.

John's mission was to make the path straight and level, removing obstacles and hindrances to the coming of Jesus. This Advent season, let us consider how we can do the same in our lives. How can we prepare our hearts and minds to receive the gift of Christ with joy and compassion?

In our busy and often chaotic lives, it's easy to become distracted by the materialistic aspects of the holiday season. But Advent calls us to a different kind of preparation, a spiritual one. It's an invitation to reflect on our lives, to acknowledge our shortcomings, and to turn toward God with open hearts.

As we journey through Advent, let us take time each day to examine our hearts and minds. Are there areas in our lives where we need to make the path straight and level for Jesus to enter? Are there obstacles of pride, selfishness, or unforgiveness that must be removed? Let us use this season to repent and realign our priorities with the message of love and hope that Christ brings.

**Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, as we prepare for the arrival of Your Son, Jesus Christ, during this Advent season, we ask for Your guidance. Help us to make straight the paths in our hearts, removing any obstacles that hinder joy and compassion from taking root. Fill us with Your love and grace, that we may shine as lights of hope to those around us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**Thought for the Day:** Prepare the way for the Lord in your life, and you will find the joy and compassion that His presence brings.
Occasionally, the Women’s Chorus of Trinity United Church of Christ reminds us in song that “He reigns forever, He reigns forever, and evermore.” In other words, God’s promises reign forever and evermore. Isaiah 61:1-4 assures us that God’s Promises reign forever and evermore, and Luke 4:18-19, which is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus’ ministry is radical as well as revolutionary yesterday, today, and forever more!

Moreover, as people of God, if we pay attention, even today, we can hear Jesus’ voice in the war between Israel and Hamas, where over 10,000 lives have been lost which are mostly children. On November 8, 2023, “Israel’s defense minister also reiterated the government’s position that the country will not implement a ‘humanitarian pause’ without the return of hostages captured by Hamas. Despite the outcry over the scale of suffering throughout Gaza’s residential areas, medical facilities, and shelters, Israel forces maintain they will strike at Hamas wherever necessary.”

In conclusion, Isaiah 61:8-11 reminds us that God is faithful and loves justice and righteousness. He is concerned about the righteous ones who are without transgressions, yet they are told by the prophet to turn away in repentance. For the righteous, God promises to establish an “everlasting covenant,” clothe them “with garments of salvation,” and “array them in robes of righteousness,” the descendants will be known among the nations, and acknowledged as blessed by the Lord.

During this Advent season, as we practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, Bible study, and corporate worship, God, remind us that You reign forever and evermore.

Prayer: Sovereign God who reigns forever and evermore, we are thankful for what You have done through Jesus Christ, what we could not do for ourselves. In the name of Jesus, we pray with thanksgiving and praise. Amen.

Thought for the Day: Remain steadfast and the restoration of the peace and justice in the land is certain, for the God who remains faithful to God’s promises reigns.
The Psalter is the hymn book of the Hebrew community. Psalm 126 is a part of the collection of Psalms known as the Songs of Ascent. The people of God would sing these songs corporately as they made their way to Jerusalem to worship God in spirit and in truth. This particular psalm is a thanksgiving psalm and a petition that may reflect the sixth-century BCE return from exile.

After years of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land, God delivered them and brought them back to Jerusalem. As they made their pilgrimage back home, they were filled with laughter and joy remembering what God had done in their lives. When they thought about the goodness of God and all God had done for them, they couldn’t help but burst out in a song of joy, “The Lord has done great things for us!”

As you reflect on your life, is that your testimony?
As you reflect on this past year, can you sing a similar song?

Beloved, as we await the radical entrance of our blessed Savior into a world that so desperately needs Him, and as we journey to the end of another year, don’t stop singing your song.

Sing your song this Advent season.

I hear the hymn writer, “Oh for a thousand songs to sing My great Redeemer’s praise. The glories of our God and the triumphs of God’s grace.”

So Beloved, sing your song.
Sing, with tears in your eyes.
Sing, when you cannot find your way.
Sing, when you don’t know where else to turn.
Sing, when you’re tied up and tangled up.
Sing, when they try to shut you up.
Sing, when all hell breaks loose.
Sing, when family and friends walk away.
Sing, even when you know all the words.
Sing, even when you feel like giving up.
Sing, with your heart and soul.
Sing, with your wisdom and love.
Sing, with all that is within you.

Prayer: Holy One, we give Your name all the glory, honor, and praise for giving us a song to sing.

Thought of the Day: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black, and bid him sing!” – Yet Do I Marvel by Countee Cullen
The Wisdom of Waiting
Luke 1:46b, 49 (NKJV)
Dr. Julia M. Speller

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. . . . For he who is mighty has done great things for me.” Luke 1:46b, 49 (NKJV)

This song of Mary in many ways is a curious song, coming from a young virgin who was told by an angel that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. While her initial response was one of anxiety, as she asked, “How can this be?” she found assurance in the angel’s reply, “Do not be afraid . . . The Lord is with you.” Thus, Mary was able to receive this unsettling news with calmness and even excitement, because she understood the wisdom of waiting on God.

Mary’s waiting was open-ended. It was not simply in anticipation of a son; it was centered on a promise from God that had been passed down for generations—the promise of a Redeemer. Rather than responding in fear of what Joseph would think or what others might say, she chose to wait on God and trust God’s promise. Unlike Mary, we too often wait on God with a close-ended spirit that centers on what we want right now. When we do, our impatience blocks the “substance of things hoped for,” and waiting becomes a chore rather than a blessing.

Mary placed her faith in the “great things” that God had already done, and despite her situation, she was able to wait and “be of good courage.” During this Advent season, let us shift our focus from what we want from God to what we have already received—a tiny baby born in questionable circumstances who became our Savior!

Prayer: Holy One, teach me the wisdom of waiting on You in humility and gratitude, knowing that Your promises can be trusted.

Thought for the Day: Those that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not get weary, they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31, NKJV).
There is always an interesting reaction to someone who is speaking truth to power. The truth is often at odds with the accepted norm of the day. Such men as Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and James Cone, to name a few, spoke truth to power. The truth of freedom, justice, and peace often contradicts those who benefit from societal norms, those norms of maintaining poverty, food insecurity, and housing insecurity—those who benefit from war.

These passages recall that those in power will question those who seek to make a way for our Lord. John being questioned by the followers of the Pharisees chooses the prophecy of Isaiah.

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

_isaiah 40:3–5_

**Prayer:** Our prayer today in this season as we wait for the birth of the Prince of Peace is for peace in our spirits and our world.

**Thought for the Day:** We are living in times of great conflict. How have we spoken to peace in Sudan, Gaza, and Ukraine? How have we humbled ourselves?
This beautiful passage is a picture of God’s divine benevolence toward David as King, a shepherd boy, and the Israelites.

God’s blessings are related to Israel’s confession that God is a gracious God who acted on their behalf in slavery. David’s story parallels Israel’s. He was lifted from smallness into greatness. Even as past promises are fulfilled, new promises are given.

God says, “I took you from the pasture to be ruler. I’ve been with you. I’ve cut off your enemies and made your name great. I’ll provide a place for you and plant you in a home of your own. I’ll give you rest from all your enemies.”

Our homes speak of our permanent residence and the presence of where we live. After God had given King David and the Israelites peace and rest from their enemies, God gifted them with a permanent dwelling place of safety.

David, overwhelmed with a heart of gratitude, wanted to honor God by building God a house to dwell in instead of living in a tent. However, God spoke through Nathan, saying, “Not now.” David, Israel, and all Christians must never forget that God is our Savior.

We must never think, speak, or act like we can care for God. David is reminded of how God is omnipresent, not tied down to one place, yet not so high to refuse a humble tent. We must not project our needs onto God.

God is interested in building a home within us. Let’s take this time to allow God to dwell deeply within us to elevate us to the next level spiritually.

The divine benevolence given to the Israelites has been promised to us and the generations to come. God’s unconditional love will never cease.

**Prayer:** Thank You, Heavenly Father, for Your amazing love. I give You honor and praise for Your blessed assurance. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen!

**Thought of The Day:** How will I honor God every day for God’s benevolence towards me?
A Song of Gratitude and Hope

Luke 1:45-55

Minister Candace Bell

In Luke 1:45-55, we witness Mary's profound realization of the blessings in her life and her response of gratitude through song. Mary recognized that the source of the goodness she experienced was only God. Her heart overflowed with praise as she acknowledged the greatness of God's works and the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Mary's humility and gratitude serve as an inspiration for us. Amid our daily lives, it's easy to overlook the blessings that surround us. Mary's example encourages us to pause, reflect, and recognize the goodness that God has poured into our lives. Each day is an opportunity to appreciate the countless gifts bestowed upon us.

During this Advent season, let us follow in Mary's footsteps. Let us take time to acknowledge God's goodness in our lives, recognizing that every blessing, big or small, comes from above. Mary's song of praise becomes a melody that resonates through the ages, inviting us to join in the chorus of gratitude.

In this season of anticipation, let our hearts be attuned to the divine rhythm of God's grace. Just as Mary laid before God her trust and openness to God’s plan, let us lay before God our deepest longings for justice, peace, and equality. The Advent season is not only a time of reflection on the past coming of Christ but also a season of hopeful anticipation for God’s future return.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for the countless blessings You have graciously bestowed upon us. Like Mary, help us to recognize Your goodness in our lives and respond with hearts full of gratitude. In this Advent season, we lay our yearnings for justice, peace, and equality before You. May Your kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Thought of the Day: Advent is a time of deep reflection, gratitude, and hopeful expectation. As we journey towards the celebration of Christ's birth, may our hearts be tuned to the melody of Mary's song, praising God for God’s goodness and laying before God our hopes for a world transformed by God’s love and justice.
As we approach the holidays, I am reminded of my niece and nephews waiting with tip-toed anticipation for Christmas morning to arrive so they could open their gifts. One particular Christmas, I’d promised something special to them. In the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I was made aware of that promise over and over again.

Today’s Advent scripture, Psalm 89, also called a royal psalm, teaches us about God’s steadfast love (Dr. Frank Thomas taught us the Hebrew name for God’s unconditional love is *hesed*) and God’s covenant to King David, a man after God’s own heart, God’s anointed one, and God’s descendants. The Davidic covenant is God’s promise to David that his lineage will continue and that his heirs will have dominion over Israel forever.

God also promises that through David’s line, the Messiah will come. Luke 1:26-38 reminds us that the angel Gabriel told Mary that Jesus would accept His ancestral throne through the House of David. That scripture anchors us to our second set of scriptures, Psalm 89:19-26; they bridge the bloodline of King David to the bloodline of God. The parallels between the awaited King Jesus and King David are there: David’s anointing, God strengthening David and overcoming his adversaries, and placing David at God’s right hand. The parental relationship is metaphoric but also providential. God’s promises to David foretell the birth of God’s Son, Jesus, The Anointed One, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, who sits at the right hand of God. The promises of God were kept and made manifest through Jesus, and God’s steadfast love will continue until the end of time. What a gift!

Christmas morning came, and my niece and nephews were pleasantly surprised with the personalized karate ghee they’d requested. They may have wondered if I would honor my promise to them, but God’s promise to humankind lets us know we never need to worry about God being a promise keeper.

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank You for Your precious gift to us, Your children. Thank You for Your promise of salvation for all people. Great is Your faithfulness! We offer You this prayer in the mighty, matchless name of Jesus, Mary’s baby. Amen

**Thought for the Day:** …Promise keeper, light in the darkness. My God, that is who You are!
Two women, one a virgin and one past childbearing age, would appear to be unlikely candidates to be used by God to bring hope and salvation to all of humanity.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, “Greetings, favored one!” and told her that she would conceive a son who would be holy and called the Son of God. In addition, her relative Elizabeth, who was barren, was six months pregnant!

It is no surprise that Mary questioned this revelation considering that she was engaged to Joseph and was a virgin. Yet she was willing to be used by God and replied, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Throughout scripture, God uses “outsiders” to signal a different way of life and future. Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor at the time of Jesus’ birth, was known as the divine savior who brought peace to the world through the spoils of war. This directly contradicted God’s divine plan to proclaim peace in the world through justice for all.

God also calls us and sets up conditions and events in our lives so that we may become agents of God to bring hope to hopeless situations and disrupt systems that perpetuate injustice.

During this Advent season, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and await His return, let us also have the faith to say, “Let it be with me according to your word,” when God calls us to a task that seems improbable. Just as Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and His ministry was performed through the power of the Holy Spirit, we too are empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out God’s purpose. Truly, there is nothing impossible with God!

Prayer: Almighty God, thank you for Your Son Jesus, who came to disrupt systems that keep us bound. Lord, help us to be obedient to Your will in our lives, so we too may embrace Your vision of peace and justice for all. Amen.

Thought for the Day: If You can use anything, Lord, You can use me!
I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest (Isaiah 62:6).

In this chapter of the book of Isaiah, we find watchmen who have been called to pray—prayer warriors for Jerusalem and the people of God. The Israelites are returning from exile in Babylon; they have been redeemed by God. God encourages them to pray without ceasing until Jerusalem becomes the praise of the earth.

Advent is a season observed as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for both the celebration of Christ’s Nativity at Christmas and the return of Christ at the Second Coming. During Advent, we are to “sit on the wall” and pray without ceasing for the celebration and return of Christ.

This role as watchmen and women symbolizes that of an intercessor in the Kingdom of God. As Christians, we are called to stand in the gap to be relentless in our prayers for the well-being of God’s people. Prayer has the power to bring about change, restoration, and renewal.

When Jesus came the first time, He gave us eternal life and freed us of our sins by dying on the cross. All those who believe that celebrate Jesus’ birth. Jesus will come again, so there is a need for watchfulness. Matthew 24:44 (CEV) says, “Always be ready! You don't know when the Son of Man will come.”

As we reflect during this Advent season, let’s be watchmen and women in our own lives and communities. Be committed to persistent prayer, never giving up on the promises of God. Trust God’s unwavering love and provision.

**Prayer:** Eternal God, strengthen us to pray without ceasing during this time of Advent. Let us reflect on Your goodness and share the reason for the season with others. Thank You for being an unwavering God, sending Your Son incarnated, and placing the Holy Spirit in us to guide us each day.

**Thought for the Day:** Be a warrior for Christ.
The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him and consumes His foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the LORD of all the earth. The heavens proclaim His righteousness, and all the peoples see His glory. All who worship images are put to shame, those who boast in idols - worship Him, all you gods! ... Light is shed upon the righteous and joy on the upright in heart. Rejoice in the LORD, you who are righteous, and praise His holy name. (Psalm 97:1-7; 11-12)

Let’s take inventory of the glory that’s in God’s story! Mountains melt like wax in His presence. We are to demonstrate daily His essence. He says, righteousness and justice are His throne’s foundation. Thank you, Lord, for being our salvation. Fire goes before Him, consuming His followers on every side. We say thank you, Lord, for being our guide even though clouds and thick darkness surround Him. His light can never be dimmed. He lights up the world. The earth sees and trembles, His glory no one can resemble. Heaven proclaims His goodness, and we all agree to keep His light shining within thee. It’s His desire that in Him we rejoice. So, we make this our daily choice. He sheds His light on all He loves. Thank you for descending on us from above. He reminds us never to worship images, or God will put us to shame. Let us continue to lift Him on high and praise His holy name. Continue to proclaim for our God reigns!

Prayer: Loving God, today we make a conscious choice to rejoice. We thank You for Your glory, and we will continue to share Your story. Amen

Thought for the day: May God set your heart aflame as you proclaim Jesus unashamed.
We as the “Beloved Ones” of God are experiencing and living through situations and circumstances that require some deep “soul work.” This work is not limited to just what we are living through on a personal level; it also involves how we relate in community with our sisters and brothers. We oftentimes find it much easier to do what is good and acceptable when we experience our private moments with God. However, we are expected to live, do, and be with one another, as people who are saved through the righteousness of Christ while sharing communal realities. We all long for and desire life and this life more abundantly, which Jesus promised. The work of salvation has no limits or exclusions attached to it. If we think or believe that this gift of salvation is solely for a selected few, we need to remember that all have fallen short!

The God whose love is unconditional is just that; no conditions must be met to be a recipient and beneficiary of this unearned, unmerited, freely given saving grace! The love God has for us continuously never falls short, despite how we choose to think or act toward one another and ourselves. When God decided it was time for the transformation in us, God took action to come as Jesus into our lives, became like us, and gave us the right and access to eternal life! Through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit being in, on, and through us, our lives have been changed forever for the better. We are now cleansed from the inside and outside to live as God’s Beloved in fellowship as well as community with one another daily.

As we are now in the season of Advent, Jesus being born and reborn within, let us seek to remember Jesus decided in obedience to become like us, dwell among us, and share the gift of salvation with us. Because of what Jesus did, we are now transformed to live the abundant life as promised and have become heirs to the eternal life yet to come!

**Prayer:** Eternal God, we come into Your presence giving thanks for the depths of Your love for us. Thank You for providing what we need daily: Your love, peace, presence, and grace. In Jesus’ name, amen.

**Thought for the Day:** The gift of eternal life is the guaranteed gift that will sustain today and continue forever!
"Beeeeeeeeeepppppppp! We are sorry to interrupt your regularly scheduled program…" Have you ever watched your favorite television show or movie and it was interrupted by breaking news? You were upset and a bit frustrated; however, the news was needed and timely. It was news that shifted your reality and the trajectory of your life.

In the first-century Common Era, the agenda of the Roman Empire was interrupted by life-changing news. The routines and lives of all persons who were involved in the birth narrative were interrupted by the news of Christ’s arrival. The lives of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds in the field were interrupted by the news that Christ would enter into time, interrupt the chaos and norms of the world, and appear in the most unexpected place—a barn—to transform their lives and redeem humanity (Luke 2:9-12).

It is so easy to get distracted by what is happening in our lives that we miss the move of God. We allow the busyness of life, our agendas, our worries, and our needs to cloud our spiritual lenses. Although we know that God is calling us to do more in the world, we become complacent in our own routines and schedules. Although we feel the call to pray more, fast more, and spend more time with God, we become comfortable with the status quo.

We need a holy interruption. We need God to break through our complacency and stagnation so that healing and transformation can take place in our world. As Christ reveals Himself in the world through holy interruption, Jesus longs to interrupt our lives so that we may come to know a path where we share the radical love of God with all people. Holy Interruption is God’s resolve to a world in chaos; it is an invitation to participate in the kingdom of God.

**Prayer:** Holy and Loving God, disturb our complacency. Interrupt our lives so that we may come to know the fullness of Your love.

**Thought of the Day:** Write down ten ways you want God to show up in your life, community, nation, and world.
Romans 16:25-27 (NIV)

Rev. Mosea L. Harris

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith— to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.

With every ending, there is a new beginning. When darkness ends, there is light. When war ends, there is peace. When life ends, there is death. At the end of every night is day, and when every season ends, there is a new season. Today’s text is the concluding passage of the book of Romans in the New Testament. I read one commentator who said it can be used to conclude all of the Pauline epistles. It is written as a doxology. A doxology is simply an expression of praise to and glorification of God. We often see passages of scripture end with a doxology, and we often recite a doxology at the close of service in the benediction.

In this passage, Paul is writing to the church in Rome. He is praising God for God’s ability to strengthen believers and establish them in accordance with the gospels and the teaching of Jesus Christ. The Message paraphrases it this way, “All of our praise rises to the One who is strong enough to make you strong, exactly as preached in Jesus Christ, precisely as revealed in the mystery kept secret for so long but now an open book through the prophetic Scriptures.”

In this season of Advent, it is appropriate to give God glory and praise for endings and beginnings as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—Emmanuel, God with us. As we end this year, let us enter the next stage of our life with exceeding joy, knowing that with Jesus, everlasting life begins and death ends.

Prayer: Most awesome and able God, we thank You and praise You for the newness of life everlasting. Bless us to receive Your words with clarity and to share with others.

Thought for the Day: As we navigate this Advent season with new hope, let us do so in a positively faithful and impactful way that brings somebody to a new life, ending the death so often chosen.
How the Light Comes

I cannot tell you how the light comes, but that it does. That it will.
That it works its way into the deepest dark that enfolds you, though it may seem long ages in coming or arrive in a shape you did not foresee.

And so may we this day turn ourselves toward it. May we lift our faces to let it find us. May we bend our bodies to follow the arc it makes. May we open and open more and open still to the blessed light that comes.

by Jan Richardson
I have loved poetry for a long time. While I am not an expert on the art form and an amateur practitioner, I believe it is the best conduit, along with music, dance, nature, and other forms of sacred art, to communicate what is Divine.

In the above poem entitled *How the Light Comes*, poet and preacher Jan Richardson, while not explicitly talking about Advent, communicates the essence of Advent. Advent is about light. Advent is about discovering illumination in moments of blindness. Advent is about commemorating God making a choice to break into human suffering and experience the suffering with us. Imagine, God choosing to experience pain to draw us closer to God’s embrace. “I cannot tell you how the light comes.” God’s choice to be human in the person of Jesus, yet Divine in the person of Jesus, is a peculiar act of the light—God’s light—breaking into human affairs. Advent is a moment of light. Advent is a time to allow the light to shine upon us, in us, and through us.

As you flip the pages of this Advent Devotional, may the light leap off the pages into your spirit. May the light of the story of Jesus’ birth become more than a story, but a sacred truth that will never depart from your heart. May the light of God’s wisdom bless you in such a way that when you wake in the morning and think about the goodness of God, all you will be able to do is smile. May the light of the prayers, the stories, the scriptures, the poetry found in this devotional bring illumination into places in your heart you thought would never see the light.

May our God bless you with light. Light that you do not know how it made its way into your spirit, but you are grateful that God chose to send the light.
Happy Holidays

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