

# Encounter

## Advent 2023 Devotionals

East End United Methodist Church

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<https://eastendumc.org>



East End United Methodist Church | Advent 2023 | Devotionals

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## *Hello, beloved friend in Christ,*

I am very excited the Advent season is upon us! This is a special time of year when we prepare ourselves for the arrival of Christmas and the birth of the Christ child. Each new Christian year begins with the first Sunday of Advent, a time when we are asked to turn our hearts and minds back to the Living God as we anticipate the joy of divine love displayed in the birth of Jesus. This year, Advent commences on December 3 and ends, as always, with the arrival of Christmas Day on December 25.

One way that East End United Methodist Church invites you to focus on God this Advent season is through daily devotional readings, prayers, and spiritual practices. Our pastors and many lay members have written a series of daily reflections and prayers designed to ready your soul for the coming of Christmas. All these reflections are contained in our 2023 Advent Devotional which can be downloaded at the following link <https://eastendumc.org/encounter-advent-2023/> and will also be distributed daily through our email list and social media posts at 7:00 AM.

Our Advent theme for 2023 is “Encounter.” We will spend time encountering different key figures from the Advent narratives. These daily devotions and spiritual practices are crafted around the Scriptures that will guide our worship each Sunday as we encounter the Prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary the God-bearer, and Jesus the Savior.

Most days will include a scripture reading, a brief reflection, and a short prayer for the day. There will also be four days that invite you to a spiritual practice and three days will include meditations on an Advent hymn. It is my hope that the variety of voices and formats presented in this devotional will provide a meaningful spiritual guide for you this Advent season.

Finish today’s moment of reflection with the prayer below and prepare to receive your first spiritual practice tomorrow as we embark on this Advent journey together!

In holy grace and Advent peace,  
Rev. Brandon Baxter

### **Daily Prayer:**

Good and gracious God, our hearts are full of anticipation as the Advent season draws near. We give thanks for the hope and joy that this season can bring, and we pray for any who are hurting or struggling as we enter this season. Divine guide and companion, as we turn our hearts and minds to you in the coming weeks, may we discover joy and the peace that passes all understanding with the arrival of your divine love. Amen.

Advent officially begins tomorrow, and you will begin reading Scriptures from the prophets along with reflections from various East Enders. As you prepare for this daily practice, you are invited to use the practice of *Lectio Divina*, or divine reading, as you read each day's scripture. Lectio Divina has been used for centuries by Christian contemplatives to encourage deeper understanding and enlightenment when reading scripture. It consists of four movements with the traditional Latin names of Lectio (reading), Oratio (praying), Meditatio (meditation), and Contemplatio (contemplation). Ignatian-trained spiritual director and author Becky Eldridge provides four simple steps with updated modern language as a guide for using Lectio Divina to explore scripture. The following steps come from a video transcript of her book *Busy Lives and Restless Souls*:\*

**Read.**

Slowly and thoughtfully, read the Scripture passage the first time. What word or phrase captures your attention and grabs your heart? Linger with it whenever this happens.

**Reflect.**

Slowly and prayerfully, read the passage again. What is God saying to you in this passage? offering you? asking you? What feelings are arising within you?

**Respond.**

Slowly and prayerfully, read the passage again. Respond to God from your heart. Speak to God of your feelings and insights. Offer these to God.

**Rest.**

Possibly read the passage another time. Sit quietly in God's presence, asking, "What are you saying to me?" Rest in God's love and listen.

Practice using Lectio Divina today as you read the following passage from Isaiah, and then close with your own short prayer. If you find Lectio Divina helpful, continue to use it in the coming weeks as you encounter our daily Advent scripture readings.

**Isaiah 61:1-2**

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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...

\*You can find Becky Eldridge's video and more about Lectio Divina at <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/personal-prayer-life/different-ways-to-pray/lectio-divina/>

## **Micah 4:1-4**

### **A Peaceable World**

But in the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of the mountains; it will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it. Many nations will go and say: "Come, let's go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob's God, so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God's paths!" Instruction will come from Zion and the Lord's word from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations and settle disputes of mighty nations, which are far away. They will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war. All will sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees. There will be no one to terrify them; for the mouth of the Lord of heavenly forces has spoken.

I, like many of you, have grown quite weary of the status quo. Month after month we hear that our Rebuilding Committee is working, but the ground has not yet been broken. Week after week we hear of mass shootings, and we hear that a vast majority of Americans are in favor of some kind of gun control, but nothing seems to happen. Day after day we hear of nations making war on other nations, or even on their own people, but peace seems far away. It's enough to make anyone just want to stay in bed with the covers over their head.

But when we encounter our scripture reading for today, we find reason for hope. Micah urges us not to fear, because 'in the days to come', we will see progress. "In the days to come", we WILL see God's house standing on the hill at 1212 Holly Street. And "people will stream to it". We know this because we see signs already. Our attendance and our membership is growing, even though we are a church in exile, without a home to call our own. Our financial giving is steady, and we see signs that we will fund our budget this year. Volunteers come out of the woodwork whenever they hear a call for help. People will stream to East End UMC to hear God's ways and see what God is doing in the world.

And as they come, they will encounter a community that is learning the ways of God. A community that hopes to bring about God's kingdom in the world: to imagine a world where everyone can sit under their own grapevines and fig trees in peace. Where children can go to school without having to be terrorized by safety drills and armed guards. Where

all have enough to eat, and a place to call home. And where forces around the world will learn how to make peace with one another. We will all learn how to help corporations make money building “iron plows” and “pruning tools” rather than guided missiles and tanks.

Encounter the Word of the Lord! The Good News is coming!

**Daily Prayer:**

God of the Ages: help us to see beyond this day, or this month, or this year and recognize that you have given us all we need to bring about your reign on earth. Guide us through this Advent time of darkness that we might see your coming light in the future. Amen.

## **Micah 5:1-5a**

### **Call to arms; the future is secure**

Now muster your troops, Daughter Troop! They have laid siege against us; with a rod they will strike the cheek of the judge of Israel. As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days. Therefore, he will give them up until the time when she who is in labor gives birth. The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. They will dwell secure, because he will surely become great throughout the earth; he will become one of peace.

There are numerous story lines in many movies where the hero of the story is facing what looks like certain death. Can you picture the scene and the dramatic music ramping up in the background as the hero tries to wiggle out of whatever tough situation they are in and that moment dawning on their face of the recognition that there was no hope? Then as the music reaches its climax something happens at the last second to swoop in and save the hero's life! Hooray! This last-minute defeat of death is such a common theme that it is almost expected. I find myself looking to try and figure out how they will be saved and cheering along when they are saved.

As we look to the prophet Micah, he is encouraging the people of Bethlehem to be encouraged and not lose hope as they are being overcome in war. In verse 2 the prophet calls Bethlehem of Ephrathah the least significant, the runt, or underdog of all those fighting. The Israelites were in a bad place with an uncertain future and what seemed like no way to survive the impending siege. Yet the text proclaims that a ruler for Israel will rise from their land with the strength and majesty of the Lord and he will lead the people of Israel and they will dwell in his security! Much like our dramatic movie scene our text even says that the leader won't come right away but will wait until after long labor pains and birth.

Beginning first in chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew and for many years later this text has been regarded as one that points towards the coming of Jesus Christ. Hundreds of years before Christ's birth, God called God's people to have hope in the face of what felt like tragedy, to have faith that God would call forth a leader to bring them security and peace. Many generations of faithful followers suffered through pain waiting for the day the Messiah would bring security and peace. And then in Bethlehem, in a manger, the answer to their suffering was born! Jesus came to bring security and teach peace.



DAY 4 | December 4, 2023

Submitted by: Rev. Carrie Yoder, Executive Director, Project Transformation

However, for many people around the world there is still much unrest and violence. There is much need for security and peace. It is not a movie, or a text in which we read about a war long ago. There is suffering in our world and people in need of peace today. We can look around at our world and begin to believe that we are still waiting for peace to come again. We could think that someone else will come and extend peace. But following the example of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we, the people of God, are called to be the reflection of the security and peace of God that came in Jesus Christ. We no longer wait around for the peace to come. We are called to stand together now and seek to resist the evil and oppression that is ever present in our world.

**Daily Prayer:**

Advent is a time of longing and preparation; may this Advent be a time we ready ourselves to participate in bringing peace to earth. Amen.

## **Isaiah 11:1-3a**

### **A shoot from Jesse's stump**

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots. The Lord's spirit will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. He will delight in fearing the Lord. He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay.

In the Book of Isaiah, the writer uses the metaphor of a fallen tree stump and the slender green shoot that emerges to express the passing of the old and the renewal of greatness to come.

After decades of great conquests and superiority in battle, the Israelites fell to other conquering peoples. Only a stump remained with a shoot coming forth reminding the world that God's plan was not yet completed.

The Israelites of the Hebrew Bible no longer had great leaders for military, nor spiritual greatness. But the people were clamoring for leadership. The Israelites would wait for 600 years before the slender shoot would reveal itself in the form of a baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

In our lives and communities of the world there is much despair. But the slender shoot that grew out of a stump sends hope into the world.

As we enter and embrace another Advent Season, let us remain watchful for signs of new life in the world around us. May we share the love we find in simple acts of kindness.

### **Daily Prayer:**

Dear Lord, Gently lead us into this season of renewal and hope. Help us find in others the slender shoot that promises completeness and of greatness to come. Bless us with love and charity for others as we look once more for the star of Bethlehem. Amen.

## Isaiah 11:3b-5

He will delight in fearing the Lord. He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay. He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth; by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

“and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.” (NIV) These verses help me to appreciate and symbolize the joy that can be found in reverence to God. We can experience that joy when we live a life that is aligned with God's divine principles. Reverence has always reminded me of the virtue of humility- what a beautiful attribute to embody, and to see in others. Advent presents an opportunity for those beautiful reminders, to celebrate the birth of our Lord, and to prepare for His second coming. I see reverence and humility demonstrated consistently at East End, which is part of the draw for me. I could write a separate tribute as far as my draw to East End!

In this passage, we are reminded that ultimately, we will be judged by God with equity and impartiality. Our status, worth, or position in this life will not matter. We will experience justice and fairness by the hand of His divine authority.

As we read further, symbolism abounds in verses 4-5. The striking of the earth and judgement upon the wicked underscores the consequences for those who are unrighteous. Our ruler is described as one with adornments of belts and sashes. These may be associated with righteousness, faithfulness, steadfastness, and constancy. These are but a few of the attributes of our Lord. Christ embodies the fear of the Lord, righteous judgement, and divine authority.

We are called to reflect the qualities of Christ in our own lives. May we be reminded that the fear of the Lord, righteous judgement, and steadfast faithfulness are cornerstones for us as we aspire to be our best. I've often heard a prayer of thanks offered for becoming/being a Christian. Building the strength to carry that is, to me, truly joyous work.

### **Daily Prayer:**

Dear Lord, thank you for this beautiful season of Advent. Help us to find joy in service, peace in reverence, and hope in salvation that You promise. In Christ's name, Amen.

## Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow and the bear will graze.  
Their young will lie down together,  
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.  
A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;  
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.  
They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.  
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the Lord,  
just as the water covers the sea.

This passage ends with the beautiful prophecy that with the coming of God's promised one, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. The preceding verses paint a picture of what an earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord looks like. In each verse we see contrasted strength and weakness, predator and prey, aggression and vulnerability. Wolves, leopards, lions, bears, asps, and mythical serpents are paired with young children and with lambs, kids, and calves ready for sacrifice. Killers are pitted against ultimate examples of helplessness. In the natural order of things, that would be a recipe for disaster, at least from the victims' point of view. But with the coming of the knowledge of the Lord, these old enemies find peace, rest, and companionship. Fear is ended. It is a picture of an earthly paradise, a creation in harmony with itself.

How does this apply to our lives today? Christians believe that Jesus, the Anointed One, has already come and that we can take part in his kin-dom in our time. But our world seems far from Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. The imagery in this passage evokes the natural world with animals and small children, but our natural world is dangerously out of order. Environmental and climatic catastrophes are directly connected to humankind's exploitation of our planet and are often exacerbated by other human-caused ills like poverty, war, and displacement. For the metaphorical strong and weak of this scripture to live together with no destruction requires some of those creatures to act against their nature. The predators lie down with the prey. The lion eats straw like the ox. In our own very real world, we humans are the only creatures who need to act against the merciless predatory aspects of our nature for God's physical creation to live in balanced peace. Full knowledge of the Lord recognizes that God put himself among the weak and vulnerable of the earth when he came to us as a tiny human baby. May we let this little child lead us in the way of love for each other and for all creation.

**Daily Prayer:**

Dear God, Creator and Child,

Fill us anew with your spirit this Advent season so that we go forward with an ever closer knowledge of yourself. Give us the wisdom to no longer hurt and destroy but through your love to make the whole earth a holy mountain of peace.

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel  
that mourns in lonely exile here  
until the Son of God appear.

4. O come, thou Root of Jesse’s tree,  
an ensign of thy people be;  
before thee rulers silent fall;  
all people’s on thy mercy call.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.

5. O come, thou key of David, come,  
and open wide our heavenly home.  
The captives from their prison free,  
and conquer death’s deep misery.

2. O come, thou Wisdom from on high,  
and order all things far and nigh,  
to us the path of knowledge show  
and teach us in its ways to go.

6. O come, thou Dayspring, come and  
cheer,  
our spirits by thy justice here;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
and deaths dark shadows put to flight.

3. O come, O come, great Lord of  
might,  
who to thy tribes on Sinai’s height  
in ancient times once gave the law  
in cloud and majesty and awe.

7. O come, Desire of nations bind  
all peoples in one heart and mind.  
From dust thou brought us forth to  
life;  
deliver us from earthly strife.

Words: 9th century Latin translation, stanzas 2, 3, 5ab, 6cd, 7ab, *The Hymnal*, 1940; stanza 2, Henry Sloane Coffin, 1916; stanzas 4, 5cd, 6ab, 7cd, Laurence Hull Stookey, 1986.  
Music: 15th century French

To listen to the hymn, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDodhnk5lRg>

We can trace the hauntingly beautiful melody of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* back to 15th century France. In the 1960s, Mary Berry, musicologist (not the Mary Berry of *The Great British Baking Show* fame), took the traceable elements of the 15th century chant and developed the melody that we know today, VENI EMMANUEL. The text of this beloved hymn is very special indeed and takes us back well over a millennium to monastic life of the 8th or 9th century. With text originally composed in Latin, unlike most Christmas carols sung today, this carol utilizes language that feels antiquated to our modern sensibilities. In fact, one might find themselves singing this carol year after year with very little understanding of the words being uttered.

Beginning all those centuries ago, seven days before Christmas Eve, monks would sing the “O antiphons” in anticipation of Christmas Eve, where the eighth antiphon, “O Virgo virginum” (“O Virgin of virgins”) would be sung before and after the Magnificat, found in Luke 1. These so-called “O antiphons” are important, as are the order in which they are sung, because this hymn is an acrostic, a poem or other word composition in which the first letter of each new line (or paragraph, or other recurring feature in the text) spells out a word, message, or the alphabet.

In the case of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, British hymnologist, J.R. Watson, provides a context for the antiphons included on the second page after the hymn in the United Methodist Hymnal: “The antiphons...were designated to concentrate the mind on the coming Christmas, enriching the meaning of the Incarnation with a complex series of references from [both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament].”

Each antiphon begins as follows:

- *Sapientia* (Wisdom)
- *Adonai* (Hebrew word for God)
- *Radix Jesse* (stem or root of Jesse)
- *Clavis David* (key of David)
- *Oriens* (dayspring)
- *Rex gentium* (King of the Gentiles)
- *Emmanuel*

When we line up the first letter of the second word of each antiphon, we spell SARCORE. If read backwards, the letters form “Ero cras,” which means “I will be present tomorrow.” The “O Emmanuel” antiphon was traditionally sung on the night before Christmas Eve, thus completing the acrostic.

When we sing this hymn today, we participate in a great and sacred Advent tradition spanning well over a millennium. At East End United Methodist, this hymn plays an extra special role in our Advent practices, especially pertaining to the idea of sacred anticipation. In recent years, we sing one verse each week in response to the lighting of the candle on the Advent Wreath. For the first three weeks of Advent, the verses and refrains are sung entirely in unison, with no harmonies employed by the choir, congregation, or accompanist. On the final week of Advent, however, the choir and keyboard erupt into harmony on the last refrain, culminating in that joyous and magical musical moment for which we have all been waiting.

### **Daily Prayer:**

O God of Israel and Palestine, of Ukraine and Russia, of Armenia and Azerbaijan, of all nations, fill us with your Divine wisdom, mercy, and love. God of love, show us how to love our neighbor so that wars may cease, and we may finally be your peaceable kin-dom on Earth. Amen.

I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,  
how Jesus the Savior did come for to die  
for poor ordinary people like you and like I;  
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.

*Traditional folk hymn adapted and written by John Jacob Niles*  
To listen to the carol, visit [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J\\_6VJGYZ7R4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_6VJGYZ7R4).

Published in 1934, “I Wonder As I Wander” has become a staple carol for the Christmas season. In its verses, it evokes the wonder and awe that we experience when we contemplate the great gift of God being made incarnate, or physically present, in the world through the birth of Jesus the Christ. The carol is unique in that it presents the act of wondering while wandering, a sort of ambulatory prayer. Perhaps this should not be surprising as many people find spiritual renewal when they head out into nature to walk. This carol recalls the experience of wandering under the sky. One imagines the hymnist walking on a crisp, cool winter night, breath visible in the moonlight as he stares up at the stars and these divine musings course through his thoughts and resonate in his soul.

Walking, meditation, and prayer go together quite well. Many people find that moving helps them get into their bodies and keep their thoughts and prayers more focused and vital. There have even been practices developed throughout Christian history to encourage people to move while they meditate, from prayer labyrinths to prayer paths in gardens and forests. Wondering and wandering is a powerful practice for centering oneself on God in body and soul.

Today, you are invited to take some time to go outside to wander and wonder. Pay attention to your surroundings. What is happening where you are? If you are in your neighborhood, pay attention to the houses and the people around you. If you are in nature, look for signs of life and hope amid the winter greyness. If it is morning, ponder what God has to say to you today. Where might God be leading you this day? If it is the afternoon or evening, reflect on your day. Where have you seen God at work in your world? As you are finishing up your little wander, say a prayer of thanks to God for the gifts of life, of hope, of love, and of this creation in which we live.

Happy wandering and wondering on this 9th Day of Advent!

\*The next page is lined and available for writing thoughts and reflections from your wandering and wondering



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## Luke 1:57-66

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John."

They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.

After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

So many wonderful and wonder-filled things are happening in this moment of Luke's telling of the gospel. Elizabeth and Zechariah became parents after years of waiting for a child of their own. They were advanced enough in age it is likely they had already given up on any chance of raising a child of their own. And yet, God had made an impossible seeming situation possible.

In the time and place that Elizabeth and Zechariah occupied, children were thought of as providing for the future of the family and therefore childlessness was a great burden to bear. So, it was a surprise to everyone that the new parents did not pass along their family name after being given this divine surprise of parenthood so late in the game. Instead they declared they would be naming their miracle child John.

As this chosen name brought wonder to those present for the child's circumcision and naming ceremony, they were also in wonder that Zechariah was able to speak again. In an earlier encounter with an angel, he had lost his voice when he expressed doubt in the message he had received. What an incredible moment it must have been to hear the name and hear his voice. I imagine there was an electricity in the air as wonder over the child, the name, and the voice all collided in one holy moment.

This Advent season has so many stories of these wonder-filled encounters with God and God's messengers. There are miracles and signs. As the air grows cold and the skies turn gray, it is a wonderful contrast to some of our mundane winter days. It can be hard to reconcile the signs and wonders as we pass through some of the seasons in our lives where we might be experiencing loss, illness, or transitions. Where are the miracles? Where are the signs?

Then I remember that Zechariah and Elizabeth had been asking for a miracle child for decades. I imagine there had been nudges and whispers, that there had been sympathetic looks and maybe some not so very sympathetic looks, maybe even some judgemental words as friends and strangers speculated why they were not living up to the societal standards for creating a family. They walked through these seasons, faithful to God as they waited. And finally their miracle came, but not in a conventional way. Beginning with his name, their child lived a unique life. Their family came differently than was the standard of the day and was still a blessing, a blessing to many.

**Daily Prayer:**

God of Impossible things, may wonder be the way we approach our encounters with God. May we look for the possible in seemingly impossible situations. May we find the miracle in the many ways we create and encounter family. Amen.

## Luke 1:67-80

### Zechariah's prophecy

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

“Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago. He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and remembered his holy covenant, the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham. He has granted that we would be rescued from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes, for as long as we live. You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace.”

The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

This passage is an awakening of God's miracles for Zechariah.

The text takes place in the moments following the birth of his son John (later called John the Baptist). John's conception was announced to Zechariah by an angel. The angel told him he would have a son who would prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah was struck with doubt, doubt of himself as a sinner, doubt of his and his wife's advanced age, and doubt of what he was seeing as truth. Could it be? He asked the angel for a sign of the truth; the angel took Zechariah's voice until he was a believer.

In this passage, as Zechariah holds his newborn son, he is remembering Old Testament promises and realizing they really are coming true. It is true! A child is coming, the Lord is coming, and we will prepare the way. He is overwhelmed with his first words and begins to sing. “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them”. “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness

of their sins”. (NIV)

Our current church rebuilding journey could be felt the same way. Like Zechariah, we have seen signs from angels, felt unfulfilled promises, experienced betrayal, and had doubt. Week after week, month after month, we yearn for some evidence of action, some hope on Holly, only to crest the next hill and see three more hills. But, this passage and Advent season gives us renewed faith that we are not walking and making our preparations back to Holly Street alone. Zechariah is singing in our choir, John is preparing the plan, and Jesus is with us.

**Daily Prayer:**

My prayer, this Advent season: Let us not doubt our journey. Let us believe in miracles and continue walking forward knowing that we are not alone. Amen.

## Mark 1:1-3

### Beginning of good news

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."

"Dr. Sam!" a small voice trilled, as Jayden's seven-year-old frame veered around the corner and bounded down the hallway. A larger-than-life smile spread wide across Jayden's face. Jayden had been part of an intensive summer reading program I directed. Each week, we monitored students' progress in reading skills to make intentional decisions about the tailored reading intervention we provided. Most recently, Jayden's tutor had incorporated self-graphing into instruction. The act of graphing reading data seemed to increase Jayden's motivation for improved reading scores week to week, making a straight path towards the ultimate reading goal we had set for the summer. "I cannot *WAIT* to see how much I grewed," Jayden sang. This week, though, Jayden's scores showed a dip. I watched as Jayden's shoulders slumped when graphing the score. "Why can't I be a good reader?" Jayden murmured.

My mind instantly went to my first Mount Washington hike, a NH hike known for its steepness and severity. There are many pathways to Washington's summit, each with different sets of blazes to guide the way, paths with switchbacks and occasional descents to make the ultimate ascent more attainable. At the summit, no one cares which path you took. Everyone revels in having made it to the top.

I looked at Jayden and gave a squeeze. "Oh, buddy. You *are* a good reader," I assured. We reflected on how dips in scores may mean we focused on something else, like how Jayden had self-corrected an error when reading this week. We talked about how what matters most when climbing Data Mountain is that we are on our way to the top, even if that means we catch our breath here and there. We looked closely at the graph to celebrate how the data had shown growth overall. Though it would take more time on Data Mountain to truly *believe* in these words, Jayden looked up at me that day and whispered a "kiss-your-brain" moment to celebrate this climb.

As both an educator and hiker, I am drawn toward the imagery of a path towards a goal. However, the goal of making *straight* paths matters far less than the journey itself. As perfect as they may be, straight paths can be boring and unrealistic, whether you're hiking, climbing Data Mountain, or going into the wilderness for God. The journey, though, represents our pursuit of progress towards that Summit, our imperfect pursuit of perfection. No matter how slow or incremental the journey is, no matter if the path is one full of switchbacks or a straight

shot to the top, no matter if you've lost the blazes for a moment and make unexpected turns to recenter the path - when we stay on the adventure into the wilderness, guided by messengers, we are trailblazing our path to understanding, Faith, and Love. And that adventure, as imperfectly *not* straight as it may be, provides the promise of those breathtaking views from the top that are far too good to lose the opportunity to experience.

**Daily Prayer:**

Thank you, God, for giving us the strength to keep climbing. Give us the faith to face the wilderness along our path, the grace to recognize the encounters that are blessings in our lives, and the courage to be proud of our own imperfect perfection. Through this Advent time and beyond, guide us in our continued pursuit of the path to You. Amen.

## Mark 1:4-8

### John's preaching

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In the joyful madness of parenting a toddler and juggling the daily demands of life, our household has entered a season where time seems to both fly by and stand still. I often reflect on the adage, the days are long, but the years are short. This time warp of early parenting has been an adjustment for our family. While we sometimes find ourselves counting down the hours until bedtime, more often than not we spend the first few minutes of peace reviewing photos and memories and wondering, how is he growing so fast?

As we enter Anderson's second Advent, Will and I are doing our best to invite stillness into our fast-paced lives and to soak up the beauty of these moments that will soon be memories. One moment this year that will be forever crystallized in our memory was Anderson's baptism. Several things made that day memorable, including the pride and love Will and I felt lighting the Christ candle with Anderson, completely unaware that he'd learned to pick his nose for the first time that morning and used the opportunity to demonstrate his new skill for the entire congregation.

In my years of ministry with East End, I had the privilege to participate in many baptisms. We baptized children of all ages including several of our youth, and I never got over the joy and love that swelled in our congregation as we sang the baptism lullaby. The tender lyrics were always sung in earnest, even when the last line drew giggles when sung to youth or adults.

It was a completely new joy to hear those words offered to my own son by the community we love so dearly. It was a moment I looked forward to for years before becoming a parent. So much so, that when debating names, I would sing the song to myself to test them out. And now, it is sung daily in our home to soothe tears, settle into bed, and to remind Anderson that he is deeply loved by God, and by his community.

In this season of Advent, time seems to both fly by and stand still. Anticipation has that effect.



I invite you to join our family in looking for moments of stillness to appreciate these future memories and enjoy our beautiful community exactly as we exist today. And to remember, “we this day do all agree, a child of God you’ll always be. We your family love you so, we vow to help your faith to grow. We are here to say this day that we will help you on your way. If you should ever tire or cry, then we will sing this lullaby. God claims you, and so do we.”\*

**Daily Prayer:**

God of love, in this Advent season, draw us together. Help us remember our baptismal vows to nurture and care for one another. Be with our community as we walk through this season of anticipation and help us hold one another in your light.

\*Words found in the Baptismal Hymn: “God Claims You” from The Faith We Sing #2249

## Mark 1:9-15

### Jesus is baptized and tempted

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

### Jesus' message

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

Some of you may be entering into this season with a heart full of peace. Some of you may be entering into this season feeling as if you are deep in the wilderness, as Jesus was. Maybe you are somewhere in between. However you are showing up as you read this today, I am so glad you are here, and I am so honored to be a part of East End United Methodist Church.

I wanted to take a moment and highlight what Jesus heard after he was baptized: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased.” In this season, as we open our hearts and minds to God, my hope is that you will hear God's voice time and time again, telling you, “You are my beloved child.” In the midst of the busyness of life and the goals we are striving for, sometimes we forget to pause and remember that we are beloved children of God just the way we are. I have had the great pleasure of getting to know some of you in my time at East End, and one thing I know for sure is that, when it comes to both our careers and our church community, we are some hard workers! And I believe that God smiles when we do good work for the community at large and for our church. However, in this season, I want to invite you to pause and remember that you are a beloved child of God because God loves you and God made you- not because of any particular accomplishment (although I'm proud of you for those too!!)

If you find yourself in or partially in the wilderness during this season, know that you are not alone. Hear the good news: God is always with you. As a queer person living in the State of Tennessee, I feel as if myself and the rest of the LGBTQIA+ community spent much of 2023 in the wilderness, as discriminatory and hateful state laws were passed attempting to strip the rights

of people within my community. Things felt very dark as I watched those laws get signed into law. But I must say, East End, that I feel hope- not just because of judicial victories partially restoring some rights, but because we serve a God who is always on the side of equality and love. And in the end, that side will always win. I hope my words resonate with you today, and no matter where you are right now, hear the good news: you are a beloved child of God, and God is always with you.

**Daily Prayer:**

God, in a time of great challenges and pain in the world at large and also within our communities, help us to find comfort in the good news. Help us to find balance in acknowledging and feeling the emotions associated with hardships while also seeing the beauty your world has to offer. Amen.

1. Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming  
from tender stem hath sprung!  
Of Jesse’s lineage coming  
as those of old have sung.  
It came, a floweret bright,  
amid the cold of winter  
when half spent was the night.
  
2. Isaiah ‘twas foretold it,  
the Rose I have in mind:  
with Mary we behold it,  
the Virgin Mother kind.  
To show God’s love aright  
she bore to us a Savior  
when half spent was the night.
  
3. O Flower, whose fragrance tender  
with sweetness fills the air,  
dispel in glorious splendor  
the darkness everywhere.  
True man, yet very God,  
From sin and death now save us  
and share our every load.

15th Century German Hymn, “Es ist ein Reis entsprungen,” Praetorius, translated by Theodore Baker, 1894; stanza 3 from The Hymnal, 1940. (Isaiah 35:1-2)

To listen to the hymn, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB1eagIUxx4>.

“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming” has always been one of my favorite Advent hymns. The beautifully haunting melody is captivating as it gently moves from note to note. Its smooth melody matches the quiet and understated beauty of its lyrics. Weaving together prophetic images from Isaiah about a Savior springing up from the root of Jesse to the Lukan narrative of Mary’s bearing of the promised Messiah, it is a hymn that ties ancient prophecy to more contemporary circumstances. Verse 1 begins in the prophetic age, Verse 2 in the time of Jesus’ birth, and Verse 3 with the ongoing eternal revelation of love and light that continues to visit our world through the God known in Jesus Christ.

The central metaphor is that of a rose. This blooming rose is none other than Jesus Christ who comes to drive away sin and death and to lighten every load. Even as a young person, this metaphor made sense to me. A rose is beautiful as is the gift of an infant child, especially one born of the Holy Spirit. A rose has petals that are soft as our Savior is gentle and compassionate. Yet a rose is also thorny, as are the demands of true love, mercy, and justice. And the thorn can prick one’s finger and draw blood as crimson red as the rose itself, a poignant reminder of Jesus’ earthly fate of death on the cross. And much like Jesus, a cut rose stem can rise up again producing a fresh and newly embodied flower. While we often associate the rose with the romantic love of Valentine’s Day, I hope next time you see a rose that you are reminded of the divine love found in the promise of Christmas Day!

**Daily Prayer:**

Creator God, divine gardener and tender of our souls, till the soil of our hardened hearts until the holy love of the heavenly rose can take root and bloom in all its splendor for all the world to see. Amen.

In 1992, beloved Christian Contemporary singer turned full-fledged pop star, Amy Grant, released her latest Christmas Album, *Home for Christmas*. That album contained the song “Breath of Heaven (Mary’s Song)” which has become a contemporary Christmas classic. The song evokes the experience of Mary as she awaits the birth of her child. In the song, Mary prays, “breath of Heaven, hold me together...” This song is beloved by many because it dares to imagine what the internal dialogue must have been for Mary as she sought to fulfill God’s purposes through a pregnancy promised by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through fear, trepidation, and uncertainty, Mary assents to God’s call on her life.

Another reason Amy Grant’s song may resonate for many is because in our very own and unique ways, each and every one of us has a call from God upon our lives as well. Sometimes we too are uncertain about where God’s Spirit might lead us, and we also find ourselves praying to God for guidance, strength, and courage. Sometimes it is all we can do to put one foot in front of the other, leaning on God and trusting that the journey will lead to new revelations of promise, hope, and love in our lives.

In the Christian tradition, there is a simple form of prayer called the breath prayer. Through this simple practice, persons take a short phrase of approximately six to eight words maximum to mediate upon as they breathe in and out. The first part of the phrase is thought on the inhale, and the second part on the exhale. The process is repeated as the mind is calmed, the heart centered, and the soul opened to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today, you are invited to remember Mary’s encounter with God and welcome the Holy Spirit into your life this day through the following breath prayer.

1. Find a comfortable place to sit, or even lie down.
2. Find a gentle, easy pace of breathing, inhaling and exhaling calmly.
3. On each inhale, silently pray the words, “Come Holy Spirit...”
4. On each exhale, silently pray the words, “Be my guide...”
5. Repeat this for at least 2 minutes or as long as you wish.
6. When you are done, allow yourself to slowly pay attention to your surroundings again.
7. If any thoughts, ideas, or promptings of the Spirit came to you, ponder them and even jot them down on a piece of paper if you wish. Thank God for the Spirit’s guidance.

\*The next page is lined and available for writing any thoughts, ideas, or promptings of the Spirit

To learn more about breath prayers and find suggestions how to create your own, visit <https://www.upperroom.org/resources/the-breath-prayer>.

For a lyric video of Amy Grant’s “Breath of Heaven (Mary’s Song),” visit this link from her official YouTube page, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWo3qlqyW1c>.



## Luke 1:26-33

### Jesus' birth foretold

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

So, there was Mary. Minding her own business, out for a walk or perhaps running an errand when she encounters an angel. As if that's not extraordinary enough, said angel then tells her she's to give birth to God's son. That's a lot for a teenage girl to take in on an otherwise normal day. Few would blame her if she said, What did I *do* to deserve *this*? That would be a natural response! Who wouldn't have thoughts along the lines of: Why me? No one's going to believe this pregnancy is divine. What will I tell my fiancée, and my family, and our friends and neighbors?

Let's take that mindset and put a different spin on it, simply by changing the focus of the ponderable. What if Mary said, 'What did I do to *deserve* this? A slight change of emphasis turns a lament into an exclamation of wonder! That was Mary's choice, and it allowed her to settle into her role as the chosen mother of the Messiah, and rest easy in the knowledge that God would care for her and help her move through this unique and unprecedented pregnancy (as we read in following passages, He did exactly that).

We often talk about being still and listening for the voice of God. What if we hear the voice, but reject the message as too vague? We remain untaught, because God's response can be murkier and more complex than a text to our phone. It's not a glowing "to-do" list dropped from the sky by a celestial drone. When we turn over a thorny issue to God, we have to wait — and keep an eye out. Sometimes the answer's delivery mechanism is seemingly unrelated, like seeing an old friend at the grocery store and a bit of wisdom embedded in the talk that ensues.

God isn't in the business of the quick fix, or the yes-or-no answer — like Mary, we must place our trust in a Higher Power, do the next right thing, keep our eyes and ears open, and patiently await developments.



**Daily Prayer:**

Creator of All We See and Are, thank you for sometimes unclear messages that require us to place further trust in you. We often assign our own vision of clarity and correctness to thought, word and deed, instead of seeking your guidance and trusting your timetable. Help us to remember that our dialogue with you is an ongoing process, that all questions are permitted, and that answers will come when we are ready to hear them.

## Luke 1:34-38

Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I haven’t had sexual relations with a man?”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.”

Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

I’ve often wondered how I would respond if I encountered an angel. Like Mary was, I’m sure I would be startled, fearful, confused, and filled with awe. I might wonder like Scrooge if I was suffering hallucinations from something bad I ate. What trust she had to take to heart his words, “Don’t be afraid.” Much easier said than done!

Then there is that unexpected message. Whoa! Mary did not understand all the genetic science we have now, but she knew the basics that an egg had to be fertilized to develop. No artificial insemination was available yet. If I encountered such unbelievable news as that, I would first laugh like Sarah, thinking it was some kind of joke. Then I would argue, “Who’s donating the other 23 chromosomes to pair with my egg’s 23? Does the Holy Spirit even have DNA? This can’t be a clone because you said it would be a son. Are you sure about this; it’s never happened before. I will be in such trouble. Why me?” It’s obvious that having more reproductive knowledge would not have made a difference to Mary. It was just impossible.

The angel included news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, perhaps to help Mary feel less alone and more accepting. He used that news to bring home this important point: “For nothing is impossible with God.” There’s no more meaningful message than that. God favored Mary because she had a strong enough faith to believe those words when she needed them most.

When we encounter challenges today that seem unsurvivable, we usually ask, “How can this be? Why is this happening? This is going to turn my whole life upside down!” The angel’s words from his encounter with Mary should still lift us up today. I may never know how the virgin birth occurred scientifically. Mary did not need to know either. Perhaps the angel didn’t even know. From our privilege of encountering this wonderful story we can learn that all that matters is to believe those words. “Nothing is impossible with God.” Just believe and trust

God's promise to always be with us.

It seems that Mary struggled to understand God's plan in Jesus, her firstborn son. We have the gift of hindsight to see how the life of Christ influences the whole world. I like to picture Mary at her death, rising to encounter her special Son again. What a sweet reunion that would have been as Jesus embraced her in a huge hug. Then she saw her faith to believe the impossible at last rewarded. I hope to encounter them both and feel that too someday!

**Daily Prayer:**

Lord, When the day brings troubling news.  
When we feel that there's too much to lose.  
When we're confused and don't understand  
All the suffering in our land,  
Calm our fears and give us peace  
So doubt and despair we can release.  
Help us remember what Mary heard.  
"Nothing's impossible with God." Blessed words!

## Luke 1:39-45

### Mary visits Elizabeth

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Mary's encounter with Elizabeth in this passage is noteworthy for several reasons. Elizabeth also recently experienced a miraculous pregnancy. Her soon-to-be-born son, John, will prepare the way for Mary's son, Jesus. Gabriel, the same angel who visited Mary, recently paid a visit to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. The aspect of the encounter that stands out most to me is the way in which Elizabeth greets and encourages Mary. Elizabeth is a strong female character that is often overlooked when the Christmas story is retold. She is the person Mary rushed to visit after the visit from Gabriel.

Matthew's account of Mary's story tells us that her fiancée, Joseph, prepared to break off the engagement when he learned of Mary's pregnancy. Our knowledge of the laws and customs of the culture and time allow us to infer that Mary encountered much judgment and condemnation at the news of her pregnancy. Yet, Luke tells us that Elizabeth greeted Mary with a glad cry. She told Mary it was an honor to be visited by the mother of her Lord. What joy and relief Mary must have felt during this encounter!

Elizabeth exemplifies a faithful life. She didn't lose faith in God after years of longing to become a mother. She trusted God when her husband, a religious leader, questioned God. Her faith in God helped her navigate what was sure to be an anxiety-inducing pregnancy due to her age. She is the relative Mary turned to after learning she is pregnant with Jesus. Elizabeth's faith in God and belief in Mary offered this young relative the encouragement she needed. Both women had exceptional faith. It is no wonder God chose them to bring John the Baptist and Jesus into the world.

Many women today are fortunate to have female family members who mentor and encourage them. The older generations learned from the female role models who encouraged them when they were young. The encounter in today's scripture reminds us of the importance of these relationships in the earthly family of Jesus.

**Daily Prayer:**

God, thank you for faith role models like Elizabeth and Mary. Help us follow their example by having meaningful encounters that encourage, uplift, and celebrate one another. Amen.

## Luke 1:46-55

### Mary praises God

Mary said, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”

As we encounter Mary responding to her cousin Elizabeth, traditionally called the Magnificat, we find a beautiful tapestry woven together by the thematic threads of humility, mercy, social justice, and divine promise.

We encounter the first theme of humility in Luke 1:46-49. When Mary says, “Everyone will consider me highly favored because the Mighty One has done great things for me,” I do not think she intends her words in an arrogant tone. Quite the contrary, she gladly accepts the role that God has bestowed upon her: Mother of God’s only son, born to redeem us from our sins and open the gates of Heaven. In this respect, I find it helpful to always pray for God’s divine counsel to show me what role I am to play in God’s plan and pray for the willingness to carry out God’s will. Moreover, I find it important to remind myself that everything that I have attained as a white, cis-gendered affluent gay male has not necessarily been merited by my own works but more attributed to the chance of being born into a wealthier family with white privilege. Last, the goodness in my life is sustained thanks to the constant support of my loved ones such as those at EEUMC just as Elizabeth and Mary supported each other in our reading.

We see the themes of mercy and social justice in Luke 1:50-52. It is true that God does indeed show mercy to everyone; however, God’s people are imperfect, and, consequently, we do not always act mercifully to each other. We often drive with our ego first, instead of our heart, driving up those “arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.” In moments when I feel uncertain, angry, or disgusted, I often try to remember Joe Lee, the EEUMC Sanctuary Choir, and Nashville in Harmony’s Major Minors singing “I Choose Love” by Lindy Thompson and Mark Miller. In this moment, I can ask for God to fill me with His Wisdom and give me the will to choose mercy and give grace. And in this moment, what I hunger for most, is peace. As one of my favorite singers Norah Jones croons, “Peace is for everyone.”

Last, we encounter the theme of divine promise in Luke 1:54-55. God follows through on His promises to Abraham and Abraham's descendants and comes to the aid of His people Israel. So, too, we must have faith in God's Divine Plan for us and that glorious things will come to pass through His Grace working through and in us.

Questions:

- How can I act with a humble heart today?
- How can I show mercy and grace to my fellow humans today?

**Daily Prayer:**

God, during this time of Advent, we ask that we act more like Mary by rejoicing in the good things you have done for us, rather than focusing on the negative. We pray that You fill us with the Holy Spirit and bestow unto us a greater capacity to choose love and give grace.

1. Come, thou long expected Jesus,  
born to set Thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us,  
let us find our rest in thee.  
Israel’s strength and consolation,  
hope of all the earth thou art;  
dear desire of every nation,  
joy of every longing heart.
  
2. Born thy people to deliver,  
born a child and yet a King,  
born to reign in us forever,  
now thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By Thine own eternal spirit  
rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all sufficient merit,  
raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Words, Charles Wesley, 1744 ; Music, Rowland H. Prichard, 1830

To listen to the hymn, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcEMnANPXgU>.

This hymn “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” was written by Charles Wesley, brother of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. This hymn is based on a prayer he wrote after being inspired while reading from the minor prophet Haggai. The scripture that so moved him reads, “...and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts (Haggai 2:7, NRSV).”

This image reminds me of a fruit tree being shaken and its fruit tumbling to the ground so that it might be picked up and enjoyed. When shaking fruit trees like peach trees or cherry trees, it actually helps them produce more fruit as it loosens the vessels that carry sap to the leaves and buds. Shaking the trees creates an abundant harvest and prepares the way for a larger harvest in the future.

Charles Wesley had a more practical vision when he read these words. He held in one hand this scripture in Haggai that offered a vision of abundance and in the other the real lived experience of people suffering in poverty due to the deep class divisions in England in the 1740’s. He was



especially overcome with the plight of orphans. In this scripture he saw the heart of God for all, whose love for all would be enough for all to have enough. He encountered a God whose love would shake the nations and stir them up so that the treasure they held would tumble down and bless the whole house. Charles Wesley saw a God whose kingdom would come as a home that includes orphans and strangers and all who accept the invitation.

Charles Wesley looked at the inequity and uncertainty of the day and found hope, big hope, and he believed this hope came in Jesus. “Born to set Thy people free; From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee...” Charles saw that this beautiful vision of God from ancient times was still true for the world around him. I would say the same is true today, that God’s gracious kin-dom is coming and all are invited. And just as those whose suffering moved Charles Wesley to write this hymn, there are folks near us today living in poverty without housing, healthcare, or enough food to eat. Do you know someone that might need rest, strength, or consolation? Are you that person? What sins and fears are holding us captive collectively? Individually? Do you know someone that might need an invitation to this freedom, this hope, this joy that Christ offers?

**Daily Prayer:**

Come, thou long expected Jesus, come. Come, hope of all the earth. Come, joy of every longing heart. Come and rule our hearts with your abundant love and extravagant grace. May we accept your invitation to rest and freedom and may we extend that invitation to others. Amen.

Our Advent devotionals began with the spiritual practice of Lectio Divina. As we near Christmas Day and the arrival of the Christ child, we turn to a related spiritual practice, Visio Divina. This is similar to the careful reading found with lectio, but instead of focusing on words you are invited to focus on a picture or a piece of art. This is “divine seeing.” Today you are invited to practice Visio Divina by gazing upon a depiction of the Holy Family painted by artist Lucas Southern. As you meditate upon this image, you may follow these steps for Visio Divina as found on the website of The Upper Room.\*

1. Pick out an image from a website, a photograph, painting, or icon.
2. Look at the image and let your eyes stay with the very first thing that you see. Keep your attention on that one part of the image that first catches your eye. Try to keep your eyes from wandering to other parts of the picture. Breathe deeply and let yourself gaze at that part of the image for a minute or so.
3. Now, let your eyes gaze at the whole image. Take your time and look at every part of the photograph. See it all. Reflect on the image for a minute or so.
4. Consider the following questions:
  - What emotions does this image evoke in you?
  - What does the image stir up in you, bring forth in you?
  - Does this image lead you into an attitude of prayer? If so, let these prayers take form in you. Write them down if you desire.
5. Now, offer your prayers to God in a final time of silence.

\*Find these instructions and more about Visio Divina at <https://www.upperroom.org/resources/visio-divina>



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The Holy Family by Lucas Southerton, used under Creative Commons License 3.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>. Download the image and read more from the artist at <https://www.deviantart.com/lucassoutherton/art/The-Holy-Family-908577407>.

## Luke 2:1-7

### Jesus' birth

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

I fancy myself a connoisseur of movie quotes. While this hardly qualifies as a unique trait for a man in his 40's, I like to think I do my demographic especially proud. If my brain recalled mathematical formulas as easily as a clever piece of cinematic dialogue, my scholastic experience certainly would have been different.

Personally, I love obscure movie quotes - short and easily applicable to a number of day-to-day experiences. The more random the quote, the more personal the connection becomes to anyone "in" on the joke with you. It becomes a bit of a game - weaving one of your go-to lines into a conversation, then scanning the reactions of those around you for a wink, a smile, a nod; any silent acknowledgement that your efforts were received and appreciated.

When quote-worthy lines *do* derive from famous movies, they soon become part of our society's lexicon. Ever wished someone good luck by saying "*May the Force be with you*"? Or uttered "*I don't think we're in Kansas anymore*" when in a new or uncomfortable situation? I wonder how many declarations of "*I'm the king of the world!*" have echoed from front railings. Or how many dads have channeled their inner Schwarzenegger in telling their family "*I'll be back*" before heading out to run errands.

Like the big screen, the Bible is rife with its share of oft-referenced quotes in everyday life. In today's passage, the phrase "No room at the inn" (as commonly known from the King James Version) is *the* quotable line; the big one; the takeaway line that everyone knows. Yes, there are numerous historical lessons to be drawn from the passage. But "no room at the inn" has become a common staple of our vernacular. And like a memorable movie line, its uses and meanings are equally varied:

When you eat so much dinner that you feel your belt cutting off your circulation, and then the

waiter hands you the dessert menu ... *No room at the inn!*

When your daughter asks to fit another stuffed animal in her suitcase, after you just spent 5 frustrating minutes fighting with the zipper to finally get it closed ... *Sorry, kiddo, no more room at the inn.*

I tend to reference “the Inn” when I’m approaching my emotional limit. At this time of year, professional and personal responsibilities seem to reach their combined zenith. I get *so* tired, *so* emotionally and energetically drained that I feel there is no more room *inn* my heart for one more obligation. And *that* is when I run into trouble, considering each opportunity as more of a nuisance.

The inherent danger of any quote lies in its over-use. Like the experiment of saying the same word over and over until it no longer makes sense, the intended meaning of a biblical line is easily lost with each repetition.

If we aren’t careful, we can miss underlying lessons in today’s passage by glossing over the phrase “no room at the inn”. Miss the warning of a dismissive attitude towards those in need. The danger of alienating yourself from the true spirit and joy of this season’s story. The threat of closing your heart to the love of others, allowing the heaviness of stress and responsibility to outweigh human connection and spiritual epiphany.

**Daily Prayer:**

This Advent season, may we all be mindful to joyfully leave room in our hearts for those who love us and, especially, those who need us. Let us be open to opportunities, to ideas, and to opinions that may differ from our own. In so doing, may we ensure we never leave “no room at the inn”.

## **Luke 2:8-14**

### **Announcement to shepherds**

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

The sacred is often found in interruptions. In my most meaningful, holy and wonderful interactions in life I have found this to be true. I experience the sacred when a neighbor pops by my house unplanned to drop off a borrowed dish and holy conversation is had. I experience the sacred when I'm busy working on emails and my child gently taps me to sit and snuggle together. I experience the sacred when I look outside my kitchen window to notice a family of deer grazing behind my home. We go about our daily lives and never know when we might encounter something or someone that changes us or our lens on life. That is what the shepherds experienced the night that the angel appeared to them. Shepherds, the most ordinary and unexpected people, are who this grand announcement of Good News was made to and for.

Today's reading reminds us that we are all God's beloved, that Christ's birth is for us too. We don't have to be anything more than ourselves, just as God created us, doing our everyday ordinary living. Wrapped in cloth, the Christ child shows us a love that comes in humble packaging, that is backwards, a kin-dom of God turned upside down, a hope that the ordinary among us are also invited to experience the great love of God. Do not be afraid! Good news is for you. All of you! I know that this Christmas, in the midst of a world that is hurting, I need to remember this message of great hope. I wonder if you and I are ready to embrace holy interruptions this Christmas? In the everyday moments, may we each be present to the interruptions that might just be announcements of the peace, hope, joy and love that Christmas brings.

### **Daily Prayer:**

God of Love, may we pause to notice and be present to the ways you are at work in our lives this Christmas. Fill us with your hope, make us instruments of your peace, interrupt our lives with joy, and help us to rest in your love. We give thanks for the gift of Christ for all the world. Amen.



## **Luke 2:15-20**

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened. Let’s confirm what the Lord has revealed to us.” They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

Merry Christmas! The day of celebration has arrived. Today you are probably sharing presents with friends and loved ones as you gather for food and fellowship. Each of us has our own cherished Christmas traditions, but no matter how you spend your Christmas, these traditions typically encourage us to take a posture of hopeful joy as we remember the great gift of the Christ child’s birth.

As exciting as the arrival of Christmas Day can be for us, imagine if it were announced to us by a host of angels! Having received the news of Jesus’ birth from these divine messengers, the shepherds (most likely shaking off the shock of such an encounter) decide to hasten to Bethlehem to see for themselves. But more than just seeing the Savior, upon their arrival, the shepherds become heralds of salvation every bit as much as the angels. When they see the baby, they tell everyone what was told to them, and we read that, “Everyone who heard it was amazed...” Having received the wonderful news of this new thing God is doing, the shepherds share this message with others. They become part of God’s unfolding story and important channels for this very good news.

As those who claim the name Christian, on Christmas Day, we are called beyond our individual and familial celebrations to a bigger task as well. Because we know that God’s love has come to visit us in a special way and continues to shape the world into a new creation through Jesus Christ, we are invited to become part of this ongoing story by sharing it with others. Like the shepherds, we are invited to do our part in reminding others of the compassion, mercy, and grace that is ushered into the world this day. We are encouraged to let others know of the gift of unending and unconditional love offered by God through this tiny babe. And we can do this as much through our living and our loving as we can through any words we might speak. I pray you have a beautiful Christmas, and I invite you to share the good news that Jesus Christ is born this day!

### **Daily Prayer:**

God of good news, on this Christmas Day, we give thanks for the Christ Child and your divine presence embodied through the birth of Jesus. Help us share the news that you have come to dwell among us. Empower us through your Holy Spirit to be bearers of your everlasting love and grace. Amen.

