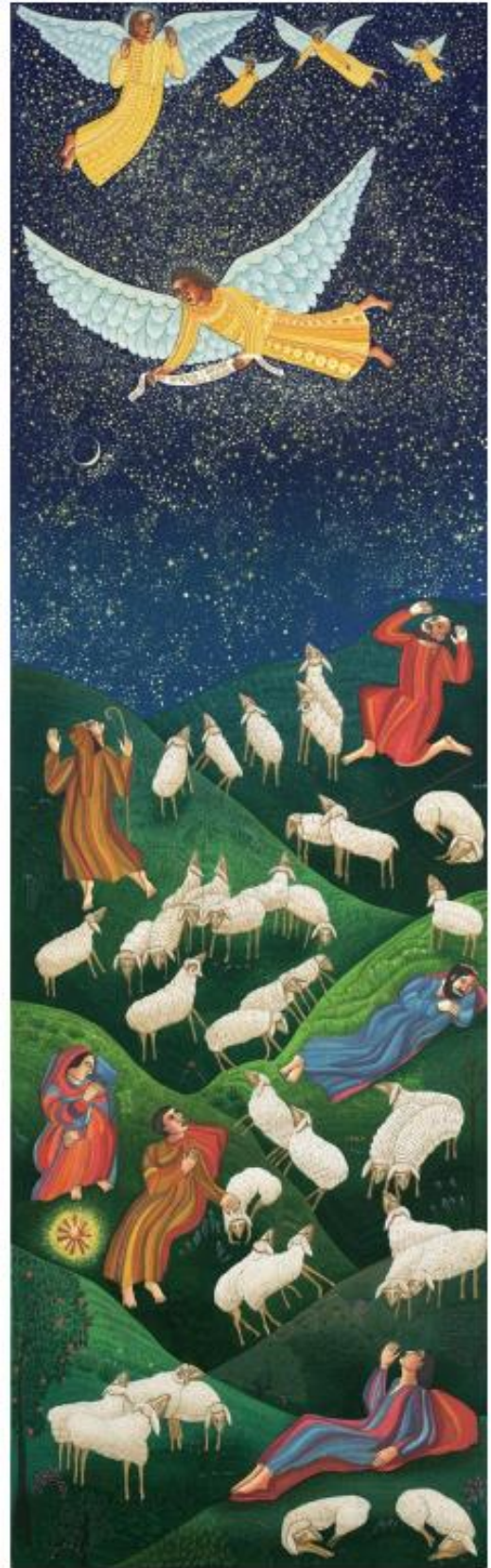


Advent  
Reflections  
With Mid-  
Coast  
Presbyterian  
Church

2023



## ***Introduction to MCPC Advent Reflections 2023***

*Come Lord Jesus!*

*The scriptures of the season of Advent can be surprisingly apocalyptic as well as wonderfully encouraging; some are familiar while others are not heard or quoted very often. The readings included here are from the four Sundays of Advent as well as those appointed for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.*

*Congregation members have been invited to reflect on a passage and write about it. Some found insight in commentaries to share while others responded with a personal reflection or some combination of the two.*

*You are invited to read through each scripture, out loud if you can, and consider your initial reaction. How have your thoughts or responses changed over the years?*

*After your initial response, read through the reflections offered here - make some notes, sing a hymn verse, offer your own prayer – and consider how does this passage prepare your heart to receive the gift of love that is Immanuel - God with us?*

*There is a certain bravery to putting your personal thoughts on paper for others to read for inspiration and so we are very grateful to everyone who submitted their thoughts, thank you.*

*Ponder This - some verses were not selected by anyone and so they are offered here in two translations, New Revised Standard Version and The Message. There is extra space for you to write your own interpretation or reflections as you Ponder This.*

*As you engage with these passage and reflections, we hope the coming days of Advent and Christmas will be illuminated with inspiration and hope so we may all be well prepared to declare “Come Lord Jesus!”*

*Cover art: <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58575>*

*1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*

*3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. 5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.*

*6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.*

I found this passage challenging so I sought help from several translations: NRSV, The Message, and Good News Bible. Scholars believe that the last section of Isaiah (Chapters 56 – 66) was written by a prophet or prophets who lived in Judah after returning from the Babylonian exile. Historically the Israelites had suffered much, including invasion and exile, and times were still hard. This passage is a conversation the Israelites have with God in which they go from citing God's amazing deeds in the past (e.g. God waits for those who wait for God") and God's anger toward them because they have kept sinning. The people acknowledge these sins but then they say that no one prays or reaches out to God because he's turned away from them. From an attempt at justification of their actions and pleading – "You created us so don't be too angry with us. We are your people." They have honestly and openly bared their very human emotions before God.

*No matter what we've done or have had to suffer, God made us and cares for us.*

*We need to keep connected to God, to keep the conversation open through prayer and being honest--whether we're praising or blaming him, whether we're excusing our actions,*

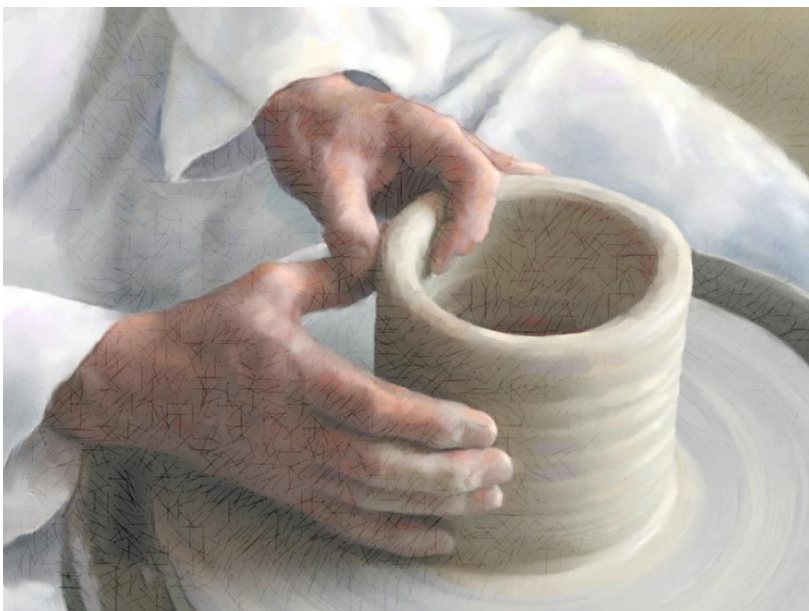
*or admitting our sins.*

*We must not stop praying even if our prayers seem unanswered or our trials haven't ceased.*

*I find it helpful to remember Psalm 46:10*

*"Be still and know that I am God."*

*Then I'm ready to pray and wait for patience and God's reply.*



*1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!*

*You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth*

*2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!*

*3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

*4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?*

*5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.*

*6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.*

*7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

*17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.*

*18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.*

*19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

Just as the people of Israel in Psalm 80 were calling out for a Shepherd to lead them and save them, so are we awaiting the birth of our Shepherd, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We, here at MCPC, are so fortunate to have Pastor Diane to guide us through the weeks of Advent leading up to the wondrous birth.

I am so thankful to be a small part of this welcoming, caring congregation.



Prayer

*Dear God bless us with your presence  
in this joyous season of Advent.*

*Help us to share this good news  
with others.*

*May the joy of this season inspire us  
to continue the gift of giving. Amen*

*1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*4 I give thanks to my God always for you*

*because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,*

*5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—*

*6 just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—*

*7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait*

*for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*8 He will also strengthen you to the end,*

*so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

For many years we have been reading together from “Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions” published by the Upper Room. One of the recurrent themes of the daily commentaries is that God wants, really craves, a personal relationship with each of us. We don’t earn this relationship, but through God’s Grace we are given this opportunity, if we only seize it. In this reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul again emphasizes this vertical relationship with Jesus.

Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth hints at some squabbles over “spiritual gifts” and a weakening of the fellowship among the people. In many ways, the church today is similar to First Church Corinth. We are often torn by many issues and each side claims some knowledge from scripture to bolster or prove its argument. In these divisive times it can be hard to “keep the faith.” Indeed, even as we have a vertical relationship with God, we also need a horizontal relationship or community, our church family, partners in faith, people of like mind and hopes to help us keep the faith.

As we await the coming of God’s Son during this Advent may we have the grace to listen to each other, the wisdom to build each other up, and to be reminded of the gifts God has given us to strengthen one another in our fellowship with each other and in partnership with Jesus our Lord.



13:24 *"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,*  
 25 *and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*  
 26 *Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.*  
 27 *Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.* 28 *"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until*  
 all these things have taken place. 31 *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*  
 32 *"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*  
 33 *Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*  
 34 *It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.*  
 35 *Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.*  
 37 *And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."*

The verses from Mark 13:24-37 encourage believers to look for Jesus to return. The second coming should be a defining reality that impacts our faith and our lives. Since the time of Jesus' coming is unknown, we should think about it all the time and not 'not' think about it. We need to dig in, stay faithful and prepare for the long haul. The emphasis is to balance a chronological uncertainty with the absolute assurance that the end will come in a glorious way. So, keep a sharp look out. Keep watch!!

I do believe that Christ will come again, but I certainly am one of the guilty multitudes who does not think about His second coming all the time. Just because bad things happen doesn't mean that God is unloving or abandoning us. However, suffering and darkness are prerequisites to His return. It is so hard to wait; to accept the unknown, but we have to be patient and trust in God's plan.



He will fulfill the promise of Christ's return on His time and we need to accept that unknown promise.

*1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*

*2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,*

*that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

*3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert*

*a highway for our God. 4 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.*

*5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"*

*All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

*7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.*

*8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*

*9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;*

*lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,*

*lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

*10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*

*11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Recently, I've been studying with an on-line class that includes the subtitle: "Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity." A challenge to all the students was to adapt a *deep reading* approach – something I understood to be akin to the reading of a poem. It is reading that is open-ended rather than conclusion-based, that ponders rather than critiques, that listens instead of "talking back." This deep reading is my practice when I read scripture devotionally. Today, as we begin this Advent journey,

I encourage you to adopt a deep reading of all the texts to be considered this Advent. To do this:

listen for the words that stand-out or tickle your imagination or trouble your heart.

Refrain from analyzing or over thinking; set aside your need to "understand" or "judge."

Let the words on the page greet you.

As I read this passage, I was first delighted by the poetic form, then intrigued by the prophetic message.

I loved the contrasts within the passage, but finally it was the first and the last verses that held my heart and calmed my mind. Here is the outline of my wonderings...

perhaps these will help you to try a *deep reading*.

v. 1 Of course, I sang (in my mind...and am humming still) Handel's setting from the Messiah:

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people...*

*Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem*

v. 2 I thought: great is the need for comfort in these days:

comfort in Gaza, Israel, and all places this war is touching

comfort on all sides of wars in Ukraine and Sudan, and trembling through South America.

*I wondered about the changes that would happen if war ceased:*

*changes for the conqueror and changes for the conquered.*

comfort in the cities, towns and villages where gun violence inflicts sorrow  
comfort at hospital bedside, around the tables feeding homeless, in prisons and treatment centers  
comfort for children crying in the night and parents reaching out to estranged children  
comfort for victims of abuse, trafficking, neglect and terror...

*I pondered the dark corners of culture and society  
places we dare not enter...untouchable darkness we turn from.*

vv. 3-5 I imagine all high places leveled and all low valleys filled up,  
uneven grounds smoothed and the crooked ways straightened:  
the wondrous changes that will one day  
bring complete satisfaction, equality before God,  
justice and peace.

v. 6-8 Demands us to call out, to cry loudly, to lift up a prophet's voice:  
all life will pass away...but God's word remains: *Fear not!*

v. 8-9 We meet God! Strong armed, with rewards and payments, coming, coming, coming

v.10-11 A stained glass image: Shepherd Jesus with his lambs,  
lambs who are healthy and sickly,  
snowy white lambs and outcast black sheep,  
lambs who need laps and  
even nursing ewes,  
all tended, gathered, lifted gently, and guided  
into comfort.





*85:1 LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
1 God, you smiled on your good earth! You brought good times back to Jacob!*

*2 You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Selah  
You lifted the cloud of guilt from your people, you put their sins far out of sight.*

*8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his  
people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
I can't wait to hear what he'll say. God's about to pronounce his people well,  
The holy people he loves so much, so they'll never again live like fools.*

*9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell  
in our land.  
See how close his salvation is to those who fear him? Our country is home base for Glory!*

*10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss  
each other.  
Love and Truth meet in the street, Right Living and Whole Living embrace and kiss!*

*11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down  
from the sky.  
Truth sprouts green from the ground, Right Living pours down from the skies!*

*12 The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.  
Oh yes! God gives Goodness and Beauty; our land responds with Bounty and Blessing.*

*13 Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.  
Right Living strides out before him, and clears a path for his passage.*



2 Peter 3:8-15a

(Dec. 3)

Audrey Grassman

*8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.*

*9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.*

*10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.*

*11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness,*

*12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?*

*13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.*

*14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish;*

*15a and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.*

*So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him.*

### ***Be Ready!***

Be ready! But for when? *When* do we need to be ready? The Message translation of this passage from 2 Peter begins, “Don’t overlook the obvious.” God’s time doesn’t match our time; even the way God looks at time isn’t the way we look at time. It seems obvious—but we still focus on life with a 24-hour clock and 365-day year. God’s time keeping is about giving everyone space and opportunity to grow as, and into, God’s creation. God’s timing is about God’s love and hopes for us.

Being ready as faithful disciples of the Lord can’t be marked on a calendar like next week’s doctor’s appointment or next year’s special anniversary or the turn of the decades or centuries. And while the scripture speaks of being ready for the end time and God’s judgment, I think it also speaks being ready in all times, ordinary or spectacular or somewhere in between.

*Beloved, the Lord will fulfill his promises. The Lord is not slow, but patient.  
The Lord wants no one to be forgotten or perish.*

God's slowness, the way God allows what we call time to pass, is God's patience. It is a gift wherein we can be seeking God, wrestling with questions of faith, enjoying and glorifying God, living in the wonder of God's amazing grace. God's slowness, allowing what we call time to pass, is also a gift for us when things aren't going so well, for when we need time to work through something; for when life is difficult and we need to seek others for support and we need time to turn to our faith for strength; for when there's seemingly nothing we can do and yet we need time—time to heal, time to pray, time to grow. However the time may pass, we are called to live holy, dedicated, sacred lives.

God's timing requires our living, our daily being, to be fully in the present, fully expectant (and hopefully aware) of God's work in the world and in our life. Ready at any time for the Holy Spirit to break through, and ready and willing to respond.

Do you ever wonder how long, and on how many occasions, the Spirit has been patiently waiting for us to notice that the Holy One is with us?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent—a liturgical time of preparation for celebrating the coming of the Christ Child so long ago, and a time for preparation and anticipation of the return of our Lord. This Advent, how might we live expectantly? What might we search for or how might we respond in our faith? If we would only stop looking at our time pieces.

This Advent, remember that God's slowness is God's patience. And, like the gift of Advent, it is our Salvation. Be ready, ready to simply receive the gift.

*1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*

*3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"*

*4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance*

*for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside*

*and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

*6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,*

*and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed,*

*"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;*

*I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.*

*8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

*As I read Mark 1: 1-8 I could not help but think of the "ones "  
who had come before me. They certainly were not clothed in camel's hair  
nor had a girdle of skin around them, but they showed me  
the way to try to live without sin,  
and to confess mistakes that I had made.*

*They were preparing me for life and trying to help me make my paths straight.*



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58375>

*1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. 8 For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

Scholars have long debated whether Old Testament prophets were actually prophesying the coming of Christ or whether they were speaking of events more immediate to their own time. However, there can be no question about Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2 which say.

*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 the year of the Lord's favor,*

When Jesus read this scripture passage in the synagogue at Nazareth he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The story of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth begins at Luke 4:16. Although the verses as they appear in Luke are translated somewhat differently there can be no doubt that Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61 and telling his listeners that he is the fulfillment of the prophecy.

*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*

In Luke, Jesus goes on to speak about how prophets are treated in their own country and ends up enraging the people so that they tried to kill him.

In Isaiah there is one of those curious shifts in person but the prophet goes on to list the rewards and joys of the faithful and the chapter ends with the promise of an everlasting covenant saying, "...*the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*" It is a fitting promise to foretell the advent of Jesus the Christ.

*1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.  
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."  
3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.  
4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.  
5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.  
6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

Psalm 126 is the 7th of 15 Songs of Ascent when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. God set his people free from captivity with a sense of happiness, grateful astonishment like a ‘dream’, celebrating God’s work with laughter and singing.

The second half of this Psalm recognizes more work needs to be done, Memories become strong hope for better days. Rain, flash floods, fill streams and dry, desert areas. Joy and sadness are two images of renewal.. The first, a gift from heaven – water and the second, hard work, weeping and cultivating, sowing seeds with faith reaping the harvest with joy.

I think everyone in today’s broken world looks back and longs for restoration and hope, verse 8 in Psalm 126 – “Those who wept as they went out carrying the seed will come back singing for joy as they bring in the harvest”



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56329>

1:46b "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
 51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham  
 and to his descendants forever."

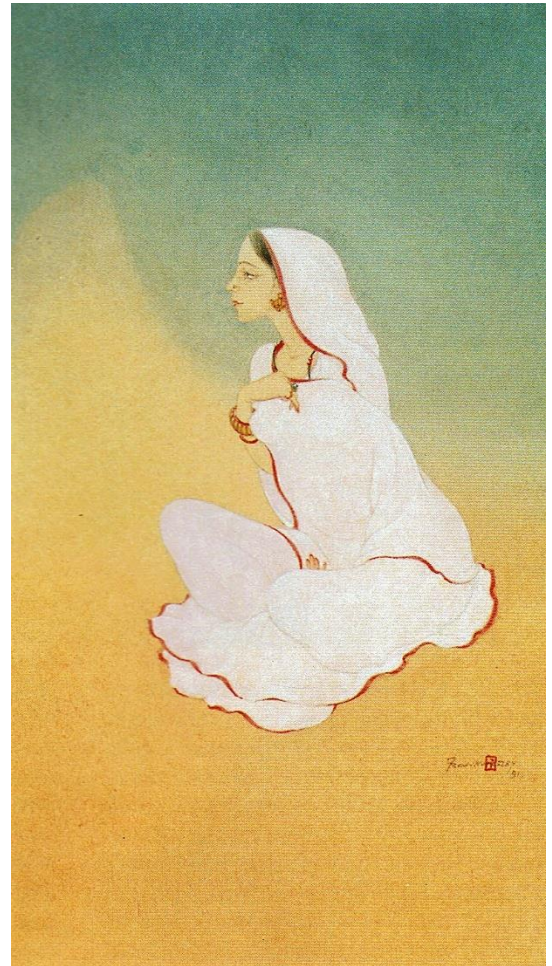
*When Mary speaks to Elisabeth,  
 it reminds me of the lessons of the Beatitudes  
 about the poor, the mighty, and the hungry.*

*To me, Christianity and our souls are a mystery.  
 To hear Mary speak about her soul and spirit,  
 it feels tangible.*

*I feel my soul and my spirit  
 when she talks about hers.*

*In addition, it's as if Mary is present,  
 speaking of Israel.*

*Is it that Israel is more than a place?  
 Is it a concept?  
 Israel as in believers?*



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59177>

**5:16 Rejoice always,**  
*Be cheerful no matter what*

**17 pray without ceasing,**  
*pray all the time*

**18 give thanks in all circumstances;**  
*thank God no matter what happens.*

**for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**  
*This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.*

**19 Do not quench the Spirit.**  
*Don't suppress the Spirit,*

**20 Do not despise the words of prophets,**  
*and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master*

**21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good;**  
*On the other hand, don't be gullible  
Check out everything, and keep only what's good.*

**22 abstain from every form of evil.**  
*Throw out anything tainted with evil.*

**23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely;**  
*May God himself,  
the God who makes everything holy and whole,  
make you holy and whole, put you together*

**and may your spirit and soul and body  
be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**  
*—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit  
for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ*

**24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.**  
*The One who called you is completely dependable.  
If he said it, he'll do it!*



6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. 1:24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 1:25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 1:26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 1:27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." 1:28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

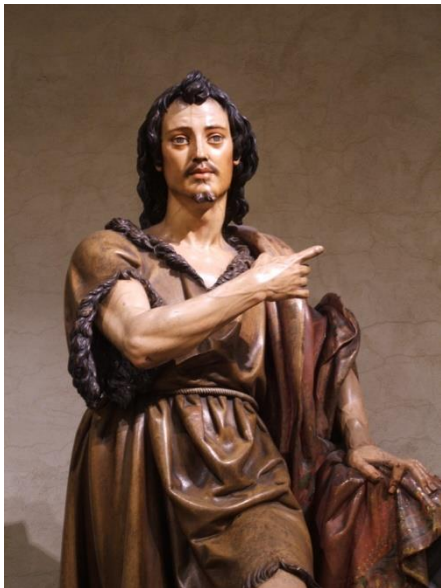
### **CONFUSING THE MESSAGE WITH THE MESSENGER**

When I was still quite young, I remember our distinguished elderly pastor mounting the steps to his very high pulpit every Sunday, and beginning the service with the words, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." Even as a child I knew he was not speaking of the Lord God----but instead was telling us to be quiet and listen to what he had to say!

John the Baptist was the first prophetic voice that people in Israel had heard in more than 400 years. It is not at all surprising that the people thought that John must be the long-awaited Messiah, or at the very least, the prophet Elijah returned from the dead! But again and again in the Gospel of John, the Baptist is quick to say, *"I am not the light, but only a witness to the light."* (1:8)

People in every age make the mistake of confusing the message with the messenger. John the Baptist knew that the real message was that the Word of God was becoming a flesh and blood human being and would dwell among us. He saw himself as one sent to prepare the way for such an incredible event.

John the Baptist is the great example for us of someone who was willing to subordinate his own ego and fame in order to point to the One who was coming into the world to save all of us from sin, evil and even the fear of death. He challenges all of us to remember that our task in life is to point others to the incredible love and grace of God.



I vividly recall a Sunday early in my ministry when I heard a man crying outside the window of my home. I immediately went out to him and discovered that he was to be the soloist in worship that day. But when he arrived at the church, he discovered that whoever had prepared the bulletin had mistakenly omitted his name. He said, "My name is not printed there. I cannot sing in the service." With that, he left.

May God grant us the grace to forget about our own recognition, and point others to Jesus, the Christ.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56325>



2 Samuel 7:1-16

(Dec. 10)

Balinda Washington

*From The Message translation*

*7:1-2 Before long, the king made himself at home and God gave him peace from all his enemies.*

*Then one day King David said to Nathan the prophet,*

*“Look at this: Here I am, comfortable in a luxurious house of cedar, and the Chest of God sits in a plain tent.”* 3 Nathan told the king, *“Whatever is on your heart, go and do it. God is with you.”*

*4-7 But that night, the word of God came to Nathan saying, “Go and tell my servant David:*

*This is God’s word on the matter: You’re going to build a ‘house’ for me to live in?*

*Why, I haven’t lived in a ‘house’ from the time I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt till now.*

*All that time I’ve moved about with nothing but a tent. And in all my travels with Israel,*

*did I ever say to any of the leaders I commanded to shepherd Israel,*

*‘Why haven’t you built me a house of cedar?’*

*8-11 “So here is what you are to tell my servant David: The God-of-the-Angel-Armies has this word for you:*

*I took you from the pasture, tagging along after sheep, and made you prince over my people Israel.*

*I was with you everywhere you went and mowed your enemies down before you.*

*Now I’m making you famous, to be ranked with the great names on earth.*

*And I’m going to set aside a place for my people Israel and plant them there*

*so they’ll have their own home and not be knocked around any more.*

*Nor will evil men afflict you as they always have, even during the days I set judges over my people Israel. Finally, I’m going to give you peace from all your enemies.*

*11-16 “Furthermore, God has this message for you: God himself will build you a house!*

*When your life is complete and you’re buried with your ancestors,*

*then I’ll raise up your child, your own flesh and blood, to succeed you, and I’ll firmly establish his rule.*

*He will build a house to honor me, and I will guarantee his kingdom’s rule permanently.*

*I’ll be a father to him, and he’ll be a son to me.*

*When he does wrong, I’ll discipline him in the usual ways, the pitfalls and obstacles of this mortal life.*

*But I’ll never remove my gracious love from him, as I removed it from Saul, who preceded you*

*and [from] whom I most certainly did remove. Your family and your kingdom are permanently secured.*

*I’m keeping my eye on them! And your royal throne will always be there, rock solid.”*

## Thy will be done?

Rest on every side from all his enemies... King David now has a house to rest in. Rest is so important. The sabbath is an important thing. Each of us needs to have a safe place to rest.

But what about the Ark of God... King David worries about the Ark still residing in a tent as he has a home. Each of us as we try to rest will have many things which we can't stop thinking about. Things we think are important and need to be thought about. Things which make resting difficult.

The prophet Nathan tells David "Whatever is on your heart, go and do it. God is with you." David leaves to go do what is on his heart, feeling as if he has had God's blessing on what his heart wants to do. But did he really ask God?

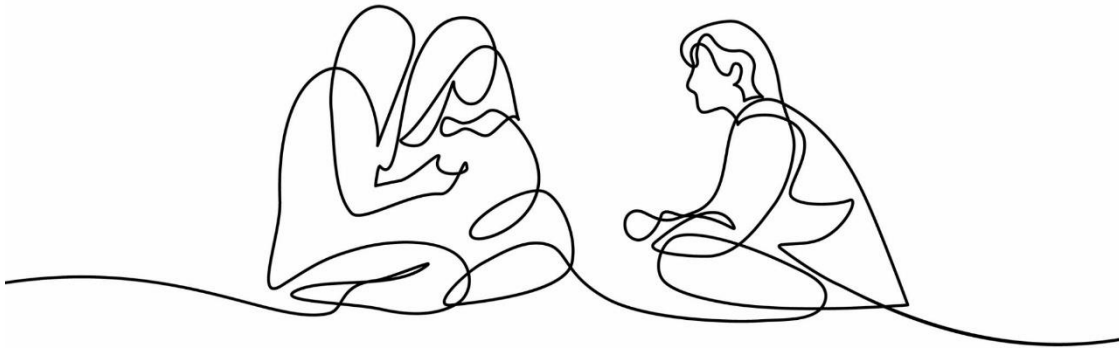
God kind of says to Nathan "Hold up a minute" Nathan is told to tell David "Have I ever asked for a house?" (to paraphrase)

I think this is kind of interesting that Nathan first told David something, not as a prophetic statement but just as one encouraging person to another.

Should Nathan have taken the time to say to David "This thing you are asking me seems like something we should pray about and wait for God's direction?"

Are there times in our life where we just want something so bad that we move forward without really taking the time to listen to God's directions?

This advent season I will be present with God.  
Instead of saying "Whatever is on my heart I will go and do it. God is with me,"  
I will say "God what is it that I should do?  
This is what is on my heart. Help me to see what I should do."



89:

*1 I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. 2 I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. 3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: 4 'I will establish your descendants forever and build your throne for all generations.'" Selah*

*1-4 Your love, GOD, is my song, and I'll sing it!  
I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are.  
I'll never quit telling the story of your love—  
how you built the cosmos and guaranteed everything in it.  
Your love has always been our lives' foundation,  
your fidelity has been the roof over our world.  
You once said, "I joined forces with my chosen leader,  
I pledged my word to my servant, David, saying,  
'Everyone descending from you is guaranteed life;  
I'll make your rule as solid and lasting as rock.'"*

*19 Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one and said: "I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people. 20 I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; 21 my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him. 22 The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him. 23 I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. 24 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted.*

*25 I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.  
26 He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'*

*A long time ago you spoke in a vision, you spoke to your faithful beloved:  
'I've crowned a hero, I chose the best I could find;  
I found David, my servant, poured holy oil on his head,  
And I'll keep my hand steadily on him, yes, I'll stick with him through thick and thin.  
No enemy will get the best of him, no scoundrel will do him in.  
I'll weed out all who oppose him, I'll clean out all who hate him.  
I'm with him for good and I'll love him forever;  
I've set him on high—he's riding high!  
I've put Ocean in his one hand, River in the other;  
he'll call out, 'Oh, my Father—my God, my Rock of Salvation!'*

*New Revised Standard Version*

***16:25 Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith -- 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.***

*The Message*

*25-26 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. All the nations of the world can now know the truth and be brought into obedient belief, carrying out the orders of God, who got all this started, down to the final detail.*

*27 All our praise is focused through Jesus on this incomparably wise God! Yes!*

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59326>

26 *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,*  
 27 *to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was*  
 28 *Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*  
 29 *But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*  
 30 *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*  
 31 *And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.*  
 32 *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him*  
     *the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,*  
     *and of his kingdom there will be no end."*  
 34 *Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*  
 35 *The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you,*  
     *and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be*  
*holy;*  
*he will be called Son of God.*  
 36 *And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month*  
     *for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God."*  
 38 *Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*  
     *Then the angel departed from her.*

### Mary's Choice

The day began with no hints of its importance. It seemed to Mary, a day like most others. She thought about Joseph, her fiancé, excited at the changes their marriage would bring. As the village carpenter their life would be tied to the life of the community.

In the midst of this ordinary day, the air became charged with a presence. A figure appeared in front of her, bowed its head in greeting and spoke: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Confused, Mary wondered what this could mean, and the being said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary, in near shock, was not reassured. She asked, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel, for this is what she realized was speaking, answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

At that, Mary paused, considering what the angel's words implied for her, for her approaching marriage, and for life as she knew it. How would Joseph receive this news? Would he believe her?

Bound together in betrothal, if he didn't believe her it would be his prerogative to cast her aside, even have her stoned. As these thoughts raced through her mind, the world of humans was oblivious to her struggle, but angels, archangels and all the company of heaven held their collective breath. The earth itself seemed on tiptoe, waiting for her reply.

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The celestial beings let out their breath, and the angel departed from her.

The angel had said, "Nothing will be impossible with God." Fair enough. The question for us is not, "Could God do this?" Rather, the question is, "Why would God do such an extraordinary thing?"

The key to that question is the identity of Jesus. When Mary said, "Yes" she was not merely agreeing to have a baby. God was taking human form, coming into the world He created to change it forever. In saying "Yes," Mary agreed to facilitate the beginning of the New Creation. Her answer was the most important "Yes" in history. And when Joseph accepted what happened, his "Yes," was also crucial. "No," from either of them would have been no to all God planned to do. "No" would have meant that whatever God then did to redeem the world would have to be by some other means. "No" might even have stopped God's plan in its tracks!

No wonder that when Mary gave birth to Jesus, not just one angel, but a whole host of angels burst into song, filled the skies with light, hurried shepherds to a stable, and spoke through the stars to set foreign sages trekking through the desert to pay homage to Emmanuel, God-With-Us. In these troubled days, may we all journey to that same stable, and gaze with wonder at what God has done for us all.



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54838>

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.  
 3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;  
 they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,  
 as people exult when dividing plunder.  
 4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,  
 the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood  
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
 6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;  
 authority rests upon his shoulders;  
 and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
 7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace  
 for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
 He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness  
 from this time onward and forevermore.  
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Several years ago my group of college friends faced the dilemma  
 of choosing a grandma name as we began to have grandchildren.  
 So, the process began..and it was an ordeal. We are now Grammi, RuRu, Bitsy,  
 Nan, Gabby, Gram, Maemae, and just Grandma! No matter the name,  
 the job is still the same...to love without limits.  
 "...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,  
 Prince of Peace.." Whatever he is called our saviour has come!



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54414>



*1 O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.  
2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.  
3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.  
4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.  
5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.  
6 Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.  
7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts.  
9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.  
10 Say among the nations, "The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity."  
11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
12 let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
13 before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.*

This is a wonderful, joyful song of praise that is so reassuring in present times. After the shooting in Lewiston, and the war in Gaza, AND my workload which seems to have bunched itself into a pressurized week, it is wonderful to hear that "great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens."

All the troubles of this world are put into perspective: God is still with us and is forever with us, and this is a cause for rejoicing. Jesus never promised us success or freedom from pain, only that He would always be with us.

We are also warned that God will judge the peoples with equity and righteousness -- not by our worldly standards or by what we think of as fair, but with God's truth. We tend to think that we want and deserve justice when what we really want and need is mercy. This is a reminder that God sees us clearly for who we are, and yet loves us -- but this does not mean we will escape the consequences of our sinful behavior, unless we truly repent.

During Advent, as I await the coming of the Christ child, I try to bear in mind my sinful acts of omission and commission and pray for a repentant heart to offer as my gift. Through God's grace, even my imperfect attempts are acceptable offerings.

*New Revised Standard Version*

*2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,  
12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions,  
and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly,  
13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation  
of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.  
14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us  
from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own  
who are zealous for good deeds.*



*The Message*

*11-14 God's readiness to give and forgive is now public.  
Salvation's available for everyone!  
We're being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life,  
and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life.  
This new life is starting right now,  
and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day  
when our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, appears.  
He offered himself as a sacrifice to free us from a dark, rebellious life  
into this good, pure life, making us a people he can be proud of,  
energetic in goodness.*

*2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*

*3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.*

*7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

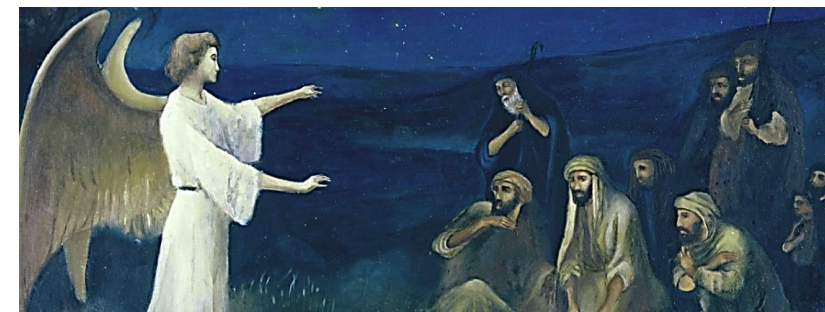
*15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."*

*16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.*

*17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 2:19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 2:20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*



*went from the town of*



The joy of Jesus' birth is proclaimed symbolically to everyone, worldwide. He has come to be the savior of not just the rich and powerful but to all of us, in every social grouping, in any nation, in any financial position. The good news

was proclaimed to the lowly shepherds, not to the ruling class. This was God's way of showing that Jesus is the savior to all. As the angels proclaimed, "peace on earth to all men and women", we then get another insight associated with Jesus' birth. Looking back over the centuries, we now understand that peace was not referring to peace from oppression or peace from sickness, but an inner peace of mind and soul.

We also had three specific observations:

- Jesus was tied to King David since Joseph was a descendent of King David.
- Jesus was Mary's first born. Does that mean there were other children that followed? The answer appears to be yes.
- Peace is proclaimed to all that please him (God), where His favor rests. Pleasing God through prayer and action will bring that blessing of inner peace, something "money can't buy"

What glorious news is being proclaimed!

*6 Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels;  
all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the LORD, take no rest,  
7 and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the  
earth.  
8 The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your  
grain  
to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have  
labored;  
9 but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the LORD, and those who gather it  
shall drink it in my holy courts.  
10 Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up,  
build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.  
11 The LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion,  
"See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."  
12 They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD"; and you shall be  
called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."*

When I saw it was Isaiah, I hoped it might be the images of the New Creation from Isaiah 65 only to be brought up short with a different perspective on God's promises to the Hebrew people. This passage focuses more on the immediate aftermath following the release from exile and captivity.

First comes the promise of relief and protection from the burden of oppression, want, and stolen resources that had been their unhappy reality. And an invitation to breathe a big sigh of relief at the lifting of those heavy burdens and worries and to revel in the freedom from the shame and desolation of the time in exile.

The second part of this scripture focuses on a reminder the task and joy of God's people is to praise God for the all the gifts of that restored freedom. It ends with a charge to go through the gates of the city and clear the pathway and remove the obstacles for all to travel that highway.

For twenty-first century Christians, the images of clearing the way is such a potent one when applied to our Advent preparation. As we are looking forward to the joy of the celebration of the birth of Christ, it can be a reminder to check our own pathways to that moment. Have we allowed that pathway to become cluttered with the potholes and stones of our worries and anxieties? Have we let our busyness and schedules obscure the reason for the joy and celebration?

Instead of railing against or focusing on the "hi-jacking" of Advent and Christmas

in support of holiday sales, we can focus on those around us in the midst of that rush and offer a smile and word of encouragement to a harassed salesclerk or server. Instead of getting irritated by the soundtrack of every commercial space, we can focus on the words of carols embedded in the midst of those tracks and let them redirect our thoughts.

If we do that pause to re-center we can keep our focus on the magnitude of what God has done for humankind and use our awareness of that enormous gift to help us find joy even in our busiest moments. We can take the time to offer that needed word to someone or take the time to share in someone's delight or laughter. We can maintain our own connection to the joy and wonder of Christmas by keeping our focus on amazing gift of Emmanuel- God with us.



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59201>

*New Revised Standard Version*

97:1 *The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!*

2 *Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.* 3 *Fire goes before him and consumes his adversaries on every side.* 4 *His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.* 5 *The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.* 6 *The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.*

7 *All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him.* 8 *Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O God.* 9 *For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.* 10 *The LORD loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.* 11 *Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.*

12 *Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!*



*The Message*

*God rules: there's something to shout over!*

*On the double, mainlands and islands—celebrate!*

2 *Bright clouds and storm clouds circle 'round him; Right and justice anchor his rule.*

3 *Fire blazes out before him, Flaming high up the craggy mountains.*

4 *His lightnings light up the world; Earth, wide-eyed,*

*trembles in fear.* 5 *The mountains take one look at God And melt, melt like wax before earth's Lord.* 6 *The heavens announce that he'll set everything right, And everyone will see it happen—glorious!* 7-8 *All who serve handcrafted gods will be sorry— And they were so proud of their ragamuffin gods! On your knees, all you gods—worship him!*

*And Zion, you listen and take heart! Daughters of Zion, sing your hearts out: God has done it all, has set everything right.*

9 *You, God, are High God of the cosmos, Far, far higher than any of the gods.*

10 *God loves all who hate evil, And those who love him he keeps safe, Snatches them from the grip of the wicked.*

11 *Light-seeds are planted in the souls of God's people, Joy-seeds are planted in good heart-soil.*

12 *So, God's people, shout praise to God, Give thanks to our Holy God!*

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54913>

*3:4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,  
5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done,  
but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.  
6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

What motivates us to do good works? Is it to just make ourselves feel good or to draw attention to ourselves?

In the spring of 2023, the Saturday MCPC Men's Group discussed the book entitled "The Wonder Drug" in which the two physician-authors noted that people live longer, are happier, have less anxiety and depression and burnout, if they are kind to others. Their conclusions were based on reviewing over 300 medical studies. But, the acts of kindness must be genuine and not driven by self-interest. And in late 2023, two additional reports from Harvard Medical School emphasized similar conclusions, one report noting our hearts are healthier when we are kind to others for genuine reasons!

In this Advent Season, perhaps we all can be reminded to be kind and not self-motivated, by remembering the words in this Titus passage. We are saved by the Grace of a kind, loving and caring God, not by any of our good works. Out of our gratitude and thanks for this gift of a loving God, may we be inspired to do good works and to be kind for genuine reasons.



*Birth of Christ.* <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59386>

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them., 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=59186>



*52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."*

*52:8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.*

*52:9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

*52:10 The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

This Bible  
portion  
is a joy to  
read! This prophecy about the church age  
uses words such as beautiful, proclaim peace/  
good tidings/  
salvation, burst  
into songs of joy  
together! It is  
such a blessing  
to be comforted  
by the Lord!



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56347>

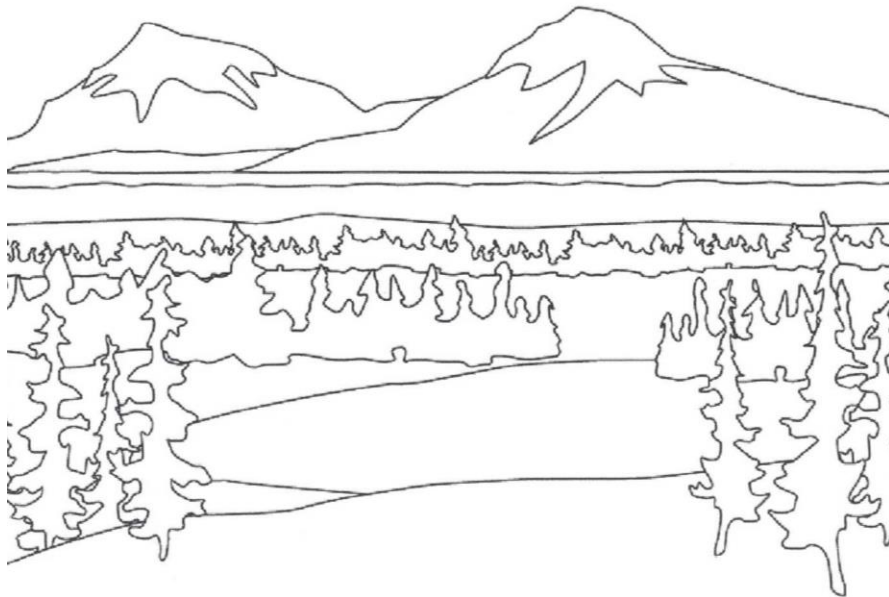
98:1 Sing to God a brand-new song. He's made a world of wonders!  
He rolled up his sleeves, He set things right.  
2 God made history with salvation, He showed the world what he could do.  
3 He remembered to love us, a bonus to his dear family, Israel—undefatigable love.  
The whole earth comes to attention. Look—God's work of salvation!  
4 Shout your praises to God, everybody! Let loose and sing! Strike up the band!  
5 Round up an orchestra to play for God, Add on a hundred-voice choir.  
6 Feature trumpets and big trombones, Fill the air with praises to King God.  
7 Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause, With everything living on earth joining in. 8  
Let ocean breakers call out, "Encore!" And mountains harmonize the finale—  
9 A tribute to God when he comes, When he comes to set the earth right.  
He'll straighten out the whole world, He'll put the world right, and everyone in it.

### A walk in the chilly air!

This change of seasons, right now fall to winter and soon winter to bitter winter, are a time to sing a new song. I would like to think that God is always looking for us to sing new songs in whatever form we want. Make a joyful noise. A walk in the woods or to the top of a mountain or even just in our own backyard are a wonderful time to listen to God's works. "Wow" is a word of praise I have said many times God's love is "undefatigable." I love this word. No fatigue when loving us. It is easy for God to love us.

Take a breath of that chilly air. Wonder in the world around us.  
Feel the presence of God in our life.

I like to picture myself standing at the top of a mountain looking out in wonder at the sight in front of me and with a smile and a round of applause shouting "Encore! Encore!"



**Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)**

**(Dec. 24)**

**Ponder This**

*1:1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,  
2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." 7 Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire."  
8 But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." 10 And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; 11 they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; 12 like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end."*



<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58411>



*1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*2 He was in the beginning with God.*

*3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*

*What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

*5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.*

*7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*

*8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

*9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

*10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.*

*11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*

*12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

*14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

The “Light: in this scriptural passage refers to Jesus’s life illumining the insides of our lives as followers. It exposes our sins and reveals divine truth. Contact with our savior enlightens us. It is only His light that can lead us out of the darkness of our sins into forgiveness and His holiness. It is the only way that we can have fellowship with Him.

Truth ...

1: If we are His children we must not live in darkness; but live in spiritual light that He provides. We must be continually vigilant to take on Christ’ character and qualities. We must transform form within and have fellowship with other believers and in a community of faith!

2: We deceive ourselves if we say we have no sin. We must not deny our sickness but confess it. We need to acknowledge our sins to God, seek forgiveness, and commit to refrain from our sinful ways. He is faithful and just to forgive us. His promises are true. God created us because He wants to have fellowship with us.

3: We who live in Jesus’s light should have a holy perspective in life. Pleasing God, not ourselves, should be our focus. Drawing near to God will lead us to becoming like Him. Our purpose will be about loving and serving others. We are in spiritual war. Let us put on the armor of God!

*Prayer...*

*Your word is truth!*

*Lord...you are my God, full of grace and mercy...*

*hear my voice and praise in prayer...*

*with the intent of my heart that it may*