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Updated November2020 by David Hornor for Advent 2020.

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Waiting for God

A Narrative Lectionary
Advent Devotional

*Written by members
of the Narrative
Lectionary Facebook
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2020



November 29

Waiting for God

Rob Shrader

Daniel 6:6-27

How do you wait? Do you sit pondering things? Do you play on your phone? Do you talk to people? Do you work through your to do list? Do you worry?

The answer to the question of how we wait depends on what it is we're waiting for. King Darius was in an awful position. He signed the edict and was compelled to carry out the punishment. He had Daniel sealed in the lion's

den and then spent an agonizing night, during which “sleep fled from him,” waiting.

I wonder how he spent that time. Maybe he walked the floor of his palace. Maybe he decided to stress eat. Maybe he went for a run. Maybe he talked it out with a friend. We’ll never really know but I’d like to think he spent at least a little time thinking about (or even praying to) God.

We wait for a lot of things but somehow waiting for God feels different. We’re tempted toward doubt or worry much the same way King Darius was. But, perhaps there’s a place for our faith to inform our waiting.

Advent is our reminder to wait and to prepare. As we mark the time between Christ’s Advents we can do so in worry, doubt, and fear or we can do so in full faith in the Living God! When our faith informs our waiting we are moved from doubt to peace.

May the peace of God guard our hearts as we wait together this Advent.

Rev. Rob Shrader is the pastor of Campbellsburg Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Henry County, Kentucky.



November 30

Longing for God

Tracy Spencer-Brown

Daniel 2:31-45

Psalm 25:1-10

“I need thee every hour, most gracious Lord.....”

Today was a difficult day, and in the midst of it, I kept hearing this hymn. I was reminded that we are not alone in this. We do not have to face life on our own. As Christian people, we know this; yet how easy it is to forget sometimes.

The psalmist reminds us, offering her soul to God, and proclaiming her trust, all the while asking for God’s help in being faithful. She desires forgiveness and mercy, and longs for God’s presence.

Annie Hawks began writing poetry and hymns when she was fourteen years old. The most familiar of those is “I Need Thee Every

Hour.” She describes the occasion of penning the hymn:

“I remember well the circumstances under which I wrote the hymn. It was a bright June day, and I became so filled with the sense of the nearness of my Master that I began to wonder how anyone could live without Him, in either joy or pain. Suddenly, the words I need Thee every hour, flashed into my mind, and very quickly the thought had full possession of me.”

We seek God’s nearness. We desire God’s grace and love. In Advent, that longing and desire become even more intense as we await the coming of Christ again. The trick is to lean into it the longing, knowing that God is right there with us all along.

Musical meditation: “I Need Thee Every Hour” as performed by Jars of Clay.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2w3y3iT3NIU>

Rev. Tracy Spencer-Brown is the pastor of Andrews Presbyterian Church in Andrews, Texas.



December 1

Hope

Tara Wilkins

Daniel 3:19-28a

Advent is an invitation to focus our attention on the expectation of God's entry into our lives. We begin with Hope. The late Henri Nouwen said, "Hope is trust that God will fulfil God's promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom". Hope is often born in the midst of dark times. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego experienced the despair of seeming powerlessness. Instead of letting fear immobilize them, they stood in their faith in God and God's ways, and the fire did not overcome them. In

fact, their act of truth-telling bore witness to the living God such that it changed the heart of an angry king.

Advent waiting is time to focus on the truth of whose we are, to wait for God's presence to lead us through our fear and despair, and to proclaim that the God of all creation calls us to divine love, hope, joy and peace. Advent waiting is not passive, it's active. Our waiting is with the confidence that what is going to happen is going to change and transform things in unexpected ways. Advent practice is to wait, eager and alert, to be a part of God's transformation.

This season in the midst of angry kings and uncertain times, we bear witness to God's invitation to care for one another, to not lose sight of the invitation to open our hearts to peace, and not let our fear overcome us for God's reign is at hand.

Rev. Tara Wilkins, pastor at Bridgeport United Church of Christ in Portland, Oregon, and executive director of the Community of Welcoming Congregations.

December 2

Not Here

Julie Holm

Psalm 90



*I wonder as I wander out under the sky
how Jesus our Savior was born for to die
for poor ordinary people like you and like I.*

Psalm 90 lingers and provides a meditation on the shortness of life, and on death. Returning to dust, swept away like grass, wasting away, living at best to be 70 or 80. A strange, strange topic for the beginning of Advent. But Advent, and Christmas, are linked irretrievably to Good Friday, and Good Friday and Easter are linked irretrievably to Advent.

The gift of Salvation, which many Christians link to the cross, and the cross only, is given to us as much in the incarnation. It is as much a gift of the Word who comes to dwell with us, who

comes to be fully human, that we might be raised ourselves. The One who lived life with such integrity that the Roman Empire felt they had no choice but to execute him, the One who was raised, that One who was once the child in a manger, the man baptized by John, the prophet teaching on the hill, the resister shutting down the temple by upturning the tables. It is all tied together.

Glenn Burleigh highlights this in his Christmas Cantata, *Born to Die*. My brother Peter Hamm wrote a beautiful song at Christmas that used the words we know from the Easter story, *He is not Here*. Starting with the shepherds and ending at the tomb, Peter brought together the life of Jesus, the salvation we wait for, into a whole. So as we wait for the birth, let us feel free to still meditate on death.

Listen to *He Is Not Here* at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECOe20XA8nA>

Rev. Julie Holm pastors the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith in Rebersburg and Madisonburg, PA: St. Peter's United Church of Christ, St. Peter's Lutheran (ELCA) and Christ United Church of Christ. She also edited this booklet.

December 3

Vision of Daniel

Chris Deacon

Daniel 7:1-14



Daniel was a prophet when Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian Empire. He and many others were exiled into captivity. In captivity, he served Nebuchadnezzar and his successors, all while remaining faithful to the one true God.

Daniel had seen his home invaded, his kingdom overthrown, and his people exiled. He now has served several foreign kings. Having seen kingdoms fall and kings die, he knows, all

too well, about the frailty of human rulers, kingdoms, and empires. He has a vision of one who appeared human, but answered to God. He has a vision of one who will have dominion over all people, all nations, all the earth. Unlike earthly kingdoms, this kingdom will not be conquered by foreign powers or even by death. This kingdom will be eternal.

As we celebrate Advent, we wait for the time for Christ to come again. We remember that no matter what happens in our earthly kingdom, we wait for the advent of the heavenly kingdom. We wait for that “everlasting dominion that shall not pass away.” We celebrate the “kingship...that will never be destroyed.” Earthly countries and political leaders will rise and fall, we serve the one who is will not fall, will not let us down, and will not end.

Rev. Chris Deacon is a pastor in the PC(USA). He is currently serving the United Parish of Bowie in Bowie, Md, outside of Washington D.C.



December 4
Desolate but not
Hopeless

Catherine Belles

Daniel 9. 20 – 27

Psalm 80.1-3, 14-19

Daniel 9 is midway through a series of visions; ferocious battles in which the Israel is divided and the people scattered before monsters. Daniel, the righteous teacher of the Qumran community, turns to the Lord with a prayer of supplication and traditional mourning posture; fasting, sackcloth and ashes. It is a prayer of “open shame” which “...falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you.” Daniel’s prayers are heard; Gabriel brings the gift of “wisdom and understanding” to explain the vision. However, as it is in explaining a parable, explaining the vision makes it more obscure with an unnamed prince, troops, destruction of the city and sanctuary,

flood and war. This is not a word of comfort and joy. Daniel mourns the struggles of Israel's people until God's final judgment on the "desolator"

We wait... for God...for the Word made flesh, yet, this is The King coming in judgment of those who temporarily wield power; princes and troops. Only those in covenant with God will survive. The desolator, those who destroy, will be destroyed. We are waiting, certain the day of "the decreed end" will come.

Catherine Belles, a pastor of two rural north central Iowa churches, Eden Presbyterian in Rudd and First Presbyterian in Greene, Iowa.

December 5

Wisdom

Allison Byerley

Daniel 2:20-23



Nebuchadnezzar has set an impossible task. He's had a disturbing dream and he wants his magicians, enchanters, or anybody to tell him what the dream was and interpret it, or, to put it another way, to read his mind and then explain the dream. If they can't do both, they will be torn limb from limb. Not surprisingly, no one takes him up on the challenge!

That sends the king into a fury, and he decides to kill them anyway. They are about to be executed when Daniel steps in to save the day. Well, God through Daniel saves the day.

Before revealing the dream and its meaning, Daniel starts with a word of praise. He knows who has given him the answer to the

king's demand and Daniel, ever faithful, boldly proclaims that wisdom and power are God's to give, that God reveals hidden things, and Daniel thanks and praises God.

Comedian Stephen Colbert famously invented the word "truthiness," which is defined as the preference for facts that one wishes or believes to be true rather than those known to be true. We live in a truthiness world with true wisdom in short supply. Daniel reminds us where true wisdom is to be found. God gives wisdom and understanding, which may seem foolishness to the world. God's wisdom reminds us that the meek inherit the earth and the cross, emblem of death, is life to those who are being saved.

Let us prepare to receive God's wisdom, embodied in his Son, who came as one of us to show us the fullness of God's love and grace.

Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Hawkins, TX.



December 6

Coming Home

Jessica McCrae

Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Every December feels like a homecoming to me. I think it goes back to the first year I left home, to go to university. There was always an excitement building as I crossed final assignments and exams off my to do list, knowing I was going home soon. Now, I still feel like I'm getting ready to go home, even when I'm travelling nowhere. But that is what advent is all about, the act of preparing and planning and waiting to come home again to Bethlehem, to come home again to God's love being born again into our lives.

In the reading for today, Joel reminds us that wherever the previous year has taken us, no matter how broken and bruised we may be when we reach that sable door, we can come home. Our God is abounding in steadfast love, and like the warmest of homes, we will be showered in love and our dreams encouraged.

This Advent as you pour a cup of tea or a glass of wine, consider what you need to prepare in order to return to home to God, to receive the love God is pouring out for you.

Rev. Jessica McCrae is with the United Church of Canada and the minister of Humbercrest United Church in Toronto, Ontario.



December 7

Home

Jo Mead

Ezra 1:1-11

Nehemiah 9:1-3, 4-8

What does it mean to go home? And who gets to go home? The Folger's coffee commercials for the holidays can always bring me to tears. Someone travels all night to get home to the family for the holiday. Tears are shed as the family realizes they are together once more.

But what does it mean to each of us to think about going home/finding home? Have we made lives and found community in the place that once was new and unknown? What does it

mean to leave your place of exile which has become home? How was it that this place that once was strange is now comfortable?

My prayer is that you know your home. Your community has claimed you as well as you claiming it. There are people surrounding you to help you make your way in the world. That even King Cyrus will come to help you on your journey by giving you that which were always yours to claim. It is unexpected that even the King lends a hand to restore rightful ownership. And yet, he hands you the treasures you seek this season: hope, love, joy and peace.

In this season of waiting my hope is that you carry with you the silver and gold of belonging. And that you know your place in the kingdom of love.

Jo Mead is a pastor in Wichita, Kansas. She loves to laugh and find fun.



December 8

Remember

Allison Byerley

Nehemiah 9:1-3, 9-15

In the TV show “Blindspot” a woman emerges from a duffle bag in Times Square, covered in enigmatic tattoos that are clues to crimes and criminals. However, she has amnesia. Her past is a mystery and living without a past impacts her present and her future. She desperately wants to know who she is, to have an identity.

The people of Israel have spiritual amnesia. In the decades of exile, they lost their connection to the stories of Israel and how God delivered and preserved them. As Nehemiah leads them in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, he also has to help them recover their spiritual memory, to know who God is and what God has done. The people gather and hear their history with God, beginning with creation. Today, they remember God hearing their cry when they were slaves, God's deliverance, and God's care in the wilderness. Remembering gives them identity and purpose.

Do we have spiritual amnesia in this season? Advent is a time to remember why Jesus, though in the form of God, emptied himself and became human. As we wait for the Christ child to be born, remember how God has acted and is acting among us. Advent reminds us of our identity in Christ, whose we are and who we are. Remember and share the story and yourself with someone this Christmas.

Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Hawkins, TX.

December 9

Everything Awry

Susie Webster Toleno

Joel 1:13-20

Nehemiah 9:1-3, 16-21



I am a Christian. I suppose that goes without saying in this context, but I repeat it to myself from time to time when I am faced with what seems like an interminable time of despair, worry, or simply waiting. Maybe you've faced those times, too, when all of your attempts to control outcomes, or to make something you're sure is good happen, have seemed to be for naught. In those moments, I find that it helps to remind myself, out loud if necessary, that I am a Christian, a believer in God's unending love and presence, a truster in God's promises.

The prophet Ezra is speaking to a people who are in such a condition, who feel that everything they've done has got awry – whose

hope lingers, but only in wisps. Ezra helps them through by calling them to remember who they are, and whose they are. He calls them to repent of their own hard-headedness, and to place their trust in God. He reminds them of God's trustworthiness, of God's mighty deeds and of God's providence.

Prayer: As we wait for the Lord this holy season, may we remember God's deeds. May we remember that God has given us bread from heaven and water from the rock. And in remembering, may we all know peace, courage, and patience.

Susie Webster-Toleno is an ordained UCC pastor serving a groovy little micro-congregation (Congregational Church of Westminster West, UCC) in rural southern Vermont in a half-time capacity. She is also a hospice spiritual counselor.



December 10

The Goat at the Party

Jan Gregory

Ezra 6:13-22

I hear Ezra's description of the first celebration of the Passover in the newly dedicated "house of God" and can only imagine the peak emotions of such a gathering. Amidst all the preparation, the corralling and consecrating of carefully counted bulls, rams and lambs, generous sacrifices worthy of this pinnacle point in time, there is this smaller acknowledgment that even now, with our joy at full throttle, we need to acknowledge our "lesser nature," our unbecomingness, our sin. Ezra recounts that among the abundance offerings made in joyful thanksgiving: "and a sin offering for all Israel," 12 he-goats, one for each tribe.

We don't usually like to go there in the midst of our joy and celebrations. We don't want

to be reminded of our Scrooge-like natures when we're singing Christmas carols or our rancor when we're lighting candles of peace. But there it is. Right in the middle of "the most wonderful time of the year." The goat at the party. Not just one, but twelve, every tribe included.

Advent offers us an invitation to make ready for God's joyful incarnation into our lives, but also to pause and remember just how and why it is we need a savior. So, let's rope our stubborn goat-like hearts, prone to wander - Lord, I feel it - and bring them forward, too, in the middle of this season of God's coming, tucked in between the shining gifts of profound joy that new incarnation brings, and lay them on the altar of God's amazing grace, offering our best and our worst that we might be truly born once more into new life.

Rev. Dr. Jan Gregory-Charpentier is the pastor of First Congregational Church of Westbrook, CT.

December 11

Gus

Bruce Ehlert

Nehemiah 8:1-12



Reading Nehemiah reminds me of Gus.

Gus was a hard-working guy. Immigrating from Germany after WWII, Gus built a life in western Canada, constructing the massive brown grain elevators that once loomed over our prairie landscape. Twice widowed, his house was tiny, but his garage/workshop was immense. After he retired, you'd find Gus puttering with something in his workshop every day except Sunday, when he would arrive at the church 20 minutes early -- like clockwork.

Looking for Gus sitting in the sanctuary (in the back row, of course) became part of my own preparation ritual. Later, I learned that coming to church early to pray and "prepare one's heart"

for worship and Holy Communion is a time-honoured German tradition.

The women and men in Nehemiah are like Gus. Working hard, stubbornly building a temple and a life in a new land, they were hungry to hear God's Word. They wanted to hear from God so much, they were willing to stand from early morning until noon in the hot Mediterranean sun. (And afterward, they went for brunch – something else Gus would appreciate!)

Reading Nehemiah as Christmas approaches makes me wonder... do we eagerly anticipate worship? Or is it another chore? During Advent busyness, is spending time with Jesus -- "the Word made flesh" -- a priority?

I pray it will be, for both you and me.

Rev. Bruce Ehlert serves Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sherwood Park, near Edmonton, in central Alberta, Canada.



December 12

Straying

Rob Shrader

Nehemiah 12:27-43

Nehemiah 9:1-3, 32-37

A friend of mine used to use her morning walk as prayer time. She had a beloved dog that needed daily walking so it seemed a natural centering time. She began her walks with confession. As she moved away from her house she'd list the areas of her life that needed attention and forgiveness. After she made the turn for home she'd switch to petition and eventually she'd move to praise, ending on a positive note. Describing her routine she said, "That walk away from home was a painful symbol of how far I've strayed from God."

It's never fun to admit when we're wrong. As the people of God made their confessions in Nehemiah 9 I imagine the mood was heavy and the pain was difficult. Sitting with the knowledge

that we've fallen short of the glory of God is not an easy burden to bear. However, realizing our need for God's grace makes that grace all the more amazing to receive.

This time of year is mostly marked with joy and laughter as we move from one holiday activity to another. But we would do well to take time to pause and to consider our sinfulness and our need for forgiveness. Coming face to face with our mistakes makes receiving the gift of the Christ-child all the more powerful.

No matter how far away from God we stray we are always blessed with the invitation to turn back toward home – to receive the grace of God.

Rev. Rob Shrader is the pastor of Campbellsburg Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Henry County, Kentucky.



December 13 Glimpses of the Kingdom

Tracy Spencer-
Brown

Isaiah 61:1-11

When I read this passage from Isaiah, I am reminded of the trip I made to Central America in the early 1990s. The group I traveled with visited El Salvador, which was still in civil war at that time. We met people who were brokenhearted, without hope to stop the tide of violence in their country. We met those who were oppressed, who had had their lands seized, and who were afraid to speak out about the human rights violations happening daily around them. We met those who had been imprisoned, and those who had family who were “disappeared” - gone -and presumably forcibly conscripted by the government forces.

Despite the circumstances, the Salvadorian people were not people of faint spirit, but were filled with deep faith and praise. The people stood against the fear and violence like oaks of righteousness, and they

trusted boldly in our God who is just, and worshipped God with joy. We went to learn, and the Salvadorian people brought us the Good News.

Their faith was tangible. They were eager to tell us their stories. They graciously and warmly welcomed us to worship, which was the most moving experience for me, even though I speak not a word of Spanish! They led us in Bible study – and we heard the gospel with new ears. They embodied a faith that made mine seem pale in comparison.

Jesus proclaimed these words of Isaiah as he began his earthly ministry. He lived a life that fulfilled that prophecy. We're not sure what it will look like when the kingdom comes, but sometimes we catch glimpses. In El Salvador, God gave me a glimpse. For that I give thanks and praise.

Rev. Tracy Spencer-Brown is the pastor of Andrews Presbyterian Church in Andrews, Texas.

December 14

Joy

Tara Wilkins

Isaiah 63:7-14



Advent joy reminds us of the abundance of God's love. Isaiah's words call us to remember God's grace filled acts in the world. They are a call to extravagant joy. But researcher and scholar Brene' Brown, in her book, *Daring Greatly*, points out our resistance to joy. She writes, "In a culture of deep scarcity--of never feeling safe, certain, and sure enough, joy can feel like a setup". She goes on to say that when life is going really well, we begin to anticipate that disaster must then be right around the corner. We're always waiting for the other shoe to drop, so we don't let ourselves feel joy.

This sense of foreboding joy is just what Isaiah is speaking to. The people were saved by God's abundant love, but they struggled to let it in, so they grieved instead. We celebrate

God's presence in our midst, God's transformation and grace. And then, not wanting to feel too vulnerable, we begin to shut out joy, to not let ourselves feel it. We begin to feel that we don't have enough, that we aren't enough, that something bad must be about to happen. And we erect walls around our hearts.

But we can't have a mentality of scarcity, when we have a theology of abundance. The antidote to foreboding joy is practicing gratitude. Joy can be practiced every day. Isaiah said, "recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord". The Advent practice of joy is a call to gratitude as a form of prayer. When we remember just how much God has done for us, when we notice moments where God's love is made real, when we look at life around us with a sense of awe and wonder, we experience joy. In this Advent season, may we heed the call to extravagant joy!

Rev. Tara Wilkins, pastor at Bridgeport United Church of Christ in Portland, Oregon, and executive director of the Community of Welcoming Congregations.

December 15

Creating Righteous People

Catherine Belles

Isaiah 63:15-64:12

Isaiah 12:2-6



Ms. Hanson, red curly hair, big smile, freckles and artistic creativity. In Riverdale Jr. High, we had never encountered anyone like her. Art taught me something amazing: Creation is ongoing. Working with clay, paint, yarn, wax, wood and carving tools, shaped and changed by my hands meant I had power within me. I made choices that could result in beauty, me, my choices.

“Why O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?” As I wrestled with clay, that just would not turn into something beautiful, the fault laid in my hands, not the clay. Our Lord, our father, our creator is the potter and we are the clay. We wait for the father’s hands to craft us into something beautiful and useful, something amazing. Would we not sin if the Lord were fully here? If we were not in that time betwixt and between?

Advent is a time to ask our father, the Lord, to make the crooked straight and the rough places plain. The clay, I, am waiting for the potter’s hands. I am waiting for the father to wash me and lead me to righteousness.

Catherine Belles, a pastor of two rural north central Iowa churches, Eden Presbyterian in Rudd and First Presbyterian in Greene, Iowa.



December 16

Isaiah's Vision

Chris Deacon

Isaiah 65:17-25

Isaiah 11:1-9

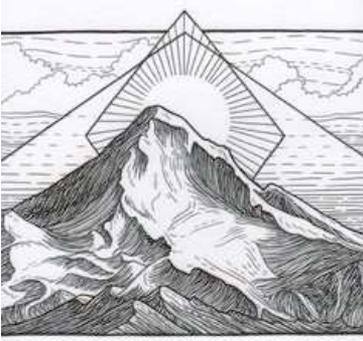
Sandy Hook. Iraq. Pulse. Syria. Mother Emanuel. Afghanistan. We don't have to look far to see violence in the world. We see needless killing both in our own communities and abroad. The world can be a very scary place. Isaiah was living in a scary place too. King Uzziah had died, leaving uncertainty and the Assyrian Empire was expanding beyond Judah's borders.

It is no wonder that Isaiah's vision of the Messiah was one who would bring peace. It is a message we can't hear enough of today. Isaiah gives a litany of natural enemies not only coexisting, but cohabitating. The wolf and the lamb live together, the leopard lying down with the baby goat, and the calf and the lion together.

The cow and bear lie down together while the lion eats straw like an ox. What beautiful imagery! Natural enemies living together in harmony.

As we celebrate advent, we wait for the time when Christ will come again. We wait for the time when Isaiah's vision will come to be. We wait and pray for a time when the lion will lay down with the lamb, when violence will cease, when God's peace will rule. As we wait, we should remember the words of the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven," and ask ourselves who are our enemies? What are doing to make peace with them?

Rev. Chris Deacon is a pastor in the PC(USA). He is currently serving the United Parish of Bowie in Bowie, Md, outside of Washington D.C.



December 17

... and the kingdom
shall be the Lord's

Julie King

Obadiah 1:17-21/Amos 9:11-15

There are different ways to think about what is just and right in the world. For centuries, God's people lived by the "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" system of Leviticus. Whatever one inflicted upon another, one must endure in punishment.

But the prophet Obadiah brings a different message, not to Israel but to Edom. The Edomites were terribly cruel to the people of Israel when the Babylonians took them into exile. They didn't just look on and laugh—they also looted the homes and cities and turned refugees over to Babylon to be enslaved or killed. They heaped great misery upon Israelites already overwhelmed with sorrow.

Obadiah's message to Esau was a warning that the people of Israel hadn't forgotten what the Edomites had done. They would be back to take over Edom and rule over them. Such a message must have caused some anxiety as the people considered what Israel might do to them in retaliation.

But the last verse in this short book describes how Israel was to rule over the Edomites. “The kingdom shall be the Lord’s.” The kingdom of God’s people shall be marked by justice, fairness, mercy. As Eugene Peterson puts it: “a rule that honors God’s kingdom.”

As God’s people, we are called to live by a different standard. We’re part of a new kingdom, not ruled by human leaders or driven by nationalistic agendas. We seek not to dominate but to serve, not to conquer but to care, not power but purpose. We seek not our own glory but justice for those who need it, not to strike out at those who strike us but to turn the other cheek instead.

This is what we wait for in this Advent season, but it’s also what we’re called to strive and work for. This kingdom of justice and fairness and mercy, established by Christ, is in our hands. If “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,” as Ghandi said, then in God’s kingdom, may all who are part of it see and hear and experience true justice and true peace.

Julie King is the pastor of Macon Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, Brookfield (PCUSA) in northern Missouri.

December 18

Zephaniah
ben Cushi

Julie Holm

Zephaniah 3:9-13



I am a white woman. Therefore it is unusual that I went to Howard University for Seminary. The flagship historically black university, Howard has been called the “Black Harvard.” And, yes, I was the only white person in most of my classes. I learned to see Jesus, a marginalized child born in the poverty of a manger, as black.

Zephaniah’s heritage, noted at the beginning of his prophecies tells us he is from Ethiopia, in Africa. With a first name that means “YHWH protects,” Zephaniah diversifies the Hebrew prophets in his own body, through his parentage.

Zephaniah's message diversifies the scriptures. Sitting at the end of a series of eight oracles, calling the nations to task nation, this oracle brings it together. From the edges of the earth, in Africa, God's people will come, giving offering. Not just the Israelites. Everyone. Like Isaiah's, Zephaniah's God is a "light to the nations."

It is far too easy to understand God coming in terms of ourselves and our own culture. This prophet reminds us, in stark terms, that God's love, God's message, and God's grace are for all of us. And God comes to and is with all of us.

Yes, to see God clearly, we need to see that the people of God are of all sorts. If we only see God in those like ourselves, we will miss the divine presence. Yes, one of the prophets was African. And sometimes white folks like me need to see the babe in manger as black.

Rev. Julie Holm pastors the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith in Rebersburg and Madisonburg, PA: St. Peter's United Church of Christ, St. Peter's Lutheran (ELCA) and Christ United Church of Christ. She also edited this booklet.



December 19
Light for the
journey

Jessica McCrae

Zephaniah 3:14-20

*“There is a crack, a crack, in everything ...
that’s how the light gets in ...”*

No matter where you are in the world, I think it is fair to say we’ve all been through a lot this year – 2016 has been challenging. We have witnessed war, the desperation of refugees fleeing, terrorism, missile test launches, the American election campaign, and the Brexit vote. We are bombarded with fear, signs of division and far too much anger. So, it wouldn’t be surprising if we feel we are journeying through this advent with a few aches and pains, and a whole lot of yearning.

How wonderful then, to encounter Zephaniah today! His song of joy today feels like a balm to our tired and bruised hearts, describing a time when disaster will be removed, shame will be transformed to praise and joy will be our song.

Imagine!

A life without fear.

Despite how broken the world may seem, this vision God has is breaking into the darkness, the light is getting in, preparing to be born into our world. Let's reflect it when we find it, and help guide each other home.

Rev. Jessica McCrae is with the United Church of Canada and the minister of Humbercrest United Church in Toronto, Ontario.



December 20

How Can This Be?

Jo Mead

Luke 1:26-29

“How can this be?” she asked. This may be a question you are asking this season of waiting and wondering. How can I set one less plate at the holiday table? How can it be that the years are adding up on my driver’s license? How can it be that I have pushed away the ones I need the most? How can I hope that something might work out? How can this be?

Even in the dark days of winter we stand in the hope of Light coming into the world. An angel appears with a message beyond any of our wildest dreams. How can this be?

One of the mysteries of faith is hearing the voice calling you to your purpose in life. It may come from a friend, a stranger or simply the awareness of knowing. You may argue or discount the call but it continues to seek you.

How can this be that God is breaking into our lives? These lives that are complicated with depression, heartache, grief and disrespect. These lives that are broken and need healing. How can this be? Because God's love will continue to break into our lives, sent by unexpected messengers, calling us forward to living into the kingdom here and now with hope, love, joy and peace. This can be.

Reverend Jo Mead is a native Kansan. She serves University United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas.

December 21

Infertility

Julie Holm

Luke 1:4-25



The beginning of the Gospel of Luke centers around two women. One, Mary is young and finds herself pregnant with Jesus. The other is Elizabeth. Elizabeth is barren, but finds herself pregnant with John the Baptist.

In biblical times being barren was a great hardship. Sarah, Hannah, and a host of other women struggle with infertility. These women were non-persons in a society and they suffered deeply for it.

Women still suffer from infertility. The promise of expensive fertility treatment does

not always succeed. Mothers suffer, too. Those with prodigal children, with handicapped children, who bear children who die, during pregnancy or during life, bear deep sorrows.

Luke, and other bible writers, identify God as the solution to this. But the miraculous births in scripture might have a bitter taste those dealing with these sorrows. The scandal of a God who lets children die befuddles many a theologian. Christmas is bitter to those dealing with such deep loss.

But through this darkness some have found a relationship with God in the darkness. Some have found a God who walks with them through their bitterness and sorrow. Let us remember and have compassion on those who suffer at Christmas – for whatever reason. Let us reach out a hand, not to explain – we can't – but to journey through the dark with them. At Christmas and always.

Rev. Julie Holm pastors the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith in Rebersburg and Madisonburg, PA: St. Peter's United Church of Christ, St. Peter's Lutheran (ELCA) and Christ United Church of Christ. She also edited this booklet.

December 22

Elizabeth

Susie Webster-
Toleno

Luke 1:39-45



*And blessed is the fruit
of your womb*

With what wisdom did Elizabeth understand
the fire of life that approached her,
costumed as her simply country cousin?

What was the sacred seed of joy
that leapt within her,
and how did it come to be
planted in such an unlikely host?

With what insight did she recognize
that something holy,
something blessed,
had taken root?

I am not Jesus.

I am not Mary, vessel of such holiness.

I am not John, the leaping seed or the raging prophet.

May I be Elizabeth,
she who notices holiness
and calls it by name.

Susie Webster-Toleno is an ordained UCC pastor serving a groovy little micro-congregation (Congregational Church of Westminster West, UCC) in rural southern Vermont in a half-time capacity. She is also a hospice spiritual counselor.



December 23

Magnificat

Lynn Bohlmann

Luke 1:46-56

As we get another day closer to the day we celebrate Jesus' birth, we are reminded again that we wait for God to come to us. We wait in hope for we know that the presence of God-with-us transforms us, transforms our world.

In a world with so many hurt people, in a world that is broken, in a world that seems to elevate the powerful and proud, we sing our song of hope with Mary. We wait and we remember that the birth of Jesus is transformative in ways that we only begin to imagine. We wait in hope.

Echoing the song of Mary as she praises God not only for being with the poor, the low, the broken but also in bringing them up, Dietrich Bonhoeffer considers the amazing hope of the birth of Christ.

"God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken." (God in the Manger)

Much of the world is in shock at the results of the US election, wondering just what the promises of hate will amount to and wondering how, if and when God will enter the scene.

As we wait for God, in this birth story and beyond, we trust that Christ is always being born in whatever dark circumstances grip our world. We wait in hope.

*Rev. Lynn Bohlmann is the Pastor of Congregational
United Church of Christ in Jacksonville, IL., USA.*



December 24 God's Census

Mary Austin

Luke 2:1-7

The story of Jesus' birth opens with a display of the emperor's power, but the power of God is at work in even deeper ways. God's plans are unfolding for people who have been waiting for centuries. A ruler now long forgotten issues an order, and his plans gets Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem to be part of God's plans. God's power is revealed, as the unlikely heir to David's throne is born in the city of David.

History preserves the names of kings and queens, generals and inventors, but the Bible gives us the names of everyday women and men who are part of God's plans. Mary. Joseph. Rahab. Ruth. Daniel. Lazarus, and so many more. If God were having a census, the registering of names would be completely different.

As the Christmas story is read, we can be sure that our names are counted in God's registry, too. We each have a place in the Christmas story. In the year that Grace was an accountant, God was born into the world again. In the year that Bob was a teacher, Juan was an engineer, Darya was elected to the state house, God chose to be born into our world again. In the year that you or I took our place in God's plans, the time came and God was born into the world again.

Faithful God,
Behind all of our waiting,
We know that your plans are growing to fulfillment.
Use our lives, we pray,
To be part of your story of love, grace and welcome.
In the name of the Christ Child, Amen.

Rev. Mary Austin is the pastor of Westminster Church, a diverse Presbyterian congregation in Detroit.



December 25
The Best Gift

Allison Byerly

Luke 2:8-20

An American couple worked with orphans in Russia, sharing with them the story of Christmas. Many of the children were hearing it for the first time. After they finished, the couple gave the children a craft to make their own manger with the baby Jesus. They walked among the children, offering help and praise.

They came to one little boy named Misha. They were startled to see that there were two babies in the manger and asked him about it. Solemnly, he retold them the Christmas story, but when he got to Mary putting Jesus in the manger, he ad libbed.

“Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma or poppa and no place to stay. Jesus said I could stay with him, but I told him no because I have no gift for him. But I wanted to stay so much that I asked, ‘If I keep you warm, will that be a good gift?’ And he said, ‘That would be the best gift.’ So I got in the manger with him and Jesus said I could stay with him always.”

Misha reminds us that we received the best gift on Christmas – Jesus. On this Christmas Day, spend some time with Jesus who invites us to abide in his love always.

Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Hawkins, TX.