



FLING WIDE THE DOOR

2022 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

"Fling Wide the Door" (ELW 259)

1

Fling wide the door, unbar the gate;
the King of glory comes in state;
the Lord of lords and King of kings,
the Savior of the world who brings
his great salvation to the earth.
So raise a shout of holy mirth
and praise our God and Lord,
Creator, Spirit, Word.

2

He is the rock of our belief,
the heart of mercy's gentle self.
His kingly crown is holiness;
his scepter is his loveliness;
he brings our sorrows to an end.
Now gladly praise our king and friend,
and worship him with song
for saving us from wrong.

3

Oh, happy towns and blessed lands
that live by their true king's commands.
And blessed be the hearts he rules,
the humble places where he dwells.
He is the rightful Son of bliss
who fills our lives and makes us his,
creator of the world,
our only strength for good.

4

Come, Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ;
our hearts are open wide in trust.
Oh, show us now your lovely grace,
upon our sorrows shine your face,
and let your Holy Spirit guide
our journey in your grace so wide.
We praise your holy name,
from age to age the same!

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Sunday, November 27

"Fling Wide the Door" (ELW 259)

When my now-adult daughters come home for a visit, I often wait for them by the front window, watching for their arrival. As the car pulls up, I will go to the door, open it wide, greet them with a hug and a kiss, help them carry things into the house, escort them in, and do my best to welcome them home. I can prepare for and celebrate my daughters' arrivals because I know what they love, what they expect to see and do, and what they need to be comfortable. As we enter into this time of Advent, looking forward to and preparing for the Christmas "visit" of the Christ child, I invite us to wonder together what might make Jesus feel welcomed, even as he welcomes us with a radical grace and love vastly beyond our simple hospitality.

Dear Jesus, we long to welcome you with open arms and hearts every day, but especially now as we prepare to celebrate your birth. Help us to listen to your story deeply, so that we can learn and move confidently into our preparations for your arrival. Amen.

Monday, November 28

Isaiah 11:1-10

At the time of the writing of this Isaiah reading, people didn't have a lot of reasons to be hopeful. Their country had been overtaken by Assyria, their dreams of a united and powerful kingdom crushed by oppression and warring. They felt like a stump of a mighty tree, cut off and worthless. But the prophet Isaiah paints a picture of hope—a branch growing out of that stump, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, actions of mercy founded on words rather than weapons. We too, have been through hard times, facing natural disasters, a pandemic, and war. Isaiah's words encourage us to remember that God has acted in the past to make new beginnings out of that which we thought would be the end, and that God will do so again. What images come to your mind when you dream of a time of new beginnings?

Oh God of new beginnings, sometimes it is difficult for us to trust in the hopefulness of your presence when so many things around us are falling apart. As we go through our day, help us to see glimpses of your creative power, bringing new life in unexpected ways. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

The psalm for today invites us to pray for our leaders, not merely for the sake of their personal wellbeing, but more so that their leadership may lead to the wellbeing of the people in their care. At a time when political divisiveness is so pervasive, it is good for all of us to remember that a failure in leadership doesn't only affect a distant political party or particular person; the effects ripple out to our most intimate communities. How we engage with the various leaders and how those leaders then engage the issues of the poor and oppressed will deeply shape the health of the overall community; when we are pitted against one another we lose the vision and possibility of God's kingdom. As you walk or drive through your neighborhood today, what prayers can you lift up for the leaders in your area?

God who is called Lord, and Jesus who is called Prince and King, help shape our imaginations about how good leadership works. May we honor your leadership by looking to you for wisdom and insight and keeping everyone in our community in prayer even when it seems difficult to do so. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

Romans 15:4-13

Today's reading from Romans encourages us to live in harmony with one another. For the writer, Paul, this isn't a shallow "let's all get along" sort of feeling. Rather, he is communicating a sense of hope—an openness to possibility—that when we build up our neighbor, we begin to live into the vision of unity that God has intended for us. There are many things that are at work to divide people and put them into different boxes, tribes, or groups. Jesus repeatedly brings these different people together, as welcomed guests to his common table, to remind us that our different talents and viewpoints can be in service to one another rather than used to tear each other apart. In the reality of our broken relationships, we may not always be able to actively live into this space. But when the opportunity arises to meet someone new or different, how might you engage in words and actions of welcoming that reflect Christ's welcome for you?

Jesus, in your travels you sat at many tables, inviting disciples, scholars, sinners, soldiers, and others to experience each other in your presence. As we go through our day, help us to practice that hospitality and life-giving curiosity about the people you place in our path. Amen.

Thursday, December 1

Matthew 3:1-12

"The kingdom of heaven has come near!" John the Baptist's message is urgent, telling people that now is the time to pay attention, now is the time to change. He is equally clear about who people should be preparing for so that they know the appropriate activities. When my daughter was young, in one of my less-than-stellar parenting moments, I said that Christmas wouldn't come if her room didn't get picked up and she didn't go to sleep. My very young theologian reminded me that Jesus would indeed come, and he probably didn't care if her room was picked up! The kingdom of heaven and Jesus continue to draw near to us in our daily lives. What do we urgently need to pay attention to, and what activities ought we be engaged in so that we are focused on welcoming Jesus into our lives rather than satisfying our own desires for perfection, organization, status, or tradition?

Jesus, you come into our lives desiring our time and attention for you and for our neighbor. As the busyness of Christmas preparations swirls around us, continue to remind and show us how to engage in these activities in a way that brings your welcome and love to those we encounter each day. Amen.

Friday, December 2

Matthew 3:1-12

Where I live, near Saint Paul, Minnesota, summer is filled with road construction. Traffic is rerouted while roads are fixed to be smooth and allow for efficient travel. When I think of the prophet Isaiah's words of "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," this image often comes to mind. I also wonder if there is something about our activity in building up one another, living in harmony, and being mindful about our words of hopefulness that makes the path straighter for the work of Christ in our midst. Maybe it makes it easier for the words of Jesus to land in another person's ears, or prepares our own hearts to be changed. When we neglect our own spiritual well-being or our neighbors' needs, it is like digging a pothole or putting a large boulder right in the middle of our common pathway of life. How might you engage in creating or clearing a path today?

Jesus, we confess that our actions sometimes break down communications and relationships rather than build them up. As we go through our day today, may we focus on words and actions that create a clear path to you and the beloved kingdom you have brought near to us. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

"Fling Wide the Door" (ELW 259, Verse 1)

"Fling wide the door!" The opening lines from our hymn paint a picture of exuberant, radical welcome. There is no hesitation as if opening the door by just a crack to see who might be ringing the doorbell. The writer is joyfully and fully opening the house, town, or perhaps even their heart to receive the beloved guest. We can only do that in a state of unconditional love and trust of the one who is arriving. As I work with people, leaders, and congregations, it isn't uncommon that I sense a hesitancy in opening the door to Jesus, a concern that one might be seen as weak, or wrong, or less intelligent if they lean into their faith and trust this mysterious relationship. As you imagine the opportunity to welcome Jesus into your home or community, how would you open the door?

Jesus, you welcome us fully into your kingdom and your presence. As we prepare for your arrival, may we find ways to learn about you, lean into your hopes for humankind, and open the door widely to welcome all that you have to offer us. Amen.

Sunday, December 4

“Fling Wide the Door” (ELW 259, Verse 2)

The second verse of our hymn shows an interesting tension between rock and heart. When we hear the words rock and foundation, we often think of things that are hard and everlasting. And yet, the writer says that the very core and foundation of our belief is heart, mercy, and gentleness—traits that we often think of as being soft and relatively short-lived. And in a similar way, later in the verse we sing that he brings our sorrows to an end so that we may praise him for saving us from wrong. We often think that sorrows end because that which is causing the sorrow is taken away; not often do we think that our own action could be the culprit! Jesus is always engaging in these creative tensions, loving us even though we misunderstand and get in our own way. As you think about your relationship with Jesus and others, what role does forgiveness—of ourselves and others—play in this idea of welcome? How might forgiveness change your ability to fling wide the door?

Jesus, we come to you knowing that we don't measure up to your holiness in ways that deserve your love, and this keeps us from truly coming to you or welcoming you with joy. Continue to take our doubt, shame, and burdens away so that we can come to you in joyful worship! Amen.

Monday, December 5

Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of a desert flourishing with life, people strengthened and healed from physical disease, and a path that can be traveled with no fear of danger or getting lost. In their time and culture, this picture describes the hope of what God would restore to the exiled people of Israel even as the realities of life showed them something quite different. As you think about the realities in your life, and the hope you believe God can restore, what might you describe? Where are the weak becoming strong? Where is disease being healed? Hearing of God's action in the past allows us to trust that God is still acting today. It is possible that even now hope is coming to life; keep your eyes open to see the signs of new life and growth appearing around you.

Creator God, you bring hope to new life every day; maybe not to the fullness of Isaiah's picture, but in small ways that we can glimpse and hold onto. Give us the eyes, ears, and heart to perceive what you are already doing, so that we can rejoice and hope in the kingdom you are creating right now. Amen.

Tuesday, December 6

Psalm 146:5-10

The psalm today is the song of the person flinging open the door, welcoming the Lord of lords and King of kings! There are no words of not being prepared or having made great preparations; the sole focus is on the one who is arriving. As we think of our own Advent preparations, what might it mean to leave behind our personal concerns and aspirations, even for a short period of time, in order to focus on being welcoming and grateful for the One who is arriving? And welcoming not only for the Christ child in a manger, but also for the risen Christ and his holy love for prisoners, strangers, and orphans—a mature love that needs to break through the hard parts of life.

Holy Spirit, it can be easy to welcome a child with love and open arms. We know that Jesus walked on this earth to promise and give so much more than a holiday with gifts. As we open our own doors and gates this season, may our eyes be wide open to the fullness of what Jesus promises and to whom—giving us a vision of the fullness of life. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7

James 5:7-10

In the late winter several years ago, my husband, impatient with the cold and desiring to garden, began growing seedlings under UV lights in our basement. Hidden from view and unbeknownst to others, he doted on those plants with scientific precision, trimming and watering those infant greens with tender care.

While restless for the moment he could bring those small vines out into the spring warmth, he knew they needed to first prepare for the outside elements—water, light, and wind. He'd take a small fan, and with alarming speed its blades would beat those tiny leaves with air, strengthening the stems of the seedlings in preparation for the season's storms.

When those small vegetables were finally received in the soil, they were ready in the way only a well-cared for plant could be, their roots gripping powerfully to the earth and their leaves reaching high to the sun.

Dear God, as we anxiously wait for the reminder of the coming of your son and our savior Jesus Christ, tend to us with loving hands and root our hearts against the buffeting winds that beat against our lives and those we love. In your compassion and mercy we pray. Amen.

Thursday, December 8

Matthew 11:2-11

"I'm bored," my daughters declared from the back seat, only an hour into a long day's drive to our vacation destination. They had burned through the best of my pre-planned activities, and it was hard not to sympathize, knowing all too well the struggle with the suffering of boredom.

I myself had packed three books, a crochet project, two movies on my phone, and car snacks. The "not-quite-there-yet" state of waiting was painful for me too.

I realized that all the entertainment—the study, the work, the consumption in the face of boredom—was an escape from the time and space to reflect on the things I'd avoided and to feel regret for the things I'd done. The agony of waiting, I discovered, was not the waiting itself, but what was waiting there for me—the "not-quite-there-yet" reminder of our sinful world and my sinful self.

Dear God, be with us in the painful journey of anticipation as we arrive at your daily promise of reconciliation, trusting in the life and forgiveness already offered in your son, Jesus Christ. In your patience and comfort we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 9

Matthew 11:2-11

Now, more aware of why a state of *waiting* can be so painful, I have also come to discover that my best attempts at self-care in the past were just distractions from the care I really needed. Entertainment replaced sabbath and gossip was misunderstood as community. In the end, the things I thought would help just made me more tired and lonely.

John the Baptist, as susceptible to the world's distractions as anyone, sought instead to labor in the *waiting*, a messenger to the crowds of people seeking baptism and transformation.

What a marvelous thing for John and the crowds to hear, that the one for whom they have been waiting was already at work offering the hope and healing of the promised redemption of God's people. They were not alone in the waiting but joined by the Holy One whose sign to them was not a show of opulence and politicking, but of care for all God's beloved.

Dear God, give us wisdom in the waiting to turn to you for care and turn back to others in love, resting in your sabbath and rooting in community. In your power and strength we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

"Fling Wide the Door" (ELW 259, Verse 2)

Caring for children, my own but also those of friends and family who are nice enough to let me get my baby cuddles from time to time, I've been struck by just how beautiful and terrifying it is to love someone so small and fragile.

As we set up the tiny manger scene in preparation for Christmas, it is hard not to feel that sense of beauty and terror. As I place the animals, shepherds, and magi on each side of Mary and Joseph, I smile with anticipation as I bring the last two pieces to the center—a small bed of hay and the delicate baby Jesus placed tenderly in its embrace. My smile and joy are matched by a furrowed brow of concern for the halo and the hay in our savior's bed, a foreshadowing of the crown of thorns and scepter of reed placed in his hands at the cross.

Anticipation and recognition quickly come full circle. I step back and take in the entire nativity scene and am overwhelmed with gratitude that this king of ours returns every year in the form of a babe, "the heart of mercy's gentle self" and our salvation.

Dear God, accept our worship of song this day as we prepare for the season of your birth and stand in awe of your gentle power and saving grace. In your holiness and loveliness we pray. Amen.

Sunday, December 11

“Fling Wide the Door” (ELW 259, Verse 3)

Advent for our family has become a season for special rhythms that invite us deeper into a practice of joy and reflection. After dinner we gather in our living room in pajamas and light a candle, a reminder that God is with us. Standing hand in hand, each of us shares something we are grateful for that day. We say a short prayer and the girls run with glee to the Advent calendar, eager to see what goodies await hidden in the windows of our countdown to Christmas.

Last year, we added a second Advent calendar, this one containing small slips of paper with the names of people in our lives, many of whom we don't see very often. The girls took turns pulling a name out, and together we made a one-minute video wishing that person a happy Advent and telling them how much we loved them. The practice was as much a blessing to us as it was to those we remembered, a “humble place” where Jesus dwells in and through this precious period of anticipation.

Dear God, in this season of your humble rule, fill our lives and make us yours and strengthen us for good. In your joy and bliss we pray. Amen.

Monday, December 12

Isaiah 7:10-16

“Do you know how much I love you?” I ask my youngest during bedtime, knowing how much she delights in this game. “To Burkina Faso to France to Minnesota” she responds with a smile, listing the names of places she knows I've been. “And back,” I answer with a kiss on her cheek.

Once she's fallen asleep, I take my dogs outside and look up at the darkness, because this is a routine that I love. Cold air cannot hold as much moisture as warm air, and so when it is a cloudless, winter night, the stars shine even brighter with clarity and sharpness.

“Do you know how much I love you?” God asks me. *As deep as Sheol and as high as Heaven*, I think. And even though I'm a tiny speck of sand underneath this massive canvas that is our Creator's universe, I feel God's kiss upon my cheek in return.

Dear God, thank you for bringing us a sign of the depth of your love—the child named Emmanuel. Give us hope in times of joy, and ordinariness, and dread alike. Trusting in your abundance we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

I had woken up in the middle of a winter night and headed downstairs to fetch a cup of water. A thirteen-year-old middle schooler, the eldest of three in a single-parent home, I endured my share of internal and external chaos, a demanding deluge of homework, chores, navigating a new school, and making sure my younger brothers didn't burn down our rental.

So no wonder that, as I let the water run into my cup, I was shocked by the brilliance of what I saw out the kitchen window. The backyard was covered with fresh laden snow, three feet deep, and I was breathless at the beauty of the bright moon against the snow and the whole world blanketed in a silence and stillness I had not yet known.

God's face shone bright in the darkness that night, and I stared awestruck out the window as I drank from the cup, knowing with visceral certainty that I was safe and that I was loved.

Dear God, let your face shine in the darkness this day and save us as only a loving shepherd can save his sheep. In your restoring comfort and sustenance we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, December 14

Romans 1:1-7

I've been avoiding this text, its talk of being called, death, and the obedience of faith seeming too heavy during this Advent season of joy and hope.

I'd rather watch my children in the Christmas pageant, dressed in sheep ears and singing carols out of sync, or pressing red hots into their cornflake wreaths and sneaking bites while I pretend not to see. I'd rather cuddle on the couch with the girls on each side thumbing through their children's Bible to see the sweet baby Jesus cuddled in his own mother's arms.

I don't want to think of the innocent set apart for the labor of sainthood. I want to keep them here in this Advent waiting and the "not yet" of the hard parts of the story. I want to receive the easy gifts of the season—the grace, not the apostleship.

And yet, as I kiss the heads of my young daughters, I hear God inviting us to *belong to Jesus Christ*, the one called Emmanuel, who in painful times and tender times alike offers the presence of his grace and peace.

Dear God, thank you for the promise of your presence and the reminder of this Advent season that even as you call us to the sacrifice of service for your gospel, you also bless us with the gift of that same gospel, God among us and for us. In your spirit of holiness we pray. Amen.

Thursday, December 15

Matthew 1:18-25

Candlelight has come to play a significant role in my spiritual life. “We light a candle to remind us that God is with us,” my spiritual director always begins as we start our time together each month. When I am struck with silence and unable to articulate the contents of my heart, I look to the dancing flame, not so much for the words to say, but the comfort to know God is listening and the courage to hear what God is saying to me.

The invitation to this practice, while recent, was always there as an unnamed tradition, especially during the Christmas Eve service that I attended as a child. Once a year, the ushers handed out slender white candles with paper collars to match and all of us— young and old alike—waited with hushed excitement at the miracle about to unfold among us.

The lights were shut off and we would wait in darkness as the pastor lit a single candle and passed along its flame, growing from parishioner to visitor, from grandparent to grandchild. In minutes, under the hum of “Silent Night”, every face shone with the light of God’s promised Emmanuel, God with us.

Dear God, wrap us in the comfort of your eternal light and the presence of your son, Jesus Christ. In your promise and assurance to be always near we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 16

Matthew 1:18-25

Even the holy family needed some time to prepare for Jesus, nine months at least. This wonderful news, *God with us* and *God granting us salvation from our sins*, needed time to breathe and space to set in.

That time and space to take in the story of Jesus’ birth always happened on Christmas Eve at my grandparents’ house, before the kids went to bed. We circled around my Papa in the living room as he took out his Bible, our faces as still as the curious onlookers of our family’s nativity set—cousins and cattle and aunts and uncles and shepherds, all facing the center of the manger and my Papa’s Bible sitting gently on his lap.

Before the stockings and gifts and turkey and dinner rolls and a floor decorated in wrapping paper, we all sat with unusual attention to hear the story of the night that Jesus was born. Though a familiar tale, it filled that room with an awe so big, it needed its own time to breathe.

My Papa closed his leather-bound Bible gently, everyone silent and wide-eyed, and we slowly rose to head to bed, still waiting and wondering at the unfolding story, a space of a full night’s rest yet needed for the promise of God’s arrival to set deep into our hearts.

Dear God, prepare our hearts and spirits for the arrival of the good news of the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. In your love and care for your creation and beloved children we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

"Fling Wide the Door" (ELW 259, Verse 3)

So often, we think of Advent as a season of waiting and anticipation: children wait for Christmas Day and all its goodies, adults wait for good times with family—or maybe even just wait for the season to be over with all of its excesses. This year, many of the scripture passages for Advent also bring in the dimension of hope and utter joy. The hymn "Fling Wide the Door" brings to mind people throwing open front doors in large welcoming gestures, with greetings to neighbors and long inhales of fresh, cool air. There is hope that the new "true king" will bring real and lasting changes to the status quo. The "happy towns" and "blessed lands" suggest that with the coming of Jesus Christ the Savior, changes are afoot—changes that will make people's lives noticeably better.

Dear God, give us eyes to see all the ways in which we are blessed. Give us the courage this season to open our doors not only to your presence but to the needs and gifts of our neighbors. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Sunday, December 18

"Fling Wide the Door" (ELW 259, Verse 4)

The verse in front of us makes it clear that by flinging open our doors, we are also opening up our homes and our hearts to Jesus and his Holy Spirit, who dwell among us. The gesture of opening a door is a welcoming gesture. It does not require us to accept everything about the visitor who enters in. In fact, we don't even have to be mentally or emotionally ready to let our visitors in, or even to let Jesus in. God does not demand that we erase our sorrows before God appears in our doorway and shines God's lovely face upon us. God's grace is wide enough, broad enough, and expansive enough to hold in its loving care a myriad of human feelings, interactions, and relationships, regardless of our own capacities to understand them all.

Dear God, thank you for shining your face upon us even when we are not ready to look into its bright grace. Thank you for taking us as we are. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Monday, December 19

Isaiah 9:2-7

Perhaps one of the most famous and comforting passages in the Bible is this one: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." The passage says it all about our faith in God. As we stumble through our days, coping with the nitty gritty of the daily complexities of late-modern technological life in America, we might often feel like we are fumbling around in the dark. But God promises that our sorrows—and the darkness—will come to an end. This poem in Isaiah shows us that *God is the light at the end of the tunnel*. It shows us that God is the bright north star that guides us. And that we will find a way. The joy of this realization is palpable among the people in darkness who are perceiving the light, no matter how far away or small it might appear.

Dear God, show us the light of your grace, your love, and the sunshine of a welcoming, vital future for us and for the children of future generations. Help us examine our lives and make the adjustments necessary so that we can partner with you to be lights at the ends of people's tunnels. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

Psalms 96

The joy of the people sitting in darkness swells into a great hurrah in the words of Psalm 96. It feels like people are throwing their hats into the air or are attending a ticker tape parade. Read Psalm 96 carefully, and you will see that it is not just people who are rejoicing at the coming of Christ, but nature too. The earth rejoices; the sea roars, including all of its fish and crabs and whales. The trees sing for joy. If this sounds too anthropomorphic or poetic to be real, science is showing us today that trees actually do communicate and have chemical community among one another. Animals have intricate relationships with one another, relationships that the human senses are often too dull to perceive. The coming of Christ means joy and salvation for all of them, too.

Dear God, help us to widen our focus for the Christmas season. Help us to see that it is a moment for all of creation to experience your saving presence. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Titus 2:11-14

This passage in Titus reminds us that Christ is coming not just to celebrate with us, but to teach us and purify us. This is an opportunity to reflect upon how our own struggles for survival and comfort have left little room for the trees, seas, and animals to rejoice in Christ *who is their Lord, too*. Have we simply taken up too much space? What would the world be like without us? One thing Christians believe is that God *would still be God for the natural world* even if we were not here as a species. But as it is, we are apex predators who have been perhaps too successful in carving—literally carving out from mountains—the resources we have needed to build for ourselves happy towns, fast cars, and warm houses. Could we fling open the doors of our hearts to the non-human world, and not just see it as a commodity to serve our own human appetites?

Dear God, the Earth is crumbling under our dominion. Purify our minds and hearts so that we stop our destructive ways. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

Luke 2:1-20

One overlooked figure in this incredible story is Joseph. Who was this amazing man who took his pregnant fiancée—most likely under a cloud of shame—to be counted in the emperor's census? Although Jesus preached that his Father was God in heaven (see, for example, John 20:17), it should not be forgotten that without his *earthly* father, Joseph, the child Jesus might not have survived at all. What would Mary have done if Joseph did not commit himself to her? As a single young mother, she would have been completely lost in the ancient society of Nazareth. Although Jesus is clearly the reason for the season, his earthly father Joseph deserves to stand at the center of the Christmas story for just a moment or two. His silence, his humbleness, remind us that humans are but one among a myriad of creatures for whom God becomes incarnate.

Dear God, help us to honor the private struggles and joys of the fathers in this world who have put their children first. Thank you for Joseph, who kept our savior alive when Jesus was but a small child, and for showing us what it means to be dedicated to one's family and children. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 23

Luke 2:1-20

Next to Joseph, there is no question that Mary exhibited tremendous bravery and persistence in carrying the unborn Christ on the back of a donkey at nine months pregnant. It most definitely was not a comfortable—or safe—ride. Not only was Jesus' life endangered by such a journey, but her life as a pregnant teenager was too. She then saw his birth through, in terribly unsanitary conditions. So many things could have gone wrong. Jesus could have been delivered stillborn. Jesus could have died right there and then, never fulfilling his mission of going to the cross for the sins of humanity. Even though the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is a singular historical event, this holy child did not become who he was in a vacuum. Without his family, Jesus would not have grown into the man he was. And without that man, we would not have a Savior.

Dear God, what a complex web of relationships you enlisted to bring us our Savior! Help us to see and accept the complexities of our own relationships. Help us honor the importance of the friends and family in our lives, and to hold their sorrows with love and patience. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 24 Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Although so much of the Christmas story is focused on the sweet, domestic scene of Jesus with his two parents, there is no singular model of "family," either in modernity or in the Bible. God has not restricted God's appearance on earth to a two-parent-one-child nuclear family. Instead, God, in God's eternal and all-knowing, all-good, divine reasoning has given us many natural signs of the Incarnation through a range of human relationships, and through non-human beings. It was the shepherds who first experienced this. They experienced God's incarnation through the angels. Whatever you believe—or don't believe—about angels, God employed these non-human creatures to show the shepherds that God was doing a *new thing* in history, right then and there. The shepherds deserve credit for their bravery in taking a chance based on what they heard from the angels and for heading towards the manger where the infant Christ lay. Without them, would we know our savior today?

Dear God, thank you, that in your infinite wisdom, you brought the unlikely crew of shepherds to be some of the first human witnesses of the infant Christ. You remind us that your Word is everywhere among the human and non-human family of your creatures, working in its saving and mysterious ways. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

Sunday, December 25

Christmas Day

“Fling Wide the Door” (ELW 259)

God has chosen to engage and work with imperfect and average people to do new things in history. This is what Christmas is all about. Jesus was not born to perfect parents. Nor was he born in a vacuum. The message of his birth came through angelic phenomenon in the sky to the shepherds who then spread the word among their friends and neighbors. In other words, we are involved in God’s incarnate presence on earth. God is out and about, moving among us right this very minute. God is flinging open the doors of a new future for us. Will we step in? But this new thing is not just for humanity. It is for the trees and birds and fish and seas, too. Christmas is not just for humans. It is the breaking in of God’s new thing for all of creation.

Dear Lord, help us to change the way we live in America. Help us pivot away from the way we burn Earth’s fossil fuels, consume too much, and take up space that we don’t really need. Help us to see that your incarnation in Jesus Christ is not just for us, but for all of your beloved earthly creatures. In your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

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