

Christmas Day: Read Luke 2:8-20

From Rev. Thaddaeus B. Allen, Regional Minister

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. It's a grand image for a regional church to read on this holy day of Christmas! At least it is for me as I stand in wonder of the good work that our church has been about in the days of Advent.

Across the church, shepherds and flock have been working at the things that life calls us to. We have been seeking to keep life normal and good. Some have been struggling with the realities of daily life, and some of these struggles are hard and exhausting. Some lives are marked by the deepest of joy, and yet others are marked by the seemingly endless cup of pain. And yet in the midst of our work and life, Jesus comes. In the midst of life "in the field," the blessing of Christmas comes to us from God. This gift reminds us of God's unending love for his people.

In the Incarnation we are reminded again that God is not done with us! In fact, today is just the beginning of a life claimed and reclaimed by God in Jesus the Christ. In the midst of life shepherds and flock are claimed and reclaimed. In the midst of life we stand in awe of the goodness of God. In the midst of life, we are given joy and join voices with the whole people of God in proclaiming the good news that has come our way.

This gift of Christ on this holy day gives us the privilege of proclaiming with great joy God's good news. May we do so with great ceremony as we live in the fields where we have been established. May God bless you on this day.

*O Christmas Light, flood our lives
with the new brightness of your presence,
and inspire us afresh to proclaim your great good news with joy!*

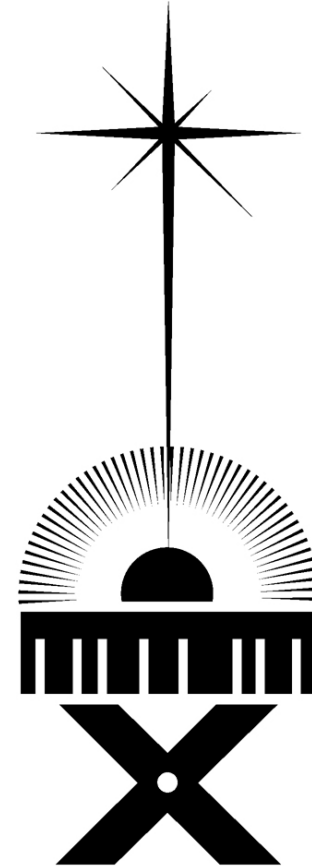
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David T. Chafin, editor.

*Many thanks to the ministers of the Region
for their thoughtful, creative contributions to this effort!*

Prayerscapes

for

Advent



2010

Created by the Order of Ministry

of the

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia

Sunday, Nov. 28: Read Matthew 24:36-44

From Rev. Dr. William B. Allen, Regional Minister Emeritus:

These Advent days are all about being ready for the coming of ... Well, really they are replete with comings (Advent means “coming”):

- The coming to fulfillment of the prophets’ visions
- The coming of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem
- The coming of the baby Jesus
- The coming of angels, shepherds, and kings
- The coming of Christmas – with all its layers of meaning
- The coming of peace and goodwill on earth
- The coming of God almighty in new and unexpected ways

You can surely add to this list of things that come to us in Adventide.

There are so many things going on when the church stops to contemplate the birth of the Christ, that we cannot comprehend them all. But we surely want to be present to and participate in as many of these gifts as possible. This urgent text from Matthew’s gospel alerts us to the importance of our being prepared, ready, alert so that we do not miss the Advent, the coming of all that God chooses to send to us with the Nativity of the Lord. A great hymn of the Advent season is “Wake, Awake for Night is Flying.” That’s exactly theme of this season. Be awake, because our God is breaking into the darkness with marvelous light. Let’s be alert to receive God’s gift.

Awaken us, coming God, to the promises and power of this season.

Monday, Nov. 29: Read Isaiah 2:1-5

Rejoice, rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear;
the evening is advancing, and darker night is near.
The Bridegroom is arising, and soon he draweth nigh;
up, pray, and watch, and wrestle: at midnight comes the cry.

See that your lamps are burning; replenish them with oil;
and wait for your salvation, the end of earthly toil.
The watchers on the mountain proclaim the Bridegroom near;
go meet him as he cometh, with alleluias clear.

O wise and holy virgins, now raise your voices higher,
until in songs of triumph ye meet the angel choir.
The marriage feast is waiting, the gates wide open stand;
rise up, ye heirs of glory, the Bridegroom is at hand.

Thursday, Dec. 23: Read Psalm 96

From Rev. Kevin Bowers, First Christian Church, Weirton:

During Advent we “sing unto the Lord” like no other time of year. You will hear the sounds of the season in homes, stores, cars and sometimes even on the street corners and in places where the sounds of peace, joy and love are seldom heard.

Advent is the season when our lives are most like a Broadway musical and we break into song: “Hark the Herald Angels Sing!” “White Christmas,” “Silent Night,” - songs that mean more than the sum of their parts, songs that bring us joyful memories and a hope for a better tomorrow.

The Psalms help us understand the importance of music in our tradition of worship and praise. This Advent season don’t forget to sing. Do you hear what I hear? I heard the bells on Christmas Day. Come, thou long expected Jesus. Mary, did you know? O come, O come, Emmanuel. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

*May our lips and our lives be filled
with songs of hope and expectation, O God.*

Friday, Dec. 24: Read Luke 2:1-14

From Rev. David T. Chafin, Deputy Regional Minister

As a family historian and one who is far too easily distracted by such things, it fascinates me that the birth of the Savior came to pass during a census. If you think the outcries from conspiracy theorists in the U.S. were unusually harsh during the 2010 enumeration, you should try to imagine the grumbling undercurrent that accompanied those journeying to the polls to register in Mary and Joseph’s day. Rome really did believe that it owned those people and their lands, and with brute force drove many into grinding poverty with taxation and conscription.

The holy people of God were treated like so much cattle, and in such a time and place was born the Messiah. Who would care about the human life behind the number on the page of the enumerator? Where would this son of a carpenter ply his trade or make his mark on this world? What would be his prospects for success?

You and I have heard the rest of the story, but tonight we are allowed to set aside its impressive details and simply stare with wide-eyed wonder with the terrified shepherds, and to join the angels singing “Gloria in Excelsis Deo!” Christ is born! Simply amazing.

*In the midst of our lives’ uncertainties and fears,
you come to us, Lord Jesus, taking on our flesh, living in our questions.
How we wonder at your extreme investment in this risky venture!
How we thrill to join the angels’ song! Alleluia!*

Why would Luke bother to include the account of a family argument over the name of a child? Why was the naming of the child so important, and so emotional? The naming of a son after his father implied that this child would “walk in the steps of his father,” that he would carry on the father’s name, and thus his work as well. Had John been named “Little Zach,” would he have been expected to grow up as a priest, just like his father? Most likely. To be named by any other name, then, implies just the opposite. John would *not* follow in his father’s steps. He would *not* learn to do what his father did. He would *not* be a priest. Elizabeth’s insistence that her son be named John, in essence, renounced the family, its work, and its perpetuation through the next generation.

If there is one thing which characterized John it was that he was a man who was set apart by his calling before his birth, by his unusual birth, by his life as a Nazarene, by his name, and by his life spent in the desert, where he lived apart from his “world,” wore distinct clothing, and ate very different food. Some would argue that it was his separation from his “world” which facilitated his ability to see its sins, to stand firmly against them, and to speak out boldly in condemning them.

In this time of Advent, we are called to stand outside of our normal lives, to examine ourselves for brokenness, and to resolve to move our lives ever closer to the example of the life that the coming Christ Child would lead. May the gifts of reflection and self-evaluation be yours in this Advent season.

*Search me, O God, and know me as I am,
and as you would have me to be in Christ Jesus.*

Wednesday, Dec. 22: Read Isaiah 9:2-7

Unbridled, savage darkness now is broken.
Power has new meaning: Light has come!
Burdens now are banished – sweet freedom’s song
echoes from the lips of joyous reapers:
He is here! He is now!
He is given for you!
Take peace.
Take justice.
Take heart.

Anonymous

*Give us reason to rejoice once again in your liberating presence,
O Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!*

Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear!
Arise, thou Sun so longed for, over this benighted sphere!
With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord, to see
the day of earth's redemption that brings us unto thee.

Laurentius Laurenti, 1660-1722, tr. Sarah Findlater

Tuesday, Nov. 30: Read Psalm 122

From Rev. David T. Chafin, Deputy Regional Minister:

When I get that mushy feeling listening to “Home for the Holidays,” I realize just how foreign it is to our culture to imagine this season as something focused on anything but house and home. Yet it is not our houses but God’s home that is at the heart of Advent – more specifically, God’s coming to this world with redemption for the household of Israel...and for the world.

The words of praise, prayer, and peacemaking in the Psalm call me back to the Source of all of this season’s promise, so that our old house on Ann Street and all of earth’s dwellings may have new meaning as signs of God’s loving and redeeming presence in the world – true signs of comfort and joy – holy hospitality.

*May we seek you and find you, O God,
bringing life to the world and meaning to our dwellings upon this earth.*

Wednesday, Dec. 1: Read I Thessalonians 2:13-20

From Rev. Jamie Gump, Madison Avenue Christian Church, Huntington:

With freedom to worship, we don’t experience what this congregation did. Or do we? We may not be persecuted for our beliefs, but we are challenged. Our worship, prayer life, and service are challenged by all that pleads for our time and energy. Do sports, brunches or kids’ activities pull you away from worship? Do your job, TV and social life leave no time for prayer? Are you so busy that you cannot find time for acts of service?

We could point fingers of blame at all that grabs for our precious time, but truly it’s our choice. So, will it be said that God’s message is visibly at work in you? Will people give thanks that you are a glorious crown of hope and joy?

*Lord, help us consider our choices
as we prepare this season to celebrate your coming.*

Thursday, Dec. 2: Read Luke 1:5-25

From Rev. Darrell Pierce, Clarksburg, WV:

Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful people who had prayed about a problem; yet when the answer came, Zechariah questioned it. Why? Because the problem was just too big and the answer too improbable.

When the "too big" problems enter our lives, may we pray in faith, expect God to act, and recognize his hand in the answer. God entered the lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah with the birth of John the Baptist. He entered the lives of Mary and Joseph with the birth of Jesus. May he enter our lives with the miracles we need, even when we think the problems are too big to have an answer.

Lord, help me to see you as the answer to my greatest needs.

*May I pray in faith, expect in faith,
and by faith recognize your work in my life.*

Friday, Dec. 3: Read Isaiah 11:1-10

From Rev. Jayne Chafin, First Christian Church, New Martinsville:

This has always been one of my favorite scriptures, Advent or not. Maybe it's because the paintings and sculptures are always so wonderful to see, from the fronts of cards we receive and send to the ornaments we hang on our trees of the lion and the lamb.

So it has been a great delight for me every time I see (or hear it for that matter) the insurance commercial with the song "Summer's Gone," by Aberfeldy. You know, the one with all the different animals playing around a waterhole, clearly enjoying being together - birds, buffalo, lions, elephants, zebras, giraffes, meerkats floating on crocodiles - just a great time being had by all while in the background the song plays: "Well, we get along. Yeah, we really do, and there's nothing wrong, with what I feel for you."

"The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" shall rest on him, and "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." What a great world! What a great God we have who invites us over and over and over again to enter into His world and not be afraid.

This Advent, I pray that we will indeed see the world as God has meant it to be, and that we will "take the scary out of life," by opening ourselves to the assurance of the coming of Christ into our world and into our lives.

May we find new hope, O God, in your promise of the peace that is to be.

Saturday, Dec. 4: Read Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

*From Rev. Dennis Sparks, First Christian Church, Ravenswood, and
Executive Director of the WV Council of Churches:*

A seemingly good Christian fellow adamantly stated, "I've read the Bible through, cover to cover twice, and I do not recall justice being a biblical concept." Many Christians make a similar claim. I recited for the man several well known verses: "What does the Lord require of you

Sunday, Dec. 19: Read Matthew 1:18-25

From Rev. Rodney Hubbs, First Christian Church, McMechen:

After reading this scripture countless times in my life, I can't help but ask some questions. Did Joseph realize what a great honor he was given? What a wonderful thought, holding our Lord and Savior in the palm of his hands. Words cannot express how just the thought of this makes me feel. Another question that comes to mind is, do we realize what this season is really about? So many people seem to think this is the time of the year is only about parties and having a good time, exchanging gifts with one another. We should never forget that this is the season that celebrates the birth of our Savior.

We serve a wonderful, forgiving God. Let us not forget that He sent His only son to this world to save our sinful souls. Brothers and sisters, it is my plea that we set the example to the world that there is more to this season than receiving gifts and having parties. Come, let us adore Him!

*Father in heaven, thank you for sending your son, Jesus,
to save our sinful souls.*

Monday, Dec. 20: Read Titus 2:11-14

From Rev. Sarah Webb, Wheeling, WV:

We live with a foot in two worlds. Our bodies have a definable shape and weight. They grow, wear down, rebuild, and eventually wear out. Yet we have an essence, a life within us that is without such shape and weight and wearing out. In our culture, we are surrounded by greed and violence and cruelty. Yet in our hearts lives a vision of a just world where even the lamb and lion live in community.

The letter to Titus and to Christians everywhere reminds us that we are called to live faithfully in one world while we share the hope of another. While we live among adversity and heartbreak, our hearts kindle the hope and promise of God's redemption. And the glow of that hope burns brightly enough to carry us through the darkest of nights.

*Lord Jesus, may our lives share the light
that is already growing among us.*

Tuesday, Dec. 21: Read Luke 1:57-80

From Rev. Richard Howard, First Christian Church, Morgantown:

Our text, occurring at the time of John's circumcision, reveals the conflict around the naming process, with Elizabeth standing her ground against an unnamed group of observer-participants, who insist that the boy be named after his father.

(v.29). For Christians, this covenant was solidified in the birth of Christ that we anticipate in this Advent season.

As we look forward to the birth of Christ, our reminder of God's presence and covenant, we do so echoing the joy and celebration of the Psalmist.

*For your covenant and presence, O God,
we life up our voices in thanksgiving.
May the light of Christ in generations past and those to come
provide for us a guiding light in this Advent season.*

Friday, Dec. 17: Read Isaiah 7:10-16

From Rev. Dawna Watkins, Bluefield, WV:

I love that commercial where the dogs are holding signs telling you what they are thinking. I wish my family came with those signs. I am finding it hard to believe that Isaiah is telling us that anyone would turn down an offer to get a sign from God that they would personally understand - like an actor winking on camera during an interview to let a loved one. Instead we now have to decipher God's chosen sign.

But now, I think it speaks to getting caught up in the "fear of the Lord," that we forget about the personal relationship God has with us - that when asked by God what it is we want, we answer back, "I'll not put God to the test." I think this is especially true when we are in deep conflict and looking for God's way out of it.

*O God, your sign is a child who would know early in life good from evil.
Help us to find our relationships with you in your Son,
and to learn to see your love in your prophet's words.*

Saturday, Dec. 18: Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

From Rev. Joshua Patty, Central Christian Church, Fairmont:

"Let your face shine," cries the psalmist, "that we might be saved." It is a request for unimaginable radiance, washing over the sinful world, offering salvation.

When Moses was to see God, he could only glimpse God's backside. Even then, the reflected glory of God necessitated Moses wearing a veil, so powerful was the reflected radiance of God in Moses' face. How much more so, then, is this request for the overwhelming shining of God's face - God's frontside.

In Advent, as in Lent, we are forced to recognize that this is still a very sinful world, despite our Christian efforts to improve it. Like the ancient Israelites fearing almost certain destruction, we should pray for the overwhelming radiance of God's face to shine throughout our world, giving mercy, love, and salvation.

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved.

but to do justice..." from Micah 6:8 and "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream," from Amos 5:24. While we often overlook it, justice is central to God's holy book and to God's acts.

For the spiritual seeker Psalm 72 resonates as a great teacher of God's meaning of justice, for the Psalm is a prayer. Here in the last of David's Psalms, the King of Israel prays over the coronation of his son as Solomon takes the throne. David prays, "Give the king justice." With righteousness at hand, quickly the prayer focuses upon giving justice to the poor. This is accomplished by defending their cause, and *this* is the way of shalom. As Advent reminds us of our waiting and watching for the coming of our glorious Savior, let us chant "justice" as central to God's plan.

*God of all people, may we find fulfillment of our faith
and the meaning of your coming in just living.*

Sunday, Dec 5: Read Matthew 3:1-12

From Rev. Donald Snyder, First Christian Church, Beckley:

Who was John the Baptist, and what did he have to do with the coming of God's Messiah? Matthew answers the question in three ways. First, he reminds readers that John is the long-awaited "voice in the wilderness." Second, John's charismatic message and demeanor drew crowds, both those wishing to experience his baptism, as well as those who would challenge him. Third, John points forward to someone new on the horizon who will usher in the new age.

John the Baptist is one of those figures who embody the unfolding plan of God. On the one hand, he draws us back to the prophets of old, and their "word of the Lord." On the other hand, he points forward to the coming of Messiah, and the advent of the Kingdom of God. John believed in and made known his role in this plan of salvation. Being a "preparer of the way" does not appear significant, and even John's disciples would later complain that the Baptist's crowds were going after Jesus. However, the man of God reminds all of God's people that whether we increase or decrease, it is faithfulness with the one we call Lord that brings us to the eternal kingdom.

*May you find us faithful at your coming, O God,
as we hear the prophet's cry once again.*

Monday, Dec. 6: Read Romans 15:4-13

From Rev. Aaron Watkins, First Christian Church, Bluefield:

There is power in numbers. It's an old cliché that we have all heard and that I believe to be true. Imagine a football game with 11 people on offense and one person on defense. That one person could not do much

by himself to stop the offense from scoring a touchdown. Here is an analogy for Christians: We are more effective when we are unified for Christ as one body, whether in the larger body of Christ or one small congregation. Verse 5 says, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus."

We need each other get to the end of this race. But in the process, may we come together in Christ, may we encourage each other in Christ, and may we in our living glorify the God and Father, singing praises to Him!

*May we be one with all of your people, O God,
in the endless song of praise to you.*

Tuesday, Dec. 7 Read Psalm 33:1-11

From Pastor Kenny Hardway, First Christian Church, Logan:

Advent is a season of waiting. How we wait is of utmost importance! I was waiting in line at our local superstore for quite a while! I began to notice the people behind me, before me, and even myself. There was a lot of grumbling, a lot of name calling, some cursing, and some giving up all together. We were not waiting well. Then I heard a child began to sing. It was off-key, but it was beautifully sweet to our ears. Quite suddenly the grumbling stopped and smiles were all around. We hadn't moved an inch in line, but we were transformed in our waiting.

Isn't it amazing how a sweet song can bring hope in the midst of waiting? Sing to the LORD a new song, as we wait well with one another for the Coming of our Lord!

May our life-song sing to you, O Lord.

May the world know your goodness by the ways in which we wait.

Wed Dec 8: Read Luke 1:26-45

Rev. X. Rae Browning, First Christian Church, Cumberland, MD:

How Mary must have felt! Fear, questioning, uncertainty at this announcement must have overwhelmed her. But after listening to the messenger, she conceded to becoming God's servant. Then she hurried to the hills to someone who might give solace, comfort, and help in coming to terms with what was taking place. What a predicament: promised in marriage and still a virgin, but now pregnant! But, as the angel foretold, Mary rests in the favor of God, and upon her arrival, brings joy to a leaping child within Elizabeth. A little puzzled, Elizabeth questions Mary: How could it be that she is given this honor of being in the presence of the one carrying her Lord?

complete in us. As our mouths proclaim God's faithfulness, it is the basic, bedrock constancy (one cannot be usually faithful, after all) that founds the life we are coming to know, have begun to life (in such utter joy) – as being at one with the life of God we so exultantly celebrate.

When we sing "Joy to the World, the Lord is come," we sing the consummation of the anticipation we so yearningly live this Advent. We sing it so for we are at the brim of the fulfillment we desire which we sing and proclaim in joy, sublime bliss.

*Our God, the love and faithfulness that is
our foundation, our life, our hope:
hear our song resound in the Great Congregation
as we express the fullness we hope,
that we learn already in Christ Jesus our Delight.*

Wednesday, Dec. 15: Read Luke 1:46-55

From Rev. David T. Chafin, Deputy Regional Minister

Mary's beloved words echo Hannah's song in 1st Samuel 2, reveling in the gracious way in which God redefines power and wealth in this world, and foreshadowing the way in which her Son's presence in this world would graciously level the high places and raise up the valleys. This is good news for a people often distracted by the flashy and obvious – a people prone to missing the holy when it is obscured by the mundane, everyday routines of life.

Even when our ears become dulled to The Story from weeks of overplayed ditties, and when our wallets are thinned and in danger of wasting away, God can and does surprise us and surprise our world again with a lift for the lowly, a word of mercy, a feast for the hungry, the birth of a child in a barren time. May we be shaken to a new awareness of his coming.

Surprise us again, O God, and meet us even in this common day.

Thursday, Dec. 16: Read Psalm 89:15-29

From Rev. Kevin Snow, Central Christian Church, Huntington:

As children of God, we are a people of covenant. However, in a world that prefers black and white to grey, contracts followed to the T, and little room for error, a life of covenant with God and one another can be difficult. Our covenant with God is ongoing (no set beginning or end date), fluid (the characteristics and shape change frequently), and grace-filled (space for error, mercy, and reconciliation). Psalm 89 speaks of different aspects of our covenant with God: presence and strength (v.21), reassurance and humility (v.22), faithfulness and steadfast love (v.24), the promise of an everlasting covenant (v.28), and endurance

Monday, Dec. 13: Read James 5:7-10

From Rev. Judy Bennett, Island Christian Church, Wheeling:

Waiting! Not many do it well. It requires that simply awful word *patience*. We are forever waiting for something or other. We wait excitedly for the birth of a baby. We count days anticipating vacations or holidays. Doctors' offices and emergency rooms are filled to overflow with those who somewhat angrily await their time for personal attention. We wait heavy-heartedly at the bedside of a dying loved one, and even in the face of certain death are required to manifest patience.

Now it's Advent once again. As we patiently await the coming of Christ into our suffering world, may we do so with confidence that all is well. *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*

*Patient God, strengthen our hearts,
and forgive our grumbling and judgmental attitudes.
We honor and bless your holy name.*

Tuesday, Dec. 14: Read Psalm 89:1-8

From Rev. William Flewelling, Proctor, WV:

In this season of awaiting, of the anticipation of the fullness of the Lord in our midst, we continually re-ground ourselves in the basics: God's love, God's faithfulness. These are and remain our standards. Not only are these the trademarks of the Lord God revealed in the life experience of Israel and supremely in the ministry and passion of the Lord Jesus, but they are and remain our standards by which we know ourselves. For as a people of the kingdom of God, we are indulged in the qualities of God ("... thy kingdom come ..." in the Lord's Prayer, as we have been taught to pray); we rejoice and sing for joy over the God who is love and is faithfulness ... without fail.

This Psalm draws out from us the richness of God whose love has been poured into us by the Holy Spirit. It is almost commonplace to speak of the experience of God's love, or God's faithfulness. But in this fermenting season of Spirit and Truth, in the longing that gropes throughout our anticipation to find the taste – the foretaste – of this coming of the Lord in his kingdom and in his glory ... here, indeed, we learn this love, this faithfulness as integral to our hearts, the character of who we are as persons and as a people saturated with God – so much so that we cannot be ourselves without the thoroughgoing density of God. We await that fullness in the clarity of life most intimately entwined with God in the medium of Spirit, Love, Faithfulness.

As we sing for ever the love of God, it is the love that leads us into the measureless intensity of the kingdom to which we belong, which is already in us, among us, already drawn near, to near as to be almost

In a first birth, much is unknown. One has no previous experience of what is coming, and while there are many who will tell their stories and opinions, each one is different. Holding a baby for the first time can fill a mother with ecstasy. Seeing God's work in such a tiny one fills hearts with love and warmth beyond words. But this baby, brought into the world by this blessed favored mother, brings to all who believe and keep faith the greatest gift of all. As we await the coming of our Lord, let us turn toward the mercy of God which has no end.

*God of love, help us to trust in your presence for our future.
In our joys, fears and uncertainties may we always turn to you.*

Thursday, Dec. 9: Read Psalm 33:12-22

Savior of the nations, come;
virgin's Son, here make thy home!
Marvel now, O heaven and earth,
that the Lord chose such a birth.

Not by human flesh and blood;
by the Spirit of our God
was the Word of God made flesh,
woman's offspring, pure and fresh.

From the Father forth he came
and returneth to the same,
captive leading death and hell
high the song of triumph swell!

Thou, the Father's only Son,
hast over sin the victory won.
boundless shall thy kingdom be;
when shall we its glories see?

Brightly doth thy manger shine,
glorious is its light divine.
Let not sin overcloud this light;
ever be our faith thus bright.

Ambrose of Milan 397; Martin Luther 1523; William Morton Reynolds 1851

Friday, Dec. 10: Read Isaiah 35:1-10

From Rev. Scott Thayer, Bethany Memorial Church, Bethany:

One of the enduring themes of the Bible is "Exile and Return." Not only does this theme wind its way through the Bible, it winds its way through our lives as well. Who of us has not experienced exile: a dry,

disorienting time - a time when God seemed far away? But then, right in the middle of the dry times, along comes Isaiah, assuring us that what looks like a desert now is really a lush paradise about ready to bloom.

Sometimes we can't see the crocus and we can't hear the song of the redeemed because we feel dry and empty. But when God comes to us, the wilderness becomes a journey of hope, not one of despair. Advent reminds us that God is making a way through the desert, even if we can't see it yet.

O God, you call us to a faith that is deeper than our circumstances.

Remind us that in Christ our dry times do not define us.

Help us to see the crocus; open our ears to the song of the redeemed.

Saturday, Dec. 11: Read Isaiah 35:1-10

From Rev. William Flewelling, Proctor, WV:

Ah! Then shall we be glad, O God!
That is the hour proclaimed,
the hour we long to find complete
that in our joy we rise.

Wilderness and dry land: be glad!
Desert: rejoice and bloom.
For now is opening the day
our Savior God proclaims.

Come, Majesty of God, become
the glory of the land.
Let strength repair the weakened hand
and firmness, feeble knees.

Be strong. Fear not. So says our God,
inviting victory.
Become the heralds of his day,
the witnesses of joy.

Behold, the Ransomed of the Lord
come singing on the way,
rejoicing as we joy as one
at God's triumphant day.

(CM; suggested tune: Bristol)

Sunday, Dec. 12: Read Matthew 11:2-11

*From Rev. Dr. Larry Grimes, Community Christian Church, Beech Bottom,
and Director of Church Relations, Bethany College:*

Are you the One who is to come?

John had his doubts.

With true Prophets there was always fire and thunder.

Ezekiel and Jeremiah on their bitter days.

Always there is thunder and awe

Amos with his ratty loin-cloth in a tangle.

Awesome fire and thunder

Daniel, in or out of the lion's den.

John himself—no one has risen greater—

Preaching fire and winnowing forks

John had his doubts.

Roman soldiers everywhere. Roman rulers.

Priests in their pockets. Money changers in the temple.

Tax collectors double-dipping from the purses of the people

John had his doubts.

John had his doubts, and so he had this disciples ask:

“Are you the One . . . Or do we wait some more?”

Jesus answered: “The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised. And the poor have good news
brought to them.”

blah. . . blah...blah...always the poor and their good news.

Nothing about the Romans. The Priests. The Tax Collectors

No fire. No thunder. No winnowing forks. No axe to the roots.

It takes violence to bring in the Kingdom—good old thunder and awe

Eating with tax collectors, touching lepers,

messing with bleeding women

releasing rotting corpses, blessing the poor, praising peace-makers

turning cheeks, going second miles, praying for enemies,

taking up crosses

The Kingdom—shall the violent bear it away?

Or shall the meek inherit the earth?

John had his doubts.

And you . . . ?

Give us eyes to see the loving Kingdom as it comes.

May the violent not bear it away, in the name of the Prince of Peace.