

JUST ONE CANDLE



original artwork by: Sally Parker-Henderson

*an Advent Devotional
written by members of the community*



*"All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish
the light of just once candle"*

- Just One Candle, by David LaMotte

Welcome to Advent....

When my children were young, my family and I took a few minutes together at the end of a day to light our advent wreath, sing a favorite carol or two, read a couple of treasured children's books, and then unwrap a shoe box I had painstakingly decorated and placed treasures inside. It was a highly anticipated part of our Advent. In the box, we would find perhaps a new symbolic ornament or book; or some stickers, paper and glitter, and instructions to make a love note for a neighbor; or maybe a cinnamon stick with instructions to create an ornament from it. The anticipation was palpable throughout the week. The kids thought about it all week.

Advent, or literally "coming" (the four weeks preceding the Christmas season) is the time we set aside to sink deeper into the stories of our faith and remember the hopes and promises God has for us and for our world. These stories of longing and truth are so beautifully expressed and sung in the lyrical phrases and notes of our hymns. Each holds a piece of the story of our justice-seeking God and the coming Christ as the light of the world.

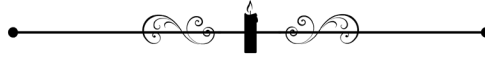
Enjoy these hymn fragments and personal reflections as you set aside a few moments, perhaps in front of your tree, perhaps in a quiet moment at work, or first thing in the morning to focus your heart and intention. As we remember and celebrate our story and God's story, leave some room for the light of Christ to break in. It is not a fragile light. It overcomes and will overcome darkness simply by being in it.

-Shannon Beck
Interim Social Justice Coordinator

Day 1: Sunday, December 2, 2018

*The advent of our God shall be our theme for prayer,
come let us meet him on the road and a place for him prepare.*

-The Advent of Our God



Advent means expectant waiting, coming; the arrival of a notable person/event/thing; appearance, materialization. In Advent we **wait**. In my experience of Advent, we **prepare**. There are two different things happening in Advent, and I never realized that before.

I remember the parable (Matthew 25) of the ten bridesmaids and their oil lamps. They are to wait for the bridegroom to arrive for the wedding. They know he will come. They know there will be a wedding. But they do not know when this will happen. They had to have lamps and oil ready at all times. Prepared! And then they had to also wait. Patience!

As a child my family tradition of Advent involved lighting the four Advent candles, one per week, for the four weeks before Christmas. Baking cookies, several different types, during Advent, was also a tradition. We might eat a few cookies as they were baked, but most of the cookies were to be saved for Christmas. Learning new songs, or new arrangements of old Christmas carols, was also a part of Advent.

In Advent we wait and prepare for **what we know is coming**: the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas. But there is also a surprise element of Advent. The "materialization" may be of something quite **unexpected**. Who do we meet on the road? Where will there be a place that we prepare for God? What will God show us today that reveals God's coming?

God will come to us as a baby at Christmas. But God is also trying to come to us today. Maybe not as a baby. Maybe as a neighbor, or a stranger, or a worker at a store, or as a creature in the garden. Let us pray that we are aware of God coming near to us. Amen.

-Stephanie Running

Day 2: Monday, December 3, 2018

*Oh Lord how shall I meet you and welcome you?
To do in spirit lowly, all that may please you best.*

-O Lord, How Shall I Meet You



How do we welcome Emmanuel, God with us? How do we, with a humble spirit, do all that may please him best?

My understanding is that we are to welcome him with thankfulness, anticipation, love, praise, great joy and a humble spirit.....to humble ourselves before him, loving and serving others.

Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." -Matthew 22:36-40

-Lorna Joy Williams

Day 3: Tuesday, December 4, 2018

*All glory to the Son, who comes to set us free,
With Father, Spirit, ever one through all eternity.*

-The Advent of Our God



What spoke to me in this verse is “comes to set us free”, because I have experienced this freedom in a very real way.

Until the age of 37 or so, I was suffering under the burdens of many false beliefs. I won’t detail them here, but they poisoned my interactions with other people, created inappropriate reactions to situations, and made me think too highly of myself. They also took a tremendous amount of mental energy to sustain. Despite reality screaming NO all the time, I never questioned any of them.

Starting at 37, I started daily spiritual practice. Over a period of years, through prayer and journaling, God was able to build a rock-solid case against these false beliefs. It got to the point where they were no longer sustainable.

It is amazing the difference it makes when reality is saying Yes. It is a kind of freedom I would have never dreamed possible. Advent is a time of looking ahead and of new beginnings. Given all God has done up until now, I can’t wait to see what He has planned for 2019.

-Dave Eicke

Day 4: Wednesday, December 5, 2018

Comfort, comfort my people; tell of peace!" So says our God.

-Comfort, Comfort Now My People



It’s hard to find comfort these days with the national political scene so out of control, with anger so pitched, and even violence. Peace seems like such a long, long way off and forever out of reach. It’s been elusive for thousands of years seeming just not possible for long when war is so much easier to perform.

Our hymn stanza says that God announces to us “Comfort, Comfort my People; tell of peace!" How do we take comfort? What will turn us from war, injustice, and violence? The curator of The Mr. Rodgers Foundation recently said, “Elevate goodness”. Teach goodness over evil, and mean it, model it, speak of it, and most of all share it.

We often say to one another at Our Redeemer’s, “The Peace of the Lord be with You”. Maybe peace is actually in plain sight. Perhaps it just needs to be dusted off, used in all manner of forms, and let God’s love and words of comfort shine through.

-Sally Parker-Henderson

Day 5: Thursday, December 6, 2018

*Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted, who sit in deepest gloom, who mourn your joys departed
And tremble at your doom. Despair not, he is near you.*

—O Lord, How Shall I Meet You



My friend is dying of brain cancer. He is 53. Once a creative force—writer, teacher, musician, poet, chef, and a friend to many—he now languishes in hospice in his distraught mother’s home. What will Christmas mean to them this year?

Eleven dead bodies strewn across a Pittsburgh synagogue. Their only sin—being faithful followers of Torah, which taught them to care for the plight of refugees struggling against stone-cold-hearted governments in the South and the North. Loving God and loving their neighbor, they are no more. And their families and faith communities are left to pick up the pieces. How will the advent of the holiday season exacerbate their pain?

Palestinians, many of them Christians, living in the West Bank, endlessly thwarted in their efforts to secure the life they long for by an ideological juggernaut bent on strangling the hope out of them. How will they survive this egregious assault on all things holy in the Holy Land? How will they celebrate the birth of their Savior amid apartheid?

Immigrant children torn from the arms of their mothers; families decimated by the opioid epidemic and by alcoholism; generations of people locked into poverty or haunted by a resurgent racism, violence, or uncaring policies; villages wiped out by hurricanes ... ad nauseum. What will Christmas be for them, and for all of us amid the ad nauseum of human experience?

For many years a scene from Matthew’s Christmas story has haunted me because it dramatizes the ad nauseum world we inhabit. It’s traditionally known as the Massacre of the Innocents. And it’s hardly ever part of our Advent liturgies and celebrations.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated. And he sent [his minions] and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*“A voice was heard in Ramah/wailing and loud lamentations/ Rachel weeping for her children/
she refused to be consoled, because they were no more (Matt. 2:16–18)*

The world in which children become the victims of political expediency fueled by crazed autocrats bent on retaining their power at all costs, leaving their mothers inconsolable—this is the world the Christ child entered. When Matthew announces that Jesus is “God *with us*” (1:17), he assures us that God is with us—not in some bucolic sentimentality of a Victorian post card or the typical Christmas pageant—but in the R-rated world we all know so well. Indeed, Matthew begins his Advent narrative with a genealogy (Matt. 1:1–16). This record rehearses the R-rated history of Israel and serves Matthew’s purpose to alert his original readers (and us) that Messiah is *with us* savingly in the same kind of violent, unjust, and despairing world Israel experienced throughout her history.

The fifth stanza from the 17th century Lutheran hymn “O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee” quoted above speaks eloquently to the realism of Advent. Only from the depth of the *ad nauseum* expressed in Matthew’s narrative and known in the depth of our own hearts will we be able to echo the joy of the Good News that Jesus is *with us* realistically. And out of the ad nauseum of human history—and our own experience of that history—will we know that the one who promises to “make his blessings flow far as the curse is found” (“Joy to the World”) is with us. “Rejoice ... despair not, he is near you.” Amen.

—Dana Wright

Day 6: Friday, December 7, 2018

*Prepare the royal highway; the King of Kings is near!
Let every hill and valley, a level road appear!*

-Prepare the Royal Highway



This highway project doesn't require the wearing of steel toed boots or heavy duty leather gloves. No hard hats or reflective vests are needed.

We prepare the Royal Highway in the real world by working for equality and justice and healing and peace. We prepare the road by caring for the world and all the people in it. We keep this road clear so God can walk among us without wading through trash and the obstacles we unwillingly leave lying about. And we prepare the Royal Highway in our hearts so that we may more easily walk toward God unhindered by the rubble of sin and selfishness. Come Lord Jesus.

-Linda Ahlvin

Day 7: Saturday, December 8, 2018

*God's promise will not fail you!
No more shall doubt assail you!*

-Prepare the Royal Highway



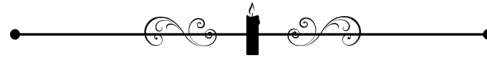
As a believer I have been challenged when the inevitable challenges and sad events confront me; so is it true that God's promises will not fail? Yes, I believe it is. My mom had a massive stroke and was very unlikely to recover, I had a number of God sightings when I most needed them. Other families who were also worried and anxious, who I would never see again, reached out to me and to each other. Color, race, gender, age, religion and the many other ways we separate and value people could not hold us back from being the loving face of God to each other. A gifted and kind chaplain listened and eased my pain while lifting up hope. A choir singing Spanish hymns welcomed me into a small waiting room while they prayed and sang for their loved one. I had been listening outside the door not wanting to intrude. They saw my grief and wanted to offer comfort. They did so beautifully in song as our language was different but their caring was the message. There were many other experiences of God's light during this time; each reflected love, grace and hope. The many faces of God are around us if we leave our doubts and embrace God's promise.

-Ellen Arrington

Day 8: Sunday, December 9, 2018

His rule is peace and freedom and justice, truth, and love.

-Prepare the Royal Highway



In the midst of the 1600's scientific revolution, generations of European colonialism, and the Sir Isaac Newton apple drop (gravity had just been discovered), the lyric to this joyful liberation hymn, Prepare the Way, was penned. Wars made the world unsafe, dictators fell and rose, poverty and oppression were daily bread. Yet, still, in the words of the Chronicles of Narnia, "magic was afoot."

If only it were magic. We know that changes in laws to treat people equally and with justice do not appear magically. We know that truth has to be revealed, often through painful exposures of greed and malice. We know that advances of freedom for people of color still keep them at risk for death. Where is this justice? And yet we hope in this person of peace who claims us in the waters of baptism and empowers us to work for the world God desires. It beckons us to not give up.

People of faith have always waited and hoped. The prophets hoped, the shepherds hoped, the early church hoped, Martin Luther hoped, and we hope. Liberating hope is not for cynics or naysayers. Nor is it a given. I would venture to guess that many of us have wanted to throw in the towel in the past couple of years. But we haven't.

My guess is that this is because we must have hope to follow Christ. Hope is being born in us every day. In the words of a song I wrote some years back based on Isaiah 40 (*"Every hill shall be made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."*), I offer this possibility:

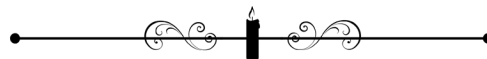
Into a world of woes and war, so too we come each year. Waiting, hoping, praying for a hope beyond our fear. We do not wage as warriors will, the paths of peace and birthing still. The paths of peace are birthing still.

-Shannon Beck

Day 9: Monday, December 10, 2018

Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.

-Come Thou Long Expected Jesus



I want to be set free from my fear. Fear of illness, fear of losing someone I love, fear of ugly politics and the ever present fear that I will never be enough. The longing for freedom from these chains is expressed in "from our sins and fears release us; let us find our rest in thee."

Our freedom from fear comes from Christ who was born, who lived and who taught us to walk his path of life. Christ becomes the spirit that rules our hearts and we no longer see ourselves nor the world around us through the fragility of fear. *"By thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts alone."* Christ's love for us all is the lens that transforms my fears and gives me peace.

-Pamela Altman

Day 10: Tuesday, December 11, 2018

To God's people now proclaim that God's Pardon waits for them!

-Comfort, Comfort Now My People



This lovely hymn passage rather hit me over the head. It reminded me of the time, in my mid-life, (when most crisis happen), where I was seeing a psychotherapist for the first time. I was nervous about this. What would he ask of me? How much would I have to talk? Where would I begin? Was I safe doing this? Had I chosen the right person for this? Did I know exactly what I was seeking? All these questions moved through me as I went for my first appointment. Upon entering my therapist's office, I said I was nervous and didn't know what to expect, or quite why I was there. His answer, I'll never forget. He said, "I wait here for 40 year olds to show up"! And I laughed, as I was 42. Then I replied that "I don't know where to begin?", and he answered, "begin anywhere.....we'll put it all together as we go". How nice was this as a conversation. I found a welcome, a place to begin, a warm smile, a gentle soul and what was there not to like? I felt I'd also found someone who could indeed help my difficult and confusing feelings and situation.

So, this little memory spoke to me as I approached the hymn text for today. God says... proclaim that my pardon waits for them! As the therapist waited for me to appear, so God waits for us to do the same and come into God's presence and accept the pardon promised. When we begin to seek out God, what waits for us is pardon, as well as grace, forgiveness and joy. What's not to like about that? And who doesn't want pardon to lighten our load, to start a new beginning, to lead a more rich and full life? Advent is the time of new beginnings, a new path being formed with God's Son as our Divine model, a new possibility for us within our reach. Who wouldn't want that?

-Sally Parker-Henderson

Day 11: Wednesday, December 12, 2018

Awake, awake and greet the new morn for angels herald its dawning.

-Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn



Rise and shine to the sounds of an American life during Advent season. It's 3:30 am or perhaps 6:00 am and I may be wide awake. It could be a baby crying, my android phone alarm, or just my body deciding to be awake. Either way, I am grateful to be alive and be able to provide for myself everyday. Everyday I open my eyes is a blessing from God above.

Everyday I am blessed with new experiences, built on old experiences. I am able to strengthen and learn more about myself, a friend, a stranger, a coworker, and about my north Seattle community members online, at the bus stop, bar or community event. I am honored to spend time with people in anyway I can and get closer to my God in prayer and visual arts. Every day is a day that assists me and prepares me for a better life. I am excited for the Advent season as we celebrate the birth of Jesus with red, green, gold, Christmas trees, and smells of festivities. Yay, Jesus for bring born and bringing us life at Our Redeemer's and in the community..

The world is better with music, hope, and women leaders!

-Victoria Gibson

Day 12: Thursday, December 13, 2018

Come as a baby, weak and poor, to bring all hearts together.

-Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn



We are invited by this passage to enter the space of open-heartedness. An infant comes to us defenseless, and enables us to release our own defenses. Without defenses, we offer others a glimpse of our true hearts, and may glimpse theirs. The noise of our justifications and excuses falls away, and we have the chance of hearing the Word based in love. If our defenses and justifications have led us away from God, it is not too late to bring our hearts back to God.

It is almost overwhelming to reflect on where the infant, weak and poor, can be found in the world today. In the foster care system, among asylum seekers walking North, in Yemen and Syria. God grant me the strength to recognize Christ in the world. Grow in me the spirit of generosity to respond to need.

-Latife Neu

Day 13: Friday, December 14, 2018

*Lost in the night do the people yet languish,
longing for morning the darkness to vanish.*

-Lost in the Night



It's no wonder that children are afraid of the dark at night. Unable to see what fearful things lie ahead on our journey or lurk unseen just outside our windows. Even for adults everything seems worse in the dark. Darkness means that things are unknown, unclear... and frightening. We want clarity and control.

Our "darkness" looks different as adults. Whether it's illness, family loss, a spiritual "dark night of the soul," or even just feeling overwhelmed by the current political climate, it's the not knowing what lies ahead that scares us the most.

I feel like we're currently a country that's "languishing in the dark": acts of mass gun violence, racial prejudices voiced by elected leaders, an appalling lack of hospitality to our neighbors seeking refuge...and the list goes on and on. I'm often overwhelmed by this feeling of darkness, just longing for the morning. My favorite line from a song at Christmas-time has always been, "*The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!*" We are living in a weary world, stuck in the dark and fearful of what the future holds.

Maybe that's why I love this imagery of the sun finally rising after a dark night, expelling the darkness with its first rays of light. With this "vanquishing of the darkness," the morning exposes all for what it truly is- not as scary and hopeless as it appeared when hidden in the dark shadows. Instead, the light brings all things into view and exposes the things that felt non-existent in the midst of the darkness: love, hope, God's ultimate peace. In the light of the morning we can finally see things clearly, feel the heat of the sun's rays, and know that, in spite of whatever the darkness brings, we know that God ultimately wins. And in the meantime, we can live in the warmth of that hope.

-Mandy Neill

Day 14: Saturday, December 15, 2018

*Creator of the stars of night, your people's everlasting light.
O Christ redeemer of us all, we pray you hear us when we call*

-Creator of the Stars of Night



I was at Fort Worden (Port Townsend) for continuing education. The night was dark and crisp as I walked from dinner to my room. I looked up. And stopped so I could keep looking up. I breathed deep. And smiled. All I wanted to do was stand and let the beauty of the starry sky wipe everything else out of my consciousness. So odd -- looking up at all that distant immensity, I felt MORE grounded than for the better part of most days when I'm intensely focused on what's going on here on the ground.

I didn't grow up celebrating Advent. But I've grown to appreciate how this seasons asks us to practice waiting, watching, hoping and preparing. Like the "everlasting light" of stars in the night sky, God's love and grace-filled power never cease shining, ever- even when the clouds roll in or we're "just too busy" to pay attention. And we never need to remember that more than when life or our world seems too dark to ever become day again.

God, creator of the stars of night, this Advent help us stop... so we can look up. Help us watch... so we don't miss signs of your presence. And help us patiently keep watching and preparing for you, so your hope can shine on us and through us, in the darkness. AMEN.

-Pastor Kathy Hawks

Day 15: Sunday, December 16, 2018

My soul proclaims your greatness, Lord; I sing my savior's praise

-My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness



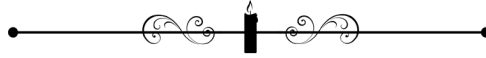
Dear Lord, There is no greater reason to rejoice than in thanksgiving for the gift of your Son, whose coming we anticipate and whose birth we celebrate. Christ has been born not only in a manger in Bethlehem but also in our hearts. We worship Him in spirit and in truth. He is there to bring us peace, joy, and love. He is there to help us pass on the good news of His saving grace to all those around us. He is there to remind us that in our Father's house there is a place for us. Jesus will comfort, guide, and help you in every aspect of your life. He is there for you always!

In this season dear Lord transform my heart to be my place to welcome you. Amen.

-Linda Carbone

*If we falter in our courage and we doubt what we have known,
God is faithful to console us as a mother tends her own.*

-Unexpected and Mysterious



I have most definitely faltered and have certainly doubted throughout my life – both in things I’ve done to others and with re: to my faith, both intentionally and unintentionally. Some things shaped who I am that were brought to me by others’ actions and behaviors – again, intentionally and unintentionally.

The words from this hymn, for me, brought to mind the word ‘family’. In real life, my father was not an encompassing source of acceptance and love for me. I was never quite “good” enough, never quite like someone else enough, never attractive enough. My mom, on the other hand, was my champion. I perceived unconditional love even through turbulent times – no matter what.

God is traditionally thought of in male terms, and hence, his attributes traditionally thought of in the same – Strong, firm, provider, protector, holding us responsible, loving. The words also describe God as a ‘consoler’, ‘as a mother’. Again, traditionally, female or motherly attributes include loving, caring, encouraging, tender, supportive.

The beauty of these words for me, lets us know that regardless of our earthly relationships with our parents or whoever raised us, and regardless of whatever issues we continue to deal with as a result of those relationships – intended or not – we can KNOW and we can be CERTAIN that we have God our Father and God our Mother, all in one – to hold us, and encourage us, and protect us, and keep us responsible and LOVE us unconditionally. That we are indeed, and always have been, that perfectly loved child.

So in this advent season, a season of anticipation, we await the birth of the little child who came to save us, and to love us unconditionally. How unexpected is that? Thanks be to God.

-Julie Vannoy

Comfort, comfort my people; tell of peace!' So says our God.

-Comfort, Comfort Now My People



So, as I looked down the list of hymns to choose for this writing, I was immediately drawn to an old hymn written in the 1600's, *Comfort, Comfort Ye My People*. Isaiah 40:1-8 is the Scriptural basis for the hymn. To see how closely the hymn matches Isaiah, I could think of no other way than putting them side by side.

1. Comfort, comfort, ye My people,
Speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
Comfort those who sit in darkness,
Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load.
Speak ye to Jerusalem
Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell her that her sins I cover
And her warfare now is over.

2. Yea, her sins our God will pardon,
Blotting out each dark misdeed;
All that well deserved His anger
He no more will see or heed.
She hath suffered many a day,
Now her griefs have passed away;
God will change her pining sadness
Into ever-springing gladness.

3. Hark, the Herald's voice is crying
In the desert far and near,
Bidding all men to repentance
Since the Kingdom now is here.
Oh, that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way;
Let the valleys rise to meet Him
And the hills bow down to greet Him.

4. Make ye straight what long was crooked,
Make the rougher places plain;
Let your hearts be true and humble,
As befits His holy reign.
For the glory of the Lord
Now o'er earth is shed abroad,
And all flesh shall see the token
That His Word is never broken.

Isaiah 40:1-8

¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

² "Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,
That she has received of the LORD'S hand
Double for all her sins."

³ A voice is calling,
"Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ "Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Call out."
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower
of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.

There is perhaps no biblical passage that breathes the spirit of Advent more than Isaiah 40:1-8, which, after the destruction and exile of the Israelites, suddenly and unexpectedly promises comfort to the people of Israel.

Dear God, once again, your people need comfort. Speak it to those in darkness, exiled, in flight, under fascist rule, living where bombs fall, on streets of our cities; where land is parched, where oceans are warm, where animals are homeless, where morality is abandoned and hate and greed grow. Your creation, like the Israelites of old, need to hear your word of comfort. Clear the way, make smooth the road, come Lord Jesus.

-Carolyn Swanson

Day 18: Wednesday, December 19, 2018

*There's a voice in the wilderness crying a call from the ways un-trod:
Prepare in the desert a highway for our God.*

-There's a Voice in the Wilderness



"I don't like straight lines," comments a rabbit, in the adventure novel *Watership Down*—a book narrated from start to finish by a band of rabbits, seeking a new home on the English countryside. On their journey they come across a bizarre "forest" of single trees running in a straight line. *"I don't like straight lines: men make them. And sure enough, we found a road beside this wood. It was a very lonely, empty road..."*

Turns out, rabbits are nervous around roads and straight lines. And with good reason. Where there are straight lines, there are people. People use lines throughout the novel to separate, to control, to displace. They post signs, build fences, tie taut ropes, and even paint letters.

But straight lines divide people from people just as well. They separate buildings from the world, one building lot from another, one parking spot from another. Relationships get defined in terms of lines of influence, lines of communication, the bottom line, even pickup lines.

Our hymnist today picked up a theme from Isaiah 40:3: *a voice cries in the wilderness, 'make a highway for our God.'* But what was on Isaiah's mind? Why does God need a highway to travel on? And why is that worth celebrating? Isaiah reports that the people of Israel were confused: *"My way is hidden from the Lord,"* they say (40:27), *"and my right is disregarded by my God."* God has not recognized them in either their direction of travel or their property boundaries. Their lines are a mess. They feel alone, confused, on a journey of exile, without end in sight, without safety or security.

But God says through the prophet that God is wiser than their boundaries. *"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth."* (v. 28) *"All people are like grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."* (v. 6-7) *"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him?"* (v. 12-13) God's ways are not our ways. God's lines are not our lines.

The hymnist today has brought this shade into the hymn by adding the word, "untrod." The wilderness is familiar to Israel, but the highway of God is not headed to the familiar; it is headed home. And this is indeed cause for rejoicing. For no highway is single-use. If God is calling for a highway to be built, and if God plans to travel on it, then a day is coming when we will walk on that highway together. *"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; ... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way... No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing..."* (35:1, 8-10)

-Harold Laurence

Day 19: Thursday, December 20, 2018

*Oh kindle, Lord most holy, your lamp within my breast
to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.*

-O Lord, How Shall I Meet You



When I was confirmed into the Lutheran church as a child, my Bible verse was 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.' I chose this verse mainly because Amy Grant had a song about it and less because I felt the need to use God's word as a light in darkness. At the time I knew God loved me and had forgiven my sins, so I wondered why I had to go to church every week to remind myself of that. My thought was if I knew I was forgiven and loved, then I could just live my life without going to church and I was good!

As I've gotten older, I've come to realize the importance of reminders. It's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day and get frustrated or sad by what's going on in the world or by my own shortcomings. It's easy to forget I'm loved. It's easy to forget I'm forgiven. It's easy to forget about hope. Going to church centers me back on the path towards love and light. Sitting regularly with God's word kindles the lamp within my breast and reminds me of all those uplifting things I forget so easily. May we remember during this dark season of Advent that God's word is always there for us to light our path and bring us hope.

-Jonath Ochs

Day 20: Friday, December 21, 2018

*From our fears and sins release us:
Let us find our rest in thee.*

-Come Thou Long Expected Jesus



These are such straight forward and simple words and yet somehow so difficult for me to do. Is my faith so shallowly rooted that I am feeling unworthy or unbelieving that I can do this? So many confessions and absolutions of past sins, yet the tendency is to hang onto our wrongs like a scar to remind of us of a wound.

This Advent as we light candles I hope they light up the way to accepting forgiveness and bringing release of past burdens and that I truly find rest in my faith and in my Lord.

-Jim Arnold

Day 21: Saturday, December 22, 2018

*Wait for then Lord, whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord: be strong take heart!*

-Wait for the Lord



In the Fall of 2016 the Chicago Cubs won the World Series for the first time since 1908. For every one of the 107 seasons in between titles, Mabel Bell waited. Just a few months old when the Cubbies last took the crown, the 108-year-old North Side Native followed her beloved team all her long life, watching them lose, and lose, and lose some more. Finally, when the big moment came, in extra innings in a Game 7 no less, Mabel was able to see her team win and toast a glass of champagne with her fellow nursing home residents. Mabel died a few days later.

"Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." This is the mystery of faith we proclaim, then we wait. And wait, and wait some more. We wait for Christ to return to us, to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth and end all human division and suffering.

And, we wait for scientists who will save us from our own destruction of the planet. We wait for political leaders who will reject tribalism and speak the truth to those they seek to lead. We wait for religious leaders who will name the hypocrisy within their own faith communities and recognize the value in others. And, we even wait for the Mariners to win the World Series (42 years and counting).

The Psalmist tells us that the day of the Lord is near and they are not wrong, even though we continue to wait. The dark of Winter's night will soon give way to the light of summer. The dreary hymnody of Advent will give way to the jubilant songs of Christmas. Christ's birth will be celebrated from floor to rafter in every corner of the globe on December 25, a miracle given Christianity's humble beginnings.

Christ will come again this Christmas, this Epiphany, this Easter, and every Sunday morning this year.

Christ is here amongst us now, even as we wait for his return. The mystery of faith indeed.

-Don Boelter

Day 22: Sunday, December 23, 2018

Oh star of promise, scattered night, loving bright till shades of fear are gone.

-As the Dark Awaits the Dawn



I envisioned cruising down the highway in a “California Dreamin’” sorta of way; nothing could have been farther from reality. Instead we encountered hundreds of switch backs only wide enough for one car (I never knew if someone was coming up while we were going down), two by one one foot tall concrete road partitions being the only thing between the car and dropping 200ft down into the ocean, morning fog, gigantic trees, wild animals darting in front of the car, and the darkest roads one can imagine.

One night we were driving along; I pulled over and hopped out of the car. I was exhausted and fearful of the next few miles on the road (no street lights and driving on the edge of cliffs can do that to you) and then I looked up. I let out an audible gasp! I was surprised, overwhelmed, and astonished.

In the middle of nowhere on Highway 101 I saw ALL of the stars; millions and millions and millions of stars. Stars I had never seen nor knew existed! I felt like God was giving me a big hug and saying everything was going to be alright. In that moment, all fear vanished.

It’s like the hymn verse, *“Oh star of promise, scattered night, loving bright till shades of fear are gone.”*

I didn’t just get one star of promise that night, I was given a cornucopia of them! All fear was gone and instantly replaced with amazement. Even in the darkest of places, God is still there. When I got back in my car I was no longer afraid, but rather energized for the journey ahead.

As you long for the culmination of Advent, may you be energized by the few or millions of stars you see. Just like the magi, just like the shepherds, and just like me.

-Shelbe Kukowski

Day 23: Monday, December 24, 2018

Let every heart prepare a throne and every voice a song.

-Hark, the Glad Sound



This Christmas Eve Advent verse comes from the hymn, *“Hark, the Glad Sound!”* For me, Christmas Eves are full of glad sounds. My first musical memory of Christmas Eve goes back to age five and my first solo. My grandpa, James T. Ericksen, was my childhood pastor at Crown Lutheran Church. He taught me, *“Jeg Er Saa Glad Hver Julekveld,”* the Norwegian words for the carol, *“I Am So Glad Each Christmas Eve.”* I got to stand in the middle of the aisle and as soon as I began singing, my heart was changed forever because of the joy I felt.

Fast-forward to Christmas Eve experiences at Our Redeemer’s - the congregation united in the sacred sounds of *“Silent Night”* - faces lit only by shared candlelight. As Advent turns into Christmas this year, our hearts are invited to “prepare a throne” for Jesus, the new-born King, and every voice can join the world-wide song.

-Karen Lee



*Love has come and will never leave us! Love is life everlasting and free.
Love is Jesus within and among us, Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas. Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high.*

-Love Has Come



John 1:14: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Merry Christmas! Love has come into our homes, in our church, into our worlds, and into our hearts in the birth of Jesus Christ. God, knowing us so well, decided to come to us in a way that we couldn't resist: a baby. God, also knowing God's self so well, decided to come to us in a way that would change everything: as a human, full of feelings and experiences and hunger and joy. Everything that we are, God has experienced through the incarnation of Jesus.

As you celebrate today, I invite you to reflect:

- What does it mean for me if God understands my body and all its workings not just as a creator, but as a person beside me?
- What does it mean for God to come among as one so vulnerable? What are the implications for me in my life? When do I choose to be vulnerable?
- With these thoughts can come deep freedom in life and in love. What will you do with the freedom that Jesus' birth has given us? How will you live into this gift? How will you love more fully?

We pray:

Light of Life, you came in flesh, born into human pain and joy,
and gave us power to be your children.
Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us,
so that all of creation may sing new songs of gladness
and walk in the way of peace. Amen.

-Pastor Gretchen Mertes

COME
let us
adore
HIM



