

Journeys Through Advent:

Stories of hope, waiting and the presence of God in the Season of Advent

St. Paul's Episcopal Church | Mt. Lebanon, PA

Advent 2026

Journeys Through Advent
About the Authors

Pauline Connelly

Pauline has been a member of St Paul's for 2 years. She is so appreciative of how open and welcoming the parish has been to her and her husband, Chris. Pauline participates in many of the adult education forums and evening classes, Sunday small group, Writing Your Life, and, when she has time to read, Book Club.

Michele Dula Baum

Michele Dula Baum has been a member of St. Paul's Episcopal Church since 2001. A native of Johnstown, PA, she recently retired from a long writing career that included stints as a journalist, media relations professional and academic institutional science writer and editor. She sings soprano with the St. Paul's chancel choir and the Pittsburgh Compline Choir and is finishing her second term on the St. Paul's vestry this year. She has also served as a deputy to diocesan convention and as a member of the Trinity Cathedral chapter. She lives in Upper St. Clair with her husband, Tim; son, Chris; four indoor cats and two feral cats who live outside but appreciate the Baums for regular feeding and a cold-weather shelter.

Katherine McMillen

Katherine McMillen lives in the South Hills with her husband, her daughter, and a collie named Caroline. She has attended St. Paul's since 2023 and was received into the Episcopal Church in November 2024. An accountant by trade, she is a member of the parish's Finance Commission and Audit Committee. She is also a member of the Tuesday morning small group, which can solve almost any problem as long as there is enough coffee to go around.

Jen James

Jen James and her husband, Kyle, have attended St. Paul's since 2023 and were married in the church in 2024. Jen is active in the Spiritual Growth Commission at St. Paul's and enjoys participating in the parish's adult formation programming. Along with other members of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, Jen is in Year 1 in the Education for Ministry program and volunteers with the downtown walk-in ministry at Trinity Cathedral.

Week One

Waiting with an Open Heart

Pauline Connelly

November 29: Being Caught off Guard

Isaiah 64:1-9 "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!"

Isaiah's plea is for overwhelming, unmistakable power — mountains quaking, nations trembling. God did tear open the heavens. But the form it took was almost the opposite of what was asked: a birth in poverty, in an occupied backwater, unnoticed by the powerful. No mountains shook at Bethlehem. Philippians tells us that Christ, "though he was in the form of God," emptied himself and took the form of a slave, humbling himself completely. God didn't add humanity onto an unchanged divine glory — the infinite God entered a finite body, and the one who spoke the cosmos into being became a baby who couldn't yet speak, feed himself, or walk.

I was well into my thirties before this truly landed for me. It was September, and I was sitting at the IKEA table in the dining room of my townhouse in Alexandria, reading to my three children — seven, six, and four. I had recently found my way back to a faith I'd lost as a young adult, and I was eager to teach them what I myself was still discovering. The book, from the National Gallery of Art, paired Renaissance poetry with the paintings it described. That afternoon we came to Giles Fletcher's lines on the infant Christ:

A child He was, and had not learnt to speak,
That with His word the world before did make;
His mother's arms Him bore, He was so weak,
That with one hand the vaults of heaven could shake.
See how small room my infant Lord doth take,
Whom all the world is not enough to hold!
— from *Christ's Victory in Heaven*, 1610

The words stopped me. I finally understood what it must have cost Jesus to take on a human body. My voice rose. I read the poem again, right there at the table, explaining it to my children — teaching them what I had only just understood myself.

That's Advent, I think: not just waiting for Jesus to arrive, but being caught off guard, mid-ordinary-afternoon, by how much Jesus was willing to give up out of love for us.

Lord, we cried out for you to tear open the heavens, and you did — not in fire and trembling mountains, but in a manger, in hands too small to hold anything. Teach us to see your power in weakness, and your presence in the small, ordinary moments you choose to enter. Amen.

November 30: How Do We Follow Christ?

Matthew 4:18-22 ***"He saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him."***

In Advent, we anticipate the coming of Christ. While we wait, Jesus repeatedly asks us to follow him. But what does it mean to follow Jesus?

"Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me" is probably the most direct demand, appearing in all three Synoptics (Mark 8:34, Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23). Following him isn't attaching yourself to a winning cause — it's taking on the same trajectory of self-giving, even to death, that he's about to walk. "Take up your cross" wasn't a metaphor to a first-century audience; it evoked actual Roman execution. Jesus is saying real followership costs everything, including possibly your life, and definitely your self-centered agenda.

In John's Gospel, Jesus gives a new commandment: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35). Love is the identifying badge of discipleship — not correct doctrine, not religious performance, not even miracles. And the standard is "as I have loved you": sacrificial, self-giving love, not just general goodwill.

Deny myself? Practice sacrificial, self-giving love? It seems scary and overwhelming. So how do I follow Jesus? The only way I know is one baby step at a time.

After my divorce, I left the church again, and spent many more years searching. In my 60's, I decided to give the Episcopal parish with the "God Loves You No Exceptions" sign a chance. I came in through the basement door from the parking lot, which meant climbing what seemed like flight after flight of stairs before I finally reached the sanctuary. And then, there it was: the altar, the candles, the organ music, the priests in their vestments. I sat near the front, the way I still do now. Something in me settled. I felt like I was home.

That wasn't a dramatic call like the one James and John received, dropping their nets in an instant. Following Jesus has not been one great leap, but a dance of two steps forward and one step back. But I do keep showing up and letting him meet me there.

Lord Jesus, you called James and John in an instant, but you meet me in slow steps and small surrenders. Teach me to leave my nets, whatever they are today, and follow you one baby step closer. Where I am weak, be my strength; where I resist the cross, teach me to trust your love. Amen.



December 1: The Stone Once Rejected

Luke 20:9-18 ***"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' The tenants said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." He looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'?"***

This is the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Ancient absentee landowners leasing vineyards to tenant farmers, who owed a share of the harvest as rent, was a familiar arrangement — so the story would have felt realistic before it turned symbolic. The owner is God, the vineyard is Israel, and the tenants are the leaders entrusted with caring for God's people. The servants sent to collect the harvest are the prophets, rejected and sometimes killed across generations. The beloved son is Jesus. The tenants' plot to kill the heir and seize the inheritance is the leaders' actual plot to kill Jesus, so they can keep control of the vineyard — religious authority, status, power — for themselves.



Jesus caps the story with Psalm 118:22, the builders' rejected stone becoming the cornerstone. It reframes the son's murder not as his erasure but, paradoxically, as the very act that makes him foundational — the worst outcome the tenants can imagine becomes, in God's economy, the means by which he becomes central. Jesus is telling the leaders, to their faces, that their rejection of him will not thwart God's purposes but fulfill them. He is the one on whom everything is being built, whether the builders recognize it or not.

I grew up afraid of God — certain I was always being watched, judged, and found lacking. Eventually I walked away from my childhood religion but still spent years searching, still carrying a God-shaped hole I couldn't fill with anything else.

What pulled me back wasn't a sermon or an argument. It was Jesus and a fig tree. I was sitting in my comfy chair in the living room, reading through the Gospels on my own. When I got to the story of Jesus cursing a fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season — as if he'd genuinely expected better from it, and was disappointed. I smiled and put the Bible down in my lap. It was so *human*. In that moment, Jesus was not the disappointed parent in the sky I'd spent my childhood dreading, but someone who got hungry, got frustrated, who ate with sinners like me. A brother, not a judge.

I am no longer afraid of God because I discovered Jesus. I still don't feel like I'm doing enough, but I've stopped needing to prove myself. I can sit in the tension now, because Jesus— not my performance, is the foundation upon which my faith is built.

Lord Jesus, the stone once rejected, you became the foundation I didn't know I was searching for. Thank you for meeting my fear with your friendship. Keep building my life on you, one uncertain day at a time. Amen.

December 2: Giving of our Whole Selves

Luke 20:19-26 ***The scribes and chief priests asked him, 'Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.' He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'"***

This can sound like a tidy division: Caesar gets taxes and civic obedience; God gets worship and the soul, each in its own lane. But look closer at the coin itself. Jesus asks whose image is on it — Caesar's. But Genesis 1:27 says humanity is made in God's image. If Caesar's image is on the coin, fine, give him the coin. But you bear God's image — so give God yourself, entirely. This isn't really a balanced division of loyalty; it's a trap flipped back on the questioners. Give Caesar his cheap metal token. Give God everything, since everything is already God's.

So how do we give God everything, as we wait for Christ's coming? Jesus tells us: whenever we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, we do it directly to him. We give to God by loving our neighbor.

I didn't really understand love until I had my first child. My own parents were good people, but in that era, obedience was expected, not praised, and love could feel conditional on good behavior. So I wasn't prepared for what I felt as a new mother. The love was animal. Primal. When Jerry and I went out and left Kevin with my mother, my whole body missed him — not just my mind, my body, physically aching to get back. I had never felt anything like it.

He was a few weeks old, with an ear infection, and had been crying for hours. It was three in the morning, and I was pushing his stroller back and forth across the living room floor, pacing, trying to get him to settle. I was exhausted. I was not joyful — nothing about that hour felt like the love I'd felt earlier. But I wasn't angry either. Somewhere in that pacing, I understood something I hadn't before: love isn't a feeling at all. It's the willingness to set aside my own comfort, my own preferences, my own need for sleep, for the sake of someone else's good.

That understanding took years to widen past my own children — to the annoying customer I serve at Starbucks, to my older sister who tests my patience, to the strangers I'm slowly learning to open my wallet to help. But it started at 3 a.m., pushing a stroller in circles, too tired to feel anything you'd call love — and doing it anyway.

Lord, you own everything, yet you ask only for me. Teach me to give you not only a coin from my pocket but my whole self, and let that gift overflow into love for whoever stands in front of me today. Loosen my grip on what I call security, and help me to trust you a little more. Amen.



December 3: Love as a Gift

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 ***And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus."***

The verbs — *increase* and *abound* — show that love isn't a fixed possession but something meant to keep growing. Paul isn't congratulating the Thessalonians on having enough love; he's praying for overflow. Love within the community is the starting point, but it's meant to spill outward to everyone. And notice who does the increasing: "may the *Lord* make you increase." Paul isn't exhorting them to try harder — he's praying that God will produce this growth in them. Love here is a gift, not something manufactured by willpower.

Paul draws a straight line between love, the means, and holiness, the result: growing, overflowing love is precisely what strengthens the heart. And "blameless" doesn't mean sinless perfection so much as having nothing to be legitimately charged with — a life so consistent that no accusation sticks. Read this way, it's a prayer for integrity, not flawlessness: love allowed to grow unchecked, producing a life so oriented toward God and neighbor that whatever scrutiny comes, nothing sticks. "The coming of our Lord Jesus" points to Christ's return, which, along with his birth, we anticipate in Advent — the horizon against which present holiness matters.

I work behind the counter at Starbucks, and one morning a regular, Dennis, came in. He was always irritable and surly, and I didn’t like serving him. I asked what he wanted, but with the noise of the espresso machine I didn't catch his answer, so I asked him to repeat it. He snapped at me. For a half-second I braced the way you do with a difficult customer. But instead, something else happened — something I hadn't decided to do. I stopped seeing an angry man and saw a lonely, lost one instead. My heart went out to him before I'd chosen to let it. I felt myself soften. For that moment, Dennis wasn't a difficult customer to get through. He was a person who was hurting.

That's what I think Paul means by love as a gift rather than effort. I didn't work myself up into compassion for Dennis — it arrived, unbidden, the way Paul prays it will for the Thessalonians. I still have to keep asking for it, order after order. But when it comes, I recognize it as something given to me, not something I built.

Lord, make my love increase and overflow, not by my own effort but as your gift. Let it spill past the people closest to me until it reaches even a stranger at the counter, on an ordinary morning. As I wait for your coming, make me whole enough that nothing needs to be held against me. Amen.

December 4: Grief and Gratitude

Luke 20:41-21:4 ***"Beware of the scribes, who devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."***

I always read this as a straightforward call to sacrificial giving — giving that costs something, that involves real trust in God, rather than giving what's comfortable. Hearing this as a young teenager, I emptied my dresser drawer of babysitting money — seventeen dollars, all in ones — and counted it out on my bed. I stuffed it into an envelope addressed to the organization helping starving children of Africa I'd seen on the back page of the Catholic Digest. When I dropped it in the mailbox, I felt light and happy. Of course, I could only do this because I still had a home, clothes, and food. As I grew older, I wondered if I'd ever be able to give away all I had to live on, and was humbled to find I could not.

But in researching this, I found that some argue Jesus isn't holding the widow up as an example to imitate — he's lamenting what the Temple system has done to her. Read this way, the passage isn't "look how generous she is," but "look what this institution, run by scribes who devour widows' houses, has extracted from someone who can least afford it." Jesus's statement is less approval than grief — a diagnosis of a system that praises large donors while quietly consuming the last resources of the vulnerable.

The widow's gift might be total, trusting devotion, and at the same time an indictment of a religious economy that allows — even encourages — someone in her position to give everything, while the wealthy give comfortably and are publicly honored for it. Jesus can admire the heart behind her gift while condemning the structure that emptied her.

I'm relieved Jesus may not expect me to give everything and become a beggar. But he still wants all of me, so I'm not off the hook. I grapple with what that means practically in my life. This Advent, waiting for both his birth and his return, I ask him to open my heart to see how I can serve him better.

Lord, teach me to hold both grief and gratitude in the same breath — grief for what systems can take from the vulnerable, gratitude for a love that still asks everything of me. Give me the humility to sit with what I don't yet understand, and the trust to keep giving myself to you anyway. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.



December 5: By Your Grace

Luke 21:5-19 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death... But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

Jesus said "not a hair of your head will perish" right after "some of you will be put to death." The promise isn't that we won't suffer physical harm — it's a promise about ultimate security: nothing that happens to us, even death, can touch what truly belongs to us. That's reinforced by the next line: "by your endurance you will gain your souls." The Greek word for endurance implies not passive waiting but active, patient perseverance under pressure. The very trials described — arrest, betrayal, persecution — become, paradoxically, the arena where one's deepest self is secured, not lost.

I have never been persecuted for my faith. But I know something about endurance from a moment at my kids' gym, after my husband moved out, waiting for their trainer to show up.

Since Jerry's departure, I had been lost in a fog and coping by over working, and in my own pain, hadn't been there for my children. My youngest son Brian, fourteen at the time, looked at me and said, "Mom, we never see you anymore."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. It's a hard time. It won't last forever. Just pretend I'm on a long trip, like Dad used to take for work."

"I should just pretend you're dead," he said, "because you might as well be."

I looked at him. Fourteen years old, and I had essentially left him to raise himself for months. There was no soft way to hear that.

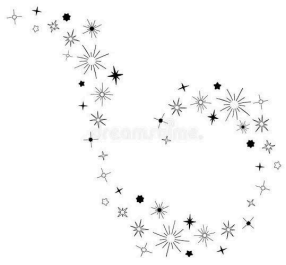
"You're right," I said, deeply chastised.

He shrugged the way teenage boys shrug, and looked away. But he'd said it. It didn't disappear because he shrugged it off. That moment of brutal honesty was a huge wake-up call to the fact that my children were suffering too. I resolved to do better.

Richard Rohr says people are most transformed through great love and great suffering, because both take you out of your own hands. Hearing my own son say I might as well be dead — that took something out of my hands. I couldn't unhear it, and I didn't want to.

I don't relish the trials still ahead of me. But I've learned that enduring one — really facing it, not managing around it — didn't cost me the parts of myself that matter most. If anything, it's the only way I've found any of them. I found my deeper reserves and was able to be more present for my children.

Lord, when the truth about myself is hard to hear, don't let me look away. Teach me that facing what's true doesn't destroy me — it's how I keep what I can't afford to lose. By your grace, let my enduring become the way I gain my soul. Amen.



Week Two

Hope in the Promise

Katherine McMillen

December 6: Accepting the Impossible

Isaiah 40:6b, 8 (Revised JPS) ***All flesh is grass, all its goodness like flowers of the field… Grass withers, flowers fade—but the word of our God is always fulfilled!***

Scripture frequently portrays the human condition as a state of impermanence, turmoil, and alienation. We come into existence abruptly, without any say in the matter, and we spend our days wandering, perplexed by the strange reality in which we find ourselves. We feel a sense of loss of something we never knew, a yearning for something we cannot name. We long for peace and comfort but are beset by strife and suffering. We search for clarity, certainty, and meaning, but we find only illusions and shadows. We have no power to avert misfortune or disaster, and the people and things we love invariably slip beyond our grasp. And then, as a final indignity, we pass out of this life at a time and in a manner not of our choosing with hardly any more understanding of ourselves or our situation than when we first entered it. “All flesh is grass,” Isaiah is told. What is here today will be gone tomorrow, and the sum of human existence will wither and fade like flowers in a field.

That human life is tenuous and fraught with trouble is incontestable. One simply has to look around or read the news or just *live* for a little while to see it. Scripture does not shy away from this fact, but neither does it remain there. The prophet is told to cry out, but the transience of mortal life is only part of the message. “Grass withers, flowers fade—but the word of our God is always fulfilled!” The verses surrounding this passage erupt in wild shouts of joy over the promise of God's imminent arrival. *Go and prepare a path through the wilderness! The glory of God will be revealed, and all flesh will behold it! He will gather up his people in his arms and comfort them.*

The theme of hope and exultation in the face of despair suffuses the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament. Isaiah’s words are echoed in the gospels, a preface to Christ’s emergence from Galilee at the beginning of his earthly ministry. *The Lord is coming*, says Isaiah. *Indeed, he has come*, answer the gospels. But Christ did not arrive as might have been expected, with overwhelming force or divine might. Instead, he slipped into the cycle of existence quietly, humbly: a helpless newborn lying in a feed trough, destined for a hard life cut short by a cruel, humiliating death. But amidst the shock and bitter sorrow of the crucifixion, hope wells up once again and transforms what seemed an empty, senseless execution into a salvific act that undid the workings of Death itself.

These are claims that to me often feel too wonderful to be true, too incredible to believe. And yet we are asked to believe them all the same, to find joy and comfort in them when all around us is bleak. We are asked to hold fast to the promise that God has not abandoned creation to futility and death but has purposed in his unfailing love to bring all things into perfect unity with himself.

As we move through Advent and into the depths of winter, let us remember that although grass withers and flowers fade, the word of our God is always fulfilled.

December 7: Staying Awake

1 Thessalonians 5:6 (NRSV) ***So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.***

Today's Daily Office contains an interesting set of readings. Isaiah rails against the avaricious and corrupt, those who twist and debase what is good, who indulge in excess and extravagance at the expense of the poor and downtrodden. The prophet warns of the sudden and unexpected destruction of such people along with the status and possessions they hold dear. "Surely, great houses shall lie forlorn, spacious and splendid ones without occupants," writes Isaiah (Isa 5:9, Revised JPS). In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul echoes Isaiah's warnings against spiritual laxity and inebriation, writing, "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!" (1 Thess 5:3, NRSV).

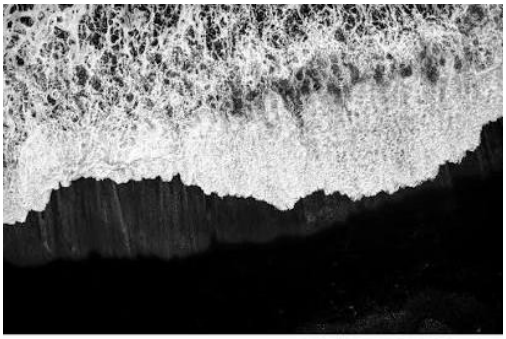
Images of wrath, judgement, and destruction in Scripture can be troubling and difficult to engage with or reconcile to the idea of a loving God, especially for those of us who came from fundamentalist or apocalyptic traditions, but I take comfort in the fact that they are set against equally powerful images of compassion, justice, and deliverance that surpass the devastation and persist after it has gone.

These passages remind us that God is all-loving but also all-just and deeply concerned with the plight of the abused and exploited. "God is a haven for the oppressed," sings the psalmist. "God does not ignore the cry of the afflicted… Not always shall the needy be ignored, nor the hope of the afflicted forever lost" (Psalm 9:10, 13, 19, Revised JPS). Scripture declares that cruelty, brutality, violence, and greed are aberrations and that a time is coming when the systems of oppression built upon them will be swept aside and those who profited from them left bereft.

Paul exhorts the followers of Christ not to lose themselves to dissipation, base impulse, or moral exhaustion, but rather to remain awake and aware, living intentional lives oriented in hope toward the promised day of the Lord, "for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness" (1 Thess 5:5, NRSV). In our current time, as in virtually every point in human history, we see injustice prevailing against justice, corruption riding roughshod over integrity, wealth hoarded in the face of abject need, and power used to dehumanize the vulnerable and deny them their basic rights. It is all too easy in the face of such overwhelming and seemingly inexhaustible badness to become fatigued and numb, to surrender ourselves to despondency and cast aside our hope for a better world as naive or absurd. But Scripture tells us to cling to that hope and to put our trust wholeheartedly in the love and justice of God and the promise of his coming.

Paul understands how difficult a task this is, likening it to a soldier donning armor in preparation for battle. He tells us that faith, love, and the hope of salvation are our defenses against darkness and despair, and instructs us to encourage one another and build each other up as we endure the long night.

This Advent, let us take Paul's advice to comfort and reassure one another, for though the morning may seem far off, the Morning Star has risen, and dawn will surely come.



December 8: Looking for Signs of God

Luke 21:29-31 (NRSV) ***Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."***

Growing up in East Texas, winter was not a particularly noteworthy season. We welcomed it as a brief respite from the unrelenting, sweltering heat of the Gulf Coast, a refreshing cold snap between the summer that was and the summer to come. Pittsburgh winters are a different story entirely. The cold and dark can seem interminable, and by February one begins to feel desperate for any stirring of life in the featureless gray of late winter. I'm something of an amateur gardener, so I take special pleasure in finding a bud swelling on a branch or a green shoot poking its head up through the frosty ground. I am often surprised to find these little signs of spring in what seem to be the coldest and most barren spots in my garden: some tenacious little green thing defying the elements and growing with all its might in hope of warmer days to come.



In the parable included in today's Daily Office, Christ employs botanical imagery to convey a truth about the kingdom of God. The parable immediately follows and is juxtaposed against images of devastation and distress: wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilence, Jerusalem besieged, its inhabitants slain or displaced, the heavens shaken. But then Christ abruptly digresses into this parable with its quiet, almost bucolic tone that seems out of step with the horrors described in the preceding passages. In one moment, Christ describes the arrival of the kingdom of God as an overwhelming divine incursion amidst the wreckage of war and disaster. In the next, he describes it as something that happens slowly, quietly, almost imperceptible at first but as inexorable as the changing of the seasons.

The symbolism of the fig tree would not have been lost on Christ's listeners. In the Jewish scriptures, it is often associated with the condition of God's people: a fig tree that is withered, barren, or stripped of its leaves evokes disaster and spiritual estrangement or sterility while a thriving fig tree is associated with peace, safety, blessing, and restoration. When I read these verses together, I see in my mind's eye the image of a young fig tree growing up through the rubble of a ruined city; a new life, unlooked-for, flourishing in a wasteland, unfurling its leaves in expectation of the glory of summer. It becomes, for me, a symbol of hope, a promise that all is not lost, no matter how deep the winter or how dire the circumstances, and an instruction to always look for signs of God's presence and power, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential.

At the close of the parable, Christ cautions us, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life" (Luke 21:34, NRSV). It is easy to lose sight of spiritual truths, especially when we are tired or preoccupied with the affairs of our mortal lives.

Advent invites us to renew our focus, to look for small signs in the places we least expect for reassurance that God is near and life and goodness will endure.

December 9: Encountering the Divine

John 8:11 (NRSV) ***"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."***

One of the most memorable passages in the Book of Isaiah records the prophet's call and encounter with the divine. In a vision, Isaiah saw God seated upon a lofty throne, the train of his robe spilling down and filling the temple. Seraphim flew back and forth before the Holy One, calling out to one another with unearthly voices that shook the doorposts of the temple.

Isaiah was overcome by his vision, crying out, "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of impure lips, and I live among a people of impure lips; yet my own eyes have beheld the Sovereign God of Hosts" (Isa 6:5, Revised JPS). Here, as in other places in Scripture, a direct encounter with the divine is portrayed as an intense and overpowering ordeal that human language is insufficient to describe. Accounts of such encounters often employ imagery of a blazing fire or an unbearable brightness that lays the innermost self bare before God, all of its delusions, pretexts, and rationalizations fled like shadows in the noonday sun. The prophet experienced this and was filled with a feeling of deep inadequacy and unworthiness. He shrank from the holy presence, ashamed.

In the Gospel of John, we find a very different sort of encounter with the divine. The religious authorities brought a woman caught in adultery before Christ and asked for his opinion in the matter, hoping to catch him out on a legal technicality. Christ seemed disinterested in the proceedings; instead of answering their questions, he bent down to write on the ground. When they persisted, he straightened and said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7, NRSV). Unable to answer this challenge, the woman's accusers went away, one by one, until the woman was left standing alone before Christ, who once again was bent over and writing on the ground. Who knows how long she stood there, silent and humiliated, waiting for him to denounce her?

When Isaiah cowered in fear and shame before God's throne, a seraph flew to him with a live coal from the temple altar and touched it to his lips, saying, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin be purged away" (Isa 6:7, Revised JPS). When Christ finally raised his head and spoke to the disgraced woman, he simply asked if any of her accusers had condemned her and then said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11, NRSV). Both the prophet and the woman stood exposed before God, their human frailties and faults on full display. But instead of judgment, they received purification and forgiveness.

Advent is a time for preparing to meet God, but we may find ourselves drawing back from him or trying to conceal the parts of ourselves that we find shameful for fear of his judgment and contempt. But that which is exposed to the light of God is not condemned but forgiven, and the human being emerges from the encounter transformed.

***This Advent, let us meet God without fear or shame, trusting in his capacity and willingness to forgive and sanctify us*.**

December 10: Room for God

Luke 22:11-12 (NRSV) ***"And say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there."***

At first glance, a reading from the Gospel of Luke describing the disciples' preparations for the Last Supper seems out of place for the season of Advent. However, the English translation of this gospel hides an interesting detail. The Greek word translated here as "guest room"—*katalyma* (κατάλυμα)—is the same as the one frequently translated as "inn" in Luke's birth narrative. Luke sets these two *katalyma* like bookends at the beginning and the end of Christ's life. The one at his birth was too crowded to admit him. The one at his death was waiting to receive him.



During Advent, we reflect on the stories of Christ's birth and how they might inform our own lives. Luke's nativity account resonates with us in part because it is so rich in theological irony: the Messiah arrives, but his birth is a lowly one. He receives no royal welcome, no fitting place is found for him, and a manger must serve as his cradle. This might prompt us to consider the sort of welcome we give to Christ when we encounter him, whether we make room for him amid the bustle and clutter of our day-to-day lives. Such ruminations can give rise to feelings of guilt and anxiety because *of course* we don't give him our full attention all of the time, *of course* the little annoyances and preoccupations of life make us forgetful of him, *of course* we're flawed and petty and awful and not at all the sort of company that Christ should want to keep.

And yet, if we go back and read Luke's nativity again, we may arrive at a different conclusion. The Holy Family took shelter where they could, and Christ was born anyway. The Incarnation was not delayed by humble accommodations; it was not beneath Christ's dignity to lie in a manger. And when he stepped into the other *katalyma* waiting for him at the end of his life, it was not beneath Christ's dignity to break bread and drink wine with a group of Galilean peasants as the hour of his death closed in. The suitability of these *katalyma* to receive and house the Lord was irrelevant; they were consecrated for their purpose simply by his entering and acting within them. Ordinary deeds of courtesy and hospitality, even those which barely qualified as such, were transformed into salvific acts by God working through them. And so, we too are sufficient to receive Christ, because Christ has chosen to come to us.

During this season of Advent, let us do our best not be consumed with worry or feelings of inadequacy but instead rejoice in Christ's presence in our lives. Let us do what we can to do good, no matter how small, and trust that God working through us will sanctify and incorporate our human efforts into his great work of salvation.

December 11: God with Us

Isaiah 7:14 (Revised JPS)*"Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel."*

The seventh chapter of Isaiah opens in crisis. The armies of the kings of Aram and Israel are moving against the Kingdom of Judah and plan to attack Jerusalem. Isaiah is sent by God to speak to Ahaz, King of Judah, and reassure him that God will not allow the conquest to succeed. Ahaz is invited to request a sign from God as proof that Isaiah's words are true, but Ahaz declines the offer, claiming that he does not wish to test God. Although Ahaz's refusal is couched in pious language, it is in fact a repudiation of God's help in favor of an earthly alternative—Ahaz is already negotiating with Assyria for aid in fending off the threat. "Assuredly, my Sovereign will give you a sign nonetheless!" the prophet retorts. "Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel" (Isa 7:14, Revised JPS).

The Gospel of Matthew takes Isaiah's words and weaves them into its account of Christ's birth. Joseph is visited in a dream by an angel of the Lord, who tells him that Mary, his betrothed, has conceived a child by the Holy Spirit. Matthew writes, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (Matt 1:22-23, NRSV). When Joseph wakes from his dream, he does as the angel commanded him. He takes the pregnant Mary as his wife and, when her son is born, he names him Jesus and raises him as his own.

The men at the center of Isaiah's and Matthew's Immanuel passages can be set as counterpoints to one another. Both are descendants of the house of David (Matthew lists Ahaz as one of Joseph's direct ancestors), and both are confronted with difficult situations. Ahaz faces the threat of siege and conquest by foreign powers. Joseph faces social humiliation for marrying a woman pregnant out of wedlock. Where they differ is in the choices they make. When Ahaz is offered a sign from God, he refuses it, preferring a far poorer deliverance that he thinks he can control. When Joseph is offered a sign, he welcomes it despite the scandal and becomes the adoptive father of the Messiah.

The sign of Immanuel was offered to both men, but only one chose to accept it.

Advent reminds us that we have been offered the same sign—freely given, but not on our terms and not within our control. We are encouraged to consider how we engage with the promise of God-with-us, especially when we find ourselves in difficult situations. Will we reject God's sign and make our own way through life? Or will we turn toward God and allow him to work in ways we did not expect?

December 12: Joy in the Morning

Saturday after the Second Sunday of Advent
Francis de Sales, Bishop, and Jane de Chantal, Vowed Religious 1622 and 1641

I'd like to take a break from Daily Office readings today to commemorate the feast day and friendship of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal.

Jane and Francis met in 1604 during a series of Lenten sermons that Francis, then the Bishop of Geneva, preached at the Sainte-Chapelle de Dijon. Jane was a baroness who had lost her husband in a hunting accident three years prior as well as several children in infancy. Widowed at twenty-eight, Jane still had four children to care for and, in order to preserve her children's inheritance, had been obliged to leave her marital home at Bourbilly for the estate of her father-in-law—by all accounts a difficult and temperamental man who treated her very badly. Jane had returned to Dijon for a visit at the invitation of her father and there encountered Francis.

Francis had been consecrated Bishop of Geneva in 1602. Because Geneva was controlled by the Calvinist Republic of Geneva, Francis resided about twenty miles south, in Annecy. Although Francis had endured scorn and outright violence (including several attempted assassinations) due to sectarian strife in Geneva, he had built a reputation for patience and gentleness. One particular sermon he preached in Dijon on the virtues of forgiveness moved Jane deeply, as she had struggled for years to forgive the man who had accidentally killed her husband and upended her and her children's lives. Jane asked Francis if he would be willing to be her spiritual director, and he agreed. Thus, from this chance meeting, one of the great friendships in Christian history began to form.

Jane and Francis' friendship produced a treasure trove of correspondence over the course of eighteen years. They wrote on a wide range of subjects, such as prayer, grief, and the difficulties of faith. Jane shared her doubts, anxieties, and deep sorrows with Francis, and Francis encouraged her to practice patience and tenderness to temper her natural inclination toward perfectionism and control.

Three years after their first meeting, Francis shared with Jane his concept for a new female religious order and, in 1610, they founded the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary together. The order accepted women who were rejected by other orders due to poor health or age and, when the order was criticized for this practice, Jane famously retorted, "What do you want me to do? I like sick people myself; I'm on their side." The order had thirteen houses at the time of Francis' death in 1622 and eighty-six when Jane died in 1641. Both Jane and Francis were buried at the Monastery of the Visitation in Annecy, which they founded together.

Francis and Jane's friendship is a reminder that our lives are made richer and more fruitful when they are shared with one another. Francis gave Jane patience for her perfectionism, tenderness for her grief, and a safe haven for her doubts, and she helped him build a religious order that has lasted for more than 400 years.



Week Three

Scripture, Saints, and Music

Michele Dula Baum

December 13: Sing to the Lord

Psalm 98 ***"Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things."***

I can't remember a moment in my life untouched by music – from mom singing as she rocked me to sleep and the growling tuneless hum dad employed during church hymns to television jingles, radio, vinyl records, cassette tapes, 8-tracks, compact discs, streaming on the internet and back to vinyl.

There was an upright piano in my childhood home, at which one of the first tunes I picked out by ear, age 4, was a melody from the movie How the West Was Won that I later learned was a traditional English folk song called "Greensleeves." (It remains a favorite today.)

Whenever mom's sister took the bench, she was sure to share a rendition of "Trees" by Oscar Rasbach. Music is everywhere around us in nature, too. Songbirds, insects and wildlife lift their voices to the morning. The soughing of the wind through the leaves and the squeaky crunch of boots in snow offer their own sacred music.

A recurring segment on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert featured a set of questions posed to celebrity guests, one of which asked them to choose a song to hear for the rest of their lives. For me, it's Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis."

Somehow more than 50 years have passed since I joined my home church choir, but I can mark each year by one or more singing groups. In church, on the street, in the car, at a concert, in the woods, learning new compositions or revisiting well-loved pieces can offer moments of true transcendence if we listen with our hearts as well as our ears. **That touch of heaven can be fleeting but you'll always know it when it happens.**

On a high and windy island, I was gazing out to sea
When a long-forgotten feeling came and took control of me
It was then the clouds burst open and the sun came pouring through
When it hit those dancing waters in an instant all eternity I knew

You can see forever in a single drop of dew
You can see that same forever if you look down deep inside of you
There's a spark of the Creator in every living thing
He respects me when I work but He so loves me when I sing

There's a magic every moment, there's a miracle each day
There's a magic every moment
Oh, won't you let the music play, oh won't you let the music play

— "Magic Every Moment," Dan Fogelberg, 1993

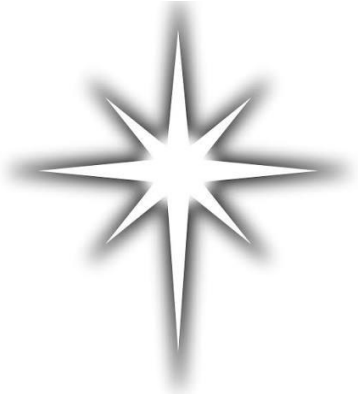
Lord, thank you for the gift of music and song, which helps us to express our joys and sorrows in ways stronger than words alone. Thank you for the community we have at St. Paul's and help us to remember to look for the magic in every moment. Amen.

December 14: Times of Trial

Luke 22:39-40 ***"He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength."***

Hardly a day goes by where I don't see a social media post from one of my oldest friends that doesn't start with "Mother of God!" followed by news of the latest political bid to restrict human rights for women and minorities. It's difficult to see the violence, anger, oppression, poverty, disasters and the staggering economic inequality in this country and around the world without wanting to throw up one's hands and retreat into apathy.

Factions within the United States government have found common cause with religious leaders who seek a rose-colored past where people understood the rules, and everyone was happy. Even a cursory look at history is enough to bust that myth no matter the yearned-for time or place.



In Psalm 4, verse 6, the psalmist laments "Many are saying, 'Oh, that we might see better times!' Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, Oh Lord."

Among my earliest memories are the political assassinations and social unrest of the 1960s, and reading journalist David Halberstam's *The Fifties* taught me that decade was a lot messier than people enjoying a *Roman Holiday*. Surely prayers were constant as America's service men and women faced conflict in Korea, McCarthyism shattered careers and lives at home and U.S. meddling reconfigured an elected government in Central America to placate multinational corporations.

Earlier decades featured world wars, The Great Depression and an influenza pandemic that killed millions. COVID-19, conflicts among Palestinians and Israelis, wars in Ukraine and Iran, and humanitarian crises in Somalia, Sudan and Haiti, anyone? The more things change, the more they stay the same, indeed.

God sent an angel to give Jesus strength as he prayed on the Mount of Olives. When we humble ourselves and pray, God also shows us that life can be more than a "time of trial" with every new friend, kind word, hug and opportunity to both give and receive love through service and fellowship. These gifts are but a shadow of what we can achieve by embracing God's charge to share God's grace in all our lives.

Dear God, help us to not be discouraged by what can feel like an avalanche of negativity that comes with each new day. Help us to live as you commanded us to love and serve you and to love our neighbors as ourselves. With your help, we can and must be the change we seek in Pittsburgh and the world. Amen.

December 15: For All the Saints

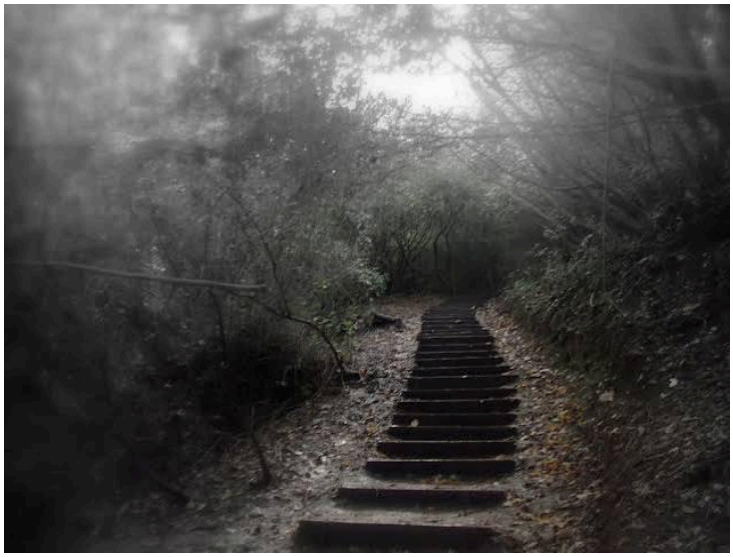
In Western tradition, December 15 is the feast day of **St. Nino (Nina) of Georgia**, a 4th-century woman credited with bringing Christianity to the Kingdom of Iberia nestled between Caucasus Mountain ranges in the east and south of present-day Georgia. As a cradle Methodist who joined the Episcopal Church in adulthood, I confess to knowing little about saints beyond a basic understanding gleaned from teenage conversations with Catholic friends about their catechism classes. (Ex. As a memory aid, a friend told me they called St. Sebastian, who was martyred after being struck by numerous arrows, “the pin cushion saint.” Right.)

As a woman, St. Nino is already notable. Only 20% of saints recognized by the Catholic Church were women. Narratives of her life offer conflicting details. She was a native of Cappadocia (now Turkey). Some biographies say she was captured and brought to Georgia as a slave. Others say the Virgin Mary appeared to her in a dream, telling her to spread the gospel in that pagan country.

Known for her piety, kindness and devotion to God, she was most active during the reign of Emperor Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Orthodox tradition venerates her as “Equal to the Apostles” in recognition of her importance as a missionary. She is credited with miraculous healings, including a terminal illness suffered by Queen Nana, who converted with her husband, King Mirian. Around 327, the king named Christianity as the official state religion. St. Nino is thought to have died around 338 and she was buried at Bodbe Monastery, which remains an important pilgrimage site for Georgian Orthodox Christians.

The Reformation began a slow decline in the prominence of saints in Protestant discipline and worship. Yet their stories contain lessons on how we, too, can follow and spread the gospel through how we conduct ourselves – even though it’s unlikely we’ll ever be called upon to heal some royal personage.

Almighty God, who called your servant Nino to be your apostle to the people of Georgia, to bring those wandering in darkness to the true light and knowledge of you, grant us so to walk in that light, that we may come at last to the light of your everlasting day. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.



December 16: Righteousness and Truth

2 Peter 2:1-3 ***"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. And in their greed, they will exploit you with deceptive words."***

Simon (whom Jesus later calls Peter) and his brother, Andrew, were among the earliest followers of Jesus. Peter is first among the disciples to recognize Jesus as "the Christ, the Messiah" (Matthew 16:18). Then there's Peter's denial of Jesus as related in the gospels' retelling of Christ's Passion. Our attorney friends would sum it up by saying that Peter's prominence among the disciples and understanding of Jesus' teachings are "so stipulated."

Scholars, however, debate whether the Apostle Peter wrote those cautions about false prophets himself or were they written by one of his followers using the Apostle's name. Such questioning is less a refutation but a reassurance that the words were a good faith warning composed for early believers to help them remain true to the message of salvation in Christ and his teachings about serving families, friends and strangers alike.

As a species, *homo sapiens* (perceptive man) has a burning desire to know more than the bottom line of any idea – especially something as central to our existence as faith. Anyone who's been around a 2-year-old for more than five minutes knows the critical nature of understanding **why**.

Ideas about those thorny whys from countless "prophets and teachers" throughout history have borne much fruit, indeed. Estimates range from ~300 to tens of thousands of denominations among Protestants alone.

The Bible has gone through about 900 revisions and been translated into nearly 2,000 languages since its content was codified by early church councils, according to the American Bible Society and Wycliffe Global Alliance. I once unsuccessfully attempted to convince a patron in a Tennessee Bible bookstore that the word of God did not divinely appear in 17th-century English via King James the First of England.

Does this plethora of pastors, preachers, priests, theologians, church leaders and religious-minded "influencers" include false prophets and teachers? Undoubtedly. *"In their greed, they will exploit you with deceptive words"* rings true enough in 2026. It is up to each of us to determine how to best move forward in righteousness and truth.

Give your grace, dear God, to all who are called to any office of ministry for your people and uphold them in their work for the extension of your kingdom. Give us the wisdom and discernment to understand your will in all our lives now and in the years to come. Amen.

December 17: Energized by Faith

On this date, the Church recalls the life of **Dorothy L. Sayers** (June 13, 1893 – December 17, 1957) who was a renowned English crime writer, poet, playwright, essayist, translator and Christian lay theologian.
She is best known for her mysteries, a series of novels and short stories set in the 1920s and '30s that feature English aristocrat and amateur sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey. However, Sayers considered her translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to be her best work. She is also known for her plays, literary criticism and essays.
She was born in Oxford, daughter and only child of Helen (Nell) Leigh and the Rev. Henry Sayers, who was then headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral School. She grew up at Bluntisham Rectory, Cambridgeshire, won a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford, and was graduated with a degree in modern languages, with honors, in 1915.

Her theology was traditionally Anglican with an emphasis on doctrine. Every available moment was spent writing, even to the wee hours of the morning. World War II led her to write *Begin Here*, followed by *The Mind of the Maker*, in which Sayers examines the parallels between the divine and human through the lens of creativity. Goodreads calls the book, published in 1941, a "classic (that) is by turns an entrancing meditation on language; a piercing commentary on the nature of art and why so much of what we read, hear and see falls short; and a brilliant examination of the fundamental tenets of Christianity."

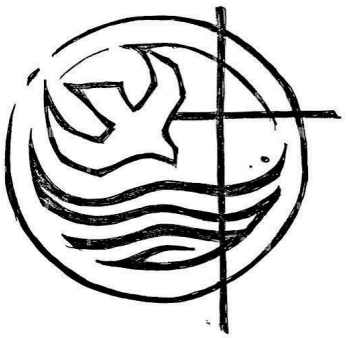
In high demand as a lecturer, Sayers was studious, delighted in puzzles and enjoyed a good argument conducted with wit and humor. She worked with the Rev. Patrick McLaughlin at the St. Anne's Center for Christian Discourse in London and became in 1952 churchwarden of her parish there, St. Thomas-cum-St. Anne's.

Sayers died of heart failure on December 17, 1957, aged 64 and was noted by many to drive herself hard, living a philosophy she expressed as: *"The only Christian work is good work, well done."*

> *--Lightly edited text courtesy of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, which was formed in 1976 to promote the study of Sayers' life and work.*

What drove Sayers more than anything was an insatiable curiosity and a formidable intellect and creativity. These traits helped her to survive through two world wars and make a living at a time when women were expected to make marriage, childbearing and household management their "proper sphere." She was sustained and energized by her faith, not constrained. We should all be so blessed.

Almighty God, who strengthened your servant Dorothy Sayers with eloquence to defend Christian teaching, keep us, we pray, steadfast in your true religion so that in constancy and peace we may always teach right doctrine, and teach doctrine rightly, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



December 18: His Grace as a Gift

Psalm 51 ***"Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit."***

In John 8:7-11, Jesus outsmarts the Pharisees and scribes who want him to condemn a woman caught in adultery. "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first," Jesus says. It doesn't take long for the crowd to dissipate. Jesus goes on to say that since no one else remains to punish her, he will not, either, telling her to "Go and sin no more."

The Bible doesn't reveal whether that nameless woman went on to a lifelong sinless existence but I'm guessing probably not. Every one of us sins, not only by our actions but also by our inaction. As I write, there are people living on the streets of Pittsburgh who should have somewhere safe and warm to sleep. Delivering sandwiches and fruit bagged by the wonderful lunch-packing volunteers of St. Paul's to Second Avenue Commons once a month doesn't mean I get to check my Christian duty to the less fortunate off my to-do list.

War is raging in too many places to count, not least of them being on American streets and in the place we should feel safest – our own homes. In October, a 45-year-old man shot seven members of his family and a family friend to death before killing himself. The dead included his wife, sister-in-law, two sons, a daughter who was due to give birth within days, a 5-year-old grandson and a toddler granddaughter. As of this writing, authorities are speculating that mental health may have been a factor, but little actually known. Could this family have been saved if anyone knew what was happening behind their closed doors? Maybe someone tried.

The essential point is that we recognize our hurting world and keep trying to make it better in whatever small ways that we can. Wallowing and giving up would be a greater sin, indeed. There will always be ups and downs, but with love, all is possible.

As St. Paul writes in Romans 3:23-24, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Dear Lord, help us to reflect your love and grace in all that we do and speak. Help us to love our neighbors, to forgive those who wrong us, and to ask forgiveness of those whom we have wronged. Despite our differences, help us to remember always to treat others as we would wish to be treated.

December 19: "I Will Always Be Beside You"

Psalm 139 ***"Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me fast."***

Some years ago, former St. Paul's organist and choirmaster Doug Starr, DMA (1952—2026) told those of us in the choir that the easiest way he knew of to describe God's grace was using a children's book. Written by *Goodnight Moon* author Margaret Wise Brown, *The Runaway Bunny* was published in 1942 and tells the story of a little bunny who tells his mother he wants to run away, initiating a fanciful game of verbal hide-and-seek.

The bunny imagines turning into a fish, a rock, a flower, a bird, a trapeze artist and a little boy. His mother responds that she will become a fisherman, mountain climber, gardener, tree, wind, tightrope walker and, finally, catches him with a hug as a little boy. Realizing that his mother's love is unchanging, the little bunny decides to stay with her, abandons the game and gets a carrot. The book's theme of abiding love, Starr said, was an excellent way to illustrate that regardless of our human pretensions, flaws and mistakes, God remains steadfast in readiness for us to stop running away and come home.

Don't all of us wish for that perfect place where we know we are loved and always welcome? At St. Paul's, we are blessed to have such a place among such people. That doesn't mean everyone always gets along, no one gets angry and makes mistakes, or that bad things never happen. But it does mean that when those issues arise, we get through them with contrition, forgiveness and, yes, grace.

You've seen me stumble, Lord, you've seen me fall
You've shared my triumphs and you've seen me crawl
And when I think that I could lose it all
You give me courage and you tell me
Don't lose heart, don't lose heart
Though it feels like yours will fall apart
Just remember when the road gets dark
I will always be beside you

— "Don't Lose Heart," Dan Fogelberg, 1997

Almighty God, thank you for reminding us that we are always welcome to see the light and come home. Help us to extend that same invitation to those with whom we meet, and to remember that you love everyone -- NO EXCEPTIONS!

Week Four

The Coming

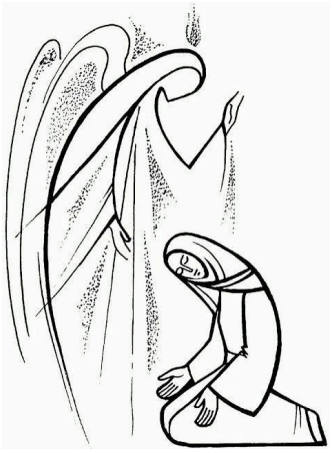
Jennifer James

December 20: The Annunciation

Luke 1:38 ***"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."***

When I attended Catholic grade school, our religion class text book had a section on the story of Jesus' birth from the gospel of Luke that included Henry Ossawa Tanner's painting *The Annunciation* as its chapter introductory art.

The painting struck me as a young girl. I grew up in the Catholic Church seeing depictions of Mary as always dressed in ornate blue and white robes. Her head was always surrounded by a halo or supporting a massively bejeweled crown since our parish was called "Queen of the World" after Pope Pius XII established the Feast of the Queenship of Mary in 1954. In other artwork I had seen depicting this story from Luke, Mary seemed confident and sure as the humanized form of the angel Gabriel stood before her.



Tanner's depiction of this same scene upended my visualization of Mary. In this painting, Gabriel is depicted as a beam of light shining in Mary's bedroom. Mary in Tanner's interpretation has no halo or crown, and she looks so young as she's sitting up in her bed, likely still half-asleep. Mary, lit by the glow of Gabriel's presence, has her head tilted, and her expression as she's processing both Gabriel's presence and the angel's greeting for her ("Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28)) is reflected in the next line: "But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29). To me, what was equally striking was Mary's humble dress dwelling, likely inspired by Tanner's travels to Egypt and Palestine.

The painting stayed with me since then because it seems like a realistic telling of a fantastical scene. Of course Mary would be perplexed both by the angel's presence and message from God! Of course Mary wondered why God chose her for this purpose! Of course Mary was young and uncertain about how she, a virgin, was supposed to bear the Son of God!

Mary was likely uncertain and had many questions about God's will at this moment, but she said yes anyway: "'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) We can all think of similar circumstances where we've been given life-altering news or circumstances. We felt perplexed and totally unprepared, but we feel compelled to say yes anyway. In this last week of Advent, may we accept that God's will for us does not always make immediate sense in our lives and ask for His presence and guidance during these times.

Loving God, you send us on many paths. Help us accept your will for us in our lives as Mary did, even if we may not feel prepared. We pray that you will be with us through the changes and chances of this life as you were with both Mary and the Son of God she would birth in this season. In Christ's name. Amen.

December 21: Persist in Our Faith

John 20:29: ***"Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'"***

Today is the feast day of St. Thomas the Apostle. Today's reading from John tells us about the most well-known interaction between Jesus and his apostle, Thomas, when Jesus addresses Thomas after his apostle openly doubted stories of the resurrection.

This feast day and Thomas' appearance in John's gospel have more significance to me beyond the famous "doubting Thomas" depiction from the New Testament. My father is Eastern Catholic from the state of Kerala in south India. According to family lore, my paternal side of the family was descended from early Christians from Syria who settled in South India as part of the spice trade since our original surname translates to "place where goods are traded." Our family, along with other Syrian Christian families (as they're known in Kerala), integrated into the wider St. Thomas Christian community in south India. Tradition says that the St. Thomas Christian community consisted of people in the present-day Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas when he arrived in India. St. Thomas was said to be martyred in present-day Tamil Nadu, and many of his relics are located at the National Shrine of St. Thomas Cathedral Basilica in the state. St. Thomas Christians have a unique culture within Indian Christianity: they have their own cuisine, their own traditions for sacraments like baptism and marriage, and many churches still use a liturgy rooted in Syriac (an ancient dialect based on Aramaic) rather than Latin like many Western churches.

This story in John has special meaning to my overall Christian faith as well. In this passage in John, the resurrected Jesus appears before John. By asking Thomas to see and touch the wounds from his crucifixion, Jesus helps his apostle affirm his belief through this sign. Thomas' skepticism and doubt throughout John did not bar him from being one of Jesus' apostles. Rather, Thomas' courage to persist in his faith despite his questions and doubt were met with Jesus' assurances and a reminder to believe, even when we can't see. Like Thomas' hagiography says in Forward Day by Day: "The sign did not create faith; it merely released the faith that was in Thomas already." That released faith would lead Thomas to spread God's word through Persia and eventually to south India according to legend. I had many doubts as a Catholic, and I still have doubts as an Episcopalian. But Jesus' sign to Thomas is a reminder for me to continue to have the courage to follow my faith and that our faith community at St. Paul's is always here to support me.

O God, who sent the sign of Christ's presence to your apostle Thomas to affirm his faith and bless those who have not seen yet still believe: Give us the courage to persist in our faith in you as we encounter doubt and skepticism in our world. Help us to continue to believe in you despite not always seeing your presence and your will in our lives. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and risen savior. Amen.



December 22: Death Will Be No More

Revelation 21:4*:*
"'...he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'"

As a Christian who has always celebrated the season of Advent, I used to be confused about why Revelation was included in the Gospel readings for this week. As a child, Revelation's apocalyptic imagery was scary and confusing to me. A portion of today's readings from Revelation also appear as suggested New Testament readings in the Book of Common Prayer's liturgy for the Burial of the Dead (Revelation 21:2-7).

As I read to prepare this entry, my younger self was asking: Why are we reading about the apocalypse right before Christmas? Why are we reading from the funeral service liturgy during the "most wonderful time of the year?"

But thanks to small group and adult formation events that I've participated in at St. Paul's and external sources like the episode "What is the Book of Revelation?" from the podcast *And Also with You* (co-hosted by the Rev. Laura Di Panflio, current Priest-in-Charge at St. Brendan's Episcopal Church and St. Paul's former Associate Rector), I realized that Advent and the Book of Revelation are connected through their themes of maintaining hope during difficult times of waiting and uncertainty.

I learned that the Book of Revelation was written by someone who identifies himself as John. John was writing during a turbulent time of intense fear, conflict among early Christians and against their non-Christian communities, and deep uncertainty for the future of the early church. According to the Bible Project, "By John's day, the murder of Christians by the Roman emperor Nero had passed, and the persecution by emperor Domitian was likely underway." Trying to survive these times, let alone maintain their faith in God, must have felt impossible to early Christians reading John's writing. But this portion of the New Testament uses apocalyptic imagery and other symbolism to remind these Christians that through their faith in Jesus and the resurrection, they could find hope that one day Jesus would conquer evil and make a new world.

For the people of Israel in the Old Testament, it must have also been difficult waiting for the birth of the Messiah during generations of instability and suffering. Still, today's reading from Isaiah points to both the hope we feel in the season of Advent and themes of reconciliation despite history: "He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isaiah 11:12).

Revelation and today's reading from Isaiah relate to Advent and other periods of waiting, strife, and uncertainty in our lives. But this period before Christmas reminds us that we can always find hope in God's promise: that He loved us so much that He sent Jesus to die for the sins of the world, and that one day, despite the suffering and evil of this world, we will all be reconciled to Him.

From the Book of Common Prayer (p.830):

55. For a Person in Trouble or Bereavement
"O merciful Father, who hast taught us in thy holy Word that thou dost not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men: Look with pity upon the sorrows of thy servant for whom our prayers are offered. Remember *him*, O Lord, in mercy, nourish *his* soul with patience, comfort *him* with a sense of thy goodness, lift up thy countenance upon *him*, and give *him* peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

December 23: A World Without Suffering and Oppression

Revelation 21:22*: "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."*

Despite Revelation's apocalyptic imagery and John's fantastical description of his vision of the new Jerusalem's exterior, there was no temple in the new Jerusalem: "...the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Revelation 21:22). John's vision goes further:

"The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it… But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:23-24, 27).

The Christians reading John's letter could imagine that their persistent faith in Jesus and their determination to follow His teachings despite conflict and the empire's oppression put them in the "Lamb's book of life" that would allow them to live free from suffering in this new world. They could find hope that in Jesus' return, the empires of their world would have no power over them. John's imagery may have encouraged them to consider how, as Christians, they could make room for the Lord as this "temple" despite their challenges as the early church.

The Christian faith persists today as a global community. Many Christians around the world are still facing persecution like the early Christians in the Roman Empire addressed in this book. Some Christians sought refuge in the US under religious asylum. Within the past year, they are increasingly being torn from their communities, detained under inhumane circumstances, and deported to their home countries where their faith places their lives at risk. Some Christian clergy in cities facing increasing immigration enforcement have been arrested at protests and had their congregations surveilled by our government because they are outspoken in their belief that this administration's immigration policies violate Christ's teachings.

As Christians, we can quote Jesus' teachings like, "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39) and "I was a stranger and you welcomed me…[J]ust as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 35, 40). But under increasing oppression and government surveillance in this country, how can we turn Christ's teachings into action? How can we support our neighbors victimized by our country's immigration policy, including Christian asylum seekers? How can we join fellow Christians in their public witness against these unjust policies? May we be inspired by the courage of the early church in living out Jesus' teachings and continually work to create a new world without suffering and oppression from empires.

From the Book of Common Prayer (p.826):

36. For the Oppressed
"Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

December 24: The Prince of Peace

Isaiah 9:6 ***"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."***

My mom taught elementary music for over forty years before she retired. In her unit on George Frideric Handel, she always included excerpts from Handel's *Messiah*, a piece for orchestra, choir, and vocal soloists based on scripture about the life of Christ. The work is split up into three parts: Part I focuses on the prophecies of Isaiah and the birth of Jesus, Part II focuses on the Passion of Christ and ends with the most famous piece, the *Hallelujah* chorus, and Part III focuses on Paul's writings about the resurrection of the dead.

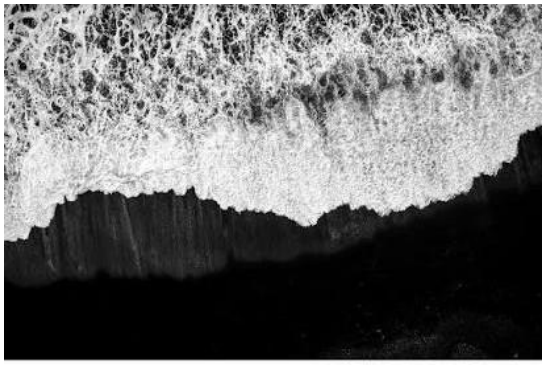
My favorite piece of the *Messiah* is "For unto us a Child is born" in Part I. To me, it perfectly expresses the joy of Christ's birth and His promise of eternal salvation. I sing the chorus in my head whenever I read the quoted line from this passage in Isaiah:

"And his name shall be called:
Wonderful,
Counsellor,
The Mighty God,
The Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace."

Music can be a beautiful way for us to reinterpret scripture. It can evoke new emotions in us that we may not have experienced just from reading the Bible. As you finish your observance of Advent, consider listening to Handel's *Messiah*, or better, going to see a live performance of the work. You may come away with not just a deeper appreciation for Handel's music but a clear view of how enduring and influential the story of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection has been throughout history. May we always be seeking new ways to meditate on God's promise to us through the life, death, and resurrection of His son.

From *A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* from the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia:

"Son of God,
light that shines in the dark,
child of joy and peace,
help us to come to you
and be born anew this holy night.
Hear this prayer for your love's sake.
Amen."



December 25: The Kingdom of Heaven

Luke 2:13-14: ***"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"***

Today, the season of Advent ends, and we celebrate the start of the Christmas season in the Episcopal Church. On the day of Jesus' birth, I'm reminded of his words from John 3:16-17: "'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.'"

We're reminded of God's love for us all as we read the narrative of Luke on the birth of Jesus Christ. We remember that the "King of kings" and "Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:16) was born into humble origins and laid in a manger. We also read in this passage that God first revealed the good news of His promise to us not to royalty, not to the wealthy and powerful, but to shepherds tending their flock that night. This is just one example of many of how the poor and marginalized are favored by God throughout the New Testament. Jesus would spend much of his ministry helping the poor, the sick, and others overlooked by society, and his teachings encouraged his followers to do the same. On Christmas Day, throughout the Christmas season, and beyond, may we be reminded that we must continue this work to support the overlooked and downtrodden in our society as we bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth.

From *A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* from the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia:

"Almighty God,
you gave your only-begotten Son
to take our nature upon him,
and be born of the Virgin Mary;
grant that we, who are born again
and made your children by adoption and grace,
may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever. Amen."



Join us for St. Paul's Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Worship Services:

Thursday December 24, 2026:

2 pm in the Sanctuary- with Music and Children's Chapel

4:30 pm in the Sanctuary- With Music and Children's Chapel

7 pm in the Sanctuary- Carols with Chancel Choir; 7:30pm Worship with the Chancel Choir and Organ

9:30 pm in the Sanctuary- Contemplative Service with Music

Friday December 25, 2026:

10 am in the Sanctuary

Collects for Advent

First Sunday of Advent

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

Second Sunday of Advent

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Third Sunday of Advent

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

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