

Worship & Wonder:

A Weekly Spiritual Resource

November 29-December 24, 2020



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Dear Reader,

We are so glad you're here! This spirituality resource is a labor of love from us to you. Each week, as you engage with the devotional materials you find here, you will need a Bible (we recommend NRSV), a writing implement, paper, and an open mind. Each week you will be invited into a practice that follows the Lutheran order of worship (gathering, word, thanksgiving, and sending). We invite you to prepare a worshipful space in your home, where you can engage with this resource. We hope this resource will help you to connect with your faith at home, during a time of physical separation. We also hope that this will sharpen your senses to notice the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love that God offers during this season.

Advent is our favorite time of year, because the season offers us opportunities to reflect on the places where Jesus shows up in the world around us. Through Advent, we are invited into a time of patient reflection in a fast-paced world. We hope this resource will help you slow down and embrace the wonder of Advent, revealed in Christ's coming into the world and your life.

God be with you through this journey!

-Pastor Blatt, Pastor Emily, Pastor Delaney, and Pastor
Allison

A decorative header featuring a dark background with warm, out-of-focus bokeh lights on the left and three lit red candles on the right. The text is centered in a large, white, serif font.

Week One

Nov. 29-Dec. 5

Advent

GATHERING

Advent wreaths have long been part of worship in many congregations to mark each week's journey to the Nativity of Christ. If you don't have an Advent wreath at home, you can gather five of any candles you have – one for each week of Advent (4) and one for Christmas Eve/Morning.

If you'd like, you can set the four candles in a circle or square shape and the final candle in the center. Each week, at the beginning of your worship, devotion, and prayer time you're invited to light your respective candles.

Light your first candle.

Meditate on the following words from Jeremiah as you center yourself for worship:

The Prophet writes, "In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; they will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior."

Holy Branch of Jesse, you come to the aid of your people, bringing safety where there is danger, hope where there is heartache, and joy where there is unfulfilled expectation. Come here now, live inside your people so that we might do your will throughout this Advent season. In Jesus name, Amen.

WORD

Scripture:

Luke 21:25-36

Happy Advent! We begin our season of waiting and anticipation with a passage from Luke that is very in your face. Luke is talking about the coming of the Son of Man and how we are to be alert – be ready – for this time. Jesus and Luke's audience are waiting for the Son of Man to show up, waiting for this time when their "redemption is drawing near;" they are waiting for new life. And here we are, excitedly awaiting Christmas, so we can celebrate God coming to us in flesh. But there's one problem. Waiting is difficult. Waiting is agonizing. We are impatient people, so used to things coming to us in the snap of a finger. We want our emails and texts responded to immediately. We want our dinners brought to our tables immediately. On a more serious note, we want our test results quicker, we want to know if the surgery was successful quicker, we want to know how long we have to wait for this pandemic to finally run its course. There is so much to wait for these days, and it's really, really hard. It can be challenging to imagine God's kingdom being present during this ever-present in between time, especially when it can feel like the chaos that Jesus describes while teaching in the temple.



Week One

Nov. 29-Dec. 5

Advent

I will not give you false hope or tell you that prayer and a positive outlook will fix the agony of waiting, of in between time, of uncertainty. But I do know one thing – God is present. God knows agony. God knows the anxiety of waiting. God has been there. And God will be with you during this time like a steady companion. May you sense God among you, and may you know that the light will come. The light will come.

Reflection Questions:

- When was a time where you had to wait?
- What comforts you when you are in the midst of uncertainty?
- When has God shown up for you during a waiting period?
- Why do you think waiting is hard?
- How can you be present for others during their difficult seasons of waiting?

THANKSGIVING

In the Gospel this week, Jesus says that when we see the trees begin to sprout leaves, we know that summer is coming. Waiting is made easier when we see small signs of what we hope for. This season of Advent, in the midst of a pandemic, we wait for many things.

What ‘signs’ do we see that help us know that Christ is with us in our waiting? This week for our time of thanksgiving, make a list of times you have been aware of Christ’s presence with you. Save this list somewhere so that you can add to it throughout the days leading up to Christmas.

When we are intentional about finding God’s presence in our lives, we find that we notice those moments more and more often!

SENDING

Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God has come near. Sometimes this is a hard phrase to understand. This week, spend some time writing down what you imagine would be different about the world if all could be as God intends. Use this list as inspiration when praying the Lord’s Prayer, to really get at what it means when we say, “Thy kingdom come.”

Week Two

Dec. 6-12

Advent

GATHERING

Blessed be God, Parent, Son, & Spirit, who makes all things new, in whom we place our trust. Amen.

As the prophet John prepared the way for Jesus by calling for repentance, let us confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness.

Holy God, I seek your forgiveness for my sins, for all of the ways I turn away from you and harm myself, creation, and those around me, both intentionally and unintentionally. I am sorry. Give me strength to turn away from my sin. Fill me with your goodness. Guide my feet into the way of your peace. May you find peace in God's grace through these words: You are not defined by your sin or your mistakes. You are defined by God's love for you. Your sins are forgiven. Receive God's mercy, and be made new.

Amen.

Scripture:

Luke 1:68-79

Luke 3:1-6

WORD

It is easy to think of John the Baptist as a "street corner preacher," proclaiming the end of the world on the streets of New York while the people busily pass him by. But in reality, John preached in the wilderness—and the people willingly left the safety of the towns and cities to hear him there. If John could get an audience in such an out of the way place, we might wonder why he did not take his preaching somewhere more accessible. But the wilderness around him was just as much a part of his message as his words.

One of my favorite books is "A Walk in the Woods" by Bill Bryson, which tells the true story of how Bill and his friend, Stephen, attempted to hike the Appalachian Trail. Bill and Stephen were older than most Appalachian Trail hikers, totally inexperienced, and set out on their quest with very little training. They completed a portion of the trail. But in Maine, in a part of the trail called The One Hundred Mile Wilderness, they met with defeat. The two became separated, and Stephen even lost the trail for a time, which was exceedingly dangerous in this part of the wilderness, where there was almost no hope of just "happening" to run into someone who could help them. It was only by extreme luck that he was able to find the trail again and reunite with Bill. After this ordeal, Bill asked Stephen, "Do you want to go home?" They both agreed that they did and they did not complete their hike.

There is something about the wilderness that not only brings us closer to God, but also makes us more aware of our own humanity. Bill and Stephen realized how small and incompetent they were compared to the vast, barren, landscape. When we enter the wilderness, we realize our own limits, we realize who we are, and we realize who God is.

Week Two

Dec. 6-12

Advent

The wilderness helps us to see that God is God and we are not. By preaching in the wilderness, John's call to repentance carried more weight. If even the valleys and mountains will bend to the words of God, then who are we to think that we do not need to change our ways?

John's setting for his preaching was like an object lesson for the people—they saw themselves, in the wilderness, as God saw them, and they were ready to repent. John's message led to Jesus' message—that God meets us in our weaknesses and failures. When we realize we are not capable, we simultaneously realize that God has been in control all along. In the wilderness, John called the people to repentance, literally, to turn around, to see how God was at work in the places where they fell short.

Reflection Questions:

- Think about a time that you have had a profound experience in nature. Where were you and how did you feel? Awed, afraid, inspired? How did this experience make you think of God?
- Think of a time you failed at something you set out to do. What did you learn about yourself and about God? Does this change how you might respond when you succeed?

THANKSGIVING

Luke 1:68-79 is referred to as "the song of Zechariah," which he sang upon his son John's birth, after months of being unable to utter a word. These words of praise and thanksgiving to God for all that God has done and continues to do is an amazing testimony to God's power and presence in Zechariah's life.

This week, for the time of thanksgiving, take a few minutes to write down your own testimony. If you had to tell a story of God's power and presence in your life, what would it include?

SENDING

A Blessing:

Take off the baggage of your sorrow and suffering, O people, and put on forever the beauty of the splendor from God. Put on the clothing of the righteousness that comes from God alone; put on your head the crown of the glory of the Everlasting, for God will show your magnificence everywhere under heaven. For God will give you forever the name, 'Righteous Peace, Holy Glory'. May you go in peace knowing that Christ has come, is coming, and will come again. Amen.

Adapted from Baruch 5:1-4



Week Three

Dec. 13-19

Advent

GATHERING

If you have an Advent Wreath, light the first three candles. In the Old Testament reading this week, the prophet Zephaniah promises the people that God is on the way. Meditate on these words from God to God's people as you prepare for worship. "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home." Zephaniah 3:19

Holy God, we are already at "home" in you, even during this season of waiting. Prepare our hearts and minds to hear your Word and inspire us to welcome all people home to you. Amen.

Scripture:

Luke 3:7-18

Isaiah 12:2-6

WORD

"So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." When you got to the end of the reading and found this phrase, did your eyebrow go up at the phrase "good news"? Mine did. I found myself wondering what "Good news," or "Gospel" John is proclaiming in the midst of this repentance-filled section of scripture.

As a person with more than my share of food, money, and coats, as a citizen of a country with far more than our fair share of resources, what good news can we find in this challenging Advent reading? I want to encourage you this day, and this season, to consider reading this passage from the point of view of someone in need of a coat, a dollar, a meal. Then, take it one step further and consider what it is that you lack, even if it's not something material. What are you longing for this season? Hope? Connection? Friendship? Purpose?

Whatever it is you find yourself longing for, take a moment to rest in the grace of the body of Christ, through which we all share what we have in common. And remember that Christ is coming, bringing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, this day and every day. So, repent, bear fruit, share what you have, and receive the gifts God is giving to you through the presence of Christ--and if you find yourself having a hard time remembering just what those gifts are, maybe turn on some Advent and Christmas hymns and let them remind you.



Week Three

Dec. 13-19

Advent

Reflection Questions:

- What parts of your life are not in line with God's dreams of wholeness and peace for all?
- How can you repent, turn, and move toward what God hopes?
- What are you longing for?
- What do you have to offer?
- What good news have you experienced in the act of sharing or receiving gifts?

THANKSGIVING

Isaiah 12:2-6 reads like a Psalm of thanksgiving, echoing the Psalms of praise found in the Psalter. Read a paraphrase of the Prophet's words below and reflect on the things for which you are thankful. Meditate on the positive things in your life, the struggles through which you have grown, and the times you felt God most active. Make a list of your thanksgivings – when you need a reminder, read your thanksgivings again so that you can remember God's work in your life.

"Yes, truly—God is my salvation.

I trust, I won't be afraid. God is my strength and song,
God, my salvation!"

Joyfully you pull up buckets of water from the wells of salvation.

All the while you say, "Give thanks to God. Call out God's name. Ask God anything!

Shout to the nations, tell them what God has done,
spread the news of God's character!

"Sing songs of praise to God, for God has done it all!

Let the whole earth know what God has done! Raise the roof! Sing your hearts out, O Zion!

The Greatest lives among you!"

SENDING

The crowds are asking John, "What should we do?" Sometimes it's easy to leave church or finish praying at home and have this feeling of *now what?* John helps us out with his commands to the crowds – share your coat, share food, don't take more than you need. This is for us, too. Is there anything in your home of which you have too much? Books? Canned food? Old clothes? Shoes? Take some time this week to go through your things and figure out what you could "share with anyone who has none" (verse 11), and make a donation to a local shelter, pantry, or organization that cares for those in your town. May you go and peace and love your neighbor this week.

Week Four

Dec. 20-24

Advent

GATHERING

Luke 1:46-55 includes what many Christians refer to as “the Magnificat” or “Mary’s song.” Mary, Jesus’ mother, sings a song of praise to God whose promises are coming to life through her. This song reminds us of Hannah’s song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), another faithful woman whom God chose to bear hope into the world. As you prepare this week, take a moment to praise God for those faithful women in your life and the world who have praised God and passed the gift of hope along through the generations, using these or similar words:

Mothering God, we praise you for the gift of hope and a lineage of faithful people, who tell stories of your faithfulness. Today, I give thanks for (speak names aloud here), who have gifted me and others with the Good News of Hope and New Life through their witness. Amen.

Scripture:

Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1:46-55

WORD

Advent is a lot about waiting, and while the world is already in full Christmas swing (and maybe we are too), we read Luke’s words and we’re invited to take a step back. The waiting is almost over. The baby in Elizabeth’s womb, John, is leaping with joy at the sound of Mary’s voice. The Spirit of the Lord is alive and well in Mary and Elizabeth and all who will welcome Jesus into the world.

John leaping in Elizabeth’s womb becomes a reminder that this is a blessed baby and the life that Jesus is about to bring to all people is important. Though we have a great deal of joy and expectation for Christmas, it’s also important for us to recognize that this Christmas, in the midst of a global pandemic, might be especially hard. We should also recognize that for some, the holidays are incredibly difficult as people deal with grief from lost loved ones, loneliness, depression, anxiety...

This passage from Luke’s gospel is full of joy, but within it resides a promise. The promise that the words previously spoken by the prophets, what has been breathed into creation, is coming to fulfillment. In this baby is life everlasting, in Jesus there is salvation. As we prepare for Christmas, as we look to the birth of Jesus, the anointed one, let us lean into the complexity of the moment – into the grief, into the pain, into the joy... birth is not all happy moments, it’s hard, it’s painful, and it’s suffering. I invite you to contemplate these realities as we’re hurled into Christmas, and I pray that you’ll find bits of joy and hope in all of it.

Week Four

Dec. 20-24

Advent

Reflection Questions:

- Think about a time you felt joyful. What made you leap for joy?
- Where is God when we don't feel joy?

THANKSGIVING

Mary's Song is her song of praise and thanksgiving to God. She acknowledges God's faithfulness to her and God's work in the world. Using Mary's Song as a model, acknowledge how God has been faithful to you and the world around you by filling in the blanks:

- "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has _____" (How has God looked favorably upon you?)
- "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me: _____" (What is something God has done for you?)
- "And _____ is God's name. God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."
- "God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts: _____" (When have you noticed the proud being humbled?)
- "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the _____" (Who has God lifted up and exalted that people might consider "lowly"?)
- "God has filled the _____ with good things, and sent the _____ away empty" (Who has been filled in your community, and who might be sent away?)
- "God has helped his servant Israel and _____ (Who else has God helped?), in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

SENDING

As your devotional time comes to a close, think of how you can sing Mary's song with your actions this week, perhaps by doing one of these things you feel called to do:

- Mary says that God shows mercy. The holidays are stressful and sometimes our anxiety causes harm to others. Show extra grace to those in your life that might need it during these times, from family members to acquaintances to employees at the store.
- Mary says that God lifts up the lowly. Reach out to someone you have not talked to in a long time, or someone from your congregation who is alone. Your pastor might have an idea of who in your congregation would appreciate a phone call or a card to show you're thinking of them!