

# Kindling the Flame of Love

A Celtic Advent Devotional



Presbyterians Today

2022 Advent Devotion  
By Maureen Paterson



In a society where Halloween candy hits the supermarket shelves even before summer is over, it seems fitting to begin Advent earlier than the customary four Sundays before Christmas.

Many don't realize anymore, but Advent used to be longer. In the fifth century, the Celts began observing the holy season on Nov. 15, which gave them 40 days to Dec. 24 to prepare to welcome the Christ Child. The 40 days also mirrored the Lenten time of journeying — and repentance and reflection.

Forty is a significant number in Scripture. In Genesis, we remember the 40 days and nights of rain that flooded the earth before God's promise was revealed. In Deuteronomy, we read of Moses pleading with God on Israel's behalf for 40 days and nights. The wilderness journey from captivity to the promised land took 40 years. In the New Testament, we see Jesus being tempted in the desert for 40 days. There are also 40 days between the resurrection and the accounts of Jesus' ascension.

It is not difficult then to see why the earliest Christians took the number 40 as an appropriate number of days to be in preparation for life-changing events — whether that was preparing for Easter or Christmas or the consecration of a new religious order.

In our modern times, it also seems appropriate that we take a little more time on our spiritual journey during one of the most hectic and stressful parts of the year. In the context of the U.S., where Thanksgiving typically occurs just a few days before the start of traditional Advent, it seems like we finish with that holiday celebration and then sprint toward the finish line of Christmas.

Beginning the practice of Advent on Nov. 15 gives us more breathing room, space to allow God's presence and the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. It allows us to begin our own spiritual practices a little earlier to center ourselves in God's Word and open ourselves up to God's call upon our lives.

Within the Celtic tradition, what I have always appreciated is the expansive view of the spiritual realm. There are ancient prayers that encompass everything from getting up in the morning and washing one's face to churning butter, hunting for the day's food, sweeping out the house, mending clothing, cleaning

out the fire and everything in between. There are prayers for the holy moments of life as well as the normal humdrum ones. There are prayers for each passing season and life-changing event. And then there are the remarkable stories of faith of the Celtic saints, those whose lives dramatically changed the landscape by their faithfulness and dedication to Christ. Men and women of faith who despite great adversity were able to advance God's kingdom in the ancient world.

In my reading of Celtic prayers, I came across one that was used as a blessing over kindling, which seemed appropriate as we move into the Advent season:

*God, kindle thou in my heart within  
A flame of love to my neighbor,  
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,  
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,  
O son of the loveliest Mary,  
From the lowliest thing that liveth,  
To the name that is highest of all.*

For each week during this season, I invite you to spend a few minutes a day with the image of kindling a flame of love for yourself, your neighbor, your foe, your friend — for Creation itself. Each week we will also spend some time learning more about some of those early saints and think about the ways in which their lives can inspire and challenge ours.

Advent is a holy time, a time of pondering and praying, a time to reflect on the Christ Child sent into our world to show God's love for us. As we consider this gift of God's love, we are also called to think about how we in turn are to live in our world.

And so, let us begin our Advent earlier this year.

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## Celtic Advent Begins

Begin your early Advent by lighting a candle and spending a few minutes praying and breathing in the following Celtic prayer. Make this a spiritual practice from now, till the beginning of the first Sunday of today's traditional Advent cycle, which begins Nov. 27 this year.

*God, kindle thou in my heart within  
A flame of love to my neighbor,  
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,  
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,  
O son of the loveliest Mary,  
From the lowliest thing that liveth,  
To the name that is highest of all.*

# Nov. 15 - The Fires in Our Lives

*The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. — Exodus 13:21-22*

The image of fire has been used in Scripture and throughout Christian tradition in both positive and negative ways.

In the Old Testament, we find Moses standing before a bush that is on fire but is not consumed: God speaks to Moses through that bush. In the text from Exodus, which begins our Celtic Advent journey, we are reminded that God rescued the people from slavery and journeyed with them in the form of fire.

In the New Testament stories of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is represented by tongues of fire. We are also reminded in several places about the refining and purifying aspects of fire to bring wholeness and healing. (And yes, there are also those images and stories that perhaps we would rather forget, such as the story in Luke's gospel of the rich man in the flames of hell.)

In our own lives, there are many types of fires: the cozy fire burning in our fireplace on a cold winter's night can provide warmth and comfort; the large fire pit to roast marshmallows around brings a sense of community and belonging; and the carefully controlled burn of backyard leaves and twigs can bring ecological balance and restoration. Then there are the devastating effects of house fires and wildfires, where the destruction of property and possessions and loss of life is tragic.

The central theme of lighting a fire in our hearts for Advent this year is one that I hope will be a com-

forting and inspiring one. Perhaps there will even be some purifying and refining moments, or even some uncomfortable discoveries about ourselves and our relationship to God or to others.

But before you can build an effective fire, there are several steps you need to take. You have to prepare the area that will host the fire, and that may mean cleaning out the ashes of an old fire from the fireplace or fire pit or it may mean creating a flat, cleared area of dirt outdoors. You need to gather some tinder or newspaper to get things started as well as some sticks, twigs or larger pieces of wood to keep things going. And, of course, you need some sort of heat source; a match or a flint striker (if you are adventurous, you can rub two sticks together!). With the right preparation, tools and conditions, a roaring fire should be attainable.

Our Celtic Advent also begins with a time of preparation. If we hope to be able to kindle a fire within our hearts, we too need to get ready. We need to make room, clear out some old debris and create the right environment for a fire to get started. We need to find ways to continue to feed the fire during this season, a time when the demands on our lives can become greater and more consuming as we get closer to Christmas. We need to take time to look inward at our own hearts as well as outward at those we are called to live among.



*Kindle within us, Lord, a flame of love, help us to prepare ourselves for this journey, help us to create room in our hearts for your presence, help us to build a place for you to grow. Amen.*

# Nov. 16 - Hide and Seek

*From there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. — Deuteronomy 4:29*

“Everything is OK, but I had to call the police” are never words you want to hear from your husband’s shaky voice when you are miles away at a preaching conference! The fear and relief were still audible in his voice as he proceeded to tell me that he and three of our young children were playing hide and seek in our house when our youngest went missing. She was only about 2 at the time and, after calling for her and searching the house, checking outside and asking some neighbors, he made a panicked call to the local police department.

The police were quick to have an officer on our doorstep in our small, suburban community. In the meantime, my husband resumed his search and found our toddler curled up in a ball at the bottom of a laundry hamper in a bathroom closet. When he asked her what she was doing and why she hadn’t answered his calls to her, she simply responded, “Am hiding!”

Sometimes our relationship with God can feel a little like a game of hide and seek that has gone on a bit too long. Whether it us hiding from God or we feel God is hiding from us doesn’t always matter; the effect is the same — there seems to be an unfathomable distance between us and the one who created us.

I love the straightforward sentiment of our Scripture today: If you seek, you will find. Yet we know it

is not always that simple.

When we seem to be in a never-ending game of hide and seek with God, sometimes the best way to be found is to remain where you are: Be still and patiently wait, listen and observe.

While this doesn’t hold true for a missing child, it does perhaps offer us some insight for our Advent journey. During this season that is filled with so much activity and busyness, having the wisdom to seek God quietly and patiently rather than frantically might serve us well. As we look for God with more intentionality, perhaps we will find him more regularly and readily. The truth is, God doesn’t hide from us as much as we just don’t see God because we aren’t looking in the right places. God is almost always hidden in plain view.

How might you open your eyes, mind and senses to God’s presence this November as you turn your back on the holiday festivities already picking up speed? Perhaps your Celtic Advent will begin each day with the intention to find God in your spouse, your work colleague and your neighbor. Maybe you set out to find God through your early morning jog, commute to work or evening walk around the block. Whatever form it may take in your life, the key is to be intentional and to live into Advent’s patiently waiting. Rest assured; God will be found.



*Ever present, yet elusive God, give us patience and insight, lead us in our searching, so that we may be surprised and comforted by your coming to us in our daily lives. Amen.*

# Nov. 17 – Moving Out of God’s Way

*I wait for the Lord; my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. — Psalm 130:5–6*

Those who were appointed as watchmen had an important job — they were to protect the people, the city, the livestock throughout the night hours, to keep them safe from harm, to stay awake while others slept. Their job came into effect when everyone else went to sleep.

The biblical day begins and ends at sundown, and Jewish religious observances still follow this pattern. There is something meaningful about thinking about time in this manner. When we are finished with our work for the day, when the business of our day is over, then we can find rest in God. When we go to rest, to sleep, then we entrust ourselves back to God’s keeping.

For others, though, this transition from day to night can be an unsettling one. “Sundowning,” for example, refers to a condition that is experienced by some dementia sufferers. It occurs late in the afternoon or early evening and can bring increased restlessness, confusion and agitation. The transition from day to night is anxiety-producing.

Truthfully, many of us experience a kind of “sundowning” when we feel things are out of our control, when things are not going the way that we had hoped or planned or when we receive some news or diagnosis that is unexpected. Our world can sudden-

ly become disorienting, and we can find it hard to maintain equilibrium. It is in those situations when we must learn again what it means to put our hope in God and to wait. We must trust in God’s presence that we will be carried through this dark period and that someone is watching over us. We must trust that God is very much at work in our life and our world even when we are feeling helpless and ineffectual. Indeed, it is in those moments that we can be even more aware of God’s workings — when we move out of the way and let God take over.

During this Celtic Advent, how can we give ourselves over a little more to God’s care? How can we move out of God’s way and let God work in our lives? How can we wait with hope and patience and expectation in the trust and knowledge that God will indeed come to us?

Perhaps it will mean surrendering some worry or anxiety to God. Perhaps it will mean handing over some unfinished or unrealized dream. Perhaps this Advent will mean becoming more content with the life we have been given. As you end your day, be mindful that the biblical day is just beginning. As you sleep, God is very much at work. Trust in God’s watchfulness.



*Watch over us, God, in the restlessness of our world. When we feel helpless, anxious and disoriented, help us find our home once again in your care. Amen.*

# Nov. 18 - Channel Your Inner Monk

*For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. — Psalm 62:1*

Many of us struggle with both waiting and silence. We don't like to be kept waiting, whether in the grocery store line or the doctor's office. We can feel our blood pressure rising as we sit in a traffic jam, and we obsessively find our eyes checking the clock on the dashboard every few minutes.

And silence? Most of us try to fill it any way we can. We leave a radio or TV on in the background or we have a fan continuously humming at night to help us sleep. We find ourselves in rambling monologues when there seems to be an awkward silence in a conversation. Being quiet is a challenge for most.

And yet for centuries the practice of finding God in solitude and silence, of patiently waiting for God's presence to be revealed, has been a foundational aspect of the life of faith.

For those living in monastic communities, the practice of seeking God and waiting in silence is built into daily living. There is time and space allotted to sitting in silence and waiting for God's presence to be made known. Our Celtic Advent journey invites us to enter that practice embraced by those holy men

and women centuries ago in abbeys and monasteries along craggy shorelines, and to create a space in our noisy and busy lives to be still and wait.

At first, that waiting will be filled with some anxiety. It will seem unproductive, and you may fight against it, but be patient in trusting that like generations who have gone before us, God will be revealed. God will come.

The practice of a Celtic Advent, which begins 40 days before Christmas, gives us the opportunity to take more time, build more space and become more comfortable in the silence and the waiting. If you can set aside a regular time each day to engage with these reflections, perhaps that can lead you into a time of silence and contemplation — a few minutes to begin with and then building up slowly. (Tip: You can even set a timer so that you don't compulsively check the time!) And when your mind wanders, just gently come back to the Scripture of the day. Be kind to yourself. Trust in the process. Trust that God is waiting, too — waiting to speak a word of grace, compassion, invitation and challenge to you.



*God of the still, small voice, come to us in the silence of our hearts. Help us in this season to make room in our lives for you, to be still, to be quiet and to wait. May we trust in your goodness and mercy now and always. Amen.*

## Nov. 19 - Soaring High

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. — Isaiah 40:31*

We have a home in a small lake community in New Jersey where we enjoy spending time in the summer. On one of our early trips to this area, long before we owned a home, we were told about a pair of nesting eagles. Eagles are territorial and mate for life and return to the same nest year after year. We have now watched for more than a decade as the nest has been added to and become larger and larger. It is quite a sight to behold. Those who live in the area year-round eagerly keep their eyes on the nest each spring for the first sight of chicks. Watching those majestic birds fly over the lake and take care of their young is truly a beautiful sight.

It is said that the bald eagle was chosen in 1782 by as the national bird of the United States because of its long life, strength, majestic looks and independent spirit. But, of course, long before 1782 the eagle had been a symbol of renewal, strength and truth.

The Bible mentions eagles 34 times, and the eagle is featured heavily in Roman culture as a symbol of courage, strength and immortality. In Native American culture, both the bald eagle and the golden eagle are revered and considered sacred — their feathers are given to others as an honor and are to be worn

with dignity and pride.

This verse from Isaiah reminds us of the power of God to transform our lives — to take our weariness, our brokenness, our frailty, and strengthen us to fly, to soar, to break free from all that tethers us and holds us back.

It is a very powerful image. The demands of our daily lives can often wear us down, the challenges of everyday life can be draining, the complex world within which we live and the enormity of its problems can be overwhelming. To truly take on this Scripture and trust in the promise of God to renew us can be difficult. In the King James Version of the Bible, this passage is rendered “those who wait on the Lord,” the implication being that when we are waiting with expectation on God, we do so with hope in our hearts. We wait with our hearts set on the promises of God, trusting that God will deliver us into a place of strength and purpose.

So, as we wait and hope this Advent, may we do so with the expectation that we will be renewed and given new energy for the life of faith. May we be able to lay down the cares, concerns and worries of our lives and allow God to lift us and restore us.



*God of renewal and restoration, we come this day with hearts that are often weary and overwhelmed. The cares and anxieties of our lives and our world can sometimes weigh us down. Give us the strength to trust in your presence and promises and may we rise each day in the knowledge that you go before us on our journey. Amen.*

# Nov. 20 - Thresholds and a Saint Named Brigid

*Let mutual affection continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. — Hebrews 13:1–2*

There are many saints in Celtic spirituality we can learn from. Among them is Saint Brigid. Born to a pagan chief and his Christian slave, legend has it that Brigid's mother was on her way into the milking shed at dawn when she gave birth to her daughter as she was stepping into the dairy. Much is made of her arrival in an in-between space. She was born in the early hours in the transition from darkness to light and born literally as her mother was stepping from the outdoors to the indoors. Her parentage meant, too, that she was neither slave nor free, pagan nor Christian. The idea of "thresholds" is an important one in Celtic spirituality and Brigid encompasses this on many levels. These luminal spaces are often found to be places of both much fear but also much opportunity and are commonly held in Celtic spirituality to be places where we may encounter the divine.

There are many heartwarming stories of Brigid as a young girl where she became widely known for her generosity to those in need. There are several miracles associated with her and most notable are the stories of her multiplying both bacon and butter. (Many of us would like those kinds of miraculous abilities!)

Legend has it that on one occasion she oversaw frying bacon and her father who was tired of her giving away food had counted the rashers. A stray dog appeared at the kitchen door, and she took pity on the creature and threw some of the bacon onto the ground — whereupon her father returned and was

mystified to find that there were now more rashers of bacon in the frying pan than there had previously been. Another story tells of how she was put in charge of churning butter and would pray while she completed the task, there would be so much butter that there would be enough for everyone in the area.

As we think about these miraculous stories, we might also pause to think about the ways we are called to share what we have with those in need. We are about to enter a season where for many of us there is an overabundance of food on our tables, not because we can multiply bacon or because we pray over butter, but because we have the resources to indulge not just our material needs but to pile our plates high.

At the same time, we know many in our communities are hungry and struggle to afford the basic necessities. As we reflect on Brigid's life example, how can we find ways to curb our own overindulgence as well as share our bounty with others?

Perhaps there are ways during this season of special meals and celebrations when we become more mindful of the waste that is often associated with these gatherings and find ways to be generous with our blessings. Perhaps this is a season where we can take time to learn about food insecurity and scarcity in our own community and contemplate ways that we might work with others to help bring food to those most in need.



*Provider God, may we never forget your call upon our lives to share with those in need and may we be generous in our giving and good stewards of all our resources. Amen.*

# Nov. 21 - Letting Go of Anger

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. — Leviticus 19:18*

Like many of the Celtic saints, Brigid possessed a strength of spirit that was quite fierce. Some stories tell that her slave mother was cast out of the household when her pregnancy was discovered and, therefore, Brigid was born into slavery. It is said by some sources that at around the age of 10, she returned to her father's household as a kitchen maid. It was in this capacity that she began her ministry of hospitality. But her father did not approve of his daughter's generous heart and tried to sell her to a local king. Then there was the time while waiting outside in a carriage, a beggar approached. Brigid gave him her father's sword so he could sell it to buy food. Her father was so enraged by this action that he finally granted Brigid her freedom, and she sought a life of Christian service.

It is remarkable to hear stories both ancient and modern where people overcome great adversity and having faced hatred or abuse, they use these experiences to fuel a life of compassion for others. These early stories of rejection and hatred could have hardened Brigid's heart and turned her against not just her

father but people in general. But it didn't.

We have all met folks whose lives have sometimes become filled with such jealousy or bitterness or regret that they are no longer able to find love or compassion for themselves or others. Perhaps you find yourself struggling this season with some of those feelings.

As we are entering a time of the year when there are family gatherings, work celebrations or more festivities to attend, search your heart and ask if you are bearing a grudge against someone in your close circle. How can you let some of that anger go? How can you show compassion and hospitality to those who have perhaps wronged or slighted you in the past? Is there a way to move beyond the old wounds and find healing and wholeness?

Sometimes the feelings of revenge run strong in our hearts, and it is often tempting to try to pay back the wrong that we have felt. This early Advent gives us more time to prepare our hearts, asking God to bring a sense of peace into our hearts so that we can kindle a flame of love for others around us.



*God of grace and compassion, we too often seek revenge for the wrongs that we have felt and harbor our anger and bitterness. Strengthen us and equip us to show love and compassion to others, to be able to let go of that anger and resentment and rest in your unceasing love. Amen.*

# Nov. 22 - Holiday Blahs Kicking In?

*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. — Hebrews 10:24–25*

As Brigid grew into adulthood, she eschewed the plans of her father to give her over to an arranged marriage through a variety of drastic means — one story tells of her gouging out one of her eyes prior to meeting a prospective husband! She of course was able to use her miraculous healing powers to restore her eye once that young man had been scared away. Finally, her father gave in to her wishes to be allowed to leave the family home and establish a monastic community.

She met with a local landowner and asked him for land to establish a religious community; he did not hold her in high regard but somewhat facetiously told her she could possess all the land that her cloak would cover. Legend has it that when she unfurled her cloak it covered more than 5,000 acres. To this day the area around the monastery in Kildare is held as common land and used by the local community for a variety of purposes. Brigid's vision was for a monastic community that encompassed both men and women and allowed people to live out their devotion to Christ through service to the poor, offering hospitality and shelter to pilgrims and creating a community where all are welcome and respected.

Many of us go through periods where we become disillusioned with the church or apathetic in our faith. Times when we find it hard to maintain our relation-

ship with Christ or times when we feel disconnected from those in our faith community. The encouragement we receive from Hebrews 10 this Celtic Advent to never give up meeting together is an invaluable one.

There are seasons of our lives when we need to rely on the faith of those around us to carry us. There are times when we must allow the ritual of our faith practices to wash over us even when we may not feel fully engaged or present to them. When we remember the great cloud of witnesses who surround us — those who have paved the way from centuries ago as well as those saints known to us — we can take comfort and strength in knowing that we are called into this rich family of faith by God.

And then, of course, there are other times when we are the ones called to carry others in their faith during a time of challenge or crisis. Times when our faith is the life jacket for someone else and our encouragement gives them strength and courage. Wherever you find yourself today — whether you need to be carried or whether you can do the carrying — give thanks for those around you who are part of your cloud of witnesses. Lean on the strength of the community and trust that God is at work through those with whom you share the journey.



*Gracious God, we do give thanks for those who walk alongside us in our family of faith. For those who encourage us, challenge us and even rebuke us; for those who pray for us and for whom we pray; for the company of saints in which you have placed us. Strengthen us in our journey so we may offer hope and solace to others and so model the love of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.*

# Nov. 23 - A Part to Play in Helping Others

*"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." — Zechariah 7:9-10*

I would guess that most of us do not begin our days by planning to "plot evil against each other." We probably don't write that down on our to-do list or mark it on our calendar. Yet judging by the number of times Scripture speaks to the idea, it was an issue in biblical times and an ongoing challenge of our human condition.

For most of us, this probably falls into the category of "sins of omission" rather than "sins of commission." We don't "commission" or set out to plot evil, but through the things we don't do or say, we allow the forces of evil to continue in our lives, the lives of those around us and in the community. As for sins of omission, sometimes they are result of being overwhelmed by the needs of the world and paralyzed by a sense of uselessness and hopelessness.

In a recent phone conversation with a church member, she remarked about the latest development on the Jan. 6 committee hearing and told me that I really needed to read the testimony. I quickly replied, "I don't really think I have it in me to hear anything else right now."

It was my honest, immediate and from-the-gut reaction. I had reached my threshold for the absurdity of what seems to be the political landscape in which we find ourselves. We all have our limits and sometimes it is for our own sanity that we must switch off

the news and not read one more article.

But we don't get to disengage completely. We may need to step back for a time and refocus our energies on ourselves or our family or our community, but we are called by God to engage in our world and to be concerned for those who have no voice or no power or no standing. As the narrative of Christmas approaches, we can use this time of Celtic Advent to realize we all have a part to play in the story of salvation.

You may be called to lobby your local politicians over a specific concern or called to a letter-writing campaign. Or you may be called to volunteer at a local food pantry or homeless shelter, to organize clothing drives for refugees and immigrants, to be part of a local tutoring program or after-school club for disadvantaged students. The list is endless for the ways that we might be engaged in counteracting the injustices and overcoming the lack of kindness and compassion we see in our world. We may feel like our efforts are inconsequential and we may get discouraged, but God calls upon us all to show compassion and mercy to others — one person, one day and one encounter at a time. And we do not give up hope. Rather we move forward believing in God who can multiply that goodness in miraculous ways.



*Lord, in the days when we are overwhelmed by the injustices of our world, give us strength and help us to focus on what we can do. To find ways each day to speak love and grace and mercy into our world. To be that light in the darkness that can banish fear and bring healing and hope. Amen.*

# Nov. 24 - Celtic Advent Meets Thanksgiving Day

*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. — 1 John 3:17-18*

For many, today is a day when we will gather with family or friends around a table laden with all our favorite Thanksgiving foods. There will be many traditional dishes that make their appearance and remind us of family members who are no longer present with us. Perhaps your gathering will be tinged with the sadness of loss. Perhaps your table has expanded through marriage or babies being born. Perhaps along with the laughter and storytelling there will be some tension or topics that will be avoided for fear of argument and offense. Being part of families comes with its joys and its challenges.

There are many who will not join their families — those who are estranged for one reason or another. Some who have been disowned and some who have chosen to walk away. There are those who are incarcerated and homeless. Some will sit at tables with

very little food to share. Some will be alone simply because they live far from those they love.

However we understand the roots and history of the day, it is an occasion to gather with others in a time of thanksgiving for the abundance of our lives. But like Brigid, we need to share what we have.

As we approach the Christmas season, think about a way you might be able to share your possessions with others and how your blessings can bless others during these next few weeks. Perhaps you can sponsor a local family through a gift-giving program at church or through the community. Perhaps you can sponsor some meals through a shelter or housing organization. Perhaps you can visit with a neighbor who lives far from relatives and feels the absence more acutely at this time of year. May our actions convey the truth of God's love for all people.



*Loving God, we come with grateful hearts for all that we have, for the gift of homes, shelter, food and family, and we remember those who go without this day. Be with those who are alone, hungry and afraid this day. Teach us to give with open hearts and open hands and share what we have with others to remind them of your love. Amen.*

# Nov. 25 - Seeing Christ in All

*Then they will also answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' — Matthew 25:44–45*

When I was training for ministry within the Church of Scotland, one of the requirements was a number of church and community internships. One of mine was in the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, which was built in 1729 and had carved above two doorways, "I was a stranger and ye invited me in" and "I was sick and ye visited me." It was sobering every time I walked through those doors to be reminded of this Scripture and the reality that not only was I a representative of the church when I visited patients, but more importantly I should be approaching each bedside as if I was visiting Christ himself.

If we truly live this passage from Matthew's Gospel, we will find ourselves challenged how we look at everyone we meet and every encounter we have. It doesn't allow us to be nice to the people we like and rude to others. It forces us to look at everyone with the eyes of Christ and not make value judgments

based on their race, gender, economic status or any kind of personal preferences. And that is often difficult. It is hard to hold onto this principle when we are busy, or tired or having a bad day. It is all too easy to take our frustrations and anger out on the first person we come across and not recognize the Christ that dwells within them.

Who are the "least of these" in your life? Who do you have a hard time recognizing the Christ within? How might you be more mindful of this scriptural mandate and be more intentional in your daily activities when encountering strangers or those people you find most difficult?

May we each try to slow down enough during this busy holiday season, to look within the other to see Christ and recognize each person as made in God's image. Imagine how different our world would be if we did.



*Creator God, we know you made all of us in your image and call us to extend your love and grace to one another. We confess that often we are too busy or self-obsessed to truly notice the Christ in one another. Open our eyes, our hearts and our minds to your presence and teach us to love as you loved. Amen.*

# Nov. 26 - Stop Searching for Loopholes, Love as Christ Loves

*He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." — Luke 10:27*

*Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." — Luke 10:37*

These four small words, "Go and do likewise," are probably among the most difficult in Scripture. (Right up there with "Come and follow me.") It isn't easy to love God with all that we are. It isn't even always easy to love ourselves, never mind our neighbors. We find ourselves sympathizing with the lawyer who has this exchange with Jesus and who wants to find a loophole to this commandment. We want to ask similar questions that might allow us to qualify just exactly what Jesus was talking about a little bit more. The parameters are just a little bit too wide, and we want to narrow them and make them more manageable.

And that is the difference between us and God. God's love is expansive and inclusive and all-encompassing and ours is narrow and defined and exclusionary. We want there to be some way out of such a broad and sweeping statement. We want a set of footnotes that will give us the freedom to make some exceptions and come up with our own set of definitions and guidelines, and so we play all sorts of mental gymnastics to try to bring us some latitude.

God, though, doesn't let us off the hook. Repeatedly in Scripture we find stories of God confronting people and demanding more of them than seems humanly possible. And perhaps that is part of the point. Left

to our own devices, we tend not to want to love with the same mind as Christ. We lean rather to judgment and selfishness. It is only when we can be honest with ourselves about our lack of ability to love in this manner that we can even begin to ask for God's help. It is only with God working in and through us that we can overcome these barriers and obstacles to truly loving our neighbor.

To love as God commands requires us to become more dependent upon God's spirit in our lives. We cannot do this apart from God. We cannot do it if we just try hard enough or set ourselves the right tasks each day. We will always fail. It is only when we are dependent upon God for each day and calling up God in each encounter that we can then give ourselves over to God's spirit moving in us. And that requires us to pay more attention to ourselves and our spiritual lives. It means spending more time in prayer and meditation and being mindful of the people God sets in our path.

This Celtic Advent, which is leading us into our traditional four-week time of preparing for the Christ child's birth, to truly kindle the flame of love for our neighbor we need to be intentional about it. May we set aside time each day to ask God to lead us and strengthen us in this endeavor.



*God of all people and places, expand our minds and our hearts so that we see as you see and love as you love. Send your Holy Spirit among us so that we might respond to your call to love without limits and boundaries. Amen.*



*Irish castle ruins covered by frost on the bank of the Corrib river.*



## Traditional Advent Begins

We now enter the four-week Advent observance that is more familiar to Western churches. But as we do, we will continue to turn to the wisdom of the Celtic saints to enrich our journey to the babe's manger and continue kindling the flame of love within our waiting hearts.

# Nov. 27 - First Sunday of Advent

## Kindle the Love for Your Enemies

*But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. — Matthew 5:44-45*

This week we will learn a little more about two of the most well-known Celtic saints — St. Patrick and St. Columba. Both have very interesting life stories and much to teach us about what it means to love our enemies.

Patrick is thought to have been born sometime between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century in mainland Britain into a Christian family. When he was a teen, he was captured by pirates from Ireland and sold into slavery to a pagan master who forced him to take care of the sheep on the hillsides. Patrick, thus, spent a lot of his formative years in solitude. It was during this time that he began spending more time in prayer and focusing on his faith. Eventually, he escaped his enslavement and made his way to a port, securing passage back to Britain.

Legend has it that shortly after his return to his homeland, Patrick received a vision in which he was given letters written by the Irish asking him to return to them. At first, Patrick resisted this calling, but finally he heeded the vision and returned to Ireland.

It was upon his return that his work in sharing the Christian gospel with the pagans and advocating for the ceasing of slave trade in that region began.

As we journey in Advent, this story speaks to us of the courage that is sometimes required when we are following the call of God in our lives. Patrick returned to a land and a people that had occupied a dark place in his life. He overcame his own fear and anger to be able to share the love of God with those who needed to know it. Patrick was able to come to a place of mercy and forgiveness.

His story asks us to consider how God might be moving us beyond our own hurts and disappointments and calling us to offer mercy and grace to those we might consider to be our enemies. While for many of us, our experiences will not include being trafficked by pirates, there is in everyone some painful part of our past that we have not been able to move beyond. This season, let us begin asking God to heal that hurt, remove the anger and bitterness from our hearts, and quell our desire for revenge on those whose offenses we still bear.



*God in whose image we each are formed, you know our human hearts. You know our pain and hurt, you know our faults and failings, you know the darkness that dwells within us. Shine your light upon our lives that we might walk in your ways and hear your voice. Teach us to find peace through mercy and forgiveness, in Christ's name. Amen.*

# Nov. 28 - Trusting a Different Path

*But in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. — 1 Peter 3:15–16*

St. Columba or Colmcille, which is the Irish version of his name, was born into a prominent and wealthy Irish family in the early fifth century. He was educated by a monk from an early age and became a priest in his early adulthood, leaving behind the privilege of his family. He was a popular priest and credited with founding many monasteries throughout Ireland.

However, one innocent act caused his life to take a different path. He was visiting a neighboring monastery and made a copy of a psalter that was housed there. When the abbot found out what Columba had done, he demanded that the copy remain in the monastery since the original was theirs. Columba, though, viewed that the copy, made by his hand, belonged to him. The dispute led to the king of Ulster getting involved and deciding in favor of the abbot. Columba's wealthy family, though, took matters into their own hands, which led to a battle in which many lost their lives. This rippled through the church community, and it was decided that Columba should leave Ireland.

Columba embraced his exile in a way that is both remarkable and inspiring, choosing to see opportunities rather than failures. He took off for the north of Scotland and vowed to bring the Christian gospel to the far reaches of that kingdom. He and his followers founded a monastery on the island of Iona, which still serves today as a center for prayer, a place of pilgrimage and a hub for Celtic spirituality.

Clearly, Columba left Ireland with a ruined reputation, but he did not allow it to define him. We have perhaps had our own form of unfair treatment in a workplace or with a group of people we have considered friends and it can be hard to recover from these experiences. But the saint teaches us along our Advent paths that no matter what scandal or failed dream, we, too, must continue with faith and conviction and trust in God. Filled with regret and remorse for the deaths that occurred because of his actions, Columba was able to go on to evangelize many and show God's grace and love to himself as well as his enemies and those God sent him among.



*God of all moments and seasons of our lives, teach us to trust in your goodness and mercy and to turn to you amid the challenges of our lives. Help us to stay focused on your life-giving spirit and allow us to keep our hearts set on Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

# Nov. 29 - Let's Play

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? — Isaiah 58:6*

I have four children, two of whom will still engage in imaginative play. They are at that in-between age, though, teetering on the cusp of adolescence, and so will only truly let themselves be free if they think no one is watching. It is a joy to look out the kitchen window and watch my son involved in some intense battle armed with his homemade and very sophisticated Lego spear. I can often hear my daughter going through her realistic lesson plans in her bedroom “school room” with her class of imaginary pupils. They can each play in this way for hours if no one is watching them. As soon as I open the door to my daughter’s bedroom, the lesson will cease, and she will shoo me away and instruct me to close the door on the way out.

While Isaiah was clearly talking about setting the downtrodden free and loosening the bonds of human injustice, I also think his words speak to us about setting ourselves free. Sometimes the greatest enemy we face is the enemy within us. Sometimes it is our own self that we wage war against. As we age, we lose the ability to be unhampered by the views of the world. We become self-conscious and often shrink inside of ourselves, not willing to risk the judgment of others. We battle self-doubt and measure ourselves

up against unrealistic images of celebrities whose lives we view through social media. We have become oppressed by the constant barrage of Instagram photos of our peers whose lives seem so much more complete than ours.

As I write from my kitchen table, I look around and realize I am far from being social media-ready. There are dishes in the sink, cabinet doors wide open, piles of clutter on the countertop — and I am still in my bathrobe. But this is the space in which most of us live our lives: the messiness of human relationships and family life that isn’t always picture-perfect.

Perhaps you struggle to untie the yoke that someone else has placed upon you —unrealistic expectations at work, a demanding partner or family member. Perhaps you deal with the demons of addiction and long to break free from their power over you. Perhaps you hide your real self from others because you fear being rejected.

Can you remember those carefree days of playing as a child, of imaginary friends and whole worlds brought to life in your head? This Advent, let’s spend a little more time at play, setting ourselves free from the ways that world judges us and holds us captive.



*Life-giving God, send your spirit among us to bring freedom from all that bind us, take the yoke of judgment and self-doubt from us and help us to be the people you created us to be. Give us courage and strength to live our best lives through Christ. Amen.*

# Nov. 30 - Advent Listening

*Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. — Colossians 4:5–6*

Can you imagine a world in which every conversation was always full of grace? No, me neither. It seems like such an outlandish and unattainable goal. Even basic civility seems unrealistic these days.

Over the past few years, we have witnessed the growing divisions within our society. Racial tensions have been magnified. Arguments escalate over gun control in the wake of the increasing number of mass shootings. Then there are the hot-button topics of immigration and border control, reproductive rights and abortion. Throughout these discussions, the rhetoric becomes more and more impassioned, and we grow further and further apart as a nation. We find our ability to speak with those we disagree with slowly eroding. We argue, yell and lambast the other side with our opinions and denigrate theirs, but do we really talk to one another? More importantly, do we really listen?

It seems that whatever issues were being dealt with by the Colossians were tearing them apart. Their sense of community and cohesion were lost, and, in these words, they are being challenged to reset the

tone of the conversation. Knowing “how to answer everyone” seems to imply a level of knowledge and insight into the minds and hearts of those “outsiders.” I wonder how often we stop long enough to try to understand the viewpoint of the other. Have we all become so entrenched in our own point of view and our own arguments that we just shout louder and louder and don’t even want to hear what others have to say?

Perhaps it is unrealistic to hope that this Advent each of my conversations are full of grace, but I believe I ought to try. I believe that we are called to participate in conversations that are life-giving and to listen to one another with hearts that are not already hardened and closed. Maybe it won’t change our position on the issues, but it will turn down the animosity in the conversation. It will allow us to see in this holy season of preparing to receive Christ into our lives again that there are no “us” and “them,” but that the Son of God came for all humankind and, thus, all equally belong to God.



*Gracious God, heal us with your love and grace and allow the divisions in our communities and our nation to be overshadowed by your compassion. Help us to be open in our minds and hearts and to listen and learn from one another. God of the peacemakers, help us to embrace your peace in our lives and sow seeds of peace among others. Amen.*

# Dec. 1 - Bridging the Chasms with Love

*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. — 1 Thessalonians 3:12*

We live in contentious times. It seems that in recent years, the political divide in the U.S. has grown wider and there is very little conversation across the aisle. Each side has become entrenched in their long-held views and there is little in the way of bipartisan dialogue. And it is not just in the arena of elected government that we see these divides. The Church has suffered through many its own round of divisive theological debates and we have witnessed denominations break apart over a variety of issues. We firmly place our theological stakes in the ground and align ourselves with those who share our same beliefs.

It would do us all some good to meditate on this Scripture from 1 Thessalonians. It can be all too easy for us to think about our love overflowing for “each other” when those “others” are those who look like us, think like us and vote like us. How much harder it is to ask that God would make our love increase and overflow “for everyone else” — for those with whom we struggle to find common ground.

The lives of St. Patrick and St. Columba remind me that past experiences and failures can be overcome by God’s grace, and that fear and hatred never should have the final say. Both of these men were used by God to bring healing and hope to people they perhaps would not have initially chosen to work among, but God had other plans.

Those are the ones for whom God is perhaps calling us to “kindle the flame of love.” During this season, take some time to think about who the “everyone elses” are in your life. What would it look like to try to open your heart and mind to them? What steps might you take to begin a conversation across the divide? I am struck in this text by the way that it is God’s efforts that produce the overflow of love — God makes it happen, not us. By our own efforts we are not capable of transcending ourselves, but through the Holy Spirit we can start to bridge the chasms that exist.



*Come, Holy Spirit, do the work in us this Advent that we are incapable of doing. Bend our stubborn will and soften our hardened hearts so that we might overflow in our love for those we see as wholly other, and unite us in love for you. Amen.*

# Dec. 2 - Sometimes Conflict Requires Quietness

*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. — Romans 12:18 and 21*

After the events that had forced St. Columba to leave Ireland, he sought the ways of peace as he embarked on his next mission. The success of the establishment of the monastery on Iona gave Columba and his followers confidence to move into other parts of Scotland. At the time, it was a dangerous undertaking for the saint, as the country was still a place of much warfare and barbaric practices. The king at the time at first refused Columba an audience and barred him from entering the city of Inverness. Through a series of miraculous happenings, Columba did manage to get before the king, who is said to have submitted to Columba and his superior God. Columba then set about demanding the freedom of those held as slaves among the land.

While there is not a clear historical account from this time, the fact that Christianity flourished in the area and the message spread through other parts of Scotland and England gives testimony to the ways of peaceful negotiation and persuasion. Columba eschewed violence since he felt responsible for those who had died earlier defending his freedom. He chose what he considered to be a better and more faithful path.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that often it is our response to conflict and hostile environments that can change the outcome. We cannot control the actions of others, but we can influence their behavior through our actions.

In one of my early ministry positions, I was faced with a few session and congregation members who did not fully support the ordination of women. Partly because I shy away from conflict and partly because I was naive and inexperienced, I mostly chose to ignore their behavior. I figured that if I simply performed in my role and tried to remain faithful to my calling, all would somehow work itself out. It wasn't much of an intentional plan and yet somehow it did work out. It wasn't easy, and there were some difficult times and many twists and turns along the path, but I stayed there for 10 years and am often invited back to preach on special occasions. I chose to keep quietly and graciously being who God had called me to be. I certainly didn't always get it right and I certainly made mistakes, but I look back upon that era in my ministry and know it could have been far less meaningful if I had chosen a different path.

Sometimes we are called upon to choose good, to act in the right way even when others around us are not making those same choices. To remain faithful in the small ways of our lives, and over time those acts multiply and bear fruit. How might you overcome evil with good in some way in your life? Perhaps God is calling us to disengage from hostile conflict and to engage in the faithful pursuit of peace — as far as it depends on us. How can we offer this season the gifts of seeds of peace, kindness and compassion where God has placed us?



*God of all times and seasons in our lives, we rejoice in the times of calm and peace and yet we often find ourselves in times of struggle and strife. Help us to navigate these challenges with grace and compassion, help us to remain faithful and send your spirit to guide us in your ways of peace. Amen.*

## Dec. 3 - In the Presence of Our Enemies

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. — Psalm 23:5–6*

One of the prayers most attributed to Patrick is known as “St. Patrick’s Breastplate” or “The Deer’s Cry.” It is a prayer of protection that Patrick and some of his followers are said to have recited when they were traveling through a particularly dangerous part of the Irish countryside. Legend has it that they were able to move through the forest safely because they changed into a herd of deer and so escaped harm from their pagan enemies. Most scholars believe that the prayer was written a few centuries after Patrick’s time, but popular belief still ascribes the prayer to the saint.

Whoever the author was, they managed to capture eloquently the sentiment of God’s powerful and protective spirit surrounding believers and giving them comfort and strength in much the same way the psalmist reminds us of God’s provision, even in the face of our enemies. Notice that the psalmist doesn’t say that God removes or destroys the enemy, but

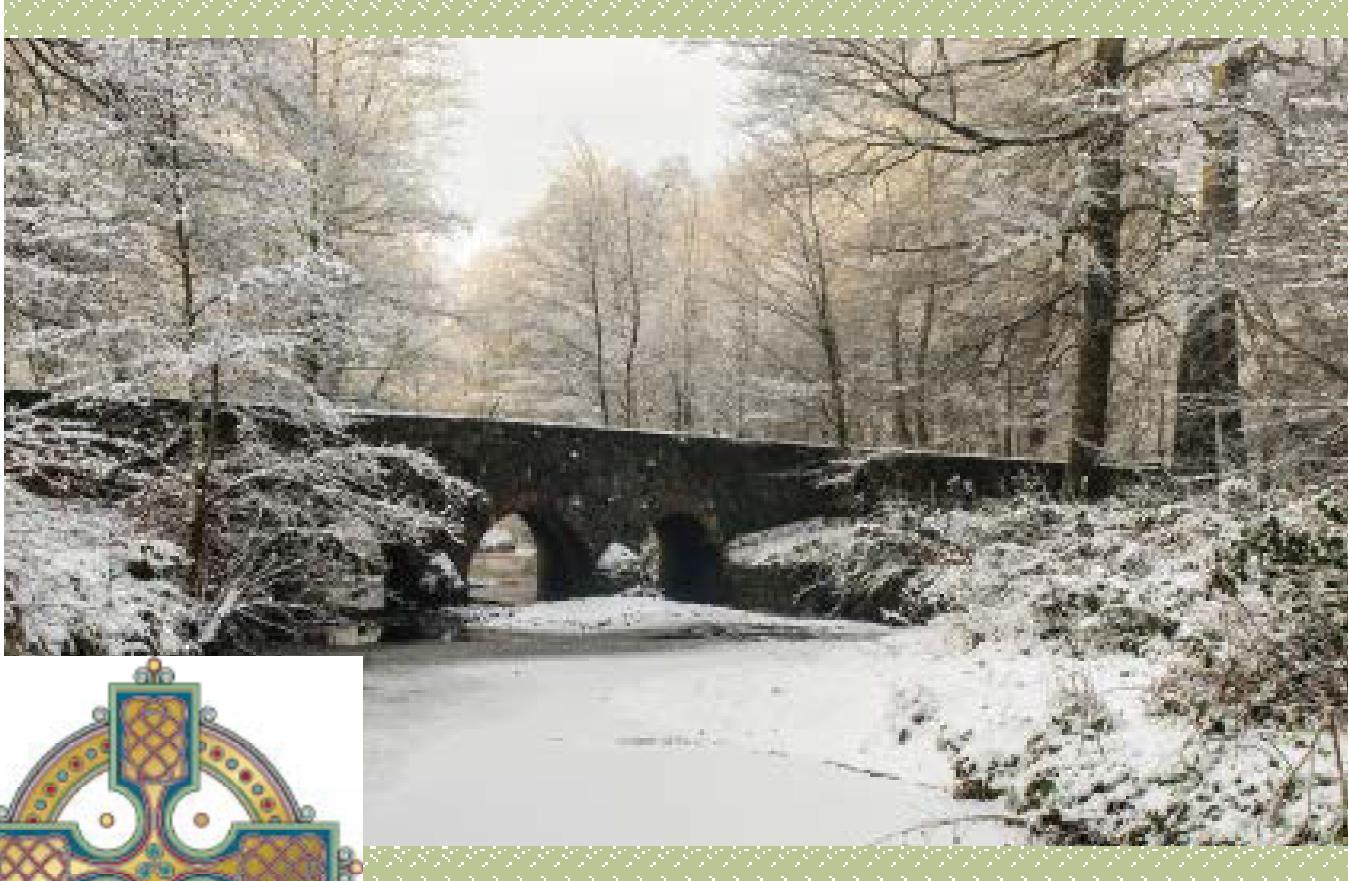
rather God meets our needs: God prepares a table in the presence of these enemies, God anoints our heads with oil, which symbolizes being set apart by God for service, God overflows our cup — a reminder of the abundance of life that is being offered to us.

Many times, when we find ourselves faced with opposition, our prayer is to change the minds of those who disagree with us. What if, though, we pray for God to remind us of our calling to be bearers of the Good News? What if we invoked God’s protection over our hearts and minds so that our anger and disagreements do not define who we are and how we act toward others?

Both St. Patrick and St. Columba found ways in which they could confront their enemies, their past mistakes and regrets, and their fears while still showing love for those who had harmed them. May it be with us this Advent that we can kindle in our hearts and minds a flame of love for our enemies.



*God of all people, during this Advent prepare a table for us before our enemies, remind us of your love and grace, your power and your promises so we may be able to share your love with all of those you place in our lives. Amen.*



*Minnowburn River, Belfast, frozen and covered in snow.*

## Second Week in Traditional Advent

As we begin the second week in traditional Advent, take a few moments to think about how you have been intentional in kindling the flame of love in your life. What has been challenging? What has been inspiring? And what have you learned about the lives of the saints you read about last week — Brigid, Patrick and Columba — that you might emulate in your life?

# Dec. 4 - Second Sunday of Advent

## Seeing Those We Often Overlook

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*  
— 1 Peter 2:9-10

In the remaining weeks of Advent, we will turn our attention to some of the lesser-known Celtic saints whose names we hardly hear and know very little about. Today, we meet two such saints: Aidan of Lindisfarne and his successor, Cuthbert.

Aidan, although born in Ireland, was a pupil of St. Columba in the monastery of Iona. At the request of King Oswald, Aidan was sent to the northwest coast of England to bring the gospel to this pagan area. Aidan chose the island of Lindisfarne and established a religious community there in 635.

Others before him had failed to make any converts in the area, but Aidan's approach was one of gentleness and compassion. He traveled from village to village and struck up conversations with those he met. He recognized all people as being made in God's image and chosen by God and, therefore, was quickly accepted by the local community. He didn't look down upon those who were poor and uneducated. Instead, he greeted them with the eyes and heart of Christ.

Aidan became known throughout the area as someone who offered hospitality and welcome to all — king or beggar. The monastery at Lindisfarne soon became a hub of learning and provided training

to many young monks. It was a place of nurturing relationships and forming deep bonds.

As we are journeying toward the celebration of God incarnate in our world, the humble outlook of many of these Celtic saints stands in line with the humble origins of Christ himself. Aidan mirrored Christ's ministry in walking on untrodden roads, entering villages looked down upon by others, and reaching out to the forgotten in remote, rural areas. And just as Christ spoke with love and grace, so did Aidan.

The example of this saint challenges us to consider the ways in which we interact with others in our community. Do we view all as made in God's image and part of the royal priesthood?

During the early stages of the pandemic, many spent time honoring "essential workers," some of whom perhaps we had often taken for granted — such as garbage collectors, transportation workers and hospital custodial staff. How have we continued not only honoring but remaining mindful of the important presence? During this season, how can we become more aware of the unseen people in our communities? Those to whom we do not always pay attention or listen?



*God who came to this world in human form and in humility, teach us your grace and compassion for all people. Help us to see that people are chosen by you and welcomed into your royal priesthood, in Christ's name. Amen.*

# Dec. 5 - Using Your God Gift for the World

*For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end. — Hebrews 6:10–11*

Ancient legend tells that on the night of Aidan's death in 651, an adolescent boy named Cuthbert was tending sheep when he saw a vision of angels taking Aidan to heaven. This experience led the young Cuthbert to seek religious training, soon entering monastic life.

Cuthbert began his ministry as something of an itinerant preacher — going from village to village spreading the Good News. He was said to possess gifts for healing.

Like Aidan, his demeanor was gentle and kind; he conversed equally with nobility and peasant. He preferred a quiet life and would retreat often into a cave. But the needs of the community would always pull him back into a more relational ministry with the world.

He embraced this public ministry even when his

own preference would have been for a solitary life of prayer. He was eventually persuaded to take up the duties of Bishop of Lindisfarne in 685.

When I think of the legacy of Cuthbert, I am reminded of the ways God uses all of us to build his kin-dom in the world. For some that means moving beyond their own comfort zone or embracing some role that challenges them. For others it may be exploring ways in which the gifts God has given them may be best used for God's service. For all of us it means developing ways to be in community with one another and nurturing those relationships so that we may support one another and further build up the body.

In a season where material gifts are the focus, let's dig deeper and think about the God gifts we are all being called to use. How might you build up the body through your special gift, whatever that gift may be?



*Gracious God, we give you thanks that you call us into relationship with one another and into communities of faith. May we always be open to your call upon our lives, so we use our gifts to your glory and service. Amen.*

# Dec. 6 - Finding Your Soul Friend

*Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. — James 5:16*

The term anamchara refers to the Celtic tradition of “soul friend.” An important element in early Celtic spirituality — and today — such a person is someone with whom we can share the details of our spiritual lives and the interior movements of our hearts and minds. Soul friends can listen to our fears and concerns as well as share in our joy and celebrations as it all relates to our faith and our journey with God.

I have been blessed to share in such a friendship with a few folks in my life. These kindred spirits have brought me great comfort and encouragement during difficult times as well as been there to witness my joys and triumphs. Together we have struggled to make sense of the mystery of God’s presence in the messy uncertainty of our everyday lives. I cherish these friendships.

In the busyness of our lives, when we have so many competing demands on our time, it can be hard to make the effort to cultivate friendships that are good for our soul — or even friendships in general as studies have shown recently how hard it is for adults

to find connection. Yet the life-giving nature of these relationships make them invaluable.

During this season of Advent, make the effort to give yourself the gift of a soul friend. If you are already in such a relationship, be intentional over these next few weeks about nurturing that friendship. Make time to get together in person or over the phone. Give thanks for those in your life who walk the journey of faith with you and with whom you can truly connect at this level. Perhaps send them a note or email during this season to thank them for being such a gift to you.

If you don’t have such a relationship, spend some time thinking about who in your current circle might be a suitable fit. Don’t force the issue, but explore some possibilities, enter into deeper conversations with those with whom you are perhaps in a small group or Bible study. Perhaps your connection may come through some act of service in which you are currently engaged, and you can suggest another time to join in conversation and prayer.



*Gracious God, we rejoice in those with whom we share the journey of faith. We give you thanks for friends who understand our fears and uncertainties and with whom we can confess our sins and find healing and hope. Help us to cultivate these friendships and thus strengthen our relationship with you. Amen.*

# Dec. 7 - The Blessing in Remembering

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. — Hebrews 12:1*

During this season, many of us take time to send cards and greetings to family and friends both near and far. More and more these days, I receive photo cards from folks, and it is a joy to see how families have grown over the past year. For many of these people, it may be the only time we communicate during the year. When I open these cards, I am brought back to that part of my life, reminded of events that I perhaps shared with that family or individual. It is such a blessing to give thanks to all those whom God has placed in my path along the years — this great cloud of witnesses who encourage, challenge and inspire.

Perhaps this year, as you send or receive cards, you might take a moment to lift those people in prayer: remember specific moments you have shared and give thanks to God for the ways that your life has been enriched by knowing them. Sometimes we think about the idea of a great cloud of witnesses as only those who have influenced our faith and are now

dead. But I think that we can also think about those who are very much still alive and well. And, even if we no longer stay in regular contact with some of these people, it can be a powerful experience to just pause and give thanks.

It is also a beautiful thing when we can share that with one another. Perhaps take a moment during these next few weeks to reach out to some of those people and let them know that you have not forgotten the impact that they made upon your life. Think of some specific way that they helped you or walked alongside you, some lesson that they shared with you or piece of advice that they gave to you that you still think about some days.

All of us value being acknowledged for the positive role we have had upon someone else's life; it encourages us to continue to develop friendships. It may be a small gesture, but I guarantee it will make a huge difference in their day.



*God, you made us to be in relationship with you and with one another. We thank you for those who have shared our lives with us — for those who have shaped us and nurtured us; for those who have cheered us on in our journey of faith; for those who have supported us and carried us through difficult moments. Help us, Lord, to acknowledge those people and help us to be that person for someone else, in Christ we pray. Amen.*

# Dec. 8 - Creating an Advent Support System

*Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. — Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs to do good work — and it seems to me that this makes a good model for all ministries. Not just from the perspective of physical safety — which I am sure was a consideration for those disciples walking the roads of Galilee — but also from an emotional and spiritual one. "Two are better than one," as the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it.

During these past few years of the pandemic, churches have experienced higher resignations from their pastors than ever before. The "Great Resignation," as it will forever be known when generations from now look back in time, has impacted not just churches, but every sector of the job market.

In the church, pastors found themselves stressed and burned out after months of trying to figure out how to do church when it was not possible to gather in the physical buildings. Many found the demands on their physical and emotional health to be too great and for their own wellbeing and that of their families.

I wonder how different this picture would have

been if each ministry position had a "partner" — not a dual clergy position, but someone who was appointed to be a sounding board, an encourager and a helpmate. How many clergy may have felt better equipped to handle the stresses of these past few years if they had someone with whom they could talk and brainstorm and share their concerns and frustrations in a safe and trusting environment?

The ancient monastic communities were built around the partnership model. There were shared responsibilities and duties; no one labored alone.

During this season of Advent, I wonder how we might embrace the monastic model and be better friends to our pastors. If you are an active in a church, how can you offer support and encouragement to your pastor? And if you are a pastor, what practices might you put in place to allow others to share the joy and the burden of ministry? What relationships, either within the congregation or between colleagues, might you foster to provide you support?



*Loving God, during this busy season help us to make time to nurture the souls of our church leaders, and help us to support one another to proclaim your Good News more effectively to our world. May we learn from Christ's example and find ways to develop healthy systems of support. Amen.*

# Dec. 9 - Holiday Trolls Beware

*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. — 1 Thessalonians 5:11*

Researchers have noted that criticism has a more lasting impact upon us than praise. We hold onto and worry over the critical things said to us for far longer than we remember the positive affirmations we receive. Some have said that this is due to the evolutionary process — negative stimuli in more primitive times may have meant danger or death and, therefore, we learned to respond quickly to such negativity as a matter of survival. Since positive affirmation doesn't tend to carry the same weight, we dismiss it more quickly and don't react to it in the same way.

With the quick and easy access that we all now have to social media and the impersonal nature of many of these interactions, we have entered a new era of being able to offer criticism more freely, more often and without any concern of the consequences.

As social media began flourishing, the term "trolling" was coined to describe someone who intentionally set out to upset someone else by deliberately provoking others through the offensive things they say or post online. Isn't it sad that this definition even came into being!

While most of us may not class ourselves as

"trolls," I wonder if we were to take an inventory of our conversations and interactions with others if we could say they are mostly about building people up and encouraging them. It seems so much easier to find fault with others than to creatively engage in positive conversation.

Can you imagine how different the conversations would be on social media and within the political realm if people took seriously this Scripture?

During the remaining days of Advent, as we continue to think about kindling the flame of love for one another, work hard at trying to speak words with a positive impact. Hold back on the criticism where it isn't necessary. Take stock of your conversations with others and truly ask if your words bring life or destroy it. If we each make some changes in our own personal relationships, then soon we will find that rippling out through our families and into our communities. Positive change happens slowly and incrementally but it must happen intentionally. So, redirect your conversations so that they may be fueled by love and grace.



*Life-giving God, may we speak words that breathe your grace and compassion into our world, and may we learn to curb our harsh and critical words in favor of positive ones that may build others up. Amen.*

# Dec. 10 - We Can All Become Saints – With Practice

*I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. — Ephesians 4:1-3*

The Celtic saints all share one beautiful trait: They were humble and patient.

But these days, humility, gentleness and patience seem in short supply. They are not traits that are widely celebrated as we go about our lives, especially this time of year when we are all a little harried and have far more things on our to-do list than we have time for each day.

When we are feeling rushed, it can be hard to be patient. Our time is valuable, and we don't want it wasted — whether that is with a slow-moving grocery store line, a colleague who wants to share in excruciating detail about their weekend plans, or a project that is not coming together in the way that we would want. When we are in that position, we tend to find ourselves losing our temper, speaking rudely to others and generally acting in a way that is anything but loving. We can even start believing that our time,

our opinion, our beliefs are more important than everyone else's.

As we light candles for Advent and seek to truly kindle the flame of love within, let us think of ways we can practice patience, gentleness and humility. Perhaps it is doing something kind for someone at work or for a neighbor without letting them know about it. Maybe it is being intentionally patient when you are kept waiting, and instead of getting upset, going out of your way to be gracious to the others involved. Perhaps it is offering peace in a situation that could easily become tense or argumentative. These simple acts do take effort on our part, they don't always come naturally or easily, but the practice is a good one and allows us to bear with one another in love. Let that be our gift to our friends and family and community this season.



*God of infinite patience, we confess that often we are quick to take offense and become angry, and we can be short-tempered and judgmental when things do not go according to our plans. Teach us to be gracious and humble, to bear with one another in love and to create a spirit of peace in our lives. Amen.*



## Third Week in Traditional Advent

Nothing is more iconic of Ireland than that of the Celtic cross. The cross' construction features a traditional cross accentuated with a circle around the intersection of the arms and stem. The cross is said to be a representation of knowledge, strength and compassion to manage life's ups and downs. The center ring of the Celtic cross is said to be evocative of the Celtic symbol for infinite love. With no beginning and no end, more precisely, it is a symbolism of God's endless love, with many believing that it is also a depiction of the halo of Christ. As we come ever closer to the birth of Christ, let us spend some time preparing our hearts for this week's readings by reflecting on the cross and how God's endless love has been made known in our lives.

# Dec. 11 - Third Sunday of Advent

## 'Here Be God'

*Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. ... They go from strength to strength; the God of Gods will be seen in Zion. — Psalm 84:5, 7*

While you may not be familiar with St. Brendan, the Celtic saint was quite well-known in the Middle Ages for his many sea adventures. Brendan was born in the southwest of Ireland around 484. He was schooled in his younger years by a nun before being sent to a monastery to finish his education. After being ordained as a priest, Brendan began making voyages around the British Isles, establishing monasteries along the coastline along the way.

He earned the name "Brendan the Navigator" because of an expedition that took him far off the coastline when he headed west into open waters. The story of this adventure was written down and, by medieval standards, was something of a bestseller.

There is a form of Celtic literature that follows in the heritage of pagan mythology and catalogs the adventures of those who set sail in search of paradise. Brendan's tale encompasses seven years at sea in the company of fellow monks in which they encounter inhabited magical creatures, escape death after encounters with fierce beasts and even come across the mouth of hell itself. They finally reach their destination and find paradise to be filled with an abundance of all things good. But all good things must come to an end. Brendan and his traveling companions were visited by an angel, who instructed them to return to Ireland.

Not surprisingly there is much speculation about

the veracity of these stories. Still, I like to believe there is some kernel of truth to them sprinkled with a generous dose of imagination. What strikes me about Brendan, though, is his thirst for adventure and, in that thirst, his utter dependence on God.

It is hard for us to comprehend the kind of faith that it would require to set sail in a small boat in the mid-5th century for some unknown destination. In the British Museum in London, there is a map drawn of the coastline of North America from 1528. Beyond the immediate coastline, most of the sea was unexplored, and in those areas the cartographer had written: "Here be giants." "Here be scorpions." "Here be dragons." It was the cartographer's way of stressing that in these uncharted waters, anything could be lurking! That map was later edited by British explorer Sir John Franklin in the early 1800s. Rather than perpetuating the tales of giants, scorpions and dragons, he wrote among those dangers the reminder that all will be well because "Here be God."

How often do we need to be reminded in our lives that God goes before us and inhabits all areas of our lives. God is in all things and over all things. Whatever challenges you might face this season in which fear, sadness and worry isn't allowed to mingle with joy, whatever uncertainties exist in your life, be assured: Here be God.



*God of all times and places, of all seasons of our lives, we praise you for your eternal presence to bring hope, comfort and strength to our lives. Help us to lean on that strength and trust in your promises to always be with us, in Christ's name. Amen.*

# Dec. 12 - The Sun Comes Up, the Sun Goes Down

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. — Proverbs 3:5–6*

A few years ago, our then-9-year-old daughter asked for a clipboard, paper and pens for her birthday. She likes to make lists and check things off. I think she inherited the joy of crossing off things that have been completed from me. She also got this need to be in control of one's life from me, as well. But I think, if we were to be honest, we all like some measure of control over our lives.

In the world we live today, it is so easy to become convinced that we are in control of all aspects of our lives. That with enough time, knowledge or power, we will be able to solve most problems that we come across. We can google answers to any and every question imaginable. We can watch YouTube videos that will show us how to do practically any task. We can research any topic, anywhere and anytime. This has its advantages and disadvantages.

Like a doctor who urges a patient not to go online searching for answers, for more times than not we will stumble upon something erroneous, and we have learned that a little information can be dangerous. And yet it is almost impossible to resist the temptation.

Living amid information overload is so far removed from the life of our ancient Celtic ancestors. They lived in a time when the day-to-day rhythms of

their life were all that could be depended upon. The rising sun told them to get up and begin their chores and its setting indicated it was time to retire to sleep. The daily routine was centered around taking care of livestock or crops, making meals and tending to children — of which were done with prayers of invocation and blessings.

The Carmina Gadelica is a collection of these ancient Celtic prayers and a beautiful reminder that there is no distinction between sacred and secular, but that God's spirit dwells in all things and aspects of our world. It is said to be the most complete anthology of Celtic oral tradition and was compiled in the 19th century by Alexander Carmichael, who spent hours with peasants in their huts in front of peat fires listening as they "intoned in a low, recitative manner" these poems and prayers.

As we continue to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christ's birth once again, may we be mindful of God's spirit residing in all facets of our lives. Christ's humble beginnings and earthly ministry reflect God's attention to the human parts of our lives. Each moment, each day, each season is filled with God's power and glory. So often we separate our world into human and divine, sacred and secular, forgetting that all of life is infused with God's presence.



*God, may we trust in your goodness and mercy in our lives, may we rest in your promises and turn to you for wisdom and guidance in all that we do. Amen.*

# Dec. 13 - Is Your Fear Real or Imagined?

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. — Isaiah 9:6*

During these past few years, many of us found ourselves confined to our homes due to the pandemic. In those early days, when things were still being discovered about the ways in which Covid spread, a simple trip to the grocery store turned into an anxiety-inducing expedition. We donned masks and gloves and created a detailed list that we pored over to make sure we didn't forget something to prolong the next trip to the store for as long as possible. We tried to complete the task as quickly as possible and to avoid contact with other shoppers. If someone dared to cough or sneeze behind their mask, there would be a mass exodus from that grocery aisle. It was all rather nerve-wracking, but our fears are real. Yet there are so many fears still that are not justified, and we find our paranoia fueled much by media clickbait — those headlines that leap out trying to draw readers in.

In the 1980s, the term "stranger danger" entered our lives to talk to our children and warn them about possible kidnapping and abduction. The implication was that strangers are to be feared. It is a lesson

taught to children as young as 3 and 4. However, the statistics on child abduction and child sexual abuse do not point to strangers as being the main offenders. Family abductions make up half of reported cases and acquaintance abduction covers another quarter of cases. (The statistics for child sexual abuse are even more striking, with 90% of cases committed by someone the child knows.)

So why does this myth remain so entrenched in our social consciousness? Fear has a way of burrowing deep into our psyche and it shows no sign of easing up. Amid social and civil turmoil and unrest, we have learned to fear "the other."

As we get ready to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace into our world, let us take time to examine our fears — those that are real and those imagined. Have we allowed the media to taint our view and create a narrative that paints the stranger as someone to be feared? How might we reframe our mindset and allow Christ's peace to open our hearts to others in our world?



*Gracious God, we so often live with fear and anxiety, and we are bombarded by stories in our media that unsettle us and keep us filled with worry. Help us to trust in your Good News, to lean into the peace that you offer to us all and to proclaim that hope into our world. Amen.*

# Dec. 14 - Find Your Advent Sense of Adventure

*Thus says the Lord who makes it, the Lord who forms it to establish it — the Lord is his name: Call to me, and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.*  
— Jeremiah 33:2-3

The stories of St. Brendan and his fellow monks who set sail for unknown destinations are both inspiring and mind-boggling to me. As someone with a very poor sense of direction who relies on GPS to get everywhere, the very notion of navigating by the stars is outside my comprehension. The spirit of adventure and curiosity for things beyond their own lives drove them to explore, but they always ventured out into the world trusting in God's care and presence.

Most of us operate within the comfortable confines of our very ordered lives. That's where we feel safe and in control. Our idea of adventure might be to try a new restaurant offering a different type of cuisine from our usual go-to places, and that's about it. And while I am in no way suggesting that we should all pack in our jobs, sell our possessions and go backpacking around the world, I do wonder what "great and unsearchable" things we might be missing.

The "van life" phenomenon has grown in popularity over the past few years, fueled by the growing number of people now working from home. This nomadic way of life, which was very much a fringe movement a decade ago, has become an acceptable alternative to the "American dream" of owning a

home and settling down. A restlessness fueled by the pandemic spurred many on a search for more meaning and adventure. People want to expand their horizons and escape from cramped apartments in densely populated cities and embrace the opportunity to seek a different way of life.

Still, for many people, the reasons such adventures are not practical are numerous. But I do wonder how we each might be called to break out of our safe and comfortable routines, without selling all and moving into a van. How might we expand our horizons without even leaving our living rooms? Christ came into the world to offer life "in all its fullness" and I wonder how we might have shrunk that down into a tame and manageable offering that doesn't invite us to continue to learn and be challenged in our thinking.

How might you step out in faith like those early Celtic explorers? How might you embrace some new chapter of life or invite God to call you into some new ministry or act of service? How might you grow and learn more about another culture, viewpoint or interest?



*God of infinite possibilities, we confess our world is often so small, our viewpoint narrow and our understanding limited. Expand our thoughts, Lord, open our minds to new challenges and possibilities and teach us to call upon you for guidance and strength. Amen.*

# Dec. 15 - When All Is Said and Done

*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. — Romans 5:8*

It is no surprise that Brendan has been adopted as the patron saint of sailors and travelers. In the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, there is a large stained-glass window depicting Brendan's journey. And, if you were one of the many Presbyterians who identify as being a "Buechner" — that is, a person in love with the writings of Frederick Buechner, a pastor, theologian and writer who died this past August — St. Brendan is a familiar name as the author's 1987 novel, *Brendan*, tells the story of the Celts' travels.

It is a compelling and gripping tale mixing faith and legend and leaving the reader with a feeling of hope about both the amazing adventures that Brendan survived as well as the God in whom he placed his trust.

Even for those of us who have no intention of setting sail anytime soon, this novel and Brendan's life offer a great analogy for our faith. Amid the many challenges that we encounter in our lives, the disappointments, the tragedies and the unfulfilled dreams, we are reminded of God's abiding presence. In the moments of fear and when we are staring death in the face, we can be assured of God's love and care. In the places of calm waters when all is going well, we have the space and the ability to take in the wonder of God's created world and be open to the God who journeys with us in our lives.

There is a moving passage in the book where Buechner describes a conversation between Brendan and a Welsh monk, Gildas. Gildas has made it his life's work to write down the names and sins of all those he encounters so that on the day of reckoning the angels won't inadvertently allow any of these people into heaven. Saddened by this focus on the sin and evil in the world, Brendan responds, "[God] wants us each one to have a loving heart. When all is said and done, perhaps that's length and breadth of it."

Having a loving heart doesn't seem such a hard thing to achieve and yet we know that too often our minds are more like that of Gildas — we focus on all that is wrong in the world, all that is wrong with the people around us, our family, friends, co-workers, strangers we meet and those we may call our enemies. We certainly do not open ourselves to each with a loving heart, nor do we always offer to carry one another's burdens.

The message of the Christmas season that will soon be here is one of love and acceptance. God's love for us sinners is demonstrated as much through the manger as it is through the cross. Christ's life was not one of condemnation and judgment but one of welcome and forgiveness. May this Advent we embrace that calling in our lives as we respond to the grace that we have received.



*Loving God, as you sent Christ into our world to teach us your love and grace, may we share that love with others through our words and actions. May the spirit of love, joy and hope dwell in our hearts and homes and may we spread that in our world. Amen.*

# Dec. 16 - Saying 'Yes' to God

*It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed. — Deuteronomy 31:8*

As the ancient Celtic saints embraced their missionary journeys, traveled through the land and set sail for the small islands surrounding Britain, they opened themselves up to danger and the threat of both known and unknown enemies. Yet they believed wholeheartedly in their calling to win the people for Christ.

In successive centuries, we have seen both the positive and negative effects of such missionary zeal. The Church has a checkered history where missionary endeavors are concerned, but what can be celebrated in the stories of St. Brendan and others like him is the unwavering trust that they placed in God.

Whether it was the courage of St. Patrick or the stubbornness of St. Brigid or the bravery of St. Columba, all of them showed a deep sense of knowing they had been called by God. While they may not have understood that call, or even been wholeheartedly in favor of it themselves, they accepted it.

And, of course, many others before them and after them have responded in the same way to God's claim upon them. Abraham and Sarah left all that was familiar to travel into an unknown future; Moses stood up to Pharaoh and demanded the release of the Egyptians; the prophets spoke God's words to the people; Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant" and Joseph took

Mary as his wife; and Peter, Andrew, James and John all left their nets and followed Jesus.

We know that each one of these people, the saints who followed them and the saints yet to come, are all flawed and sinful creatures, none were perfect, and none had all the answers or even knew the right questions to ask. They all had doubts, uncertainties, fears and concerns and yet they were able to take that first step of faith and to keep taking those steps.

They didn't allow their fears or anxieties to overwhelm them or their doubts to assail them. They were able to trust in the knowledge that God was with them — God went before them, and God would not leave them.

There were moments for all of them, just like for us, when I am sure they were afraid, and even discouraged, but that was never the final word. Always God's promises triumphed over their own apprehension and reluctance. Always God's grace strengthened them and gave them courage. Always God's love conquered their fear.

May that be the case in our lives. Let this season of Advent be a time in which we ask boldly for courage that those who have gone before us in the faith had. May we be able to move beyond our fears and embrace God's call on our lives.



*God of Abram, Sara, Mary, Joseph, God of us all, calm our fears and help us to lean into your promises as we respond to your call upon our lives. Give us the courage to go where you send us, to speak your words of hope and show your love to our world. Amen.*

# Dec. 17 - Make It a No-Stress Season

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

— Matthew 11:28-29

I came across a 2019 survey that revealed 88% of respondents said the holidays were the most stressful time of the year — with that stress beginning as early as November. I can't imagine what the results would have been like if they had been asked about stress levels in 2020 and 2021.

There is no shortage of stressors during this season: family gatherings, social functions, travel planning, gift buying and financial outlay. Additional responsibilities in a variety of areas of our lives make this season a tense one for so many. Amid it all, we are expected to exude joy, peace and goodwill when many of us don't feel like celebrating and would rather avoid every interaction with others.

The increasing commercialization of Christmas and the pressure to create a picture-perfect celebration worthy of Pinterest and Instagram feeds have added to the anxiety that many experienced. And none of it could be further from the heart of the season. Jesus' newborn baby shoot would have pushed the far edges of shabby chic. A dimly lit stable, with an exhausted teen mother and a bewildered father and an assortment of animals and visitors, would have required more than a little bit

of creative staging to be social media-ready. Perhaps, though, we need to hold on to the images of that first Christmas and allow the imperfect, messy reality of it inform our own preparations.

Perhaps this year is the year we welcome a simpler celebration, a smaller gathering, a less expensive and exhausting plan for gift-giving. Many of us are weary of trying to create the perfect holiday season for others and need to rest in the peace that Christ offers.

So, if you have not yet gotten your cards in the mail, perhaps send an email greeting instead. If your menu planning and Christmas family gatherings are getting overwhelming, think about dialing it back. Instead of trying to fit in every social engagement before and on Dec. 25, the big day, remember there are 12 Days of Christmas to meet with friends and family. In fact, consider Jan. 6, Epiphany, a day to get together as well!

Christ came to bring rest and peace. May that be the gift that we give ourselves this year and may we give ourselves permission to say “no” to the things that we find a burden.



*God of peace, may we sense your presence in all things during this season of Advent. Help us to experience the rest that Christ offers and find peace for our soul as we prepare to celebrate once again the birth of Christ. Amen.*



*Skellig Michael Monastery, Ireland*

## Fourth Week in Traditional Advent

Along this Celtic Advent journey, we have met saints who have helped us find our trust and strength in God as we watch and wait patiently for the Christ light to radiate on our paths. We learned about the Celtic practice of having soul friends to travel with. We have also heard about the power and significance of thresholds in Celtic spirituality — that space we find ourselves when we enter from one reality into another. Celtic monks have always been drawn to “edge” places, such as Skellig Michael, a jagged stone island jutting out into the Atlantic on which the ruins of a monastic community are still perched on top.

While our “edge” places might not be so pronounced, the fourth week of Advent is a threshold of sorts, bringing us out of our Advent hopes and expectations and to God’s Christmas promise that never are we alone — Emmanuel, God is with us.

As we journey this last week of Advent toward Christmas, each day becomes mindful each time you cross a threshold — walking through a doorway, going from one task to another, noticing the rising and setting of the sun. Make it a point to pause in that threshold moment and meditate on the words from the prophet Jeremiah:

*Thus says the Lord:*

*Stand at the crossroads and look,  
and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way lies; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls.*

*But they said, “We will not walk in it.”*

*— Jeremiah 6:16*

# Dec. 18 - Fourth Sunday of Advent

## All Creation Sings

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it, for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers. — Psalm 24:1-2*

Our last week in Advent finds us focusing on St. Kevin, another lesser-known saint who is renowned for his connection with nature and the land. It is St. Kevin who will help us to think about how we might kindle the flame of love to “the lowliest thing that liveth as well as the name that is highest of all.”

There is not a lot of documented evidence about Kevin’s early life, but it is thought that he was born around 500 A.D. to nobility. As a young adult, he sought a hermit’s life in Glendalough (“the glen of two lakes”) in Ireland. He lived in a partially man-made cave in a desolate and isolated area. The remoteness of the area, coupled with his less than sociable personality, meant that his only companions were the animals and birds around him. Legend has it that he lived there for seven years wearing animal skins, eating sparingly and communing with animals.

The most famous miracle attributed to Kevin is the story of a blackbird who descended on Kevin’s outstretched arms when he was deep in prayer. The blackbird began building its nest on Kevin’s arms as he prayed. When his time of prayer was done, Kevin continued to stay still with his outstretched arms

until the bird had laid her eggs, hatched them and the fledglings were old enough to leave the nest.

St. Kevin, like many ancient Celts, held a deep veneration for nature and understood that God’s presence was infused through all Creation and its creatures. In a time of increasing concern about climate change and the ecological degradation facing the world, it is time for us to rekindle our awareness of our interdependence on nature. For our ancestors, this was an obvious part of their daily living — they were so connected to the land and understood God’s presence to be contained therein. In our more modern-day living, many of us have become very disconnected from the land, and centuries of ignoring our interconnectedness have brought many ecological challenges.

As we think about our own relationship with nature and Creation, how might we be better stewards of all that God has made? How might we teach our children what our ancient forebears understood instinctively? How might we care for the animals who were granted front-row seating to the birth of our Savior? How might our preparations for Christmas be more eco-friendly?



*Creator God who made all things, forgive us for the ways in which we have used and abused your Creation. Lead us in the ways of your ancient people who were great stewards of your earth and respected all who lived in this world. Amen.*

# Dec. 19 - Thin Places

*When the Lord saw that he [Moses] had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." — Exodus 3:4–5*

There is no doubt that Moses' experience by the burning bush was a sacred one, a place where God's presence was manifested in an acutely real way that it may just be described as a "thin place."

"Thin places" is the phrase used by ancient Celtic Christians who were deeply connected to nature and who sensed in specific places a very thin veil between heaven and earth. It was a place where they felt the presence of the Divine in a more pronounced way and felt that the space between ordinary life and God was especially thin.

Given that these ancient believers were keenly aware of God's presence in all moments of their lives and had a way of weaving their spirituality into the mundane tasks of daily living, these thin places that the Celts marked have now become sacred pilgrimage sites dotting the Irish and Scottish countryside. They are often ancient ruins of monasteries or holy communities but can even be primitive standing stones spotted in the middle of fields surrounded by grazing sheep or cows.

The idea of thin places is not limited to sacred Celtic sites; they can be any place where we feel acutely aware of God's presence.

Perhaps you have a place in your life where you have been able to bridge the divide between the secular and sacred and come into a deep sense of God's

presence. Perhaps for you it is a specific mountain peak, or a retreat center, or a place deep in the woods. For most of us, these places may represent a break from the daily routine of our lives. It may be a place that we travel to infrequently and that may be part of its allure.

But how might we experience this connection between the earthly and the divine more frequently? What practices might we establish to unlock some of these spiritual mysteries? By developing some intentional practices, we may be able to experience these thin places more readily in our daily living. Perhaps taking some time each week or month to break away from the normal routine and seek some space in nature, some quiet period of reflection surrounded by the beauty of God's Creation.

God's presence is all around us all the time, but the busyness of our lives and the noise of our world can sometimes make that hard to capture. I can't help but to think of that holy night of Christ's birth when the shepherds in their "thin place" — a lonely field watching their flock — experienced the Divine, listening to the angels proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest!"

During this last week of Advent, take time to venture out into nature, even for just a short time, and invite God's spirit to enter deep into your soul.



*God of all times and places, we seek your presence in our lives. In the noisy, busy world in which we live, help us to find moments and places of quiet beauty. Help us to enter into holy ground, and may this joining of heaven and earth bring us peace and hope. Amen.*

# Dec. 20 - We Have a Job to Do

*The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. — Isaiah 11:6–9*

As we have journeyed through Advent this year, we have looked back into the lives of some of the earliest Christian saints and we have been informed and inspired by their example. Advent is always a time of looking back; looking back in Scripture to the proclamation and arrival of the Christ child into our world, remembering the faith of Mary and Joseph who accepted the call upon their lives; and being present in Bethlehem with shepherds and angels. But Advent is also about the present moment. It is a time to experience the birth of Christ once again in our own hearts and homes, to take time in the busyness of the season to hear God's call once again upon our own lives so that we might share the message of Christmas with others in our world. It is also a season that looks forward to a time that is yet unrealized here on earth.

Scripture points toward a time when all will be reconciled once again in perfect harmony. The perfection of Eden will be found again in our world. When that time will come and how it will be manifested in our world is far beyond my understand-

ing just as it was beyond the understanding of the believers in Christ's own time and the many generations of believers since then. Where our knowledge ends, our faith in God begins. The promise and hope that we are given through the baby born in Bethlehem and the crucified and risen Christ is the assurance that we receive that God's glory will one day be revealed in a new Creation.

Until then, we work toward bringing God's light to bear in our world. We work for the reconciliation of our world in whatever way we can each day. The sum of all our small and seemingly insignificant efforts do indeed make a difference. We work to bring peace into our families and communities and watch as those ripples are spread out around us. We make changes in the ways in which we live in our world and slowly we can impact the damage to Creation. As we continue to ponder the coming of Christ, may we welcome his birth with a renewed energy to work toward bringing that healing and hope to our world.



*Lord of life and prince of peace, may you once again be born in our hearts and minds this day. May we commit ourselves to the work of reconciliation in our world, joining our hearts and lives in your ways of peace and bringing light into our world. Amen.*

# Dec. 21 - Saying No to Fake Light

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined. — Isaiah 9:2*

For centuries, as early as the eighth century, Christians have used the “O Antiphons” — the verses for the ancient hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” — to anticipate the coming of Christ. It is traditionally on this day, Dec. 21, that the fifth antiphon is used: O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: Come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death. It of course recalls the Scripture from Isaiah and other verses throughout the Old and New Testament where Christ is referenced as the light and offering hope to the people who are living in the darkness of sin and separation from God.

In the Western Hemisphere, our Advent journey begins in the season of shortening days and diminishing light. It is a time when for many of us the world of nature is lying dormant, not much is in bloom and these images have long been associated with our celebration of the season. When I think about the Celtic saints who lived in a time before the invention of modern light, I am reminded of how dark their lives would have been during this time of year. Growing up in the lowlands of Scotland, I remember walking to the school bus stop in the winter just as it was beginning to get light in the morning. By the time I

got off the bus in the late afternoon, it was already starting to get dark again. How much more surrounded by darkness would the ancient Celts like St. Kevin have been! With only the fire to cast any light and heat, their winter days would have been short, and they would have experienced a deep darkness of a very real kind.

In our modern-day lives, such darkness is hard to find. Light pollution in many of our cities and suburbs makes it hard to spot stars in the night sky and has adversely affected habits of many nocturnal animals. As we think about our interconnectedness with these plants and animals, how might we adjust our lifestyle in such a way to reduce our impact on light pollution?

As we sing many of our Christmas carols this week that center on light and darkness, may we be reminded again of the gift of God’s Creation and our calling as stewards of all that God has made. As we wait with hope for the birth of light into our dark world, may we also reflect on the ways in which our created world waits in hope for rebirth through our commitment to change.



*God of light and darkness, as we prepare once again to welcome the light of the nations into our world, may we be mindful of the ways that you call us to take care of all that you have made. May we respect the needs of your created order and work to bring balance and harmony again to our earth. Amen.*

# Dec. 22 - Are Heaven and Nature Singing?

*"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being." — Job 12:7-10*

Many ancient communities and Indigenous peoples had a keen awareness of their dependence upon nature. They lived in harmony with Creation and fostered a deep appreciation both for its beauty and its holiness. Each element of the created world was understood as coming from the hand of God and thus imbued with inherent worth and goodness.

During periods of human history, some of these relationships have been lost. We have been careless with the lessons that nature had to teach us. We have stripped the earth of natural resources and been slow to listen to the groaning of Creation. In recent years, there has been a renewed awareness of the damage inflicted upon the earth and a growing concern to right these wrongs. Many of us live in ways that are deeply disconnected from Creation and need to remind ourselves of the highly intricate web of relationship between ourselves and the earth.

One of the most popular hymns at this time of the year is "Joy to the World." It is a rousing carol that we sing with gusto. But what does it mean to us for "heaven and nature" to sing? Or for "fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains" to "repeat the sounding joy"? As we consider the current challenges facing our environment, are we able to learn from the mistakes of the past and listen to what Creation has to tell us?

How might we join with nature in singing praises to God this season, and more importantly, how might we better care for Creation so that it may continue to bring glory to God for generations to come? Are there changes you can make in your daily life to better conserve earth's precious resources? Can you adjust your buying patterns to better support those initiatives that support care for our planet? How might you incorporate those changes well into the new year?



*Creator God, we rejoice in the beauty of your created world and marvel at the ways in which nature sings your praises. Help us to be better stewards of our world, to learn how to care for Creation and to use its resources wisely. May we all join in sharing the joy of this season. Amen.*

# Dec. 23 - Miracles in Nature

*By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. — Psalm 65:5–8*

Another Celtic saint venerated for his care of Creation is St. Kentigern, also known as St. Mungo. He was born in the sixth century and is the patron saint of Glasgow on the west coast of Scotland, having spent most of his missionary life establishing a religious community on the banks of the River Clyde. He is said to have performed four miracles in his lifetime, three of which concern nature and are featured on the coat of arms for Glasgow.

First is an image of a robin, as the saint is to have raised a robin from the dead after his classmates accidentally killed it. There is also a fish, which represents the legend that he came to the rescue of a local noblewoman who was accused of infidelity by her regal husband. The king demanded that she produce her ring, which he claimed she had given to her lover. In fact, he had thrown her ring into the River Clyde. The queen appealed to Mungo for help, and he dispatched a friend to catch a fish from the river, and from within the belly of that fish the ring was produced, allowing the queen to clear her name. The last miracle depicted is that of a tree, which refers to an incident in which Mungo had been left in charge of the monastery fire and fell asleep, whereupon the fire went out. When he awoke, all he could find was some frozen wood with which he was able to restart the fire.

These stories and the many others that come to us from the Celtic tradition remind us of the connection that these ancient people had with the land. Theirs

was a real and earthly faith — they worked the land and lived off the fruit of their labors. Their lives were governed by the rising of the sun and the setting of the same, they marked time by the changing seasons and were keenly aware of their dependence not only on the land, but more importantly on the one who created the world and all that dwells within.

The author of Psalm 65 speaks to this same connection — an ability to come into God's presence through the created world. For many of us, the general revelation of God in Creation comes to us in moments when we might be quite literally on a mountain top or gazing upon a sunrise or sunset that spreads across the sky with an array of breathtaking color. It may come for us when we can roll up our sleeves and get our hands into the soil to plant flowers or vegetables.

However you feel that connection with God in nature, try to establish practices that allow you to regularly engage in Creation. Even if you live in a cold and dark climate at this time of the year, take some time to be outside, to observe whatever living things may still be in sight. Perhaps it might be as you enter your home and once again smell the fragrance of your Christmas tree or live greenery around your home. The One who made the world and all that is in it created us both to take care of that Creation and to enjoy it. May we make the time to slow down enough in our lives to truly see the world around us and through it to come into God's presence.



*Mighty God, you who brought light from darkness, sound from silence and order from chaos, continue to bring your creative power into our lives. May we welcome your life-giving and life-renewing power into our hearts and homes this year and may we live out your calling to care for your world. Amen.*

# Dec. 24 - Christmas Eve

## You Are Part of the Christmas Miracle

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

The Greek word Σκένωσεν (skénoó) is most often translated as “dwelt” or “lived” or some variation of those verbs. In Eugene Peterson’s interpretation of the Bible, The Message, he writes, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” Commentators often talk about the common usage of the word to mean to pitch one’s tent. And I like that imagery: God pitching a tent among the people and Jesus living alongside us.

It is the human element of Christ’s life that we celebrate in his birth, the ordinariness of his arrival in the world to young parents and in humble surroundings. We remember the visit by shepherds and often highlight how these men would have been dirty and smelly and not of the highest social standing in the community and yet they were given a front-row seat to the Messiah’s arrival. We love the marrying of the ordinary and the lowly with the mighty and the divine. It seems to speak a message of hope and acceptance to all of us.

In our ordinary and often messy and complicated human lives, we are invited into the mystery of God’s love and grace. We are welcomed by Christ no matter who we are and what our story is. And that is the good news of our faith. Christ pitched his tent among us to show the love of God in a real and tangible way.

During this Advent, as we have reflected on some saints and themes from Celtic spirituality, we have been invited to think about our response to that indwelling. How Christ’s moving into our neighborhood influences the ways in which we are called to interact with friend and stranger, neighbor and enemy. The world that Christ inhabited was the world that God created and calls us to join in loving and caring for. As we welcome Christ anew into our hearts and homes, may we join in being the embodiment of God’s love. May our words and actions kindle a flame of love toward all we meet and to the whole of Creation itself.



*God, as you made your home among us in the form of the baby of Bethlehem, we ask that we would welcome you once again to make your home in our hearts and in our lives. May your light dwell within us and shine through us so that others will know of your love for them. Amen.*

# Dec. 25 - Christmas Day

## The Flame of Love Is Kindled

*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. — John 1:3–5*

As we have journeyed these 40 days to this moment of welcoming Christ into the world, we have been opened to the wisdom and rich heritage of those who have gone before us in Christian faith. The stories of the Celtic saints are humbling reminders of how we are called to continue to kindle the flames of love in our world today.

There is much darkness in our world that needs to be illumined by the light of Christ. Much that we need to strive toward bringing into the brightness of God's glory. As we kindle the flames of love for our own lives, may that bring us strength and wisdom to bring that light into the lives of our neighbor, our enemy, our friend, to all people and to Creation itself.

Jesus beckons us to be children of the light, to dwell not in the shadows but to bring his light to

bear in the world. May we trust in the source of all life and may we have courage to be bearers of that light into the dark places of our communities and our world. May the light of Christ burn brightly in us and through us and may the darkness never put it out.

We close our time together and enter the Christmas season with the very prayer that inspired our Celtic Advent journey:

*God, kindle thou in my heart within  
A flame of love to my neighbor,  
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,  
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,  
O son of the loveliest Mary,  
From the lowliest thing that liveth,  
To the name that is highest of all.*

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