

# *Attending to Advent:* poetry, prose and prayer

THE PRESBYTERIAN  
OUTLOOK



## INTRODUCTION:

My idea to center the *Outlook's* 2022 Advent Devotional on poetry came while reading an essay in Jon Mooallem's recent book, *Serious Face*, recounting a time when the author felt decidedly lost. He was 22 and working his first job at a small literary magazine in New York City. Jon's father had died a year earlier, and the grief he had tamped down began to bubble upward. In the evenings, Jon wrote. He'd walk 58 blocks home from the office "excessively serious-faced, wrenching my mind around like a Rubik's Cube, struggling to make it show a brighter color."

Desperate to lighten his emotional load, Mooallem joined a couple of friends on a wilderness adventure in Alaska's remote Glacier Bay National Park, despite being comfortable with the wilderness only in the abstract. Mooallem is an excellent writer, and the story climaxes in a tragic accident where their expert guide – also named



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Jon – got trapped beneath a tree that fell on top of him. While their friend went for help, Mooallem was left with the job of keeping Jon conscious, keeping him tethered to the world with his voice so the guide wouldn't slip into death. Through a long and terrifying night, after Mooallem had exhausted retelling the memories he and Jon shared of friendship and family, he began reciting the poetry he knew by heart: a lyric poem by Elizabeth Bishop about the enormity of time, W.H. Auden's poetry that had been easiest to memorize due to its rhyme and meter, and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Road Not Taken."

"For the most part," Mooallem wrote, "I trafficked in hits," feeling like a late-night radio DJ playing records to which he was unsure anyone was listening.

In the end, help arrived and Mooallem's friend survived. But as a reader, it is this nighttime poetry-reciting scene that stayed with me. Poetry, for me, also serves as a lifeline to this world. The carefully chosen words of poetry – the brevity and precision, the break in the lines – slow my typical amped-up, anxious pace. Poetry forces me to attend to life and the world in ways I don't normally privilege with my attention. And this is what I hope this Advent devotional does for you, our reader.

Many of you, I imagine, can relate to Jon Mooallem's "serious face." We remain in an unprecedented time of change — grieving what has been lost, unsure of our futures, struggling to find steady footholds.

Advent leads us into a time of expectant waiting, a time when our faith can find its foothold despite our unsteady world. As we make our way to Christmas, reading the stories of Mary, Joseph, Herod and the Christ child reflected through poetry and prose, I pray these devotions tether you to our world and lighten your load with a hope-filled, tenacious faith. May God bless your reading and your living in this Advent season.

— TERI MCDOWELL OTT



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## *Advent Devotions:* WEEK 1

— Theme of Mary —

*“When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).*

These poems and prose reflections focus on Mary’s story: her experience as God-bearer, her song, her prayers and ponderings, her faith. Readers will also explore themes of motherhood, the beauty and pain of childbirth, and a mother’s longing to provide and protect her children.

As you attend to these daily reflections, I invite you to call Mary to mind — to meditate on her story and locate yourself within it. Who are you in relationship to Mary? How do you relate to her faith? Or how do you not? Enjoy Mary’s company this week and be blessed.

Sunday, November 27

## POEM

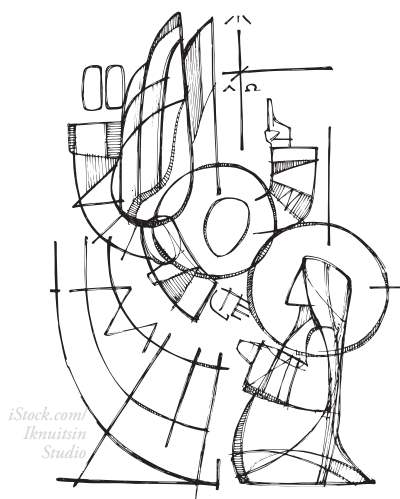
### *According to Thy Word*

Or thy love.

Or thy life.

Or thy humanity.

Be it unto me  
according to Thee.



**BARBARA WOOD GRAY** lives in a senior living community in Louisville, Colorado. Her most recent book, *Sharing the Song*, can be found at [lulu.com](https://lulu.com).

## PRAYER

Savior God, we start simply — a poem and a prayer evoking your word and our desire to follow you faithfully. We begin this Advent journey inspired by Mary’s response to your angel’s news. Her words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” read simple and steadfast, but lead us to wonder about this young, new mother. How could she bear this astounding call? What doubts and fears rose within her as the angel named her God’s favored one? But maybe we’re overthinking this story, this journey. Maybe we’re burdening Mary with what we carry, rather than seeing her for who she really is. Mary said, “Yes,” and stepped forward in faith. God our guide, hear our “Yes.” May this Advent journey be according to your word. Amen.

Monday, November 28

## POEM



*Virgin of Hope by artist Matilde Olivera ([matildeolivera.com/en/product/virgen-de-la-esperanza/](https://matildeolivera.com/en/product/virgen-de-la-esperanza/))*

### *Calm: The Sculptor Contemplates Mary after Virgin of Hope by Matilde Olivera*

In stone cold relief, the mother  
sits, closes her eyes  
to fear. All she knows is  
here: the calm release of  
*Be still and know,*  
her small one kicking —  
rosary of breath and belly.  
Though she is tired  
and her chiseled garments wrinkled,  
she feels only Him,  
majesty of miracle now turning  
slightly inside her.  
Like this, her humble hands  
daily reenact the Magnificat,  
embrace the ancient prophecy of pain  
and salvation. But first,  
in sculpted contemplation,  
mother and unborn son  
pray to the Creator together,  
that same *I AM*  
who also molded the artist's fingers  
now faithfully shaping  
this maternal and eternal  
moment of hope and calm.

**MARJORIE MADDOX** is professor of English and creative writing at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, and author of 11 collections of poetry. Find more of her poetry at [marjoriemaddox.com](https://marjoriemaddox.com).



## PRAYER

God, bless the tired, those worn weary from the day's labor and burdens carried. Bless those heavy of heart and body with the calm release that comes from knowing you are near — as near as a baby's kick within mother's womb. Amen.

## Tuesday, November 29

Who is ever ready to give birth to a child? In today's world we diligently prepare for this transformational moment with tests, ultrasounds, a new vitamin regimen and the difficult switch to decaf. The home is reorganized — a room painted a new pastel shade, a crib assembled, a mobile hung. Dangers are foreseen, with every outlet plugged for safety, every corner padded and every dangerous cupboard door locked. The parents-to-be are showered with gifts — diapers, wipes, tiny nail clippers and strange tools like a rubber bulb to suck snot out of infant nostrils. Birthing classes are taken and parenting books read. Car seats are bought and installed. Yet, even after all this preparation, parents are not ready. They'll never be ready for the wild wonder and extravagant chaos a new baby brings. When the swaddled bundle of baby is placed in a mother's arms, she can't help but wonder, "Is this real?"

Mary may have been 13 years old, or 16. It's impossible to imagine her being ready for the birth of her son, our Savior. No doctors, no tests, no vitamins to swallow with breakfast. She was betrothed, but not yet married when the good news first broke. And yet she was bold enough and brave enough to say yes to God. "Let it be with me according to your word."

Nothing can prepare us for the birth of the One who comes to turn our world and our lives upside down. This Advent, let us simply prepare to be unprepared, to be bold enough and brave enough to say yes to God, trusting that when the new baby cries — wonder of wonders — God is with us.

## PRAYER

Holy of holies, you break into our lives in unexpected and unplanned ways. We'd prefer to know your plans. We'd prefer to make our lists and check off each task, confident we will be prepared for all you have in store for us. Yet you are the God who makes all things new. Help us rejoice in your holy surprises. May we trust in your plans, like Mary. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

## POEM

### *The Season of Waiting*



She spent Advent wondering  
how she would tell her children  
that Santa knew they were good  
even if he didn't bring them  
dolls and bicycles.

Her season of waiting  
was measured not by candles  
lit in an evergreen wreath,  
but weekly Lay-Away payments  
for toys she could ill afford.

Her Advent meant  
teaching her children  
that the faith of the Magi  
was more precious than their  
gifts of frankincense and myrrh.

**GLORIA HEFFERNAN'S** writing has appeared in over 100 journals including a number of publications that focus on faith and spirituality including *Presence*, *Dappled Things*, *The Windhover*, *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Amethyst Review*, *Chautauqua*, and the upcoming anthology *Without a Doubt: Poems Illuminating Faith* from New York Quarterly Books.

## PRAYER

God of abundance, hear our prayers for those of scarce resources: parents who cannot lavish their children with Christmas toys, mothers measuring the season in layaway payments, children doubting they've been good enough for Santa. God bless them, and those of us with enough gifts to share. May the generosity you inspire, Great God, bring joy to all your children. Amen.

## Thursday, December 1

I saw Mary today at the airport. She stepped in front of me as I was breezing through the automatic doors, rushing to check in for my flight. Her halting pace slowed mine to a crawl, as she shuffled inside to escape the chill of the wind, holding a half-drunk disposable cup of coffee, the sole of one shoe flap-flapping on the slick cement.

Mary was outside Costco last week with a grocery cart stuffed with garbage bags and a toddler on her hip. She held the side of a cardboard box inscribed with black marker, “Will work for food and diapers.”

The week before last, Mary was at my daughter’s school, sitting alone by the bike rack watching other teens getting picked up by their parents. The defiant streak of purple running through her hair contradicted her despairing eyes. No one stopped to speak to her.

Then there was the time I saw Mary in the mirror, weary and defeated, disappointed in herself for snapping at her child, wondering what was wrong with her, wondering why she wasn’t a better mother, feeling the big feelings — shame, regret, despair.

Mary’s showing up everywhere this Advent. I hear her singing a familiar, magnificent tune about a God who lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, and scatters the proud. “All generations will call me blessed,” she sings to herself, to me, to us.

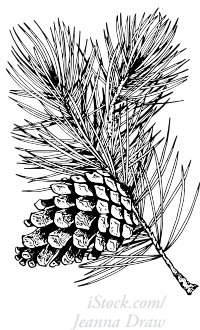
## PRAYER

Magnificent God, in whom our spirit rejoices, may we recognize Mary in the lowly, the dispossessed, the marginalized, the poor — and in ourselves. May we hear her song of witness, reminding us of your care for all your children. Lord, forgive us when we fail to acknowledge the humanity of others. May our souls magnify your mercy and your love. Amen.

Friday, December 2

## POEM

### *Humility the Final Frontier*



Mother Mary adorned the tree  
at Christmas in the country church  
which called me, a newly  
minted grad from seminary, to serve.  
And I, head full of lofty ideas,  
without bothering to learn why She  
had come to grace the evergreen  
cut from the surrounding hillside,  
insisted on something more Protestant.  
Thankfully, no one listened,  
but continued their tradition as before,  
and now, after a decade or more,  
I still think of the God-Bearer  
whenever there's a scent of pine in the air.

**ANDREW TAYLOR-TROUTMAN** is the author of *Gently Between the Words: Essays and Poems*. He is the pastor of Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He and his wife, also an ordained minister, parent three children and a dog named Ramona.

## PRAYER

Steadfast God, we are humbled in your presence. We often think so much of ourselves — even belittling those who worship differently. But our ways are not necessarily yours, and Mother Mary inspires us to adorn our faith with grace. We worship and adore you, Great Mystery of mysteries, and we press on in humility. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

## POEM

*Lynn Arrives for our  
“Advent Prayer Service for the Unhoused.”*

“No. That’s okay,” she says, moving  
past my hand. She points  
to my expanded belly.  
“You have a baby inside.”

She yanks her roller bag  
across the threshold into  
the sanctuary. “I’ll just take this  
over there.” She walks down the aisle,  
her heavy-laden bag trailing behind, swaddled  
in duct tape, announcing its presence to all  
it passes with one angry wheel, sparing me  
the inconvenience of shepherding  
her most precious things  
packed so tight  
those final steps  
to safety.

**KATHRYN LESTER-BACON** is the director of religious  
life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North  
Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual  
reflection on Instagram ([@pastor\\_poetry\\_practice](https://www.instagram.com/pastor_poetry_practice)).

## PRAYER

Holy One, each of us bears precious things. May those of us who  
do not lack for shelter see those clustering in the corners of every  
community. May those of us with convenient and comfortable  
lives, see the poor, the unhoused, the rejected, those deemed  
“unclean.” Shepherd us all to your sanctuary of grace. Amen.

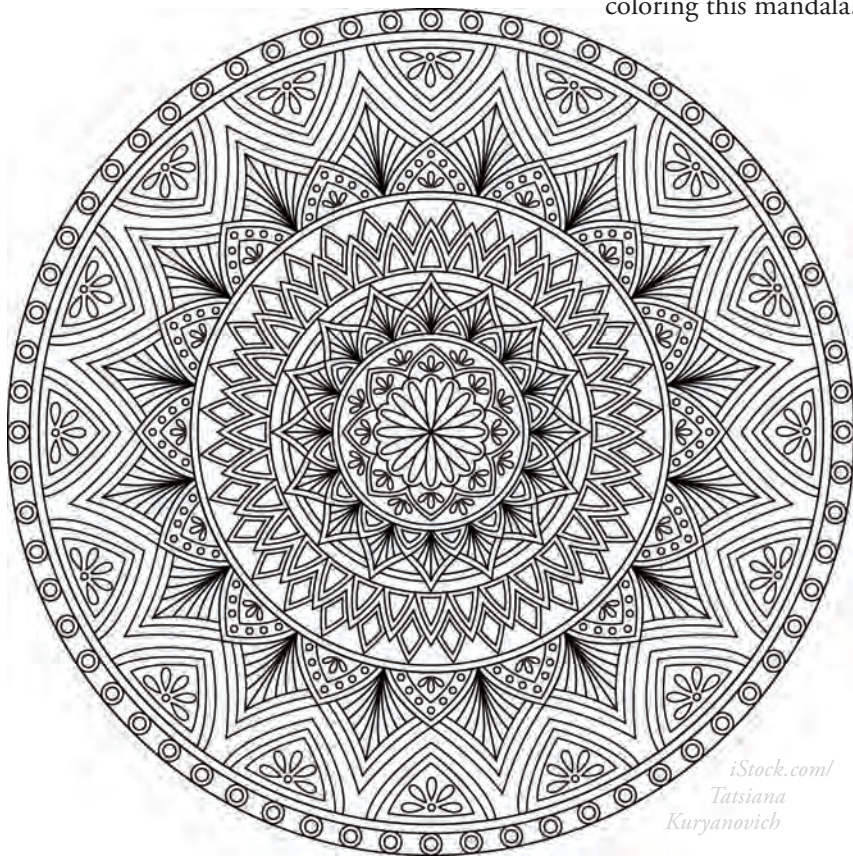


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THE SPIRITUAL  
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# MEDITATION

*Created for color.* Meditate on this week's devotion series while coloring this mandala.



*iStock.com/  
Tatsiana  
Kuryanovich*

Next week: Joseph



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## *Advent Devotions:* WEEK 2

— Theme of Joseph —

*“Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” (Matthew 1:19-21).*

These poems and prose reflections focus on Joseph’s story: his experience as Mary’s fiancé, his questions, his fears, his hesitations, his faith. We will also explore themes of parenting, patriarchy, the beauty and pain of childbirth, and scandalous pregnancies.

As you attend to these daily reflections, I invite you to call Joseph to mind, meditate on his story and locate yourself within it. Who are you in relationship to Joseph? How do you relate to his story? Or how do you not? Enjoy Joseph’s company this week and be blessed.

Sunday, December 4

## POEM



*"The Annunciation" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, c. 1852, Birmingham Museum and Gallery, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

### KATHRYN LESTER-BACON

is the director of religious life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual reflection on Instagram ([@pastor\\_poetry\\_practice](#)).

### *Joseph, before he awakes*

I thought it would be up to me.  
The fig, the sower, the seed,  
the conquest.

No one told me  
what to do when I was not  
needed. I was taught to be  
the conqueror  
of fruit and field,  
my dominion, my right. But  
I wasn't even there.

What do you do when  
you thought the story  
began with you?

No one warned me  
that something could end  
and begin

without my input,  
that this was enough:  
the choice made,

a word passed  
between a girl  
and her God.

## PRAYER

God, we can think of ourselves as more important than we are, considering ourselves the center of the story when the narrative really revolves around you. Humble us on this Advent journey. Awaken us to people who live and move on the margins, people who know what it's like to be dismissed and whose voices aren't included. Awaken us to our need for you. Amen.

Monday, December 5

## POEM

### *Joseph's Prayer*

You are my shepherd, yes, but what does that even mean?  
You give strength. You bless. But, I called you for help,  
and overheard heard my neighbors saying  
you will not deliver me. You cannot spare the hyssop...

A poor citizen cried out to you recently,  
and here's what I told them when they asked me for good news: "Look,  
Even the lions grow weak and hungry, so make darkness your closest friend,  
and collect your own tears in your own bottles, and jot all this down if you can,  
make it holy. And, while you're at it," I said to them, "Keep track of your own turns  
and tossings; and give an ear to my pleas – *please!* –  
because the cares of your heart  
are way too many."

you are the source from whence comes my help,  
and the source of my help is this: please,  
come sit beside me and weep  
and here hang your harp on the willow there  
and look now the river is jogging away  
and stay right here – stay beside me –  
and see: we are the little ones                      dashed against wet stones  
lying    in lower oblivions

rumor has it the unformed were formed                      at one time or another  
the dead once coaxed into breathing                      another breath  
but tell me                      what's the point of all this  
beginning to end                      just to begin again when  
I'm not even sure  
you                      exist

#### **GARRETT MOSTOWSKI'S**

work has recently appeared  
in The Galway Review, Across  
the Margin, Geez, Clerestory,  
and others. He is a second-year  
doctoral candidate in public  
theology and creative writing  
at Pittsburgh Theological  
Seminary. He's co-pastor of  
Fort Street Presbyterian Church  
in downtown Detroit, Michigan.

## PRAYER

Great God of Mystery, you are hardest to  
grasp during times of trial and tragedy.  
Oftentimes we cry to you for help and feel  
as if you fail to hear. Holy One, mend the  
faith our doubt dashes against the stones.  
Turn us to you, again and again, even when,  
especially when, we doubt you exist. Amen.

Tuesday, December 6

## POEM

### *Saving Grace*



The Bible, once again, dares redefine  
The notion “righteous” as much more divine  
Than oft we make it when we think of laws  
All kept, producing someone lacking flaws.  
For Joseph’s righteousness stems from his will  
To do a *gracious* thing — and thus fulfill  
The law his son would later say is best,  
The law of love, by which we all are blessed.

And how it blessed him! For he had this dream  
That told him that no matter who it seemed  
The father of this child-to-be had been —  
Abusive soldier? Or perhaps some friend? —  
There was another possibility  
To lead both them – and all the world – to see  
That Jesus, meaning “Yahweh saves,” still shows  
That love for all is how God’s spirit grows.

**SCOTT L. BARTON** is an honorably retired member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia who had pastorates in Northern New York, Vermont and Philadelphia. Now living in western Massachusetts, he enjoys writing, hiking and singing with Boston Symphony’s Tanglewood Festival Chorus. His latest book is *Lectionary Poems, Year C: Even More Surprising Grace for Pulpit and Pew*

## PRAYER

Amazing God, like Joseph, you bless us with grace upon grace, calling us to entertain alternative possibilities. As Joseph sought to understand Mary’s pregnancy, help us not pre-judge a situation or a person. We aren’t perfect and you don’t expect that of us. Help us live according to your law of love and share your grace with others. Amen.

## Wednesday, December 7

*"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:1-7).*

What does it do to a man in a patriarchal culture to not be the center of the story?

The emperor's registration required Joseph and Mary to return to Joseph's hometown. They would be registered under his name and his family line. Mary's life and story is subsumed by Joseph's. She, by marriage, is his.

But when it comes time for Mary to give birth, the story turns to focus on her, as the mother of Jesus. Joseph fades into a supporting character. I can imagine Joseph anxious and afraid, perhaps even running through the streets of Bethlehem to find a midwife. A first-time mother, Mary's labor could have lasted 12 to 36 hours, hours during which many women in that time died. Where was Joseph during her labor pains? Sitting by Mary's side? Pacing outside the stable? Luke doesn't give us any hints; the details of Joseph's whereabouts, his thoughts, his feelings are unnecessary to the story's progression.

What a rare and humbling experience for a man, even a poor man like Joseph — to be removed from the center of the action, to not be the one in control. But I also imagine this made Joseph a better husband, father and companion to the mother of Jesus. Joseph could have disrupted this story of salvation if his ego demanded to be fed — if he insisted on centering himself and his story. Thanks be to God patriarchy did not have its way.

## PRAYER

Holy One, we praise you for men who recognize humility as a strength, who listen well and are attentive to the needs of those whose stories surround them. As we approach the birth of Jesus this Advent, may we be mindful of positions of power that impede your faithful path and serve as stumbling blocks to the radical, counter-cultural message of the gospel. Free us, Holy God, for your path of faithfulness. Amen.

Thursday, December 8

## POEM

*Joseph  
Acquiesces  
to His Fate*

**PAUL HOOKER**

is an honorably  
retired  
Presbyterian  
minister and  
former associate  
dean at Austin  
Seminary. He is  
the author of two  
volumes of poetry  
as well as other  
works in biblical  
studies and  
Presbyterian polity.  
He lives in  
Austin, Texas.

I have a reputation to uphold.  
Not that you would know, but in this town  
I am looked up to, I am told,  
The object of some praise, even renown.  
This will not do, this girl whose belly holds  
A child with father nowhere to be found.  
I won't have scandal sniffing at my feet.  
An end is what I need, quiet, discreet.

This is no time for children out of wed  
Whose lineage is prone to imprecision,  
Whose origin in some unmarried bed  
Provokes a man like me to hard decisions.  
Still, I am fond of her, and in my head  
I cannot bear the thought of her derision.  
Let her go some other where, not here;  
A clinic where such problems disappear.

Fear not, you say? Do you know what that means?  
You angels have no fear of human law  
Designed to capture folk like us between  
The cost of peace of mind and moral flaw.  
Are surgical solutions so obscene  
But carrying the child not the last straw?  
You haunt my dreams and promise me salvation  
But ignore the danger of the situation.

*Yehoshua*, you say, shall be the name  
That echoes down the halls of history  
And bears the hope of nations. But the blame  
For offering hapless peasants just like me  
False hope that one day hearts will change  
Will fall upon my shoulders. Wait and see.  
You want my word? Then let thy will be done.  
Joseph may have a child, but God a Son.

## PRAYER

Holy God, in Joseph's day as in our own, men can fail their female partners, dismissing them and their pregnancies as 'problems' rather than people. God, guard and protect the women whose men are provoked by pregnancy. Melt and humble the hearts of unwilling fathers and bring hope to the hopeless this Advent. Amen.

Friday, December 9

## POEM

### *First Sunrise*

Did earliest birdsong greet the new arrival?  
Were those cattle in their stalls lowing,  
urgent to be milked, the hungry donkey curious  
about the new and noisy neighbor in his feeding trough?  
And how about the rooster's clarion call?  
Did it disturb Our Lady's mending slumber,  
waken Joseph to stir the dying embers of their fire?  
The local shepherds had already hurried back  
to tend their sheep, those wandering wise men  
with their mystic gifts, yet to arrive.  
What kind of breakfast could that new father  
put together? What kind of waking greeting  
might he give his new and first-born son?  
Did he hold him arms-length high and sing to him  
a morning song? Would he tenderly unwrap  
all those entwining swaddling clothes  
to count the infant's fingers and his toes?  
Did he pass a rough yet gentle hand across  
his Mary's resting brow in gratitude?

**J. BARRIE SHEPHERD** is an award-winning poet and an honorably retired PC(USA) pastor, the author of many books.

## PRAYER

God bless the new fathers, full of awe and wonder, the tender caregivers ready to take over when mom needs respite. God bless those who respond to your call to protect the most vulnerable, to nurture the new, to swaddle love in gratitude. Savior God, may we greet your morning sun with equal praise for the miraculous gift that is life. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

## POEM

### *First Night Question*



**MARJORIE MADDOX** is professor of English and creative writing at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, and author of 11 collections of poetry. Find more of her poetry at [marjoriemaddox.com](http://marjoriemaddox.com).

## PRAYER

Holy One, for those of us who doubt our capacity to rise to the occasion of your call, who feel unfit, who ask “Why, me?” in the face of newly birthed responsibility, bless us with your grace. Grace for ourselves. Grace for those under our care. Grace for impossible possibilities beneath an ancient moon. Amen.

What could he, Joseph —  
old beside this Mary —

*possibly*

*possibly*

teach Him,  
the one swaddled by dark

in this last-resort makeshift  
animal-room for a Son-

not-a-son? He looks around  
the straw-strewn space

unfit for this king.  
Already, he’s failed.

The seconds between  
quiet stars and angels’

boisterous hallelujahs fill  
with a moon — even more ancient

than he feels — that spotlights  
his calloused hands

*possibly*

*possibly*

With care, someone  
constructed the manger;

someone nailed the roof.  
He touches the infant’s

untrained fingers. Yes,  
he will start with that.



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## *Advent Devotions:* WEEK 3

— Theme of Herod —

*“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened...calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born” (Matthew 2:1-4).*

These poems and prose reflections focus on the character of Herod and the killing of innocents. We will explore themes of power, dominance and empire and contemporary correlations to war and violence.

As you attend to these daily reflections, call the innocent and oppressed to mind, and pray for the victims of violence. This Advent, we venture into this frightening and painful terrain with hope. Christ is coming. Thanks be to God.

Sunday, December 11

## POEM

Arise, ye of little/no/much faith.  
The hour is here and fleeting.  
Strike the lintel with lambs' blood.  
Stain now the crossbeams of schools,  
sirens echoing Rachel's weeping,  
our weeping, as Uvalde's children scream  
for those younger still.

Cry to Adonai. Call down torrents of rain  
from Vinnytsia's sorrow-laden clouds,  
ritual cleansing of a slain toddler  
beside her toppled stroller, the plagues  
of cruise missiles and rocket artillery  
out-populating the trampled sunflower  
again and again.

And mark for protection  
the foreheads of immigrant babies,  
of homeless infants, of the innocent newborns  
thrown out with the bathwater of war and greed  
and the everyday sin of not seeing, not doing.

May the Almighty (and we) flood this post-Noah landscape  
with mercy, float the crude water-cradle of Moses,  
proclaim loudly the long lineage of Messiah,  
ignite the dazzling star map of wise men,  
cradle the already-slaughtered Lamb  
cooing in the manger, for them,  
especially for them. Arise  
and go. Do it  
now.

MARJORIE  
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professor of English  
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more of her poetry at [marjoriemaddox.com](http://marjoriemaddox.com).

## *Slaughter of the Innocents*

## PRAYER

Have mercy, O God, on the innocents. Curb our addiction to domination and violence. Command us not to kill, again and again, so we fear you more than we fear the sins that lead us to bear arms, worship guns and then wail loudly when our violence spills into our children's lives, hiding under school desks. This Advent, as we await the birth of Emmanuel, we also await your intervention of peace. Amen.

## Monday, December 12

On May 14, 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron targeted, shot and killed ten Black grocery shoppers in Buffalo, New York, with an AR-15 style rifle.

On May 15, 2022, 68-year-old David Chou killed one person and critically wounded four members of the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California, with a 9mm handgun.

On May 24, 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos entered Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, and fatally shot nineteen students and two teachers, and wounded seventeen others with an assault-style rifle.

On July 4, 2022, 21-year-old Robert “Bobby” E. Crimo III climbed to a rooftop in Highland Park, Illinois, with a semi-automatic rifle to shoot and kill seven people and wound dozens more attending an Independence Day parade.

## PRAYER

Lord, have mercy upon us. Melt our guns into gardens, our spears into pruning hooks. Free our hearts from hate. Release the pain of those who would take others’ lives from hate, turning them towards your love. Restore your order of peace. Make the lion to lie down with the lamb. Protect the innocent. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

## POEM

### *Villanelle for Herod and Ourselves*

He is killed; the table set; the king states “Understand:  
John spoke with fire, brandished force; now, silver serves his head.  
These words, this flesh, my power will break; my kingdom is at hand.”

*“Repent and Turn, Obey the Law,”* he wearied me with demands.  
I promised you a plated feast, enthralled, you shall be fed.  
He is killed; the table set,” Herod states. “Understand?”

Such blood the warp of power unspools and — artfully! — it spans  
across our gaze, the gauze of games. Thus, entertained, we’ve read  
these words: “this flesh our power must break. Our kingdom’s in your hands!”

What body’s worth more than its weight when not in the rulers’ plan?  
Who hesitates to lose, when higher the stakes are ratcheted?  
So, he is killed; the table set. All kings — states — understand

that this is what’s decided when fear dances across the land:  
No meal is served without victor’s fare. And so the conquered?  
Just words and flesh that power will break. Our kingdom is in hand.

And so and so momentum hurls. What force can force withstand?  
Love. Love will tear all might apart and share in what has bled.  
He is killed; the table set. All Kings, States, *understand*:  
the Word Made Flesh will break your power. God’s kingdom is at hand.

KATHRYN LESTER-BACON is the director of religious  
life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North  
Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual  
reflection on Instagram ([@pastor\\_poetry\\_practice](https://www.instagram.com/pastor_poetry_practice)).

## PRAYER

God of the powerful and the powerless, we praise you for breaking light into our  
darkness, for overwhelming hate with the shining power of love. Emmanuel,  
we praise you. May your kingdom come and your will be done. Amen.

## Wednesday, December 14

“Nuclear blackmail, illegal annexation of territory, hundreds of thousands of Russian men rounded up and sent to the front lines in Ukraine, undersea gas pipelines to Europe mysteriously blowing up. After endless speculation, we can now say it for sure: this is how Vladimir Putin responds when he is backed into a corner.” (“What if we’re already fighting the third world war with Russia?,” Susan Glasser, *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2022)

Vladimir Putin scares me. Trained as a KGB agent in counterintelligence, he epitomizes all our tropes of the evil master-manipulator who toys and tortures. In her article, Glasser describes Putin’s practiced use of conflict escalation to get what he wants. Putin, she writes, “is not one to walk away from a fight or back down while losing.”

Last February, as we witnessed the buildup of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine, I prayed for the elder veteran pacing an old army trench, the grandmother in her pink housecoat taking up arms, the mother and her teenagers practicing at the shooting range, the common citizens answering the call to protect their homeland. Tragically, Russia’s escalation led to the brutal war we still follow today. Isn’t this what we have come to expect in a world full of Herods — tyrants hell-bent on violence to steal and hoard power?

In this fresh season of conflict and human betrayal, Advent reminds us of God’s alternative path and its power to send shivers down the most powerful spine. The Savior to come is the Prince of Peace. The birth of Jesus escalates the power of love, against which evil stands no chance.

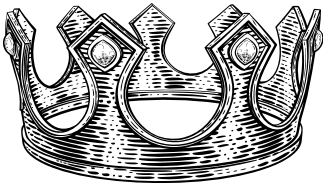
## PRAYER

God of grace, have mercy. We’ve heard that the arc of the universe bends towards justice, but we watch the nightly news in horror and doom-scroll through reports of bombs falling on the innocent. Our hearts lament the war in Ukraine and we groan over the atrocities laying waste to lives, homes, and communities there and in the Middle East, Africa, and other conflicts. Turn us, and help us turn others, from the evil path of destruction, domination and violence. This Advent, remind us of the power of your love. Amen.

Thursday, December 15

## POEM

iStock.com/ChrisGargio



### *Heartbreak*

All megalomaniacs have fear  
They'll be dethroned, from far, or near;  
Thus, nothing stops them from their ends,  
Including children, whom they'll rend  
From life and parents, by all means  
Necessary! Thus it still seems  
That holding power for its sake  
Can only end in great heartbreak.

**SCOTT L. BARTON** is an honorably retired member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia who had pastorates in Northern New York, Vermont and Philadelphia. Now living in western Massachusetts, he enjoys writing, hiking and singing with Boston Symphony's Tanglewood Festival Chorus. His latest book is *Lectionary Poems, Year C: Even More Surprising Grace for Pulpit and Pew*.

## PRAYER

God of righteous rage and holy pursuits, humble the powerful who use their positions for evil, self-serving ends. Strike such fear in their hearts that they will turn from evil and claim your life-saving path of peace. Protect the innocents from tyranny so all your children may know peace and security. Amen.

## Friday, December 16

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” 19<sup>th</sup> century British politician Lord Acton is credited as coining this phrase, but he drew on ideas expressed by others about absolute monarchies where all power is either given, or taken, by the monarch.

In 1 Samuel 8 we hear God warn his people about giving power to a king. “You shall be his slaves,” God warns in 1 Samuel 8:17. But the people refused to listen. They wanted to be like the other nations governed by kings.

The story of King Herod manifests all God’s warnings. Herod identified as a Jew but supported Rome and its oppression of his people. Herod was rewarded for his betrayal by being given the title “King of the Jews” by the Roman senate. He was known among his people as ambitious and ruthless — a king who would order the killing of all the babies in order to eliminate the threat of one.

Not all power is bad. “Power is the ability to achieve a purpose,” said Martin Luther King Jr. “Whether or not it is good or bad depends upon the purpose.” The child born “King of the Jews” was a threat to Herod’s power because of Christ’s purpose. Christ came to save, not oppress. Christ’s power is love, not threats. Despite Herod’s influence and authority, this newborn King would thrive, his legacy more lasting than any tyrant.

## PRAYER

Savior God, powerful people control and oppress, but you call us to love and lift up. As we await the birth of our king, help us reflect on your purpose for our lives together. Usher in your reign of love and peace. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

## POEM



### *Innocents*

I have held within my arms a child emerging  
from deep sleep's cocoon, limbs softened, secure,  
wrapped in a blanket the color of sky.  
His damp skin smelled like salt and dreaming.

Does it make a difference what language  
he speaks or the hue of his face or who  
his parents are or who might feel threatened  
by the breath he breathes, which he refuses  
to quit breathing, in and out, in and out,  
in and out? I want to say *No*, shout it until  
the wings of my heart beat against  
the growing bones of his body, feathering  
those languid limbs, making wings, gifting  
flight. But it does. It does  
because, in this world,  
it will.

**KATHRYN LESTER-BACON** is the director of religious life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual reflection on Instagram ([@pastor\\_poetry\\_practice](https://www.instagram.com/pastor_poetry_practice)).

## PRAYER

God, thank you for the child who brings us hope in this season of dark despair. Open our hearts to all your children in need of our welcome and care. This Advent, we pray for the protection of innocents. We pray for lives threatened by violence to know safety, security and peace. Amen.



THE PRESBYTERIAN  
OUTLOOK

## *Advent Devotions:* WEEK 4

— Theme of The Child —

*“Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,  
‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’”*  
(Matthew 2:2).

These poems and prose reflections focus on the image of God as child or God in children. Themes of innocence, vulnerability and incarnation are explored as well as contemporary correlations to children and the vulnerable.

As you attend to these daily reflections, call children or the Christ child to mind, meditate on the role and character of children, locate yourself within their stories. How do you see yourself as a child of God? How do you not? Attend to these words this week and be blessed.

Sunday, December 18

## POEM

### *Winter Night*

Small red wreath,  
single candle light in its center,  
adorns our frosted-farmhouse window  
that watches the gravel road.

Its light sifts softly,  
over the snow and through the grove,  
to Aunt Minnie passing by,  
and to me, alone in our front room.

In this peace of darkness,  
I hear angels singing,  
see Joseph touch Mary's hand,  
feel Mother Mary's love,  
hear a baby cry.

**ARLIN BUYERT** was born and raised on an Iowa farm. He has published four poetry collections and edited three anthologies of inmate poetry. He has been published in *The Christian Century*, *Coal City Review* and *Fine Lines Press*. Arlin is retired and lives in Leawood, Kansas, with his wife Kristen Kvam.



## PRAYER

In the hectic frenzy of this last week of Advent, as we make our final holiday preparations, wrap gifts, cook meals, mail cards to family and friends, help us find a moment of stillness, Holy One. Lead us to a place of quiet. Turn us to your peace so we, too, can hear the baby's cry. Amen.

Monday, December 19

POEM

*The Magi  
Recall  
the Star*  
MATTHEW 2

PAUL HOOKER

is an honorably retired Presbyterian minister and former associate dean at Austin Seminary. He is the author of two volumes of poetry as well as other works in biblical studies and Presbyterian polity. He lives in Austin, Texas. "The Magi Recall the Star" first appeared in P. Hooker, "Sightings of the Holy" in *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Fall 2022.

Epiphanies always have consequences.  
Apocalypses always require assembly.

A star. A distant pin-prick—maybe  
light from an ancient orb gone supernova—  
portends the end of something, and the birth  
of something new. But what? Or who?  
Why should this punctuation in the dark  
become the instigation for the journey?

The journey. Set your foot to paths uncharted  
impelled to some uncertain destination,  
ask inconvenient questions of those whose power  
disinclines them to acknowledge answers,  
barter time from old, bloodthirsty fools  
who sit on queasy thrones and dread the star.

The star. It moves, yet night to night the same  
point of light in the aching windswept darkness,  
the cold black emptiness of space.

Like you, it makes its own strange journey,  
setting sail to catch the breath of God.  
It finds its destination in those eyes.

Those eyes. The child sees you, and calls your name—  
a name you had forgot, or did not know  
you knew, a name whose riches, undeserved,  
will cost you everything you have, and more.  
He looks at you, and in his eyes you see  
the rising and the setting of your hopes.

Your hopes. Leave them behind, these selves you carry  
the journey long, like treasures of the heart;  
return, then, empty-handed, knowing nothing  
but the light behind the dark eyes of the child.  
Be haunted by that light. It does not fade  
even as the dark absorbs the star.

Darkness falls. You are night-blind, and groping.  
Go home a different way, if home at all.

PRAYER

God of the journey, may we follow your star this Advent to the rough-hewn bed of the newborn Christ child and the eyes that give rise to hope. May the birth of Christ return us to our lives transformed, sending us home by another way. Amen.

## Tuesday, December 20

In her poem, “Black baby,” Harlem Renaissance poet Anita Scott Coleman adores her child who looks at her with “eyes like coal/ They shine like diamonds.”

What would we see in the eyes of the Christ child? What would we and the world look like through newborn eyes? Black and white and shades of grey are all these undeveloped eyes can see — which might frighten those of us used to color, dimension and perspective. But curiosity is born within that which is new. Wonder, too. What might appear possible through this newborn vision? What might we hope for through precious eyes shining like diamonds?

Advent takes us back to the beginning — a new year, a new birth. Through Emmanuel’s eyes we see through darkness and beyond despair. We look to a hope-filled future of beloved community to come. Through adoring eyes, we see that we are precious in God’s sight.

## PRAYER

Through Christ you make all things new, Holy God. This Advent help us to look with new eyes upon your world and those who live in it. Help us see all your children as precious. Adjust our eyes to the dark, so the path to your glorious future is clear and sure. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

## POEM

### *How Odd*

How odd, they came to worship a child,  
How odd, that someone so meek and so mild  
Would gain the attention of the wise.

How odd, we come to him this night,  
How odd, no matter our power or might  
To change the world, or even our lives.

Perhaps the children are the key —  
Those who from fear and violence flee —  
To help relieve our worldly pains.

For when our hearts by love are stirred  
And lines 'twixt us and others are blurred,  
We'll come to this odd new Child again.

**SCOTT L. BARTON** is an honorably retired member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia who had pastorates in Northern New York, Vermont and Philadelphia. Now living in western Massachusetts, he enjoys writing, hiking and singing with Boston Symphony's Tanglewood Festival Chorus. His latest book is *Lectionary Poems, Year C: Even More Surprising Grace for Pulpit and Pew*.

## PRAYER

God of grace, you turn our world upside down this Christmas, returning us to the manger where you risk being born into this world a helpless child. Stir our hearts with love for you and love for each other. May Christ's birth inspire us to new and nobler paths. Amen.

## Thursday, December 22

I flew home yesterday seated next to a mother with a toddler on her lap. This boy began the flight engaging with his other seat neighbor, an older woman who offered to help entertain. Buttons to push on the tiny seat-back TV screen served as a curious diversion, allowing mom to get settled. When the plane's wheels lifted off the runway, the feeling of taking flight widened the boy's eyes. Watching him, I recalled my daughter's first flight, her chubby toddler's hand in mine squeezing in fear and glee.

After fussing and struggling, my young neighbor finally gave into the weariness that overtakes all travelers, falling asleep in his mother's lap, his head resting on her chest. I remember that too; my child's small body on my own, the warmth and the weight. The limited days when your children are small and needing to be held are both precious and exhausting.

The child we welcome this Christmas was like all children: curious, wiggly and weighty, sleeping on his mother's chest. But this child, unlike others, came to serve and save. This child, whom we worship and adore, takes flight in our souls and leads us to look forward in hope. These days may be limited, but they are precious. For unto us a child is born, Emmanuel — God with us.

## PRAYER

God whom we adore, we praise you for your son Jesus Christ, for his birth and the hope he brings. May all your children know a safe place to sleep and the warmth of your loving, protective embrace. Amen.

Friday, December 23

## POEM



### *Late to the Manger*

Those Judean hillside shepherds  
tending their grazing flocks by night,  
until splendid interrupted, must have arrived  
at last, clamorous on Bethlehem's streets,  
well past the midnight hour.

Those three sage monarchs,  
confused and almost lost at Herod's court  
– and finally twelve days late –  
must have traveled all their way  
completely overnight in order for a star  
to light their wandering path.

And if I have any hope of making it,  
seems I'll be arriving way beyond the sunset hour,  
weary, wrinkled, sore, much travel-worn,  
leaning heavy on my crooked stick  
and limping slow beyond the stable door  
to seek a vacant space against the rear wall,  
there to kneel, my final burdens shed,  
with nothing to be done or spoken,  
nothing save to learn how to adore.

**J. BARRIE SHEPHERD** is an award-winning poet and an honorably retired PC(USA) pastor, the author of many books.

## PRAYER

Eternal God, we often show up late, unprepared for the unexpected ways you break into our lives. Help us prepare our hearts this Advent to arrive ready for you at the manger. Help us shed all that hinders our path to Bethlehem so we may learn how to adore. Amen.

## Saturday, December 24 | Christmas Eve



### POEM

#### *Nativity*

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,  
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,  
There He hath made Himself to His intent  
Weak enough, now into the world to come;  
But O, for thee, for Him, hath the inn no room?  
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from the Orient,  
Stars and wise men will travel to prevent  
The effect of Herod's jealous general doom.  
See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how He  
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?  
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,  
That would have need to be pitied by thee?  
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,  
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

**JOHN DONNE**, from *La Corona* (published  
in 1610 and in the public domain)

### PRAYER

What joy, what  
hope emerges from  
a mother's womb  
tonight! We praise you,  
God of glory, for the  
immensity of Christ.  
We praise you for this  
child's life-saving birth,  
for the One who comes  
to set us free from  
prisons of our own  
making. We praise you  
for daring to dwell with  
us, weak and vulnerable  
as a newborn, yet  
threatening to every  
power-drunk king. Our  
souls magnify you on  
this Christmas Eve. We  
wonder at your love.  
Amen.