A Presbyterian Outlook

Night Watch

Advent Devotional

by Teri McDowell Ott



Day 1| GENESIS 1:1-5

Focus Verse: Genesis 1:5 "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day."

I encourage you to begin this devotion series at night, outside if you can. That's where I am now — writing this on our back porch, my notebook lit with a small battery-powered lamp. I can't stay out too long. The crisp Illinois prairie wind will soon numb fingers holding pen to paper. But I welcome the fresh scent of the night air and the nocturnal stirring of critters I never see during the day. The darkening sky invites me to behold the stars that ask, "What has kept you from the gifts of the night?"

I used to venture out at night more often. After the kids' bedtime, I'd walk through the grass, breathe deep and lean against a sturdy maple tree to look up and take in God's creation. I'm not sure what lured me from this spiritual practice. (Netflix binges? The distractions of work?) But Advent is the perfect opportunity to return to the night.

The metaphor of darkness runs throughout the Bible — typically associated with evil and sin. But darkness does not mean the absence of God. When the sun disappears below the horizon, God doesn't vanish with it. The night is part of God's good creation.

Darkness is the chosen medium of artist James Turrell. Heather Lanier's essay "In Praise of Darkness" (published in Poets & Writers, September 2018) describes one of Turrell's museum exhibits: "You enter by stepping into a narrow corridor – the only source of light is behind you – which quickly turns 180 degrees to the right. As you get farther along, the walls must be painted black because now the darkness is nearly complete. If you go alone, this is when you might seek out the handrail, flu season or not . . . and let it guide you through another 180-degree turn. The darkness at this point becomes thick, almost palpable." Lanier describes how the viewer of the exhibit eventually finds a chair and sits, waiting as long as 15 minutes for their irises to open enough to perceive Turrell's work.

The belief that art and beauty await you in Turrell's work helps you walk into darkness, then wait. And in the darkness, beauty emerges. As Lanier describes it: "A faint, gray amorphous source of light. It's so faint at first you might not be able to place its shape. Circle? Oval? Blob? It's like a reflection of a reflection of light, like a moon of a moon."

The dark of night holds promise. Advent points us to this same promise: God is not absent when all appears dark. God waits with us as our eyes adjust to the beauty and meaning that can be found in the dark. The key is to believe that something is there – that something is here – for us, something good and beautiful. Something that is worth our patience.

As Advent begins, our nights stretch long. There is more darkness now than any other time of year. Let's walk together into the night to see what God reveals.

Holy God, help us to patiently walk with you and wait with you in the night so we can marvel at the beauty of your creation lit by moon and stars. Amen.

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Day 2| GENESIS 15:1-6

Focus Verse: Genesis 15:5 "[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'"

It's as impossible to count the stars in the sky as it is to count the blessings God bestows. This Advent, take some time to go outside at night and stargaze. Imagine the hope Abraham felt as God pointed his attention to the heavens and promised him a long line of descendants. Imagine moving from a state of barrenness to a state of fulfillment. What blessing has God shown you this past year? What blessing is God preparing you for this Advent?

God of uncountable blessings, your stars remind us of all we have been given and all that is yet to come. Your promise to care for and protect us, our children and our children's children illuminates the night sky with beauty and hope. In this season of Advent, we turn our eyes heavenward with Abraham to marvel at your faithfulness and praise you for all you provide. Amen.

Day 3| EXODUS 10:21-24

Focus Verse: Exodus 10:21 "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt.'"

In this Exodus story, God uses darkness to strike fear into Pharaoh's heart and protect the Israelites from those who seek to keep them enslaved. The Egyptians could not find the Israelites hidden by God's darkness. This Advent, find some quiet time to sit in the dark. We are often afraid of the dark because it limits our vision. But can you experience the dark's protection like this passage suggests? What do you find comforting when all the lights are out? How is God seeking to protect and comfort you this Advent?

You cover and comfort us, Eternal God. We thank you for the darkness that reminds us of the ways you protect and provide for us. Help us to seek you, even when we cannot see. Help us to feel your presence among us this Advent. Amen..

Day 4| PSALM 136:1-9

Focus Verse: Psalm 136:1, 7, 9 "O give thanks to the Lord . . . who made the great lights . . . the moon and the stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever."

The moon and stars are a steady presence and a nightly reminder of the steadfast love of God. No matter what happens during the day, God's stars still shine. No matter what doubts or fears plague us, God's love for us never wavers. No matter the cruelty of the world, God is there every night, reminding us that love rises above all else. This Advent, spend some time praying in a place where you can view the moon and stars. This Advent, pause to remember and give thanks for God's steadfast love.

Beautiful Creator, we pause to praise you. Your steadfast love endures forever. The moon and the stars point us toward this truth. In a cruel and violent world, we are grateful for this nightly reminder that your way is love. In a world where we are so often brought low, the signs in your night sky raise us up. Thank you. Amen.

Day 5| PSALM 148:1-3

Focus Verse: Psalm 148:3 "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!"

A star praises God by being all that God created it to be. A star illuminates the night, directs wandering travelers and ships at sea, humbles us with the vastness of the universe beyond our planet, pokes holes in our dark loneliness and despair to let in a little light of hope, stokes the fires of our faith with a glimpse of what is beyond the beyond. This Advent, praise God by being who God created you to be.

Creator God, like the stars, we praise you, we appreciate you, we marvel at the gifts you offer and the beauty you have painted in the sky. When we need direction, remind us to look up. When we need humility, let the night sky remind us of how small we really are. When we need hope, guide our eyes from our base reality toward your beauty and being. Amen.

Day 6| PHILIPPIANS 2:12-16

Focus Verse: Philippians 2: 14-15 "Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world."

We are lights meant to shine in the world. This is who God created us to be. Paul reminds the Philippians that God is at work within and through them. The world can know of God by the way we illuminate injustice and work to overcome the darkness of evil and sin. The world can know of God as we reflect Christ's humility, love and desire to serve. As we move through this season of Advent, our mission becomes as clear as a cloudless night sky full of God's glory.

Let us shine! Let us shine! Let us shine! Inspiring God, you ignite us with passion and purpose. May we live as Christ lived. May we shed light on all that is wrong so we can clearly see how to work toward what is right. Illuminate us from within, Holy God, so we can shine like your stars in the world. Amen.

Day 7| PSALM 104:19

Focus Verse: Psalm 104:19 "You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting."

Spring, summer, fall, winter. Morning, afternoon, evening, night. Childhood, youth, adulthood, older adulthood. Our days are marked by seasons. Our lives are marked by natural stages of development. This division of time adds interest and beauty to our days and reminds us of the preciousness and passing of life. We are not God. We begin and end. The church's seasons also mark time as sacred and precious. As the beginning of the church year, Advent calls us back to our faith and prepares us for Christ's birth. As the winter moon fills the sky this December, mark this time by praising God for the gift of Jesus Christ, born into this precious and passing life.

We praise you, God, for the variety of each season, the beauty of each stage of life. We praise you, Holy One, for the Christ child, born into our human, fleshy, worldly reality to save us and set us free. Amen.



Day 8| GENESIS 32:22-32

Focus Verse: Genesis 32:24 "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak."

I used to suffer from nighttime panic attacks. As the sun set and I grew tired, I had less energy to ward off the doubts, anxiety and fear that plagued me during the day. My emotions would build so high and grip me so tight, I ended up crying out, Why, God? Why this? Why now? Why me? Our fears can quickly turn catastrophic at night. When we are tired, overwhelmed and lonely, everything can feel as if the world is coming to an end.

Jacob's nighttime wrestling match is an apt metaphor for our struggles in prayer with God. The setup for this biblical scene is dramatic. Esau is hunting down Jacob with 400 men, ready to kill his brother for stealing his birthright. Jacob enters this night with a very real fear. He has sent gifts ahead by messenger to soften Esau's anger. But those messengers haven't returned. Jacob is

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in the dark. He is alone. He's afraid he's not going to be able to talk or bribe his way out of this mess. Although the text says only that a mysterious man appears to wrestle with Jacob that night, Jacob is sure the man is God (v. 30). The mysterious man departs before the sun rises, before his identity can be clearly known and seen. "No one can see God and live," according to Exodus 33:20, but Jacob seems to see and wrestle with God, shadowed by the night.

Jacob prevails in this hours-long wrestling match, but his struggle with God is so physical, so violent, that his hip is knocked out of joint. He limps away from his experience wounded — and blessed. He is given a new name, Israel, meaning "the one who strives with God." That day, Jacob and Esau reconcile their relationship.

Every Advent that has followed the COVID-19 pandemic has distanced us from its losses. But every individual, of the more than 1 million people who have died from COVID-19 in this country, was loved by someone. They were grandparents, parents, siblings, sons or daughters. There were empty seats at the Christmas table, stockings no longer needing to be filled, gifts no longer needing to be given. The struggle with so much loss can still feel like darkness, as we cry, Why, God? Why this? We'll never know the full extent of the damage the pandemic wrought. Yet here in Advent, we commit ourselves to continue the struggle.

Jacob's story bears witness to the ways God is present with us in the darkness of struggle and late-night panic attacks. Advent returns us to this expectation, reminding us of God's promise to be with us in the flesh, even in our anger, doubt and fear. Our God is not distant and aloof. Our God does not simply placate our anxiety. Our God accompanies us. And sometimes this looks like wrestling with us through the night and then releasing us into a new day.

Loving God, thank you for being with us, for struggling with us, for never leaving us alone. Amen.

Day 9| PSALM 30:4-5

Focus Verse: Psalm 30:5 "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

Weeping happens at night. A rising tide of emotion, escalating problems right when we have limited energy for reason and rationalizations — all thesethings can lead to evening meltdowns. I've often turned to this passage when I find myself weeping at night, and I have quoted it to my children when worry or fear seizes them at bedtime. It's a comforting reminder that there are seasons and stages to our grief. Weeping may linger for the night, but it's not our constant state. Nighttime breaks into a new day. Weeping breaks into joy. In these Advent nights, as we weep with grief, let us look with hope toward a new morning of joy.

Holy God, linger with us when the night leads us to weep. Turn us to the hope of your promised Son and your kingdom come and the joy we can find in this new day. Amen.

Day 10| ACTS 5:17-21

Focus Verse: Acts 5:19-20 "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, 'Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.'"

In Acts of the Apostles, we read how imprisoned apostles were freed at night. As the apostles preached and healed the sick, the Sadducees had grown angry. They had the authority to direct the Temple's happenings. How dare these apostles tread on their turf? The high priest ordered the apostles' arrest, thinking that would be the end of them. But an angel of the Lord visited during the night, setting them free to teach again in the Temple.

This Advent, contemplate who or what imprisons you. Who has arrested, paused or delayed your spiritual growth and development? What has locked you into addiction, despair, fear or temptation? What angels has God sent your way to break you out of prison?

Savior God, you appear when we are imprisoned. You provide wisdom, resources and conviction to find our way free. This Advent, help us recognize your offerings of help and hope. Lead us to the liberation we need to grow in faith and service. Amen.

Day 11| ACTS 18:9-11

Focus Verse: Acts 18:9-10 "One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will

lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.'"

Paul had been teaching in the synagogues of Corinth, convincing both Jews and Gentiles that Jesus was the Messiah. But some did not receive his message well. They opposed and reviled Paul, forcing him to leave. God encouraged Paul in a nighttime vision: Don't be afraid. Don't stop preaching and teaching. I am with you and will protect you.

God often chooses nighttime to speak or reveal visions. Perhaps God knows that is a time when we are quieter, more still, more able to hear and discern without the day's distractions. Have you ever experienced God speaking to you? What time of day was it? How can we position ourselves this Advent to hear and receive God's encouragement?

God of grace, help us set time this Advent to listen for your voice and receive your visions. Encourage us to be still and undistracted. Encourage us to spend some time tonight focusing on you. Amen.

Day 12| JOHN 3:1-10

Focus Verse: John 3:1-2 "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night."

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus at night.

Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus comes from God and that he can learn something from Jesus. But as a Pharisee, Nicodemus is supposed to be the teacher, not the student. The nighttime provides Nicodemus with the cover he needs to approach Jesus and ask his questions. This Advent, consider what questions you might ask of God when no one else is around to hear you. What would you like to know? What don't you understand? Position yourself humbly as a student before the Teacher. Use God's gift of night as your cover.

God of wisdom, there are many things we do not understand. Yet we let our questions go — embarrassed to ask, embarrassed to reveal how much we don't know. Be with us in this humbling moment, O God. Under the cover of this Advent night, we seek you and your wisdom honestly and faithfully. Amen.

Day 13| LUKE 2:8-14

Focus Verse: Luke 2:8 "Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."

The shepherds heard the Good News of Jesus' birth at night. They were terrified when the angel of the Lord first appeared, when the darkness of night shone with the glory of the Lord. These herdsmen never expected a messenger of God to privilege them with time and attention. They weren't high-class. They weren't respectable. They lived with and tended sheep. They worked the night shift. This Advent, consider who in your community might be most surprised by a nighttime herald of Good News. How might you or your church shine the light of Christ into their lives?

God of glory, as we prepare for the birth of Christ, help us discern who most needs to receive this Good News. Empower and encourage us, God, to surprise the shepherds with our time and attention. May we bear witness to your glory and your love. Amen.

Day 14| MATTHEW 2:13-15

Focus Verse: Matthew 2:14 "Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod."

When the angel appears in Joseph's dream, Jesus is a newborn. New parents are already filled with anxiety about their baby's health and safety. They carry out the first diapering, first feeding, first bath and more in fear of breaking this tiny, new, fragile, human. Now Joseph and Mary must protect Jesus from Herod — on top of all their other fears. The night serves as a welcome cover for their flight to Egypt. This Advent, contemplate the worldly dangers haunting us by day. As the sun sets into darkness, contemplate the ways Christ's coming offers comfort and protection.

Faithful God, before you we are all tiny, fragile, fearful humans. As we prepare spiritually to welcome Christ this Christmas, we are mindful of the ways you care for and cover us. May the dark nights of Advent remind us of how you protected Mary, Joseph and Jesus in their flight, and of how you protect us. Amen.

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Day 15| EXODUS 20:8-11

Focus Verse: Exodus 20:11 "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it."

I am not a night owl. When the sun disappears below the horizon, my body instinctively wants to slow down and stop. I've only pulled a couple all-nighters in my life. One time was with friends in our last days of high school. We spread sleeping bags in my family's backyard, gorging on junk food and watching the sunrise. Another time was during a semester overseas in Spain. Staying up all night was par for the course in Madrid, where nightclub lovers party until 6 a.m., go straight to work and later take a long afternoon siesta. The friends I studied with convinced me to stay up with them on our last night together. I'll never forget the fun we had . . . nor how awful I felt boarding my plane home the next morning.

Before electricity, the setting sun forced everyone to stop the day's activities. Nighttime is God's daily reminder: We are not meant for nonstop work. Lack of adequate rest short-circuits our body's healthy functioning, increases stress, impairs our thinking and disrupts our hormonal balance, which can lead to increased appetite and weight gain. We're learning more about the importance of a good night's sleep from science. But God made rest an imperative from the beginning. The third commandment of the Decalogue is the longest, indicating its importance. We honor God with our rest. Failing to rest, or denying our need, is one way we "play God." After six days of labor, even God took a break.

Remembering the Sabbath and God's commandment to rest from our labor is a sacred and faithful act. Rest is a call to humility. Time continues when we stop: The sun sets, the moon rises, the night breaks into a new day with or without us. This daily rhythm reminds us of our equal status before God. Whether you are a landowner or a land worker, you require rest. The Sabbath commandment is for servants and masters alike to follow.

Jewish families welcome Shabbat on Friday nights by gathering around the table for a long, slow candlelit dinner. Family and friends enjoy quiet conversation, sing songs and recite prayers. Special food is saved to enjoy during this meal. Jews who struggle financially will deprive themselves all week in order to enjoy a little wine and delicious food on Shabbat.

Now, during Advent, practicing devotions prepares us to rest in God's presence. So can small evening rituals. We sleep better if we take time to wind down, turn away from our digital screens, drink a warm glass of milk, meditate. Denying our bodies the rest they need denies the natural rhythms of God's creation. Take the time to honor Advent rituals (lighting candles in prayer, singing hymns of hope and expectation, decorating our homes and sanctuaries) to rest better with God as we wait for Christmas.

Eternal God, guide us to rest so we can live full of faith and hope for Christ's coming. Amen.

Day 16| 1 KINGS 19:4-8

Focus Verse: 1 Kings 19:5 "Then [Elijah] lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.'"

Elijah is on the run, fleeing Jezebel, who wants to kill him for killing Baal's prophets. But after a day's journey, Elijah is mentally and physically spent. He collapses under the only tree he can find and cries out to God, "It is enough." Now exhaustion is Elijah's greatest enemy. He wants to die. Blessedly, he falls asleep and wakes to an angel who gives him food and drink. Through these miracles of rest and replenishment, Elijah is able to carry on.

Sustaining God, thank you for being present to us when we've had enough, when we can't go on. As this Advent arrives, we've had enough of injustice, divisiveness and division. It is all we can do to keep ourselves from opting out of all the struggles. May this Advent season feed and nourish us spiritually as we rest in the promise of Christ's coming. Amen.

Day 17| PSALM 3:1-6

Focus Verse: Psalm 3:5 "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me."

The psalmist laments those who rise against him, the "ten thousands of people" surrounding him. Yet the psalmist doesn't succumb to pressure. He sleeps well because God serves as his shield. God answers his cries. God sustains the psalmist so he can get the rest he needs, even under stress.

Those who rise against us may be not enemies from without, but rather enemies from within. Doubts and insecurities circle our hearts and minds. Fear and anxiety wound our potential, hindering us from becoming who God created us to be. This Advent, meditate on the God who gives us rest, who understands our fully human and fallible nature, who risked being born into a world strewn with enemies without and within.

Holy God, despite our stress, help us to rest as the psalmist rests this Advent. Calm our anxiety. Steady and slow our breathing. Comfort us with your Advent promise to be God-with-us. Amen.

Day 18| PSALM 23

Focus Verse: Psalm 23:1-2 "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters."

Psalm 23 is often read at graveside committals. Death is our ultimate rest. But this passage offers comfort for the living too. The shepherd guides his sheep and ensures they rest well in green pastures beside still waters. Enemies may be at our tables, but we rest in the assurance that God is present to protect us. Here in Advent, as we await the birth of the Christ child who will grow into our Good Shepherd, we anticipate the comfort, guidance and rest our Savior will provide.

Good Shepherd, save us from the darkest valleys. Save us from evil. Save us from paths that do not lead to righteousness. With hopeful anticipation we await the birth of Christ. We await the miracle of a God incarnate, a God who loves us enough to provide us with goodness and mercy and the blessed rest that comes from being in your company. Amen.

Day 19| PSALM 121

Focus Verse: Psalm 121:3-4 "He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

This psalm of ascent is sung by pilgrims making their way to worship. They prepare their hearts by singing praise to a God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, a God who does not rest so that we can do so.

As a child, and even sometimes as an adult, I've found it hard to fall asleep alone in the house. My imagination turns shadows into creepy monsters, and floorboard creaks become unwelcome footsteps. Alone at night, I conjure the worst of my own fears. Psalm 121 offers exactly the help and hope I need: a God who stays awake so I can sleep, a guardian of both day and night.

O God, our guardian, we can rest well knowing that you are keeping watch. As we prepare our hearts this Advent for Christ's coming, we lift our eyes to the night sky to praise the God of heaven and earth, the God who keeps watch on our behalf. Amen.

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Day 20| LUKE 21:37

Focus Verse: Luke 21:37 "Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called."

Chapter 21 of Luke's Gospel is full of foreboding lessons: Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed, the disciples will be persecuted, the signs of the second coming will be terrifying and earthshaking. After all this heavy teaching, Jesus slips away from the people to spend the night on the Mount of Olives. From Luke's account, we don't know whether Jesus spends this night praying or sleeping or just sitting in the darkness alone. But we see a clear separation between the work he does during the day and the renewal and replenishment he seeks at night.

Holy God, you gave us Jesus as a model of what our lives can and should be like. Help us to follow him in our life's work and in our need for rest. Help us separate our days and our nights so we can be renewed to serve you to the best of our ability. Amen.

Day 21| JOHN 9:1-5

Focus Verse: John 9:4-5 "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Stories of Jesus healing the blind appear in all four Gospels. This healing ministry is a significant portion of his daytime work. But this work, like all occupations in Jesus' day, stops at night. Certainly, the Son of God could heal at night too. The Light of the World doesn't need the advantages of modern electricity to work in darkness. Yet Jesus honors this natural boundary. He stops when others stop.

What work do we need to stop in Advent so we can prepare to receive Christ this Christmas? What do we need to stop doing, to give a rest, so we can be spiritually ready to receive our Savior?

God of the sun and the moon, help us order our days around your natural boundaries. Help us stop our work when it is time so that we can renew ourselves and ready ourselves for Christ this Advent. Amen.



Day 22| MATTHEW 25:1-13

Focus Verse: Matthew 25:5-6 "As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'"

We don't have to honor Advent. The Advent police will not come after us if we don't wait until December 25 to hold our Christmas parties, give and receive presents or sing our favorite carols. Our consumeristic culture supports an early start, with Christmas arriving on store shelves before Thanksgiving. Waiting loses worth in an age of instant gratification. But even as the night reminds us of our need for rest, some must keep watch: emergency services, hospital staff, chaplains, firefighters, police officers. Not everything or everyone can stop when the sun goes down. Someone must wait for those who need help during the night.

For those of us who don't work an on-call job, the watchfulness of Advent can feel like too much to ask. The bridegroom in Matthew's parable is delayed. We

all get drowsy. Why can't we just check out and call it a night? Do we need Advent calendars and ominous hymns in minor keys? Wouldn't a good night's sleep serve us better than staying up late to welcome the bridegroom, who might not even show up? Who knows what plans he's made?

But giving up on the bridegroom also means giving up on the promise and hope of our faith. Matthew's parable of the maidens and their lamps reminds us of the wisdom earned during the night watch. When we anticipate and celebrate what is to come by preparing ourselves with the spiritual supplies to wait for the bridegroom, we can more clearly see what is not yet here. If we indulge ourselves with early gratification, we will not know what it is like to long for a new reality.

Do you need a little prod?
Do you need a little darkness to get you going?

Mary Oliver wrote these words in her poem "The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac" after surviving a cancer diagnosis (Blue Horses, 2014). Oliver could be described as the patron saint of watchfulness who urges us to record and remember every detail of life. The darker episodes of our days – cancer scares, pandemics, racial injustices, ugly divisiveness and political power grabs – reveal truths we cannot and should not ignore. The bridegroom has not yet arrived, and we are left wanting. We are hungry for health and healing, for justice, for goodness, for truth and beauty.

We lean into life, expectant and waiting, straining our ears for the midnight shout: "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." If we do not pay close attention, if we do not let the darkness prod us to keep our oil stocked and our lamps trimmed, we will miss this moment. We will overlook this celebration of how all-that-is turns into all-that-should-be. Advent positions us to receive this Good News. While this season calls us to rest, it also calls us to anticipation. It encourages us to take our turn on the night watch, praying fervently, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

Come, Lord Jesus. Forgive us. Heal us. Break into our darkness with the light of your love and justice. Amen.

Day 23| 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Focus Verse: 1 Thessalonians 5:2 "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."

Should we be scared when Paul uses the thief as a metaphor for the day of the Lord? Fear motivates us to prepare for burglary or break-ins. But Paul's words urge the Thessalonians to stay awake and sober so that their faith, love and hope won't be stolen by spiritual apathy or sleep-inducing comforts. We must be alert so we can honestly assess our present reality in the light of God's kingdom to come. This Advent, let us spiritually prepare for Christ's coming like we would prepare for the night thief. Let us be awake to the ways Christ might break in.

Merciful God, let us not grow comfortable with a world that is not in tune with your love and justice. Let us not slip into an easy apathy that disregards your call. Let us be ever watchful this Advent for the ways you break into our current reality to reveal Christ's beloved community to come. Amen.

Day 24| LUKE 6:12-16

Focus Verse: Luke 6:12 "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God."

When it comes time for Jesus to choose 12 disciples, he steps away from his ministry, finds a quiet place on a mountain and spends the night in prayer. In this way, Jesus models an attentiveness and intentionality about the work of discerning God's will and making faithful decisions. Our days are full of busy distractions. Sometimes the only way we can hear God's still small voice is to spend the night in prayer. What decisions do you need to make this Advent? What do you need to attend to that your busy day keeps you from? Where would God's Spirit lead you if you set aside time tonight for prayer and discernment?

Keep us vigilant, Holy God, for the ways you are present to us, helping us discern and decide the faithful path. Open us to the wisdom we can glean from you when we stay awake, watch and pray. Amen.

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Day 25| MARK 14:32-42

Focus Verse: Mark 14:37-38 "He came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'"

This is a painful passage to read. Jesus rarely, if ever, asks for help, shows vulnerability or reflects his human need. But here he does. And the disciples fail him. All he asks is that they stay awake with him in the dark hours before his arrest. He doesn't want to be alone. But sleep is the enemy of their faithfulness.

Christmas is days away now. Jesus will be born small, fragile and vulnerable. Through these final days of Advent, let us ask ourselves, "What does Jesus need from us? From me? What can we do tonight to prepare to faithfully respond when Jesus calls?"

Merciful God, save us from ourselves and the weakness of our flesh. Help us stay awake and alert in these final days of Advent so we can be ready to attend to Christ upon his birth. Amen.

Day 26| LUKE 21:25-36

Focus Verse: Luke 21:25 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves."

The sun, moon and stars give us signs of the coming of the Son of Man. We should not fear these apocalyptic visions, because Jesus brings the gift of redemption. God saves the world through Jesus. God saves us through Jesus. And we need divine intervention. Our problems are overwhelming and complex. Our planet suffers from our abuse and neglect. Whole populations are impoverished, while a few live in luxury. Christ is coming to subvert these narratives of abuse, misuse, greed and neglect to free us to live as God's beloved community. This Advent, we stand ready, our eyes turned to the night sky for signs of this coming Savior.

Come, Savior Jesus, come. We await you with joyful anticipation of the redemption and salvation you offer us. We welcome the signs of your arrival in the night sky and look forward, with hope, to your intervention in our lives and our world. Amen.

Day 27| ISAIAH 9:2-7

Focus Verse: Isaiah 9:2 "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

Note the verb tense in this text. The light has shined. You have multiplied, have increased, have broken the rod of the oppressor. These present perfect verbs show actions that began in the past and continued to the present. The prophets often share their visions of the future in this verb tense — implying their prophecies are as good as done. We cherish these words of hope on Christmas Eve when our night watch culminates in the birth of the Christ child, the Light of the World. We hold each other in the darkness and sing hymns of joy. This is what we have awaited, this is where our Advent devotional journey has led. Hope has risen.

God of the sun and moon and stars, God of the prophets and angels who announce your Good News of great joy, we thank you for this Advent journey and the hope we feel tonight. Amen.

Day 28| REVELATION 22:1-5

Focus Verse: Revelation 22:5 "And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

On Christmas day, our world holds the newly born Christ child. This is a beautiful moment in the church year to reflect on the culminating vision of Revelation: abundant life, clean flowing rivers, trees full of fruit, healing and wholeness for people and nations. In this redemptive vision of hope and the grandeur of God, there is no more night because God becomes the source of all light.

Through these Advent devotions, we have seen and observed God at work in the dark, marveled at the beauty of creation lit by moon and stars, and rested from the day's labor. We have moved through this season as watchful disciples, keeping vigil for the One who was promised to arrive like a thief in the night. Today, we give thanks for the fulfillment of this faithful journey, even as we continue to pray.

Come, Lord Jesus. Be our source of light by day and by night. Amen.

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