

How do we sing the LORD's song  
in a strange land?



## An Advent Devotional

Created by Tres Rios Presbytery and St. Paul Presbyterian Church in San Angelo, Texas

This has been a very rough year - maybe the roughest so far for many people. COVID, isolation, financial difficulties, mental health difficulties, racial unrest, police brutality, political unrest and conflict, the list goes on . . .

While this is new to us, this level of disruption is not new to the world. The people of Israel saw their land conquered, Temple destroyed, were forcibly deported and resettled in a new place. In Psalm 137, they ask, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

We seek to answer this question for us this year.  
What do the themes, scriptures, and traditions of Christmas say to us in this strange land we find ourselves in?

Do they have anything to say?  
We think they do and we invite you to come and see.

**Sunday, November 29, 2020**

HOPE

Luke 1:26-38

Rosanne Girton

“Hope in Change”

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord’s servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

-----

When the angel appeared before Mary and told her that she was highly favored, she was "greatly troubled". The angel had to tell her, "Do not be afraid."

Next, the angel told her that her world was about to turn upside down. She was to be an unwed mother, in a society where stoning was a distinct possibility. Even after Joseph stood by her, life would not be easy. She would make a multi-day cross-country trek, pregnant. She would bear her child in an unfamiliar place. Some time later, she would flee to Egypt - in haste, with a very young child. She would share her beloved, unusual child with the world. She would watch Him die.

Nonetheless, Mary's trust in God allowed her to say to the angel, "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Mary was strong. She trusted, through change. She had hope, through change. She was blessed to know that she was not alone. Because of Mary's faith, hope, and trust through hardship, OUR world changed.

We've had a rough year, and it's not over yet. But we too are blessed to know that we are not alone. To quote the Rev. Laura Frazey:

"We live in a new world because of this person who came to us. We live in a world where we're still afraid, but it doesn't have to take over our lives, because someone came for us. And not just someone, but God came for us, in this person we call Jesus, to change everything for us."

"If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." (Psalm 139:8-10).

### **Monday, November 30, 2020**

Hope

Luke 1:46-56

Tim Gray

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

This year has been a difficult one, from fires in Australia, the US and Arctic, to videos of God's children being shot and killed, to the necessity of mobile morgues due to so many of our neighbors dying from COVID-19. As we now head into Advent, I don't feel much like singing carols. But then I remember Mary's song.

Mary has no reason to sing. She is pregnant and engaged, sure to be the talk of the town, sure to be a liability and dishonor to her parents. Her home is occupied by oppressive and abusive foreign soldiers. In these uncertain times she responds to the life growing within her. She sings about what God has done and what God will do. She sings about a God who makes things right. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann notes:

“Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the good of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.”

-- Theology of Hope.

Mary's eyes are open, she sees the need for God's justice and righteousness in the world. Her joy comes from knowing that God has worked that justice and righteousness before, and God is working now in the coming birth of her child. Let us sing this Advent, with hearts broken, restless and grieving, knowing that God has worked in our lives before, and Christ's coming will bring that work again.

## **Tuesday, December 1, 2020**

Hope

Ecclesiastes 9:4

Bob & Betsy Herbst

“Anyone who is among the living has hope — even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!”

We are among the living; therefore, we have hope! God has a plan for all of our lives, but we often don't know or understand what that plan is. Sometimes we don't even know when we have positively influenced someone. Think of what we each can do and are already doing in this world of 2020 to give hope to others. Think about what is being done by St. Paul Presbyterian to give hope and help to those who don't have enough to eat. Think about those who are discouraged and feel helpless. What can we do to encourage them? Does even a smile and a pleasant greeting help someone feel better? How about the cards and letters sent to each other? What lesson is God teaching us during this time of pandemic? Are we willing to learn the lesson? I am so much better off than if I was living during the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, the Plague or during any of the wars. I have the internet, TV, downloadable books and music from the library. Isn't Zoom wonderful! We can sit in our homes and participate in Sunday worship without fear

of giving or contracting the corona virus. That might not be the case if we actually attended church. We will feel empty and lonely if we try to be happy apart from God. Our hope is in God. We are not separated from God even during this Pandemic!

### **Wednesday, December 2, 2020**

Hope

Lamentations 3:19-24

Ann Hurt

“ The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! / My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me./ But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: / the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end:/ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness./ “The Lord is my portion” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

Most of our lives we were going along as usual until Covid-19 hit. It was like being caught in a storm that we saw coming on the horizon but were unable to get out of its way.

When I was a child, we went to my granddad's cellar when storms raged. Now we are sheltering together in our homes. If we go out, we wear masks and social distance.

We are not unlike the writer of our scripture passage who is voicing his despair as he thinks over what has happened to Jerusalem after it was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people taken into captivity.

We cry out to God as we agonize over Covid-19, our losses of loved-ones, jobs, businesses, and our changed ways of life. This passage reminds us to remember our blessings and that we have hope in the Lord because no matter what happens God will always love us.

Even in this dark time, God's love and mercy for us is "new every morning." It is refreshing and reassuring to know God's faithfulness to us will go on forever.

As Christians living on the Easter side of the cross, it is important that our lives reflect God's love, mercy, and hope to others we meet. We must be living examples of hope through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let us continue to hope in the Lord. He is a God of faithfulness and abounding love. He is our Rock of Hope. Let us cling to him forever.

### **Thursday, December 3, 2020**

Hope

Isaiah 8:17

Gretchen Smith

“And I will wait upon the Lord that hideth his face from the house of Jacob; I will hope in him.”

In this time of Advent, the world holds its breath and waits for the mingling of things of heaven and earth.

To be clear, this is not a game of cosmic hide-and-seek. God is not ashamed. He's not avoiding folks. The prophet Isaiah is waiting on a promise, a hope waited upon for generations upon generations, a God not-yet-revealed. It's worse than being a kid waiting for Christmas. It's an entire people holding its breath, not knowing how long the wait will be and not knowing exactly what it is they are waiting for.

While this should seem easy and obvious for us, who have always known how Act II would unfold, we still find ourselves waiting, don't we?

We wait on test results. We wait to hear a call back on a job. We wait for things to get better. Sometimes we don't even know what we are waiting for—we just know that, whatever it is, this ain't it.

We get discouraged, frustrated, feel stuck. We get tired of waiting and look for a shortcut or fall into despair.

But what does God call us to do in these waiting spaces?

### **Friday, December 4, 2020**

Hope

Proverbs 13:12

Nancy Treadwell

“Puzzling Over Proverbs 13:12”

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.”

Reading Chapter 13 of Proverbs may cause a movie buff to think of the Sphinx in *Mystery Men*, the character who specializes in sayings such as "He who questions training only trains himself at asking questions." While the Sphinx's bon mots add to the comedy, using reversals is an ancient literary, teaching device.

In the pandemonium of the pandemic, people are experiencing fatigue and despair because they grieve for what was and is: their hope is deferred, or postponed. If one reverses the proverb, however, life takes a brighter turn: Sickness deferred makes the heart hope.

We are not without hope in today's grim scenario. God has not abandoned us but given us tools to combat this scourge. Masks, soap, and distance help protect us; we live in a technological age that allows us to connect almost instantly with family and friends; two vaccines show incredible promise for combating the virus. All of these “trees of life” allow us to have our present desires in part as we may experience them fully in the future. Faithful Israelites did not lose hope in the face of many self-inflicted disasters; we must not either. Paul himself said “we know in part” (1

Cor. 13:9) as the Israelites knew God in part for centuries until He chose to reveal Himself more fully in Jesus.

Many persons hope and work for things that twist their hearts and wizen their souls; we can choose to hope and work for things that expand our hearts and enrich our souls. God promised the faithful of Israel that they would not be disappointed; neither shall we.

Nancy Treadwell

### **Saturday, December 5, 2020**

Hope

Matthew 12:21

Mike Burnett

“In his name the nations will put their hope.”

I find that some days, all we have to cling to is hope. Hope for something better. Hope for tomorrow. A new hope (a la “help me Obi Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope.” 2020 has been something of a year like none of us have experienced before. At every turn, at every corner, new trials and tribulations have been thrown at us. And at times, it wears us down. When we think we’ve hit the bottom, something else hits us and we sink lower.

And yet, there is the one who is always there with us...Jesus. He is our “Obi Wan Kenobi”...our only hope. In Matthew 12:21, the word for nations can also be swapped with Gentiles...meaning non-Israel...people like you and me. We find our hope in Christ. He gives us the strength to carry on...to press onward. Look for Him and find the hope you need.

There is a great Third Day song that gets right to the point. I find that in my deepest, darkest times, singing to God, praising His name...that helps me find the hope that is promised to us.

To You, O Lord, I lift my soul  
In You, O God, I place my trust  
Do not let me be put to shame  
Nor let my enemies triumph over me  
My hope is You  
Show me Your ways  
Guide me in truth  
In all my days  
My hope is You  
I am, O Lord, filled with Your love  
You are, O God, my salvation  
Guard my life and rescue me  
My broken spirit shouts  
My mended heart cries out

My hope is You  
Show me Your ways

Guide me in truth

In all my days

My hope is You

Songwriters: Bradley B. C. Avery / David Carr / Johnny Mac Powell / Mark D. Lee / Samuel Tai Anderson  
My Hope Is You Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.

**Sunday, December 6, 2020**

PEACE

Matthew 1:18-21

Gretchen Smith

What a strange calling it must be to be the adoptive father of the Word made flesh.

We don't know much about him, do we? We've got one heck of a birth story, he shows up again in a quick story a few years later, we know there were more children after the one the Angel told him to name Jesus, we know he's a man who worked with his hands. But Joseph doesn't make it to the crucifixion. He doesn't weep at the feet of the cross. He does not show up at the tomb in the early morning. This is the closest we ever come to seeing who the earthly father of God incarnate.

Faithful Joseph. The man of quiet resolve. The one who considered with grace and humility how to be a man of God in an unfortunate and shame-ridden situation.

Disgraced. Faced with this dilemma, he encountered in a fitful night the comfort and reassurance of the presence of God. This did nothing to stop the whispers and knowing nods of the people who knew this baby wasn't his, but the inner strength appear to have been sufficient to keep his eyes forward and his chin up.

Overlooked Joseph. He never gets lines in the Christmas pageant. They hardly even let him hold the baby. He leads the donkey. He's not even supposed to be the one there at this birth—that's the world of women—and yet here he is, a quiet and firm presence.

But aren't those precisely the people whose steady, peaceful faith carry us through the intensely hard and strange journey?

May we all have such peace on our strange journeys.

**Monday, December 7, 2020**

Peace

Matthew 1:22-25

Jim Miles

“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus."

There are many terms describing Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah had foretold the coming of Immanuel. The angel of the Lord would tell Joseph this in a dream.

Immanuel means "God with us." Isaiah had also described him as the "Prince of Peace"

The term peace is an "umbrella" term that has meant everything from the absence of war, to an inner tranquility, to an uneasy cessation of hostilities. As one of the oldest "boomers", I have lived through the Cold War, the Viet Nam era, integration, the flower children, pacifism, the peace sign, the passing of the peace, and all the regional and global conflicts along the way.

Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, wrote that "Peace will only come when all of us become the change we wish to see in this world."

As Christians, we must recognize that God is truly Immanuel, God with us. We need to see peacemaking as something we are engaging in actively, in every level of relationships. The world ages war. This Advent and Christmas season and beyond, let us intentionally wage peace.

## **Tuesday, December 8, 2020**

Peace

Numbers 6:22-26

Kathy and Lee Dunn

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them'."

This particular passage has long been a favorite of mine, so I was pleased when Tim assigned it to us. But in trying to see how it pertains to our times, I had to look a little closer at it. I discovered that "make his face to shine upon you" is a Hebrew idiom that means "to smile". And

the Hebrew word for peace isn't just that sense of serenity and calmness, when the knot in the pit of your stomach relaxes, but it also included the ideas of prosperity and happiness.

So, how does this speak to us in our strange new land? To understand that, it helped me to look at when God gave this blessing to Moses. God doesn't tell Moses to give this blessing to the people when they arrive at the promised land, but as they are about to head out in search of it. Once they got past the initial excitement of finally moving on, they must have had a lot of questions, and a lot of anxiety. Just exactly where are we going? How long is it going to take? There's an awful lot of us, so where are we going to get enough food? What about work? Will my job still exist in this new kind of economy that we'll have? What about my family and friends? Which of them will not survive to see this 'promised land'?

How many of these questions have you asked yourself these last 8 months?

So why would God give this blessing now? How many of us look at the chaos that our lives have become and really believe that God is smiling on us and blessing us with peace, prosperity and happiness? Yeah, right. And yet, I find this blessing of God a reassurance, and a reminder that there is hope, and that peace will come. It's a reminder that the road ahead is long and a little bit scary. Or maybe a lot scary. But God is still there, and that gives me at least a little more courage to keep on going.

### **Wednesday, December 9, 2020**

Peace

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Mary Noel Golder

Could the author of Ecclesiastes foresee this “season” of 2020? Where are the verses for “a time to wear a mask” or “a time to constantly wash hands” or “a time to stay home and go nuts”? We have seen the upheaval of our daily lives by a pandemic we had never even heard of a year ago. But upheaval is not unique to our time.

“A time to be born”---but without the celebrations which are limited due to fear of spreading COVID.

“A time to die” and “a time to weep”---today over 252,000 deaths in the United States alone, most without traditional services for the grieving families and friends.

“A time to refrain from embracing”—staying at least 6’ away from those outside your “pod” and with virtual church services the usual Sunday morning hugs are absent.

“A time to hate”—what divisiveness we have seen over the election and over the treatment of those of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

In this advent season, look to the rest of this scripture. How can we make this a time “to heal”, “to build up”, “to laugh”, “to mend” but most importantly, “to love” and “for peace”?

Dear Lord,

While conflict surrounds us, please teach us how we each, in our own way, can restore love and peace to our lives and to the lives of those around us. Thank you for the Peace and Love that you have promised us through your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Thursday, December 10, 2020**

Peace

Isaiah 9:2-7

Jacob Flint

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2). In December of 2019, I was sitting in my World Geography class at CFC and we were watching CNN 10, which is advertised as “news from around the world in 10 minutes.” Carl Azuz, the host of CNN 10, said, “in China, a new disease is spreading rapidly and it’s believed to be coming from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China. It is expected to reach the United States, but no major impact is expected.” Little did I, and the rest of the world know, our whole world would come to a standstill for 8.5 months. On March 26, 2020, Drum Corps International canceled the 2020 tour. On June 8, 2020, The World Bank reported that the global economy could shrink by 5.2% this year, which would represent the largest economic recession since World War 2. Whenever I read this passage, I immediately thought about the world. The people walking in darkness truly are like today’s population. 7 Billion people have walked through the darkness of COVID’s direct and indirect effects on our world. It’s a tough walk, especially if your glasses are fogged from your mask, but God is there to guide you through everything. Whether you’ve lost a loved one or lost your job, God will find a way to make it better. As a member of the Jewish community in San Angelo, I’ve learned that prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

**Friday, December 11, 2020**

Peace

Zechariah 8:11-12

Pam Combs

Unprecedented times. Worldwide pandemic. Lockdown orders. Unrest in the streets. A highly contentious presidential election. By worldly standards, it would seem there is little joy to be found as we head into this Advent season. How do we celebrate the birth of the baby in Bethlehem when the world around us seems so out of control? It is hard for us as believers to keep our attention on the infant in the manger, but that is precisely what we must do, and there are several things we can and should do to keep our hearts focused. The Lord told us that he came that we might have abundant life, and He is not at all surprised at the events of 2020.

First, we need to recognize the infinite power and love of the savior that we follow! Jesus is the Word made flesh. The Father spoke the universe into existence, and He saw fit to bring himself into the mire that is our world to ransom us, collectively yes, but also very specifically and intimately individually. When Moses asked God who he should tell the Egyptians sent him, the only fitting answer was, "I Am." When His children, the Israelites, stood in fear at the edge of the Red Sea, our God told them that he would fight for them; they need only be still. He walked the earth in flesh performing miracles, signs, and wonders. Finally, He conquered death and the grave so that against Him the Gates of Hell could not prevail. His death and resurrection split time itself, and the vast chasm between Creator and creation was bridged for all eternity. He is the Alpha and the Omega, our soon and coming King. Jesus promised us that in this world there would be trouble but exhorted us not to not be anxious because He has overcome the world. While the God of whom all this is true loves us intimately, we must never become familiar to the point that we take for granted who He is, what He has done, and what He stands ready to do today.

Second, we must not let the cares of the world cause us to lose sight of our identity in Christ; who He says we are. The world may recognize us by our profession, our looks, our family connections, or our financial status. The Lord tells us that we are His. We were created in His image and for His good pleasure; fearfully and wonderfully knitted together in our mother's womb. He tells us that we are more than conquerors, and that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. His Word promises that He will never leave us. We read in Jeremiah 29 that He has plans for us, and that when we seek Him with our entire hearts He will be found by us. We are described as a royal priesthood, and sons and daughters of the Most-High God. James 1:4 tells us to, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Even the debacle that 2020 has seemed to be is no surprise to our Lord, and He can and will bring good to His children in and through it.

Ephesians 3:20-21 promises us that He is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us.

So finally, and probably most importantly, finding joy in the midst of turmoil is reliant on us remaining connected to our Lord Jesus. The Lord gives us the keys to this inexplicable joy in John 15:4-11, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The joy that Jesus speaks of is impossible in our flesh, but abundantly possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, the helper that Jesus promised us would come. He longs for us to draw near and be filled to overflowing with the Living Water of His Holy Spirit. A life dripping with the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control is only possible when we abide vine to branch with Jesus. Then, and only then, we will be able to experience joy beyond this world and beyond our circumstances.

You see, the baby in Bethlehem was, and is, the most significant human ever born. He was fully God and He stepped down from Heaven, causing the shepherds and wisemen alike to join the angels in praise. And He grew to be the Savior of the world, one who desired more than anything to make His home in our hearts. Even, and perhaps especially, in 2020.

### **Saturday, December 12, 2020**

Peace

John 14:27

Brent Jenkins

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

At the time Jesus said this to disciples, he was preparing them for his death and leaving them. Jesus comforted them by promising them peace and thus charging them to pass the message of peace in their teaching to the world. Unlike earthly assurances of peace, that are often transient and short-lived, peace through Jesus is everlasting and durable and carries us through the difficulties of this life.

I answer a help line for people that are in crisis because COVID has made their world so small with no end in sight, in their view. They are doubtful and fearful for the future. 2020 has been

hard on so many of us and the separation from friends and family who are our means of support, seem to be vanishing. Christ said, “let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” That, even in this year, we find Christ and the peace and hope he promises in every zoom call we log onto instead of meeting in person, every hand for every box that is filled with food for families that are staying together but struggling, to every person who picks up a box of food for themselves but also for their neighbor, to every mask you see someone else wearing that says, ‘I don’t know you, but I care about you and I wear this for you’.

Jesus’ love and peace is seen this year maybe more than ever.

We won’t forget 2020 anytime soon. And this holiday season won’t fade into the other holidays that we spent like all the rest. We will remember this Christmas was the one we showed our town, our state, our country and the world just how much we cared. And by doing so, we are assured that the peace of the Lord knows no disaster and no pandemic but is indestructible and everlasting.

### **Sunday, December 13, 2020**

JOY

Mark 1:1-8

Norm Stroh

Surprise! For whatever reason, the writer of Mark chose to skip the first twenty-seven years of Jesus’ life! The focus here is on the **adult** Jesus and his ministry, those last three years . . . included, however, is what precedes his ministry, that is the joyful, expectant John the Baptist, sharing the message that the Savior of Mankind is soon to appear - and “y’all” better get ready: confess your sins, be baptized, and enjoy God’s blessings. John sees his role as an announcer, a proclaimer, a herald. So, in the immediate future, Jesus shows up at the River Jordan and John sees his ministry validated. Jesus’ baptism that follows in chapter 1 is the springboard into his role as a proclaimer, too, as well as a preacher, a teacher, and a healer. Both men were comfortable with whom they were and what purposes they aimed to fill. Perhaps I should add that John’s call reminds of Billy Graham’s call at those hugely attended rallies in the 1950’s, which always included his favorite hymn and a “come forward” call. It was all very stagey and emotional. Actually Jesus’ approach to John’s call seems to have been rather subtle. Suddenly, it was his turn and he wanted his baptism to be a **turning point**, the point when he committed to “the ministry” and centered his life on that vocation. Frankly, I think America is answering a call to turn from a self-serving approach to life to one of service, as often voting conscience - if they have one - if not. I see young people wearing masks whether they are inconvenienced or not. I see young people leading the way again toward sensible gun control, toward less exploitation of natural resources, toward more compassionate treatment of immigrants, toward more humane measures to protect minorities and children. There is a reason for hope. And I am not as fearful as I was.

## **Monday, December 14, 2020**

Joy

James 1:2-4

Tim Davenport-Herbst

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.”

In Star Wars: The Phantom Menace, Yoda warns against the trauma Anakin Skywalker has experienced and how it impacted him. It will lead him to the dark side of the Force and to become Darth Vader. “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” We’ve all seen something like this happen to people.

St. James says something different, though. He encourages a change of attitude. Instead of reacting to troubles with fear. James says to count it all joy. This seems foolish - who counts their troubles as joy?

But James wants us to see through the immediate moment and into a longer view. Troubles can become the crucible wherein a better character is forged.

It can help faith become genuine and stronger because testing faith leads to endurance and enduring long enough under difficulty brings full maturity.

This doesn’t mean troubles aren’t real or painful, or that you shouldn’t try to escape them - Jesus told us to pray that we would be saved from the times of temptation.

But we do have a choice in our attitude, to see the difficulties around us as an opportunity to grow or be destroyed. Sometimes the growing happens in ourselves. Sometimes it happens when we reach out for help.

## **Tuesday, December 15, 2020**

Joy

Hebrews 12:1-3

Theresa Wright

While I am not a “runner” I do enjoy taking long walks in the evening. That is when I can find a little quiet time to just listen to God. This year has been difficult for everyone. I find myself always in some kind of “race”. And some days I never seem to be able to even get started. But when I allow myself to let go of the things that “tangle” me, I can look more closely and see the joy that is around me. My first grandchild was born in March right about the time everything shut down. I was crushed because I could not be there to help as I had planned. But what I did

see was how my son stepped up to take wonderful care of his new family! That fills a mother's heart with JOY! I find so much comfort in this verse "surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses". I can just imagine all the sweet souls who have gone before me, those that shaped the person I am. So I continue my "race" – to be a good grammy, mom, daughter, sister, teacher, care giver, friend...the list goes on! But my hope is that during this season everyone will be encouraged to "finish the race set before us". However long it takes may we continue to focus on Jesus and find a little JOY along the way.

### **Wednesday, December 16, 2020**

Joy

Philippians 2:2-5

Cynthia Davenport-Herbst

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care -- then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.

This year has been painful for all of us. Maybe you got sick and your body hurt all over this year. Maybe your mom, your brother or your good friend got sick and they didn't get better. Maybe you had to say goodbye, and now you ache with grief.

Maybe you hated staying home. You went stir-crazy looking at the same four walls. Maybe you were afraid to leave home and go to work. Maybe you get yelled at for wearing a mask, or you took the mask off and tried to forget what can happen if someone coughs in your face. Maybe the fear made your heart hurt.

Many, many people became desperately depressed because there was no one to talk to, or the people they wanted to hug were so, so far away. Many people were anxious. Bills got a lot harder to pay, having kids in school was complicated, and you can't even go to the park or Target for a change of scenery. Many people became anxious because none of us knew what was going to happen next. We know that God rules over the future, but we don't know how it's going to go.

Maybe your surgery was put off and your pain is terrible. Maybe you're drinking more or smoking more or eating more and you are angry at yourself about it, and that makes it all hurt even worse.

Pain has a way of making people get caught up in themselves. Pain that goes on for weeks and weeks makes a person selfish and unhappy. It's nobody's fault. That's just what humans do when they hurt. Pain makes you tired because thinking about how much you hurt all the time is exhausting, but you can't stop thinking about how much you hurt.

In the reading up above, one of the verses says, “Put yourself aside and help others get ahead...Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves as Christ Jesus thought of himself.”

Be careful. This verse does NOT say to help other people until you get angry at them for being so needy. That’s hatred and it will make you even angrier and you will hurt more and then you yell at someone you shouldn’t yell at. Don’t do that. Angry help isn’t help. Rest and pray until the angry tension in your chest eases up and you have some peace. After that, your help will be helpful.

When you are ready to stop thinking about how much you hurt, and when you have some peace in your heart – that’s when you should go help someone else. That’s when you are closest to thinking about yourself like Jesus thought of himself.

#### **Thursday, December 17, 2020**

Joy

Galatians 5:22-24

Lee and Lisa Campbell

But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

There sits a neatly arranged basket with goodness carefully tucked in next to love and kindness. Patience gently placed with joy, faithfulness, and peace. Just next to that, snuggling in are joy, gentleness and self-control. No there is no law against it.

But in this strange land there is also another basket, where war and intolerance sit next to each other. Way on the other side sits annoyed, evil, and unrestraint. Then grouped in the far edges are sorrow, injustice, and hate.

With the ‘fruit of the spirit’ what basket to you want to carry?

Lisa and Lee Campbell

#### **Friday, December 18, 2020**

Joy

Romans 14:17

Kathleen Wylie

“For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”.

During this time, food was regularly offered to Roman gods and sacrifices made to pagan idols. Paul knew believers who had previously engaged in these sacrifices and were now repulsed at

the thought of eating that food, while other Christians understood that it was not eating certain foods that defiles a person, but the attitude of their heart.

I took this passage even deeper – relating it to today’s issues, it doesn’t matter whether you voted for Trump or Biden, but what is in your heart. Are we in touch with God’s priorities and his heart?

Prayer: Lord help us to remember why we came to be believers in the first place. Help us to find a quiet peaceful time during this holiday season. Help us to remember that salvation is a condition of our heart, and help our hearts to trust you. We pray for steadfast faith and a reminder that we are to live up to the image of Christ.

### **Saturday, December 19, 2020**

Joy

John 15:9-13

Randi Havlak

This scripture is from the Last Supper, a time that began in joy and calm after a very strange week for Jesus and the disciples, this doesn’t last long. Jesus does take time to reassure them that they are loved though, and that regardless of what comes next, there should be joy in that knowledge.

We are also living through a very strange time, and one where finding joy can be difficult. A loss in my life this year was the death of a hero of mine, Rep. John Lewis. A longtime member of the House of Representatives, youngest speaker at the March on Washington, and organizer/marcher across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Rep. Lewis’ life was driven by a deep sense of justice, that was coupled with joy. His optimism in the face of often brutal opposition to his work and the ability to find joy regardless is a deeply preached sermon to me. Joy is deep, it is not a simple emotion, it is a well that sustains us and moves us onward, that is what I see in Rep. Lewis’ joy filled legacy, and that is what Jesus is saying as well.

Joy can be hard to find in the dark, difficult to grasp when times are desperate, but it is joy that will see us through. Joy that we are loved by our Creator and joy that we are more than capable of sharing that love with others.

### **Sunday, December 20, 2020**

LOVE

John 1:14-18

Melody Smith

A notable phrase in our passage is “among us”. There is much among us in these difficult times; a rapidly spreading virus, both political and racial upheaval, and general trepidation for what will happen in the future. Before this year, we had expectations and aspirations, yet now we stand uncertain of what transpires next. It is easy to expect disaster when disaster has become a

constant in all our lives. And after calamity becomes the norm, it can be hard to see an end to it, to picture a world any different to constant struggle. Yet God, too, is among us. Beautiful things have come from this year, as we picked ourselves up from the rubble and made the best of the world around us. Humanity always shines brightest whenever darkness tries to consume it. It is God's love that we can look to for answers about the future. After all, it was God's love that made us, God's love that forgives us, and God's love that saves us. God's Plan was not deterred just because all of ours were. These are scary times, yet we can take comfort in the fact that God stands by our side, guiding us in his infinite wisdom through choppy waters. Hate resides in the world, yes, but so does God. Take comfort in the knowledge that he is still here, as he has always been, and always will be. We as his children can be soothed by the promise of his Plan, which was birthed in his great love for us. Even though the world is a large and terrifying place right now, know that God's love has always been among us. Go out into the world, and share this love.

### **Monday, December 21, 2020**

Love

John 1:6-10

Tim Davenport-Herbst

“John came as a witness to testify to the light . . . but himself was not the light. The true light was coming into the world . . . the world was made through him; yet the world did not know him.”  
There's a lot of confusion in the world. What is God saying? What is the meaning of my life? When one path becomes very difficult, does it mean that God is saying “go another way” or “try harder?”

If you ever feel like you've gotten mixed messages from God and the universe, fear not! You are not alone!

At the time of Jesus, some people confused the messenger with the message. And then they had the answer to every question walking among them but blew him off and didn't notice him and realize who he was, even though he made them.

If you feel confused this year, you are not alone.

The good news is that even though his people didn't recognize him, Jesus never ditched them. He stuck with them through thick and thin. He dined with them, taught them, cried with them, and comforted them. He gave everything for them, even when they didn't see it.

God's doing the same for you today. Whether or not you see it.

Because that's who God is: Love.

## **Tuesday, December 22, 2020**

Love

John 1:1-14

Peggy Tharp

This is John's Christmas story, a very unsentimental one with no angels, no virgins, no shepherds or kings. In fact, there are only two lines that deal with Jesus' birth: 1:1 (In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God.) and 1:14 when the Word "became flesh and dwelt among us." John spends less time on the event and more on the significance of Jesus' birth because, I think, he's less interested in the birth of a babe in Bethlehem and more in the birth of you and me as children of God.

Look again at the verses we often skip over in our hurry to get to that two verse Christmas story: He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Did you get that? Jesus came so that we, you and me, might become children of God, children not defined by our circumstances, our limitations, our hurts, our fears. Children whose destinies are not controlled by others. Children who, however the eyes of the world may see us, are of infinite worth in the eyes of God, children who deserve love and respect, children who will be used by God to care for the world He has created.

Jesus was born, lived, died and was raised again to remind us, even convince us that God loves us more than anything, and to empower us to share that love with the world.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to embrace our identity as your beloved children and give us the courage to reach out to others in love. Open our eyes and our hearts to the ways you would use us to change the world. In Jesus name, amen.

## **Wednesday, December 23, 2020**

Love

Luke 2:25-38

Hailey Malcolm

"For my eyes have seen your salvation," is my favorite part of this passage. We're told that Simeon has been promised he will see the Messiah before he dies. In his lifetime, he's seen a lot of stuff. Maybe he hasn't seen 2020, but we can be sure he's seen political tension, social movements, and probably his fair share of grief, too.

And yet, in the midst of the messiness of life, seeing Jesus as an infant gives him great hope. Notice that he is not overcome with blind optimism- he does not tell Mary that everything is going to work out with a neat little bow on it because Jesus is here. No, he acknowledges all the

struggles that hope can bring. He tells her how it will be unimaginably hard. But that ultimately that struggle brings salvation.

What have your eyes seen this year? Pandemic. Violence. Political unrest. Societal trauma and grief. A reckoning, even, some say. Maybe you've experienced illness or the death of a loved one on top of all of it. Hope can be hard to find, but the good news is that we don't have to ignore the difficulties in order to find it. We can be realistic, as Simeon is, that we still have many struggles ahead of us and that God is taking care of us through the presence of Christ. Amen.

### **Thursday, December 24, 2020**

Love

Luke 2:8-20

Matt Miles

June 9, 2003 was a Monday. I know that because my life was indelibly altered that day. My twins were born. I became a Daddy. Charis was born with a low birth weight and had some blood sugar issues so we were ensconced in the hospital a few extra days. That Friday, I traveled from Graham (where the twins and my wife were in the hospital) to Ballinger (where the presbytery was meeting). At the time, I was completing a brief four year sojourn in Palo Duro Presbytery where I was ordained and had responded to my first call. The twins were to be released on Saturday and I was on a mission. After the meeting of Tres Rios Presbytery, I was to return to the hospital in Graham, having detoured through Abilene in search of premie diapers!

I was coming home. I was raised by Tres Rios Presbytery. There were ministers and elders here who had influenced my life literally from my birth. My father was a minister member of this presbytery. My grandfather was an elder in the Pecos church. Ron Sotto was in El Dorado and then San Angelo. Allan Guthrie was in Sonora then San Angelo. Flynn Long was everywhere. Charlie Hollingsworth was a constant in our home. Shoot, my childhood was so long ago that Theresa Wright had not yet begun to work for the presbytery but her job was held by Glenda Harbert long before she went to seminary. Tres Rios is where I belong! That Friday, June 13, 2003, I was being examined by the presbytery as I was preparing to accept my second call to First Presbyterian Church in Big Spring. It made for a long day. I awoke on a cot in a hospital an hour from home, traveled to Ballinger to stand before the presbytery, found the correct sized diapers in Abilene, and made my way back to that cot in Graham that night.

It's okay, though. I have made a lifetime of driving. Even when I was in high school, I spent my life commuting from Fort Stockton to Fort Davis where I worked for Prude Ranch. John G. Prude was one of those elders in the Fort Davis church who influenced my young life in ways it would take me decades to realize. Elder Rob Dunagan from the Fort Stockton church hired me to drive his 18 wheeler back and forth across the state hauling Coca Cola while I paid my way through college. By the time the twins were born I had considerable experience driving personal vehicles, fire trucks, ambulances, big trucks and school busses. Driving is not an issue...

... Until I had babies. On Saturday morning early we were released from the hospital. We loaded those babies into the newly installed car seats and prepared for the one hour drive

home from the hospital back to Seymour where they would spend the first six weeks of their lives and I would close out my first call to ordained ministry. As it turned out, that meeting in Ballinger had gone very well and I was welcomed back home into Tres Rios Presbytery. I will never forget that one hour drive. I am confident I can drive any vehicle on the planet but that one hour in a Chevrolet Cavalier scared the daylights out of me. All at once, I was completely responsible for the lives of two utterly helpless human beings who were to rely on me for everything. Their protection was the only thing important to me and I was convinced that every other car on the road was out to get them! Those two are seniors in high school this year, by the way. They are thriving in life. They no longer let me change their diapers, and they navigate their own cars as they get around in the world.

I wonder if this is how Mary felt? She was a new mother in a world hostile to people like her, occupied by the Roman Empire. She was a mother out of wedlock which would have put her at odds with her own people. She and Joseph would soon learn that Herod was out to kill her baby and she would have to flee to Egypt until it was safe to return to her life and Joseph's carpentry business in Nazareth. What would she have thought of this bunch of men who smelled like sheep and wanted to hold her baby? God's child or not, he was still a completely human infant who would rely on his mother for everything from his nourishment to his cleanliness to his very protection. Christ's birth is about that kind of love which causes us to uproot life.

Advent is ultimately about the cross. Advent is literally about a God who loves us enough to reach beyond the confines of this cosmos in order to protect us from this scary thing we call life. Advent is the realization that there is nowhere we can go to escape the love of our parent, the God of all that is known and unknown. Advent is knowing we have a parent in God who's head is constantly on the swivel for our protection against the evils in this world. Advent does mean there are not things to fear in this world. Advent is knowing that those things we fear do not have the last word.

Today is Christmas Eve. May you slumber in the knowledge that the peace that passes all understanding falls upon you with the coming of Christ in this season.

### **Friday, December 25, 2020**

Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:1-8

Tim Davenport-Herbst

The first Christmas happened in Bethlehem a little more than two thousand years ago. Jesus came into the world in a place that used to be great. King David was from there. Not much had happened that was worth reporting in a thousand years after that. A prophet foretold great things for Bethlehem but that had been about 500 years.

Bethlehem is a couple miles from Jerusalem. It was not a sleepy suburb but a place that used to matter and now didn't. It wasn't filled with executives who commuted to work but rubes who didn't make much money or of an impression.

A lot of people have written about how Christianity was born in the perfect time to spread across the Roman Empire because of roads and merchant trade routes. But there had been merchant routes before and after.

In fact, Jesus was born into an empire that had just seen the death of democracy. Julius Caesar and his successors became tyrants that pushed aside the Senate and ran things by whim and preference, a cult of personality and personal privilege. There had been a form of democracy in Greece and Rome but it was killed decades earlier.

It was an occupied land of Palestine ruled by Herod the Great, who was great at killing people and building buildings but not much else.

Bethlehem was poor and obscure. It's best days were gone. It was ruled by a selfish man-boy who loved killing people in his way. The best days of Israel seemed to be behind them, let alone Rome.

And yet this is when and where God came into the world in a new way.

God took on flesh from a peasant woman who would have been nobody to the rest of the world.

God slept in a feed trough, not a golden bed in the palace.

No human heralds went ahead of him to announce his birth like they would for a prince.

His birth threatened the life of his earthly parents and was the direct cause of them becoming refugees.

It was not convenient, it was not pleasant - but God came into the world.

And as he was born in obscurity, an army of angels announced his birth to the stinkiest nobodies in the land (shepherds).

As he fled promised death, he lived in solidarity with every refugee.

As he slept in a manger, he identified with the poor and homeless.

This is where God enters the world most fully - at the margins, in people long overlooked and powerless, to set us right and pull the whole world into his arms.

Happy birthday, Jesus; may we notice you today among the poor and powerless of this world.