A night sky with the Milky Way galaxy and silhouettes of mountains. The Milky Way is a bright, pinkish-purple band of stars and dust that stretches across the sky from the bottom left to the top right. The sky is filled with many smaller, blue and white stars. The bottom of the image shows the dark, silhouetted outlines of mountains and hills.

Words for Waiting

Daily Devotions
for Advent & Christmas
2023

Words for Waiting

is provided by the UKirk Collegiate Ministries Association in partnership with the Presbyterian Mission Agency's Office of Christian Formation.



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Welcome to **Words for Waiting**, a series of daily devotions for the seasons of Advent and Christmas.

As we prepared for this devotional, I kept coming back to the phrase **Keep Awake**. These days we have access to a never-ending stream of news, notifications, and reminders of the brokenness of our world. It can be tempting to tune out – to shut down, disengage – from pure exhaustion or for the sake of self-preservation. Honoring those true experiences, and still hoping for a more life-giving way forward, what are the voices that should have our attention? How can we sift through the noise to figure out and focus on what's really important? Where might we find the energy to continue doing the work that needs to be done?

The reflections and prayers on these pages offer the chance to dig into those questions and more. This year's contributors represent 38 faith communities in 21 different states, including 25 college ministries serving students on 32 campuses.

As we all seek to wake up our hearts and minds to the meaning of this season, may you find inspiration in the words and images on these pages, and in these days to come.

In hope,
Rev. Allison Wehrung
Editor | Campus Minister, UKirk Ole Miss

Words for Waiting is also available as daily blog posts on ukirkadvent.org, and in the UKirk Daily app.

December 3

Read Mark 13:24-27

I never know what to do with apocalyptic texts during Advent, when Jesus gives us cosmic signs that seem to be pointing to the beginning of the end of the world. How is this good news? On this first Sunday of Advent when congregations light the candle of HOPE on the Advent wreath, where is the hope in this passage?

Maybe a different question is: where is hope when all signs point to things falling apart? Where is Jesus when the world around us is crumbling with suffering and despair?

The word advent means “coming” or “arrival,” and once I get past my initial reaction, what I realize is that it is into the cosmic crumbling, despair, and suffering that the Son of Man comes. When we see these signs of the beginning of the end, verse 29 invites us to realize that Christ is at the door of our hearts, our lives, and our world, coming to us amidst all the signs to the contrary.

What I love about the Advent season is that it is a time to remember not only that Jesus was born 2,000 years ago, but also to pay attention to Christ’s second arrival, in our lives and the life of the world now. Jesus doesn’t leave us to fend for ourselves during difficulty – he is near. That gives me hope!

Pray

Holy One, when it feels like our lives are falling apart, or that there is no hope for our world, may we know that that is precisely when you are often nearest to us. Help us to be awake to your Love and Presence surrounding us and giving us hope. Amen.

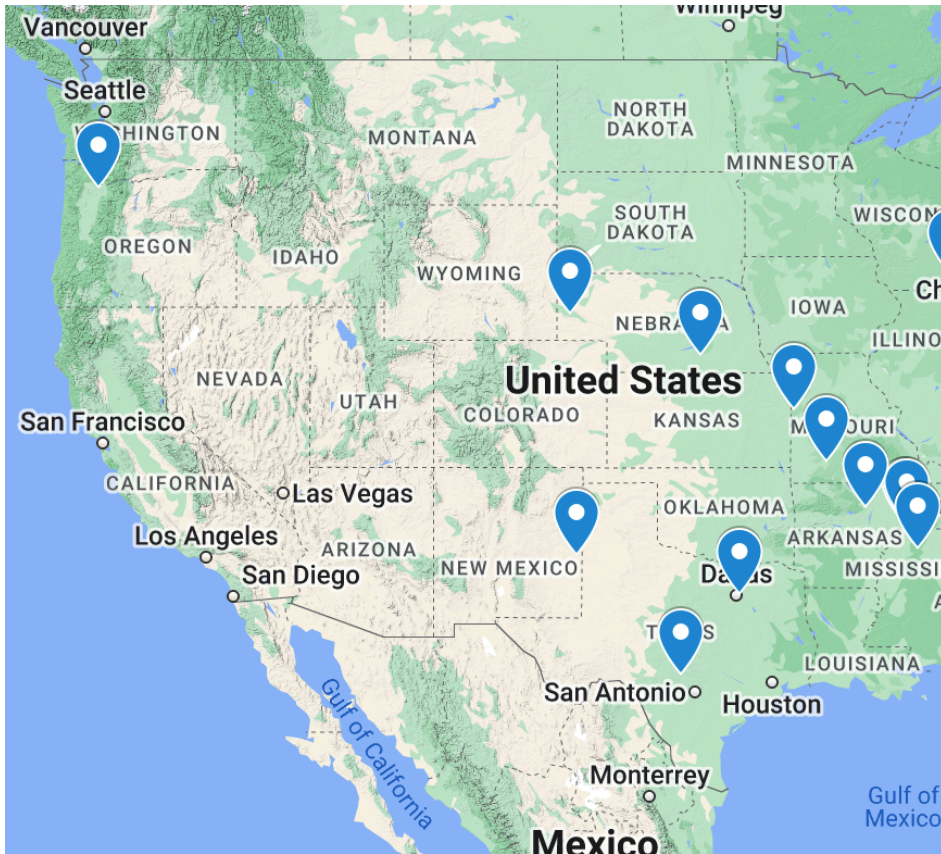
Rev. Gini Norris-Lane
Executive Director, UKirk Collegiate Ministries Association



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- UKirk SMU
- UKirk @ UMich
- UKirk Virginia Tech
- UKirk Wooster
- United Campus Ministry (Kalamazoo, MI)
- University of Pikeville

Ministries Represented

December 4



Read Micah 4:1-5.

Awaken Me

In these days all I see is war: pain, suffering, deepening darkness.

All I want to do is crawl back into bed.

Hide under the covers.

Yet your Word calls to me.

Bringing HOPE.

I step out in faith once more,
making my way to you.

In you I find the good news that

One day we will beat our swords into plowshares.

Spears into pruning hooks.

I dream of the day we study war no more.

Bringing PEACE.

I know that plans are unfolding,

that there are helpers and healers among us.

Doing the hard work of making the world a better place.

Bringing JOY.

Remind me to look for the signs of your promise this day.

Call to me once more to walk in your way —

Bringing LOVE.

Awaken me this day to the ways your kin-dom is near.

Pray

God of hope, on days when the world seems too dark, awaken us to your good work happening in our lives and world. May we be mindful of the ways your peace reigns among us this day.

Embolden us to share your love and joy with those we encounter. May we walk in your ways this day and always.

Amen.

- Arise Campus Ministry
- Carroll University
- Columbia Theological Seminary
- Ekklesia Campus Ministry
- ENMU Presbyterian Campus House
- FPC (Bay City, MI)
- FPC (Laurens, SC)
- FPC (Lexington, KY)
- FPC (New Haven, CT)
- FPC (Quincy, MA)
- FPC (Scottsbluff, NE)
- Hastings College
- JVC Northwest
- The Kirk of Kansas City
- Lafayette College
- Lyon College
- Marshall UKIRK
- Myers Park Presbyterian Church

Rev. Maggie Alsup
Chaplain, Lyon College

December 5

Notes

Read Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13.

The Psalmist writes, "let me hear what the Lord God says." God speaks in many ways, through many voices. According to Luke's Gospel, after Jesus's birth, it is the shepherds – a lowly profession in biblical times – who go forth, spreading the news of Christ's birth (2:17-18).

In August, I moved across the country to Portland, Oregon to begin a year of service with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest. Walking around Portland – widely known for a large population of people experiencing homelessness – it can be easy to try and ignore the people I pass on the side of the street, instead focusing on where I'm going or who I'm with. It can be easy to want to avoid these people, to give them as much space as possible, or to hurry past. What is much harder to remember when seeing people sitting by their tent on the side of the road, or standing near a highway with an "anything helps" sign, is that they're children of God, too, created in God's image.

The author of Genesis writes, "in the divine image God created [humanity]" (1:27), which includes people who are poor, food insecure, experiencing homelessness, or otherwise on the margins of society. Just like the shepherds, sometimes the people society has pushed to the side have an important message to share, and it is up to us whether we choose to listen or not.

Pray

God, help us hear your voice, wherever it may come from. Help us listen to what you have to say, no matter how you choose to say it. Help us take action when you speak, even when we don't want to. Amen.

Andrew Pinches

Jesuit Volunteer, Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest
Alum, UKirk at Michigan State

December 14

1. Brown, William P. *Obadiah Through Malachi*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

December 28

2. Adam, Adolphe. Christmas hymn; O holy night. Sudds, W. F., monographic, 1883. Notated Music. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sml883.19142/>.

Cover

Photo by Riyanthi Sianturi on Unsplash.

January 6

Read Matthew 2:1-12.

Epiphanies

The stars align
A path made clear
Love made manifest
So hope defeats fear

Liberation is coming
Freedom is here
God in our midst
Brings peace, love, and cheer

Awaken to God's glory
Your gifts will soon appear
When you share them freely
God's kingdom will be near

Pray

God of great awakenings, thank you for the ways that you guide us, whether it be through stars or signs, friends, or other forms of revelation. Help us to awaken to your glory within and around us. Help us to know, to name, and to live into our gifts, so that we might, in turn, help others do the same. Forgive us for the times that we shrink ourselves for fear of what you might ask of us, and empower us to show up fully and boldly in all the places where you call us. We pray in Jesus name, amen.

Ekklesia Campus Ministry
Missouri State University & Ozarks Technical College
Springfield, MO

December 6

Read Luke 21:34-38.

Our reading for today actually marks the end of Jesus' public ministry in Luke, and it is part of a larger apocalyptic discourse. In the preceding verses, Jesus describes earth-shattering events that will bring forth the promised kingdom of God. The imagery is disheartening, and would weigh heavily on those coming to Jesus for spiritual guidance.

Jesus is preparing his followers for his departure and the transitional period to follow. So, his encouragement to "be on guard" and "stay alert" intends to give some final guidance to those who came seeking his direction.

Today, however, I am more interested in what Jesus does than what he says. The text describes this indefinite time between this scene and Judas' betrayal during Passover. Jesus spent his last days working and teaching in the temple, but he still found time to rest.

You are likely reading today's devotional amid your finals. A semester's worth of work is coming to an end. With all the stress that entails, we can quickly become overwhelmed by papers, exams, and final projects. Even more, we often feel pulled to work to the point of exhaustion. Yet, our reading for today gives us an example of a Christ who worked diligently till the end, and found time for rest. May we seek to follow that example.

Pray

God, who gives us sight of what's to come, grant us the energy to work through our current stresses. Give us the strength to stay alert, but also help us find rest in your presence. Keep us attuned to the task at hand, but also give us hope for the future as we look forward with anticipation in this Advent season. Amen.

Rev. Chris Bailey
Campus Minister, Marshall UKIRK
Alum, Spartanburg UKIRK (PSA)

December 7

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10.

There's power in "the work of faith and the labor of love" about which Paul writes, but it's the words "steadfastness of hope" that are grabbing my attention. I've always considered myself a hopeful person, even amid inevitable tribulations. But, the cumulative effects of the pandemic and a mental health crisis worsened by it, with rampant gun violence and no appetite to address it, culture wars that stunt access to books and attack the personhood of anyone outside a traditional binary, the war in Ukraine and the recently reignited violence in the Middle East in which the most vulnerable are harmed most, have me feeling deflated. It's hard to remain hopeful when it feels like the world is held together by Scotch tape.

And then, I remember that injustice and violence have always been part of the fabric of humanity; peace has always been fragile. Otherwise, the world wouldn't have needed God as an infant who grew up to teach and heal and lead in ways that transformed it.

Don't forget, while the stories we know of Jesus' words and actions are out in the open, it was his steadfastness of hope below the surface that drove all of those loving actions that changed the world. Remembering that ineffable hope of Jesus, who surely saw more pain and suffering than I can imagine, has a poignant way of returning me back to my own hope and remembering, too, that hope is like candles on Christmas Eve — you light mine, I light another, and in that way, the whole place is ablaze.

Pray

God, help us be people of faith, laborers of love, and bearers of hope. Amen.

Rev. Kathleen Robertson King
Campus Minister, United Campus Ministry (Kalamazoo, MI)

January 5

Read Luke 6:27-31.

It is easy when reading this passage to focus on what is individually being asked of us as followers of Jesus. That we must love our enemies, despite that being life-shatteringly hard. That we must give unconditionally, and in turn not seem to care about our own basic needs. This self-sacrificing focus has been upheld as nobility, and often shaped a narrative that having basic human needs is a flaw. But, this is not what Jesus is sharing. He says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." The implication is not an individual plan of action, but a radical restructuring of community. We should all seek to do good to one another, we should all give one another clothing and food. We should all communally care for one another. This call is not a small one. It demands that we radically reshape our way of being, and it demands that of us all. Because only in totally reshaping our communities can we thrive as the body of Christ. When voices shout out that success is individual growth, we must instead recenter the voices that call us into this new way of being — the kin-dom of God.

Pray

God who is three-in-one, give us the strength to fight the shouts of individualism that draw us into isolation and apart from your creation. Replace them with the song of your kin-dom, a harmonious community that reflects your desire of dignity and joy for all. In the name of one who broke down barriers and reshaped worldviews, we pray. Amen.

Kate Trigger Duffert
Director of General Assembly Planning,
PC(USA) Office of the General Assembly

January 4

Read James 4:11-17.

The Epistle of James is a beautiful piece of literature from the ancient Near East. James borrows from the wisdom literature and prophetic traditions to exhort his audience to live in peace and charity within their community. James flows from one teaching to another, poetic images woven together.

The implication of James 4:11-12 is that this community experienced inner strife from within their ranks. All communities have some disagreements within them; that is natural, for people all have different lived experiences. However, when inner strife leads to dehumanization, then a community can no longer live their different experiences together.

In James 4:13-17, we see the author use their prophetic voice to chide merchants who are striving after vanities. These traders are accustomed to relying on their own skills, ingenuity, and craft to provide for themselves. It is easy to imagine them haughtily turning towards the impoverished members of the community, saying, "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps!" This condescension and judgement lead to inner strife between socio-economic class. Furthermore, this perspective forgets a fundamental truth: everything in life is a gift from God.

We are called to live in peace and charity within the body of Christ. This means that we must not estrange ourselves from our siblings through arrogance or self-conceit. Instead, we must continually acknowledge our radical dependence first on God, and reconcile ourselves to all who likewise live within God's providence.

Pray

Creator, deliver us from the time of trial. May we resist boasting and saying evil to one another. May we instead awaken to this reality: I need you to survive. We need you, God, to thrive.

John Golden
Campus Minister, UKirk ETSU

December 8

Read Jeremiah 1:4-10.

It is both a terrifying and wonderful thing to be known. For someone to see the capital-A-All of us. For another to peer at our insides – the things we cannot change or control. It is through this knowing that we are able to be loved. To pull back the curtain for a moment, soften the jaw, lay the armor down (it's rather heavy, isn't it?).

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," says God.

"I knew you," says God, before you were born, before you learned to hide, before you decided you were hard to love. I see you, All of you, and it is wonderful. I know you. I am with you. I love you.

We are so conditioned to compose our outsides, to constantly ask: who do they want me to be? It's a perpetual restlessness – I can change, I can change, I can change. Our God sees us as we are and calls us to rest – I love you, I love you, I love you.

To be seen is an act of faith. To be known is an act of grace. Stay there. Don't look away. Lean back, rest. Lay your head down. Hold both of your hands open. Let it in.

Pray

You see me, you know me, you love me. Amen.

Jessica Joshi
Student, UKirk Memphis

December 9

Read Mark 11:27-33.

The problem, as I see it, is one of a very small imagination.

I began volunteering at my children's elementary school and somehow got myself in charge of the costumes for the school play. The dragon had to head butt the hero, thus stabbing her in the gut, and the horn had to get stuck! The heroine was to lay on her back in such a way that the audience could see the horn sticking out and causing her injury. All my seminary training never taught me how to conquer a detachable-yet-reattachable dragon horn.

So, I did what all resourceful college chaplains do. I invited myself to the "shop hours" in the theater department. I explained my situation to our theater students. The next day, I had a horn with two invisible magnets that could affix itself to a dragon's headpiece or a heroine's belt. Two weeks later, the dragon stabbed the heroine, the heroine saved the dragon's life, the dragon's tears healed the heroine's wound, and everyone lived happily ever after.

My problem was a lack of imagination. The students had no such problem.

In this passage from Mark, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders could not imagine a God that is both mysterious and powerful. They could not imagine a Jesus who had the authority of heaven and the tenderness of the human touch. Jesus' authority requires our imaginations to be open to hope, faith... and maybe a few magnets.

Pray

Holy God, we cannot imagine all that you are. Make our imaginations large enough that we do not put false limitations on who you are, or your love for us. Amen.

Rev. Doodle Harris
Chaplain, Hastings College

January 3

Read Proverbs 1:20-33.

Years ago, while in seminary, the Rev. Dr. Michael Jenkins told our class that one cannot "be a Christian by one's self." I've never been much of a note-taker, but I wrote those words down and have carried them in my heart ever since. Whenever I find myself faltering or feeling discouraged, I do what Mr. Rogers advised: I look for the helpers.

In today's scripture from the book of Proverbs, faith formation is at the heart of the matter. When we try to do things by ourselves, when we don't rely on the wisdom of others, we risk facing grave consequences. Who are the people in your life you can turn to when you are struggling? What are small ways you can connect with those who help you to feel closer to God? What are ways you can reach out to others who need your support and encouragement?

May the year ahead be a pilgrimage to find others to join you on your journey of faith.

As we reach the final days of the Christmas season and look forward to what 2024 brings, let us be inspired by Woman Wisdom as we make intentions for our faith journey.

Pray

Holy Wisdom, help us to discover the knowledge you have set before us. Help us to notice those who reach out to us, seeking connection and friendship. Most of all, help us to seek out those who are wise in their faith. We believe that you empower others to be your hands and feet, your heart and your mind. Give us the courage to seek you out and to share your love with others. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Alexandra M. Hendrickson
College Chaplain and Director of Religious & Spiritual Life,
Lafayette College (Easton, PA)

January 2

Read Proverbs 1:1-7.

"For just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so, such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused."

(John Calvin, Institutes, I.xiv.1)

Reformed theologian John Calvin once wrote that reading Scripture is like putting on a pair of glasses. In a world obscured by fake news, disinformation, and partisan fearmongering, the Bible helps us discern what is true and trustworthy and worthy of full acceptance (1 Timothy 1:15). It clarifies and refines our vision, teaching us the story of our faith and enabling us to see God at work in the world around us. Though we are constantly bombarded with information, it helps us cut through the noise to determine what deserves our time and attention and focus. It invites us to reflect on what sustains our faith and brings us life and what absolutely drains us. Just as corrective lenses don't perfect our vision, the Bible doesn't give us an exhaustive picture of the divine, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's living breathing Word can allow us to see as in a mirror, dimly, the One we will eventually see face-to-face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Pray

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word, may the words we read in Scripture come alive for us. Through the power of your Spirit, may we find knowledge and insight to guide us as we seek to live with integrity and purpose and love. Amen.

Rev. Emily Rhodes Hunter
Campus Minister, UKirk Virginia Tech

December 10

Read Isaiah 40:1-11.



This Isaiah text is one that flows around me during Advent. Just seeing the citation brings the old hymn to mind, and I am sure the text really reads "Comfort, comfort ye my people!" When things are hard, as they're bound to be, when staying awake means always being a little heartbroken with the world it's comforting to have familiar words to twist around you like the waters of baptism.

Pray

God of peace, you gave us the words that soothe our souls. You also gave us a challenge to pay attention to the injustices in the world. Help us to be active agents of peace, and bring your love and justice to our communities. Amen.

Rev. Rachel Paige Mastin
Minister for Inter-Generational Faith Formation,
First Presbyterian Church (New Haven, CT)

December 11

Read Psalm 27.

As I read the ancient words of the psalmist, "whom shall I fear and of whom shall I be afraid," the news announced horrific terrorism in Israel on October 7, of daily bombings in Gaza, and a mass shooting in Maine.

Honestly, the fear is very real. War is raging around the world, our nation is intensely divided, less and less people are finding comfort in a church community, while politicians appreciate guns more than social safety nets. And then I read, "though an army encamp against me." Seems like the psalmist can relate. Yet I yearn, "how are we to find any solace or hope in these moments?" For the psalmist and for us, the answer is the character and nature of God. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; The Lord is the stronghold of my life...For he will hide me in his shelter and set me on a high rock." The Lord is the One who hears us when we cry out and the One who never leaves us or forsakes us. So then what shall we do when the violence and evils of the world rage and multiply? Seek after the Lord's house, behold the beauty of the Lord, offer up shouts of joy and make melodies to the Lord. Ultimately, we can take courage, and wait on the Lord, because God is God, and God is our salvation, the light of these dark times.

Pray

Oh great Light, our salvation and hope, be near all those who are grieving due to acts of violence and war. Please bring an end to armed conflict and usher in the peace of your Kingdom. Amen.

Rob Musick
Chaplain, University of Pikeville

January 1

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-13.

A Time for Everything



This piece is inspired by the changing seasons, literally and figuratively. We used a mix of craft materials as well as found natural objects to add to an Advent wreath. There are quadrants representing each season, spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

Pray

Gracious God, may we remember that there is a time and a season for everything. May we rest in the familiar but also find joy in the new faces. When there is anxiety may we find relief in the certainty of God's presence in all of it. God, may we find comfort in the changing seasons. Amen.

UKirk Wooster
The College of Wooster - OH

December 31

Read Isaiah 61:10-62:3.

As much as I love how houseplants brighten my home, I admit: I have no idea what I'm doing. Some of my plants have flourished, growing beautifully regardless of what I do, and yet others, despite all my research and care, wither away. Sometimes it feels like no matter what I do, these plants will flourish or fade for reasons beyond my understanding.

It's easy to believe that we are the creators, instigators, and controllers of our own universes. If we are good gardeners, tending to our life and even our faith like a houseplant, then all those good things God promises — justice, righteousness, and grace — will flourish.

But that's not always the case with plants, nor with our relationship to God. The prophet Isaiah understands this. He writes, in other words: I am joyful because of God. The Lord God is the one who will grow righteousness. God is the force that makes gardens grow, the one who creates justice, and the one who offers grace. God tends to our universe and life, not the other way around.

If God promises to grow righteousness, what then is our reaction to this good news?

We are called to be joyful, to proclaim that joy loudly, and help tend to the garden God is already growing. Because of God's actions, we are sustained to spend another day, another year, living into God's promise of justice that grows no matter how good of gardeners you or I may be.

Pray

Creator God, you grow righteousness and offer grace and mercy. Guide our lives so that they might be joyful proclamations of what you have done and will continue to do. Amen.

Rev. Caroline Barnett
Pastor, Presbyterian Church (USA)

December 12

Read Acts 11:1-18

I am a storyteller by nature, and a rambling one at that. My stories get interrupted by other stories. In this passage, when interrogated about his inclusion of those deemed unclean, Peter chooses to tell a story. Peter tells them the whole story, from the beginning to end, to describe why he was suddenly different. We tell stories of our faith because there is no other way to explain the truth of the gospel. The truth of who God is. Peter knew there was no other way to communicate why he was communing with these people previously unaccepted, so he started at the beginning. It was the only way to convey the radical change and all-inclusive love he had been called to in Jesus. He concludes his story with this question, summarizing his entire change of heart in one sentence: "Who am I to stand in the way of God?"

Isn't that what Advent is all about? It is the start of our Church calendar, the start of this epic chapter in the story of God's love and salvation. It is when we stop to say, "I can't quite explain it in one breath, but let me tell you a good story about a God who is so extraordinary as to be born as a human, to invite us into radical newness, new love, that expands beyond our tribes and nations and traditions and rules." It's when we lean into the story that we cannot possibly stand in the way of, because it has already happened. How might you choose to awaken yourself and others to the story this Advent?

Pray

God of old and new, we know that your story is the most magnificent one of all. Might we experience your story afresh this season, and joyfully share it with others through our hearts and actions of radical love. In your grace and goodness, amen.

Rev. Anna Langholz
Chaplain, Carroll University

December 13

Read Luke 1:5-17.

What is it about those angels of the Lord that they strike fear in the hearts of all who see them? The angel Gabriel is often depicted with shining white robes, curly yellow hair, and a comforting smile. But just as Americans have white-washed Jesus, I suspect we've got Gabriel's features all wrong, too. When he appears, reassurance is required: "Don't be afraid!" What's so scary about an angel? Are Gabriel's wings massive? Is his brightness overpowering? Does he shine at all? Does he even look human?

Perhaps, as it is with God, human minds can't entirely comprehend angels. But we know this: they are scary, and they encourage us to not fear. Zechariah and Elizabeth have waited their whole lives for children that never came, reminding us of their biblical ancestors Abraham and Sarah. Their lives have felt empty without the kids they've prayed for. And then, out of the blue, Gabriel shows up and changes everything, announcing they will have a son named John. The news must have been overwhelming to Zechariah. Not only will they have a baby, this John will be no ordinary kid. As Zechariah trembled with fear, I wonder: did he want to disengage? To brush aside this scary angel's life-changing claims? To hold onto what was familiar rather than step into the unknown?

What would it feel like for you to have your prayers so soundly – and unexpectedly – heard?

Pray

Loving God, you encourage us to faith, even when we feel fear. Help us keep awake to the new things you are doing in us and through us, even when they scare us. Amen.

Rev. Linda Kurtz
Associate Pastor, First Presbyterian Church (Lexington, KY)

December 30

Read 2 Peter 3:8-13.

We always seem to be waiting for something. College acceptance letters, an upcoming break from school, a plane. We know these will come eventually. There are other things, like healing for someone we love, that are less assured, but we trust they will.

Then there are things we've been promised, but never seem to arrive. Peace in our time and the return of Jesus, both of which may occur together. Some time.

When we consider the evil in the world, we often want to say, "Come on, God. Hurry up!" We know we could do better, but still...

Today's passage offers a hopeful reason for our waiting – patience. Not our patience, but God's. "The Lord is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." God is waiting on us, more than we are for God. God is waiting for us to live lives of holiness and godliness, set apart from the skewed values of the world, and striving to reflect the mercy and justice of Jesus.

As Isaiah said that God's ways and thoughts are not like ours, the author of this letter is saying God's time is vastly different than ours. We are simply asked to live with patience and anticipation. To paraphrase the Lord's prayer, perhaps God is saying "be patient with one another as the Lord is patient with you."

In the meantime, let us seek to live like Jesus would want us to live, and be thankful for God's patience.

Pray

Blessed Lord, now that we have celebrated your first coming into the world, we thank you for your patience with us. Support us as we seek to be more fully your followers in the coming year. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Timothy Coombs, Campus Minister
Elaine Batts & Andrew Dariano, Students
Protestant Campus Ministry (Union College, Schenectady, NY)

December 29

Read Matthew 12:46-60.

Part of the Family

In today's scripture, Jesus invites us to expand our idea of what it means to be family. While addressing a crowd, someone invites Jesus to give his attention to his family, who was waiting nearby. In response, Jesus questions the labels used to assign status or importance. Instead of redirecting his attention to his family (who should apparently have his undivided attention), he uplifts the importance of his siblings in the crowd. In this subtle subversion of power, Jesus affirms the dignity of all those gathered – not just the ones who share his bloodline. In doing so, Jesus highlights the ever-widening circle of God's family.

Today more than ever, our world is divisive. We often allow politics and conflict to dictate who we consider to be friends and family. Yet as followers of Christ, we must consider everyone a part of the kingdom and kindom of God. Through his life and ministry, Jesus invites us to be vigilantly inclusive, in a world that attempts to exclude. So as we approach the new year, let's keep awake and look for God's family in our midst. May we have the courage to lengthen the table, pull up extra chairs, and love and listen to every person. After all, each of us is a beloved member of God's family.

Pray

Loving God, you've created each one of us to be members of your family. As we venture into 2024, broaden our understanding of what it means to be family. May we engage everyone in your holy family with the same love and compassion that you do. In the name of the newborn Christ we pray, amen.

Nell Herring
Mission Specialist for Volunteer Ministries,
Presbyterian Disaster Assistance
Alum, UKirk Furman

December 14

Read Habakkuk 2:1-5.

For many centuries, we humans have built fortresses (or ramparts, or watchtowers, or whatever else your version says) with the anticipation that there is something beyond them that we must keep watch for. As Habakkuk takes his post and keeps watch for God's answer to him, he is looking out not only with the hope that God will answer, but the defiant expectation that They will; to borrow from Dr. William P. Brown's commentary, Habakkuk is "dar[ing] God to be God."¹ And in the words that follow, this dare is not only acknowledged by God, but rewarded. They say to Habakkuk about Their message: "If it delays, wait for it; for it is surely coming; it will not be late," and They say the same to us today. As the greedy and arrogant continue to gather all that they can to themselves, this is the promise God offers to us: our watch will not be in vain. The answer has come in the form of Jesus. The answer comes everyday in the work we do to care for our siblings and our home here on earth. And the answer will come again.

Pray

Loving God, we give thanks for the promises You have made to us, the promises that You are still keeping, even when it feels like we stand on less-than-steady ground. Help us to not grow discouraged in our waiting and watching; open our eyes to the work there is for us to do where we are. We pray all this and more in the name of Your Son, the Living Word. Amen.

Feagin Hardy
Student, UKirk Ole Miss

December 15

Read Philippians 3:12-16.

Often, we spend our lives wondering about questions like, "who am I?" and "what am I supposed to be doing with my life?" For some, it becomes a crisis of sleepless nights; for others, it becomes a time of enlivening exploration. Here, Paul speaks directly to our wonderings by pointing to the one born in the manger.

Who am I? "Christ has grabbed hold on me." The Message translation by Eugene Peterson translates this as Jesus "has so wondrously reached out for me." Your identity is bound up in the one who reaches out to you, calling you by name. You are God's child. You are a member of God's flock. Who we are is not a mystery to God. Our identity comes from Christ, who draws us into God.

What am I supposed to be doing with my life? "I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus." For Paul, our lives are not meant to be spent wrangling over our past – whether good or bad – but our lives are a journey into Christ's calling for our lives.

This Christmas season, I invite you to see the babe in the manger as one who continually reaches out to you, grabs hold of you in a loving embrace, and gives you a blessed calling.

Pray

God-with-us, thank you for continually reaching out to us time after time, grabbing ahold of us and calling us your children, no matter what our past may have been. Amen.

Will DeLaney

Director of Christian Education, First Presbyterian Church (Laurens, SC)
Alum, Presbyterian College UKIRK

December 28

Read Jeremiah 31:15-17.

Jeremiah 31:15-17 depicts hope amid bitter sorrow and weeping. Perhaps you've experienced this kind of bitter sorrow and weeping, or you know a loved one who has. Perhaps you've seen this bitter sorrow and weeping on the news or social media. Our lives and world are often plunged into bitter sorrow and weeping.

Jeremiah meets us in our personal sorrow and in the world's sorrow with this message: "There's hope for your future, declares the Lord."

Advent and Christmas are seasons of hope. Advent gives us the hope of the coming Messiah. Christmas gives us the hope that comes with the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. Hope is fuel for the actions of faith and devotion to this hope-bringing Messiah.

I love the Christmas carol "O Holy Night." When I hear this song, I envision a darkened, expectant sanctuary illuminated by candlelight. Reflect on this stanza with Jeremiah 31:15-17 in mind:

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.*

*A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.²*

Hope thrills us into action so that we rejoice amid bitter sorrow and weeping, and keep awake to see a new, glorious morning. Thanks be to God!

Pray

O God of light who meets us in our dark moments, hear my cry. Fill me with the thrill of hope offered by Jesus the Messiah. Help me rejoice, even in weariness. Keep me awake to experience the joy of that new and glorious morning! Amen.

Rev. Drew Hanson

Pastor, First Presbyterian Church (Quincy, MA)

December 27

Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

Hannah's story of infertility, hopelessness, and longing is one I unfortunately know too well, as it is my own story. Thankfully, after much struggle and loss, our son was finally born this year. If I learned anything from her journey and mine, it's that it is entirely possible for joy and sorrow to coexist — that hope and despair can breathe the same air, and one can praise God and curse God in the same breath.

Hannah's prayer is her exhalation of all those emotions which have been bound up in her for so long. All the years of being made to feel less than, of being told she was a problem, a curse, unworthy. All the crushing disappointment and unanswered prayers. All the judgment and isolation. Her words flow out to declare the truth: that God is for her and not against her. To tell the world that while they had written her off, God never did.

To be human means learning to live in the middle of the joy and the pain, in the bittersweet liminal spaces. Hannah offers hope to anyone still waiting, that God is with us, and for us, no matter what the rest of the world says. It's a promise for everyone who has ever been an outcast, ever felt unwelcome, ever struggled to hold on — that if we keep our eyes open, one day we too will have our hearts rejoice, our strength rise up, and our deliverance be found in the Lord.

Pray

Dear God, help us to see you in the bittersweet places. Help us to breathe in faith and exhale hope as we wait for you once again. Amen.

Rev. Brenna Hesch-Overland
Head of Staff, First Presbyterian Church (Bay City, MI)

December 16

Read Matthew 21:28-32.

I have a friend who likes to show love through random \$5 Venmo payments to her friends. The words "For Starbucks," "Buy yourself some flowers," or "You need ice cream!" often accompany them. She sends them for friends taking a difficult exam, navigating the first day of a new job, mourning a loss, or just because. Even from thousands of miles away, small surprise Venmo gifts make her love tangible.

In Matthew's parable of the two brothers, Jesus draws out the theme that actions speak louder than words. God sees the goodness of those who have a bad reputation, and those who are looked down upon or easily dismissed. God sees the root of our actions and love rather than surface-level labels. It's not enough that the one brother says he will help in the vineyard, the meaning comes from the one who steps up and does the work.

When someone sends a Venmo surprise, shares a song they found encouraging, or puts a card in the mail to say hello, those little actions remind me of my value and root me in God's love. This week, you may be busy and overwhelmed by finals, end-of-semester deadlines, and holiday plans to come. In the midst of it all, may you be grounded in both words and actions that remind you that you are loved. Share the love with a friend, or do something kind for yourself. No matter how we are labeled, and no matter how small, our actions matter.

Pray

God of overflowing grace, remind us of your presence in small actions, and help us to make your love visible to our neighbors. Amen.

Rev. Hannah Lundberg
Transitional Pastor,
UKirk@UMich, First Presbyterian Church (Ann Arbor, MI)

December 17

Read Luke 1:46b-55.

Awaking to Joy

Have you ever been jolted out of bed by a weird dream or noise? This happens more times than I would like to admit. Most of the time it's because the events of the day (corruption, eliminated rights, wars, and scandals) are wearing heavily on my heart and mind, and I find myself dreaming and being in the center of it all. I wish I could view the world with Joy the same way Mary said yes to carrying the child of God. She saw the good in a very scary situation (being pregnant and not married). Trying to find the joy in the bad is hard, but it is possible. What is snuffing out the joy in your life? Is it school? Relationships? Debt? The Future? All those things will play out. I encourage you to listen to that small voice that is giving you a sense of hope. The voice that is giving you courage. The voice that can bring you joy even when the world is stacked up against you. Think about Mary's courage to say yes. Where do you need to find joy in the midst of anguish to say yes to what God is calling us to do and be? How can you be awakened by the small joys in life? See the good, try to be positive, look and experience JOY!

Pray

Creator, give me the strength to say yes in adversity, when the nightmares of today's society keep waking me up. Give me the courage to say yes when I feel defeated. Give me the ability to see the joy when I and the world need it the most!

Mich Phillips

Director of Congregational and Education Ministries,
The Kirk (Kansas City, MO)

December 26

Read Psalm 148.

December 26 begins the strange and stretchy days in between Christmas and New Year's Eve. You may forget the day of the week. You may forget how many days are left in winter break. You may even forget to "keep awake," and take that monster nap you've been looking forward to after Christmas. Perhaps the refrain "Praise God!" can serve as an anchor during this time.

As you read today's psalm, pick out a few images that you will likely see this week. When you see the sun and moon and bright stars, praise God and invite them to praise God too. Is there snow outside, or fire in the fireplace, or wind blowing the tree branches? Praise God and invite the snow and fire and wind along. The animals you see — wild or tame — they too can be invited to praise God with you throughout the week. Sea monsters do not know what day of the week it is, and yet even the sea monsters are invited to praise our Creator.

Keep awake to the beauty, diversity, and majesty of God's creation. Keep awake to the ways God strengthens God's people. Keep awake to the ways you are close to God. Enjoy your winter break, little monsters, and praise God.

Pray

Gracious God, your majesty is above earth and heaven. And I am here in my pajamas without a clue as to the day of the week, praising you with deep sighs of contentment. Fill me with gratitude for your mountains, every single hill, fruit trees, and every single cedar. Thank you for loving me, just as I am. Receive my praise. Amen.

Rev. Beatrix Weil
Chaplain, Rhodes College

December 25

Read Luke 2:1-20.

Like the shepherds keeping watch by night, we've spent much of the past year anxiously waiting for morning. When each day asks us to witness fresh violence and catastrophe, it becomes a blessing when night passes without a new tragedy to bear. So, the shepherds' terror is understandable, even familiar to us. A messenger of the Lord would not come with good news so late, when it could wait for morning. Only bad news is urgent enough for the middle of the night.

But, this night is different! The angel of the Lord is bringing good news of great joy for all the people! News so good, it can't wait until morning! The shepherds make haste, no longer anxious, but overjoyed and glorifying God. Maybe they'd been waiting for good news all along.

The good news is this: as we wait for dawn, praying to make it through unscathed, God is already here. In the middle of the night, God is calling us to witness and take part in the story. The story of Christmas reminds us that God doesn't wait until morning to give us good news. God is with us, even when we can't see what's next.

Pray

God of Great Joy, our hearts are holding so much hurt that we can hardly hope for better. We grow weary of keeping our eyes open, for we have witnessed as much as we can bear. Bring good news of great joy for all the people, even before the morning comes. Remind us that in this bruised and broken world, you are already here. Amen.

Austyn Long
Student, Columbia Theological Seminary
Alum, PCM Raleigh

December 18

Read Ephesians 6:10-17.

Put on the armor of God — the belt of truth and shield of righteousness,
Don't sling the arrows of hurtful words, of hate, of prejudice, of intolerance.
God's armory does not include guns, or knives, or any instrument of violence and war,
But instead the armor of God is the gospel of peace.

What a strange dichotomy!

Isaiah prophesied: *His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!*
All that power, omnipotent, but never used as a weapon,
All that power used, instead, to shield us against evil and evil-doing.

The power of love and life everlasting, with compassion and mercy for all,
The power of forgiveness and salvation,
That is the gracious might and strength of the Savior we celebrate this Advent season,
Whose gospel is packed with compassion, mercy, and love,
Sent to bring us peace on earth and to spread goodwill to all people, everywhere.

Pray

Dear Lord, we get caught up in our own opinions, insisting that we are right and others are wrong. We seek vengeance, hold onto grudges, and carry dark sin in our hearts. Release us today from our human weaknesses. Shield us from our human failings and empower us with your love and compassion, your mercy, grace and peace, so that we can reflect your goodness and light to others. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, amen.

Kristin Kuhlmann, CP
Commissioned Pastor, ENMU Presbyterian Campus House Ministry

December 19

Read Acts 3:17-4:4.

Human Alarm Clocks

From the time of our ancestors of the faith to now, prophets can be difficult to listen to. They point out the truth about us, our faith communities and our institutions. Oftentimes they are truth-tellers speaking hard things to our leaders, systems, and to the powerful. They are uncomfortable, because they call us outside of our comfort zone to honor God with everything we have. It is all too easy to become defensive, or to ignore the faithful people in our world who speak with a prophetic voice. But then we remember God's call to remember the oppressed, the marginalized, and the hurting in our world, and we hear our prophets call those of us with privilege, who have become so comfortable, to wake up and heed the call of the needy.

Today, give thanks to God for the people who call us to more, and remind us to keep awake to serve and advocate for the Kingdom of God and those who are often overlooked. Those people call us to pay attention to the plight of others, and find ways to bring about God's plan for the world right here and now. While prophets can be difficult, they are gifts of God that are our human alarm clocks when we fall asleep and ignore those in need.

Pray

God, give us ears to hear and a spirit of willingness to listen to your prophets when they speak. Help us discern your voice in the midst of others and not ignore the cries of the needy. Help us to use our voice to stand for those in need, and help us today to give appreciation to those prophetic voices in our lives. Amen.

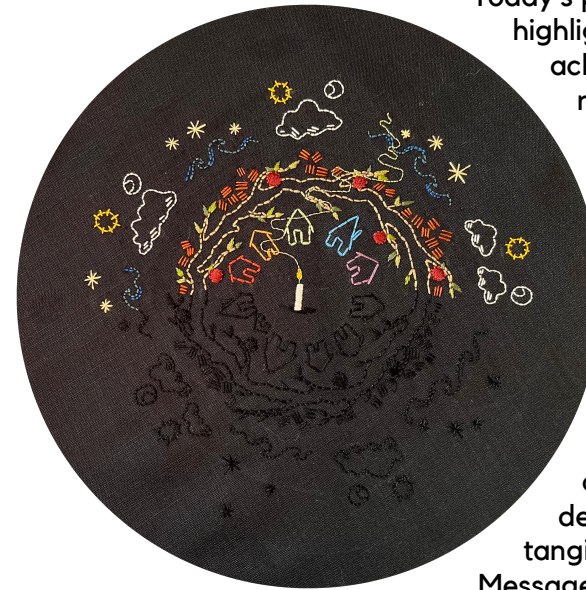
Rev. Drew Ensz

Campus Minister, Arise Campus Ministry

(George Mason University & Northern Virginia Community College)

December 24

Read John 1:1-14.



Today's passage is one that highlights dichotomies, acknowledging heavy realities and reminding us that the love of God shall not be overcome. The way the Word, the Light, is described feels a bit like magic with its eternal presence. But the other side of the description is a tangible God. The Message translation of John 1:14a reads: "The

Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." This helps Jesus feel really human, not just something magical and mystical and distant. During Advent we pay special attention to God With Us. This passage invites us to think of God in a big picture, ALL of creation way, but also an intimate, in our own backyard sort of way. This closeness of God isn't just to reframe the world in color to make us feel good, but to illuminate a path of hope so that we might be inspired to live with generous love.

Pray

Holy Light, illuminate our every step. Show us the grace with which you are shaping the world around us. Renew our hope so that we might offer it to the world, moving together from despair to delight. Amen.

Rev. Allison Maus

Associate Pastor for Campus Ministry,

State College Presbyterian Church & PSF at Penn State

December 23

Read John 7:40-52.

In some ways, the winter season has become a time of too much. There's the stress of finals, pressure to buy the perfect gift, manage finances, hang up all the decorations. Showing the holiday spirit feels less about cheer and connection and more about having the biggest and best, be it presents, Christmas trees, or holiday meals. There's little time to take a moment and process what's going on outside us.

It's easy to shut in and block out anything outside of what's directly in front of us. And while this might seem to help, it means we have a good chance of blocking out something important. In this passage, the crowd has a lot of different things to say about Jesus, but some of them recognize who he truly is. When receiving such an overload of information, just ignoring it all doesn't benefit us in the long run. Those who said, "this is too confusing, I'm walking away from figuring out who this man is," missed out on the opportunity to learn from and know Jesus. That's a huge loss.

How many times do we turn away because there's so much chatter, because it takes extra effort to understand? What opportunities from God to grow and connect are we missing? What would our holiday season look like if we took a step back and refocused on what's really important?

Pray

Dear Lord, give us the strength to stay present and listen when we want to block everything out. Help us seek out truth, even when it's hard. Give us the energy to keep searching for you this holiday season. Amen.

Melissa Whitler
Hospitality and Program Intern, UKirk SMU

December 20

Read Mark 9:9-13.

In Mark's ninth chapter, Jesus takes disciples Peter, James, and John up to the mountain top, and there he is transfigured before their eyes with the prophets Moses and Elijah appearing before them. They are stunned and bewildered, and their senses flooded with the intensity of this wild encounter. Though they have seen this physics-defying sight, they do not understand what it means...and just as quickly as it came, it goes.

As they descend from the mountain, they're filled with many questions but no clear answers. But they are now, more than ever, clued in to the unique and powerful mystery that is God's love through Christ — to heal and restore. It seems the Transfiguration has caused these disciples to reconsider what they know, inviting deeper questions and making space for the impossible to become possible. They are being awakened to a new world and perspective they didn't think existed.

In a world where so much doesn't seem possible right now, this story — read as an Advent tale — reminds us of the beautiful and tricky tensions present in the season of Advent: a longing for clarity in uncertain times. Cautious optimism and adjusted expectations. Finding the courage to climb the "mountains" of our lives. The choice to love hard in the face of violence, chaos, and heartbreak. Perhaps there are Transfiguration-moments happening in our midst, begging for our attention, even if meaning has not yet emerged.

Pray

Dazzling God, awaken in us a desire to know and be challenged by the mystery of You. May we find courage to dream new futures for ourselves and this world, just as the disciples did. Amen.

Rev. Erin Guzmán
Chaplain, The College of Wooster - OH
UKirk Advisor, UKirk Wooster

December 21

Read Hebrews 1:1-4.

In today's passage, we see that God speaks to us in different ways over time. In the Old Testament, prophets often spoke on God's behalf. In Advent, we wait with anticipation for a new way of God speaking into our lives. Jesus comes without fanfare or printed birth announcements. He is revealed originally in small moments to only a few people. Nevertheless, God has entered the world as a human! This is truly astonishing news. We may not have Jesus with us on earth today in the same way as he was two thousand years ago, but we have a record of many of his teachings. We can learn a lot about how to live through the stories of Jesus, who is both fully human and fully God. Being in a community of faith can also give us new insight into how to understand the Word of God.

So keep awake! What ways might God use to speak to us today? Be it a wise word from a friend, an enlightening scripture passage, or a surprisingly meaningful post on social media, pay attention. God is speaking into the world even now.

Pray

Holy God, we thank you for the ways you communicate your love and grace. Help us watch for you in this Advent season, and wait joyfully for the gift of your Son. Amen.

Rev. Erin Tolar
Resident Pastor, Myers Park Presbyterian Church (Charlotte, NC)

December 22

Read Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26.

I have a penchant for never getting enough sleep. That means I'm always tired. Some days that tiredness really catches up to me, and all I want to do is lie down. But the busyness of life rarely allows for that, so I must find a way to push through the fog of tiredness and do what I need to do. The best way I've found to do this is to focus on a goal, whether that be finishing a task for work or loading the dishwasher. The goal might also be a bit more vague, like: give my wife a few minutes to rest, encourage my kids to work hard even when they don't want to, love my neighbor.

The beginning verses of Psalm 89 have the feel of someone reminding themselves of the goal of a spiritual life with God. "I will sing of the Lord's loyal love forever. I will proclaim your faithfulness with my own mouth from one generation to the next." It's easy to fall asleep in our faith and lose track of where we're going and what we're called to do. But the Psalmist reminds us of God's love for us, which is also our call to love others. As we draw near to Christmas, may the celebration of Christ's birth waken our faith from its sleep. And may the love of God empower us to love our neighbors.

Pray

Loving God, open our hearts and minds to your love. Awaken us to a world desperately in need of your love. May your love be incarnated in our flesh, that it might shine like a star in the night. Amen!

Rev. Jeffrey Fiet
Co-Pastor, First Presbyterian Church (Scottsbluff, NE)