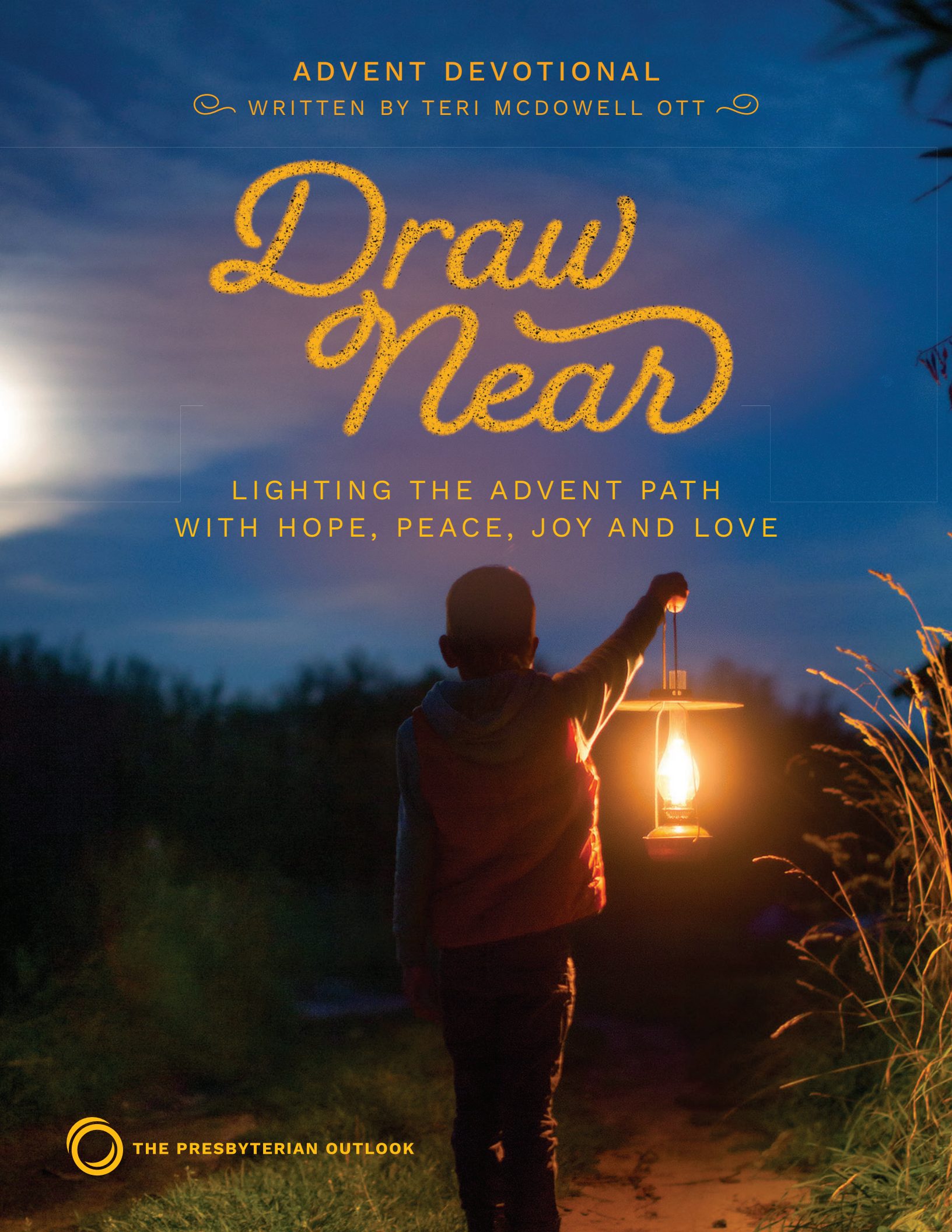
ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

WRITTEN BY TERI MCDOWELL OTT

Draw Near

LIGHTING THE ADVENT PATH
WITH HOPE, PEACE, JOY AND LOVE



THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

WRITTEN BY TERI MCDOWELL OTT

Each day of Advent,
this devotional offers a gentle invitation
to draw near — to Scripture, to stillness, and to the heart
of God. Following the traditional Advent themes, you'll light the way
week by week with hope, peace, joy and love, preparing not just for
Christmas, but for Christ's presence among us.

Alongside daily reflections, this journey is enriched by artwork
from children — tender, honest interpretations of sacred texts that
remind us what it means to receive the kingdom like a child.
Their drawings offer not just illustration, but illumination —
echoing the wonder and welcome of the season.

Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.
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Field of vision

MATTHEW 24:42

"Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Shug Avery, in *The Color Purple*, offers this bit of holy mischief: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." It's a startling image of divine disappointment, but it has always struck a chord with me. I imagine God, the artist of stars and oceans and wildflowers, yearning for someone – anyone – to stop and take notice.

Jesus' words in Matthew carry that same ache. Keep awake, he says. Pay attention. Don't miss what matters. Advent begins not with sentiment but with summons: a call to wake up, to notice the beauty, the ache, the holy presence woven into our days.

Scripture is full of moments when God's people lost focus, when we drifted into distraction or despair. But even then, God did not turn away. Even then, the Artist kept painting. Kept reaching. Kept hoping we'd lift our eyes.

This first Sunday of Advent is less about countdowns and candles and more about clarity: Where is God in your field of vision? What distractions have dulled your sight? This season is a sacred invitation to reawaken our attention and open our hearts to the presence of the One who never stopped noticing us.



FOR REFLECTION:

Set a timer for 10 minutes and take an unrushed walk, outside if possible, inside if not. As you move, ask yourself: *What "purple" have I been passing by?* Notice one small, easily overlooked sign of God's artistry — a splash of color, a sound, a scent, a fleeting kindness. Pause with that sign, name it aloud, and thank God for the awakening.

How might staying this alert reshape the rest of your Advent?

PRAYER:

Awaken us, God, to your wonder and your artistry. Stir our sleepy spirits. Draw us near this Advent. Amen.

Keep looking out your window

GENESIS 8:6,8,11

"At the end of the forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ... Then he sent out the dove from him to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground ... and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf."

Noah may have been a flawed man – he drank too much, exposed his nakedness while sleeping – but he trusted God enough to follow instructions that sounded absurd. Build an ark? That big? Out here in the yard? Still, he obeyed.

God gave specific measurements. Told him what wood to use. What to seal. What to include.

Noah added a window.

Windows matter. They let in light. They let in hope. Can you imagine being trapped inside that dank-smelling ark, sealed off from the world, with no sense of time or space? That one window, his one view of the sky, was a lifeline.

I always place my desk by a window. It helps me lift my eyes from the tasks and to-do lists, to pause and remember there's more. More than what's right in front of me. More than the flood. If I had a dove, I'd send it out too, looking for signs of life. Signs that God is still with me. Signs that the storm is receding.

Advent reminds us to keep looking out the window. To keep searching for the olive leaf. To remember that God's promises still hold.



FOR REFLECTION:

Find a literal or figurative "window" today — a place where you can look beyond your immediate tasks. Pause for three slow breaths and ask: *What olive leaf might God be sending me?* Jot down one small sign of renewal you notice: a birdcall, a kind text, the scent of rain. How does this glimpse of hope change the way you face the remaining "floodwaters" in your life?

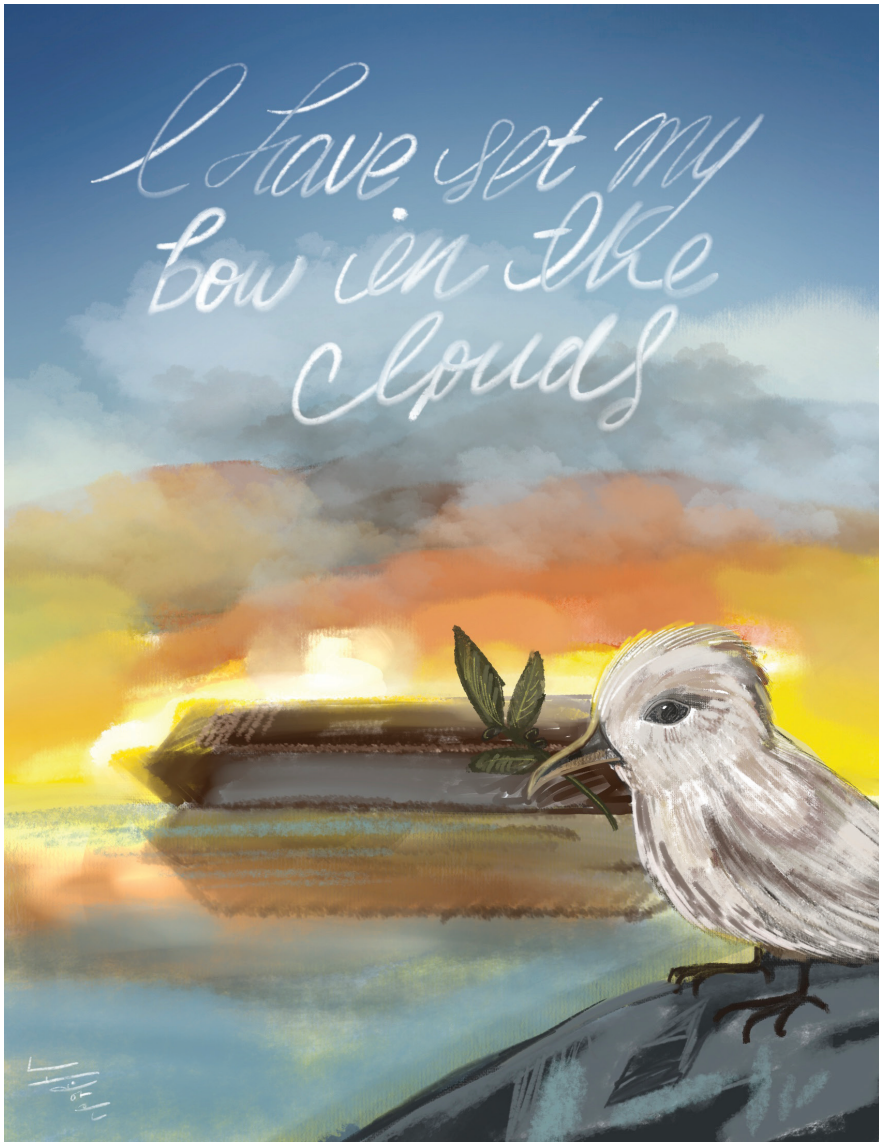
PRAYER:

God, grant us windows to your presence. When we feel lost in the flood, send us signs of life. Amen.

A rainbow moment

GENESIS 9:1-17, GENESIS 9:13

"I have set my bow in the clouds."



WATERCOLOR BY
JOY HUSKEY
AGE 15

WOODS MEMORIAL
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SEVERNA PARK,
MARYLAND



FOR REFLECTION:

Think of a recent "rainbow moment" — a burst of unexpected color, beauty, or mercy that caught your breath. Where did it appear, and what promise might God have been whispering through it? Take a few minutes to sketch or write a brief description of that moment, then ask: *How can I carry this reminder of God's unbreakable covenant into the storms I'm facing today?*

PRAYER:

God of the promise, write your hope in the sky and our hearts. Help us see and believe. Amen.

God's voice in the here and now

MATTHEW 24:35

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Advent means arrival, but not just of the Christ child. It means we're watching for what's coming, what's next, what's new.

Jesus' words in Matthew are apocalyptic, but not in the cinematic, world-on-fire kind of way. Apocalypse literally means *to reveal*. And in times of pain or upheaval, what we see – what is revealed – matters.

Apocalyptic scriptures are often written from the margins, by people suffering under empire. They don't predict doom so much as proclaim hope: even when everything feels like it's falling apart, God's Word endures.

When we feel unmoored by change or heartache, we can anchor ourselves in the stories of Jesus — his words, his life, his promises. Love your neighbor. Care for the vulnerable. Walk humbly. These are the teachings that guide and serve us well. These are the words that don't pass away.

In Advent, we remember that God's voice still speaks not just once in Bethlehem, but also here and now.



FOR REFLECTION:

Recall a single teaching or promise of Jesus that has steadied you in the past — perhaps "Love your neighbor," "Do not be afraid," or another verse that echoes in your memory. Write it down, carry it with you, or repeat it aloud throughout the day. As the noise of news, deadlines, or worries swirls, pause and ask: *How does this enduring word reshape the way I respond right now?*

PRAYER:

Steady us, God, with your lasting Word. When the world shifts around us, help us hold fast to your love. Amen.

A vision of God's shelter

ISAIAH 4:5-6

"Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory, there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, providing shade by day from the heat and refuge from the storm and rain."

I thought I was prepared for the bitter cold and freezing wind on the sidelines of the soccer field in West Central Illinois, but the cold found its way in. My fingers turned numb inside my gloves as I clapped and cheered for my then-8-year-old daughter. My toes had long since lost feeling despite my wool socks. Yet there she was, running up and down the field, her cheeks pink but her movements unrestricted, as though the cold couldn't touch her. I couldn't run with her; I needed shelter.

I scanned the sidelines and noticed two dads huddled in a small pup tent. One of them caught my eye and waved me over with a mittened hand. The second dad shifted to make room, a silent offering of community.

"Smart move with the tent," I said as I ducked inside.

"Third season watching soccer in this county," the first dad replied. "You learn or you suffer."

Isaiah offers a vision of God's shelter: a canopy over Mount Zion, a refuge from storm and heat. Not flashy. Just enough. Just in time.

God's protection doesn't always come with grandeur. Sometimes it's a gesture, a tent, a friend with a mittened hand. Sometimes it's a Scripture that lands in your lap or a prayer whispered beside you.

Advent is a reminder that refuge is real — and often closer than we think.



FOR REFLECTION:

When has someone offered you shelter, literal or figurative, in a season of need? Who might need your protection today?

PRAYER:

Sheltering God, thank you for the small tents and the quiet kindnesses. Teach us to offer warmth to others this season. Amen.

Looking ahead, looking back

ACTS 13:16, 23–25

"So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak ...
'Of [David's] posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised; before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he.
No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of the sandals on his feet.'"

My grandfather wrote his memoir at age 93 — yellow legal pads filled with memories. My grandmother proofed it, my aunt typed it, and my father had copies bound at the office supply store for every family member. Inside the cover of my copy, he wrote: "To Teri, with love, Grandpa Mac."

I regularly purge my book shelves, following a one-in, one-out policy that keeps my collection from swallowing me whole. Prize-winning memoirs come and go, their spines cracked once before finding new homes. But Grandpa Mac's book remains unmoved, claiming its territory between literary giants with Pulitzers and National Book Awards. Those books will eventually join the donation pile. Grandpa Mac's book never will.

There is something holy about knowing where you come from. In Acts, Paul offers a sweeping retelling of Israel's story — how Jesus stands as fulfillment, not interruption, of God's long arc of grace.

Faith is often future-focused: we look ahead, long for what's to come. But Advent also calls us to look back. To remember the story we've inherited. To trace the thread of God's faithfulness. Hope also comes from history, no matter whether you are a descendant of kings, like David, or a long line of prophets, like John the Baptist, or a Scots-Irish American grandfather, whose story, even after dying at 103, lives on in his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



FOR REFLECTION:

Who shared their story of faith with you, and how do you carry on their legacy? What story would you pass on?

PRAYER:

God of generations, thank you for the storytellers who brought us here. Help us carry the legacy forward with faith. Amen.

Hope for the journey

ISAIAH 40:1

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

Why does Advent *begin* with hope? At some point in church history, someone decided that the first candle to be lit on the Advent wreath should be the hope candle. This has always puzzled me. Shouldn't hope be the climax, the top of the mountain you've just spent four weeks climbing? The pinnacle of our spiritual Christmas experience?

But hope is a crucial part of any journey. Without hope, we can't progress. Hope is what motivates us to lace up our shoes and start moving. Hope says, 'Let's go.' Why start a journey if you don't have hope in what's to come? Hope for discoveries. Hope for understanding. Hope for more hope.

Isaiah's people were exiled, displaced and grieving. But God speaks comfort — not empty words, but the deep reassurance that we are not alone, not forgotten. The signs are everywhere this Advent: candlelight softens the dark. The air carries the scent of pine and cinnamon. Cookies baked and shared. The hush of snowfall. The swell of music. The quiet expectation that something sacred is on its way.

Hope is not wishful thinking. It's trust in a God who keeps showing up to guide us on the journey. As we begin this Advent journey, don't wait to find hope at the end. Look for it now. Let hope lead you to Christmas and beyond.



FOR REFLECTION:

Besides hope, what other essentials do you need for this Advent journey?

PRAYER:

God of hope, light our path. As we begin again, meet us with comfort, courage, and grace. Amen.

A vision of holy imagination

ISAIAH 11:6

"The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them."

A world where enemies reconcile and rest together. Where the predator stops circling. Where the vulnerable are safe.

This is the vision Isaiah gives us — one we long for but can barely believe in. Not when headlines scream of politicians assassinated and wars erupting everywhere. Not when protestors are met with militarized force, and families are separated in the shadows, undocumented and unseen. Peace feels like a fairytale in a world governed by fear, fueled by grievance, sustained by violence.

And yet ...

Isaiah dares to speak it aloud. Not just peace, but reconciliation. Not just coexistence, but communion. Wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, lions and calves — not avoiding one another, but *sharing* the same space, the same sustenance. Led not by strength, but by a child.

This vision is not wishful thinking. It's a glimpse of God's desire for creation. A vision born of holy imagination. A future not made by our efforts alone, but by the One who is already at work – even now – disarming hate, dissolving fear, sowing seeds of *shalom* in the scorched ground of our despair.

We may not see it yet. But Advent points us toward that peace. Advent is for believing, with trembling hearts, that the world does not belong to violence, after all. It belongs to the child. And the child will lead us.



FOR REFLECTION:

In your life or the world, where do you most yearn for reconciliation among adversaries? How might you begin to envision peace there?

PRAYER:

God of holy peace, in a world thick with conflict and fear, plant in us a longing for your promised reconciliation. Teach us to follow the child — to walk gently, to seek justice, and to trust in the peace we cannot yet see. Amen.

DAY 9

Resistance and the peace of Christ

1 THESSALONIANS 5:13B, 15

"Be at peace among yourselves. ... See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all."

The busy port city of first-century Thessalonica buzzed: ships docking, traders haggling, languages and accents crowding the marketplace. As the Roman capital of Macedonia, it was a crossroads of cultures, religions and loyalties. Diversity brought opportunity ... and friction. Against that backdrop, Paul writes: *Be at peace among yourselves*.

He did not mean peace that evokes a quiet calm of sameness. Rather, Paul's peace entails making a courageous commitment to the common good in a teeming, cosmopolitan city. Paul pushes more: *Do good to all*. Not just to those sharing your accent or your politics. Not just to your church friends. *All*. Even the rival merchant, the skeptical philosopher, the cynic who rolls their eyes at your faith.

Revenge is the default currency of a world jostling for power. But Paul calls the Thessalonians to a radical alternative: an economy where evil isn't repaid but is resisted through right relationships, where goodness and goodwill is the circulating currency, where the peace of Christ stretches enough to shelter strangers.

Advent invites us into that practice today. Our news and social media feeds resemble Thessalonica's streets, crowded with opinions, collisions and competing narratives. How do we keep peace amid this crowded and diverse public square? We resist the reflex to strike back. We look for the smallest actionable good: an honest compliment, a listening ear, a cup of coffee shared with someone whose worldview jars our own.

Each choice for goodness is a lantern of peace lit in a crowded port, offering a beacon to the world.



FOR REFLECTION:

Name one person or group outside your usual circle who could benefit from a simple act of goodness this week. What concrete step will you take to seek to do good for them?

PRAYER:

God of every nation and neighborhood, anchor my heart in your peace. When vengeance whispers, still me. When division flares, guide me toward the good — for my neighbor, and for* all*. Amen.

A step toward peace

MATTHEW 5:9

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."



ARTWORK BY
TOBY LITTLEJOHN
5 YEARS OLD

OAKLANDS
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

LAUREL, MARYLAND



FOR REFLECTION:

Where is God inviting you to make peace today — at home, work, church, online? What might your first faithful step toward peace look like? Listening without interrupting? Speaking the truth in love? Apologizing?

PRAYER:

Prince of Peace, calm my defensiveness and quicken my compassion. Make me a maker of peace so your Spirit may be reflected in my words and actions. Amen.

Peace is relational

MATTHEW 18:15

"If a brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If they listen to you, you have regained that one."

Advent calls us to peace, yet few things steal peace faster than unresolved conflict. Jesus knows this. Before teaching about prayer or worship styles, he offers a simple, hard instruction: *Go*. Go to the person. Speak face to face. Listen in the hope of regaining the relationship, not of winning.

No texts. No vague social media posts. No silent stewing.

A few years ago, a friend's offhand comment stung me. That evening, I typed and deleted three versions of an angry text. The next morning, I more clearly discerned the Spirit's nudge to go and meet my friend in person. So I asked her to coffee. My stomach churned, but once we sat down – with real cups, real eye contact – everything softened. She apologized. I learned that what had felt like betrayal turned out to be a misunderstanding. We left laughing, lighter, our friendship reclaimed.

That's the peace Jesus imagines: not passive avoidance, but the active work of mending frayed ties so joy can flow again.

Advent peace is relational. Peace on earth starts with peace *between us*. Don't let resentment fester through December. Name the hurt. Step toward the person. Listen for the Spirit's nudge to reconcile, to regain loved ones — your mutual peace flickering in the world's dark.



FOR REFLECTION:

Who comes to mind when you read Jesus' instruction to "go"? What first step toward a private, grace-filled conversation could you take this week?

PRAYER:

Prince of Peace, give me courage to go. Guard my tongue, steady my heart and fill me with the hope of restoration. Let your reconciling love move through me, one conversation at a time. Amen.

Receiving the gift of peace

JOHN 14:27

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

Jesus' words are not a lecture, but a benediction wrung from his own aching heart. In the hush of the upper room, the weight of Jesus' impending goodbye presses down. Everyone present senses it: the coming separation, the looming cross. Into the disciples' rising panic, Jesus speaks these words of promise: *My peace. Not the world's version. Mine.*

I have whispered the promise of this Scripture verse beside hospital beds where machines monitor heartbeats and pump oxygen into lungs. I have spoken it at the graveside, where the grieving weep and the cold earth echoes loss. I have clung to it myself when deadlines pile high and anxiety squeezes tight. *Every time, the words act like a hand steadying a rocking boat: Peace I leave with you.*

The world's peace is conditional, fragile. It hinges on circumstances that must line up just so. Christ's peace is different — deeper, sturdier. It settles into the chest, slows the pulse, expands the lungs. It reminds us that we are not abandoned, not orphaned, not alone. God is still at work – often invisibly – on our behalf.

Advent invites us to receive that gift again. To sit still long enough for the peace of Christ to catch up with us, to sink beneath the swirl of headlines and to-do lists. To let it do its holy work: unclenching our shoulders, lowering our blood pressure, steadying our hearts.

Breathe in: *My peace I give to you*. Breathe out: *Do not be afraid*.
The gift is already yours. Open your heart and receive it.



FOR REFLECTION:

Where is your heart most troubled right now? Spend a few slow breaths repeating Jesus' promise — and notice how Christ's peace begins to settle in.

PRAYER:

Prince of Peace, quiet my racing thoughts. Let your peace move from promise to presence — from words on a page to a new calm in my bones. Hold my fears, and fill me with trust. Amen.

The imaginative way of Christ

MATTHEW 5:38-39

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

At first, Jesus' words sound like surrender: *Let them hit you again. Take it. Be quiet.*

But in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination,* New Testament scholar Walter Wink insists that Jesus is not teaching passivity; he is schooling us in creative, nonviolent resistance.

Notice the detail: *the right cheek*. In Jesus' world, a superior would backhand a servant with the right hand — a slap meant to demean, not to maim. By turning the left cheek in response, the victim forces the aggressor to strike with either the open right palm or the back of the left hand — both were socially taboo. A second blow, then, would expose the bully's cruelty and strip the insult of its power. Turning the other cheek is not submission; it is a defiant refusal to be dehumanized.

Advent peace works the same way. It is neither flight nor fight. It is the stubborn, imaginative way of Christ, the Lamb who disarms violence without wielding it.

When lighting the Advent candle of peace, we remember that "peace on earth" isn't a gentle wish but a revolutionary practice: confront evil, refuse revenge and expose injustice through acts of creative and courageous love.

What situation in your life might need this holy subversion? A family quarrel that resurfaces each holiday? A workplace slight that robs you of respect? A public injustice that calls for creative witness?

Turning the other cheek is daring God's *shalom* to break into the cycle of hurt. According to Wink, this action says, "Try again; your first blow failed." And humiliation loses its sting when we stand in the dignity Christ gives.



FOR REFLECTION:

Where is God inviting you to respond to hurt with creative, nonviolent courage? What might "turning the other cheek" look like in that specific situation this week?

PRAYER:

Prince of Peace, teach my heart the courage of the other cheek. Show me how to resist evil without mirroring it, how to expose injustice without losing compassion. Let your fearless love be my strategy and my song. Amen.

God's Hospitality

REVELATION 22:1-2

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ... On either side of the river is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

In Brian Blount's *Revelation: A Commentary* (part of the New Testament Library series), he calls John's closing vision "a new, improved, urban Eden." The garden we lost in Genesis reemerges here as a city — alive with crystal water, fruit for every season and leaves that are potent enough to heal the world. What humanity once knew in intimate fellowship with God is not merely restored but expanded. Paradise is no longer a private garden; it is a table large enough to welcome all peoples and nations to drink, eat and find healing.

Advent peace is anchored in this vision. Beyond the silent night and swaddled infant lies Eden reimagined. Streets flow with living water. Medicinal leaves bandage wounds, and estranged enemies reconcile in the light of God's welcome.

The tree once guarded behind a flaming sword now stands accessible beside waters that quench all thirst. Israel's ancient hope blooms into a universal embrace. God's hospitality breaks down every border, every bitterness, every war-torn battlefield.

When we light the candle of peace, we cast our eyes toward this envisioned future, and we commit to practicing peace: watering parched relationships, sowing seeds of justice, and offering presence that heals. Each small act contributes to the river's flow, forming tributaries that pour into our promised Eden.

Hold this vision. Hear the rush of living water. Taste the fruit that never spoils. Let Advent peace wash over your fears and widen your welcome until Eden's promise feels near.



FOR REFLECTION:

Where do you see a hint of Eden's river today? What "leaf of healing" can you offer someone beyond your usual circle?

PRAYER:

River-Maker, let your water of life run through my unrest. Grow healing in me: leaves for neighbors, fruit for strangers, hope for every nation. Amen.

Joy pulsing beneath the surface

LUKE 1:46B-47

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Mary's joy doesn't just live on the surface. It doesn't sparkle like a holiday ornament before disappearing with the decorations. This is joy that *sticks*. Joy that settles into the soul.

"My spirit rejoices," she says — because something has shifted. Not just in the world around her, but within her. God has seen her, chosen her, not just to bear a child but to bear more than the world ever expected from someone like her: a poor, young, unmarried girl from a small town.

In her patriarchal society, Mary was never supposed to be central to the story. Yet God lifts her up, fills her with purpose and makes her a leading character in our salvation narrative. The arc of her life stretches enough to hold the Messiah.

The kind of joy that erupts in Mary's Magnificat is not born of comfort or ease. It's a joy rooted in calling, in the outrageous grace of being seen and sent.

This is what Advent joy can look like. Not always jingling bells and Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," but deep and luminous. It is a joy that pulses under the surface, even in seasons of uncertainty or fear. A joy that comes from knowing your life matters, because God has chosen you too — maybe not to carry the Christ child, but to carry Christ's light. To live a story larger than the one the world assigns you.



FOR REFLECTION:

Where and when have you felt God inviting you to live a story bigger than any you imagined? How might that calling be a source of joy?

PRAYER:

God of joy, you lift up the lowly and fill our lives with purpose. Let our spirits rejoice in your grace. May we live this day with the quiet boldness of those who know they've been chosen. Amen.

The sound of your greeting

LUKE 1:39-44

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.'"



ARTWORK BY
ANNA HARDEMAN
AGE 7

MADISON
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

MADISON, GEORGIA



FOR REFLECTION:

Who is your Elizabeth: the person whose presence makes joy leap in you? Reach out to them today (call, visit or leave a voice message). Then flip it: Who might need your greeting to help awaken their joy? Go "with haste."

PRAYER:

God of holy visitations, guide me with Mary's haste and Elizabeth's welcome. Let my greeting carry your Spirit. Awaken joy in me and in those I meet today. Amen.

Summoned to sing

PSALM 98:4

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises."

Minister Isaac Watts didn't technically write "Joy to the World" for Christmas, but we keep singing it for this season year after year, sanctuary after sanctuary — because something in it just feels like Advent.

It invites us to prepare room in our hearts. Its uncontainable joy bursts from the chorus: *And heaven and nature sing!* It's not a quiet, polite hymn. It's meant to be belted.

I remember my father singing this carol like he was trying to wake the dead, his voice deep and booming. He was always a little off-key. But he meant it. It wasn't a performance — it was praise. It was loud, unfiltered joy: the kind that pushes out despair, that clears space in the body and soul for something more.

That's the joy Psalm 98 calls forth: not reserved or refined, but full-throated and global. It summons *all* the earth to sing; the sea, the rivers, the hills join the chorus. This joy is too immense to be contained in one voice or one season.

Advent joy does not depend on how we feel. It's a response to who God is. And sometimes the only faithful reply to God is song, whether or not we sing in tune.



FOR REFLECTION:

What does joy sound like to you? Where might God be inviting you to make a joyful noise today?

PRAYER:

God of joy, unclench my heart and clear the clutter. Let your joy rise in me: louder than fear, stronger than sorrow. Let heaven and nature – and I – sing. Amen.

Choosing to rejoice

PHILIPPIANS 4:4

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

It's the "always" that trips us up.

We can rejoice *sometimes* — when things are going well. When prayers are answered. When joy arises in unexpected, yet beautiful moments. But always?

Paul writes these words from prison. He is in chains, unsure of his fate. And his friends in Philippi – those he is writing to – face persecution. These are not joyful circumstances. And yet: *Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice.*

Paul isn't being sentimental or performing shallow positivity. He's issuing a command. And sometimes, there's strange relief in being told what to do.

I was always a good student. If a teacher told me to complete an assignment, I did it — sometimes out of enthusiasm, sometimes out of habit. But even when I didn't feel inspired, doing the thing usually led me somewhere. I learned and grew.

Rejoicing works the same way. We can rejoice not because we feel like it, but because we've been told to. Advent joy doesn't ignore pain. It holds it — and still dares to praise, because our rejoicing isn't about our circumstances. As Paul writes, our rejoicing is "in the Lord." He calls us to rejoice in the One who came close, who stayed, who saves. And in the doing – in the act of rejoicing – we begin to open. To shift. To remember that joy isn't always spontaneous. Sometimes, it's chosen.



FOR REFLECTION:

What would it look like to rejoice anyway this week — not because you feel like it, but because you trust God enough to try?

PRAYER:

God, you know the days when joy feels out of reach. Teach me to rejoice anyway. Not in denial, but in defiance, because you are still good. Amen.

The intentional disruption of joy

PSALM 42:5-6A

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

Some days, joy feels far off — like a song you can't quite hear, like sunlight behind too many clouds. The psalmist knew that feeling well: cast down, disquieted, undone. Yet this isn't a psalm of despair. It's a psalm of refusal.

I shall again praise him. Not because the pain is gone, but because hope still holds.

There's power in that kind of defiant joy.

Joy as resistance.

Joy as holy rebellion against despair.

Lakisha Lockhart-Rusch, a womanist theologian and play facilitator, recently wrote an article, "The Complexity of Joy," for the *Presbyterian Outlook*. Her name, Lakisha, comes from the Latin Leticia, which means "great joy." And she lives up to it: not with naive cheer, but with grounded, intentional delight. She writes, "My joy is not simply an emotion or a disposition. It is an intentional disruption, an act of resistance and a spiritual practice to see and be open to the good – regardless."

That's the kind of joy Advent invites. Not denial of suffering, but determination to praise anyway. A joy that steadies us. Strengthens us. Sings even through tears.



I shall again praise. Joy refuses to let despair overcome and win.

FOR REFLECTION:

What small, intentional joy could you practice today as an act of praise, resistance or hope?

PRAYER:

God of joy and resistance, when my soul is weary, give me the courage to delight. Let my joy be an act of faith, a protest against despair and a testimony to your goodness. Amen.

Lasting joy, spiritual nourishment

GALATIANS 5:22-23

"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."

Joy is not something we manufacture. It's something we bear. Like a tree bears fruit.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul could have said "traits" or "qualities" – but he said fruit. He tells us that joy is something borne of the Spirit, something that ripens in us over time.

And just like fruit, joy needs the right conditions to flourish. Sunlight. Soil. Stillness. Sometimes pruning. Always patience. We can't speed it up. But we can stay near the source. We have to be close to the tree to notice the fruit. To see what's growing. To recognize when it's ripe. To reach up and taste what's ready.

Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with the "works of the flesh": desires that spiral but never satisfy, that feed our cravings but never nourish our souls. The fruit of the Spirit, on the other hand, sustains us. It grows life in us and through us.

Joy is part of that fruit. It's not fast food. Not artificial sugar. It is real, spiritual nourishment. The kind that lasts. The kind that fills.

This Advent, draw near to the tree. Pay attention to what's ripening in and around you. Joy may be growing quietly. When it's ready, taste and see.



FOR REFLECTION:

What helps joy grow in you? Where might you need to slow down and draw near the Spirit in this season?

PRAYER:

Spirit of joy, plant your fruit in me. Grow in me what I cannot grow alone. Let my life bear joy that feeds others: nourishing, sweet and full of you. Amen.

Joy longs to be shared

JOHN 15:11

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

When something delights me – a beautiful line in a book, the first snowfall, a ridiculous meme – I can hardly keep it to myself. I want to run and tell someone: "Look! Listen! Taste this!" Sharing my joy multiplies it. Makes it real. Makes it full.

When my son, Isaac, was learning to talk, his whole world revolved around two things: balls and trucks. From his car seat in the back, he'd scan the world with wide eyes. As soon as he spotted something wonderful, he'd shout with uncontainable glee: "BALL!" "TRUCK!"

He needed me to see it, too. Because joy isn't something to hoard. It doesn't last, it doesn't stay whole when you keep it to yourself. Joy longs to be shared.

Jesus knows this. That's why he doesn't just teach joy — he gives it, "that my joy may be in you," he says. Not just any joy. *His* joy. God's joy. The kind that pulses with love, connection, and life abundant.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He wants our joy to be complete. And here's the holy secret: sharing joy completes it. Jesus shares his joy with us. In turn, we are called to share it with our people, our neighbors, the weary and the wondering.

This Advent, may your joy not be quiet. May it call out from the backseat. May it point and shout and insist: "Look! See! This is good!"



FOR REFLECTION:

Who shares joy with you in ways that make it complete? How can you pass along that joy this week?

PRAYER:

Jesus, thank you for sharing your joy. Make my heart quick to notice beauty and eager to share it. Let my joy be loud, generous and full. Amen.

We are not alone

MATTHEW 1:23

"'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"

Love shows up — not with all the answers, or with easy fixes, but with presence. That's the kind of love we meet in Advent. Not distant. Not clinical. Not observing from afar. It's a love that is *with* us. In the pain. In the joy. In the questions. In the blood, sweat and tears of being human. Emmanuel. God *with* us.

Advent love is the staggering love of the incarnation. God doesn't send instructions. God comes in human flesh to live our life and grieve our grief. God knows what it feels like to be tired, to be anxious, to be left behind and left out. God's love is not abstract. It is love that breathes, walks, weeps. A love that stays.

As a pastor, I once sat in a hospital room beside a man who had lost the ability to speak after a head injury. I talked to him for a while, filling the silence until I ran out of words. I considered leaving – even started gathering my things – but then he reached out, grabbed the arm of my chair and gently pulled me closer. He couldn't say it, but he didn't have to. He wanted me to stay. So I did. We sat together in silence, holding hands, praying prayers we never spoke aloud.

When life collapses, what people remember most isn't what you said. It's that you were there.

Advent reminds us that we are not alone. Not in our suffering. Not in our celebrations. Not in our ordinary Sunday afternoons. God is not just for us or above us. God is *with* us.



FOR REFLECTION:

When have you experienced someone's presence as a form of love? How might you offer someone else your presence this week as that kind of love?

PRAYER:

Emmanuel, thank you for the kind of love that shows up: not with platitudes, but with presence. Help us feel your nearness today, and help us mirror your love by showing up for others, too. Amen.

Receiving and giving God's love

PSALM 95:6-7

"O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand."

"O come, let us adore him" (Hymn #133, *Glory to God*).

We sing this hymn every Advent, every Christmas. But how often do we really pause to do what it says: to come before God — not with a wish list or a weary sigh, but simply to say: *I love you?*

Psalm 95 is a call to worship, a summons to bow down, to kneel, to sing — not out of obligation, but from a deep, unfiltered love for the One who made us. The One who still holds us in God's hand.

Advent is filled with so much anticipation: waiting for hope, peace, joy and love to break in again. But perhaps part of our waiting includes wonder at our own ability to love and at how much our love truly matters. Maybe we need to remember that this season isn't only about receiving God's love. It's also about returning it.

Too often, even in our closest relationships, we forget to say what matters most. We assume people know we love them, so we don't say it. We forget that adoration is not just sentiment; it's something we express.

Let's not let Advent slip by without expressing our love directly to God. Let's tell Jesus we adore him. Let's sing it, whisper it, pray it, write it, *mean* it.
"O come, let us adore him — Christ the Lord."



FOR REFLECTION:

What words of love and adoration do you want to say to God this Advent? What's keeping you from saying them?

PRAYER:

God, I adore you. I love you. You are my Maker, my Shepherd, my Savior. Let this be a season when I say it more often and mean it more deeply. Amen.

A star in the east

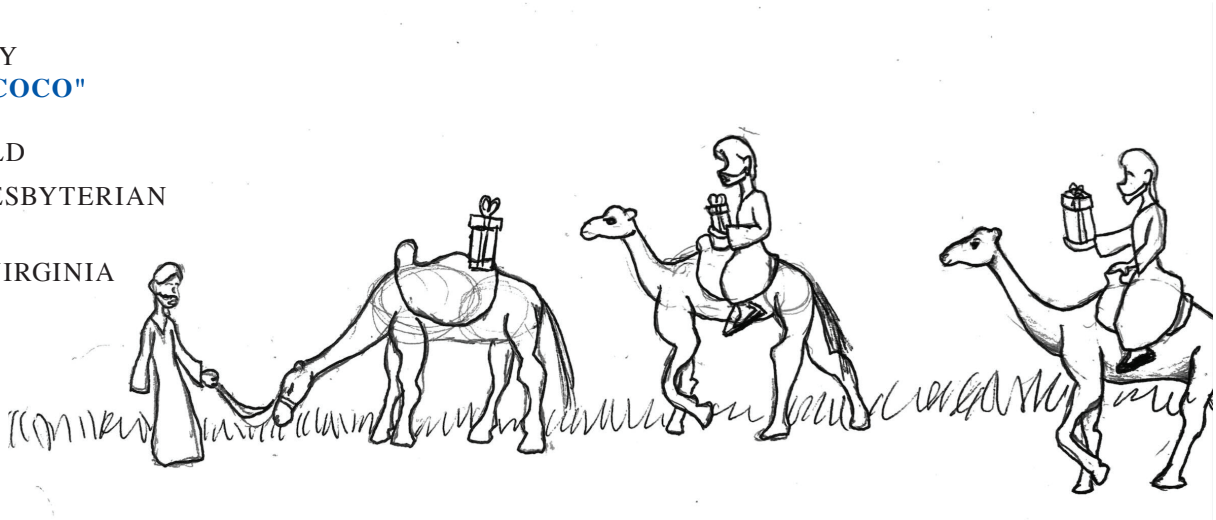
MATTHEW 2:1-2, 11

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.' ... On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

ARTWORK BY
CORINNE "COCO" WILSON
11 YEARS OLD

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

ROANOKE, VIRGINIA





FOR REFLECTION:

What signs let you know that Jesus is present in the world? Most of our loved ones don't need frankincense or myrrh. But what gift of your time or your self can pay homage to them as a child of God?

PRAYER:

Star-guiding God, as you led the magi, lead me to Jesus. And when I find him, let my life be homage: the gold of my attention, the frankincense of understanding and empathy, the myrrh of love for neighbor, all to honor Christ in each person I meet. Amen.

The good news is for all

LUKE 2:10-11

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'"

It's easy to miss the scandal tucked inside the angel's song.

All the people.

The angel doesn't say, "I bring good news for the religious" or "for the well-behaved" or "for those who have memorized the words to 'Silent Night.'"

This good news is for the insiders *and* the outsiders. For the hopeful and the hardened. For the devout and the doubting. For those confident in their welcome and for the ones who have been told their whole lives they don't belong.

Every Christmas Eve, sanctuaries inevitably welcome guests who harbor doubts about their place there. Perhaps a visitor, invited by family, who hesitantly steps through the church doors for the first time since childhood. Or a "Chreaster," who only graces the pews at Christmas and Easter. Then there's the solitary soul, who wants to be less lonely on Christmas amid the soft murmur of prayers and the candlelight reflected in the stained-glass windows.

Let's remember, then, that it isn't the pageantry or the candles or even the beauty of the music that makes this night so extraordinary. It's this truth that breaks through it all.

God's love does not discriminate. God's love does not wait for us to get our act together. God's love does not ask us to measure up before it shows up.

The good news announced to shepherds on a hillside is still echoing tonight: God's love is for *all* the people.

This story – this love – is anything but ordinary. It is radical and scandalous and wide enough to hold the whole aching world.

Where else do we hear this kind of love proclaimed? Where else are we called to love like this in return?

The angel says it plainly: This is not a private salvation. It is good news for *all* the people.

Thanks be to God.



FOR REFLECTION:

Who might be waiting – hoping – to hear that God's love includes them? How can you embody the good news of all the people this Christmas?

PRAYER:

God of all people, on this holy night, open our hearts to the wide wonder of your love. Break us out of routine, out of narrowness and into the scandalous joy of your welcome. May we receive your love freely — and share it just as freely. Amen.



ARTWORK BY
ELEANOR LINK
7 YEARS OLD

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Reflections



Reflections

