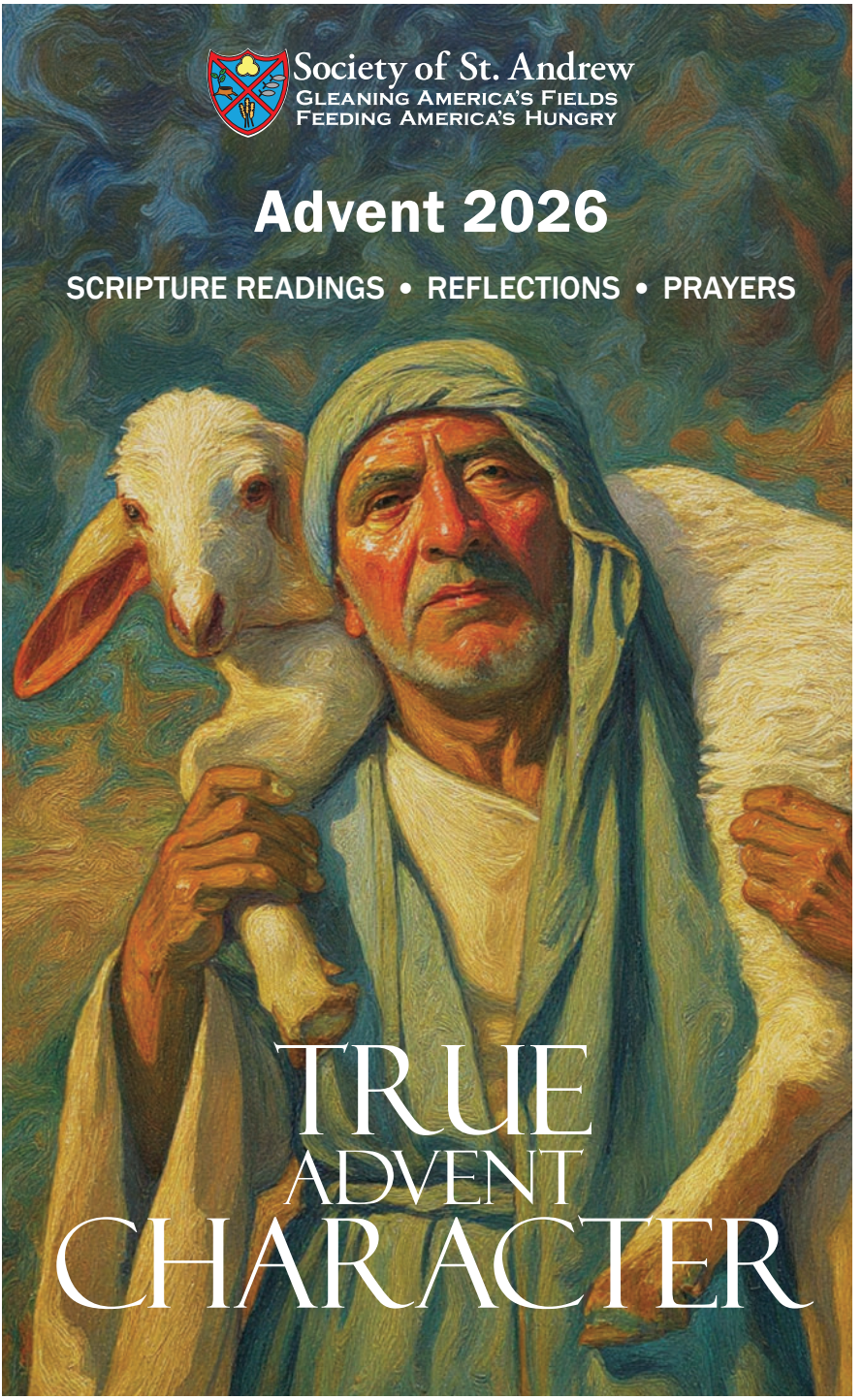
Society of St. Andrew
Gleaning America's Fields
Feeding America's Hungry

Advent 2026

SCRIPTURE READINGS • REFLECTIONS • PRAYERS



TRUE ADVENT CHARACTER

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True Advent Character

The flames of the Advent candles traditionally inspire Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Each is kindled through the rich, storied tradition of the people of God. Without the Biblical story, these words easily become hollow. 'This gadget will bring you joy!' 'Perfect families before a fireplace know peace!' 'Love is best celebrated with expensive trips and fine jewelry!' 'All your hopes will be fulfilled with the next promotion!' This Advent devotional draws on the scriptures and particular characters to enrich our understanding of hope, peace, joy, and love. This year, you'll encounter some familiar Advent characters—John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah make appearances. You'll also bump into faith ancestors less frequently visited in Advent, such as Esther and Habakkuk. Together, they suggest the character of Advent–a time of darkness in which small, powerful flames begin to blaze, challenging the turmoil around us.

This Advent, we've made the Sundays special by reflecting on a well-known hymn. If your congregation is using Revised Common Lectionary or Narrative Lectionary readings this season, you'll notice them throughout the devotional following the relevant Sundays. We're so grateful for the contributors* who have prayed, prepared, and shared their words. We're convinced that the character of God is reflected in communities that care for God's abundant creation and share food generously with those in need.

May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—
the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—
for this will bring much glory and praise to God.
Philippians 1:11 NLT

Pastor Jennifer Davis Sensenig
Director of Church Relations

*Several of our contributors share their writing on blogs, Substack, or publications, so don't hesitate to do an internet search if you're eager to read more.

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Society of St. Andrew
GLEANING AMERICA'S FIELDS
FEEDING AMERICA'S HUNGRY

How Can I Help?



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O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

SUNDAY, NOV. 29

Hymn: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

We pray "O come, Emmanuel" because Emmanuel, the incarnate God-with-us, is missing. The story we find ourselves in is one of humanity's devastating loss: from intimate friendship with God in the Garden to being exiled from the very source of our life, breath, and joy. Yet God persisted in his intentions! God-far-away became Emmanuel, the Word-made-flesh, and for a moment in history, God again walked in intimate friendship among his people. Now, however, the church groans and grows in longing, for the resurrected and ascended Christ has promised his sure return, but we live in the liminal years of painful waiting.

Not only Christ, but we ourselves, are characters in this story. Longing for Christ, we enter the story and pray, "Even so, come!" We do not pray as those who have no hope, but who grow in confidence in the One who has promised. Advent trains us both to grow in longing and in confidence, preparing us to live Jesus' mission, a mission of embodying a return to God's shalom: "Your kingdom come, your will be done..." For until the return of Christ, when heaven and earth are finally and fully reunited, the church becomes Christ's Advent to the world, proclaiming the coming King and living the coming kingdom.

Prayer: Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Wendell J. Nisly — Rockingham, VA

Make Your Face Shine

MONDAY, NOV. 30

Psalm 80

Recently, I saw an image of a huge crowd. It was supposed to show humanity coming together in solidarity. But if you looked closely at the crowd, there were no actual faces in it! It was an AI-generated image. In the hymn, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," we sing, "look full in his wonderful face." Our faces are our image, our presence, our light. The Psalmist pleads, "Make your face shine upon us." It's a longing for God to come close, be present, and help.

Awaiting Jesus' birth, perhaps Mary and Joseph imagined what his face would look like. Imagine their delight in looking at his face for the first time.

Imagine the face of Jesus: Eyes of truth and compassion. Ears that hear the voices of the downtrodden. The mouth that spat on the ground to heal and ate with sinners. A nose that smelled frankincense, myrrh, shepherds, and animals. The face that shines as the light of the world. Take time this week to look full in someone's face. What do you see?

Prayer: O Come, O Come Emmanuel. Make your face shine, for you are the light of the world.

Casey Mursten — Durham, NC

New Arrival

TUESDAY, DEC. 1

Isaiah 64:1-9

The writer in Isaiah addressed exiled people who questioned the presence of God with them through change and suffering. The prophet's vision was of the vast sky tearing open and gigantic mountains quaking. The coming of God is more than the sky can hold, more than the mountains can stand.

Advent is our season of expectation and hope. A holy time in the life of the church as we anticipate the celebration of the birth of Christ. Through this child, God is made known among us in great mystery and wonder. Like the people who heard the words of Isaiah, we too wait anxiously for the presence of God to be made known again. We see the suffering in the world and want relief. In Advent, we focus on the hope, peace, joy, and love that exceed all that we know and come from God.

The arrival of Emmanuel, God with us, overwhelms the laws of nature, changing the ordering of the world as God's love is poured out on us. God acts on our behalf regardless of our human frailties. God is present in times of suffering. In our despair, we are not abandoned. God continues to be revealed anew to us as we trust God more and live more deeply in faith.

Prayer: God, visit us anew during this season of Advent. Open our hearts to receive you, as we experience the Mystery of your presence. Amen.

Karen Georgia A. Thompson — Olmsted Township, OH

God has Saved

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 2

Luke 1:26-38

One of my favorite paintings of the holy-ground event in Luke's Gospel known as the Annunciation is by Henry Ossawa Tanner. Tanner's realistic art portrays a teenage Hebrew girl in earthy brown tones and depicts the Holy Spirit as shimmering golden light. How do you imagine that mystery-filled moment when the angel Gabriel announces God's plan to Mary? Mary's Gabriel is the same Gabriel named in Daniel 8 and 9 as the interpreter of dreams, and who announces John's birth to Zechariah the priest.

Mary hears that the Lord is with her, that she has found favor with God, and that she will bear God's Son. For all this favor, would Mary get to name her child? No. That, too, would be of God's choosing. She would call him Jesus, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua; or in Mary's Galilean/Roman-Judean/Aramaic tongue, Jeshua: "God has saved." The time had come to reveal heaven's plan of hope for the world.

Perhaps you have also experienced a Gabriel visitation or heard the voice of God's Holy Spirit. But if not, we all – through our baptism in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit – become God-bearers. In a way, we, like Mary, carry Jesus in us.

Prayer: Holy One, help us be like Mary, saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Amen.

Katy Yates Brumgraber — Chambersburg, PA

Paying Attention

THURSDAY, DEC. 3

Mark 13:24-37

Each year during Advent, I hope for a time of slow, steady preparation for the celebration of Christmas, expecting to find time to linger and do the spiritual work of preparation instead of rushing ahead to what is coming, overwhelmed by the busy nature of Christmas.

The signs of Christmas arrive earlier and earlier each year: decorations, radio stations devoted to Christmas music, and innumerable sales encouraging us to buy more. Thankfully, Mark reminds us that Advent is not just about giving gifts

and celebrating the birth of Jesus. Advent also has a forward-looking aspect, the return of Christ. This aspect of Advent also has signs. Jesus recalls words from the Old Testament and adds the image of the fig tree. While pointing to what is to be, Jesus urges us to keep watch.

An unknown hour does not require gift-wrapping and carol-singing, as enjoyable as those are; it simply requires us being attentive to what is to come. So as I come to Advent 2026, through scripture, study, and prayer, I do my best to slow down and keep watch for what is to come.

Prayer: God of Creation, with Mark who gazed at the heavens, watched the trees, and saw in Jesus your revelation, I am looking for you this Advent. Amen.

Adam Blagg — Harrisonburg, Virginia

Violence, hunger, and yet...

FRIDAY, DEC. 4

Habakkuk 1:1-7; 2:1-4; 3:3-6, 17-19

Unless God's great promise of peace on earth is fully realized, today is a day of violence and hunger. Violence is hidden in homes, splashed across media, distant, and local. Not violence in general, but particular persons beloved by God are injured, killed, and exploited as if they matter not. Hunger today means empty cupboards, rumbling bellies, poor health, and brain fog from under-nourishment. You have seen the face of hunger, even if you didn't recognize her at the register, waiting for the school bus, or clearing tables. Habakkuk confronted God about violence and hunger in the world. By the end of his indictment, the world hasn't changed, but the final verses are famous for one word: yet.

Amidst hunger and social breakdown Habakkuk says: Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord. To a world of violence and hunger, God must come to feed and heal. When we have abundance, we must share. When we have nothing, yet we rejoice. This Advent character sustains the Society of St. Andrew until all are fed.

Though the fig tree does not blossom
and no fruit is on the vines;
yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

Prayer: God, plant in us the hope and joy of a world we cannot yet see, where all are fed and living in peace.

Jennifer Davis Sensenig — Rockingham, VA

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The Gift of Companionship

SATURDAY, DEC. 5

Luke 1:39-45

We've been given a remarkable gift in scripture through Luke's story of Mary and Elizabeth. Luke shows us two women who need each other. Their companionship provides connection and joy in serving the Lord. Within the shelter of a home, they receive what God is doing, treasure it together, and offer each other a depth of understanding that perhaps exists nowhere else.

Different in age, experience, and circumstance, these two are drawn together as full participants in God's unfolding story. Elizabeth offers Mary the gift of hospitality for today and the promise of hope for tomorrow. Three months together seems like a much-needed holy pause, just enough time to move from ordinary life into something far greater than themselves.

In reading their story, I have often seen myself as Mary, visiting Elizabeth, who, for me resembles many female clergy companions. Although our lives differ, I have traveled many miles to sit with them and speak honestly about the joys and challenges of ministry. In our friendship, they have offered some of the same gifts Elizabeth offered Mary: an invitation to linger, a listening presence, affirmation, and encouragement to keep going. These holy pauses in friendship remind me that God's love is lived and shared in ordinary rhythms of life.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the gift of companionship, especially in friendship. May our friends today help us live into your hope this Advent. Amen.

April Cranford — Fishersville, Virginia

God's Commissioning

SUNDAY, DEC. 6

Hymn: Comfort, Comfort O My People

Forty years ago, our Central America solidarity group asked a visiting Nicaraguan pastor to share in a local congregation about the devastation wreaked on his people and communities through warlike and controversial US policies. After the presentation, we asked the host pastor to pray. His prayer was, "This is a very distressing and confusing situation. We ask God for peace in our hearts."



"Comfort, Comfort O My People" is a message of peace. A metered version of Isaiah 40:1-5, it speaks the truth. With grace and forgiveness comes a commission for God's people: to prepare in the wilderness the way of God, in the desert a straight highway, to level uneven ground and make the rough places smooth. A faithful response to God's love and justice is hard work!

Recently, Matt Moburg wrote these lines as part of a longer poem:

"There is a kind of peace that only exists
because it refuses to tell the truth.
That peace is a lie.
And lies don't grow anything worth saving.
The scriptures you love weren't written to keep things calm.
They were written to set things right.
And sometimes the most faithful thing you can do
is stop praying around the pain and start standing inside it.
If that makes you uncomfortable—good.
Growth always is."

Prayer: God of comfort and commitment, restore our strength and our resolve. Do not allow us to treat wounds carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

Daniel Erdman — Albuquerque, NM

Backseat Peace

MONDAY, DEC. 7

Psalm 85

In the quiet reverie of falling snow and icy temperatures, a summertime adolescent memory bursts into my consciousness. My family was packed into our 1960s-era station wagon as we traveled across the state, accompanying my father on his annual sales calls to variety stores in one small town after another. The car windows were open enough for a breeze but not enough for my mother's hair to blow out of place. It was hot, as we waited for my father to return carrying his sample bag or as interstate construction crews blasted through the mountains.

My younger brother, sister, and I shared the crowded back seat. I see myself staring out the passenger side window as the unfamiliar landscape flew by, and my mind teemed with "who am I" and "who will I become" questions. My siblings quibbled over how much of the bench seat was theirs. Sometimes the invisible boundary held; other times the line was breached, and anger erupted.

In those moments, it was not good enough for one person to be comfortable. Everyone in the negotiated space had to experience justice along with peace. Isn't that true about food security, affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, access to healthcare, and a voice in governance? Christ's Advent peace is necessarily intertwined with righteous justice for our neighbor.

Prayer: Holy God, you call us to an active peace in which all know justice and righteousness. Help us follow Christ with hope, joy, and love. Amen.

Kathleen Overby Webster – McGaheysville, VA

Finding True Peace

TUESDAY, DEC. 8

Isaiah 40:1-11

Finding peace can be especially challenging this time of year, yet I'm reminded of my dad who would often reflect on finding true peace. It is not only during the weeks leading up to Christmas that we can become busy and preoccupied. We may also be busy with our jobs, family, and a host of other things throughout the year. Surprisingly, preoccupation with busyness and productivity is not exclusive to our 21st-century context.

We need to reflect on and find our true peace. My dad found true peace in Jesus. Jesus is first and foremost our Lord and Savior. He is also our peacemaker. Like the people of Isaiah's time who were searching for comfort and peace, let us rejoice that our true peace is found in Jesus.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the peace we find in you as Lord and Savior. Amen.

Barb Radebaugh – Lexington, VA

What then will this child become?

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 9

Luke 1:57-66

As young expectant parents, one of our most significant tasks was choosing a name. We considered possibilities for either a boy or a girl, dismissing this one or that one for various reasons, often related to our own experiences. In the end, we decided on a first name pointing to family heritage and a middle name reflecting family surnames.

In Luke's Gospel, it was not John's birth as much as his naming that was significant. Family and friends expected a name reflecting family history, family ties. But Elizabeth instead harkened back to an even older tradition. Names have meaning—especially Hebrew names—meanings shaped by experiences with people, family traditions or values, culture, and expectations.

In Scripture, names often speak to God's work and God's promises; Moses means 'drawn from the water,' reflecting his narrow escape from death, Jacob means 'one who grasps,' reflecting his characteristic striving to get ahead, and Abram means 'exalted Father'—a hopeful, if ironic name for one who was childless for decades. John means "God is gracious," a fitting name for the prophet who would preach repentance and herald the Messiah's coming.

When Zechariah, struck mute for doubting God, confirmed Elizabeth's declaration on a writing tablet, his voice was restored, and he sang God's praises before an amazed and frightened crowd. This break with tradition and demonstration of God's grace in their midst prompted them to wonder, "What will this child become?"

Prayer: God of grace, as we wonder about what's ahead, lead us to sing your praises and trust in your gracious and faithful ways. Amen.

Ann and Patrick Pettit — Grottoes, Virginia

A Voice

THURSDAY, DEC. 10

Mark 1:1-8

Have you ever gone to a church service expecting one thing and hearing another? I did. That morning, I was excited to hear a preacher who not only spoke about the Gospel but lived it, even when he was face-to-face with threats, violence, and gunshots. I left disappointed. All I heard that morning was him shouting at me. That's the kind of preaching I grew up with and was finished with. But something drew me back week after week. And in time, it was not shouting I heard but his deep and passionate proclamation of the Gospel of forgiveness and love.

Years ago, I had a similar impression of John the Baptist. I thought of him as one of those revival preachers who yelled at you about how sinful you were and how you only deserved punishment. As I reread these verses from Mark 1, I see how wrong I was. Here was a man whose life, speech, and even his manner of dressing were deeply formed by his understanding of the great Hebrew prophets. Repentance and forgiveness prepared the way for the coming of the Kingdom. And for John, that was something to get excited about and even raise your voice to proclaim.

Prayer: God of the prophets, in these days of numbing noise, give us courage to hear your voice of thunder and respond with our whole lives. AMEN.

Charles Gambrell — Saraland, Alabama

For Such a Time as This

FRIDAY, DEC. 11

Esther 4:1-17

What was at stake for Esther in using her position to influence the king to reverse the murderous decree against her people? Nothing less than her life. If she goes to the king without being summoned, she may be put to death. Yet in deep conversation with her mentor-relative Mordechai, she concludes: "if I die, I die."

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Few of us will face such politically-charged life and death choices, with consequences for a whole community. Yet slowing down in Advent to consider our conditions personally and culturally can reveal a choice before us. Will we retain our familiar comforts while neighbors are at risk? Or will we align our lives with the hungry, the poor, the threatened, the weak, and the lonely? Will we put our resources and roles to work in blessing others?

Esther's story occurs in Israel's long Advent waiting—after the exile, when people are scattered, compromised, and no longer speak of God. God is never mentioned in the whole book of Esther! Yet a kingdom of righteousness and peace is coming. And we get a glimpse of the kind of character it produces in the story of Esther.

Prayer: God, the costs of doing what is right and following through with what is mine to do are sometimes steep. Give me Esther's resolve and surround me with a community of prayerful solidarity. Your kingdom come. Amen.

A SoSA Staff Memeber

How can we keep from singing?

SATURDAY, DEC. 12

Luke 1:67-80

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when we were not gathering for worship, we missed singing hymns. In an online forum, someone asked, "What is your favorite hymn?" One reply was, "How Can I Keep from Singing?"

Perhaps Zecharia. who lived in a time of deep darkness, said something similar. After many months with no voice, his tongue was released, and the Holy Spirit gave him prophetic words. He calls baby John "a prophet of the Most High...a forerunner to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." No wonder Zechariah sang!

This promise came during the Roman occupation to a people "in the shadow of death." With the events swirling around us today, that lament is shared.

The hymn begins, "My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentations…" But then at the refrain, "No storm can shake [our] inmost calm while to the Rock [we are] clinging. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how

can [we] keep from singing?" Might Zechariah have asked, "How can we not sing? God has given us a tremendous gift in this child, John. It is the beginning of a new day for all Israel."

Prayer: Gracious God, do not allow us to dwell in darkness and despair when we have the Light that comes from you. Give us a song that lifts all our spirits to see and feel your coming kingdom. Amen.

David A. Rash — Waynesboro, VA

Joy to the World

SUNDAY, DEC. 13

Hymn: Joy to the World

Advent maps the great landmarks of history that shape the contours of our daily lives. A good world created as an abundant, fruitful sanctuary of communion between God and humans was shattered by sin; that same world was cursed with a roguish abundance of thorns and thistles and pain-filled fruitfulness. As generation yielded to generation from Abraham and through his descendants, history became a womb preparing and awaiting the coming of one who would turn the curse to blessing.

In a great moment in time and place, he came, birthed in water and blood. The earth, through Mary, gave birth to her Creator, who in devastating meekness took upon himself the curse of that earth. At the cross, thorns became his glorious crown. He poured out upon the ground a crimson flow of blessings as far as the curse is found. And so in a flood of water and blood, he birthed the church, a new sanctuary of communion with God.

The map of history has been drawn and its contours charted, but its territory has not all been entered. We, too, in our waiting, are feeling the birth pangs of better things to come. The waiting does not diminish us, but enlarges us: the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy (The Message, Rom 8). So let every heart prepare him room, for he has come, he now comes, he will come! Joy, joy, joy to our world!

Prayer: God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing. Amen.

Weldon Nisly — Rockingham, VA

Lean In

MONDAY, DEC. 14

Psalm 126

Decades ago, I lost my dream job. Thanks to severance pay, I had a few months to find another job, but it was a devastating blow. I remember being filled with anxiety about the transition and how I would take care of my family. Who was I? What was I called to do? Had I been wrong about my calling? I woke up several nights a week from nightmares that I couldn't remember, but that clung to me like a fog, stealing my joy during the day.

Today, I look back at the situation differently. I still carry a scar or two from the loss, but I recognize that in that transition, I grew. I recognized who "my people" were as they supported me. I came to understand better who I was and what my character meant to me. Many of our priorities, like careers or finances, can be lost or taken away. But your people and the person you are—the personal ethics you choose to live by—can't be stolen by others.

In the midst of this transition, I learned what the Psalmist meant in Psalm 126. When life troubles us, we need to remember how God has come through in the past and lean in.

Prayer: Holy God, you have saved us from life and from ourselves time and again. Help us to trust in the promises of your love when trouble next threatens our joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Jacob Sahms – Chesterfield, VA

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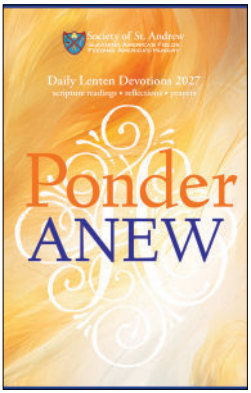

Mud, Mission, and Ministry

TUESDAY, DEC. 15

Isaiah 60:1-4, 8-11

Twenty children (out of 200) and all six teachers were meeting outdoors… again. Their school, made of mud with roof trusses of sticks, was just too dangerous to be inside. Most parents would not allow their children to attend. But those teachers, sometimes serving without pay, stood by their students, convinced that the future required their leadership, light, and example.

This United Methodist primary school in Sierra Leone had the fewest resources of any of the denomination's 250 schools. But those teachers stuck to their mission. It was a gloomy existence, yet teachers knew they had an important mission to shine light for the future of others.

Isaiah also had a mission–proclaiming a future that would bring light to people after a painful and dark existence. He assured them that God stood by them, that the future would be bright, and that God would never leave them. Isaiah would have loved those teachers!

And that school in Sierra Leone? Over time, a new school was built to accommodate 300 students, the most modern of all the United Methodist schools in Sierra Leone, one with a design that could be duplicated throughout the country. God's light and love always mean a future to be cherished.

Prayer: Papa God, gracious God, may we be ever mindful of your care for us, ever mindful that you always bring a future of hope in your goodness for us all.

Kip Robinson – Glen Allen, VA

A Voice Calling for Liberation and Justice

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 16

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist says that he is "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."

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In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist quotes the next verses too:

"Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together..."

You may recognize that as a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. in his "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963.

The original context of those verses in Isaiah is Israel's experience of being conquered by the Babylonian Empire, which took Israel's ruling class into exile. The imagery pictures God's liberation of the nation and its people. When John the Baptist quotes Isaiah, Israel is under the boot of the Roman Empire. When Martin Luther King quotes those verses, his people are suffering under the oppression of the racist structures of 20th-century America. In each context, these verses depict liberation as level ground that makes travel easy. The things that make life hard will be done away with.

Prayer: God of Justice, Mercy, and Love, God who takes the side of the poor and theoppressed, grant us your spirit of courage and compassion to speak out boldly in these troubled times, that your vision for our society might come to pass: a society where everyone lives in comfort and without fear.

Bert Newton — Pasadena, CA



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Angel in the Living Room

THURSDAY, DEC. 17

Luke 1:46-56

On the mantel above our fireplace, we have a piece of iconography by Ukrainian artist Ivanka Demchuk entitled the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel is depicted almost peeking around a doorframe at Mary. It makes me wonder if he felt nervous delivering such a message to this young girl. I walk past this piece of art in the course of my ordinary days, often forgetting the enormous moment it depicts and sometimes standing in wonder. I am certain my response to this message would not have been nearly as gracious as Mary's.

Thankfully, I was not chosen as the Mother of God! Instead, we have Mary, a saint to look toward as an example of incredible faith and clarity of spirit. In her Magnificat, she rejoices in God as her savior, praises him for his many mercies, and for keeping his promises. May we follow in her faith, believing that he who promised is faithful, that he who made the stars in the sky has his eyes on his children.

Prayer: God, give us faith like Mary. Help us to be brave in the face of your commands. Amen.

Kelsey Miller — Nashville, TN

How shall we know salvation when it comes?

FRIDAY, DEC. 18

Isaiah 42:1-9

Isaiah surprises us by announcing that salvation does not arrive with spectacle, noise, or force. It comes through God's servant—quiet, faithful, gently healing rather than crushing.

To know salvation when it comes is to see God's character, a servant who "will not shout or cry out… A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." Salvation comes through One who restores the fragile and rekindles what is fading. To know salvation when it comes is to see the One who lifts the broken rather than discarding them. The servant brings justice not by crushing nations but by revealing God's truth and light. Salvation is an invitation, not forced compliance.

And, though gentle, the servant "will not falter or be discouraged." Human leaders grow weary, but God's servant remains steadfast. Where we lose heart, he continues his work. To know salvation when it comes is to look for the One who keeps going even when we cannot.

God declares the servant's mission: to open blind eyes, free prisoners, and release those in darkness. Salvation is not by our effort, but by God doing something new that only God can do: liberating, illuminating, transforming.

Prayer: Lord, open our eyes to recognize your salvation when it comes. Teach us to trust your faithful Servant, and to welcome the new things You are doing in our lives. Amen.

Steve Scheid – Springfield, TN

It Builds Character

SATURDAY, DEC. 19

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

As a child, my mother would often respond to any discomfort I expressed by saying, "It builds character." As a mother now, I assume most of my protests were due to boredom or simple childish discomforts.

My character-building opportunities today involve circumstances more complexp and painful. Yet, I still hear my mama's words, reminding me ultimately of what this passage in I Thessalonians is encouraging: a posture of joy and hope which accepts discomfort for the sake of the good which lies ahead.

But this isn't as simple as my mother's pithy phrase implied. It requires practice and diligence to continually remind myself to hold onto the good. And yet, isn't this the perfect antidote to modernity's copious offerings of that which makes us spiritually unsettled? We exist among infinite scrollable negative takes on any current event, such that an equal and opposite reaction is called for.

Practices which require continual prayer, consistent rejoicing, and perpetual thanksgiving in the face of continual rage, consistent tragedy, and perpetual tumult. So, while the phrase may be a simple response to temporarily quell a child's whining, may my mother's "it builds character" be a refrain for you as you hold onto what is good, as God does the work of character refinement within.

Prayer: God of all creation, remain close as I endure difficult, hard, and painful circumstances, which will ultimately build a character of joy. Help me to hold on to the good, for these sufferings will not return void. Amen.

Leslie Eiler Thompson — Nashville, TN

Hail to the Lord's Anointed

SUNDAY, DEC. 20

Hymn: Hail to the Lord's Anointed

Advent hymns guide my heart, mind, and voice to a deeper experience of singing Christmas carols. Texts reflecting hope, peace, joy, and love lead me to the manger. The contemplation and anticipation of Advent offer transformation as I prepare to welcome the Christ child yet again.

James Montgomery (1771-1854) wrote Hail to the Lord's Anointed in 1821 as a reflection on Psalm 72. Like Charles Wesley, Montgomery advocated on behalf of the imprisoned, poor, widowed, and destitute children of England. A prolific hymnwriter, he wove the Psalm attributed to King Solomon into an Advent hymn setting whose verses anticipate Jesus' coming and call to social justice.

"He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free. He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong. Before him, on the mountains, shall peace, the herald go. His name shall stand forever—that name to us is Love."

While on a Celtic pilgrimage to Ireland in 2018, I came upon a stone carving of Biblical stories on a Tall Cross. Among other images were the scales of justice, a heart on one scale balanced by a feather on the other. The artisan monk's depiction of justice, illustrated by the light-as-a-feather heart, compelled me to seek that transformation in my own heart. This depiction of love is personified in Advent preparations leading to justice for this weary, chaotic, wounded world.

Prayer: Gracious God, may my Advent pilgrimage to the manger of Love, soften my heart to be an instrument of justice throughout the year. Amen.

Laura Blevins Douglass — Harrisonburg, Virginia

God Has Not Changed

MONDAY, DEC. 21

Psalm 89

The year 2025 was my roughest due to physical limitations, which had plagued me for about three years. Mostly, I couldn't speak clearly, and I felt less than human, especially in public places. But I also saw blessings each day. Like the Psalmist in Psalm 89:38, I thought God had spurned and rejected me.

Most of Psalm 89 tells of God's love and faithfulness. But then it takes a turn. At precisely verse 38, it speaks of God's renouncing what had been done to God's anointed. Then I realized that this was a defense of both God and the king, the anointed one. It hit me that the king felt spurned as well. Trust in God had been broken. At the end of the Psalm, however, the king blesses God. God had not changed. God was still full of love and faithfulness, plus mercy, grace, and all the attributes proclaimed by so many other psalms. Like the king, I had changed and remembered what God has done, is doing, and will do! Praise and bless God!

Prayer: Gracious God, help me remember all that you have done so that I may bless you always. In Christ's name by the power of the Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.

Chris Suerdieck — Emmitsburg, Maryland



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Sit, friend

TUESDAY, DEC. 22

2 Samuel 7:1-11; 16-18



Nathan Rebuking David, folio 136v from the Paris Psalter, c. 950. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Grec 139. Image source: Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain]

It seemed like a fantastic idea. King David loved the cedar palace he had built for himself. Surely God would want one, too. It seemed obvious to David, and to the prophet Nathan, that God would be delighted with a temple. So, it didn't even occur to them to ask.

But a temple was the sort of gift David liked. It is easy to confuse our desires with God's and then to be so confident in our ideas that we rush ahead, forgetting to bring our plans before God.

Fortunately, God gave Nathan a message for David: I'm the one who builds houses. When did I say I wanted a temple? My people have met me in a tent for generations. I like to be on the move with my people. Don't forget that it is I who built your house. I made you famous. I made you a leader of my people. I protected you from your enemies.

On hearing this, David did what he should have done first; he went and sat in God's presence. I, too, can get carried away with my ideas, projects, and plans. My head can be so full that there's hardly room for God. But God promises us wisdom if we ask for it, when we sit in the presence of God.

Sit, friend, in the presence of God. What is God saying to you?

Prayer: God, my mind is spinning with my plans and my ideas. Help me to stop and sit in your presence.

Kristin Loeks Jackson — Chicago, IL

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Being a Righteous Man

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 23

Matthew 1:18-25

Dear Joseph, Thank you for being so faithful and courageous. I wonder what it was about your character that allowed you, like Mary, to say yes to God's plan for the birth of the Messiah.

What prepared you to make the choices you faced? Who nurtured and protected you in your youth? What questions did you wrestle with along the way, as you faced extraordinary responsibilities? Listening to God's voice and risking your reputation, in the face of danger, you chose love and obedience. With a young family, you became a refugee and depended on God. Like your ancestor David, you became a man after God's own heart. What we see in you is love.

Psalm 27 is a companion for a righteous man: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? ...Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!"

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the righteousness of Joseph. May his model of love and faithfulness inspire and encourage us on our journey with Jesus, arduous as it may be. Amen.

Mary Jo Bowman – Callaway, Virginia

Joseph

CHRISTMAS EVE, DEC. 24

Luke 2:1-7

We hear a lot about Jesus, Mary, angels, shepherds, and the wise men this time of year. Last year, "Joseph's Song," by Michael Card, got me thinking.

Try to put yourself in Joseph's place. God asks him (via an angel) to marry Mary despite her condition. He is told that the unborn baby is God's son. Perhaps he asked: "How can I, a lowly carpenter, be a father to the Son of God? What about a rabbi or a priest?" But God chose Joseph.

As the story unfolds, the angel is always there to help Joseph with the task God has set before him. God doesn't always call the qualified, but he always qualifies the called. Can you relate to Joseph? How many times has God asked us

to do something, and we have replied: "Not me. I am not qualified. Ask someone else." But, as we went ahead, didn't God provide all that was needed?

Prayer: Dear God, accept my gift to you, the gift of myself, the gift that only I can give. Help me remember that whatever you ask of me, you will provide all the support needed to accomplish it. Amen.

Alvin Jenkins — Maryville, TN

Shepherds

CHRISTMAS DAY, DEC. 25

Luke 2:8-20

First-century shepherds were on no one's guest list. Working with animals made them perpetually unclean–unfit for Temple worship–and their reputations were compromised as untrustworthy thieves. A shepherd's testimony was inadmissible in court! Nevertheless, the announcement was made to shepherds. Despite their bad rap, shepherds' work was valuable–tending the food supply and the ritual animals used in worship. Some of Israel's past leaders had come from humble shepherding backgrounds. Even God identified with them: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." (Ezekiel 34:15)

As Christmas turns our attention toward the God who came as one of us, we do well to develop the character of these shepherds. Regardless of how others viewed them, they believed God's good news was meant for them. They "went with haste" to Jesus. They shared their experience. They praised God.

Prayer: Today I receive your joy and peace in Jesus Christ. Today I live in the dignity in which you made me. Thank you for coming as one of us. Let me be one of yours. Amen.

Jennifer Davis Sensenig — Rockingham, VA

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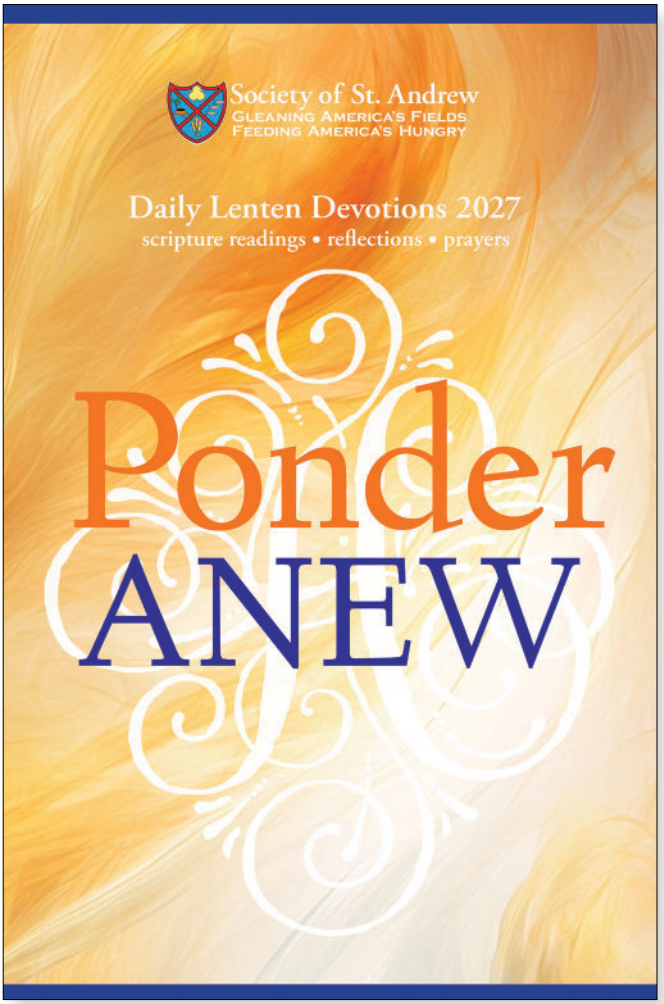

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