

3. Prepare the Way of the Lord! Advent Daily Devotions

The Rev. Eugenia Anne Gamble

First Sunday in Advent: Light in the Dark

Isaiah 9:2 *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. And John 1:5* *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*

It was a dark stormy night and I was fighting for my life. Only the flashes of lightening lit the little hospital room. I was terrified. For hours my doctor read the Psalms to me from his well worn pocket Bible. He used a pen light to see the pages, to split the darkness and give me hope.

The people of Israel were in a dark night, too. Their hope was feeble and fading. To them Isaiah gave a powerful image of light coming and changing everything. In the Bible, light often means truth. When light comes, we see things the way they really are. Jesus is called Light because in him we see the truth of God's love and values in our lives and world. Even when the dark times seem very powerful, the Light of Christ is more powerful. Nothing can overcome it!

During Advent we pray and expect Christ's Light to shine into every situation of darkness and despair bringing a real and living hope for all people. I invite you to spend these days noticing the light, where insight comes, where darkness lingers, where your need for Christ is strongest. If you care to, make a note of those times in a journal. You might write about how the winter light changes or how the stars seem nearer or farther away. You might write about how easily insight and encouragement come some days and how absent God feels on others. Do not judge any of this. Just notice. That will create new space in your heart for the Christ Child this Christmas.

Prayer: Gracious God, break through our darkness with your loving truth. Prepare us to serve you as people of your Light. Amen.

Monday: Genesis 1:3-4 *Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.*

On the first day of creation God created light. This is not the creation of sun, moon and stars. That comes later on the fourth day. Granted, creation itself is a mystery that defies literal interpretation. Still the fact that God's first action was to create light (truth/insight) and that that is what separates the darkness is instructive. From the beginning God has desired that his created order be able to separate truth from confusion. We have not always been good at it. So, abounding in love and patience, God sends Jesus, the light of the world, to allow us to truly see what love and life look like. Today pause and take a deep breath if you feel confused or do not know what to believe or choose. Check inside to see if the confusion comes from a space of fear or pain inside of you. If it does, notice the feeling and invite the great light of God's creative spirit to shine into that place. You might want to write about what you see or notice. If the source of confusion is from outside you and beyond your control, notice how much room you have allowed that situation to occupy in your heart. Is it deserved? If not, invite the creative light of God into the situation and see what it reveals. Don't judge anything. Just notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Great God of All Creation, we thank you for your light that allows us to sort truth out of confusion. Fill our hearts today with just the light we need. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday: Exodus 25:37 *You shall make seven lamps for it; and the lamps shall be set up to give light on the space in front of it.*

The book of Exodus tells the story of how the people of Israel found their way from slavery, through wilderness, into the life of Promised Blessing. In this verse, the covenant of special relationship has been established, and God has asked God's people to create a Tabernacle which was to be a place of intimacy and worship. Within the Tabernacle they are to set up seven golden lampstands so that people can see clearly in their renewed close relationship with God. Our sanctuaries, whether in our churches, homes or other special sacred places, must be filled with light or they will be easy to dismiss or misuse. The fact that God asks for the lampstands to be gold, is not just so that they will be beautiful. It is so that they will be valuable as God's light and insight are always valuable. Worship in darkness is not God's desire. Encounter with God in worship is always intended to shed light into any dark corners of pain, ego or ignorance. At some point today, light a candle. Maybe you have an Advent wreath in your home. If so, light the first candle. If not, any candle will do. Stop for a moment and notice the candle light. Watch how it flickers. If practical, move it around the room and notice the shadows and light it gives. As you move with the candle, invite the light and warmth of God's intimate presence with you to show you what you most need to see. Make a note of that in your journal, if you keep one, and in your heart if you do not. Don't judge anything, even if you choose not to do this at all, or feel ridiculous doing it. Just notice that, too, and wonder about it. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Great God of insight and intimacy, shine your light in our hearts and world. Show us the corners that must be swept, the love that needs to be fanned. Create new inner spaces for the coming of the Christ child this year. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday: Exodus 34:29 *Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God.*

Moses has been communing with God on the holy mountain. God has entrusted him with the mighty vision of God's love and values that are to guide human life and community. The tenderness, clarity and insight of that encounter has changed Moses. It even changed his physical appearance. He reflected the light of God in which he had spent so much intimate time. It was so powerful that the people were afraid to come close to him. Have there been moments in your life, or people from time to time, that fairly glimmered with a holy light? Perhaps you have seen that light sparkling on the ocean, or in the crags of a mountain, or the burbling of a stream. Perhaps you have seen a glimpse of God's presence in a friend, family member, colleague or pastor when their love, or words really hit home with you. Perhaps you have even seen the glimmer of God's presence as you looked in the mirror and prayed for loved ones, or dug in the garden, or turned the page of an inspiring book. Today notice the places and people that seem to shine with a special light and be thankful. Don't judge or resist anything that you notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Gracious God, your shimmering presence fills the world and even our small lives. Help us today to notice you more and more. Help us to clear away the clutter of the unimportant so that we will have new room for you when you come at Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Thursday: 2 Samuel 22:29 *Indeed, you are my lamp, O Lord, the Lord lightens my darkness.*

King David, a man like each of us, filled with a combination of contradictions and faith, has just led his army in victory over the Philistines. It was a fierce battle of ups and downs. At one point David was so worn down and disheartened, his army sent him home. It wasn't just to protect him, however. They saw in David a wisdom and closeness to God that they did not want to vanish from the land. On the day of victory, David spoke a beautiful song to God thanking God for the victory, for God's hand in it, and for all that David had learned about himself, his people and God in the process. About midway in the song he writes today's verse. Adversity and facing his own limitations has allowed David to recognize that every real insight comes from God and leads to a more real and true understanding of oneself. Can you think of a time of adversity when you were not able to do what you intended to do and others had to pick up the ball and run without you? What did you learn about yourself? About how God works in your life? How have you experienced the Lord lightening your darkness? Take a moment to notice the times that flicker across your mind. If nothing readily comes to mind, perhaps this is such a time and you need the Lord to lighten your darkness today. If that is the case, ask for light to guide you. Don't judge or resist anything that you notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: O Great God of Light, we thank you for all the ways that your presence and wisdom lighten our darkness, help us accept our limitations and welcome the victories you bring. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Friday: Job 24:13 *There are those who rebel against the light, who are not acquainted with its ways, and do not stay in its path.*

Job's life has completely fallen apart. He has lost his health, his family, his position in the community, and his certainties about how God will behave and how justice works. Still, the book of Job is not really about all his suffering. It is about how a man navigates his suffering and at what point he will be willing to go against his deepest beliefs and curse God in the process. Job may lose a lot, he may not come to any real understanding of God, but still God is always the central character in his life. In this section, Job is distraught about the state of the world. The violence of it all is adding a deep gash to the wounds of his own personal life. "Where is God in it all," he must wonder. In today's lament he is astounded at how many people rebel against the love and light of God. He is struck by how many are perfectly willing to destroy themselves, others, and the earth in their rebellion. Today take a moment for quiet lament with Job. There are still many who rebel against the light, who do not recognize it, and who will not stay on the path of God's love and values. Sit with Job, and with God, and weep for them and the damage they cause. Perhaps you will notice how you, too, rebel against the insights God sends, or the path on which God has placed you. Don't try to fix anything. Don't judge anything. Just sit with it for a moment and make note of what you think and feel. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Gracious God, you accompany us even when times are hard and our own behavior makes them harder. Help us today to place our hand in yours, no matter our condition, and weep with you for a moment at the pain of your people. May our tears clear new space in us to greet the Christ child when he comes to us at Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Saturday: Psalm 18:28 *It is you who light my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness.*

Again, we find King David giving thanks to God for deliverance in battle. He recognized that nothing he does is solely of his own doing. God moves with him, stays close to him, sweeps the path for him and gives him exactly the insight that he needs for everything he faces. In this beautiful song, David describes the indescribable majesty of God with words and images that soar above the ordinary experiences of life. About two thirds of the way in, he reminds us and himself, that every insight for good has been given to him by God. God has become his light and his lamp. Can you think of a time when you got a special insight and you just knew it came from God? Maybe you did something that you look back on and can't believe you accomplished it. Maybe you wrote something and know the words were not solely yours. Maybe a word of comfort or insight came to you when you were trying to help a family member or hurting friend and you didn't even know that you knew the things you said. Take a moment to record those moments in your journal, or on your heart. Don't judge yourself if nothing comes to mind. Don't beat yourself up and tell yourself you never have insights. Just notice what you think and feel as you re-read the verse. That itself is insight. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: O Gracious God, you are a lamp unto our feet and the very light of our lives. Help us today to be open to all that you have to give and share. Open in us new spaces to receive your light in the Christ child at Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent: Dark as Light

Read Psalm 139:7-12

Nellie the Night Heron lives at the end of my old street in Shell Beach, California. She lives in a cypress tree overlooking the Ocean. She is fat as a football with grey feathers and bright terra cotta rims around her eyes. She is a wild bird who has been befriended by my neighbors who bring her two fish at sun up each morning. She comes up to them on the bench, eats their offering and then nests for the day. Night is as day for her.

So it is with God. The Psalmist tells us that darkness is as light for God. Sometimes darkness is not really darkness at all. We may not be able to see clearly when night comes but God's vision is never clouded. And in a God-filled darkness we may experience depths that the day's responsibilities make it difficult to see.

Advent is a season of waiting. Sometimes it means waiting in the dark for a dawn that is slow in coming. Even in our waiting we do not despair because the darkness, too, is filled with Light! A seed busts from the dark ground, a butterfly from the dark chrysalis and even justice from the darkness of war, prejudice and greed. So in this season of preparation (that includes repentance) and waiting (that tries our patience) we rest, knowing that God sees what we cannot and stays close to guard our nights.

Prayer: God of Light, we await your coming with hope and joy! Come and enLighten us! Amen.

Monday: Exodus 10:23 *People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were; but all the Israelites had life where they lived.*

Moses has had an insightful conversation with God from a strange burning bush. He has answered God's command to return home to Egypt and be God's instrument in freeing the Hebrew people from slavery. Pharaoh is resistant to losing his cheap workforce, as all enslavers usually are. So, God sends plagues to convince the people that Moses is the real thing and that the enslavement of the people must end. In today's verse, the ninth plague is upon them: Darkness. The only thing worse is the last plague, the death of the children. That is really where ignoring the darkness of injustice always ultimately leads, isn't it? If we will not look at the dark corners of self-serving, other oppressing behaviors and assumptions, it is always the innocent that suffer first. Perhaps in our day, never-enough-profit can still be a powerful motivator that makes it impossible to see clearly or hear God's call for justice and equity. Today, ponder times in your life, or our history, when the desire to gain has led to misusing people. Have there been times when you found yourself 'enslaved' by a harsh boss who simply could not see what he or she was doing to others? Have you ever been that boss or partner? Have you ever felt the weight of prejudice yourself, while all the while hearing the oppressor claim that you were the one doing the oppressing? Are there things that you just decided not to see because you felt it was in your best interest not to do so? Notice what memories and feelings this reflection surfaces. Make a note in your journal, or on your heart. Like the Hebrew people did, ask God to give you light to see real truth in difficult times. Again, do not judge anything or try to fix any of it right now. Just notice for today. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Light and Love, remove our blindness today, both our willful and our ignorant blindness. Help us to see clearly in dark times so that we never allow anything to stand or become normal if it leaves the vulnerable to pay the price. Open new space within us to receive your Christ at Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday: Isaiah 42:16 *I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do. I will not forsake them.*

The prophet is writing from a time of despair and promise. Even when things are bleak, he steadfastly believes that God is faithful and will lead the people through their time of confusion and danger. This verse comes from the Servant Songs section of the book of Isaiah. They are prophetic songs that Christians associate with the coming of Jesus and his work of redemption and guidance. It is important to remember that in the Bible, the theme of darkness is not about badness. Darkness is not evil, it is the lack of insight. Too often in associating darkness with badness, white people have let that association land on darker skinned people. This is a serious and dangerous mistake. When the servant says ‘I will turn the darkness before them into light’ he is saying that he will provide insight and illumination for the journey. Can you think of times when you did not know which way to turn? Times when you felt that the path you were on was strange and you couldn’t read the sign posts? Times when you felt lost and could not see a way forward through the problems, sorrows or challenges you, your family and community faced? Were you able to experience God with you in those times? Were you able to cling to God’s promise that you would not be forsaken in those times? How did light eventually dawn? Make a note in your journal or on your heart about the thoughts and feelings this verse inspires. Don’t judge anything, either in the time you are remembering, or in your response now. Just notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Insight and Accompaniment, we thank you that you have walked with us all of our lives, sweeping the path and pointing us toward what is best. Help us today to notice your leading and create new space within us to receive Christ again at Christmas. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday: Nehemiah 9:19 *You in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go.*

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra were originally one long book that tells about the struggles and dedication of the people exiled in Babylon. It tells of their commitment to the ruined city of Jerusalem and their determination, when they return, to restore it. Today's verse comes in the midst of a long remembrance and repentance service. Ezra and Nehemiah believe that their national calamity was a result of people losing sight of God and their own story with God. When that happens we are always vulnerable to all sorts of destructive things. In this service, they call the people to recall how God was faithful in their time in the wilderness after their earlier release from Egyptian bondage. They invite the people to remember how God illumined their long journey, especially when they could not find their way or began to lose heart in their future. Can you recall a time when God gave you a glimmer of light when you were lost and losing heart? What are the ways that hope and direction most often come to you? How do you experience God's leading? How have you experienced God's majestic mysterious presence (the pillar of cloud) in the times of clarity in your life? How have you experienced God's guidance and insight (pillar of fire) in times of chaos or confusion? Take a moment to jot down your thoughts and feelings as you think of these mighty images and tender moments. Don't judge. Just notice. It is enough. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Fire and Cloud, we thank you for your guidance and presence in the sacred journey of life. Give us awe and insight today so that we may meet the Christ anew on Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Thursday: Esther 8:16 *For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor.*

The book of Esther is unique in the Bible as the only book that does not mention God directly. It is the story of a Jewish woman who became Queen during the time of Persian rule in Palestine and, through her implied faith, her commitment to her people, her wits, her courage and a stalwart mentor, Mordecai, saved the Hebrew people from genocide. The verse we consider today comes after the saving events. It reminds us that when clarity comes, when salvation comes, we experience joy, gladness, and honor. In other words, in whatever ways God moves to our aid, it comes with insight, joy and a rise in our self-esteem. This is, of course, exactly how we Christians respond to the coming of Jesus: insight, joy, gladness and a rise in healthy self-esteem. It is often when we surface from difficult times that we truly experience the Joy of the Lord. Can you think of a time when God rescued you from trouble or danger? What were your feelings associated with that time? Who have been the people in your life who have fought for you, even at personal risk? What have you learned from those ones? Take a moment to write their names in your journal and list the lessons learned. Or, simply pause to think about each one in reverent prayer. Today stop often and thank God for the Queen Esthers in your life and in our community. Don't compare yourself. Just rest in the light, and joy that has been at the heart of your journey even when you did not recognize it. Notice how this joy feels. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Light and Joy, we thank you for all those ones who have conspired with you to save, guide and protect us. Each one was your image in our lives. As we experience the joy of your ways, open up inner space within us to meet you anew on Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Friday: Job 12:22 *He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light.*

Job's friends are not being helpful. The only way they can make sense of his calamity is that he must have done something really awful and deserves what is coming to him. Job knows that he has not been perfect, but he also knows that he has lived a righteous life and there is no way he deserves what is happening to him. The particular technique the friends are using is to tell Job that he, who was once held in esteem, has become a laughingstock in the community. This is very painful so Job goes to God complaining about his lot and how he is being viewed. He pours it all out. And then. Then he goes back to where he always goes, to the belief that God is in control of his life. In a beautiful poem he recounts all that he has seen of God's hand in the world, in the animal kingdom, and in the rise and fall of powers. He says in our verse that as lives and princes rise and fall, God, in God's own time and in God's own way, uncovers the truth that is at the heart everything. Sometimes it seems that there is deep confusion in our hearts, our churches and our nation. There is much we do not understand. There is much that those in power seem to want to keep hidden. Even so, Job, from the depths of his despair, reminds us that even the most confusing times are in God's hands and that which is good and true will always come to light. Today think about a time in the past when you were confused about just about everything. How did that time resolve? Looking back can you see things now that you could not see then? Can you see God's hand at work? What helps you to put things in perspective when trouble comes? What helps you to trust in God when God seems to be absent or unconcerned? Take a moment to breathe deeply. Notice what memories and feelings arise. Do you feel mostly gratitude? Mostly wonder? Mostly sadness? Don't try to fix anything right now. Just notice what arises. It is enough. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of the Often Unseen Presence, we thank you for the faith to rely on you when we cannot understand either the big or small picture. Fill us today with the light of your presence and create in us new spaces to welcome the Christ anew on Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Saturday: Job 17:12 *They make night into day; 'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.'*

Things have not improved for Job. Now his friends are telling him that his plight is even bad for religion. He is making God look bad. Job is in such despair that he acknowledges that his spirit is broken and he is ready to die. Those who mock him and blame him for his distress have stopped trying to help. They figure he has brought his trouble on himself and is no longer worthy of God's help or their own. In this verse, Job is actually mocking his friends, saying that they don't know up from down. What captivates me in this verse, however, is something quite different from Job's intention, but something that I find to be true nevertheless. Light is, indeed, very near darkness. Like Nellie the Night Heron, sometimes we too find our greatest nourishment in the darkest of times. It is into the times of confusion that insight comes. It is in the midst of times of pain that healing comes. It is in the night that stars become brightest. It is when we think we can't go on, that a wash of pink begins on the eastern horizon. It is when we cannot save ourselves that Messiah is born. Can you think of times when you found the darkness to be very close to the light? What have been the gifts and insights that have come to you from times of trouble? Have you ever felt that you couldn't stand it, whatever it is, one more day, and almost without knowing, a breath of hope arose in you? Make a note of any light God shines on these memories for you today. Thank God that in Christ, darkness is never complete anymore. Notice how that feels to you. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Dark and Dawn, we thank you for the gifts of the night. Help us to learn its lesson and fill our hearts with stars. Remove resentment from our hearts and create new space for us to welcome Christ at Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Third Sunday in Advent: Light to the Nations

Isaiah 42:6: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

The season of Advent reminds us that no matter what our circumstances, things are about to change. The help we long for is coming. The salvation that we need is on the way. God is on the move. The time is ripe.

This was spectacularly good news for the hearers of Isaiah 42 and, of course, to those whom Jesus later addressed. They were in terrible shape. They needed change desperately. We do too, of course, but sometimes the news that change is coming doesn't seem quite so welcome.

For many of us, life is pretty good. Even in the time of enduring pandemic and national turmoil, most of us have homes, food, health care. As a nation we have extraordinary power, even if less than we once thought. Many of us, don't want the world turned upside down, maybe just tweaked a bit.

Isaiah offers us uncomfortable comfort! Not only is change coming, we are its agents! We are the ones through whom Light comes. We are the Light tellers, the Love shedders, the justice bearers, even if we must speak change and repentance into our own comfortable lives. Think today about those who have brought life giving change to you. How have you been a light, love or justice shedder in your life? How about your church? Take a moment to relive those times in your heart. Feel the joy of being used by God. Feel the discomfort. Ponder today what you need in order to have the courage to be the Light in your family, church and community. Notice those moments when you give light. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Light, you call us to be light. Teach us to live up to that holy calling. Remove our blinders and create in us new spaces to welcome the Christ child at Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Monday: Isaiah 60:3 *Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

The prophet is filled with passionate longing and joy at the thought of the coming restoration of the people. He imagines throngs coming from the dispersed people of God back to a restored holy city. He knows that even though there are times when confusion seems to reign over the earth like a thick darkness, God will arise and dispel the confusion and darkness. In this verse, he tells the dispirited people that when this restoration happens, the whole world will see the transformation and be drawn into its light and values. Even nations and kings cannot resist the glorious transformation that is coming. Wow. Sometimes it is difficult to look at our lives, family, church and nation and to see ourselves as so powerfully transformed that the whole world will see in us what it means to truly live and come together in glorious unity. Still, that is the image the prophet offers. Granted, he is envisioning the joyous return of the exiles to Palestine, but the reality of lives so transformed by the love and power of God that they shine to others is our reality too. As the prophet looks forward to that great day, we as Christians also look forward to its fullness. As we do, we simultaneously live out of its present reality. Christ has come, redeemed and transformed. Christ comes, redeems and transforms. Christ will come redeem and transform again. Have there been times in your life when you longed to be transformed so that you could be an example for others to follow? Have you had experiences when that actually happened? How do you think your church is a winsome example of true life in your communities? How does God's faithfulness shine through us to a hurting world at home and far away? What do people see when they see you? How do people feel around you? Take a moment to jot down your thoughts and feelings in your journal or on the canvass of your heart. As always, don't judge. Just notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Redemptive Grace, help us today to look like you. Forgive our blunders. Heal our wounds. Remove our resistance and create new spaces in us to welcome the Christ child anew on Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday: Psalm 4:6 *There are many who say, "O, that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"*

Psalm 4 is a song about confidence that God will deliver in times of trouble. The psalmist begins by asking God to answer when he calls. Then he moves to state his case and also encourage the people to act righteously. He encourages them to not let their hardship lead them to make bad choices. Rather, they are to think about God, to ponder God in their lives as they lie down to sleep, and not neglect the importance of right worship. In today's verse he expresses the hope and longing of many of us in times of trouble... 'O that we might see something good! O that we might see God's face.' It is easy for us when faced with personal difficulty, or when we see the suffering and violence in our world, to share the psalmist longing to see something good, to see the hand of God. That is a part of the longing of every Advent. We want God to come in new ways, to be born again in us, and in our broken and fearful world. We, too, trust that God will work, but it is also hard to wait to see results. The beauty of this poem is that once he has called out to God, stated his need, remembered God's faithfulness, encouraged others, he then takes a nap! He lies down to sleep in peace knowing that God alone can fix all that needs fixing in his life and nation. Perhaps he knows, too, what Advent seeks to teach us every year, that all good things come in God's time and not our own. Can you think of times when you have especially longed to hear some good news, to see God's hand obviously at work in your life or community? Imagine using the process of the psalmist in times like that. Call on God. State your need. Remember answered prayer. Encourage others. Check your own moral choices. Then take a nap trusting that God's timing is perfect. The baby will indeed arrive in the manger at just the right time. Notice how you feel and what memories arise for you. Jot them in your journal or inscribe them in your heart. Thank God for what you have noticed. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Perfect Timing, we thank you even for the longing that we feel to see good results right away. Help us to trust that you are our help and salvation. Create space within us to welcome you, however and whenever, you come to us, especially as we greet you again in Bethlehem as a little child sent to save. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday: Psalm 27:1 *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

Psalm 27 is one of the most beautiful expression of confidence in God ever written. The writer has been through much. He has won and he has lost. He has experienced ecstasy and despair. He has experienced love and betrayal. He has experienced faithfulness and terrible moral failing. Throughout it all he has learned one thing. God is everything and with God there is nothing left to fear. Fear is indeed, false evidence appearing real. Notice that in this verse his first exultant declaration is that the Lord is his light. By that I think he means both the one who shows him a clear path, like a lantern on a dark pathway, and also that it is God who gives insight and puts things in perspective. It is God who makes what we go through make sense eventually. It is God who allows us to take experience and, with God's light, turn it into wisdom. The word 'salvation' in Hebrew means wholeness, nothing broken and nothing missing. Looking back, how has God shed light on the experiences of your life? Are there things that seemed completely confusing and awful at the time that now seem to fit somehow in the fabric of your life? Are there choices you made that, given the chance, you would not make again, but that still were somehow the making of you? When we are able to view our lives from the psalmist's perspective, that naturally reduces our fear. While we might wish some things never happened, God works even with those things to help us see God and ourselves more clearly. And with more compassion. God makes us whole again no matter what we experience. This is true for communities, nations and peoples. When God is our light, even our scars can become light for others. Notice what thoughts and memories arise in you as you think about these things. Can you say even a broken thank you for what has gone before, for what you have learned? Don't feel bad if you cannot. It is enough to wonder if someday you might be able so to do. Today just notice and do not judge. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Great God, you are the one who stitches life together from many different fragments. We thank you that you are our light, our wholeness. In you the pieces all fit together. Help us today to open our hearts to create even more room for the Christ child this Christmas. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Thursday: Psalm 37:6 *He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday.*

Then psalmist is asking worshippers to be patient and trusting while God works justice for, with, and through them. It can be hard to keep up the fight when things seem not to change. Or if they do change, they seem to change for the worse. This is most difficult for those who are oppressed. It is also difficult for allies and those who may be unsure if their efforts are helping or hindering. In this beautiful song prayer the psalmist encourages worshippers to hold on, He reminds them that God will always vindicate the cause of justice. Justice may momentarily fail. Those moments may build up into what seems like an immovable mountain, but one day the sun will rise, and injustice will fall. Someday the just cause that may be denied too long, will be obvious to all. Someday the kingdom breaks through and nothing is the same again. In Advent, we remember such an inbreaking in the birth of a baby in a stable in Bethlehem. We may want the waiting to be done. But it is not done. Just as we must wait by the manger for the right time, we also keep up the fight for justice until God's right time. It could be any minute! Can you think of times when you have needed encouragement to continue to do the right thing when you could see no results? Can you think of times when you wanted to give up and let someone else do the heavy lifting? Think about a time like that and hear the psalmist utter God's promise to you "Your vindication will shine like the light." What feelings or memories arise? Take a moment to honor those moments with understanding and compassion. Doing the right thing is hard. Working for justice is hard. Ask God to create space in you for a new spirit of energy so that you can meet the Christ child in Bethlehem. The wait is shorter today than yesterday. Today, notice your desire to continue to fight and your desire to throw in the towel. Don't try to make one desire win over the other. Just notice and God will do the work. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of the Long -View, we thank you that our cause rests in your power. We thank you for the promise that when we are in the right we will be vindicated and shine ourselves like the sun. Make room in us for the work that is ours so that we may greet the babe in Bethlehem with joyful hearts. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Friday: Psalm 43:3 *O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.*

Once again we find the psalmist in a time of trouble and confusion. He does not know what to do. Every option either seems like it won't work or he doesn't have the strength for it. He needs help and he knows it. So he turns to God and asks for insight, truth and guidance. For Christians, we cannot read this verse in Advent without thinking of the answer that came in Jesus. He is God in skin giving us insight, showing us deep and lasting truth, and giving us guidance through whatever our days may bring. Further in the psalm, the writer says that when the light comes he will follow it to the altar and sing praises to God with the harp. In that moment of joyous worship, he wonders how he could ever have been downhearted and encourages others never to give up hope. In these winter days, when light dims and nights are long, we can experience insight, guidance and joy as we worship together, both gathered and dispersed. Today, push the season just a bit and think of your favorite verse of your favorite Christmas carol. It's not my favorite carol, but a line from O Little Town of Bethlehem comes to mind in this regard. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Throughout the day sing this, or another verse, to yourself whenever you feel the need of God's closeness, when you long to be brought to the holy hill. Thank God for the desire to worship and for each moment of comfort and guidance you have received in your life. Notice what memories and feelings arise. Just notice. It is not a test or a work you must perform for Santa to come. Just notice. God does the work. God always comes. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Great God, we thank you that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you alone. Give us the joy of our faith and the ecstasy of worship. Prepare our hearts to receive you anew as you come to us on Christmas Day. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Saturday: Psalm 97:11 *Light dawns for the righteous and joy for the upright in heart.*

Psalm 97 is a song in praise of the glories of God's reign on earth and in heaven. That reign always sheds light and joy for those who are willing to enter into it. Earlier in this song, the psalmist rejoiced that God is king, that even his lightening lights up the world. We are a week away from the manger. It may feel like the season has come and gone. Trees went up in stores three months ago. Some of us put ours up on All Saints. The gift of Advent waiting has never been our long suit. Still, even if we have kept a scrupulous Advent, only lighting candles and waiting until Christmas Eve for our tree, it can begin to feel like light is dawning. The nights may feel shorter. We may feel the memory of straining in our beds on these close-to-Christmas nights, wondering if maybe Santa would come early and thinking we hear reindeer on the roof. Sometimes we see before we see because we are so sure of what we will see. Such was the case with the psalmist. His life wasn't perfect. Things didn't always seem to work out. Yet he sings his confidence that God is bringing everything needful about, even if he, and we, must wait just a little longer. When we know that the outcome is good, when we are confident that God is at work, we too can live in the fullness of what is coming even while we live in the waiting of the present moment. We live as Paul put it, already and not yet. Wherever we are on the continuum of fulfillment and hope, we too can rest today in joy. What are the ways that you have kept Advent with its themes of coming light, hope, and expectation? In what ways has Christmas fulfillment joined in Advent's spiritual work? Notice today how you both wait and receive. Jot down any thoughts that arise and any feelings. Don't judge. It is enough to notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Dear God of every Dawning, we thank you that you fulfill our every need. We look forward to all the future miracles you have in store for us as we walk with you to Bethlehem once again. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Carrying the Light

Read Luke 1:26-56

Mary was probably only 13 or 14 years old when she became engaged to Joseph. Marriages were arranged by the families. During her engagement Mary was considered Joseph's wife. If Joseph died during this time, Mary would be a widow even if the marriage was never consummated. If she were to get pregnant, not by Joseph, she would be guilty of adultery and subject to the death penalty.

One day an angel came to Mary with a strange and dangerous message. He told her that she would have a son named Jesus who would rule over the house of David forever.

She was mystified and afraid. But she said, "I am God's servant. Let it be as you have spoken." With that moment of risky obedience, Mary agreed to become the bearer of the Light for the world. Advent reminds us that we are to do that, too, and it may be risky for us as well. Can you think of moments when you experienced 'carrying' the light of the world to someone? Perhaps you have shared your Christian faith with someone who was seeking God. More often, I expect you have displayed that faith in acts of love and service to others, maybe without ever speaking of Jesus at all. Still, he was the message that you carried. If you imagine yourself as a torch bearer, a Christ bearer, what feelings arise in you? Do you feel joyful, like Mary? Awed? Afraid? Exhilarated? Ill equipped? Ready for risk? Perhaps you are in a place where your light feels dim and you need re-kindling yourself. What do you need? Just notice these feelings and desires. The noticing of them in the context of devotion is itself a prayer. Remember, that each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Dear God, we want you to use us to bring your Light and love to the world. Help us say yes to what you want to do through us. Create in us new spaces for you to claim when you come to us as the babe in Bethlehem. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Monday: Psalm 56:13 *For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling, so that I may walk before God in the light of life.*

The context of this psalm is a time when King David was seized by the Philistines in Gath. He is in big trouble and the kingdom with him. Amazingly, his trust in God seems deepened by the experience. When he hits the bottom reaches of his own fear, he finds there a bedrock of trust in a God who exists and rules within and totally apart from whatever we experience. God is deliverer and God is faithful and sure. For Christians, we cannot read this song without thinking of our Savior as our ultimate deliverer. He is the one who comes at just the right moment when we are in trouble and afraid. As we move through these last days of Advent, we are invited to deepen our trust in the One who comes, and who is to come. That little baby, God in skin, is still the bedrock of our lives. He has delivered and continues to deliver us in every time of trouble. While God as a helpless infant is a surprising manifestation, so also our own deliverance can come in surprising packages and at surprising times. Can you think of a time when you experienced deliverance from trouble, maybe big trouble? Did the Savior follow your time table? Did the result look like you hoped or expected? Maybe yes. Often no. Even when the path forward in our lives seems strange, or filled with obstacles, God is there keeping us from utterly falling. This is true through all of life and even eternity. Perhaps that is the 'light of life' that David describes as our walk with God. Perhaps it is simply the insight that God is always there, always delivers and that even death has no power to change that truth at all. Notice today, moments when you feel confident in your faith. Check inside to see if you feel a sense of release, even for a second or two. Notice if there are things in your life that still need full deliverance. Noticing is a step in the walk of healing. Don't judge your progress or even your desire for progress. You are in a perfect place because you are with God just as you are. Deliverance always comes. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Light and Deliverance, we are drawing ever nearer to your manger cradle this week. We know that you have already come. And we also know that you come again in ever surprising ways. Help us to welcome the light that shines forth from Bethlehem even into our own hearts. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday: Psalm 89:15 *Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance.*

Psalm 89 celebrates God's covenant with King David. A covenant is a binding agreement of faithfulness. When God makes covenant in the Bible that agreement is literally cut, or carved, into something indestructible, like the stone tablets of the Law. The prophet Jeremiah recognized that the most indestructible thing in which a covenant can be carved is the human heart. As Christians, we often talk about binding ourselves to God. Sometimes we use the word submission to talk about this. Less often do we think about the mystery of God choosing to bind Godself to us in an indestructible way. At least a part of what the incarnation demonstrates is just how powerful and transformational God's commitment to us is. God doesn't just act on us. God acts with, for and within us. The psalmist recognized that the intimacy of God's presence, the light of God's countenance, is enough to make us shout out loud and dance with joy. In the coming of Jesus, we see God's covenant faithfulness in a form we can comprehend. We see love with arms to hold, wisdom to share, healing to offer, clarity to display, sacrifice to embrace, salvation to ensure. Today, see if you can remember the first time Jesus' Presence became real to you. Has it always been there? Did you shake your rattle at him as he rocked your cradle? Or did you have a time, or series of times, when your eyes popped open and all you could say was, "Oh my"? Or has your relationship been a rocky one, tarnished by the punitive ways in which he was introduced to you, or used as a weapon on you? Perhaps you were long estranged and only recently decided to risk reconciliation. Whatever your experience, think of a specific moment. Re-inhabit it. Look around and describe what you see. In your imagination see Jesus. It doesn't matter if the image is blurry. Just let your heart see and tell him everything. Notice how you feel? Are there tears? Is there dancing? Don't judge. Just notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: Gracious God of the Festal Dance, in this sacred time as we approach the festival of the incarnation, help us to experience the joy of our salvation and be thankful. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday: Isaiah 50:11 *But all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands. Walk in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that you have kindled.*

Today I want to take this verse totally out of context. The prophet is not feeling great about the people's insight and capacity to do the right thing. In the early part of the chapter, he talks about the depth of his own faith and the certainty that even though he is wildly unpopular and disparaged that God will vindicate him. In this last verse, speaking for God, he is basically saying to the wicked, or the simply falsely faithful, that they have made their beds and they will lie in them. They have lit a destructive fire by their behavior and so they will experience the torment they have chosen. Whew. Still, in the Bible fire is not only a symbol of destructive power. It is also a symbol of cleansing and purifying. It is also a source of light. What if we looked at the verse with that lens? What if we thought of ourselves not as people whose failings burn the house down, but as people whose experiences can illumine our lives and warm the house rather than destroy it? Sometimes we tend to define our lives by either our failings or our accomplishments. We ruminate over a failed relationship or a hurtful word spoken in anger. We can even come to think of ourselves as failures who hurt other people. Or sometimes, we day dream about our accomplishments, reliving the feelings of power or adulation until we must have more and more and nothing is enough. What if we looked at our lives as a walk with God along a sparkling river bank. Each step, painful, difficult or joyful, is a teacher in the ways of grace. Take a moment to think of your life as a lovely walk with God. How has God turned your darkness to light? Redeemed your failings? Put your accomplishments in perspective? Jot down your thoughts and feelings in a journal, or ask the Spirit to help you remember what you need. Notice what comes to mind. Don't judge. Just notice. Each time you notice, you create more inner space to welcome the Christ child this Christmas.

Prayer: God of Wild Fire, illumine our lives by your grace. Clear away what does not serve your purpose for us. Purify our hearts and heal our consciences so that in the spaces that have held our pain we may create new room for you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Thursday: Psalm 118:27 *The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.*

In this psalm the people are celebrating a great victory. They have been vindicated. They think that not only did God vindicate them, but God was also vindicated in the eyes of the surrounding nations. In other words, the victory they experienced has made God look good to the world. So they are worshipping with joy and abandon. The horns of the altar were especially sacred. That was the place where even those who had committed crimes could go for sanctuary and no one could touch them. The branches are signs of victory and the greening of life after times of death or destruction. For us as Christians, it is Jesus himself who is the ‘horns’ on the altar. He is our safe place where nothing can ultimately harm us. That is why in Presbyterian churches we choose not to have an altar. We don’t need to make sacrifices anymore because Jesus has done that. We have a communion table instead, a place of intimacy, refuge and feeding. Granted, other Christian traditions see this very differently. One is not right and another wrong. It is all a song of insight and praise and that is simply the note we sing. Today, think about the ways that Jesus has been your refuge. Have there been times when you ran to him when you were discouraged or feeling lost? Bring one of those times to mind and re-inhabit it for a moment. What was going on? What did it feel like to run to him? What light did he shed on your situation? Take a moment to jot this down. If you feel creative you might draw your memory and include celebration branches. Or just look at your Advent wreath or Christmas tree and celebrate your own deliverance. Notice if anything shifts inside you. Don’t judge. God is working even when we don’t feel it. Just notice your experience right now.

Prayer: God of Safety and Deliverance, we thank you that you are our safety and our point of starting over. We thank you that we can always run to you and you help us understand our lives and celebrate your new beginnings, especially our new birth in the One whose birth we prepare to celebrate. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

Friday Isaiah 58:8 *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

In this passage God, speaking through the voice of the prophet, tells the people about true transformative worship. God tells them that their heavy ritualized fasts and traditions are not cutting it. Why? Because they are not resulting in real demonstrable change in lives and communities. What good is a fast, God asks, if the people do not give their bread to the poor and invite the homeless into their homes? When worship so transforms us that we become beings of welcome and doers of justice, that is when our light shines to the world and the darkness cannot overcome it. In this holy season, how does your worship (not what you are *offered* in worship, not the style, or the smoothness of what others do on your behalf,) how does **your** worship contribute to a change in your character and behavior? In what ways do you demonstrate that change to benefit others on a daily basis? As we approach the Incarnation, it is always appropriate for us to think about how we make Jesus visible in the world through our own lives and choices. Are there ways that you feel led to contribute your 'bread' (financial resources, time, gifts, wisdom) to those who are lacking? Take a moment to imagine in your mind's eye someone to whom you might offer your 'bread.' Look deeply at that person's face and demeanor. Do they seem sad, bowed down, suspicious, surly, resistant, hesitant? What wounds might have led them to that reaction? Take a moment to breath a prayer of healing on that person. You might even imagine doing what Jesus did, and wash their feet. Then, in this imagining prayer, ask the person what they need. Since prayer is always guided and protected by the Spirit, it will likely be something that you can provide. Do you sense an instant of wonderment, like dawn breaking? Respond however feels natural to you. As you close this time of prayer, ask Jesus to make you shine and notice, without judgment, how that happens.

Prayer: God of the Guiding Light, help me today to reflect your light of compassion in everything I do. Show me the bread I have to offer and exactly who needs it most so that I may look more and more like you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Saturday: Hebrews 1:1-3b *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.* We have walked together for this season in the Light of Christ largely as it shines through the Hebrew Scriptures. Today's text moves us into the time of fulfillment. While the word light does not appear here, the whole passage is infused with it. How in the world were our ancestors able to see the full light of God in one baby, then refugee, then child, then man, then itinerant rabbi, healer and exorcist? How did they see in him the very essence of God, the very presence of God in human life? It boggles the mind and could only have happened by God's doing, God's own light shedding. As always, God does what has to be done for, with and through us. That itself is miracle. So, today I invite you to create some small places of welcome in your heart for the God of love is born for you, born in you, just as vibrantly real as on that star sprinkled desert night more than two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. As you finish your preparations, or laugh with family, or bow in worship, or search the sky for stars, remember the truth of the Little Town of Bethlehem. The hope and fears of all the years are met in him tonight. Alleluia.

Prayer: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace goodwill! Alleluia!
Amen!

Christmas Day: The Light Comes!

Read: Luke 2:1-14

For centuries God's people waited and prayed for Messiah to come. They imagined a great warrior to vindicate them in battle and restore their homeland and honor. They imagined him riding through town in a chariot with golden wheels polished to catch the sunlight and blind their enemies, wearing boots encrusted with pearls.

For centuries they prayed and strayed, begging God for help one moment and resisting God's ways the next. The prophets urged them to change their ways. But it was too much for them. Still they believed. Still they hoped.

Then one night, under a deep desert sky with stars like diamonds close enough to pluck by hand, a Child was born in Bethlehem and Help arrived.

Help does not always come as expected. Christ/Light often comes quite unexpectedly, in the cries of children, the burden of the poor and in the intimacy of family life. Christ *calls* to us in the needs of others and *comes* to us in the midst of our own. Hallelujah! Our Light has come!

Prayer: Loving God we celebrate your coming! Help us recognize you in the needs of all your children. In Jesus' Holy name we pray. Amen.

