

Advent Devotional



Introduction

Season's Greetings!

I am very excited about this year's Advent Devotional. I believe it will fill you with awe and wonder as you reflect the season. We are blessed to have our Advent devotional readings from four prominent members of our denomination. You will find the devotions reflect the four themes of the Advent Season: **Hope** – Corey Schlosser-Hall, **Peace** – Valerie Izumi, **Joy** – Amantha Barbee and **Love** – Samuel Son .

I know you will be blessed by these readings and that joy will fill your souls. Through their inspiring words may you find a deep sense of God's presence surrounding and upholding you.

Reflection

Advent is the season of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The word Advent means "a coming" or "an arrival." It comes from the Latin word *adventur*, meaning "arrival" or approach." Advent is the period beginning four Sundays before Christmas, observed in commemoration of the coming of Christ into the world. (source: www.dictionary.com) This is reflected in the Gospel of Matthew 24:44,

"Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

The Advent season reminds us of peace that comes through the relationship with our Savior. It is the

fulfillment of prophecy as attested by Micah 5:2 that states,

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

Advent highlights the expressions of God's love for all of humanity. From Isaiah 9:6, Scripture says,

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (KJV)

Prayer

I pray that your spirit will be lifted and the illumination of scripture will inspire you to live in hope and peace.

I pray that you will have a spiritual awakening that guides you toward joy and love for God and your siblings in Christ.

I pray that you are filled with the Holy Spirit and are inspired to be fully open to express holy, life-giving virtues as God leads and guides you. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Veronica E. Cannon

Manager, Office of Vital Congregations

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Hope

Written by Dr. Corey Schlosser-Hall

Deputy Executive for Vision and Innovation,
Presbyterian Mission Agency – soon to be a new unifying
agency

Luke 1:46-55

During a very bleak moment when the future was completely unknown to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Luke records a prayer that she exclaimed to God. This prayer, known as Mary's "Magnificat" is **hope** embodied and recorded.

Advent is about the spiritual practice of expectation and anticipation of Jesus' birth. We remember and rehearse the stories leading up to Jesus' birth and that divinely orchestrated moment of the incarnation of God emerging in the gritty, earthy world.

When Mary learned she was pregnant and not yet married, I imagine she felt at least confused, if not scared about the future, her future. She could have been cast out of her community's future for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Anticipating a future excommunicated from community may have been experienced as *hope-less*.

Somehow, somehow, in her relationship with God and others, her framing of the future shifted. In this prayer, we see an expression of coming into more confidence – *con fide* is Latin for "with faith" – that God was at work, participating in and giving shape to this future. Just the sense that God is paying attention, is at work in this circumstance, had the capacity to edit fear and

hope-less-ness with a shift toward confidence and *hope-full-ness*.

I wonder as I wander all over the U.S. listening to mid councils, congregations and their leaders converse about their future, what story are we telling ourselves about the future? What story are we participating in about the future? Is it a story colored by demise, decline, and fear for the future? Or one infused with *con-fide* that, come what may, God is participating in shaping this story.

"Corey! Just do what I told you. I've got it all setup!" I heard that message audibly in my head on a Wednesday morning in 2013 during a retreat. After sharing what I heard with several trusted colleagues I grew confident it was a message from God for that time and circumstance. I was serving as an Executive Presbyter at the time and was holding onto profound tension about a few of God's congregations and their futures. That tension contributed to fear and worry about their future and our future together. I carry that kind of tension and anxiety in my torso - gut and chest!

While such a message wouldn't land the same way with everyone, for me the message shifted

my spirit. The tension and fear didn't go away, and the message didn't provide any details about what's to come. Yet the message and the Messenger – God – grew confidence in me that God was participating, God was involved in the unfolding present and future, whatever may come. And that infused a tincture of hope in a whole lake of fear and made a HUGE difference for me.

Looking back on that time, I learned more about many of the ways God was working with so many people and teams that neither I nor they could have seen at that time. Such an outcome wasn't being predicted in the message I heard that Wednesday morning in 2013. But that message, those words, that reframe, changed *me* and how I held onto hope through that whole ordeal. And, looking back, I wonder whether my tension and worry was contributing to the tension of the whole situation. Was my emotional life and spirit making things worse? Maybe changing *me* is part of what God needed to shift the situation.

*⁴⁶ And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

(Luke 1:46-55, NRSV)

I pray that in this bleak midwinter, you might experience a word, a presence, a knowing that God is participating in your present and future. In that confidence you might experience hope, a taste of God's abundant life breaking into your present right now. In Jesus' name. Amen!

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Peace

Written by valerie izumi
Malachi 3:1-4

Grace and peace to you.

My mother grew up in Japan during World War II. Her encounters with the brutality of war – the preparation as a young teenager to defend her school against invading soldiers, of escaping her burning home after it was bombed – left a lasting impact on her. Listening to the horror of my mother’s experiences and witnessing the trauma she carried years later made me aware, even as a young child, of the generational trauma and other impacts of war and conflict in the world. Even as a teenager, her experiences and my faith gave me the courage to participate in peaceful marches alongside my peers despite the threats we faced.

If only I could begin this Advent devotion knowing that our lives are at peace and that the world is at peace. Unfortunately, our news sources underscore every day that these are times of conflict and unrest. We are confronted with the reality of injustice in the world – children slaughtered in struggles for dominion and power, the number of unhoused siblings increasing each day, oppressed peoples denied freedom and relief, the earth distressed and waiting for restoration.

Overwhelmed, we may tell ourselves it would be easier to disengage, to say that there is nothing we can do about it, that we are powerless. We cry out, “Where is peace, O God, will it ever be?” or “Where are you, O Holy One? When will the world be made whole?”

Malachi 3:1-4 brings a word of hope and promise for transformation. The messenger reminds us that though there is so much around us that is unsettled in our broken and chaotic world God IS present. As difficult as it might seem in the moment, especially in the swirl of chaos around us, God IS at work within the

world and most importantly in us, renewing our hearts and minds so that we may awaken from our slumber to work for a world that is whole and in harmony with God – a world of true peace.

Advent calls us to hope and preparation for the promised presence of God who enters into our broken world and offers the “promise of peace and abundant life in Christ.”¹ Understanding the world around us through the lens of scripture and faith we may begin to see new ways to actively address challenges that prevent true peace from existing.

We have to work for peace to have peace.

Reflection

The Book of Order says that a faithful [PCUSA] member bears witness to God’s love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ’s Church. . . including “working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.”

How might you work towards this both as an individual and with others?

Prayer

*In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and
Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.*
- A Brief Statement of Faith (1983)

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Joy

*Written by Rev. Dr. Amantha Barbee
Luke 1:39-45*

Advent is a time of dynamic commemoration of a known arrival. That known arrival can be met with anxiety, fear, stress, exuberance, excitement, happiness, and joy. All of these things can be positive or negative, and often simultaneous. Our challenge as believers is to seek empathy with others in their advent. A woman who is unable to have children may understand this text in a very different way than a woman who has multiple children, a healthy relationship in a socially acceptable partnership with a stereotypical life. Two married men who are awaiting the arrival of their adopted child will read this text differently as well. We must be sensitive to all realities. We cannot gloss over what a newborn means, not only during the time of Mary and Elizabeth but also how it relates to us today, gaining strength from Mary's story of struggle.

Mary was afraid. What we have now accepted as the ultimate gift meant anything but joy for her. How would she tell Joseph, her betrothed, that she was pregnant? She and he knew that they had not consummated their relationship. Society would dictate that Joseph stoned Mary. Mary would shame her entire family and embarrass Joseph. Joseph would feel hurt and betrayed. Mary's pregnancy was nothing but an avenue of destruction for Mary and Joseph. So, what did Mary do? She listened attentively to Angel Gabriel, who shared some rather unbelievable things with her. Furthermore, he told her the worst curse of her life was because "she was favored by God". Where is the joy in that?

Our joy comes in that God meets us where we are. God knew that Gabriel's message was difficult to receive. God sent Mary to see Elizabeth. No matter how huge our life struggles, we don't have to go through them alone. Advents in life can be daunting at times but we

are not alone. Elizabeth offered comradery, strength, hope, gladness, honor, dignity, and yes, joy! Elizabeth validated Mary in her moment of weakness and humanity. Elizabeth saw Mary. Mary's biggest fear was becoming more invisible than she already was. There is joy in being seen, no matter the circumstances. We must see God's people, meet them where they are, and offer no judgment, only joy.

Reflection

- Where have we judged Mary? Where have we judged Joseph?
- With whom do you identify in this story? Mary, Joseph, or Elizabeth?
- How can we support individuals and families in their difficult advents and offer joy?

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, thank you for gifting us multiple pathways to joy. We also thank you for our tears that give us temporary relief while we wait. Your Son, Jesus Christ comes to comfort and guide, heal and forgive. We eagerly await the joy you provide for us. We may not understand how you offer your joy, but we delight in the fact that you do. We live in gratitude, dear Lord, during this amazing season of Advent. Please help us to walk in faith of you and your promise, and in so doing, offer joy to your children all over the world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

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Love

Written by Samuel Son
John 21:9

When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread. (John 21:9)

John ends his gospel on this story, Jesus making breakfast for his friends. A stark contrast to John's beginning salvo where he starts with the eternal moment before the big bang. John introduces Jesus as the Word of God who created everything: "Without him, nothing came into being." Cosmic! Grand! What does Jesus do with his last days on earth? Make breakfast. Grill fish over a charcoal fire. Mundane. Like the breakfasts we make every day. Every day, I wake up at 6am to make breakfast for my growing teen boys who require half-a-dozen eggs each!

John had tons of other stories to choose from over this quaint breakfast story. If he was to write about everything post-resurrection Jesus did, John explains, the world couldn't hold all those papyrus – pre e-book days. But John selects this one, because to John, whose favorite name for God is "Love," this story best embodies Love. He dedicates a whole chapter to this single story! And the rich details! 153. That was the haul of the day. John counted it out. "Fish cooking over a charcoal fire." We are right there with John, hearing the crackle of the fire and the murmuring of the morning sea.

We tend to skip this breakfast to get to what we think is the "real" drama of the story where Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" to help him work through his guilt. But that conversation does not happen if not for this hot breakfast. Something about a perfect grilled fish in the open air opens the body and soul for hard and vulnerable conversations. There's a reason why

proposals usually come after a meal. The question, "Do you love me?" is the most vulnerable confession of love, for it says that I love you so much that you loving me back matters. But before that question, Peter enjoys a deliciously crisped fish.

I remember as a kid when I acted up in front of guests and my father asked my uncle – a head taller than my father so a giant to me -- to take me out and discipline me. My uncle gave me a look that said, "obedience or death," so I got up and followed him worrying about in what state I would be returning home. When we were out into the street, my uncle kept walking. Because he didn't want witnesses, in my mind. We stopped about two blocks away from our house. Then from a street vendor, he bought a baked sweet potato (this was Seoul in the 80s). He said, "먹어" which means eat. I still taste that warm sweetness of that cold winter evening. After I licked off the remaining orange goo from my fingers he said, "Should we go back?"

Reflection

- Why does Jesus ask Peter the same question about Peter's love for him three times?
- Why do you think John gives the number of fish caught that morning? Why does that detail matter to John?

Prayer

For prayer, I offer a [poem](#) I wrote reflecting on this story which I consider as the greatest love story ever told:

Peter dives into the icy morning waters of Galilee,
his broad sunburned chest so full of regret,
he could not get to the shore fast enough.

The ashen sky giving way to blue,
when he finally reaches the shore,
the sea weighing on his shirt and beard.

Peter wipes the salt off his eyes and walks
to the small fire waiting for him
and when he sits he cannot remember

the words he rehearsed if given the chance
to set things right. But how does one begin
making amends with a friend you denied?

He hears the water rubbing the pebbles,
the robin returning to the cries of her hungry
chicks, and his lung catching breaths.

Then the friend gives Peter a fish, a skin
crisped into a deep sliver, deciphering
the new day's light. His lips wade the temperature,
then tears off the flesh enfleshing
the nourishment of the deep sea.

For a moment,
he forgets
his guilt,
knows only
the full-bodied pleasure
of a fish perfectly grilled,
over an open fire,
on a spring morning,
with an old friend.