

INTRODUCTION

Let us light candles

By Donna Frischknecht Jackson, Editor of *Presbyterians Today*

About this devotional

Welcome to *Presbyterians Today's* Advent and Christmas devotional, “Let Us Light Candles: Matthew 25 and the work of Advent.” This extended online devotional — taking us not just through Advent but through Christmastide and ending with Epiphany, Jan. 6 — brings to you the inspiring words in Howard Thurman’s poem “I Will Light Candles This Christmas.”

Thurman, a Baptist pastor, theologian and civil rights activist, was born in 1899. The grandson of a former slave, Thurman was named by *Life* magazine in 1953 as one of the 12 greatest preachers in the country. The pastor not only co-founded San Francisco’s Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in 1944 — the first interfaith and intercultural congregation in the United States — but he also mentored a young Martin Luther King Jr., who received his Ph.D. in 1955 at Boston University, where Thurman was serving as the first Black dean of Marsh Chapel. Thurman’s most well-known book, “Jesus and the Disinherited,” published in 1949, illustrates the pastor’s theology. In it he expounds on Jesus’ example of unconditional love and illustrates how that love not only helps the disinherited endure oppression, it also changes the heart of oppressors.

Nowhere better can Thurman’s belief in such a redemptive, transformative love be seen than in his writings about the light that came into the world at Christmastime.

How to use the devotional

Each week’s Advent and Christmas theme will be a stanza from Thurman’s poem, followed by a reading from Scripture, a short meditation and closing prayer. At the start of each week will be a reflection question in which I invite you to light a candle (or play the video of the candle provided) and ponder more deeply that week’s theme.

I also invite you throughout the seasons of Advent and Christmas to submit pictures of the candles you are lighting — actual wax candles or

photos of the “flames,” the little actions done by your hands — that are lighting your community with love. These pictures will be posted on *Presbyterians Today's* social media sites — Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

It is my hope that by Epiphany, we have many lights burning brightly. Why? Because our world has been shrouded in the darkness of racial and political unrest, and the cloud of pandemic uncertainties is still hovering low. But there is a light coming to us, one promised by God. It is a light that John’s Gospel says “shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

It has been a powerful privilege to journey with Thurman as I wrote this devotional for you. I now hope that you find your journey with Thurman this season just as powerful. Let us begin these Advent and Christmas seasons lighting those candles Thurman envisioned — candles of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace and love.

Social media participation

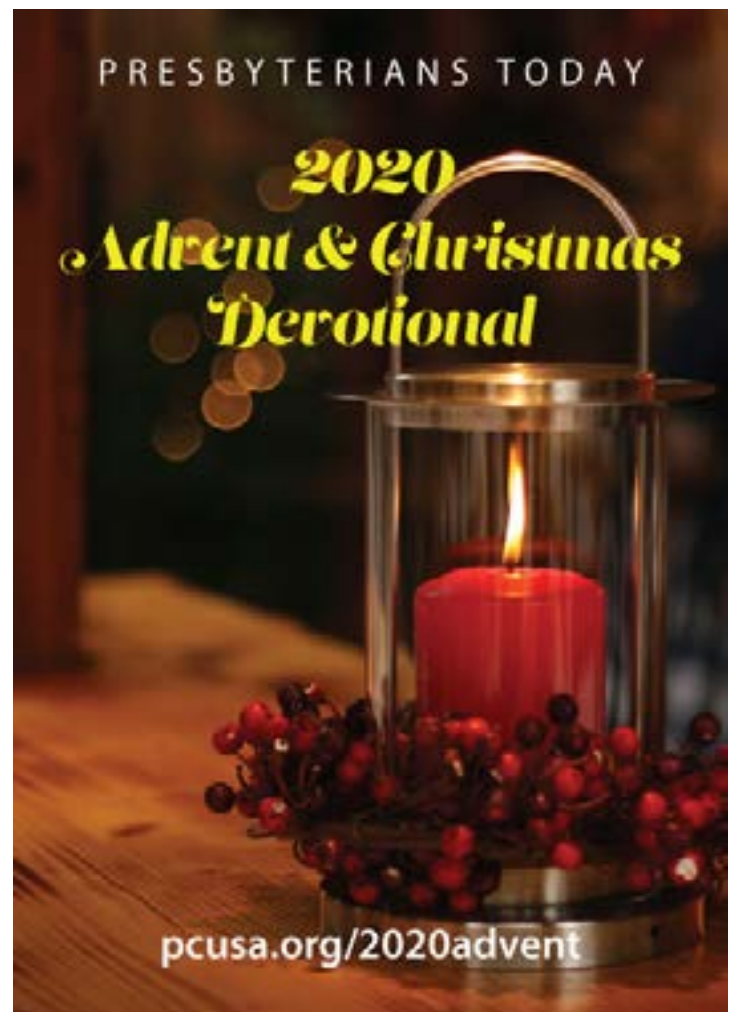
Presbyterians Today wants to see your light shine this holiday. Submit pictures of the candles you are lighting (actual candles or how you are shining light in the world by living out the words of Matthew 25 to give water to those who thirst, visit those in prison and clothe the naked). Include your name, church and a brief description of the picture. Send to Donna Frischknecht Jackson at editor@pcusa.org.



I Will Light Candles This Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.



Candles of joy despite all the sadness

We begin our Advent journey by lighting the first candle on the Advent wreath. As we watch its flame dance, think about the joy that Scripture speaks of: a joy that doesn't mean happiness. Rather consider the joy that comes to any heart that knows no matter what circumstances we face, we do not face

them alone — Emmanuel, God with us, is indeed with us.

Spend time this week reflecting on where you have experienced such joy. How did it comfort you in seasons of sadness, grief or hopelessness? How can you share that understanding of joy with others?



Day 1 | First Sunday of Advent, Nov. 29 Oil for our lamps

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. — Matthew 25:1–13

Howard Thurman wrote, “There are those who have in themselves the gift of joy. Wherever they go, they give birth to joy in others. To be touched by them is to be blessed by God.” Beatrice had this gift of joy, and she shared it generously throughout her 93 years on earth. Her family spoke at her funeral of how in spite of losing her father at an early age, in spite of being sent to work grueling hours shucking oysters at the age of 10, in spite of being widowed with two children by 20, in spite of the unrelenting seasons of sadness in her life, Beatrice somehow

radiated joy. “There was always a gentle smile on her face, even when tears were flowing down her cheeks,” her great-granddaughter recalled.

As the stories about Beatrice continued to be shared, I found myself wondering, “How someone who had faced so much hardship could be remembered as being so joyful?” Then an elderly man came forward to the microphone and began telling how Beatrice never let her “lamp of joy burnout.” Rather, he said, Beatrice kept it burning brightly with God’s promise that she would never be left alone. Even in her darkest moments, she made sure to have enough “oil” on hand — enough trust in God — to get her through the times of waiting for the divine presence to arrive and chase away the shadows.

I found my mind drifting back to the times when I was not prepared with enough oil for my lamp, to how in my search for more oil — searching in places other than God’s Word — I had missed God’s presence. Beatrice, though, stayed awake, ever watchful for joy to arrive. She kept her lamp burning so brightly that even in death, her light continued to bless, comfort and inspire others.

Pray

God of promises fulfilled, help me to be better prepared for your coming into this world once again. May I remain vigilant to always have enough oil for my lamp. May you find me wide awake this Advent season, ready to greet you with great joy. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Who have been the “Beatrices” in your life, and what have you learned from them?

Day 2 | Monday, Nov. 30

Our 'inner authority'

One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders and said to him, "Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?" He answered them, "I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" They discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet." So they answered that they did not know where it came from. Then Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." — Luke 20:1–8

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. — Isaiah 30:15

I began lighting candles year-round — not just during Advent and Christmas — when I moved into my 18th-century home. It didn't seem appropriate to me to fill the primitive rooms — complete with small windows and low ceilings — with LED lights. While trying to stay true to the house's history, there was another reason I began living more by candlelight. I noticed a calming peace washed over me whenever I lit a candle, especially when I was faced with a pressing writing deadline or grappling with a church conflict. The candle gave me permission to be still. It invited me to stop filling my world with words for answers or rebuttals and to listen

to God's whispers.

Those who have studied Howard Thurman's writings describe him as having a "quiet faith," and they have noted that throughout his life he sought a deep commitment to silence. It was in this silence that Thurman discovered what he called the "inner authority" — that place in our hearts where we find the strength and purpose to live the lives we are called to live and, by doing so, possibly be able to make a difference in the world.

The priests and scribes were always asking Jesus who gave him the authority to turn the world upside down and to challenge the status quo. We know Jesus' authority came from above, but what we tend to forget is that Jesus spent quiet time alone with God to renew his strength and to gain clarity.

These days, we are so quick to react with rebuttals and rhetoric. What would happen if we quieted down long enough to tap into that "inner authority" Thurman speaks of? How would God speak to us? What would we be led to do? The prophet Isaiah reminds us that "in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." This Advent, may we find our strength. May we find our inner authority.

Pray

God of great guidance, quiet my heart today so that I can be fully present to you and tap into an "inner authority" which will renew my strength to better serve and glorify you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Turn off your email notifications, cell phones and TVs, and give yourself at least 30 minutes of uninterrupted quiet time to reflect on Thurman's idea of the power of "inner authority."



Day 3 | Tuesday, Dec. 1

Seeking a gracious spirit

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her — but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. — Isaiah 1:21–23

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or

nakedness, or peril, or sword? — Romans 8:35

I used to skim over Scripture passages that didn't seem "holly jolly" to me during this supposed "holly jolly" season. After all, who wants to hear about once faithful people losing their way to the point where God's wrath is invoked? I don't ignore these passages anymore. Maybe it's a sign that I'm getting the wisdom that I heard comes with age. While I can't be certain of possessing such wisdom, I'm certain that Advent is not a time to skim over the evil and injustices of this world. If anything, Advent is a time to face the darkness, holding on to God's promised light.



And as we confront the injustices, we must remember to have a “gracious spirit.”

Howard Thurman spoke of this gracious spirit as one that doesn’t gloss over the stark, brutal nature of evil. Rather, he said a gracious spirit was what helped him see clearly and stay mindful that “even as I resist evil, I share the guilt of evil.” In his book, “The Mood of Christmas,” Thurman wrote: “I am aware that the Light not only illumines, but it also burns.”

Chris Singleton, a former professional baseball player, has a gracious spirit. His mother, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, was one of the “Emanuel Nine” — the men and women who were killed in the June 2015 shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Amid the carnage, the world not only learned about each of these people, including Chris’ mom, who was said to have a deep faith and a smile that lit up a room. The world also learned what forgiveness looks like as family members spoke words that elevated love over hate. Sadly, this would not be the last act of violence against people of color in the United States.

Seeking a way to honor his mother and to

keep a conversation going on how important it is to set aside differences, Chris, on the fifth anniversary of the shooting, released a children’s book, “Different.” The book, he told a local newspaper, shares the message of the importance of love and unity, and how we need to celebrate each person’s uniqueness. Like Howard Thurman, Chris Singleton isn’t ignoring the evil in the world, but is seeking “a gracious spirit in dealing with the injustices of the world.” May we join in seeking that spirit as well.

Pray

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus, your Son, who modeled for us the power of forgiveness as he died on the cross. Help us remember we are all standing in the need of grace, and that the greatest gift we can give this season is to find ways to elevate love over hate. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Today, let us do two things that are very difficult to do: First, let us confess how we might be adding to the injustices in this world. Second, let us commit to moving forward in ways that elevate God’s love for all.



Day 4 | Wednesday, Dec. 2 Mountain lessons

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. — Isaiah 2:1–4

The tiny stone chapel was nestled on the side of a mountain. No larger than a child’s playhouse, it captivated my 8-year-old imagination. I had to go inside. As I entered, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of stillness that led me to sit reverently on a bench for quite some time. It

was only my mother’s worried cries coming from the outside — “Donna! Donna!” — that broke my moment of contemplation.

We were on a family vacation visiting my father’s relatives in Switzerland, and we were hiking in an area of the Alps which he had called his “backyard” as a boy. We wanted to go up to the mountains to enjoy the amazing vistas. But I found much more: I found God and God found me. I went up to the mountain that day and came down wanting to walk in God’s paths — paths that would twist and turn, and lead me into ministry many years later.

This Advent, the prophet Isaiah invites us to go up the mountain so that we can once again be taught by God and learn to walk in God’s ways. That mountain doesn’t have to be a literal one to climb. It can be any moment in our lives in which we seek to go further and higher with God. Those mountain climbs are the ones where we want something more in life — more love than hate, more joy amid sadness, more peace than conflict — and we realize that “more” can only come from God.

In the documentary, “Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story,” filmmaker Martin

Doblmeier, shares the “mountain” moment that impacted Thurman’s life. It was a trip to India where the Black pastor met with Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had wanted to learn more about the Black struggle in America. Thurman, in turn, wanted to hear more about the nonviolent approach to resistance that was foundational to Gandhi’s spiritual life. Thurman would return from that “mountain” and share for years come about the power of living peacefully, even amid opposition. In a divided world where joy seems fleeting, we need to climb our metaphorical mountains of the Lord. We need to ascend to those places where we can learn to be people

who walk in God’s ways.

Pray

God of mountaintop lessons, help me climb higher in my knowledge of you, so that I may walk in your ways all the days of my life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take a moment during your day to visualize walking up the mountain of the Lord as spoken by the prophet Isaiah. What do you see? Is the walk hard? Once at the top, sit quietly and ask for the God path to be revealed to you.

Day 5 | Thursday, Dec. 3

Don’t let distractions dim the God view

Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” For they no longer dared to ask him another question. — Luke 20:34–40

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion — to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. — Isaiah 61:1–3

The session meeting grew longer and more contentious by the minute. The discussion, though, wasn’t about finances or major building repairs — items that tend to prolong meetings and agitate elders. The pressing business at hand was how to hang the holiday greens with so few abled bodies to help. When the suggestion to

scale back the sanctuary Christmas decorations was made, one elder grew red in the face and huffed that that was not an option.

As pastor at a new church, I sat there trying hard to find the right way to say how our energy shouldn’t be spent on church decorating matters. I wanted to remind the elders to focus on what I always thought to be Isaiah’s Christmas gift list: bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives.

Distractions — they happen to the best of us. We see that in Luke’s gospel where Jesus is asked a question about marriage: specifically, if a woman is married more than once, who is her legal husband in the afterlife? The Sadducees in the text are referring to a law in which a man was obliged to marry his brother’s widow to provide a legal heir for the man’s property and keep the family name going. But they wanted to know what happens after death.

I have always been challenged by this text, but after that session meeting I am not that challenged by it anymore. If anything, I am comforted by the reminder I read between the lines. Like the Sadducees, we can easily find ourselves caught up in endless discussions on things in the church that are minor: holiday decorating, the new paint color for the fellowship hall, the Christmas carols to be sung during Advent and the list goes on.

It is true that many of the things we spend so much time on are the very things that do not give glory to God. And as the Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us, isn’t our chief end in life to glorify God? If we are to light candles of joy this Advent, then we need to stop being distracted. Perhaps we can begin by heeding the words of Howard Thurman, by taking “our little



lives, our big problems” and placing them “upon Thy altar.”

Pray

God, who calls me by name, help me see more clearly what I can do this Advent season to reach out to those in need of help. Remove the distractions that keep me from glorifying your name. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



Day 6 | Friday, Dec. 4

Never alone

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. — 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. — Psalm 30:5

It was just a simple computer printout of a photograph of a few lighted candles taped to the door of an ICU patient’s room. But to the family of the loved one lying in the bed beyond the door, unresponsive to all treatment, it was a great solace. It was a reminder of what Howard Thurman said that our lives are never left to themselves alone.

In 2018, the Mayo Clinic proposed an initiative of placing an illustration of a glowing candle on the doors of dying patients as a gentle, comforting way of identifying the rooms with patients who had transitioned to comfort care or died. The image of a lit candle encouraged staff members to modify their words, silence themselves and reflect. After a one-year trial of the candle pictures, hospital staff and families reported a positive experience. In a report issued by the Mayo Clinic, a spouse of one patient was so moved by the site of the candle door card that she asked to take it home in remembrance of her husband.

For centuries, candles have been used when

Go deeper

Today, take a picture of where you find joy breaking through the world’s sadness. Is it as simple as a plate of Christmas cookies left on your porch by a neighbor who knew you were down? Is it a heart-shaped cloud in the sky that made you smile? Is it a peaceful message of hope on someone’s lawn? Capture the image and share the joy by sending it to editor@pcusa.org.

mourning the loss of a loved one. The candle in the Roman Catholic Church signifies the divine savior. In the Jewish tradition, it is customary to light a candle on the anniversary of a death of a loved one. The National Holocaust Museum even has a candle room for remembrance. And so, while the lighting of real candles is not allowed in an intensive care unit, the Mayo Clinic proposed the next best thing: a picture of a glowing candle.

Sadly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, being alone in the moment of death is a harsh reality that loved ones and medical professionals find incomprehensible. No one should die alone, yet COVID-19 is challenging that. People have searched for ways to be present: a phone call or video call to whisper goodbye. But the beautiful truth is this: Even when we cannot be together, God’s presence is always with us. We can trust the psalmist’s words that while weeping may linger for the night, joy will come in the morning. No matter what the situation, the divine light will comfort. We can find a way to light a candle.

Pray

Divine Light, for those who are grieving this day, for those who are facing the holidays with an empty chair at the table, for those who are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, we ask that your grace and love wipe away the tears that fall. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Create a short memorial service today in your home. Set up a group of candles, and with each one you light, name a loved one who had died. Remember the funny stories and remember the joy he or she brought to others. Now thank God that they are basking in heaven’s light.

Day 7 | Saturday, Dec. 5

Taking joy into the world

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. — Isaiah 4:2

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. — Romans 12:15

The nation was stunned. A grief beyond words was heavy in the air. Twenty children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, had lost their lives to yet another senseless school shooting. I walked into the sanctuary to prepare for worship. It was the third Sunday of Advent, and we were to light the third candle on the wreath: the candle known as “Joy.”

“Really, God?” was all my broken heart could say. How could we proceed with lighting the Joy candle amid a tragedy that was still too painful and fresh to process? As I sat staring at the Joy candle, I kept thinking about the joy God was speaking of in the Bible. Joy wasn’t about everything being right in the world. Joy wasn’t about being happy or in a good place where there was no death or dying or tears. Joy was the certainty of knowing all would be well because no matter what the situation, God was still God — ever present and forever helping us. Joy was trusting that God’s loving arms were still wrapped securely around you. Joy was the Apostle Paul penning these words from prison: “Rejoice in the Lord

always; again, I will say, Rejoice.”

When the organist entered the sanctuary a few minutes later, I told her that our worship plans had changed. She gave me a quizzical look that grew more so when she spotted the white vigil candles that were already prepared to be handed out for the singing of “Silent Night” at our Christmas Eve service. I told her to extend her playing of the last hymn because I was going to invite the congregation to come forward, take a candle and light it from the flame of the Joy candle. All she could do was nod “OK” as tears filled her eyes.

As the worship service drew to a close, I said a prayer for all the precious lives lost. I then invited everyone to come forward and light their little candle with the light of joy that was burning from a candle I had found so ironic earlier that evening. But it wasn’t ironic anymore. It was appropriate. For joy was still burning brightly — no matter how hard the world tried to extinguish it. Rejoice! The candle of joy is burning in spite of the sadness around us

Pray

God, your light comforts us and guides us. During this Advent season, may we find ways to shine joy in the darkest of places. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

As the first week of Advent concludes, look back and reflect on all the moments of joy that chased away sadness.



Candles of hope where despair keeps watch

As the second candle on the Advent wreath is lit, let us reflect: What leads people to despair? How can we get

better at identifying early signs of despair? What ways can hope turn despair around?



Day 8 | 2nd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 6 The most precious diamond

“I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.) “To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.’ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” — Luke 7:28–35

I was a young editor of a jewelry business magazine whose job entailed mingling with the industry’s illustrious players at elegant parties. Tonight, the champagne would be flowing in one of New York City’s Fifth Avenue jewelry stores. The jeweler, famous for accessorizing celebrities for their red-carpet walks, did not disappoint his guests, greeting us to window displays of Christmas trees dripping in diamonds.

But it was a woman huddled outside the front of the store, holding her hand out for help, who got my attention. It was an all-too-familiar sight on the city’s streets, but the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty was especially raw and brutal

that wintry night.

I didn’t want to admit my name was on the party’s guest list. I didn’t want to be like the children in the marketplace that Luke wrote about: those who — even though Jesus and John showed them the way to what really mattered in life — continued making excuses for why they couldn’t follow. Would I listen to John? I’m not listening to someone who ate locusts. Would I listen to Jesus? He dined with sinners, not A-listers.

I stared at the figure obscuring the dazzling window display. I had a choice to make: mingle with those inside or stand with those outside. Turning my back on the party, I handed the woman my cab fare to return to my apartment and began walking home.

Howard Thurman once said that there are times when we refrain from doing the thing that could rescue another person. That night I didn’t want to refrain from doing something for one of God’s children: the real “diamond in the rough” who was more precious and valuable than all of the pressurized pieces of coal dangling from a Fifth Avenue jeweler’s Christmas tree.

Pray

God, forgive me when the world’s riches dazzle me. Open my eyes so that I truly see the precious lives I pass by too quickly on my Advent journey. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Do a mental scan of your community: the streets you walk, the roads you drive and the houses you pass. Where does the candle of hope need to be lit?

Day 9 | Monday, Dec. 7

Holding on to hope

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. —

Psalm 40:1–3

Caring friends who walked with me after losing my boyfriend in a jeep accident kept telling me to hold on to hope. “Your loneliness will not be forever,” they would say. The thing about hope, though, is it gets harder to hold on to as the years go by with nothing but God’s deafening silence humming in your ears. And yet, we are told to wait patiently; there will be a new song of praise. My song came 11 years later when, at age 43, God heard the cry of my lonely heart and led me down the aisle. Psalm 40 was the Scripture woven throughout the wedding ceremony.

Eleven years, though, is nothing compared to God’s children who had waited longer than that for God to answer them. Scholars say about 400 years had gone by from the last words spoken from the prophet Micah to the cry in the wilderness from John the Baptist announcing the kingdom of God has come near. I wonder, “How did they hold on to hope?” We don’t know. Those 400 years are silent ones in our Scriptures.

But there is another group of God’s children who have also been waiting 400 years and not waiting silently anymore. Their stories of “hoping against all hope” are being told and are begging to be heard. They are the stories of African Americans still longing for freedom and justice to prevail. They are the stories of those whose patient waiting has rightly turned into righteous anger and the call for action.

This season, I would love to rejoice in the wilderness with John who says to repent, the wait is over. Truth is, we haven’t repented; and we are still waiting for the steps of all of God’s children to be made secure. This Advent, if we must still wait, then I pray we do so together. I pray we light the candles of hope that Howard Thurman speaks of: hope heard in the words we speak, hope seen in the actions we take, and hope shining in the love we share abundantly and without prejudice. May our hearts hold on to hope.

Pray

Great and loving God, I am not good at patiently waiting. I need to know you are here with me. I need to know that all will be well. And, I need strength — strength to fight the good fight. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Explore the many racial justice resources that are available for you and your congregation at pcusa.org/racial-justice-resources.



Day 10 | Tuesday, Dec. 8

A Christmas rainbow

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” —

Luke 21:29–36

When Howard Thurman pondered the symbols of Christmas, he didn’t call upon the obvious: tinsel-strewn trees, sparkling lights and sprinkled sugar cookies. Rather, he pointed to a rainbow “arched over the roof of the sky when the clouds are heavy with foreboding.”

I never associated rainbows with Christmas, until one year. Christmas Eve was in a few days, and I was struggling with a message on hope. What could I say about a holy night in which God came to us in the flesh when lately it seemed as though God incarnate was as fabled as “a leprechaun’s pot of gold at the end of a rainbow”?

I went for a drive to clear my head. As I drove, I noticed something arching over a barn in a valley. Could it be a rainbow this time of year? It was, and its vibrantly colored arches created a perfect bow. I had my Christmas message:

Years ago, God’s announcement of hope



breaking into our lives came with the appearance of a brilliant star in the East pointing to the Christ Child who would bring light to our chaotic world. I've always stared up at the sky on this holy night, wishing I could see a sign that God is still at work in our lives. And I know many of you are looking for such a sign as well. If only we could see that star for ourselves. But we did see something. There was a rare December rainbow in our skies. What made this rainbow even more amazing is that it appeared in the the moment our nation paused in silence to remember those killed in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Connecticut. I know this, because when I called my mother to tell her about the rainbow, she rushed me off the phone because she was watching the televised memorial service. For those who say, "God has

forgotten us," I say, "Open your eyes. God is with us, as promised. In the brilliance of a star, in the cry of a newborn baby, in the songs of the angels, and now, in a rare Christmas rainbow — yes, God is with us!"

Pray

God of stars and rainbows, you never stop revealing your presence among us. May my eyes be eyes of great faith this day, seeing clearly your beauty that is always before me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Go outside either during the day or in the evening and gaze up to the skies. What do you see? What do you feel? Make sure to end your sky-gazing moment by giving thanks for God's abiding love and presence.



Day 11 | Wednesday, Dec. 9 Battered yet still blessed

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." — John 8:2–11

I gently pried the angel figurine from her mouth and spoke a feeble, "Bad dog," which I'm sure didn't do much good in the puppy training department, especially as it was topped with a loving kiss on her head. I placed the "angel-turned-chew-toy" safely on a high shelf and went back to work in my home office.

Later that night, as I passed the shelf, I stopped and stared at the angel. While she was battered with puppy teeth marks and now missing her wings, she was still the picture of serenity with her head gracefully bowed down and hands folded in prayer. In fact, I found her even more beautiful than when I first received her as a gift. She was beautiful because I saw a reflection of myself in her battered state. I saw the reflection of those I was called to serve. I saw the reflection of all humankind — for aren't we all bruised and battered?

Yet, no matter what scars or sins we carry, there is someone who sees beyond the surface and sees our beauty: Jesus, God's gift to us. He came to show us how to forgive and be forgiven; and because of that grace, we, too, can be serene knowing we are worthy.

This time of year, while a multitude of the heavenly hosts sing a soaring chorus of "Glory to God in the highest," my battered prayer angel sings a different song to me. It goes like this: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see. This Advent, may we allow our battered selves to recognize that no matter what, God always finds us. No matter what, God keeps on loving us.

Pray

Loving God, I bring to you my battered soul. Life has been chewing me up lately, yet you see me: you see the beauty, the hope and the goodness within. Thank you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Recall a time when you felt battered, worn

down, misunderstood or rejected. Who was the “angel” who came to your side and revived you?

Day 12 | Thursday, Dec. 10 God signs abound

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah — the king of Assyria.” — Isaiah 7:10–17

I have a friend who is always seeking “God signs” in answer to her prayer requests. Many days, though, she sighs that nothing appeared. “Perhaps tomorrow?” she asks hopefully.

God signs, God moments, or God glimpses: whatever you want to call them, they are always present. But we can’t go looking for them. For when we search, our vision is clouded with our limited expectations of God. We look for what we think is of God.

If the Christmas narrative has taught us anything, it is that God gives us signs we least expect to see. A woman, not any woman, but a virgin, will bear a son, whose name will be Immanuel — not exactly how many thought their savior would come into the world. But that is how God works. How many have missed the sign of Immanuel because they were expecting something different?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many have been looking for signs that God is still in control of an out-of-control world. I will admit I was among the sign seekers, and when I didn’t see anything but growing despair, I found myself getting anxious. That’s when I took my own advice. I stopped searching and, when I did, I began seeing God in the children’s drawings of rainbows taped to windows to brighten a weary world.

In New York City, where hospitals were overwhelmed with the virus, apartment dwellers opened windows and climbed onto fire escapes at an appointed time to clang pots, ring bells and cheer the medical workers who courageously walked straight into the valley of death. And when social distancing brought the advent of circles or X’s onto the floors of public buildings to keep people safely away from one another, one educational institution turned an isolating act into a message of love by turning those circles and X’s into hearts.

Are you seeking a God sign this Advent? Stop looking with your eyes and simply be open and receptive with your heart. For as Howard Thurman once observed: We are visited in ways that are beyond our understanding! No truer words have ever been spoken.

Pray

Ever-present God, open the eyes of my heart so that I may see your extraordinary love and grace in the ordinariness of my life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Challenge yourself to see with your heart — not with your eyes. At the end of the day, take time for quiet prayer and reflection; then write down the God moments you experienced.





Day 13 | Friday, Dec. 11

The broken ornament

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. — Psalm 130

I drove to the church still sniffing over the pieces of a broken ornament that were in a plastic sandwich bag. I had hoped to find some glue in the office to piece it back together. The ornament meant a lot to me as it was my great aunt's. When I got to my desk, I was better able to assess the damage. The ornament was beyond repair.

A soft knock at my door interrupted the tears that were about to fall. I glanced at the clock. School was out and that meant the girls from the rural village I was serving as pastor would be dropping by the church to hang out with me. Sure enough, the teens came barreling in, talking a mile a minute about what was served for lunch and who had a crush on whom.

I noticed one girl was uncharacteristically quiet. I was about to probe deeper when she asked me if I believed God could put together broken

hearts. She had just gone to the funeral of her young cousin who was killed. She was struggling with the dreaded "why?" question that even we adults can't make sense of.

What was I to say? With the smashed ornament in my hand, I said, "Not only do I believe God can put together the pieces of our broken hearts, I know that in the process, God will do amazing things." I told her what a pastor told me years ago: Our brokenness allows room for God to enter in and make something beautiful.

I showed her the ornament, and I told her I knew it was silly of me to cry over it, for my loved one wasn't in this ornament but in my heart. Then I reminded her that Christ was born exactly for this: to give us hope in the midst of our sadness.

She leaned forward, taking a closer look at the pieces of glass in my hand. "That's a lot of brokenness in your hand, Pastor Donna. God really has room now to do something amazing," she said, giving me a smile that was probably her first one since the funeral.

Pray

God of broken hearts, broken dreams and broken ornaments, enter into my life and recreate something beautiful from the shards. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Is there brokenness in your life this day? Or perhaps there is a brokenness in the world that is making your heart ache. Visualize handing over the brokenness to God, trusting that God will make everything new again.



Day 14 | Saturday, Dec. 12

The journey begins at the manger

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me." — Luke 22:31–34

I have decided to follow Jesus. ... The world behind me, the cross before me; no turning back, no turning back. The children of Vacation Bible School were belting out the words to this song

with such energy and enthusiasm that I thought I was seeing my first revival as a pastor.

For many, Advent is the Christmas "starter course" with what gifts to buy and what cookies to make for Santa on the menu. Very rarely do our Advent appetites crave the cross of Good Friday. Yet, Advent is not just the preparation for the birth of Christ.

Advent is our reminder that Jesus, the Christ, was born to die for us. Advent is the time to be reminded, too, that just as he came in the form of a child, God will come again. There will be a second Advent for which we are also preparing. But these conversations sound strange to our ears that have long been tickled with stories of angels singing and Wise Men bearing gifts. We don't want to hear about death as we celebrate

a holy birth. We don't want to be reminded, as our Scripture reading does on this second Saturday in Advent, that we are at risk of denying our Savior. We prefer to follow the star to Bethlehem to welcome a baby. It's a journey that inspires our faith and warms our hearts. But that baby grew up to be a radical preacher, and that is where the journey gets hard. Jesus, the preacher, challenges us to see the world differently and to serve in ways that are countercultural. Jesus asks us to follow him all the way to the cross.

At the manger, we might be so filled with awe that we agree to such a journey. But like Peter, we will find ourselves in situations where we might be tempted to deny our Savior. No matter how resolved we are to stick with Jesus, or how much bravado we show, it can happen. Look at Peter.

It's Advent. We are eager to "see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us," as Luke's gospel says. This babe we find in the

manger will ask us though, "How eager are you to follow me all the way to the cross?" I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back.

Pray

God, an infant Jesus — so gentle and mild — is a precious sight to gaze upon. We welcome his birth. We rejoice that he is with us. I want to fully receive this gift, which means following him to the cross. Grant me the courage and the strength to do so. May I never deny that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. In his name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Is there a manger scene set up in your home or perhaps on the lawn of a church in your neighborhood? Visit it today. Gaze upon the Christ Child and ask God to make your steps strong in following him, not just in this season of Advent through Christmas, but in all the seasons of the New Year and for all the days of your life.

Candles of courage for fears ever present

Reflect: What does courage look like? Who are those in your life who have exemplified courage? What can you learn from them?



Day 15 | 3rd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 13 Courage to admit you need help

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized — John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." — John 3:22–30

Lighting the candles on the Advent wreath was a tradition in my family. The wreath, which my father made larger and larger each year, would be placed on the dining room table come Sunday evening. I knew this was a special moment because we only ate at that table for birthdays or holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Once gathered for our meal, my parents allowed my brother or sister or me to light a candle. While this is a fond childhood memory, it is also a memory that taught me the meaning of courage. My brother is disabled, and his coordination is not the best. His hands aren't steady, so there

was tension rising in the room when he held a match over the evergreen that could quickly become a pile of kindling. My brother's first attempt failed. A second match was lit and burned out before it reached the candle. When the third match did drop onto the wreath, there was chaos that involved a glass of eggnog dousing the smoldering needles. I don't remember the smell of burning evergreen, though. What I remember is how deflated my brother looked. I can still hear his voice choking through tears, asking, "Can someone help me?" I learned that night that our inabilities aren't something to be ashamed of. In our struggles, God's grace shines, showing us, with help, that all things are possible. I learned that true courage is being able to admit you need help, and there's no shame in that. Howard Thurman once said that what every person wants is to know they are not journeying alone. We all want to know that we are cared for. Eventually the Advent candles around our family wreath were lit. The fire department was never called. We all smiled, including my brother.

Pray

Great God, who sees the shaking hands and the trembling hearts, come to me in my moments of doubt. Help me remember that with you by my side, I can do all things. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

As uncomfortable as it might be, take time to sit with something you are struggling with. Find the courage to face it, to name it and to ask for help.

Day 16 | Monday, Dec. 14

A brave little state

Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. See, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?" surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness. — Isaiah 8:16–22

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 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. — Isaiah 9:1–2

Prior to the November election, I noticed signs appearing on the side of my rural roads that read: "This brave little state says 'no' to hate." I live in Vermont and "brave little state" is the nickname President Calvin Coolidge, a Vermonter himself, gave the state after it showed bravery and resolve to work together in the aftermath of a flood that hit one of the counties in the early 1920s. Now in 2020, an advocacy group has created a campaign around the nickname, raising awareness of the racial justice work that needs to be done in a mostly white state. It's

important work because Bernie Sanders and Ben & Jerry's ice cream aside, Vermont isn't as liberal as my friends think it is.

I realized that a year ago when the children of a neighboring school voted to fly a Black Lives Matter flag on the flagpole. The news story unleashed a torrent of hate messages that flooded the station's social media feed. As I scrolled through the comments that slammed the school's education board for allowing this, and the many more comments about how "all" lives matter, the scales from my eyes began to fall. I was shocked and realized that I had been living in a bubble. It was time to shed light on what was really happening. The prophet Isaiah talks about people walking in darkness, but eventually they will have a light shine upon them. Redemption will be theirs. This light, though, is not a given. We need to do our part in order to have it shine upon us. We need to stop living in bubbles. We need to recognize the ways we perpetuate hate — no matter what hate it might be. We need to open our hearts, repent and invite that light in. It is not going to be easy because sometimes we get used to being in the dark and a sudden stream of light can be jarring. But we need to be brave little states that say "no" to hate. For how can we enter into the season of Christmas, where love came down from heaven, and still harbor hate?

Pray

God, remove the scales from my eyes that keep me from seeing the hate that is in me. Break open my heart so that this Christmas I will sing with a new conviction, "Truly he taught us to love one another." Amen.

Go deeper

What is your community doing to say "no" to hate? Is there a group to get involved in? If not, is there a need for such a group, and could it be something that God is asking you to start?



Day 17 | Tuesday, Dec. 15

The courage to stick close to Jesus

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said,

"This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The



Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. — Luke 22:54–62

One of my favorite Christmas songs is "Away in the Manger." Perhaps it was the illustrated book I had as a child depicting the cutest barn animals cuddling baby Jesus as they sang to him, "Away in the manger, no crib for his bed," that captured my fancy. The line, though, that I held onto as child, and as an adult navigating career and relationship moves in New York City, was: Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me forever and love me, I pray.

"Don't ever leave my side" has come from my lips many times in my life as a problem or a challenge led to me to crawl into bed and pull the covers over my head. And through my tears I would sing, "Be near me, Lord Jesus."

When in physical or emotional anguish, we often find ourselves crying out to Jesus, praying for God's son to love us, unconditionally and forever. Yet our Advent Scripture reminds us that while we expect Jesus to remain by our sides, many times we keep a distance. Many times, we will deny knowing the Holy Child because admitting we are friends with him just might jeopardize our current relationships or jobs or even put our lives at risk. But do we want to be Peters?

I was at the fine jewelry trade magazine for a few years and had some seniority. There was a Sunday morning breakfast at a trade show that weekend at New York City's Javits Center. I had

assigned a junior reporter to cover the event. When my boss asked why I wasn't attending the breakfast, I said, "I have church." He wasn't expecting that answer. I wasn't expecting that answer, either. I often kept my newfound churchgoing activities quiet. "I guess you don't care about career advancement?" was his reply. I huffed out of his office. Sunday came and I went to church as planned. I wasn't going to turn my back on what was important to me. My career wasn't hurt. I eventually became editor-in-chief of the publication, only to leave that post after two years to pursue ministry.

Peter kept a distance. That is a heartbreaking and troubling sentence to me, because I know how easy it can be for us to do just as Peter did. But when the world tempts me to be quiet, to play the game, to not ruffle feathers, I begin humming, "Be near me, Lord Jesus." I then reach my hand to the skies to let him know I am here by his side as well.

Pray

God, your love for me boggles my mind. It is sometimes too much to comprehend that you never let go of me. You are always by my side and for that I lift my thanks to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take a look at your schedule, your activities, the time you spend working and the time you spend with family and friends. How much time is carved out for God? What can you do this day to follow your Savior, Jesus, the Holy Child, more closely?

Day 18 | Wednesday, Dec. 16

The courage to look through a magic mirror

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,

and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." — Mark 1:1–8

"Romper Room" was a television show for preschoolers that ran from 1953 to 1994, and I loved it! My mother couldn't drag me away from the black-and-white TV with the rabbit ears that had to be fiddled with to get a clearer image on the screen. I enjoyed the singing, the dancing and the time of show and tell. What I looked forward to the most, though, was when the host would end our time together by holding up a magic mirror so that she could "see" us. And so, with the mirror in her hand, she would begin



naming the children: “I see Tommy and Maria and Robert and Jamel. I see Frances and Jose.” I waited with bated breath in front of the TV to hear my name. Most times my name wasn’t mentioned, and I would turn off the TV feeling sad and lonely. But, boy, do I remember the time when I heard, “I see Donna.” Even now, when I transport myself back to 5-year-old Donna, I feel the excitement of being “seen.” We all want that, don’t we? Not only to be seen, but as Howard Thurman points out, to be understood. Many didn’t see John the Baptist for who he really was — the one sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus. Many didn’t see John for who he was because of how he presented himself in wearing strange clothing and eating weird food. Yet he was the one sent by God to pave our way. I wonder how many people — ordinary angels — God had sent to me that I have not seen at all because they weren’t what I was expecting. I wish we had a magic mirror in our lives, one that would allow our cynical, judgmental eyes to really see God’s children for who they are — beautiful — and what they offer the world. Imagine a magic mirror in which you see and call by name the homeless person discarded by society. Imagine calling by name the person who

you were brought up to hate. Imagine the smile you would receive when seeing — and calling by name — the person whose body is twisted in a wheelchair. Imagine the joy on the face of a woman with a speech impediment who you have called by name and asked to read Scripture on Christmas Eve. Imagine what the world would be like if we walked around with such a mirror that allowed us to see and name one another.

Pray

God, years ago your Son stood on the lakeshore and, smiling, he called out the names of those fishing, inviting them to follow him. There is such power in hearing you speak my name, to know that I am known by you, seen by you, gives me courage to do the same — to call by name the stranger, the outcast, the hurting, the wounded. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

While shopping in stores this holiday season might be curtailed by the COVID-19 virus, when you are in store, make it a point to thank the cashier by name. Or when helping someone who is a stranger, remember to always start by asking their name. Sounds simple, but it is something we often forget to do.

Day 19 | Thursday, Dec. 17

Finding the courage to give what little we have

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down

and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” — Matthew 3:1–12

There was a cartoon making the social media rounds of John the Baptist, arms flailing in anger, pointing to some religious bigwigs. In the picture were also snakes slithering away. The text read, “Happy Advent! You brood of vipers.” This passage makes me chuckle and cringe at the same time. Chuckle because I think about that cartoon, and cringe because John is calling out the corruption that is often lurking behind good deeds. John is angry with the hypocrisy of the religious elite of his day. They claim to be righteous, but they are really just a brood of vipers — snakes that slither away so as not to get consumed by fire. Any farmer will tell you how snakes slither to safety when the stubble in the fields is burned to prepare for a new planting. Those in John’s day would have had this image



in mind when hearing “brood of vipers.” Many today are turned off by organized religion because words and actions don’t seem to match one another. During the holidays, especially, you hear stories of scams claiming to help others when really the money donated lines a pocket that doesn’t need lining. Vipers are out there, but so are obedient sheep, like my neighbor. He’s a logger. The trail I run on borders his property, which has a huge pile of logs to be cut into firewood. Firewood isn’t cheap, but for those in my rural community it is a bit more affordable than oil or propane. There is many a household I have come to hear about that relies solely on firewood. These are families, too, that often run out of wood to burn just as winter’s deep freeze descends. I know that pile of logs is my neighbor’s bread and butter. So, imagine my surprise when one December I learned that he wasn’t selling the wood, but rather giving it away to families in need. Now this neighbor isn’t a churchgoer, but when he heard of a severe shortfall in the village’s community fuel fund, he took it upon himself to give what little he had to help others. How many times do our words of loving others that we toss around in the church match our actions outside of a cloistered building? It’s a question we need to always ask,

because the temptation for self-preservation is always great, especially in the church. This past summer, I smiled when I heard of a Presbyterian church whose working-class members took their COVID-19 stimulus checks and gave that money to help others. I also remember one Christmas when a parishioner who struggled to buy gifts for loved ones told me he was going to challenge himself to match the amount of money that he spent on gifts and give it to a local homeless shelter. There will always be a brood of vipers in this world. But there are many more who are finding the courage to give what little they have.

Pray

God, giver of my daily bread, may I not fear scarcity, nor may I seek abundance. Help me instead to see that with you I have just enough, and just enough is enough to share with others. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

In preparing for Christmas, challenge yourself to match the amount that is spent on family gifts and give to an organization in need. Especially keep in mind organizations that help eradicate the hunger that is rising due to the global pandemic.



Day 20 | Friday, Dec. 18 The courage to allow others to speak

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. — Ephesians 6:10–20

I woke up Sunday morning rattled by a dream I had. It wasn’t the usual “I forgot my sermon notes” or “no one is in the sanctuary” dream that pastors sometimes have. In this dream, I was really excited to share the Good News and I couldn’t because I had no voice. Nothing came out of my mouth when I spoke. It was frustrating and scary. I woke up vowing that no matter, I would always find a way for God’s Word to be proclaimed. With the dream still on my mind I got to church. Today was the launch of a new service — a twist on the traditional “Lessons and Carols.” This was “Lessons, Carols and Witnessing to the Light.” I had arranged for a child to read the Scripture passage and then for a new church member — we had several people join the congregation that year — to share what that passage meant to them in their walk of faith. I just thought this new service would be a

refreshing way of presenting the familiar nativity passages. What I didn't expect was how powerful it would be to hear Scripture read by children and then hear the stories from people from all different walks of life. By the end of the service, there wasn't a dry eye in the sanctuary. Not only were the adults touched, but the children were in quiet awe, having listened to so many people share about the power of God working in their lives. Later that day, I thought back to my dream. This time it didn't rattle me. Rather it gave me an "aha" moment. For what I witnessed was the beauty of God's Word being shared among the generations and shared so honestly. And, the space for those stories to be heard was made when I, as pastor, kept quiet. Sunday worship wasn't about me nor my ability to eloquently proclaim the Good News. The new Advent service of "Lessons and Carols and Witnessing to the Light" gave the space for voices not heard to be heard. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul

asks for prayers so that he may speak boldly. That Sunday, though, I learned that prayers for others to speak boldly and to share their stories of faith need to be said. We need more people finding the courage to speak. We need even more people to find the courage to be silent for a moment and listen.

Pray

God, who spoke Creation into existence, give me the courage to speak when I need to speak and listen when I need to listen. Help me to hear the stories of others and in my listening come to understand more of who you are. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

When was the last time you had a family story night? Winter is the perfect time to gather around a virtual fireplace and have a night of witnessing to the light of Christ.

Day 21 | Saturday, Dec. 19 Courage to trust all will be well

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp

of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. — Revelation 20:1–10

My New Testament class was going to discuss Revelation. I was looking forward to it as it was one book in the Bible rarely expounded on in the church of my childhood. I was disappointed, though, when an important church meeting called me away from class. When I arrived at the church, the pastor, seeing my disappointment, joked that as a Presbyterian I wasn't going to miss much. "We don't spend too much time in Revelation," he said. We Presbyterians haven't spent much time in Revelation and after reading this entry in the daily lectionary schedule, I can see why. I am more comfortable talking about people walking in Advent darkness than about the battle between good and evil. Yet here we are, and here is Advent good news. Really.

First, I have to ask for you to not take literally the thousand years mentioned in the Scripture. Both Augustine and John Calvin viewed this cosmic event as something happening now. OK, I know that doesn't sound like good news, but stay with me. What John is sharing with us is a picture of triumph and the people who have battled in life now being blessed, resurrected, safe, secure — whole. This passage is an Advent



one for it underscores once again that the birth of Jesus wasn't just so we have a sentimental holiday to celebrate. Jesus was born to save. Jesus also came to equip us with how to battle evil in this life — how to stand up and speak up, learn to love more deeply and forgive more freely. Sure, the battle is a fierce one, but in the end we will persevere. All those bearing battle scars will be made whole. It seems these days there is a battle raging in our world. This year has been a rough one. Too many deaths from too many viruses named COVID-19, racial injustice and poverty. Yet we are called to find the courage to fight the good fight and be part of making the world a better place. There is nothing to fear for Revelation is telling us we are on the winning team — and team is the key word. We are called to work together in making the world a fair and just one for all. Howard Thurman knew this when he wrote, “There are areas of the common life in which we must do our part in order that

the very fabric of society may be maintained against collapse and disintegration.” And in case you find your courage waning, remember this: “Do not fear” is the Advent message spoken by God’s angels back then to a frightened Mary, a confused Joseph and rejected shepherds. “Do not fear” is being whispered to all of us now.

Pray

God, battle between good and evil seems to be escalating as each day there is news of a yet another injustice, another health threat, another natural disaster, another innocent death. I pray boldly for courage to face the day. I pray for courage to calm my shaking hand so that I can keep on lighting candles that will chase away the darkness. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Remember to share your pictures of the candles of courage you are lighting this season. Send them to editor@pcusa.org.

Candles of courage for fears ever present

Think about a time when — amid a storm in life — you found a sense of peace. Where did it come from? Was there an “angel” perhaps who brought it to you?

Day 22 | 4th Sunday of Advent, Dec. 20
Keep the dream alive

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”
— Luke 1:13–20

Howard Thurman wrote, “As long as man has a dream in his heart, he cannot lose the significance of living.” But what happens when the dream in our hearts — that earnest prayer — is delayed? How do you keep hope alive when days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months and months turn into years?

Zechariah knew all too well what it was like to wait. He had long hoped for a child, and it was only in his old age that God answered by sending Gabriel — the angel of Advent conception announcements — with the good news: You will have a son, and his name will be John. Zechariah was shocked and perhaps a bit skeptical. But we know how the story goes. Elizabeth delivers John, who would later emerge

from the wilderness with a message to prepare the way of the Lord.

Many years ago, I held on to a dream of having a child. I held on even after my boyfriend, whom I thought would become my husband, was killed in a jeep accident in Africa. I was in my early 30s — still time to find and meet someone to start a family with. I held on to the dream, and I prayed. Each birthday, though, gifted me a sense of growing hopelessness. There were many dark nights of my soul as I cried to God, wondering why this was not to be for me.

God, though, was answering in the most amazing way. When I finally married in my 40s, I saw just how God answered my desire for children. My bridal party had 17 flower girls: children from the rural community I was serving as a pastor. In addition to the flower girls, there were the boys who served as ushers. There were many more children who came together to form a choir that sang during the ceremony. They might not have been my biological children, but they were indeed mine, given to me by God to be part of their lives and tell them the story of a God who hears our cries, no matter how long it seems we are waiting.

Thurman urged all to “keep the dream alive.” Yes, keep it alive because we are never too old for dreams to be answered.

Pray

Ever-listening God, I surrender the dreams I hold in my heart, dreams that are new and dreams that have been way overdue in coming true. Grant me a sense of peace as I wait to see how you will answer me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Name a dream that was answered in an unexpected way. What was it? Who was involved? How did you feel? And, more importantly, how can you see God’s hand in it now?





Day 23 | Monday, Dec. 21

Catching a new vision

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoptase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. — Revelation 21:9–21

Years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to the Greek island of Patmos, where John, exiled there by the Romans, received the visions that are recorded in Revelation. I was excited to enter into the dark, dank cave where the apostle resided. I was eager to "feel" something; perhaps to receive my own vision from God.

What I didn't expect, though, was hundreds of tourists buzzing about, making it hard for me to be in a contemplative mood. In fact,

there wasn't much time to pray and ponder as guides quickly shuffled camera-snapping tourists through the cave. I was given a moment to sit on one of the chairs lining the walls. I tried to sit still, quiet my thoughts and sense God's presence. Disappointed that I didn't get a divine tour of my future, I made my way to the exit, only to stop suddenly. Something nudged me to go back and sit some more, and so I did, sitting through three more tour groups. I sat with my eyes closed and expectations low. Then I left.

When my husband, who was by my side throughout this experience, asked later what I thought about our visit to the cave, I was hesitant to share. How could I tell him that I felt a warm sensation in my hands and heard a clear message to write and keep on writing? How could I tell him that I felt this peace in seeing clearly who I am: a writer first, a pastor second? And what would this "vision" mean when it came to my call as a traditional pastor of a parish? I began to speak: "It might sound weird, but I felt ..." That's when my husband finished my sentence: "I felt something too."

God is always trying to get our attention, always willing to show us a new Jerusalem. This Advent especially, God is showing us a new vision of "doing the holidays" that has been forced upon us by COVID-19. It's a vision we might not welcome as it means letting go of beloved traditions and not holding large family gatherings. But God is always recreating our lives and always presenting us with a vision of what can be. And that vision, if we see with eyes of faith, is indeed beautiful.

Pray

God of new beginnings, in this season of Advent, open my eyes so that I can see a future full of hope and catch a vision for a brighter tomorrow that is overflowing with peace and beauty. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take a virtual tour of John's cave in Patmos, Greece, via this link: [youtube.com/watch?v=EX1m53o1AY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EX1m53o1AY)

Day 24 | Tuesday, Dec. 22
Safe and secure

Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord! Yet he too is wise and brings disaster; he does not call back his words, but will rise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall, and they will all perish together. For thus the Lord said to me, as a lion or a young lion growls over its prey, and—when a band of shepherds is called out against it—is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill. Like birds hovering overhead, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it. Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. For on that day all of you shall throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you. “Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals; and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him; he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labor. His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic,” says the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem. — Isaiah 31:1–9

My husband went to get his pickup treated with an anti-rust undercoating — a necessity in Vermont where road salt is damaging to trucks. He went to a mom-and-pop auto store that just happened to be a gun retailer, too. (Yes, only in Vermont.)

When he came home, he told me about a conversation he overheard as he was paying his bill. The cashier was having a side conversation with a few friends and mentioned how great gun sales were. In fact, the other day, she had sold four guns in less than a half hour.

I felt uneasy when I heard this. I felt a twinge of fear as I remembered hearing the recent sta-

tistic that Americans have purchased almost 17 million guns so far in 2020, more than in any other single year on record, according to Small Arms Analytics & Forecasting, a research firm that tracks firearms.

People are afraid of the social and political unrest in our country. They want to feel safe and secure. They want to protect whatever peace there is. Yet the season of Advent reminds us that peace will not be obtained with a firearm.

Isaiah tells us that trusting in horsemen because they are strong and relying on chariots because there are many of them are not where our security lies. Real peace comes when we look to the Holy One of Israel. Security is found when we consult the Lord.

Living in a rural area, where I learned that the opening weekend of hunting season meant low attendance in church that Sunday, I can understand why there are those who bristle over gun-control laws. Having guns is a rite of passage for many rural teens. But I can't shake how troubling it is that the rise in gun sales coincides with a recent FBI report that hate crimes in the United States have risen to the highest level in more than a decade.

It seems what Howard Thurman wrote decades ago, is true today, that “the panic of fear, the torture of insecurity, the ache of hunger” have “rekindled ancient hatreds.” These ancient hatreds, though, are not kindling. They are a raging fire.

Do you want to feel safe and secure? Then let us lean into the everlasting arms of the Savior — the One who was born for a world such as we live in now. Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice ... Jesus Christ was born for this!

Pray

God, may a peace that passes all understanding enter into my life this Advent season. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

The work for peace is great, and it begins with education. Every year the Southern Poverty Law Center updates a national map of hate group activity. See the hate groups in your state at splcenter.org/hate-map





Day 25 | Wednesday, Dec. 23 Singing a new song

Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre. He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. — Psalm 147:1–11

“Brokenhearted” and “downtrodden” are words that sum up how many people are feeling as Christmas Eve approaches. Broken hearts abound as loved ones taken by COVID-19, unjust shootings, accidents and illnesses have left empty chairs around many holiday tables this year. And there are hearts broken by vacant chairs because friends and family can’t gather together this year out of safety concerns for a virus still infecting the young and the old.

There will also be many downtrodden Christians making their way to the manger with heads hung low and steps that are faltering due to the tiredness that comes in trying to fight injustices. Let us not ignore the drooping shoulders of many who are burdened with trying to put food on the table. The world is in pain, and to not be able to even gather in person on Christmas Eve to light candles and sing “Silent Night” is just

too much for some to handle. This year’s “Silent Night” will indeed be silent, but maybe not.

Just because we won’t be singing an old, familiar song in an old, familiar way — in a church sanctuary — doesn’t mean that there isn’t a song to sing. Could it be that our broken hearts are creating space for a new song this Christmas Eve? Could it be that “the old song of my spirit has wearied itself out,” as Howard Thurman discovered years ago?

Thurman added that “the words belong to old experiences. I know that the work of the old song, perfect in its place, is not for the new demand. I must learn the new song that is capable of meeting the new need. I must fashion new words born of all the new growth in my life, my mind and my spirit.”

Perhaps not being able to sing “Silent Night” — as we have always done in church — is not a bad thing at all. Yes, this tradition will be grieved. But can we look beyond the loss to see what new thing can be found? “We need the untried melody to meet the need of the untried tomorrow,” said Thurman. May this Christmas bring us the gift of an untried melody.

Pray

Gracious and loving God, as Christmas Eve approaches, I can’t help but feel some sadness this year. Nothing feels right. The holiday cheer is missing. The traditions I have looked forward to are just not happening. Help me to find a new song to sing: a song of praise to you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take time to mourn the losses in your life. Don’t push them aside. Let the tears fall. Then wipe your eyes and ask God for a new song to sing this Christmas, a new tradition to begin, a new friend to make and a new understanding of Emmanuel: God with us.

Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens

On this holy night, mentally drop all of the burdens you are carrying at the side of the newborn's cradle. Imagine

streams of light coming from heaven, surrounding you with grace.

Day 26 | Thursday, Dec. 24

The light of grace

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" — Luke 2:1–14

I will never forget the Christmas Eve when I saw with my own eyes a multitude of the heavenly host. No, I wasn't hitting the eggnog early. These angels weren't like the ones described in Luke, illuminated with the Lord's glory shining upon them. These angels were disguised as weathered farmers with bad knees and calloused hands. The evening worship service had just ended, and I made my way to the front door to wish the faithful filing out into the frigid night air

a "Merry Christmas." When I got to the door, I let out a groan. The outdoor light was not working, making the already hazardous snow-slicked, creaky wooden stairs of the old rural church even more menacing. I looked back toward the narthex. Those getting on their coats were mostly seniors with mobility issues. How were they ever going to get safely down those darkened stairs? That's when my unassuming angels appeared by my side. They knew the worried look of their pastor all too well. They quickly assessed the situation and came up with a solution. They would escort each person down the stairs and to their cars. Those with walkers or canes were told to wait. Their cars would be retrieved for them and waiting right at the door. It was a church valet service that I had never thought of before, and it would be a ministry that would continue for the elderly congregation that winter. As I watched the band of angels working, I couldn't help but think this illustration of Christmas was better than the one I had used in my sermon. "Now THIS IS Christmas," I thought silently.

Howard Thurman wrote, "The true meaning of Christmas is expressed in the sharing of one's graces in the world in which it is so easy to become calloused, insensitive and hard. Once this spirit becomes part of our lives, every day is Christmas, and every night is freighted with anticipations of the dawning of fresh, and perhaps holy, adventure."

That night, in a struggling rural church I witnessed that grace, for there was light shining more brightly than any electric light could shine. It was the light of grace coming from angels disguised as farmers with bad knees and calloused hands — a holy adventure was about to begin.

Pray

God of Christmas grace, your love is breaking through the dark night of my soul with a divine light that not only illuminates hope in my life, but



*also chases away my fears and gives me courage
once again. I couldn't have asked for a better gift
ever in my life than the gift of Jesus, your Son.
May my Christ light that has been rekindled shine
brightly now and forever. In Jesus' name I pray.
Amen.*

Go deeper

Light a candle. That is all. A simple act that can transform your life and your world. Light a candle of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace and love. A blessed Christmas season begins!

From the author

My friends, our journey is not over. We will continue celebrating Christ's birth through the season of Christmas. Our "12 Days of Christ

mas" devotional begins tomorrow, Dec. 25, as we "light" Howard Thurman's candle of love.

— *Blessings, Donna Frischknecht Jackson*

THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Candles of love to inspire all my living

Reffect: The season of Christmas has begun. For each of these 12 days, write down one way you will show God's world

the love of Christ. Consider this the start of your 2021 spiritual resolutions to carry with you throughout the new year.

Day 1 | Christmas Day, Friday, Dec. 25 A gift for God

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. — Titus 3:4–7

A worship service on Christmas morning was not a tradition in the little rural church I served, but one year I decided to offer such a service. The turnout was small. The worship was casual. “Make sure to bring the cookies that Santa didn’t finish,” I told the children beforehand. Truth be told, I didn’t have time to bake, and I was on the search for some homemade goodies.

Snow was gently falling as we gathered in the fellowship hall around the Christmas tree. We sang our favorite carols and did a candy cane prayer of praise, where I invited the person holding the piece of candy to say what they were grateful for. Of course, the children’s praises were for the toys that Santa had delivered.

After we were done, one perceptive child pointed to a beautifully wrapped present underneath the tree. “Who’s that for, Pastor Donna?” he asked. The children huddled close to me, eager to peek inside the box I was now holding. I told them this was my present to God for giving me the greatest gift ever — Jesus. I asked the children what they thought was inside. What could be the most perfect gift for God?

I had to suppress my laughter as the children shouted things like a cow, because God needed milk to go with the Christmas cookies, or a Barbie dream house, because God deserves some time off playing with dolls. When they were out of ideas, I showed them what I had given God.

The children’s faces scrunched with disappointment as they stared at the red paper heart in my hand. “What a lame gift,” said a teen sitting on the sidelines. “Is it?” I countered with a soft smile. I then shared with the children, the adults and that teen, all the presents of grace and love God has given me through Jesus. What could I ever give back to show my gratitude? I could promise God to love others — completely, without judgment, as Jesus loved.

Howard Thurman once said that Christmas is “the event above all events,” a turning point in human history, marking the moment “when a new meaning is given to ancient words: *The eyes of the blind are opened, the captives are set free.*” Christmas is here once again. It is the event above all events.

I just pray that this year it really is a turning point for us, because the world needs our eyes to be opened to hurts that need healing, to the lonely that need companionship, and to the hate that needs to be chased away with love. I still keep a present for God under my tree, and every Christmas morning I take out that now-faded, red paper heart and renew my promise to God — to love. What about you?

Pray

Gracious and generous God, you are the most amazing gift-giver. The gifts under the tree pale in comparison to the one that came wrapped as a swaddling baby. On this Christmas Day, I find myself awed and humbled that I can be loved so deeply. How can it be that you deem me worthy of such a precious gift as Jesus your Son? Thank you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take time this Christmas Day to make a paper heart for God. Write on it your commitment to love God’s children. Place it in a box and whisper, “Here’s my gift to you God. Merry Christmas.”





Day 2 | Saturday, Dec. 26

Remember those who are grieving

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

— Acts 6:1–7

In this passage from Acts, we see the early church flourishing, so much so that men and women had to be appointed to tend to the care of those who were lonely, sick or grieving. It was the start of what many of our churches now know as the office of deacons: those ordained to make calls, write letters, bake cookies and be with those who are hurting.

I find myself thinking a lot about the “ministry of presence” this time of year. The holidays can be hard for many. I know this all too well. It was the day after Christmas, and my parents and I went for a jaunt in the woods. I was a teenager who still liked hanging out with them, so when my friends darted for the shopping mall for the post-holiday sales, I declined their invite and put on my hiking boots instead. We returned home to a ringing phone. My father answered and began speaking in his native Swiss German. I didn’t understand what he was saying, but by the tone of his voice I knew it wasn’t good. Within an hour, my father’s bag was packed. He was heading back to Switzerland. My grandfather had died by suicide in the family farmhouse nestled in the Alps. Elderly and frail, his heart had never healed from my grandmother’s death

just months before. He was 84 years old, and they were married for 60-plus years.

I learned later that the minister of the village had visited my grandfather two days before his death. He was not looking forward to a cold, lonely Christmas morning, the pastor had told my father. He was not looking forward to any more lonely mornings. What was to be a festive holiday week was one filled with gray skies and tears. I was just a teen, but when I looked at the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree, I found myself praying for a greater light to shine on all those who were hurting.

My father flew back from Switzerland on New Year’s Eve. There weren’t any celebrations in our house that night. Rather, we gathered around the Advent wreath and lit only one candle: the white one in the middle, the Christ candle. As we ate our simple — and very Swiss — meal of soup, crusty bread and cheese, I noticed my father staring at the flickering candle. I’ve always wondered what he was thinking. Perhaps he was remembering Christmases past with his father. Or perhaps he was allowing the presence of that light to heal his grieving heart.

“We remember the old people,” Howard Thurman wrote about Christmastime. “Those whose fires have been banked, and who sit in their solitariness . . . who cannot be comforted by the memories of other times.” May we not just remember those “whose fires have been banked.” May we be the ones to rekindle the flames of hope and love.

Pray

God, for all those who are grieving, whose hearts have been shattered by lost dreams or lost loved ones, I pray that they feel your healing presence so strongly that it gives them not only strength and courage to face this day, but also hope to face tomorrow. Help me, as well, to become a light bearer to those still walking in darkness. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

If you or someone you know is depressed or has expressed thoughts of suicide, contact the National Suicide Prevention lifeline at 800-273-8255. The lifeline provides 24/7 support that is free and confidential. You can also learn more at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Day 3 | Sunday, Dec. 27

Don't discard Christmas so quickly

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. — Matthew 1:18–25

There's nothing that makes me sadder than seeing discarded Christmas trees thrown to the curb right after Dec. 25 has come and gone. Yet there they are, stripped of all their tinsel glory, proclaiming the fake news that Christmas is over. It isn't. If anything, Christmas has just begun.

I'm not talking about being mindful of observing the 12 days of Christmas. While doing so is a great start (and a reason why I wanted to extend this year's Advent devotional to include Christmastide), I'm talking about the challenge to keep Christmas in our hearts — always. We have just been given the most amazing gift — Jesus, God's Son, to be by our sides through thick and thin, the ups and downs, the trials and the tribulations. Now it's up to us to use the gift.

There's no exchanging Jesus for something better, because there's nothing better out there.

Day 4 | Monday, Dec. 28

Jesus, my refuge

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." He who

There's no putting Jesus on a shelf to collect dust, either. So, what will you do with this gift? How will you allow such a gift to change your life? For me, Christmastide is a perfect time to reflect on those questions.

The frenzied build up to the big day, Dec. 25, is over, and there's stillness in the air that gives my racing mind permission to slow down. With all the "must-do's" for the secular Christmas celebration — mask-wearing, last-minute trips to the store for eggnog or butter for cookie making — off of my list, my spirit can now breathe in God's Spirit.

Howard Thurman always saw Christmastime as a time for us to remember the graces of life. "It is important to seize upon the atmosphere during this period, to let it tutor our own spirits in kindness," said Thurman.

When we are quick to discard the trees and pack away Christmas as the secular world tells us we ought to do, we are missing out on this precious, holy season that can indeed tutor our spirits in how to be the light-bearing children of God. But sometimes God whispers to us: "Don't be so quick to discard something that has grown old or just doesn't serve a purpose anymore. Don't rush to move on. Linger a bit. Trust some more. Enjoy the Christmas lights. Let the significance of the gift of Emmanuel really sink in, for it is a gift that changes lives. Just ask Joseph."

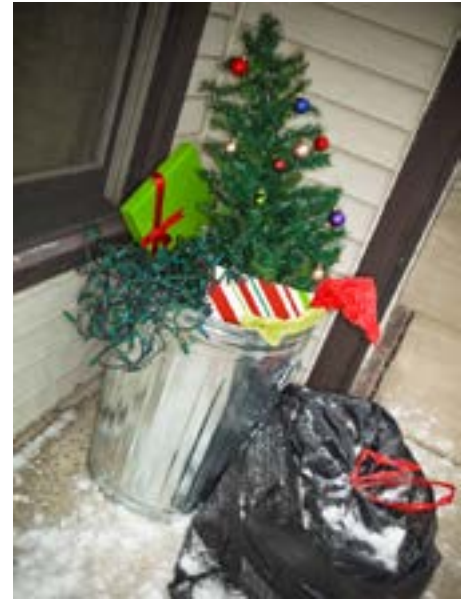
Pray

God of light, you who shines brighter than any string on the Christmas tree, help me to embrace this season of Christmastide. May these days be ones in which the gift of your Son truly enters into my heart, creating a new one that beats with more love. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Keep the Christmas candle of love burning bright — make some cookies for a friend, cook a festive meal and deliver it to someone who might have celebrated Dec. 25 alone, or simply call someone you haven't spoken to in a while.

sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of



iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him. — Psalm 2

One of my favorite childhood Christmas movies is the 1968 claymation production of "The Little Drummer Boy." I still remember being a five-year-old wearing pink cowgirl boots and watching the holiday classic on the shag rug of my grandmother's living room.

I also remember bawling my eyes out when the drummer boy's lamb got hit by a Roman chariot while rushing towards the crowd gathered at the stable to see a newborn baby. It's a scene that gets me every time. The little drummer boy gently cradles his hurt lamb, desperate for someone to save it. He spots the Magi who are on the scene and thinks, since they are wise, they will know just what to do for the lamb.

When the drummer boy gets the attention of one of the kings and explains the dire situation, the king breaks the news to the little boy: There is nothing he can do to help. The boy cries and insists. "You are a king," he says. And here's the part where my tears stream down my face. The king points to the baby in the manger and tells

the grieving boy, "I am an earthly king, but there is a king above all kings who can save your little friend." Perplexed, the drummer boy gazes upon Jesus. He gives the baby a gift by playing his drum. The lamb is healed. All is well.

Life isn't that simple, though, nor does it always have a happy ending of a hurt lamb miraculously jumping up and down with joy. Sometimes our prayers for healing are not answered as we want them to be. Yet, no matter what life's circumstances, I learned that Christmas on the shag rug in my grandmother's home to take my sorrows, my fears and my pain to Jesus first, rather than seeking answers from the limited wisdom of the world. Jesus, the babe, can help? Yes, Jesus, the babe, can help. Happy are all who take refuge in him.

Pray

Mighty and amazing God, on this fourth day of Christmas, I come to the side of the manger and gaze into Jesus' eyes, for it is in your Son, where I will find the healing and hope I am seeking. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What is it that is troubling you this day? Is there a "little lamb" in your life who is hurt? Are you perhaps that little lamb needing healing? Imagine Jesus' arms cradling you or your loved one.

This depressive state is captured in the darker colors that one sees in "The Starry Night" with blues dominating the canvas, blending hills into the sky, and a village painted in browns, greys and blues, with each building outlined in black. Such a dark background makes the stars in the in the starry night sky stand out even more.

What I notice the most in Van Gogh's painting is that while the village houses are illumined with yellow windows, indicating light shining within, the windows of the white steepled church are darkened — there is no light inside. Art critics, art historians and psychiatrists can all have a field day analyzing why this is so. But a pastor friend helped me to see the darkened church windows not as disturbing, but as hopeful.

After all, the light of Christ is not to be contained in a building. It is meant to shine brightly in our homes, on the streets of cities, towns and villages, and, as Matthew's Gospel reminds us, we are the light of the world, carrying the Christ light wherever we go.



Day 5 | Tuesday, Dec. 29 Let the light of love shine

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. — Matthew 5:14–16

Sometimes the most beautiful works of art are born out of one's deepest pain. Vincent van Gogh's oil painting "The Starry Night" is such an example. The Dutch post-Impressionist painter created the painting in 1889 while he was a patient at a French asylum near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Even though he suffered from paranoia, Van Gogh was allowed to leave the hospital grounds. He was also provided with his own studio so that he could continue painting. His improving mental health was short lived, though, and soon spiraled down into the depths of depression.

One year, I received a print of Van Gogh's "The Starry Night" as a Christmas card from that pastor friend of mine. An artist herself, I wasn't surprised to receive such an unconventional holiday card. She had a unique way of seeing the world. But it did make me wonder what she was thinking in choosing such a card. And then I read her message inside. Along with Christmas greetings, she added a postscript that read: "May the light of Christ never stay inside a church building."

Pray

Ever-radiant God, thank you for the starry nights

Day 6 | Wednesday, Dec. 30

Angels still dance with joy

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. — Psalm 139:1–6

I held the tiny pink felt Christmas stocking with an angel clothed in blue felt glued onto it. It was the stocking an aunt on my mother's side made for me on my first Christmas. Some 50 years have passed since it was thumbtacked onto our wooden TV console because we never had a fireplace mantel to hang our stockings on.

I eventually graduated to a bigger Christmas stocking. The pink baby one was packed away, soon forgotten until the year my mother gave it to me, along with other childhood memorabilia overflowing in a box. That warned me there were more boxes to come. She and my dad were decluttering their house.

Since then, I find myself every Christmas retrieving the stocking from the bottom of the ornament box and wondering: "Was I really once that little? What was put inside the stocking my first year of life? Should I hang it on the fireplace mantle I now have as an adult?" Some years, I hang it up with a bit of nostalgia in my heart. Some years, I don't. Those are the years I find a tear falling down my cheek thinking about the children I never had.

This year, though, I held the stocking in my hands a little bit longer than usual. I found

that give me hope when my world descends into darkness. And thank you for seeing in me, the ability to be a "Christ-light" to others. May I shine Christ's love brightly beyond the safety of organized religion and beyond the comfort of a familiar building.

Go deeper

In what ways can you carry the light of Christ beyond traditional church things such as Sunday morning worship, Bible study gatherings or the occasional mission project? If Van Gogh was to paint your house, would its windows be illuminated with Christ's light?

myself taking a prayerful pause as I stared at the blue felt angel on the stocking. I remembered a song I had heard on some Christian radio station once about how the angels dance around God's throne at the birth of a baby and how they will dance again the day we return home to God.

Angels danced for joy over me being in the world? I never really thought about it. But now with the angel staring back at me, I wondered: "Have I lived my life so far for God? Have I done my best in reaching to the least of these — the lonely, the hungry, the captives, the naked? Are angels dancing with joy at the life I am leading now? What about the God dreams in my heart that are so uncertain and scary I just don't follow them? What about those crazy ideas to do some things — things so against what the world says we should do — that I ignore them? Are the angels dancing each time I whisper to myself that I am too old to do something or that I don't have what it takes to tackle a dream?"

Howard Thurman knew how much God loves us. Thurman knew deep down that each of us is indeed God's beloved. God, Thurman knew, sees our potential. And so, Thurman advised that each time we doubt our abilities to shine brightly, we should pray, "God make me big." "And then a strange thing happens. Strength comes from somewhere. Deep within the task, something is released that eases the load; and the quality of your performance pervades your spirit with the assurance that God has answered," said Thurman.

Yes, the angels danced when you came into this world. They will dance again when you return home. But until that day, don't ever stop living boldly for God.



Pray

God, my prayer is short and simple: make me big. Help me to glorify you this day. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Reconnect with your inner child. What gave



Day 7 | Thursday, Dec. 31

Led by the light

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." — John 8:12

I was never one for ringing in the New Year by attending boisterous parties. Nor was it my idea of fun to be in a jostling crowd in New York's Time Square to watch a ball drop — even though I lived just blocks away from that crazy scene. I preferred a quiet, contemplative start to the New Year: light a candle, finish off the last of the holiday eggnog, or watch an old movie.

When I moved to Vermont as a pastor, I had the opportunity to offer others my dream contemplative New Year's Eve celebration: snowshoeing through the woods at night. With a friend on board, encouraging my crazy idea, we plotted the trail we would take, opting for a shorter one as temps would be in the single digits. We would have flashlights that strapped to our heads to help illumine the snowy path. When we emerged from the woods, we would start a large bonfire in the field and ring in the year with hot cocoa.

Later I added to the evening's festivities. Along the path itself, I planned on hanging battery operated lanterns. When we got to the first tree with a lantern, we would stop, and I would read Scripture or an inspirational poem about letting go of the old and welcoming the new.

New Year's Eve came, and a fresh snow had fallen that was perfect for snowshoeing. We entered the woods and found ourselves being enveloped by darkness. The lights from our flashlights were feeble, and I soon began to feel a bit nervous about being in the woods at night. It was darker than I thought it would be.

But then, I saw it: a tiny speck of light way in front of us. It was the most beautiful speck of light that I had ever seen. With each step I took,

you joy when you were younger? What are some dreams that you have let go of that still dance in your mind? It doesn't matter how old you think you are. With God, all things are possible. Today, dream, act and live with great faith.

that speck grew larger and brighter until we were standing at the first tree with a lantern, listening to God's promises of guiding us always, of being with us always, of always providing light on our paths. And so it continued. After the readings and a moment to reflect on what it was that we wanted to leave behind in the old year, we stepped forward back into the darkness until the light of the next lantern appeared.

Howard Thurman observed that "to continue one's journey in the darkness with one's footsteps guided by the illumination of remembered radiance is to know courage — the courage to demand that light continue to be light even in the surrounding darkness."

A new year is about to begin, and while we pray earnestly for it to be better than 2020, we can't help but feel apprehension about the unknown tomorrow. We have been walking in thick, scary woods it seems. But remember this: "To walk in the light while darkness invades, envelops and surrounds, is to wait on the Lord."

Pray

God, you hold my days in your loving hands. As I say good-bye to a year that has been trying in so many ways and for so many people, I thank you for being there by my side always. I know you are guiding me. I know that there is a divine lantern burning brightly along my snowy, wooded path. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

You don't have to go for a midnight hike in the woods to experience the light of God guiding you into a new year. You can create a lighted path in your home, placing candles throughout your home and creating mini prayer stations at each candle that is burning. "Travel" to each station and let go of something you need to let go of, or lift a prayer of praise, or simply pause and soak in the light and say the greatest prayer ever: "Thank you, God."

Day 8 | Friday, Jan. 1

A New Year's resolution

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. — Colossians 2:6–12

I'm not one to make New Year's resolutions. I used to, but it always seemed by January 31 I lost my resolve to do any of the things that I vowed I would see through. If I were to revisit this tradition, though, I cannot think of a better resolution than the one Paul writes in Colossians: "continue to live your lives in him." This is exactly what Howard Thurman has been encouraging us to do all throughout Advent and now Christmastide when he penned, "I will light candles."

Through these last few weeks, we have been reflecting on how to live our lives in Christ by lighting candles of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace and love. But the challenge is coming for us to continue being candles of light in the world, long after this devotional is over, and the new year gets into full swing. Will we remember what we have been reading through, reflecting on and praying over? Will we remember that the most beautiful light that can shine from us is the light that seeks to illumine another's darkness? Will this be the year in which we live not for ourselves, but we live to serve others? And I think there lies the problem I have with most New Year's resolutions. They tend to be focused on self: to get fit, look better and make more money.

Howard Thurman, though, reminds us that there is something "very important that belongs in the New Year." That is, the chance to "relate

to something beyond our families, our cares and our responsibilities." Thurman suggests selecting one thing outside your own needs to focus on. "Give a part of yourself" to some cause, some purpose or even someone. God gave a part of God's self to the hurting world, by taking on human flesh and blood. It's a Christmas gift that ultimately saved us from ourselves. If I am to live my life in Christ this year, that means looking beyond my own comfort to help another.

I have a friend who is a pastor of a struggling church. In the winter, they often meet in a small fellowship hall to save on the oil bill for heating a large, mostly empty sanctuary. Her church is still meeting in person, with masks, in spite of rising COVID-19 infections. In order to keep meeting in person, they would have to use the large sanctuary, which allows sitting six-feet from one another, but they worried about paying the heating bill.

The pastor had hoped this would be the very thing to open her congregation to try virtual worship. It didn't, though. Rather, a member made a generous donation to heat the sanctuary. My friend saw the goodness of the member's heart, but it didn't stop her from feeling sad. While the church is filled with wealthy retired people, the congregation doesn't reflect the just-scraping-by reality of the community they are in. There are many who will not be able to afford heat for their homes, but the church's mostly empty sanctuary will be heated. I think this is the year I will invite everyone to make a resolution: Live in Christ.

Pray

God, I thank you for my daily bread, for a bed to sleep in and for the ability to heat my home. But I want 2021 to be a year in which I live in your Son, Jesus Christ. I want to commit to comforting others. I want something more beyond my own comforts. Show me the way. Work through me. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

List all the comforts you have. Now take an honest assessment of those in your community who are struggling. What do they need the most? What can you do to help? Could the money to heat one sanctuary be used to heat more than one home instead?





Day 9 | Saturday, Jan. 2

Snow angel

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." — Hebrews 11:1–12

I've always loved this passage in Hebrews which is often referred to as the "great roll call" of faith. We are told of men and women who, by faith and nothing but faith, trusted God completely, even when God didn't give them all the information up front as to what to expect or equip them with a detailed roadmap showing every twist, turn and pothole. It was simply, "by faith" that led them forward into a life they never would have experienced if they had chosen not to take that proverbial leap.

It was by faith that I said "yes" to God's call to pastor struggling rural churches — churches

that few pastors would get excited about. I didn't intend on a life of being a country pastor. I still smile remembering when the head of a pastor nominating committee of a rural church reached out to me after reading my profile on the national church search site. She wanted to know if I was interested in talking with the committee, even though I didn't mark "yes" to being open to rural ministry on my profile. I didn't realize I did that. We spoke. I was called. And the rest is history.

What would have happened, though, if I had kept the rural door closed? I would never have experienced the most amazing moments of grace. I never would have seen the love of a community pulling together to raise money for a family in need. I never would have discovered how beautifully God does provide our daily bread if I never had a church that always struggled for money, yet always had enough. I never would have met my husband who, after years of unsuccessful dating in Manhattan, was waiting for me in Small Town USA. I never would have met my snow angel, Alice, who taught me to see hope in tomorrow even when there seems to be none.

It was one of those January Sundays where the wind whipped through the valleys and hills. It had snowed the night before, and so I expected church attendance to be even lower than usual. It was a small church of silver-haired seniors, and I was sure they would not want to venture out on slick roads. I was wrong. They came.

I opened our time of worship commending them and then joked that they were now expected to join me after worship to make snow angels in front of the church. There was laughter, and I thought my invite was forgotten by the time coffee hour rolled around. Imagine my surprise when I felt a tug at my clergy robe. Alice, one of the oldest of the older members, was standing there with her winter jacket on. When she told me to "get going," I had to ask, "Get going where?" "I'm ready to make snow angels with you," said Alice. I was shocked. So were others. But soon, by faith, they, too, got into their coats, and we made our way out into the frigid air.

Alice was the first to plunk down into the snow, flapping her arms to make angel wings. Helping hands were reaching out, pulling one another back up off of the ground. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was still life in this church. There was still hope. There was an angel named Alice who "by faith" did one of the most

exceptional things I will ever see in ministry. She took a crazy pastor's invite and showed that pastor that all things are indeed possible — possible by faith.

Pray

God, forgive me when I hesitate to step out in faith. Forgive me when I doubt your limitless love and your perfect guidance. Help me this day to see that all things are possible with you. May my steps this

year be steps of great faith in you. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What are the things in your life that you think aren't possible? What have you been hesitant to do? If you are feeling stuck, close your eyes and imagine standing on a path. Now move your foot one step forward and whisper, "By faith, I will ..."

Day 10 | Sunday, Jan. 3

More gifts to come

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. — Matthew 2:10–11

Historians say that we can thank the Victorian period for catapulting Santa and his sack of toys into stardom. It was during this time that "A Visit from St. Nicholas" was published anonymously in 1823. Later, in 1837, Clement Moore was given credit as the author, having renamed the poem, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." Cue Santa coming down the chimney, and the holidays have never been the same again.

But prior to the 19th century, gift-giving was done on Epiphany, Jan. 6, the day which remembers when the Magi presented their gifts to Jesus. I've always joked with my family that I was going to revive the tradition of exchanging gifts on Jan. 6 for two reasons: (1) December is a busy month for pastors, and I never have time to shop; and (2) I can take advantage of all the merchandise marked "50% off" on Dec. 26. This year, though, I am exchanging gifts on Jan. 6 because COVID-19 has meant more people have ordered gifts online, and UPS and FedEx have not been able to keep up with the demand. Many of the gifts ordered are still delayed.

While some might be disappointed by this, I am not. For once again, it seems this pandemic is making us reframe and rethink everything that has been taken granted for too long. And in the reframing and rethinking, something amazing is happening. We are being given the opportunity to experience God's story of salvation in a new way, with new traditions emerging.

Can you imagine your loved one's surprise when you give a gift to them during these 12 days of Christmas or even on Jan. 6, rather than the traditional Dec. 25? And can you see how

this can be the perfect opportunity to share the story about the Magi with another as you explain why the gift is being given now?

A few years ago, I did this with the church I was serving. I noticed that there was flurry of gift-giving to nursing home residents from November to mid-December. What about after Dec. 25? Isn't that when many begin feeling the post-holiday letdown? Now imagine if you are in an assisted living home and all of a sudden no one and no treats are showing up? So that year, I suggested to our session and deacons that we keep the gifts flowing throughout January. The children made Epiphany gifts for those in the nursing home. There were smiles of joy and tears of surprise by the residents. The church's Christmas mitten tree, collecting warm items for children who might not have winter weather gear, soon became the Epiphany tree. The local school was grateful for the items to be given to the children.

Howard Thurman wrote, "There is nothing more exhilarating to the spirit than to be able to minister to the needs of others at the time when a particular need is most acutely felt." The needs of others continue well after Dec. 25 has come and gone. Perhaps an unexpected gift this day will be the very thing to fill a particular need for someone who is struggling today with hunger or a case of the holiday blues.

Prayer

Most merciful and caring God, forgive me for being so tied to traditions that I miss what is really important. Open me to new ways of doing things, of serving others, of worshiping you, of being Christ's hands and feet in this world. Work through me, God. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What are some Epiphany mission ideas you and/or your church can do this month? How can you keep the candle of love burning brightly?





Day 11 | Monday, Jan. 4

The candles we burn

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. — Matthew 2:11

We take light in our lives for granted. A room gets dark, we flip a switch and voila: Light! We rarely worry about the lack of it until there is a power outage or — as many will be facing in a COVID-19 strained economy — an electric bill goes unpaid.

Light was not always an easy thing to come by. For centuries, the advent of light in one's life was the result of much toil. Trust me. Have you ever tried making candles? I have, and I failed miserably. My interest in mastering 18th-century living skills led me to buying a hunk of beeswax and a tin candle mold. How hard could it be? Pull the wick through the mold, melt the wax, pour and let harden. Then pop out the candles. The candles, though, didn't pop. They had to be yanked. And even then, many refused to come out of the mold. I couldn't imagine having to make 400 candles, the average number of candles American colonial women were tasked to make annually for a household.

When I got to the store to buy candles that I had failed to make on my own, I wasn't prepared for the assortment available: soy, paraffin, coconut and beeswax. Did the material really matter? I did some research and discovered the wax used did indeed matter. In early days, many houses depended on light from a rush dipped in tallow (animal fat). Later on, the rush was replaced with a wick that was dipped in tallow. But tallow produced a horrible smell, especially if it was made from pig fat. The tallow candles didn't burn cleanly either, producing a thick black smoke. There was the problem as well that many people couldn't afford to eat a lot of meat, and so tallow was not readily available for all. Thus, candles were a premium item.

History records a servant's terms of employment in one wealthy household to include a daily ration of one candle, to be used only to find their way to their room at night to get ready

for bed. Only the wealthy had the means to burn candles made out of beeswax, which had a pleasant scent and a longer burn time.

Then there was the bayberry candle. In New England, women discovered that boiling bayberries would produce a wax-like substance that would burn cleanly and smell beautifully. It would take 15 pounds of bayberries, though, to make one pound of wax. So, bayberry candles were often reserved for special times — holidays — and special places — inside a church. There is a folklore that burning a bayberry candle on Christmas Eve will bring health and wealth in the new year. I have brought this tradition to my 18th-century home, burning a bayberry candle throughout Christmastide.

Throughout Advent and Christmastide, we have been invited to light candles. But did we even stop to think that the very act of lighting a candle could be an act of social justice? Who is burning tallow? Who has the means to burn beeswax? Have we ever stopped to think that the ability to have a candle is one of privilege? Do we realize the amount of work it takes to create a candle to burn?

If we are to be candles in this world — the lights of Christ to others — then we must realize that light is not to be taken for granted, that light comes with work and responsibility. And the "wax" we burn for God should be the cleanest and the purest. Just as the Magi presented their extravagant gifts to Jesus, we, too, need to give our best.

Pray

God of light, illumine my world to see those who are sitting in darkness. Help me to not only be a candle of hope and love for them, but to give freely the light from my own candle. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Try your hand at making candles. Go online to research candle making instructional videos and where to buy the supplies needed. The candles you make can be used in the celebration of Candlemas, Feb. 2, a church feast that marks the presentation of Jesus in the temple.

Day 12 | Tuesday, Jan. 5

Stay the course

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. — Matthew 2:11

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. — Isaiah 60:1–6

We have come to the end of Christmastide on a day that is called “Twelfth Night” — a celebration on the eve of Epiphany that prepares for the Magi’s arrival and the presentation of their gifts to Jesus. I find myself reflecting on the Magi’s account in Scripture. Matthew tells us that when they saw Jesus, they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Three gifts that over the years inspired greeting card artists to depict a Magi carrying each one.

But were there only three travelers from afar? In Isaiah we read about a “multitude of camels” on the journey. Now maybe these Magi didn’t master the art of packing lightly for a trip. What if, though, there were more than three Magi

following that star?

The word “multitude” means a large number. If there were a large number of camels, then I believe there were more than the three learned men on this trip. What if there was a multitude of travelers, eager to see what this new star in the sky meant? What if the arduous journey led some to fall by the wayside? What if some in the multitude decided the journey just wasn’t worth it and turned back? What if some got side-tracked along the way by something better — a better village to stay in perhaps? What if, out of the many who wanted to see this thing God had done, only three faithful, die-hard travelers were rewarded and saw Jesus?

On this Epiphany Eve, I wonder about our faith journeys? How committed are we? I wonder about the candles that will continue to light the world long after the star in the sky has vanished? Will we grow weary on the road serving God and turn back, never seeing fully God’s manifestation in the world? Or will we have enough faith to stay the course and be one of the few who will one day fall on our knees in awe and adoration, for before our eyes, we have seen the Christ Child?

Pray

God, I want to see your Son, Jesus. I want to pay him homage. I want to stay the course and not grow weary on this journey of faith. Give me the strength and courage I need so that I do not give up or give in. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Celebrate tonight by lighting the Christ candle from the Advent wreath. If you have white Christmas lights, string them somewhere in your house. With the three gifts the Magi gave to Jesus in mind, think about what three gifts you would give to the Christ Child this day.



Epiphany | Wednesday, Jan. 6

Candles that will burn all year long

Our time together ends with the celebration of Epiphany, a church feast on the calendar commemorating the Magi’s arrival with gifts for Jesus. Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epipaneia*, meaning “appearance” or “manifestation.” Christ has appeared to us and his divinity has been revealed. It is now time to take action and commit to burning candles of joy, hope, courage, peace, grace and love all year long. To-

day is a great time to start an Epiphany journal, recording daily where you have seen Christ’s light in the world or where you yourself have been that light.

Howard Thurman has graced us during Advent and Christmastide with the words from his poem, “I Will Light Candles This Christmas.” It is only fitting to journey forward now with Thurman’s message to us in his other notable poem — a poem that captures beautifully the work of so many congregations who are actively working in their communities to become



Matthew 25 churches. May it be like a shining,
guiding star in your life.

The Work of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.