

God Lifts the Lowly

An Advent devotional based on Mary's Song of Praise

About the devotional

When planning *Presbyterians Today's* 2018 Advent devotional, verse 52 from Mary's Song of Praise, also known as The Magnificat, which is found in Luke 1, kept coming to me: He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

I began thinking about those times God had lifted me. I began thinking about those who have gifted me with their songs of praise — beautiful notes of God looking on them with mercy. I also thought about our world so in need of a Savior. And so, this year's devotional is for you, for your friends and family, for the stranger next door — it's a reminder that God has a song for us all.

Just ask Andrew Weatherly, who wrote the poems and created the artwork for this devotional. Andrew was in my Sunday school class while I was interning at a church during seminary. Even then, I could see more to him than his disability. Born with Down syndrome, Andrew hasn't let anything stop him, and he now uses his art to raise awareness of the capabilities of those with special needs.

Krin Van Tatenhove joins me in writing this devotional, sharing his thoughts in Weeks 1 and 2. The father of a son with autism, Krin knows what it is like to fight "the system" so that his son can have the same opportunities as those who are labeled "normal."

As for me, this project is close to my heart. I have a special-needs brother who struggles to find his place in the world. His time of Advent waiting seems endless at times, but God is working on his song of praise.

May this devotional, inspired by Mary's song, be an Advent blessing to you. May it be the reminder we all need that no matter what, God lifts us up.

Donna Frischknecht Jackson Editor, Presbyterians Today



Title: Open Arms



-> First Week of Advent -

Sunday, December 2

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." — Luke 1:46–48

RISE

Beckoning empty skies,
a light comes breaking through
burning ever so powerful.
Painted star of early morn;
its glow will find us peace.
From the kingdom where love is new
break of dawn,
new life unfolding before our eyes.
Glimpse up to the skies embraced in the light.
— Andrew Weatherly

This Advent season, how will you live into God's promise of a new dawn breaking?

God of Advent, remind us to seek your light always — even when darkness sets in. Amen.



Monday, December 3

THE POWER OF MAGNIFICATION

Extol the Lord our God! — Psalm 99:5

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord ..." — Luke 1:46

Magnification has two meanings, and if we consider each of them, no wonder Mary burst into a song of praise.

The first meaning is to make something appear larger, like a photo taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. It focused on a tiny, remote spot in our universe, but even there it discovered previously unknown galaxies, many larger than our Milky Way. Mary understood that as God looked closely at her soul, God magnified her precious merit despite her humble origins. It's the sentiment we echo in the Christmas hymn "O, Holy Night" — till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.

The second meaning is to extol or glorify. Mary praised God for choosing her to be the mother of the Messiah. The light she experienced in the Annunciation refracted through her soul, amplifying God's love for all of humanity. This is the power of magnification.

-KVT

How do our lives in Christ help us radiate God's love to the world?

O God, in this Advent season may we rediscover — and treasure — the worth of all your children. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4

EXULTANT SPIRITS

Rejoice in the Lord always! — Philippians 4:4 ... and my spirit rejoices ... — Luke 1:47

Recall moments when you rejoiced wholeheartedly — times of worship, family gatherings or even communing with nature.

As father of a special-needs son, I think of the Special Olympics. These events celebrate the worth of every human being — their value in God's eyes, not the pyramidal structures of this world. From coaches to timekeepers to volunteers cheering at finish lines, a message rings out: Rejoice, for you are a child of God.

I will never forget an inspiring moment as a packed stadium watched a wheelchair event. One boy, affected by cerebral palsy, struggled to keep himself on track, lurching from side to side, crying out with a plaintive voice. Soon, the entire crowd was on its feet, urging him forward. When he crossed the finish line alone, we roared our approval, a crescendo that underlined the Special Olympics motto: "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."

-KVT

What causes your spirit, like Mary's, to rejoice?

No matter our circumstances, O God, help us remain grateful for your neverending love. Amen.

Wednesday, December 5

SAVING WAYS

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. — Luke 19:10

... my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...

— Luke 1:47

There are many ways to think of salvation, but surely we can see how the teachings of Jesus "save" us from life's snares. He rescues us from worry, reminding us of God's care. He deters us from materialism, calling us to store up treasures that last. He saves us

from narrow notions of love, expanding our mercy to include even our enemies.

In keeping with our Advent theme, Jesus can banish our sense of insignificance. Remember, he said, that God counts every hair on your head. Remember that no matter how far you stray, God leaves a light on in the window to welcome you home.

- KVT

How have Jesus' teachings saved you from error?

O God, help us through the Spirit to understand Jesus' saving ways. Amen.

Thursday, December 6

GOD'S FAVOR FOR ALL

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. — Luke 4:18–19

 \dots for he has looked with favor \dots — Luke 1:48

A powerful Old Testament practice was the Jubilee Year, also called the Year of God's Favor. Every 50th year, debts were forgiven, family lands restored, slaves and prisoners set free. Early in the Gospel of Luke, while visiting the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus chose to read Isaiah's prophecy of how the Messiah would inaugurate this era of favor for both Jews and Gentiles. Rolling up the scroll, Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Isn't this the gospel in a nutshell? God loves everyone equally, but God has special favor for the lowliest in our world. Jesus proclaimed this new age: a time when a Palestinian maiden becomes the Savior's mother, fishermen transform into disciples and outcasts are welcome at the table. Mary reminds us that in Christ, God looks upon us with favor.

-KVT

With gratitude, can you list some ways that God has shown favor to you?

Loving God, thank you for looking upon us with neverending mercy. Amen.

Friday, December 7

HUMBLE ORIGINS, GLORIOUS DESTINIES

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up ... — James 1:9

... for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. — Luke 1:48

Consider the humble life of Jesus. Laid as a newborn in a feeding trough, this carpenter received his schooling at home, not with established rabbis. When his disciples asked him how to excel, he replied, "The one who would be great among you must be your servant." On his final day, after washing those disciples' feet, he was crucified alongside criminals outside the gates of Jerusalem.

Yet, as the famous poem says, "All the navies ... ever built, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned ... have not affected the life of (humanity) upon this earth as powerfully as that one solitary life."

Mary's Song of Praise exemplifies the boasting prescribed by James. It is not a conceited sense of self, but a bragging about God who lifts the lowly, beginning with each of us.

-KVT

Have you witnessed the power of lowliness in our world?

O God, train our eyes to see your majesty in what the world often scorns. Amen.

Saturday, December 8

A LESSON IN HUMILITY

 \dots clothe yourselves with humility $\dots -1$ Peter 5:5

On a trip to Mexico, I joined a local pastor, his wife and their four children for lunch. Their home was little more than a shanty; no water or electricity, situated along the Colorado River canal, its water highly polluted from northern industrial waste.

The man's sons asked me to swim with them. Gulp! I agreed, but carefully kept my lips sealed that I was not the best swimmer. After swimming a bit, I scrambled up the embankment, realizing that I had drifted. My sandals were far away. Suddenly, I felt a tap on my

leg. I looked down to find my fellow pastor kneeling in the dirt, a towel and my sandals in his hands. He began to dry my feet. I resisted at first, but then let him continue.

I will never forget the feel of his touch, the love in his smile or our arms around each other's shoulders as we walked from that place.

- KVT

How can you show your love this Advent season through a simple act of love?

O God, clothe us with humility so that others will see Christ in us. Amen.

-> Second Week of Advent -

Sunday, December 9

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. — Luke 1:48–50

GUARDIAN OF PEACE

The angel sent a message of joy
from God of Heaven above,
holy light gleams on earth
where creation is born; new magical place,
where dreams come true.
The angel knelt and told me
"I love you, let mortal flesh keep silence,"
who shall wear the robe and crown?
Thy good brothers all are we.
The angel sprinkled silver light,
she touched her harp of gold.
Rejoice to the earth;
ours the Cross, the grave and skies,
from God of Heaven above.

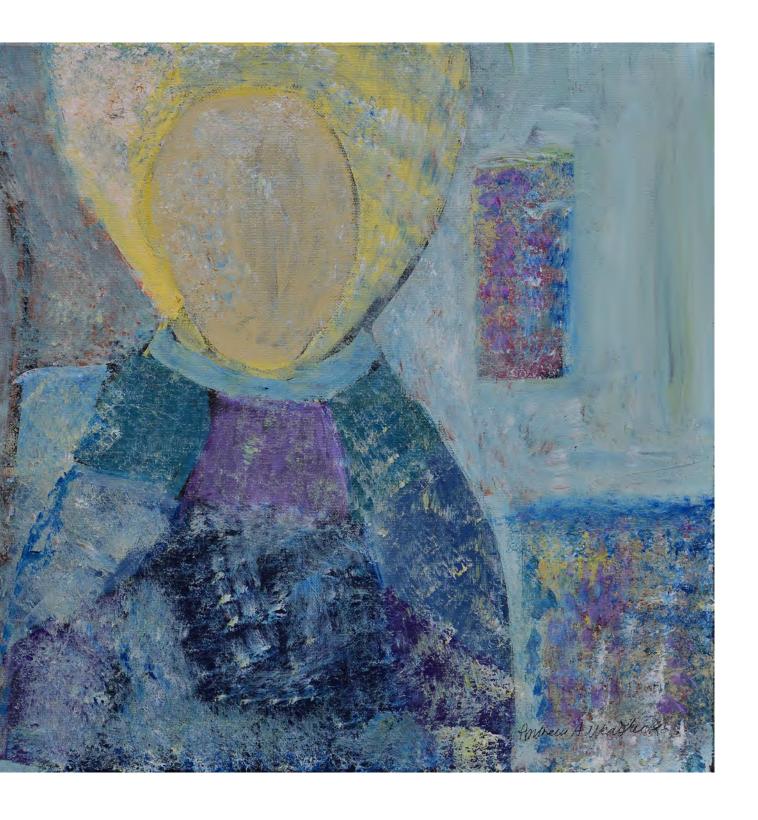
Andrew Weatherly

How can you share the angel's message of joy this Advent?

Gracious God, help us find our voice once again to share the good news of a Savior born for all. Amen.



Title: I Am Peace



Monday, December 10

THE LAVISH LOVE OF GOD

... who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing ... — Ephesians 1:3

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed ... — Luke 1:48

In her Song of Praise, Mary recognized — and treasured — her blessedness.

Do you also treasure the blessings God has lavished upon you through Christ? If we gauge our self-worth by the measures of this world — position, title, wealth or influence — we may find ourselves lacking.

If we embrace the love of God that lifts us up on eagles' wings, however, we gradually realize the truth of Paul's words to the Ephesians. We have every spiritual gift we need. As the famous hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" says, "Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!"

-KVT

How can you learn to more fully count our blessings this Advent season — and in all seasons?

O God, thank you for choosing all of us to receive your abundance. Amen.

Tuesday, December 11

GOD'S MIGHTY PRESENCE

I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. — Psalm 77:12

 \dots for the Mighty One has done great things for me \dots — Luke 1:49

Mary recognizes that her new status as the mother of God is not based on her own righteousness. It is the result of God's power.

There is a belief that we share in the recovery movement, contained in the "promises" of the AA Big Book: "We will ... realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves."

This does not mean we shirk our responsibility. It does not mean we are passive. It means learning that when we partner with the living presence of God, when we walk in the Spirit, miracles happen that far exceed our expectations. Do you doubt this? Re-read the book we call "The Acts of the Apostles." It could easily be titled "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" — evidence of God working powerful deeds through fallible human beings.

-KVT

Are you trying to control too many things, relying solely on your own willpower?

Loving God, teach us that if we surrender to your power, you will make a glorious way for us. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12

HOLINESS SURROUNDS US

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and let your glory be over all the earth. — Psalm 108:5

... and holy is his name. — Luke 1:49

Mary's song has so many powerful levels of meaning, but it is ultimately an act of worship, ascribing glory to the Holy One of Israel.

We live in a world where so much of the sacred has been stripped from our lives. Corporations commodify everything, their alluring lies promising to meet our deepest needs through the acquisition of material things. But God calls us to dwell in the holiness of God's presence and to see evidence of our Creator everywhere. It means to remember where we came from and where we are returning. The holiness of God surrounds us.

-KVT

What moments can you sneak in today to notice the details of God's holiness all around?

O God, during this Advent season, help us relax and savor your presence. Amen.

Thursday, December 13

REVERENCE, NOT FEAR

- ... let all the ends of the earth revere him.
- Psalm 67:7

His mercy is for those who fear him ...

— Luke 1:50

The Hebrew word *yare'* and the Greek word *phobeo* are consistently translated as "to fear." A more nuanced rendering would be "to revere." As we celebrate the Advent of Christ's amazing love, this distinction anchors our faith. In his first letter, the apostle John puts it beautifully: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Those of us with special-needs children can tell you about our cries for mercy, our pleas for perfect love to transform our fears. It's a cry for all children as well. God, help our children find a place in this world! Help us provide for them both now and in the long term! Give us love and patience worthy of this precious human being you entrusted to our care!

Each of our journeys is different, but I have learned his timeless truth. God's mercy and love are enough to sustain us through every trial.

-KVT

Are you holding onto a fear or worry that God's love can vanish?

Loving God, we praise you for the mercy you show to all your children. Amen.

Friday, December 14

PASSION PLAY

... the mystery ... hidden throughout the ages and generations ... has now been revealed to his saints. — Colossians 1:26

 \dots from generation to generation. — Luke 1:50

Mary had a prophetic premonition that her role in God's passion play would reverberate for generations. As we celebrate seasons like Advent, we also have a chance to relish our role in the long procession of those who have followed Jesus into adventures of faith. We can rejoice that what Paul called a mystery is now revealed to all of us.

What is this mystery? The God of all creation loves each one of us intimately, and our worth in God's kingdom is eternal. It is a truth that asks a question: How do we share this good news with others through our words and actions? As our Brief Statement of Faith says, are we doing our part "to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace"?

-KVT

What role is God asking you to play in loving those deemed unlovable?

O God, kindle in us a new desire to enlarge our part in your passion play. Amen.

Saturday, December 15

FRONT ROW SAINTS

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. — Matthew 5:5

I was once senior pastor of a church that had a longstanding Bible study for special-needs adults. Its faithful teacher, Helen, was nicknamed "Sunshine" by its members, a recognition of her radiant compassion.

During worship, the class sat together in the front pews. As I looked out from the pulpit each Sunday,

their faces were the first to greet me. It became a living parable that shaped my theology of preaching. I asked myself a regular question: Would I remember the world-overturning lesson of Jesus, that unless we become like children, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven?

-KVT

This Advent, how can you embrace the simple, liberating power of Jesus' message?

Loving God, you have called us as saints through the love of Christ. Help us to live with this empowering knowledge of our identity. Amen.

-> Third Week of Advent -

Sunday, December 16

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

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

— Luke 1:51–53

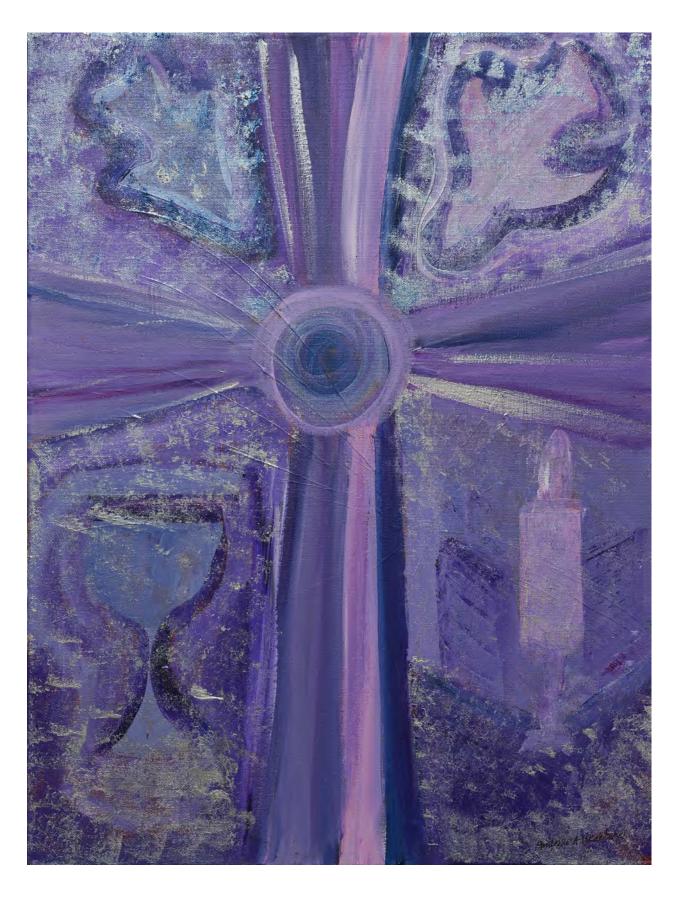
WHEN LOVE TAKES OVER

When love takes over victims now sons and daughters, darkness disappeared, guardian angels brought home on this day we'll never forget; find some distraction and peace tonight. When love takes over from heaven above, where love is born and its power is blossoming new, we are one nation under God who oversees the sundial of life. When love takes over His light will follow you.

— Andrew Weatherly

What would our communities look like if we allowed love to take over and push aside our hate?

God of heavenly light, shine brightly through our words and actions. Amen.



Title: Passion

Monday, December 17

LEAPS OF FAITH

Do not fear, for I am with you ... — Isaiah 41:10 He has shown strength with his arm ...

— Luke 1:51

The climb up the tree wasn't hard; it was the climb down that had me fearful. My brother stood with his arms outstretched, telling me to jump. I begged him to get others to help me. My brother was "different." He couldn't possibly get me out of the tree. When he persisted, I knew I had to leap into the arms I was sure would fail me. But those arms didn't fail. I smiled and exclaimed, "You did it!" My brother, though, looked disappointed that I didn't trust him.

How many times have I hurt God with my lack of trust in God's strong arms to catch me? How many Advents have I brought God to tears because I chose to stay fearfully stuck in a "tree"? Mary took a leap of faith into God's capable arms. Won't you?

- DFI

What leaps in life is God inviting you to take?

Loving God, help us move forward with great faith, knowing you will catch us always. Amen.

Tuesday, December 18

A SPECIAL ANGEL

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God ... -1 Peter 5:6

... He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. — Luke 1:51

I was intrigued when an angel of color was placed on the tree in the sanctuary. I was especially surprised after hearing a racial slur whispered about the angel by visitors one Sunday. Why did this white congregation choose such a tree topper?

I later learned the angel had been a tradition since the foster child of one of the church families died of AIDS. It was that year, on Christmas Eve, the angel appeared. No one ever found out who put it on the tree. When Mary sings about God scattering the proud, I think about how that angel with the darkened skin scattered a family away all because it didn't fit their picture of a Christmas. They couldn't see God's picture, complete with new traditions and a new call to love radically.

– DFI

What blessings do we miss when we stick to what we think Christmas should look like?

Boundary-breaking God, help us remember that your message of salvation first reached the humblest of your children — the shepherds. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19

SILENCING MARY

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

— Matthew 20:16

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones \dots — Luke 1:52

She had cornered the market on playing Mary. There was just no competing with her Mary costume, the best of the best when it came to blue sheets. One year, though, a girl with Down syndrome was given the role. The original actress was not happy, and she tried her best to get the new Mary ousted. A sense of privilege can make us do crazy things.

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, he didn't translate Mary's Song of Praise. Rather, he left the words in their Latin form. The German princes, who supported Luther, didn't want others to hear about God bringing down the powerful from their thrones. Mary's song, though, can't be silenced. I saw a glimpse of that when I watched a special-needs Mary lovingly cradling a baby doll and the former Mary reluctantly mooing in a threadbare cow costume.

— DFJ

What songs of justice do we try to silence?

God of mercy, help us place the needs of others before our own. Amen.

Thursday, December 20

WHO'S LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH?

We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

— *Romans* 12:5

 \dots and lifted up the lowly. — Luke 1:52

Growing up, it always seemed that the same families were invited to light the church Advent wreath. And they were just that — families — father, mother, son and daughter. When I became a pastor, I vowed to invite those often overlooked in the congregation to come forward and light the candles. And so there have been same-sex couples, single men and women, elderly people with no family, special-needs children, and immigrants still struggling with their English — all lighting the flames of hope, joy, peace and love, and sharing a prayer with all.

God didn't seek perfection when God chose Mary. God chose Mary because she was open to God's mysterious ways. God smiled upon her and lifted her up.

Who is lighting your Advent wreath?

- DFI

How can we make a conscious effort to reach out to those who are overlooked?

God, open our eyes to the forgotten in our society and help us invite them into our circle. Amen.

Friday, December 21

GOD EASES THE HUNGERING

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

— James 4:8

He has filled the hungry with good things ...

— Luke 1:53

Empty calories. I am an expert on that subject and, like others who indulge in too many Christmas cookies, I will greet the new year with yet another diet.

Most of the empty calories I consume, though, are not because I love cookies. I reach for them to chase away the sadness I feel this time of year. I think of Christmases past, when there was tension rather than joy in the house because of my brother's many challenges, and I grab a cookie. I think of Christmases present and feel the sadness when I think of how few visitors my adult brother receives, and I grab a cookie. I grab the sweet treat because that was always the solution to sadness. What I needed, and still need, is the Christ child, the promised Bread of Heaven, for he is the one who will satisfy my deepest hungering.

- DFI

How can this Advent be different if we allow God's healing love to fill us?

God who feels our pain and cries with us, send us peace this Advent. Amen.

Saturday, December 22

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

 \dots and sent the rich away empty. — Luke 1:53

My brother was a huge Beatles fan as a teenager. Inspired by the Fab Four, he would sign birthday cards with the words "All you need is love."

Sound advice from a child of God whom the world might look at and say, "Man, you need more than love. You need a stronger body, a sharper mind to be happy."

We have fallen into that trap of thinking that the more we have, be it material possessions, intellect or beauty, the more loved we will be. More "things" cannot heal our brokenness. Only love can make us whole.

My brother got it right. All you need is love. And that's not just a Beatles song. That's God's song.

DFI

What would happen if we gave the gift of being fully present to others?

God of Advent promises, help us let go of the need for riches. Help us make more room in our lives for you. Amen.

-> Fourth Week of Advent -

Sunday, December 23

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. — Luke 1:54–55

NIGHT DIVINE

Father sky

Appears in angel voices

Glorious sound from afar.

Shadows and stars appear

On the night Christmas Eve

Mother earth alights again;

comes alive

Come embrace on bended knee

The wonders of her aerial views.

- Andrew Weatherly

When was the last time you felt the wonder and awe of the divine gift of Jesus given to you?

Loving God, may we find ourselves falling on our knees in humble worship to you who has given us so much. Amen.



Title: Peace



Christmas Eve

Monday, December 24

A BROKEN CIRCLE

But Moses' hands grew weary. ... Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set. — Exodus 17:12

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy ... — Luke 1:54

The little country church I served had a Christmas Eve tradition of inviting the congregation to form a circle of light with candles around the sanctuary while singing "Silent Night." It sounded beautiful, but I wasn't looking forward to it.

My brother, who had a hard time holding anything with his trembling hands, let alone a lit candle, would be at worship that night. His steps were just as uncertain, making it hard for him to walk to be part of the circle. I voiced my concerns to a friend. She advised me not to carry the burden alone. So, I shared my brother's limitations with the worship committee.

The holy night came. The circle of light around the sanctuary was there. This time, though, there was also a path of light connecting my brother to the circle as church members sat with him, while others stood beside him in the aisle with lit candles. Years to come, that tradition would continue — brothers and sisters meeting those in need where they were, and helping to hold the Christ light for them.

— DFI

Who have been the angels in your life who have met you where you are in your time of need?

Be near us, Lord Jesus, and chase away our doubts and fears and struggles with your healing light. Amen.

Christmas Day

Tuesday, December 25

Do not be afraid; for see -I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people ...

- Luke 2:10

... according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. — Luke 1:55

As children, setting up the Nativity scene was a highlight for my brother, sister and me. We would take turns picking a figurine out of a shoebox and placing it in the stable.

I always favored the shepherd boy — until I dropped it. My mother glued the head back on, but to no avail. She then used a toothpick to keep the head in place. It worked, but the head wobbled. I no longer wanted the shepherd. Neither did my sister. We chose the Wise Men and fought over Mary. My brother, though, stuck with the broken shepherd, embraced and placed him in the seat of honor — next to baby Jesus. In my best bratty sister voice, I snapped that the shepherd didn't belong there. My brother snapped back, "He does."

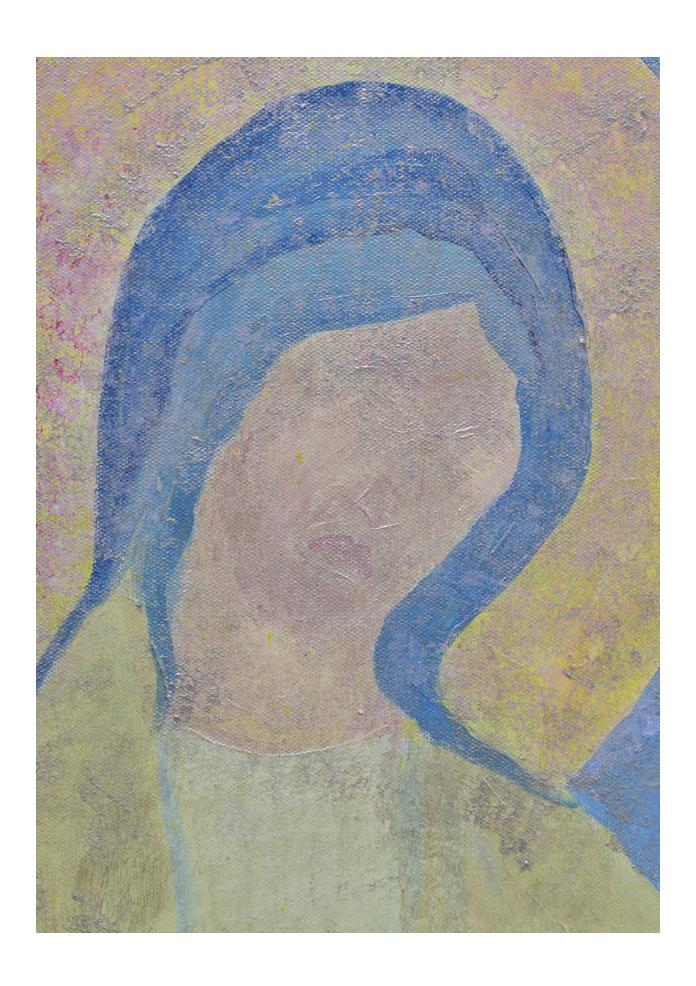
The broken shepherd boy does belong. My brother belongs. I belong. You belong. We all belong, in our own brokenness, close by Jesus' side. Jesus, who was born to be our friend. Jesus, who will always lift us up.

- DFI

On this Christmas Day, how close are you standing by the holy babe in the manger?

Incarnate God, thank you for greatest gift of all — *your son, Jesus, who reminds us we are all worthy and loved. Amen.*

Title: Mother Mary





ABOUT THE WRITERS

Donna Frischknecht Jackson is the editor of *Presbyterians Today*. A former magazine editor for the fine jewelry industry in New York City, she was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2007. She lives in Vermont with her husband, Paul, and a bumbling Bernese mountain dog, Sofie. She has a heart for advocating for those who may be overlooked, like her brother. She is also passionate about rural ministry and seeks to get those voices heard. She blogs about her experiences at accidentalcountrypastor.com.

Krin Van Tatenhove has been an ordained Presbyterian pastor for 31 years, with experience as a hospice chaplain, director of two projects for Habitat for Humanity, substance abuse counselor in both Nevada and Texas, and writer for newspapers and magazines. He is the co-author of Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission, due out from Westminster John Knox Press in early 2019. Krin and his wife, Donna, have a blended family with four children, including their special-needs son, Kristoffer.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Andrew Weatherly of South Presbyterian Church in Bergenfield, New Jersey, is a young man with Down syndrome who has found his voice through art. Insightful, intuitive, sincere and passionate about his work, he views art as a tool for both personal and social growth. He explores his creativity through painting, photography and writing; has published two books on his experiences; and gives talks about his experiences as an artist and in life. Additional information can be found at andrewweatherly.com.

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Title: Wondrous Star of Night