“For a Time Such as This, He Comes!”

An Advent Devotional for a most unusual journey to Bethlehem

Photographs by Fr. Gerald Schweitzer
Devotions by Rev. Dr. Don Wagner
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Advent 2020

In a time unlike any other in our collective memory, there is still . . .
HOPE
PEACE
JOY
LOVE
And, most poignantly, GOOD NEWS!
“God With Us” will never abandon, nor turn away.
Prepare for the One of God who comes for us all.

Introduction

‘Who would hang a wreath on an old weathered barn?’ I thought. Then I smiled and mused, ‘Who would take a picture of a wreath hanging on an old weathered barn?’

All of the photographs throughout this Advent Devotional are the work of Fr. Gerald Schweitzer, an incredibly gifted Priest, Pastor, Colleague, Friend, Mentor, Servant of God and Photographer, whom it is my good fortune to have met and become friends with many years ago. Jerry has spent nearly all of his ministry among God’s people in Northern Indiana where the stories of his servanthood, caring, laughter and Spirit-filled teaching and worship are legion. Though now officially retired, Jerry is still hard at work in Christ’s Church as opportunity, need and, now, Covid-19 allows. As you will see in his photographs, his passion for God’s creation, Christ’s people and the Spirit’s inspiration and leading are at the core of how he views the world and invites others to see it. Have you ever desired to see the world through the eyes of God? Look carefully at these photographs. Jerry produces daily devotionals and sends them out via email—and these photographs are from those devotionals, used with his express permission for this Advent Devotional. My prayer is that his work and faith are as honored and valued in this Advent journey as they are in his own faith journey for, certainly, they each speak to one’s heart and soul from the very voice of God.

Now many months into this season of the novel coronavirus, Covid-19, pandemic, with all of the changes, stresses, challenges, difficulties and crises which permeate our daily human journey, it seems an appropriate time to go back to our Christian root and tradition for God’s foundation of Hope, Peace, Joy, Love and Good News. It is time to prepare to receive God’s Gift to a world struggling in the throes of conflict, oppression, taxation, ruling party arguments, lack of adequate health care, bigotry, hatred, injustice and lethargy. Israel, when Jesus was born, has much in common with where we are today in (feel free to name your place of residence here), yet it is important to note: God did not abandon, nor turn away from Israel then, any more than God will turn away from us now. “God With Us”, Immanuel, opens our eyes to what is important on the journey, turns our hearts to consider the place of angel voices along the path and softens our soul to receive that which God’s Wisdom understands to be true in the nearing Kingdom. Like a wreath hanging on an old weathered barn, God has Good News to share and, as Father Jerry reminds us, the Light of God’s Good News shines in
worship facility and nature alike. It is up to us to notice, to ponder, to hold these things dear and to prepare to receive it.

All Biblical texts quoted in this Advent Devotional are from the Common English Bible, (c)2011.

A note of thanks to Ms. Becky Harrison, the Office Manager of St. Paul United Church of Christ, Lebanon, Illinois for all of her work in editing this work and allowing space and time for me to write it in the midst of other ministry calls, needs and opportunities. Becky, you are an incredible and talented gift of God. St Paul UCC and the Church universal are blessed you continually say, “Yes” to God’s call in your life.

All gifts received in the distribution of this Advent Devotional will be divided equally and distributed to:
DuBois Retreat Center, the camping and retreat center of the Illinois South Conference of the United Church of Christ. These funds will be used to assist with scholarships for children and families in need.

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Sojourner Truth House, in Gary, Indiana, which provides much needed assistance to women and children who find themselves homeless or in need of specialized care and assistance.

Be sure to check out the work of these two vital ministries on their webpages:

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Thank you for joining Father Jerry and me on the journey to Bethlehem in this strange, yet awesome time. Read on and ponder what is being revealed to you in the One born to be the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

God’s Shalom on the pilgrimage,
Rev. Dr. Don Wagner
St. Paul United Church of Christ,
Lebanon, Illinois

Please address all gifts to:
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"Shepherd of Israel, listen! You, the one who leads Joseph as if he were a sheep. You, who are enthroned upon the winged heavenly creatures. Show yourself before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh!"

Psalm 80:1-2a

Have you ever stopped to consider the pine tree? Held the tender needles? Felt the stickiness of the sap? Smelled the aromatic freshness of its very presence?

Then, in walking away, you realized the pine tree was going with you? The sap sticking to your fingers, pine bough richness lingering in your nostrils and the last vestiges of needles still clinging to you, seemingly not letting you depart without their insistent reminder?

So it is with God.

The Psalmist calls upon this reality and boldly names what they understand of it, as though God could be therein contained! Ah, but that is the beauty of this Advent journey: The God upon whom we call, the God who leads Joseph as if he were a sheep, the God who is enthroned upon winged heavenly creatures, the God of all twelve tribes of Israel can be called upon for deliverance. God’s impact upon our journey throughout every generation resonates in our heart as a pine bough catches our eye. God’s lasting fragrance of delightful care powerfully beckons to us to trust and obey. And, God’s unwavering nearness experienced in grace and mercy, like sap upon our hands, summons us to boldness, even as God’s love guides us from despair. We cannot ever walk away from God’s salvific vision of Hope in this time precisely because God is the One who never leaves us . . . like the experience of the pine bough along the road.

In these difficult days of pandemic isolation, as political turmoil rises seemingly every moment of every day, and cries for justice, equity and righteousness ring out throughout our world, call upon the God who first calls you, knows you and loves you. Our shared history in this God is but a faint blip of light in all that God has done, is doing and will continue to do that humanity, and creation itself, not lose Hope. Be bold, call out. God hears your heart and answers in your soul.

Prayer: God, hear my voice calling for Hope to arrive when most we need it. Amen.
Monday, Week One, Day Two of Advent

“Wake up your power! Come to save us!” 
Psalm 80.2b

Urgency in prayer is not an accident these days, it is a hallmark of our desperation. Exclamation points punctuate our cries, as though saying it more loudly or more insistently makes our petition more worthy to be heard. Nothing can be taken for granted, no stone left unturned, no clue too small. We are searching, searching, searching, like wise people watching the heavens for answers and digging deeply within the human experience for resolve. We give voice to what we feel we need and imagine how we expect our prayers to be answered, yet the One to whom we call, the One who is from beginning to Beginning, that One will answer as only the Shepherd of Israel can.

God hears, not the exclamation point, but the cry, even as God heard the cries of Israel in Egypt. God answers, not the insistence, but the devotion of the heart to faith, as God answers the faith of Jesus hung upon the cross. God delivers, not as we imagine, nor as we demand, but only as the Wisdom of God chooses to express Her voice in rolling a stone away from a tomb outside of Jerusalem - or in birthing a King in a stable in Bethlehem.

Eternal Hope will be heard and seen by those who wait, who listen, who watch.

Prayer: Lord God, replace my insistent prayers with a persistent Hope in the One who comes in your Name. Not as I imagine it, but as You choose to reveal it. Amen.
Tuesday, Week One, Day Three of Advent

“Restore us, God! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!”
Psalm 80.3

What does the shining of God’s face look like? Is it like a bush burning on the side of a mountain without being consumed? Might it resemble that still small voice Elijah heard which sent him back to do God’s will? Could it be seen in Ninevah as Jonah called that great city to repentance, in spite of his reluctance? Or, might it be as profound, as deeply beautiful, as captivating as a flower reaching to the sun?

We long to see the shining of God’s face within our heart of hearts: Meeting our social isolation with the fullness of Presence birthed in a place away; Confronting our loneliness with Angel songs celebrating Immanuel (God With Us); Announcing a Cure in the excitement of shepherds whose troubled visions found resolve in the New Life they worshipped; Quieting our fears in the appearance of those Wise enough to look up and follow courageously; and, Leading us from danger around every corner with the Peace of those who went home by another way. We long to see the shining of God’s face, for in this world of darkness and turmoil there is Hope which burns brightly in the promises of God, a Hope which makes Moses’ skin glisten with brightness as he comes down the mountain, a Hope which makes Jesus, Moses and Elijah appear as Transfigured on a mountain as they talk together and a Hope which turns the mourning and grief of Mary in the garden into Joy as she hears her name spoken into the dawning of Truth, “Mary!”

We long to see the shining of God’s face, however God might come in answer to our plea, for in God’s shining is our Light to move towards restoration and rejoicing. In God’s shining is Silent Night comfort and Gloria in Excelsis awe when most we feel overwhelmed by the tragedy of headline news which never seems to stop. In God’s shining is our call to live the fullness of Divinity in our humanity, entrusting fragility to Strength and doubt to Wisdom.

Prayer: Restore us, not to the way we were, but in the manner for which You birthed us . . . And Him, in Hope. Amen.
Wednesday, Week One, Day Four of Advent

“Restore us, God of heavenly forces! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!” Psalm 80.7

In the midst of rising Covid-19 positivity rates around the globe, overflowing hospital emergency rooms in nearly every nation, ICU bed availability being stretched to the max in most major cities and the Medical Warning Level in many regions being determined by accessibility of hospital ventilator units, should it surprise anyone that, with the Psalmist, our eyes search the skies for the God of heavenly forces? ‘Oh God of heavenly forces’, begins our daily prayer, for were it not for heavenly forces in this troubling season the earthly forces would have no Hope at all.

Doctors sit crumpled and worn out in the corners of their wards as nurses wipe away, first, the tears of their patient’s fear, then the tears of their own building dread. Machines are brought in to do for some what their bodies can no longer do on their own. Vitals are taken, retaken and taken again. Medicines are tried, re—tried and tried again, each at varying dosages, pitting science against nature and human will against virus. The hallways are filling as rooms overflow, the staff is overwhelmed with the ceaseless parade of new arrivals, while housekeeping shifts do double-time, rode roughshod to control the chaos between necessary sanitization and inevitable contamination. All the while politicians ply their trade and hawk their wares of easy answers and ready money to make everything okay again, as people take sides and cast blame, rather than care for each other as they pray the God of heavenly forces cares for them.

If we pray with the Psalmist in Hope from the God of heavenly forces, wouldn’t it seem prudent to prepare for a Heavenly Force to arrive in a manner befitting a Deliverer who can address that which is right before us? So, be aware, the God of heavenly forces rarely arrives as anyone imagines. Yet, know this: The God of Heavenly Forces will arrive. Keep watch.

Prayer: Open my eyes to see you, God of heavenly forces, whether in the flow of water over rocks or in the care your children provide, one for the other. Amen.
Thursday, Week One, Day Five of Advent

“Let your hand be with the one on your right side— with the one whom you secured as your own— then we will not turn away from you!” Psalm 80.17-18a

It never ceases to amaze me regarding at what a young age we learn to negotiate. Early on we learn to negotiate for good behavior, for treats, for protection, to play our favorite games, to not have to visit our relatives, to go to church, to not go to church, to do our chores or to have someone else do our chores, to get paid, to get our way, to grease the wheels of our dreams and the list goes on and on—and that is just with each other.

Our negotiations with God are a whole different topic and at a much higher level of sophistication.

We negotiate with God for love, for health, for healing, in grief, in desperation, in anger, for assurance of success, for protection from evil, for deliverance from poor choices and in the midst of perceived Divine retribution. ‘God, if You will only do this, then we will do that, so help me God.’ ‘This is the last time I will ever ask this.’ ‘I have never asked this of You before.’ ‘They didn’t deserve that fate, so if You can change it . . .’ ‘I am yours forever if only You can save me from this.’

We stand on the dry dock of our existence promising God we will sail, but never setting our own hull in the water, never spreading our own sails in the winds of the Spirit and never allowing the movement of Grace to bear us up in the waves of the storm. Often, it is easier to sit on the shoreline and negotiate, then wade in the Baptismal waters of our existence and put our life and faith where they will most make the difference.

It is as if we do not ever stop and consider that God knows the difference, that God has heard our words before, that God is not influenced by our elaborate promises, nor that God cares for anything we might offer for our life. Still, God listens, God attends to our call, God saves. Still God waits for us to keep our word, knowing all the while that the Son will make the connection and define the negotiations between Heaven and earth from here on out. Still, God believes and arrives.

Stop negotiating and start sailing in sure and certain Hope. God has got this.

Prayer: See through my promises, Lord, and deliver me by your Love made flesh. Amen.
Friday, Week One, Day Six of Advent

“Revive us so that we can call on your name.” Psalm 80.18.b

They are among the earliest flowers of Spring, the lowly, ordinary, majestic, persistent Daffodil. It seems to matter little how many years ago they were planted or how the ground around them may change throughout the generations, inevitably every Spring, nearly without fail, the Daffodil pokes its head out of the snow, grass or weeds sending bud, then bloom, upward towards the sky to soak in the sun and grant new vision and beauty to our world. Other flowers may last longer, stand taller or offer a deeper fragrance lingering in the wind, but few are so anticipated for the message they bring: New Life, a New Beginning, is about to sweep over the earth announcing a renaissance of Hope for all of creation.

Driving through the countryside in the early Spring, it is the Daffodil which beautifully marks the place where once a homestead stood, where once a mailbox awaited deliveries, where once a garden fed a family, where once an earthen sidewalk led the steps of children from house to barn and back again or where a flower garden graced a front lawn for guests. It is the Daffodil in its labors which slows down the passersby, invites a smile, encourages a memory and evokes the imagination. It is the Daffodil which summons from humanity’s soul the courage, the faith, the joy of receiving God’s new revival in the heart of this day’s challenges. Such is the great power of the humble Daffodil.

What then should surprise us about the power of a stable? A manger? Or birth in a barn? Why then would we doubt angel choirs in darkened skies? Or shepherd’s breathless stories carried as on the swift feet of the most unusual of evangelists? Or the appearance of people from other lands whose wisdom and diligence brought them so far to see the Appearance?

We seek so much clarity and truth from science and research, answers to deep questions which affect our health and longevity. Maybe it is time to put down our pretenses and receive the simple, reviving Name of God in Jesus, God’s Promise and our Hope.

Prayer: Allow us the vision to see—and believe—the arrival of Your Salvation. Amen.
Saturday, Week One, Day Seven of Advent

“Restore us, Lord God of heavenly forces!
Make your face shine so that we can be saved!” Psalm 80.19

Have you ever really watched one of these little creatures in their busyness? It is exhausting. Many has been the morning when, before dawn’s first rays lit the floor of the woods, the skittering of a chipmunk darting from one place to the next would put my senses on edge. I couldn’t see them, but I could hear them go from log to limb to bush to nut, then all over again in reverse. A chipmunk is God’s version of an ant doing its daily routine and chores, only on steroids, with an occasional barking to warn others not to follow. Amazing, simply amazing.

In so many ways, chipmunks could be considered a metaphor for many in this country on Saturday morning: One day off from work, one day to get the laundry done, the yard work complete, the shopping list filled, the to-do list checked off, the kids to practices and games, the overdue work projects completed (on your own time) and the expectations of others, whether family, friends or neighbors, satisfied—all without appearing to be kerfuffled. No small task to say the least. Yet, there it is, the way it has always been for a long, long time: Do the hustle on Saturday and collapse and recover on Sunday, the Sabbath. God will understand, after all, is that not what Sunday is for, resurrection?

Now, Covid-19 has added a whole new layer of fatigue to this reality: the unknown. Some address the unknown by going on as though nothing has changed, others approach it with the most extreme of caution, choosing to mask up and stay in as much as possible. Still, it is the unknown and, though researchers and the medical community have made great strides in identifying and treating this virus, it remains aloof from mere human manipulation or control, spreading more and more every day throughout the entire global community. Now every day has become Saturday, whether because of changing paradigms in the work place, in your job, in child care, in elder care, of being together—or apart, or just in dealing with the ongoing strain of not knowing, but wanting to be perceived to be completely in control.

Our inner voices cry out, even if our lips cannot speak, ‘Restore us to the way it was, Lord God! Save us, give us Hope!’ and, when all else seems lost, Hope is what we have in the One who comes. Hope is not lost.

Prayer: Do not allow us to get lost in our busyness or despair, Lord God, bring us into your Hope. Amen.
Week Two of Advent: PEACE
Sunday, Day Eight

“Let me hear what the Lord God says,
because he speaks peace to his people and to his faithful ones.” Psalm 85.8a

Few things quiet my soul and renew my faith like time spent in worship. There is something about entering into the Nave and having others speak my name as family members call out one to the other, in singing with sisters and brothers those cherished hymns of faith, of praying together in the name of our Lord Jesus, in the hearing of the Word, first read, then proclaimed and in partaking of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There is a sacredness about the time and space set aside in the Presence of God, a kicking off of the sandals as did Moses or a standing on the mountain as did Elijah. Like walking barefoot on the sands of the shore, following the path of faith, trusting the One who takes you by the hand, worship has the power to transcend the ordinary and reconcile the challenges of the current age.

Lately that has been a rare and precious commodity. First came the ‘stay at home’ orders, followed by a wide variety of live stream/pre-recorded uploads/Facebook videos and other assorted fill-ins. Then came worship services on the parking lots, FM-tuned radio stations for listening or gatherings on the lawn. Then came limited worship numbers and specific sanitization protocols, no singing together, carefully wrapped and distributed Communion elements and greatly reduced time spent in fellowship of any kind. Pastors and Priests alike struggle, still, under the weight of responsibility for the health and welfare of the people in their parishes, balancing the directives of well-meaning administrative types in far away places and the need for their people near them to be together naming the Peace for which they yearn.

With the Psalmist this day, regardless our worship environment, together we say with all our heart, mind and soul, “Let me hear what the Lord God says, because he speaks peace to his people . . .”

Prayer: Speak of Peace in this age, Lord God, Speak of your Peace in our soul. Amen.
Monday, Week Two, Day Nine of Advent

“How much light does it take to separate the darkness? I have heard it said that Albert Einstein surmised that there is actually no such thing as darkness, only the absence of light. Though not a scientist, as was Einstein, to me Einstein’s observation only underscores in my faith much of what we are seeing in these days:

The Black Lives Matter movement is a necessary expression of Light in a world where the lives of persons of color have been downtrodden, undervalued and denigrated by those in positions of power and privilege. In other words, where the absence of Light resides in the hearts of some, the lives of others languish in the darkness of hatred, prejudice, bigotry and injustice. The only way to step out of such darkness is to embrace the Light and hold it up high, revealing the works of treachery some are using against others.

“Don’t let them return to foolish ways,” implores the Psalmist to God, because the ways through which the people have gone resulted in defeat, exile, slavery, pain and death. The darkness through which we have come longs for the Light of Salvation, the Light of Truth and the Light of Faith. The Light towards which we stretch our hands and our lives is the Light only God can offer, a Light which leads to Wisdom, a Light which leads to Life. Such a Light cannot be overcome by the presumed privilege of some or the conniving and posturing of others.

Peace finds its home in the midst of those whose Light is God. Thus we walk these days of Advent preparation in God’s Light which illuminates Peace in the midst of every foolishness, every hardness of heart and every stiff-necked way. Watch for God’s Light and welcome it into your heart.

Tuesday, Week Two, Day Ten of Advent

“God’s salvation is very close to those who honor him so that his glory can live in our land.” Psalm 85.9

Where is it that the water meets the land? Or are water and land one inseparable entity, sharing primacy one over the other in varying measure according to their geography? Could it be that such distinctions are left to the human imagination by a God who has never seen one as anything other than fully a part of the other?

So God sees you and longs to dwell in you.

In the midst of the daily jog, the cup of coffee, the piece of toast, the time clock check-in, the monotony of routine, the exhilaration of challenge, the passion of relationship, the heartbreak of not being understood, the frustration with kids, the fear of the coronavirus, the anger over stalled educational systems and delayed sports programs and the resignation of nightfall meeting day’s end far too soon, where does God’s salvation meet you, wash over you, cleanse you and grant you Peace? Where is it that the water meets the land?

God’s salvation, according to the Gospel of John, has been from the very beginning and, if we pause long enough to listen to that Word, God’s salvation is in every Beginning, without end. Why? So that God’s glory can live in the heart of humankind, opening both manger to Child and tomb to Risen Christ in each and every moment. God will not be denied God’s Presence and Peace for all God’s children, in the same way water and land cannot deny the existence or need of each other in God’s Creation. God is that close to those who honor God.

Prayer: Be so close to us, God, that as water and land are one, so are we in You through the One who comes, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.
Wednesday, Week Two, Day Eleven of Advent

“Faithful love and truth have met; righteousness and peace have kissed.” Psalm 85.10

As the lake reflects the image of that above and around it, so is reflected in our pilgrimage that which is truly in our soul. Try as we might, even rippling the water with all our strength, still that which God sees in us goes far beyond the surface. Like the tree on the shore, God knows the beauty and majesty of our root, as well as the soil which holds and feeds our being, not just what we choose to show above the shoreline.

In the One for whom we wait, unfaithfulness is named and healed in Love. In the One for whom we watch, the lies we tell ourselves and others are silenced by the Truth which will not be overshadowed. Faithful Love and Truth have met.

In the One for whom we pray, brokenness is touched by the Healing Hand of the Physician. In the One for whom we long, the angst and distress of struggle are met by the Peace of Faith which will not let us go. Righteousness and Peace have kissed.

Before we thought to understand, God understood. Before we paused to pray, God answers. Before we paused to worship, God reigns.

In the One who comes is the Balm needful in these moments, in our life, in our nation and in our global community. In the One who comes is the Strength necessary to build God’s Kin-dom, not for the church, neither because of the church, but because the One who comes teaches, “... on earth as it is in Heaven.”

Prayer: Prepare me to be fully open to You, Lord, that I/we might be made whole and Holy. Amen.
Thursday, Week Two, Day Twelve of Advent

“Truth springs up from the ground; righteousness gazes down from heaven.”
Psalm 85.11

One of the most frustrating parts of being a farmer is having the soil prepared, the seed planted, all of the additional sprayings completed, only to look out over the field a week later and see the first sprouts of weeds making their appearance between the rows. It is just so frustrating.

Did the earth not notice the careful tillage? Did the disc, the field cultivator or the ‘do-all’ not make any difference? Did the thick planting and the carefully chosen and applied herbicides not do their work? Must there always be weeds, Lord?

They spring up from the ground, without thought of cultivation or caution. They spring up from the ground, as though driven to compete with the good seed just for the fun of it. They spring up from the ground, reminding one and all that there is more to God’s Creation than the control we try to exercise over it.

Truth springs up from the ground, whether in Bethlehem, where shepherd voices echo angel songs, or in Jerusalem, where crosses mark dissident complaints and law makers demands. Truth springs up from the ground, whether in Herod’s irrational fears and Rachel’s lament of grief or in Caiaphas’ hatred moved to rejection and Pilate’s disdain and command. Truth springs up from the ground, whether in Joseph being told to depart by way of Egypt or in John being instructed, “Behold, your mother.”

As Righteousness gazes down from heaven, earth prays not everything is seen, not everything is known, not every motive counted yet, there it is: the cocklebur appears, the crosses of our wounded souls rise up, and the hope of our behavior toward each other being overlooked is rendered moot.

God knows—and still God comes.
God knows—and still God stays.

Prayer: Lord God, spring up in my heart and make me new in Jesus. Amen.
"Yes, the Lord gives what is good, and our land yields its produce."
Psalm 85.12

"You cannot shortcut farming", is one of the axioms by which my Dad lives. Dad, Melvin Wagner, is now age 95 and still active on the farm, though by his standards he is slowing down, he complains, “I just can’t go like I used to, an eight hour work day is as much as I can take now.” Others hear that and think he is trying to make a joke at their expense, I hear it and know that is half of what he used to regularly do each day. You just do not have short work days or short work weeks on a dairy farm and my Dad is a living reflection of that experience.

So, when he says, “You cannot shortcut farming”, he knows that of which he speaks. He has seen it, where some have tried to minimize the amount of care they give the ground, cut back on the nutrients they apply, reduce the number of times they mow around the edges, decrease the number of seeds they plant per acre, or even slide into a cycle of plant and harvest with no visual monitoring and care in-between.

Usually, the lack of personal investment and time begins to really show in the bottom line of production by the 2nd or 3rd year, sometimes it moves towards disaster even more quickly, depending on the pests, weeds and weather you have in any one growing cycle. In Dad’s mind, if you shortcut farming, worse than reducing potential yields, you are short-cutting your stewardship of God’s creation—and neither God, nor Dad, are amused. To the one given much, much is expected.

I sat beside my Dad in worship for years as a child, learned from him when I had him as a Sunday School teacher and, most poignantly, observed him as I grew into the farming operation as a partner: God has an advocate who gets it in the person of my Dad, much as Paul Harvey mused about farmers. There is just no shortcutting anything if you are going to do it correctly. It is just as Jesus taught us in His prayer, ‘ . . . On the farm as it is in Heaven.’

If we human beings are capable of such understanding and practice, then how much more so is God? God does not shortcut anything. In the gift of the Child who comes, in the birth of the Peace of the world, God exercises the greatest of care for God’s own children, including you and me. For our faith, for our very life, God extends only the very best of God’s own self. Let us be certain we reciprocate God’s effort in Salvation as we prepare our souls in this Advent season to receive the Son who comes.

Prayer: God, You withhold nothing and give only the Best. Help me to do the same in preparing to receive You. Amen.
‘Covid fatigue’, ‘Zoom weary’, ‘shortened attention span’, ‘easy frustration’, ‘relationship stress’, ‘patience deficit’ and the list goes on and on: It seems a tall order to prepare our lives in righteousness and make a road for God’s steps during Advent when, at nearly every turn and in every moment, we are having to deal with the affects of a global pandemic, on top of a toxic political climate. The number of people who walk into my office or call me on the phone for a minute of my time and end up staying or hanging on for half an hour or more just needing to unload their souls in the midst of the struggle has gone up exponentially.

Instead of the virus becoming easier to manage, the pressures and concerns are being ratcheted up: by ill-advised community members who will not practice safe distancing, much less wear a mask; by doctors who are making daily announcements of how the numbers are rising in hospitals and morgues; by politicians who are using this moment as fodder for their campaigns and agendas; and, maybe most telling of all, by faith communities who act as though they are impervious and stand shoulder to shoulder, hugging, singing hymns and saying, ‘God will protect us’. The inevitable surge sweeps through, wiping out the elders and the at-risk, and the leadership just shrug their shoulders and go right back to what they are doing, chastising the reluctant to attend for their unfaithfulness. It is an unholy sight.

Yet, in such a moment as this God walks down the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem to bring an offering of Righteousness into the world. In such a moment as this God walks down the road and takes our hand and places it in the hand of a Maiden who, herself, could not believe the stress she was under or the expectations of faithfulness which were thrust upon her. In such a moment as this God walks down the road and takes on our burdens, placing them upon the heart of a Baby, whose countenance and Peace eases the pain and quietly removes the worry. In such a moment as this, God walks down the road. Lay down your burdens and walk down the road with God in this Advent season.

Prayer: God, let my prayers about pandemics become prayers of gratitude for Deliverance in a time such a this. Let me walk down the road with You, always. Amen.
Week Three of Advent: JOY
Sunday, Day Fifteen

“When the Lord changed Zion’s circumstances for the better, It was like we had been dreaming.” Psalm 126.1

I have to admit, both pastorally and personally, throughout this year Joy has been a somewhat elusive feeling. Too many of my friends, family and parishioners have struggled with job changes; too many of our families have endured the effects of the novel coronavirus, Covid-19; too many of our days as a community of faith, as the church, have been spent apart with only the unblinking eye of the YouTube Live Stream serving as a connector; too many of our days have been spent washing our hands, rather than holding the hands of another; too many of our days have been marked by the amount of hand sanitizer we use, rather than the number of lives we have touched; too many of our days have been spent peering out from behind the mask of our life, acknowledging the ever present possibility of infection, instead of rejoicing in the gift of the other; and, too many of our days have been spent burying the dead in open air services where family and friend alike could be safely spaced, accepting the priority for protecting the living over comforting the grieving. On my desk there resides a folder simply marked, “Covid-19 Funerals”, and it contains the obituaries of many who passed from this life into life eternal, their family choosing to either have a small service now in anticipation of a larger Celebration of Life later or to simply wait for a day and time when their loved one will truly be lifted to God in worship and the family can be comforted without fear of spreading a contagion.

It has been like a dream, an unimaginable, unthinkable, horrific, unending, season of stress and grief, punctuated by brief moments of fresh air, sucked in before having to face the next reason to cover it all up again in trepidation, anxiety and building despair. “O come, O come, Immanuel” seems like a heartless prayer from created to Creator, requesting a Deliverer which likely will require someone other than ourselves to step into the morass of human sickness, spiritual resignation and mental fragility.

Still, God answers. Still, the Child comes. Still, there is reason for Joy: The Lord is changing our circumstances for the better.

Prayer: Holy God, that your Joy may be complete, may my life be ready to receive You, not as a dream, but as the Gift You are in Joy forevermore. Amen.
Monday, Week Three, Day Sixteen of Advent

“Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter; Our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.” Psalm 126.2a

Really, how bad could it have been, being a shepherd out in the Judean countryside, having only to watch over some sheep and not having to balance the personal opinions and expectations of a bunch of judgmental snobs who are always looking down on you anyway? How bad was it not taking baths for weeks, sleeping on the ground, smelling like the wool of the ones you were watching and being regarded by those passing by as just another part of the herd? So what if you had to occasionally take on a threat to one of your little lambs and prematurely end the life of a predator using your bare hands, a sling and a rock or the staff you carried? Isn’t this the life you chose? Or the life you ended up taking on because your father before you was a shepherd and chose not to teach you to do anything differently? Good food, a warm bed, ample fresh water and the constant company of a close companion to share your thoughts, dreams and work with you are all overrated, right? Maybe . . .

Don’t let it be lost on you, though, the first people beside Mary and Joseph who knew about the birth of Jesus were those simple, smelly, ignorant, tenders of sheep, who likely knew more about a skin of wine than the prophesied arrival of a Savior. These guys had absolutely no idea of what was coming as they tended their flocks in the cool clear night near Bethlehem. They were, for all intents and purposes, like fish out of water when the sky lit up and angelic Beings appeared. Then, when the music began and the heavenly chorus echoed from star to planet and to places beyond in the universe, all they could do was bow down in awe and trepidation. Who among us would not have done the same? And, for that matter, why were the shepherds the only ones who heard their voices? There are just some things we will never fully know or understand, but what is clear in the story is this: They were chosen, they heard and they went with great joy to worship the Child. Unknown to them, their place in God’s salvation history went suddenly from the marginalized to the idealized, from the object of derisive comments to the example of how to be ready to receive God, and from the local uneducated ruffians to the most blessed of all God’s children—all because God chose them and they listened. The fish once out of water are now the ones swimmingly full of Joy and Laughter. Never were their lives the same thereafter. Could it be the same for you in this Advent season? Be watching.

Prayer: Lord, fill us with Laughter and Joyful Shouts, unworthy shepherds though we may be. Amen.
Tuesday, Week Three, Day Seventeen of Advent

“It was even said, at that time, among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them!” Psalm 126.2b

Not too long ago, a longtime farming acquaintance posted a picture of new grain bins going up on his farmstead, taken while he was combining a field of soybeans nearby. The accompanying comment was about how hard he was working trying to get everything done while making room for his abundant harvest. I could not help myself as I privately messaged him, “Luke 12:15-21”. A day later a message appeared on my phone, “Thanks. Point taken. God is good.”

Sometimes we all need a reminder, “The Lord has done great things for them!”, especially when we begin to believe that the entire world hinges on our every thought, plan, investment, opinion, belief or perspective. It is so easy to get caught up in the virtual world of self-aggrandizement: We make the farming decisions, we prepare the soil, we plant the grain, we harvest the crop, we store it away and we make the strategic marketing decisions. Not unlike the politically motivated who announce the payments they will make to businesses or the doctors who view themselves as lifesavers or even the pastors/priests who claim to have a corner on God’s healing grace, such claims to fame, power or authority are essentially baseless before the God of all Creation. It is God who does great things for God’s people. It is God who lifts up the down-trodden and feeds the hungry. It is God who marks the roads and makes our way into God’s future. It is God who humbles the nations and raises up the marginalized. It is God who comes to save. It is God who will save. It is God ... before we ever were.

The ones who would be wise remember this, even as others will come to experience it. Advent gives us the time to prepare for, and walk humbly with, such a God.

Prayer: God, bless my eyes to see You, my heart to feel You and my soul to believe You, in this and every season. Amen.
Some of the most intelligent, insightful, common sense people I know grew up in the era of one-room school houses. Kids today have little idea of what that term even implies but, then, kids back then could not have imagined attending classes virtually, either. It is all in where you are.

Yet, there is something about those one-room school houses which shaped generations in this country to learn deeply, study hard, strive to make the most of what you have and, if possible, give back to the ones who made your education available. Most often, one-room school houses had one teacher who taught everyone who attended, from the first grade through the twelfth grade, all subjects, including math, science, history, spelling, grammar, English and art. A hurried run through the backdoor to the outhouse could have qualified as a field trip—and a short walk to the nearby stream might well have been considered a science expedition or, depending where the school house was, a history lesson. Everyone helped the other and, as they learned citizenship in caring for each other, time spent in school became an investment in the future, not only for the life of each child, but for the region, the state and the nation itself. No one grows up in a vacuum. We each need the other for everyone, anyone, to truly excel.

Today, the old one-room schoolhouses either stand abandoned or have been long since torn down, and much of what they taught has gone the way of antiquities. Still, I cannot help but give thanks to God for allowing me to be a child of parents who attended the one-room schoolhouse, for by their example they continue to inspire and motivate me to live up to their level of education, faith and civil discourse which announces the nearing Kin-dom in the name of the One who comes for us all.

Prayer: Lord, in remembering what You are doing in the gift of Jesus, help us to give thanks with great Joy for all which You have already done in Love. Amen.
Thursday, Week Three,  
Day Nineteen of Advent  

“Lord, change our circumstances for the better, like dry streams in the desert waste!” Psalm 126.4

From where does the cactus get its water? How do blooms form in the desert? When everything around you is brown from heat and sun, where does the color green find its beginning?

We are far better practiced at asking questions than in waiting for answers. The truth of the matter is, we do not like to wait for anything, questions, answers, thought processes or faith perspectives, it makes little difference. Instant gratification is the goal for nearly everything, everyone and everywhere. If you do not believe it, Google it.

If it is so for the day-to-day minutia of life, then how much more is it true of our prayer life? Of our Advent journey? Of our lifelong pilgrimage of faith?

“Lord, change our circumstances for the better . . .” NOW! Do what I ask of You! In the manner I ask it of You! In the time frame I need it from You! With the urgency I implore You!

And still the global pandemic continues, those in power behave as little children—each insisting on their own way, racial and ethnic injustices and inequities continue to tighten their grip on our collective soul, fear of the other siphons down into the most basic of instincts and we find ourselves competing for toilet paper as though our soul depended on having enough. Even the stock market is beginning to understand that neither they, nor the government, can bail out our faulty systems and definitions of success and happiness. Finally, we find ourselves seeking a Savior in the desert of our own making, even as we stoop to drink from the streams which once quenched our thirst and now only yield dust. We have lost our way in our insistence on answers, our answers—and begin to realize maybe it is time to seek God’s answers. Joy comes to the ones who wait, who watch, who listen, who prepare.

Joy comes in God’s time. Be ready.

Prayer: Lord, come, not because of my insistence, but because of your Will. Amen.
Friday, Week Three, Day Twenty of Advent

“Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts.”
Psalm 126.5

No one is certain what the lasting effects will be of this period in our world’s history, but one of the lasting images and feelings many will bear in their heart and soul will be the separation which occurs, even today, at hospital doors, at nursing home entrances, at assisted living accesses or specialized care facility entry ways as loved ones are taken into these places for the attention they desperately need.

For a long time, at least in this region of the world, no one was allowed in to visit or serve as an advocate, even if someone was desperately ill, maybe especially if they were desperately ill. Facetime and Skype bridged the gap between caregivers in the facility and family/caregivers outside the walls. There just was not enough PPE available to equip the staff and those who longed to hold the hand of their loved one. For far too many, suffering and death happened surrounded by compassionate, professional staff trying valiantly to save their life, not near the ones who could speak for them, encourage them or remind them they were not alone. God bless the medical professionals who see it all, have lived through it all and have endured the wrenching of their own soul, along with every family who had to place their complete trust in them.

Like a deep, heavy snow hanging on the branches of our journey in the dead of winter, such moments and memories will take a long time to resolve themselves in the thinly veiled balance of moving forward in faith and wanting to curl up and cry just a little more. Yet, this is God’s Promise, this is God’s Assurance: the One who comes into the grief, pain, anger, anguish and doubting of Bethlehem, also comes into the world where we are today, Covid-19 notwithstanding. The empty tomb announces in Joy what the manger bore in Love. We have but to prepare for and receive God’s Good News who meets us where we are.

Prayer: God, what tears prevent my heart from seeing in anguish, as You did with Mary at the tomb, cause me to receive in Joy as You speak my name in Life. Amen.
Saturday, Week Three, Day Twenty-One of Advent

“Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain.” Psalm 126.6

Nearing Bethlehem and the long awaited arrival of the Christ-Child in this Covid-19 era, our thoughts inevitably turn to our own children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, neighboring children and entire communities of children around the world—wondering how this, all of this, will mark their lives. What of the educational days they have missed? The virtual lessons they just could not understand or chose not to attend? Or those transformational moments when one teacher in one classroom might have said something in just the right way and, suddenly, everyone embraces the concept—but it never happens?

What of the socialization skills, the laughter of games on playgrounds, the buddy-system on field trips or the study partner opportunities now lost to a virus and a world embattled by it?

Few parents of which I am aware are unworried about the educational future of their children and many are expressing their feelings to overburdened and underpaid Boards of Education, made up of mostly well-meaning people who never dreamed they would be serving through such a costly nightmare. School administrations and teachers are trying to balance in-person and virtual hybrid models but, as one current phrase aptly paints it, ‘It is like flying an airplane while building it.’ We just do not know where it is going to go and whether or not every flight will be successful.

The Christian church, along with most other faith traditions, are in the same airplane—and for many of the same reasons—so it is in this Advent season, more than ever, we trust God to be the Pilot on our journey. Like an orchid in bloom, God will take us safely to the most beautiful places and understandings we once thought impossible, all because of the One who comes. It is up to us to trust and not try to take over the controls mid-flight.

Prayer: Holy Parent of every child, Parent of Jesus, bring us Joy and Peace and Hope through your Gift, who comes in the midst of every age, including this one. Amen.
Week Four of Advent: LOVE
Sunday, Day Twenty-Two

“I will sing of the Lord’s loyal love forever. I will proclaim your faithfulness with my own mouth from one generation to the next.” Psalm 89.1

Have you ever wondered how the birds learned to sing? When notes became a song? When a song becomes their language? Do they know the difference between nouns and verbs? Pronouns and prepositions? Are they aware that you should not allow your participles to dangle? Or end a sentence with a preposition?

Or do you suppose that God put a song within them from the beginning, each according to their kind? That as Momma Cardinal sits on the eggs during incubation, she is preparing a new generation to sing an ages old song? That as the little ones are growing, their genetic makeup kicks in and the notes within them just begin to bubble up in praise, communication and connection?

If so of the birds of the field, then how much more of you or me? The Psalmist calls the people of faith to sing of the Lord’s loyal love forever. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, sing the song born within you, the song whose Love is birthed in your DNA and longs to be shared with the world. Sing of faith with angels above and below. Just Sing!

Prayer: Lord, let our song be of You and your Love, in this and every generation. Amen.
Monday, Week Four, Day Twenty-Three of Advent

“That’s why I say, “Your loyal love is rightly built—forever! You establish your faithfulness in heaven.” Psalm 89.2

Catching the full moon as it rises into the darkness of night takes patience, care and tenacity, the photographer carefully choosing the correct site and time, ready to snap away when conditions best favor the vision they anticipate in their heart, mind and soul. The same could be said of preparing for the coming of our Savior.

Who among us in this Advent season would spend more time striving for such a stunning image of the moon or pay someone else to, yet spend little energy striving in our own lives to be ready for Christ? Who among us would acknowledge the ‘Love of God rightly built—forever’, as the Psalmist dares to phrase it, yet not prepare to receive it?

Who among us has cast the moon and the stars in their places, yet knowingly comes in the dark of the night, birthed of a maiden, His Light seeping through the cracks in the boards of the stable walls? Who among us envisioned the beauty of the moon’s rising and the stars placed in their constellations, yet without pomp or circumstance enters the global village of our existence and walks the earth with feet like ours? Who among us arrives to take on our brokenness with Healing and soothe our anger with Understanding?

Such faithfulness of Love is established in heaven—and made known on earth. His name is Jesus.

Such faithfulness of Love rises, as though from the waters of Baptism, and shines over all which is His. His name is Messiah.

Such faithfulness of Love mirrors the Maker, shimmering through the years and the telling and re-telling of the Story, inviting servant and queen alike to bow in humble adoration. His name is Immanuel.

Prepare, His moment is coming and we must be ready. His name is Savior.

Prayer:
Lord of moon and stars, Lord of night made glorious by your impending arrival, Lord who defines day by the Brightness of your Being, make me worthy to meet You and see your Love. Amen.
God does not forget God’s steadfast love. God does not forget God’s covenant.

Yet, the Psalmist does the most bold and audacious thing before the entire congregation of God’s own people, the Psalmist reminds God of what God has promised, the Psalmist repeats the covenant and, in so doing, the Psalmist invites God to recollection and prompts Israel to live in joyful response to God’s Loving commitment.

Selah (Think on this for a moment.)

Like grandchildren excitedly reminding grandparents of what they promised, “You said you would take us!” or as a child reminds a teacher, “You presented this theorem as a basis for understanding”, or as a global village reminds one another how much they need each other, ‘We cannot overcome this virus without mutual cooperation’, so the Psalmist invites both congregant and the Holy One to reflect, to remember and to live forward in such an understanding. ‘It is right there before us, just look!’

There in the reflection is the vision of a beautiful new day, one marked by unity, equity, justice, kindness and humility. There in the reflection is the Salvation history of God, named in one king, yet present for all who would follow the Ruler. There in the reflection is the image of created and Creator, so blended in identity together that they announce the nearing Kin-dom in the oneness such Love brings. Remembrance births honor, the Sacred cherishes worshipper, the Holy kisses the servant, and all is One.

God does not forget God’s steadfast love. God does not forget God’s covenant. Along with the Psalmist, neither should we. Repeat it in every generation on this Advent journey.

Prayer: God, in the One who comes I see my life in You. I pray You see your Life in me as I seek to welcome Him every day. Amen.
Wednesday, Week Four, Day Twenty-Five of Advent

“Heaven thanks you for your wondrous acts, Lord—for your faithfulness too—in the assembly of the holy ones.” Psalm 89.5

With all the seriousness one could muster, my friend who had nearly lost their life in an accident asked me, “Do you believe in angels?” Then, they were silent, waiting for my answer.

“Yes”, I said, “I believe in angels”, and then I said, “There is so much more to life and Life beyond this life than we will ever know. The birth story of Jesus reminds us of that.”

My friend smiled at me, then proceeded to tell me their story at the scene of the accident. I can tell you, it was one of angels and their care—and I must let the rest of the story there.

“Heaven thanks you for your wondrous acts, Lord . . .”, so does the earth. Two days before Christmas, the carols ring brightly against the backdrop of sickness and death caused by Covid-19; The church bells prepare to ring home the faithful—most of whom will worship virtually because of the governmental restrictions on gatherings; Worship leaders prepare homilies that celebrate the arrival of Justice, Mercy and Grace, born of Mary, in the harsh reality and need of the Black Lives Matter movement and extended political unrest in the world; and, Shoppers rush home with their treasures, via Amazon Prime, Walmart and any of a thousand other online shopping sites encouraging the poor to increase their debt, the rich to flaunt their wealth and the in-between to try to keep up.

*Angels We Have Heard On High* comes none to soon, but they do come, even as they did in the age of the Roman government, as they did in the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, during Revolutions, Civil Wars, two wars to end all wars, police actions—and, perhaps most telling of all, during Holy Wars throughout all of history. The church is sometimes the worst offender and silencer of angel songs.

“Do you believe in angels?” they asked. Yes, I have to, because earth is so far from Heaven—and the angels bridge the abyss between us and what is Good, Right and Holy. Heaven gives thanks to the Lord for the Lord’s wondrous acts—and earth, in reply, does the same, because it is for us He comes. I do believe. Do you?

Prayer: Let the praise of earth join that of the Heavens before your Throne, O God. Amen.
On this eve of Christmas, take a moment and prayerfully consider what it is we are constantly asking of God: In essence, Deliver us. But, who among us could have conceived the Wisdom of God in how such Deliverance would arrive? Who among us might imagine doing the same for another? Maybe for a friend—but for one who does not believe? And for another who hates the thought of God at all? Still, the Promised Gift of Love nears His arrival for our deliverance. God, as Parent, prepares Him for every possibility, every eventuality and every contingency, then simply, quietly and in the most modest of settings, places Him among us.

The One who Creates the seas comes from the birth waters of Mary. The one who would walk on the waters is washed from Heaven to earth. He comes with a Name, gentle as a Child, toughened as a cross-bearer, and the river in which He will place His hand will be the waters with which John baptizes Him.

This day we wait, ponder and pray. This night we bow down, for God is setting Him out to sail towards us, alone, unafraid, in faith and in obedience. The shepherds are doing their work, the inn-keeper has sent the lowly couple away, the cattle and sheep stand back before them, and parents do as they have always done when the water breaks and the birth-pains begin: They hold on to each other for dear life, praying God will see them through, that God will Deliver.

Do you hear the angels tuning up? Do you see the Magi peering anxiously into the skies? Do your eyes follow theirs? Are you even listening?

Deliverance comes to those who ask, to those who are ready, to those who prepare. Come, Lord Jesus, be thou our Guest . . .

Prayer: Be near me Lord, Jesus, I ask You to stay, close by me forever and Love me, I pray. Amen.
Christmas Day: Good News!

“He will cry out to me: “You are my father, my God, the rock of my salvation.”
Yes, I’ll make him the one born first—I’ll make him the high king of all earth’s kings.” Psalm 89.26-27

Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.
Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.
Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.
Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.
Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.
Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

The Sermon on the Mount began in Bethlehem and found its fullest meaning at an empty tomb. Deliverance, God’s Deliverance in the Son of God comes for you—and for all who would believe and follow. A blessed Christmas to you and yours— for He comes for a time such as this. Amen.