



OLD CAMBRIDGE BAPTIST CHURCH

*A Progressive Peace and Justice Congregation*



*“God with us, revealed in us.”*

A Daily Devotional for the Season of Advent 2016 (Year A)

Composed by Congregants of OCBC

## Entering Advent Together

Dear OCBC Family (and many friends reading along),

It is a joy to enter into this Advent season with you as companions on the journey into which we are being called. It's an exciting prospect to move through this season of expectation and anticipation for the coming of something we can't see coming alongside one another as a congregation. The experience will surely be made richer by the words of these twenty-three friends who've graciously reflected on one or more of the daily lectionary texts and have invited us all to enter into reflection and contemplation alongside them. I am thankful to each writer and to Martha Collins for her diligent copyediting of this devotional. (Don't be surprised when you read more than one devotional reflecting on the same passage scripture. Each is sometimes assigned to more than one day.)

For this year's weekly Advent wreath lighting, Tom Jones selected the beautiful chorus, "Emmanuel," to accompany the illumination of each week's candle. There's a line in the song that says, "God with us, revealed in us." I couldn't think of a better phrase to encapsulate an Advent season during which we continue the work of dismantling white supremacy than a line that points us to the revelation of the Divine within each human body.

With this in mind, the picture on front cover is comprised of several mothers with child: the famous icon of Mary and Jesus called the Theotokos of Vladimir, a Black mother with her child awaiting help after Hurricane Katrina, a Honduran woman trying to cross the US border with her baby in arms, and a Syrian Kurdish mother with her infant, awaiting transportation to a refugee camp in Turkey. We can see in each one of these depictions a *Theotokos*, or "God-bearer," inviting us on the Advent journey of expectation as we look deeply and intently for the coming of Emmanuel, "God with us, revealed in us."

In Anticipation,  
The Rev. Cody J. Sanders, Ph.D.  
Pastor

November 28  
by Maureen Power

**Psalm 124 & 125** From *Psalms Now*, Leslie Brandt (St Louis: Concordia, 2003), 198-99.

What cowards we are  
    we who claim to be children of God!  
How insipid is our faith  
    in an insecure and faithless world!  
The pressures increase,  
The old props fall away.  
Many of the old traditions and standards  
    we held so dear are no longer relevant  
    in our rapidly changing society.  
Even the proclamations and exhortations,  
    the prophecies and promises,  
    that excited and supported us in our youth  
    sound hollow and empty and frightfully  
    inadequate in these times in which we live.  
The little boxes we wrapped around our God  
    are breaking up ;  
    we can no longer hold on to God in our  
    expanding, exploding universe.  
Though we cannot hold on to God,  
    God does hold on to us.  
Those who trust in the true God are more secure  
    than the mountains that rise above the  
    clouds that cover us.  
Though everything changes around us,  
    our great God cannot be changed.  
Though the sands may shift and  
    even our institutions and governments  
    and the ideals and aspirations of  
    men and women give way,  
    our great God is not subject to the impermanence  
    of our temporal world.  
Though the storm sweeps over us,  
    our relationship with our loving God is forever.  
What cowards we are, we who claim to be the  
    children of God!  
We don't have to be afraid.  
Let us have faith in God!

***Meditation***

O how the pressures have increased this year !!! We are in such a contentious, conflicted, context. Black lives have been needlessly lost, refugees drown at sea and others are unwelcomed when they land, inequality grows, the slurs of sexism and racism have flooded our environment and the stench is everywhere. Our political process has unleashed such a level of deep discord in what we once thought of as the land of the free and the home of the brave. There is no peace. How do we hold on to God in our polluted universe?

As we venture now to explore the dark corners of white supremacy, we are unnerved, unsettled, and anxious about what we will learn about our institutions and ourselves. So many questions emerge. How will we cope with what is revealed? Will we become paralyzed and stuck, lost in despair? Will we be worn down with guilt? Or will we be freed up to move forward in a new way? How will we hold in love those whose views differ so much from ours? How do we embrace ALL our sisters and brothers? How do we forgive ourselves and each other?

Well, maybe we really are losing our grip on God. But the psalmist tells us, God holds us tight and will never let us go. If we trust in ourselves, our institutions, to solve all these problems, we will surely lose our way. In God is our HOPE. If we trust in the God of mercy and compassion, if we are willing to grope our way together in the darkness, the answers will be revealed. During this season of waiting and hope, we are invited to put our trust in the Holy One who comes to us as a vulnerable babe who brings peace and understanding.

### ***Prayer***

Holy One our HOPE is in you. Guide us on our journey. Give us the courage to walk this path together, to lift each other up as we stumble. Help us to be secure in your promise to never let us go.

### ***Question for Reflection***

What signs do I see today, that God is tenderly holding me and this mixed up world in love?

**Genesis 9:1-17 (NRSV)**

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.”

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

**Meditation**

Despite our efforts to make it into a children’s story, with toy arks and cuddly animals, the tale of Noah is one of the strangest and darkest in the bible. It has roots in ancient oral tradition, and tendrils in the collective unconscious. Reading it literally would send us shopping for another deity, but glimmers of Advent hope lurk in its mythic depths.

In Genesis 9, the great flood is over. Dazed humans and animals exit the ark onto the muddy earth. God knows the back story. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Their children murdered each other. Only five chapters in, God regretted creating the whole mess. Noah’s family alone was faithful. They were chosen to survive earth’s horrifying baptism of death, and to seed a new creation with the animals of the ark.

The text is clear that God also knows that the future won’t go well for creatures at the hands of humans. Yet, as in Genesis 1, they are again given complete control of the earth (v. 1-4). People will continue to betray God, and to wreak violence and injustice on each other and on creation. The *very next chapter* tells the bizarre story of the invention of slavery, whose deadly legacy is still unfolding. Ultimately, mortals will develop the capacity to destroy life on earth, independent of Divine intention. Why would God think it was a good idea to hand over control to creatures made of mud? Twice? What was God thinking!?

Here is the hope. In spite of knowing all this, God made a covenant with Noah, with all the creatures of earth, and with earth itself (v. 8-17). The rainbow is a metaphorical ribbon around the Divine finger, reminding God, in moments of frustration with mortals, not to meet violence with violence, but to remember that all life is sacred and One with the Creator, not to be destroyed. As beings made in the Divine image, made of the same mud as one another and all creation, the rainbow ribbon belongs on our fingers too. It reminds us that God seems to believe, all evidence to the contrary, that we are capable of keeping covenant; of remembering our unity with our

Creator, one another, and all life; of living out that Oneness in justice and peace. The God of this story has great hope for us.

***Prayer***

Holy One, open our eyes to the rainbow ribbon of covenant tied to our fingers. By your grace, may we see ourselves through your eyes, and live as members of your beloved community, and agents of your new creation. This Advent, give us your hope. Amen.

***Question for Reflection***

Why does the biblical God continue to act as though it's possible for us to live in Holy Hope and become the covenant people God imagines? What does God know about us that we don't seem to know about ourselves?

November 30  
by Jean Chapman

***Psalm 124 (NRSV)***

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—  
if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;  
then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone the raging waters.  
Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.  
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.  
Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

***Meditation***

Psalm 124 belongs to a group of psalms, each called a Psalm of Ascent. The psalms are connected with each other by a repetition of verse from one to another. It is believed that these psalms were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem in the post exilic time of Israel. Like all best remembered hymns for the road, Psalm 124 is short, including repetitive phrases and familiar imagery. This is a hymn that is sung in community, not private meditation; a public expression of thanksgiving to God for deliverance from captivity. “Blessed be the Lord,” the pilgrims sing, “the snare is broken and we have escaped.” There is a call and answer within the song. “If it had not been the Lord was on our side. Let all of Israel say, If it had not been the Lord was on our side!”

Can you imagine walking with the pilgrims? Miles of road can take a toll on feet and backs, energy level, patience with fellow walkers and confidence in the wisdom of the journey. Singing of experiences of God’s faithful love, jostling one another with familiar verses in call and answer fashion, would offer perhaps the best chance of sustaining hope; hope that your call to this journey was God directed, hope that you won’t just fall to the wayside out of exhaustion, hope that once again God’s faithful love will deliver you from any harm along the way. And when you are hoarse or too weary to sing, the voices of your fellow sojourners carry you along.

The post exilic pilgrims’ spiritual journey toward reconciliation and healing had not ended in their release from years of captivity in Babylon, nor would it end in Jerusalem. The trauma of exile for both those taken away from Jerusalem and those left behind would prove to present a far more daunting challenge to reconstruction of Israel than rebuilding the physical ruins of the Temple. Hope, carried along on the journey in the form of psalms such as Psalm 124, would be as necessary as water in sustaining hope in the pilgrims’ journey toward full spiritual reconstruction of a New Jerusalem.

***Prayer***

Gracious God who loves the pilgrim and sojourner, walk with us. Sing to us on the way, and teach us songs of hope that we can carry with us and share with anyone thirsty.

***Question for Reflection***

What songs or kinds of music restore your spirit? Why?



December 1  
by Sue Stockard

***Psalm 72:1-7 (NRSV)***

Of Solomon.  
Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.  
  
May he live while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.  
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.  
In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

***Meditation***

We are entering my favorite liturgical season. I love Advent. I love lighting candles against the growing darkness. I love trees wreathed with lights. I love that hope turns to certainty – the story has a happy ending. We not only hope, we know, that the Son of God will come, bringing with him the promise of justice for the oppressed and prosperity for those in need.

The scripture reading parallels this hope for Solomon, that he will bring justice to the afflicted and prosperity to the people; that he will save the children of the needy and defeat the oppressor. The people hope that the reign of Solomon will be long and nourishing.

One of the things I've been thinking about, in becoming more aware of my white privilege, is the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism is based on the experience of things turning out for the best . . . that tomorrow is another day . . . and everyone gets a chance. I have been privileged to experience this and often describe myself as an optimist. However, Cornel West says, "Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet we know that the evidence does not look good. . . . To live is to wrestle with despair yet never to allow despair to have the last word." Optimism, in other words, is a privilege. Hope is a gift of God.

***Prayer***

God of Justice and Mercy, in this Advent season, help us hold onto hope in the face of all the powers that work to defeat it. Like the Psalmist, we pray that the new leaders of our country will bring prosperity and righteousness to those in need and will protect our children. Help us to be the lighters of candles against the darkness. Amen.

***Question for Reflection***

How can we use this season of hope to guide us through the bumps and bruises of examining our individual and collective roles in perpetuating white supremacy? Can hope survive evidence to the contrary? Can we be instruments of justice without accepting the image of violence to the oppressors?



**December 2**  
**by Sue Schroen**

***Isaiah 30:19-26 (NRSV)***

Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’ Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, ‘Away with you!’

He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

***Meditation***

This passage immediately follows the prophet Isaiah’s warnings to Jerusalem that the city would fall to the superpower of the day, the Assyrians, unless the people of Judah returned to the ways that God had set for them. In today’s scripture Isaiah offers hope to his frightened people. God will be merciful to those who throw out their idols and follow the path that God has set for them. There will be blessings and abundance when God binds up the injuries and wounds inflicted by God’s blow.

In 2016, our own country is the world’s major superpower. The ancient city of Nineveh, the capital of the dreaded Assyrian empire, is across the river from the modern city of Mosul, Iraq. Refugees again flee the destruction of their cities as they did in biblical times. Much of the weaponry is now coming from factories in the United States. What is the path that we are to follow to heal the wounds?

And what of the wounds brought about by our country’s history of slavery and economic injustice? In Isaiah’s passage I hear the hope of Dr. Martin Luther King’s beautiful image: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” What is the path that we are to follow to stop the injustice and heal the wounds? I am learning about some of the ways that I have walked and continue to walk in the broad pastures of white privilege. This passage speaks to me about past and present terrors inflicted upon innocent people. But it also speaks about a teacher who will not let me hide anymore from the knowledge of my own part in this injustice, and who will whisper in my ear “This is the way. Walk in it.”

***Prayer***

We have not always listened for the voices which could guide us to a better path. Renew in us the desire to follow the example of Jesus who crossed lines of bigotry and intolerance to find the humanity and the divine in others. Keep us aware of the blessings of God’s mercy and help us find the hope that lies therein.

***Question for Reflection***

In this season of hope, what is the message or voice that both guides me and gives me the courage to keep moving forward toward justice and mercy?

December 3  
by Jean Chandler

*Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)*

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.  
A voice cries out:  
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'  
A voice says, 'Cry out!'  
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.  
Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
'Here is your God!'  
See, the Lord God comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

***Meditation***

Indeed if every valley were lifted up and every mountain and hill made low, there would be a level playing

field. Then blacks and whites, developed and developing countries would all have an equal opportunity for good food and lodging and therefore good health, happiness, and harmony among all of God's beloved people. There is enough for everyone if everyone takes only their fair share.

And if people lived in peace and prosperity, perhaps they would cease to exploit the planet as a commodity and treat it like the beautiful expression of God's love that it is. Then the glory of God would truly be revealed.

This seems like a tall order, but a hopeful article\* by some scientists at the University of Oxford argued that if we all ate a whole plant-based diet (as God intended, according to Genesis 1:29), we would greatly increase the health of all the people in the world, save trillions of dollars in the process, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 70 percent. If such a simple change could save God's creation for generations to come, why would we not consider it?

\*Marco Springmann, H. Charles Godfray, Mike Rayner, and Peter Scarborough, Analysis and valuation of the health and climate change cobenefits of dietary change, *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, February 9, 2016.

### ***Prayer***

God, open our hearts to love your creation and our vision to see how we might be better stewards of it. And help us to love both our neighbor and ourselves.

### ***Question for Reflection***

Can you think of a time when you were aware of a disparity in the "playing field"? Were you on the mountain side or the valley side? How did you feel about that?

December 5  
by Chris Cornelius

**Psalm 21 (NRSV)**

To the leader. A Psalm of David.  
In your strength the king rejoices, O Lord,  
and in your help how greatly he exults!  
You have given him his heart's desire,  
and have not withheld the request of his lips.  
*Selah*  
For you meet him with rich blessings;  
you set a crown of fine gold on his head.  
He asked you for life; you gave it to him—  
length of days for ever and ever.  
His glory is great through your help;  
splendour and majesty you bestow on him.  
You bestow on him blessings for ever;  
you make him glad with the joy of your presence.  
For the king trusts in the Lord,  
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.  
Your hand will find out all your enemies;  
your right hand will find out those who hate you.  
You will make them like a fiery furnace  
when you appear.  
The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,  
and fire will consume them.  
You will destroy their offspring from the earth,  
and their children from among humankind.  
If they plan evil against you,  
if they devise mischief, they will not succeed.  
For you will put them to flight;  
you will aim at their faces with your bows.  
Be exalted, O Lord, in your strength!  
We will sing and praise your power.

**Meditation**

In the time of the Old Testament, the tribes of Israel had to fight to retain their identity and sovereignty in the face of opposing factions and other nations. Gods served as surrogates for the conflicts between people competing for land and authority. This insecurity and need for justification manifested in symbols of strength and authority, and even in the choice of ways to praise and pray to God. Psalm 21 thanks YHWH for the wartime victories of the King, linking the protection of the tribes to the power of God. YHWH became a god who projected his power through violence because his people were so pressed that the only strategy they saw for survival was to dominate through war.

This is not simple, however. A powerful God is a God who provides shelter and safety. In dangerous times, the people of YHWH take heart in an image of God the protector, God who will turn back enemies. Taking heart, they have the strength to stand another day. Violence and is not the only outcome of a God who uses power to defend and keep safe.

Fast forward to our own country, our own leaders, our own fractured identities struggling to retain legitimacy. For Christians striving to make peace paramount, this God might seem to embody things we reject - partiality, tribalism, violence, and war. But in truth, we are closer to this God than we know. Grasping for justification is a familiar experience, and one that we often enact before we even realize it. Many times, even small insecurities, like a confusing conversation at work or a narrowly avoided collision while driving, can cause the defensiveness to boil over. In these moments of vulnerability, our need for protection can manifest as anger, blame, and demonization of the other.

Let us pray, then, that we are saved in that time of trial - in that moment of fear, we will be sorely tempted to collapse our worldview, and therefore our image of God, into terms of right and wrong. If we desire to tell the story of a God of peace, we must pray that our courage will hold even when we are met with challenge.

### ***Prayer***

Oh God, you know our hearts and the pain we carry from the ways we have wounded our world, our neighbors, and ourselves. Forgive us so we may free ourselves from despair. Restore us so we may look with love upon all creation. Strengthen us so we may be resilient in our service of peace. Amen.

### ***Question for Reflection***

In which areas of your life are you clinging to truths as if they were Gods? From what dangers do these Gods give you protection?

December 6  
by Jerry Saunders

*Psalm 21 (NRSV)*

To the leader. A Psalm of David.  
In your strength the king rejoices, O Lord,  
and in your help how greatly he exults!  
You have given him his heart's desire,  
and have not withheld the request of his lips. *Selah*  
For you meet him with rich blessings;  
you set a crown of fine gold on his head.  
He asked you for life; you gave it to him—  
length of days for ever and ever.  
His glory is great through your help;  
splendour and majesty you bestow on him.  
You bestow on him blessings for ever;  
you make him glad with the joy of your presence.  
For the king trusts in the Lord,  
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.  
Your hand will find out all your enemies;  
your right hand will find out those who hate you.  
You will make them like a fiery furnace  
when you appear.  
The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,  
and fire will consume them.  
You will destroy their offspring from the earth,  
and their children from among humankind.  
If they plan evil against you,  
if they devise mischief, they will not succeed.  
For you will put them to flight;  
you will aim at their faces with your bows.  
Be exalted, O Lord, in your strength!  
We will sing and praise your power.

***Meditation***

Psalm 21 seems to be a psalm of thanksgiving focusing on the image of King David, who is often referred to when considering the moral state of affairs. God appointed a succession of rulers on earth, starting with David and eventually leading to the Messiah. This psalm's message could be generalized to "all kings." Happy and joyful are those whose kings confidently embrace God and God's salvation. Of note is that when God's blessings sometime come sooner than later, prove richer than we imagine, or are given before we may know to pray for them, we truly experience the power of God's presence and agency. David was more excited with the presence of God than with the crown of royalty or victory.

Many today threaten and confidently announce to the world the demise of God's work in our time, but they are ultimately without agency to accomplish those ends. David saw the enemies of God as helpless before our "judging" God. The psalm reminds us how near the judgment of God actually is against those who reject God, and how it is only God's great mercy that prevents the release of judgment at any time. It is in this psalm that we see that David is given agency by God to extract a victory over sinners. This psalm is full of praise to God for the

blessings of victory, deliverance, and answered prayer. Psalm 21 seems to teach us to look forward with faith, and hope, and prayer about what God can and will do.

The theme of “peace” is very much a part of Psalm 21, i.e. peace achieved through God’s attention to our flawed humanity and God’s willingness and ability to move to judgment of sinners in order to achieve peaceful states for all. God worked through David to achieve that end. In our time, God works through us to achieve peace in our world. Psalm 21 can help to motivate us Christians to stay steadfast in faith and actions, and be open and receptive to God’s messages and direction to us to achieve our goal of dismantling white supremacy and the evils that directly flow from that supremacy.

### ***Prayer***

Dear God we pray that we open our minds and our hearts to your voice in our lives, that you continue to speak to us even when we are not speaking to you, to remind us, encourage us, and hold us accountable for loving our sisters and brothers on this earth. We pray that we can sing psalms that cheer us forward, but also comfort us and sustain us when we are discouraged in our efforts. We pray to grow deeper in love, patience, and in our faith to truly embrace and act on caring for humanity in all of its beauty and variety.

### ***Questions for Reflection***

How do I shore up my courage to act on my faith and embrace my Christianity more openly in a world that is increasingly more secular? How do I continue to be patient and forgiving in a world that continues to offend me, anger me, and scare me?



December 7  
by Josh Gregory

**Mark 12:33-37 (NRSV)**

'Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.'

**Meditation**

This passage from Matthew should be jarring, especially in contemplating peace. Any pretense of repose is shattered by Christ's starkly oppositional language. After all, the schematic of "good" and "evil" leaves little room for debate, and there will only be further divine "judgment" and "condemnation" befalling all wrongdoers. Christ's vociferousness is troubling, but there is no doubt that Jesus intended in every way to rouse his ancient audience—it is little wonder his words might still rankle contemporary ears. And it is just as well. It means we are listening. Christ desperately needs to tell us that peace is not always peaceful, in the same way that Martin Luther King Jr.'s tactic of radical nonviolence was neither serene nor harmonious, but contentious and especially dangerous for those fighting for civil liberties.

Jesus, MLK, and all radical peacemakers demonstrate that seeds of paradigmatic change are only planted through the unglamorous and backbreaking work we call justice. These kernels are watered by taking Christ's blunt words to heart: "make the tree good." For if the work is true, if roots grow deeply and are mindfully protected, then the miraculous endeavor of justice—be it through the vehicles of the Civil Rights Movement or the Black Lives Matter campaign, or even in our modest initiative to examine white privilege in our own community—will surely yield the fruit that is good. Fruit that, before it burst into being, had never been tasted.

The *struggle* for peace is what Jesus embodied; indeed, it was why his Jewish body was exterminated by the Roman regime, like the many broken black bodies in our American society that are coded dangerous, other, marginal. We must hear, then, the full brunt of this living Christ with all of his human emotion—his sudden anger and flaring frustration—in the ringing statement: "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil?" as a call to engender peace through decisive action. To create a just, divine world such that all speech is necessarily good and shared between all people equally. So we are called to summon righteous anger when the powerholders continue systemic religious, political, environmental, and ideological oppression. We are called to be upset when peace is upset.

**Prayer**

Dear Christ, we hear your exhortation. We hear your anger. We too are filled with emotion, but are so often downtrodden. May we borrow your will. May we follow closely your ways, O God, so that peace replenishes back what hate weathers down. Endow us with strength and conviction. Amen.

**Question for Reflection**

Christ's warning that "you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter" puts a premium on language and the effects of our words. Are there contexts in which we may need to especially guard ourselves by ensuring that our speech is indeed "justified" and spoken from peace, not ignorance, hatred, or intolerance?

December 8  
by Jenny Stuart

***Ruth 1:6-18 (New International Version)***

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!"

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

***Meditation***

Peace takes conviction. It is an intention that is strong and deep. Or at least that is what I am learning. As much as I would like to believe it, peace is not me lying in a hammock near the lake, on a summer's day. It is peaceful, for sure, but it is not peace. Over the summer, a friend of mine suffered deeply, her pain and fear acute. Everything was going so well. Yet, it was one of those things that just happen. An out of the blue disturbance: devastating and life changing all at once. The emotional/spiritual pain is intolerable, the surrounding love is life saving. In times such as these, all those hurts and annoyances, those ego injuries that took up so much time before, slip away in a blur. Life and death have never felt so real. Witness is all that matters. Love reaches through with a clarity that is like God. Ruth says to Naomi, "Where you go, I will go, where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my god." Ruth continues, if death separates us, may God deal with me severely. And she tells Naomi, "Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried."

In the violence that only humanity can render, paradoxically people can also display an extraordinary capacity for love, witness, and peace. God reminds us, "And what can separate you from the love of God? Nothing. Not angels or demons, not famine, or war, not the past or future....Nothing can separate you from the love of God" (adapted from Romans 8:38-39).

Some of you may have seen the play *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education* that was here in Cambridge not too long ago. The actress, Anna Deavere Smith, portrays a principal from a Philadelphia school where conditions are terrible, and education happens in the midst of racism, poverty and fear. In the play, the principal speaks of a former student from her school. "This girl, she was a really bad one. I mean really bad," she emphasized. Yet, this youth came to visit the principal a few years later to say thank you. Unbelievably, she had gotten into college. "Sometimes," marvels the principal, "just saying something nice at some point in someone's life can change the day." The principal continued, "You got to give kids hope, you just got to. Hope is how you get to faith." She recalls her own college graduation ceremony. "You know," said the principal, "my mother stood up in that crowded auditorium and said into the silence, 'Thank you Jesus.'" No one asked her mother to sit down.\*

Our convictions of hope and peace, often born of despair, are also words of power. A voice is finally heard, understood and validated. Seeds of hope begin to emerge out of the rubble and ashes. The chains of denial are broken. In the clarity of God's love, a new peace becomes possible.

\* Play by Anna Deavere Smith, Music composed and performed by Marcus Shelby, Directed by Leonard Foglia.

### ***Prayer***

*There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life down for a friend.* (John 15:13) May this love lead us through the hard work of peace and reconciliation.

### ***Question for Reflection***

Where do you sense seeds of hope beginning to emerge in places that have long felt like rubble and ashes in your own life? In our world?

**December 9**  
**by Jan Harvey**

***Psalm 146:5-10 (NRSV)***

Happy are those whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who bow down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

***Meditation***

Our scripture for today is on a theme that is intrinsic to the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament. It speaks of the true nature of God, whose desire is for the delivery of the poor and suffering. In Luke 4:18, Jesus declares he has been anointed with the spirit of God to carry on the work of deliverance. Then Jesus passes the mantle to his followers in Matthew 25:35-40.

Teresa of Ávila, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, wrote of what this means for His followers.

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

In the struggle for realizing these desires of God’s heart for the world in which we live, sometimes, no matter how peaceful the intent, conflict and even violence erupt. Our peace is threatened, and as we so often equate peace as being the absence of conflict and of violence, we need to look at another definition of peace. It is the peace that Jesus promised us in John 14:37, a peace that he left with us, “not as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.” This peace is within us, allowing us to be tranquil deep within our souls even as it seems the world implodes around us.

***Prayer for the Day***

Come, Prince of Peace, to surround us, to lift us up, to sustain us as we endeavor to realize God’s desire for her world. May your peace reign in our hearts.

***Question for Reflection***

Am I taking time in my busy, whirlwind life to commune with God, to strive for tranquility of soul regardless of outward circumstances?

December 10  
by Louisa Fish-Sadin

**Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)**

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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 axe 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.'

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

**Meditation**

Though this week's theme is Peace, I can't honestly describe the scripture reading from Luke as peaceful. "Brood of vipers," "the axe is already at the root of the trees," "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire;" these are uncomfortable, even violent images, and yet Luke tells us that what John proclaims is Good News?

In the spring of 2015, I spent a few months working with the Iona Community in Scotland. One of the things I carry close with me from that time is a set of responses from the Iona Morning Service, in which we proclaim that "we will not offer to God / offerings that cost us nothing." In our world of convenience, thriftiness, and instant gratification, this is a revolutionary promise. Discipleship is not comfortable. Jesus did not make people comfortable. In Advent we are not just waiting for a cute baby surrounded by placid sheep. In fact, something quite disruptive and uncomfortable is about to be birthed.

In our work of dismantling white supremacy, we are birthing something disruptive as well. It will not cost us nothing – particularly not the white people in the crowd. I believe that if I'm comfortable and it costs me nothing, I'm not doing this work right. In this scripture reading, discipleship costs everyone in the crowd *something*; John names the sacrifice required of them, each according to their position in society. However, like the characters in the scripture, discipleship does not cost us what we *truly* need for flourishing, only what we *think* we need. And what we *think* we need may actually be an obstacle to our full flourishing.

**Prayer**

Holy One, help us to gather the courage to practice holy disruption. Speak to us in the quiet moments; make us better acquainted with your peace, which we rely on and work toward. May we ask with all your disciples "What should we do?" and face the costly answers. Amen.

**Question for Reflection**

What might I cling to that is actually an obstacle to my flourishing or the flourishing of my community or our world?

**December 12**  
**by Laurie Young**

***Acts 5:12-16 (NIV)***

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. 13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. 14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. 15 As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. 16 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

***Meditation***

Joy comes from healing. Whether it is healing of a loved one or healing of self, joy comes from healing. Whether it is healing of the physical, emotional or spiritual, joy comes from healing. But healing can be a painful process. Have you ever experienced surgery that then required time for healing? The process of healing can be painful. Have you ever experienced a slight or insult or hurt feelings; have you ever slighted or insulted or hurt another's feelings? The process of healing can be painful. Have you ever sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)? Sin creates spiritual wounds and the process of spiritual healing, or repenting, can be painful. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains repentance by saying, "When Jesus told people to repent, he didn't, basically, mean in our sense have some kind of very sad religious experience. He meant you're going the wrong way, you're going to have to turn around because God is doing a new thing and if you're going to be part of that new thing you're going to have to give up the way you've been going." What are we to give up? We are to give up the wounding nature of sin, both personal and societal.

In this year of Dismantling White Supremacy, OCBC has committed to understanding how the ideology of white supremacy is sin, sin against God and sin against each other. We are called to repent, to turn away from white supremacist ideals and systems, to give up this ideology and go with God, to be part of a new thing, a new way. Repentance is the process of spiritual healing and healing can be painful but joy comes from healing, joy comes from repentance.

"Repent and live!" (Ezekiel 18:32)

***Prayer***

Gracious God, loving God we come to you for healing. We come for healing of ourselves, healing of our communities, healing of our world, and we pray special healing of the wounds caused by white supremacy to so many generations of your people. Remind us each day and each step of the new way that the Joy of the Lord is our strength.

***Question for Reflection***

Think of a time when you have been through the painful process of healing. Remember how good it felt, the joy that came, after your healing. Is there any place in your life today, personal or societal, that needs healing?

**December 13**  
**by Tom Jones**

***Jude 1:17-25 (NRSV)***

But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, 'In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.' It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.

***Meditation***

In this week centered around "joy," we are reminded in the Letter of Jude not to be dragged down by those who seek to divide us or by those who mock our commitment and determination to be faithful. He goes on to urge the faithful to have mercy on those who are experiencing doubts about their faith and on those who may be overcome with fear. The divisions and the dividers are ever present in our 21st century lives. The fear and the temptation to lose hope that God can somehow rescue us from the despair is apt to engulf even the most faithful among us and to rob us of our joy on a daily basis. But the wonderful thing about being a part of a strong community of faith is that we are never very far from living reminders of resilience and determination and purpose. Restorers of joy and their acts of unwavering determination bring us back to center. At a time when political, social, and racial divisions are a regular part of the news and life experiences, Jude shores us up with words of assurance and joy by reminding us that God through Christ Jesus is the only rock of consistency; the very foundation of our faith, purpose and mission; and indeed the final authority on all of these concerns, divisions and fears. In Hebrews 11, we are reminded that "faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things unseen." The naysayers will say that our faith is in vain and that God's power and mercy are signs of wishful thinking. But our faith outweighs the doubts. The circumstances will most certainly seek to overwhelm us, but we as a people of resilient faith cling to the joy that is grounded in the God we love and serve. May joy be yours today.

***Prayer***

Our loving God, I ask this day that you would kindly remind me that you are the source of my joy and my strength; that nothing that I face today or throughout this life is greater than the love, the power and the strength with which you hold me close. Guide us as a congregation as we boldly move to do your will and to serve your people. Amen.

***Question for Reflection***

Is there a way in which I can discover joy in a place or circumstance which has been the source of angst or sorrow?



December 14  
by Leslie Hergert

***Zachariah 8:14-17 (NRSV)***

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty, “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.

***Matthew 8:14-1 (NRSV)***

When Jesus came into Peter’s house, he saw Peter’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

***Meditation***

The God of Zachariah is a crabby but repentant God. Angry and fed up with human bad behavior, God gets a grip and “determines to do good again” to the people. But God also acknowledges that the people have been doing wrong—“I hate all this!”—and reminds us how to behave: Speak the truth to each other, render sound judgments in the courts, and don’t plot evil against each other.

These seem like good standards for us and our country as we confront white supremacy and its results. While most of us do not act in a directly and deliberately racist way, we may inadvertently hurt others by making assumptions or generalizing or acting out of ignorance or assumed superiority. Here at OCBC, we are taking time to examine our own behavior and the systems that white people benefit from. Speaking the truth to each other may help us see things that we have not been able to see on our own. Most of us—I don’t want to assume!—probably don’t plot evil against others, but we may tell untruths from time to time, especially to ourselves.

In Matthew, the writer reminds us that God has promised to take up our weaknesses and bear our sins. We are not alone in preparing ourselves to be better people. God will carry us and help us as we strive to do better.

***Prayer***

Oh, God, please help us to understand the truths that have been hidden from us and help us to speak those truths, kindly, to others.

***Question for Reflection***

What healing actions can we take both in our own lives and in dismantling systems that harm others?

December 15  
by Martha Collins

**Psalm 80:4, 6-7 (King James Version)**

O Lord God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?  
Thou makest us a strife unto our neighbours: and our enemies laugh among themselves.  
Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

**2 Samuel 7:1, 4-5 (King James Version)**

The king sat in his house, and the Lord had given him rest round about from all his enemies. . . .And it came to pass that night, that the word of the LORD came unto Nathan, saying, Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the Lord, Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in?.

**Galatians 3:25, 28 (King James Version)**

But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.  
There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

***Meditation***

A traditional Advent meditation on the three complete lectionary readings for today might note that the first and second end with a promise of the Messiah (see Psalm 80:17 and 2 Samuel 7:12-14), and the third with the fulfillment of that promise. But there may be a subtext here that explicitly or implicitly makes us as active participants in a process that is relevant to many facets of our lives, including, individually and communally, the process of dismantling white supremacy. The three scriptures themselves, as excerpted above, suggest that process.

In the Psalm, the “enemies” of the speaker and his people are active; clearly, the people are in need of God. But notice that the Psalmist does not ask God to turn toward us, but rather asks that God “Turn *us* again”: we must do the turning, to see that face.

In the second passage, the enemies are not active: at least for the time being, God has given King David and his people “rest” from them. But there is still an implicit command, that David and his people should not just turn to God, but build a “house” for him—a descendant of which we might see as our own church community.

In the third passage, there are no enemies, and there is no command, no “schoolmaster” to command us; there is only the amazing news that “There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . bond nor free . . . male nor female.” If we turn ourselves to God, if we build a community for him, white and black, brown and yellow and red, citizen and immigrant and refugee may *all* be one. And where are the enemies? Maybe, in the most blessed vision of the beloved community anticipated in this Advent season, even the distinction between friend and enemy might disappear.

***Prayer***

Holy One, rather than waiting for you to turn to us, help us to turn to you. And rather than waiting for you to build the beloved community where you may dwell, help us to work toward building that community ourselves, knowing that, particularly for those of us who identify as “white,” dismantling white supremacy will necessarily be a large part of that work. Help us to look toward a time when words like “white” and “black” will make no more spiritual and social sense than they now do as descriptions of skin color—a time when we will all be able to greet each other in joy.

***Question for Reflection***

Think of several ways you and/or your culture divide people into “us” and “them.” Are all the groups on your “them” list potentially “friends”? Even if they are, think a little more deeply and see if there are some people or

groups it would be easier to consider “enemies.” If you find any group or person on an “enemy” list, consider what it would take to move them to a “friend” list. Then try to imagine, while still respecting the cultural identities of all groups, a time when everyone—including “enemies”—could experience the joy of celebrating a single “us” together.

***Psalm 80:1-7 (NRSV)***

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.  
Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!

Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
You make us the scorn of our neighbours;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

***Galatians 4:1-7***

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

***Meditation***

Restoration

In the midst of uncertainty and unrest in our nation, we echo the plea of the Psalmist: "Restore us O God." Through the learning experience of social and racial injustice, we witness the need for restoration of trust and faith to be ever present. N this day, musicians remember Beethoven's birth. Can we even imagine the pain this man experienced, not being able to hear his own compositions? Yet his final symphony contains the "Ode to Joy," which lives on today in hymnals of many denominations. Finding joy through pain, he used these lyrics:

O Friends, no more of these sounds  
Let us sing more cheerful songs  
More songs full of joy!  
Joy! Joy!  
...World, do you know your Creator?

### Adoption

C.S. Lewis's book *Surprised by Joy* recounts his personal search for joy in his life after finding little in his family and school life as a young man. Intellectual pursuits failed. The aesthetics of nature did not satisfy. The paths of reflection eventually led him to the Scriptures where he found the true source of joy in its deepest and most profound sense. He was "adopted" into God's family as we read in Galatians.

### *Prayer*

Most Holy God, I pray that as we anticipate the birth of the Christ Child, we will be aware of Your Joy in us, your children. May the light of Your love shine through us to bring JOY to others. Amen.

### *Question for Reflection*

Where will you find joy this Advent season? Will you be surprised?

December 17  
by Jim Stockard

***Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 (NRSV)***

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.  
Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
    you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
    before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
    and come to save us!

Restore us, O God;  
    let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts,  
    how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
    and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
You make us the scorn of our neighbours;  
    our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts;  
    let your face shine, that we may be saved.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
    the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
Then we will never turn back from you;  
    give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;  
    let your face shine, that we may be saved.

***2 Samuel 7:23-29***

Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people for ever; and you, O Lord, became their God. And now, O Lord God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it for ever; do as you have promised. Thus your name will be magnified for ever in the saying, "The Lord of hosts is God over Israel"; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, "I will build you a house"; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue for ever before you; for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed for ever.'

***John 3:31-36***

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no

one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

### ***Meditation***

As we focus our thinking in this Year of Dismantling White Supremacy, it's easy to be discouraged. It has been 62 years since *Brown vs. Board of Education* and 52 years since the Civil Rights Act. And yet, we continue to see painful and seemingly unrelenting signs that the healing among all the children of God is intolerably slow. We pray over these tragedies, yet we may often feel like crying "How long wilt thou be angry against the prayers of thy people?" We may imagine that we are being given "tears to drink in great measure." We wake to the headlines and hang our heads and wonder how long we must struggle and fail.

But in the Psalm, we see three times the phrase "Turn us again, Oh God, and cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved." We have recently been talking about "repentance" as a turning. Not just an apology and regret, but a turning to a new way of acting in the world. So could it be that this thrice-repeated chorus is calling us to the path for change? "Turn us again" – help us to peel away the layers of habit and assumption and inherited bias to build a new pattern of honest and courageous behavior in our everyday interactions. "Cause thy face to shine" ~ multiply our actions by joining them to those of others who seek justice and equity. "And we shall be saved" ~ this world will move toward the beloved community we are called to establish.

This certainty . . . that if we but renew our efforts to bring racial and sectarian and economic and ecological harmony and justice to our world, it will happen . . . must be an amazing source of joy to us all. It's the difference between being a people of faith and merely "good citizens." Good citizens get discouraged. People of faith can find that elusive source of joy and persevere because we are promised a better world if we but act to make it so.

### ***Prayer***

Our God, Center of our Being, we pray for your face to shine on us. Give us the courage to repent and find a new path toward justice and equity for all your children in this world. And speak to our hearts so that we may find the endurance to walk that path through sun and rain, up hill and down, over smooth ground and rough. We are grateful for your promise that this journey, shared with so many others, will lead to the beloved community. Amen.

### ***Question for Reflection***

In what part of your life are you called to a new course of action that will bring us closer to the Beloved Community?



**1 Samuel 2:1-10 (NRSV)**

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

***Meditation***

Hannah's Song is part of the Biblical story of God enabling justice for oppressed people. Following Hannah's example, it is strengthening for us to sense that God is aware of our needs and struggles, and that we can be encouraged to call on God. It is liberating to reveal our hearts to God, and to be honest and open to feeling God's presence. And it is empowering to look for ways that God's hand has moved in our lives to bring justice to our world and to rejoice in that progress.

Racial equality and reconciliation are certainly a work in progress in the U.S. and steps are dreadfully slow. Yet many of us remember a time when most African-Americans were denied equal opportunities to even vote. Then God moved and things changed. Judge Wendell Griffen cites four instances of God's intervention. God moved in the hearts of white men on the U.S. Supreme Court, and racial segregation in public schools was declared unconstitutional. God moved in the hearts of a southern President and the U.S. Senate, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted outlawing discrimination based on race. Then the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted outlawing the poll tax. God moved again when an African-American was elected President as people of color and white people, senior citizens and young people, and gay and straight people came together to vote for change. Hannah experienced God's hand bringing change in her life as we may experience God's hand in ours. By God's hand, the rich and powerful are turned back by the poor and weak.

Hannah's Song challenges us to sing about God's deliverance. Let's testify that God is good and that as we do the hard work for justice we can look forward with hope and love.

***Prayer***

Loving and sustaining God, we are amazed and inspired by the faith of Hannah and the miracle of your deliverance and blessing in her life as she trusted you. May we have such faith, that we might recognize evidence of you in our lives, and that we might be open to your hand as we work toward justice and love in our world. In your loving name. Amen.

***Question for Reflection***

What recent miracles of dismantling white supremacy have we experienced? What evidence do we see of the movement of God in that change and how can we rejoice in it?

**Galatians 4:21-5:1 (NRSV)**

Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, “Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birthpangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married.” Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? “Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.” So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

**Meditation**

This scripture, and its reference to freedom, reminds me of a question God planted in my spirit about two years ago. As a woman who is a descendent of Africans who were enslaved in the United States, the question that I have been meditating on is: “*What does it mean to be a descendant of a people who were born free, but not into freedom?*” I am blessed to have a living grandparent, Rev. Marcus Garvey Wood, a 96-year-old Baptist pastor, who is able to share stories about his grandparents, Susan and Moses Wood, who were enslaved on a plantation in Virginia. My grandfather has shared stories of their faith, and of their strong love for Jesus and each other. They maintained their love for Jesus, and each other, while enslaved under a system that used a distorted version of Christianity to justify their oppression. Susan and Moses are one of my greatest examples of what it means to be born free, but not into freedom. They were able to hold onto to the freedom they embodied at birth, by embodying the free Spirit of Jesus Christ. I inherited their legacy of love and freedom.

Paul reminds us in this passage that we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman, and that we are to stand firm in the freedom Christ has given us. (Galatians 4:31-5:1). As I continue to reflect on what it means to be *born free but not into freedom* for the rest of my life, my insights will emerge from an understanding that my freedom is rooted in my love for Christ, and in my awareness of his freedom made manifest in me.

**Prayer**

Dear Jesus, thank you for your love and your freedom. Please deepen our understanding of what it truly means to be free in you.

**Question for Reflection**

My great-grandparents, like so many other enslaved people, were able to transcend the system of oppression they were living under, through their relationship with Christ. It takes work to cultivate a relationship with Christ. What does this look like for you?

**Genesis 37:2-11(NRSV)**

This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

**Meditation**

The story of Joseph and his father and brothers is compelling for me on many levels. Certainly one of them is the sibling rivalry that develops in response to the favor and privilege granted to Joseph by his father. We can all probably identify with, at least to some degree, the envy, resentment, and yes, hate, which his brothers feel toward Joseph – though we are horrified by the acting out of those feelings later in the story. Certainly, Joseph's position as the privileged one gives us some insight, in this time of our own intense reflection on "white privilege" during this year of Dismantling White Supremacy.

The part on which I would like to reflect in this Advent meditation is Joseph's handling of the dreams that he had. For these, I have used some of the thoughts from the online Bible Commentary produced by Theology of Work Project (online). It appears that Joseph may have seen his dreams as revelations from God – a common understanding of dreams in the ancient culture in which Joseph lived.

As the Theology of Work comments: "From his brothers' point of view, however, the dreams were further manifestations of the unfair privilege that Joseph enjoyed as the favorite son of their father, Jacob . . ." and, as such, must have been intensified by Joseph's coming back after getting his brother's negative response to his initial dream disclosure to tell them of another dream in which he, Joseph, is in an even more exalted position. As we continue our work this year on Dismantling White Supremacy, the Theology of Work Project writers make an observation that seems important: "Being sure that we are in the right does not absolve us from empathizing with others who may not share that same view. Good leaders strive to foster cooperation (and, I would add; curiosity, respect, understanding) rather than envy. Joseph's failure to recognize this put him at severe odds with his brothers."

As we work together during this year of Dismantling White Supremacy, being aware and reflective, open and listening to what one another and others have to say may not mean that we are not "right," but that there are many perspectives and feelings that need to be heard. To do so, we need to stay humble, curious and open-hearted, and perhaps most of all, grounded in God's love – extended to our neighbor and ourselves.

***Prayer***

Dear God, help us to be sensitive and empathetic with one another, while also being courageous, and to stay grounded in your love as we await the full incarnation of your love in the Coming One.

***Question for Reflection***

When and how do you feel most held in God's love? What will help to bring about this grounding as you await the coming of the fullness of this love?

***Luke 1:46-55 (New Living Translation)***

Mary responded,  
“Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.  
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!  
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,  
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.  
For the Mighty One is holy,  
and he has done great things for me.  
He shows mercy from generation to generation  
to all who fear him.  
His mighty arm has done tremendous things!  
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.  
He has brought down princes from their thrones  
and exalted the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away with empty hands.  
He has helped his servant Israel  
and remembered to be merciful.  
For he made this promise to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and his children forever.”

***Meditation***

The love and anticipation of the birth of the baby Jesus are, for me, the meaning of Christmas. Mary’s song, or The Magnificat, was spoken during her Visitation with her cousin Elizabeth during the sixth month of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy with John the Baptist, the one who would “prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him.”

Mary, in her song, shows such mature understanding of her Savior who gave her the great responsibility to be the mother of Jesus and to be called blessed for generations. She also understood how the Lord “lifts up the humble” and “feeds the hungry.”

John Rutter closed his composition “Magnificat” with a Sancta Maria asking for “support of humanity, including the needy, the timid, the clergy, women and the laity”: that about covers all of us!

As we look forward to Christmas and continue on our road to dismantling white supremacy, we can look at this song of Mary’s and try to find where we fit. Have we been proud and haughty at times or have we exalted the humble and filled the hungry, or both?

***Prayer***

Dear God, as we wait and prepare for Christmas, help us to be still and think of Mary and her song of praise. Help us to feel the anticipation and understanding that Mary had as she prepared to give birth to one who would make such a difference for generations to come. Amen

***Question for Reflection***

How can we rejoice in God throughout Advent and the coming year? As God remembered to be merciful, can we show mercy and compassion in our work as a congregation?

December 23  
by Naro Pongen

**Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV)**

And Mary said,  
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
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.  
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.  
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 for ever.’

***Meditation***

What a joyous day it must have been in the life of Mary when the angel announced that she will bear the savior! And at the same time, I pause to imagine that it must have been an anxious moment as well. This is a season in time where we can all pause to be with Mary, to share in her joy and fear, to encounter the unknown path she is treading and also celebrate the mystery that will be revealed. And even as I read this song of Mary, I realize that many times the things that seem easy and joyous are in reality filled with doubts and fears. But what is real joy without having a taste of what it means to be afraid? Because only when we are entrusted with a task do we know the meaning of responsibility: a responsibility toward God and to those we consider as the other.

God has been ever mindful of us, but are we? Are we mindful of the injustice that is all around? The prophetic voice to do justice is the song God is offering us even today as we long for the Holy Birth. If our God is a God of Justice who can do great things to those that fear God and at the same time bring down those who are proud, then why do we, who are created in God’s own image, not proclaim and do justice and sing with affirmation the song with Mary.

***Prayer***

Dear Jesus, our friend and lover, today more than ever, speak to us as we wait to celebrate your birth. Empty us of our self-seeking ways and our ignorance, allow us to create the space in our hearts and lives, in our families and community, where we can embrace and nurture each other, where we can break those chains of isolation and hatred. Help us, we pray, to sing so that we can affirm what it means to love you and to love others as ourselves, and to be called your friend and lover.

***Question for Reflection***

Do we so feel so entitled of God's love and mercy that we have failed to know or forgotten the true language of love? If God has given us a gift of song today, then allow it to transform us and transgress the fear so that God may dwell within and among us.