



# FOCUS

CHURCHES OF ALBANY

## 2018 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



## *FOCUS Advent 2018 Devotional*

### *Foreword*

Grace and Peace to you!

On behalf of the FOCUS churches and organization, I want to wish you blessings of grace and peace as you read, celebrate, and witness in the waiting of Christ's coming in this Advent season.

Advent is a centuries old tradition that unites the church as we wait with expectation and hope for the birth of our Savior, Jesus. The word "Advent" in Latin literally means, "Coming." A word that implies something, or someone, notable is about to arrive. Maybe you're like me, and when you know a major event is coming up, or a particular guest will be arriving soon, you like to prepare for such noteworthy event. In a similar fashion, the four Sundays leading up to Christ's birth, the church prepares by meditating on hope, peace, joy, and love.

One of the ways we are invited to participate in Advent is by reflecting on God's word in community. Which brings us to this devotional. You'll find in this devotional twenty-four reflections on passages from all of Scripture, with voices from all of the FOCUS churches, FOCUS staff, as well as a reflection from one of the Breakfast Club guests. It is one of FOCUS' core beliefs that we worship and learn together, though we have differences, we come together in the name of Jesus as one united body of Christ. There may be some devotionals that confuse or surprise you, and that is okay. It's our hope that this will be an opportunity to lean in and learn from one another, rather than put up walls within denominations or people groups.

Each day, during Advent, you'll be asked to read the passage that is at the top of the page, followed with the devotional reflection on the Scripture, and then finishing with a prayer. You'll notice that each of the authors is named, along with their particular congregation or FOCUS affiliation if you'd like to follow up or even thank them for their writing.

Join with me as well as the whole of the FOCUS community as we turn towards Christ and hear the Scriptures afresh each day on our Advent journey.

May God embrace you, Christ enlighten you, and the Holy Spirit empower you in this season of waiting in expectation and hope for Christ's birth.

Be held,

Rev. Marcy Rudins, Delmar Reformed Church

**December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018**

Luke 21:25-36

*Rev. Renee Hollinshed, FOCUS Acting Executive Director*

There is nothing strange about the events being reported in today's news leading to devastation. This scripture warns us of this imminent destruction, but our joy shall focus on the coming of God's kingdom! Those who lack a relationship with God may be filled with fear and uncertainty, but Christians can rest assured that "Help is on the way!" (v. 28, MSG)

Jesus is reminding us to "watch and pray constantly." We are not to get caught in the web of "parties, drinking and shopping," for we don't want to be caught off guard, unaware, or asleep at our post. When we guard our hearts and minds against the things we witness, our confidence in Christ helps us "escape" through the devastating news, so we can stand in eager anticipation before Christ.

Jesus' words ring with authority, and warns us to get and stay ready. To be steadfast no matter the destruction, even the cosmic events. These are not a threat to us, but a promise to end our suffering! So rejoice, Paul says, for wrongs will be righted at Christ's appearance because we know ... God's Word never fails!

*Heavenly Father, Everlasting Lord, we thank you for the Word that breathes life into the lifeless, and comforts us in our hour of need! Help us stay alert as we await the coming of Your Son, and fill us with Your love, Your joy, and Your peace as we endure until that sweet hour of when Your Kingdom comes. Amen.*

**December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018**

Psalm 90

*Richard Gascoyne, First Presbyterian Church*

I picked up an acorn from a tree whose parent had lived there for 300 years, and whose generations of oak trees had lived in that same spot for eons, as the Vikings, the Romans, and the Phoenicians passed through. I was in Guernica, the center of Basque country, where their language, culture, government and religion predate the Indo-Europeans; the place that Hitler bombed to smithereens on market day in 1937 and Picasso immortalized in his controversial painting. The Basques live!

Their government house, home of their ancient laws, the “fueros,” similar to the 10 Commandments and the Bill of Rights, stood before me by the oak tree. It looked like a Greek temple to the gods. I stepped inside, only to find a legislative chamber. There were crucifixes on the wall, and the Basque national logo, which seems to be a symbol of the sun – a strange combination.

The essence of “something” was there. I felt it in my blood, my brain, my heart. I held an acorn in my hand. In a later age a young girl will hold a baby in her arms. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.”

*Eternal God, our Way, our Truth, and our Life, teach us to count our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Amen.*

**December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Revelation 22:12-16

*Rev. Bill Schram, Westminster Presbyterian*

The world is a broken, fearful place both now and in Biblical times. We see hardship and challenge for God's people; we see refugees fleeing violence either from Romans or Herod or the violence of today's world. We see people seeking to be faithful and those who are seeking just to get by day to day.

Advent is a time of still hoping. Not for Jesus' birth, that's come and gone. Now we hope for him to return and set things right, and clean up the mess.

We still want a savior, perhaps even with a terrible, swift judgment. But what we need is a savior who brings a terrible, swift mercy. We need a savior this merciful because it is we also who need this much mercy.

The rest of the world predicts the rise of darkness, desperation, death, fear, and blame. We speak of still having hope. We dare to believe that living in the starlight of the birth and the morning light of the resurrection allow us to live, still speaking of hope in the light of Jesus' bright, morning star when his love will reign over all.

*In this dark time of year, we string lights of hope. In dark times of life, help us be the lights of hope as we reflect the light of Jesus, our bright morning star. Amen*

**December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Isaiah 1:24-31

*Leroy Suess, First Church Albany*

Pinched in the middle of seven prophetic verses, Isaiah announces, “Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her repent, by righteousness.”

How true might those words ring in our ears and hearts? For we live in a time not too dissimilar from Isaiah’s, except for one big difference. We live on the other side of that prophetic voice due to the blessed assurance of the advent of Christ, which we are now in the midst of trudging through again.

Times were tough then in Judea and Jerusalem. Times aren’t easy now in Jerusalem and Albany, in the days of Netanyahu and Mayor Sheehan. Plenty of gloom and doom still abound.

Yet there is hope. Advent hope. The adventure of being a prisoner of hope. The hope of being redeemed by justice to come, to eventually come. For fun I looked up the word “adventure” and the third definition was “A bold, usually risky undertaking, hazardous action of uncertain outcome” with which I righteously agree.

For we are marching through Advent with a most CERTAIN outcome of hope fulfilled, that day is anon when the world, not just here or there cities, will be redeemed by justice, and those who repent by righteousness.

Yes! Come Lord Jesus! Imagine this: Albany being called a city of righteousness, or how about this: America a country of righteousness? Or one further adventurous outlook, the whole world? Haven’t you sung it – “He’s got the Whole World in His Hands?”

*COME LORD JESUS! Amen!*

**December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Philippians 1:12-18

*Rev. Chris Vande Bunte, Delmar Reformed Church*

Have you ever met those “silver lining” people? They find the silver lining in every situation, person, and cloud of life. Frankly, they can be a little irritating. After all, we don’t always want to look for the good in a situation. Yet, here is Paul, pouring out his heart to his friends who are worried about him, and to us. He says his imprisonment has actually been a “good thing” because it is helping him spread the Gospel to more and more people. While many of us would find it hard to find a silver lining being imprisoned, it is difficult to object to Paul. When someone we know has gone through something difficult, yet perseveres, overcomes, and then uses the experience to encourage others, it can be as powerful as Paul’s letter.

As we journey through Advent, many of us find it to be a difficult time. Perhaps grief or pain suffered in the past doesn’t seem to fade. It can turn us off to the idea of celebration and especially to the people around us who are having “the perfect Christmas.” Deep down, though, we know even those who look happy, experience hurt and pain too. Perhaps, then, when Advent seems to bring more blues than joy, instead of turning inward, we might seek to encourage others by sharing our story. Like Paul, together we can help one another through, sharing Good News even in difficult circumstances. In lifting others, we too may find new strength for the journey.

*Emmanuel, as we prepare for your coming, we sometimes come with grief and pain, as much as joy and celebration. Help us to share your love and Good News with one another in the ups and downs of life, as we seek to welcome your incredible love enfleshed into our lives and world once again. Amen.*

**December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Malachi 3:1-4

*Judy Hartley, Westminster Presbyterian*

Malachi is the last of the Old Testament prophets. Little, if anything, is known about the last of the minor prophets in the Bible. A short summary of the book of Malachi is this grand message he delivers. Malachi makes it clear in his message that a Messenger or a King is coming, and that Messenger will be of great power.

All will be tested. That test will be thorough and arduous. Malachi warns believers and unbelievers of the refiner and purifier of silver as unyielding and severe.

Using the tension between the sins of the fallen and the Messenger's formidable test, Malachi directs our attention to an unpredictable future. By preparing us for the future, and for the test, and by holding our feet to the refiner's fire, we are being guided to a more pure or deeper understanding of the Messenger's teachings and lessons: Jesus' lessons and teaching.

*Purifying God, test and cleanse us now as we prepare for the arrival of our Messenger and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Psalm 25

*Marilyn Pendergast, Trinity United Methodist Church*

What does a psalm written about 500 years before Jesus was born have to tell us about Advent, about preparing ourselves for the birth of Christ? We celebrate Christmas as a time of joy, of family togetherness, presents, feasts, giving, and receiving. But Advent is a time for us to contemplate and prepare ourselves for the greatest gift of all.

David was an older man, beset by war and treachery, yet he begins with “O God, I trust in thee.” Our world today is likewise frightening and we can feel powerless...can we remember to trust God and not despair?

“Show me thy ways O Lord, teach me thy paths.” Can we spend time each day in prayerful contemplation, to give God the chance to guide us in our personal relationships, our work, and our lives?

“O Lord, pardon my iniquity for it is great.” We are human and often do not follow God’s path but rather our own desires. Can we seek forgiveness and resolve that we can do better? We can be better?

“My eyes are ever toward the Lord, he will deliver me from my troubles.” Trust is a key element of faith. Can we prepare for the coming of our Savior, filled with hope and knowledge, that God has blessed us and continues to do so each day, even when the day seems dark?

With God’s help, we can.

*O God, teach us your ways and guide our lives to make us worthy of your gifts. We are hungry for peace and healing of our souls that can only come through your grace. Amen.*

**December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Luke 1:68-79

*Kathleen Moore, Emmanuel Baptist*

Zechariah has his voice back after nine long months of being unable to speak. He uses it to praise the God of Israel, who is at that moment raising up salvation — Justice and Righteousness — among his people. There will be liberation from their oppression. Zechariah's own son, John the Baptist, will be someone who will call people to righteous living, and he will point to Jesus as Savior.

In September, I met a woman in Flint who is a Water Warrior, whose voice had been reduced to a whisper due to nerve damage from toxic effects of the water in that city. As we —those of us who had come to listen, and those who had come to speak of the impacts of the water crisis — sat in a circle in the dark, the phrase, “giving voice to the voiceless” reverberated in my mind.

Does not God require that we do justice for people everywhere affected by environmental issues? Each of us can give voice to all those parts of Creation so affected.

*O, for a thousand tongues to sing praises of the One who, even now, commands us to do justice. I pray that I will find a voice to speak the Word of liberation for all, to hear it when others speak it, and to act accordingly. Amen.*

**December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Psalm 126

*Mike Asbury, FOCUS Pastor of Breakfast Programs*

The psalmist described each of these as a heavenly gift ... to dream, to laugh, to sing, to cry, to carry seeds, and to reap harvest in joy for all. Each is a human and spiritual experience that requires life and time to grow within us and alongside others. Each is a gift to contemplate in life and time, yet mere life and time are no guarantees from what we understand God's purpose in any of these.

My life has been lived in a *forward* direction; and *understood* only in a backwards direction. My life, our life in Christ, our True-Self, our life from the Holy Spirit in Christ, begins as an infant, a child, and as a man raised from the dead. This has taught me that we must go out weeping, carrying seeds to sow *in this world*. If *not of this world*, we are to be restored, reborn, and return to sing of joy in the harvest with others. The more we directly give Christ our life, our time, our unseemly seeds to sow *in this world*, the more Christ will appear within us. Though *not of this world*, as the Lord of the Harvest, the "nations," or those of this world, will take notice.

Advent is looking *forward* for Christ to come, again and again, and yet like life or the harvest, it must be understood looking *backwards*. After sowing seeds in our tears, it is soon time for the Lord of the Harvest.

*Oh, Mother and Father God, enliven us to be still, to wait and to watch. Amen.*

**December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Isaiah 40:1-11

*Rev. Marcy Rudins, Delmar Reformed Church*

Timing has a way of surprising us in life. Whether that be with unforeseen opportunities or with varied nuances to our daily routines, sometimes the particular timing of such events can wake us up to unexpected feelings, memories, or thoughts. One of those times was when I began meditating on the verses found in Isaiah 40.

In the midst of writing this devotional, I received a call from a friend sharing that he would be going into the hospital, and from what the doctors shared, "... it didn't look good." Various feelings of sadness, frustration, and fear came over me, and in all honesty it was hard for me to look at Isaiah 40. It's hard to read Scripture, at times, when there is so much pain in the world. Sometimes it's easier to shove the Bible away, along with the painful memories and thoughts of hopelessness.

If we crack open our Bible to the verses in Isaiah 40, we hear of a God who isn't forcing us to be happy or even to be feeling a certain way in light of trauma and terror. What we hear instead is a God who comforts us, meets us where we are at, and holds us with tender care.

Maybe you too have experienced grief and sorrow this past year, and don't really know where to turn to. The beauty of Advent, and of the Gospel, is that it's a reminder that you don't need to be any particular way for God to come to you. But that God always has and always will be with you.

*Maternal God, who tenderly holds us in your arms, I have a lot of questions, doubts, fears, pain, and trauma that I've been holding onto for a long time and I'm tired. Father in heaven and God with all of us, continue to receive me as I am, and extend your almighty comfort to me. In the power and precious name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.*

**December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

2 Peter 1:2-15

*Keith Barber, First Presbyterian Church*

A gift is not complete until it is accepted and put to meaningful use. Shortly before my high school graduation, my dad gave me an old Pontiac to use for transportation to the summer job he'd arranged for me as a telegrapher for the railroad. I was to pay for the gas and handle upkeep, to save a large percentage of my pay to cover upcoming college expenses, and to not embarrass him with his co-workers on the railroad. In the process, a stronger bond grew between my dad and me. We worked together to do some body restoration on the Pontiac. I did not embarrass him with his railroad buddies; in fact, I did a pretty good job. The railroad even invited me back to work during every college vacation. And I think I became a better person for the experience.

Here, the author of 2nd Peter encourages us to accept and put to meaningful use the most wonderful, most fantastic, most glorious gift the universe has ever seen: the gift of Godself to humankind. To you and to me. It is not enough to just say "Thanks, God," and go on with our lives just as before. In coming among us, God shows us how to live in ways that will not only please God, but will bring joy and peace to us. The author spells out a chain of virtues that God readily offers: faith, knowledge, goodness, self-control, endurance, Godliness, mutual affection, and love. He presents a series of gifts, each one leading to another, and all springing from the original gift of Godself among us, and ultimately bringing us eternal life with God in his heavenly Kingdom.

*As we anticipate the birth of Jesus, the manifestation of your Word in flesh living among us, may we joyously anticipate this beautiful gift and all it represents. May we open our souls and minds to the gift and prepare to receive it and act upon it. Amen.*

**December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Amos 6.1-8

*Becky Hudak, First Church Albany*

The first time, actually several times, I read this scripture passage I thought “WHAT!?!? Why is this passage included in an Advent devotional?” Several verses begin “Woe to those who are” ... middle class/upper class/privileged. I found myself squirming, feeling guilty and uncomfortable. This isn’t a feel-good Christmas message, and I don’t want to feel guilty in the middle of this season of joy!

Over the course of the next few weeks I settled down and listened for God’s voice in these verses. I came to see that, indeed, this passage belongs in the middle of my Advent journey. I am brought back to center, reminded that in the midst of my holiday preparations, Christ came into this world for all of us; rich and poor, privileged and marginalized.

As FOCUS church congregations we have a heart for this city, a fire that burns inside of us for social justice, equality, and dignity for all. This scripture is exactly what I need to hear today so I don’t become consumed by consumerism. Jesus is “the reason for the season.” Jesus who came into the world, God made flesh, to show us how to live, love, and care for one another.

*Lord, thank you for pricking my spirit. For bringing me back to you in this busy holiday season. For reminding me why we celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus. Amen.*

**December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

*David McMillan, Westminster Presbyterian*

The people of the young church in Corinth were quite a crew; some slaves and others rich, some Jews and some Gentiles. Paul worked and lived with them for more than a year before he felt secure to leave them on their own.

When he did leave they promised to take a collection for the people of the young church in Jerusalem. Wherever he went he boasted about their generosity. Now he was going back to Corinth. Would the gift be ready, cash in hand? If so, then he could arrange to have it sent east to Jerusalem while he went west to Rome.

When he arrived in Corinth, the money was there but the Corinthians wanted him to take the money himself, to go hundreds of miles away from Rome. Could he give the gift of surrendering his hope to satisfy his friends? Thus it was that Paul reluctantly accepted their request, sat down with his scribe and dictated a letter to the Romans, a letter that was to become the foundation of our faith, a letter that would never have been written had he gone to Rome.

*Strange are your ways. When your plans invade my plans, give me the gift of grace. Amen.*

**December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Isaiah 12:2-6

*Michael Cooper, Delmar Reformed Church*

How often have you felt that you are unworthy of God? We may be caught up in the mundane chores of our lives, or conflicted over a thought or action we have taken that we know deviates from the path God laid out for us. At such times it may seem that the path to God's kingdom is so long, or so difficult to follow, that we are tempted to give up and let ourselves follow whatever trajectory our desires lead us to.

I'm fairly certain that for many of us, one of your favorite movies is *The Wizard of Oz*, a staple of our childhood and a yearly ritual on TV (in those ancient days before videos, DVDs, and streaming services). Dorothy, the lost girl from Kansas, and her three compatriots are given a very simple task by Glinda, the Good Witch: Follow the Yellow Brick Road. If they follow that advice they will find their way to the Kingdom of Oz, even though there are Wicked Witches, flying monkeys, and other creatures trying to divert them from the path. And, in the end (spoiler alert), she discovers that the power to return home was inside her the whole time, and the others found that the answer to their true desires was not on the Yellow Brick Road but in their hearts, minds, and courage.

In the same way, Isaiah is reminding us that the way to our salvation was within us all the time. By singing and praising the Lord, we can draw water from the wells of salvation.

*Dear Lord, please remind me on a daily basis that the way to your Kingdom may not be a straight, even road, but that I can call upon you to give me the strength I need for the journey. Amen.*

**December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Luke 3: 7-18

*Amy Jane Steiner, Trinity United Methodist Church*

Love and kindness; caring for our neighbors, community, and beyond, to all we can reach, doing as much as in in our power and ability. This is what I hear as I read and read again this passage. We need to hear this message repeatedly. We are always looking for protection from “the wrath to come,” however it manifests, as illustrated, through the people’s repeated questions and John’s calming and realistic responses.

The provocations and threats are disquieting to me in our current political climate, as they and other passages, can and have been taken out of context to be used to provoke fear and violence. I believe and trust that God will continue to work through His people, to use our actions to share the love of Jesus, as foretold by John, in the gathering of all that is good and the obliteration of violence and division.

*Dear Lord, be with us as we fight the lesser parts of ourselves in these times of trial and strengthen our better selves to continue your good work while we prepare again for the celebration of Jesus’s birth. Amen.*

**December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Hebrews 13:7-17

*Roger Green, First Presbyterian Church*

Quite a few of my friends are apathetic or even antagonistic towards the church. I totally get that. I'd been there myself some years ago. My friends often see some elements of the church favoring those who "have," or are the insiders. "Send money" so the pastor can have a bigger house or a better plane. I actually heard one of these guys say that if Jesus had come to earth in the 21st century, rather than the first, he'd be riding around in the newest and fanciest airbus.

That's not the Jesus I'm seeing in this passage. He is instead a sacrificial Lord. While he is learned enough to swap scripture with the scribes and elders, he's spending most of his time tending to the marginalized.

I've been a member of a FOCUS church since 1984. What inspires me about service to others is that it doesn't end at the sanctuary door. It goes "outside the camp" (v. 13), meeting the needs of the broader community. Jesus commands us to feed the hungry, and FOCUS does that with a food pantry, the breakfast club, and other services. "Do not forget to do good and to share with others..." (v. 16). FOCUS volunteers also sacrifice their time to do advocacy, trying to address the root causes that require a food pantry that was designed as a temporary activity to be in place for nearly five decades.

Just as Jesus brought people together to express God's will, occasionally turning over a table or two, FOCUS mobilizes "individuals and other community organizations to work for systemic and structural change to address issues including poverty, social and racial injustice."

*God, when people come to Advent services, they see the lighted candles and hear the familiar hymns. May they also see the love in our hearts that comes from caring for others, even those ragged people outside the door, per the example of Jesus. Amen.*

**December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Acts 28: 23-31

*Barkhiem Amir, Breakfast Club Guest*

As Paul explained to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, he quoted the Law of Moses and the Prophets: “Some were convinced ... others would not believe.” The prophet Isaiah was the final argument of Paul, and in the words of Isaiah, Paul reminded them that “...this people’s heart has become calloused,” and so their healing will not come to them, but go to the Gentiles! Among the Gentiles were those same Romans that crucified Christ. Paul must have irritated them by saying the Gentiles have *and* will listen to Christ. The Gentiles know this same salvation as the Jews! Alleluia! Emmanuel, God is with ALL of us!

Now we may choose ... choose to trust in Scripture, ... choose to have faith in the coming and work of the Holy Spirit as the One on Pentecost that drove away all of our fears, ... choose to believe that Christ is eternally in love with all of Creation, and ... choose to live in Christ, indwelling here and now, in us by the same power and love of His Holy Spirit.

We are not imprisoned. We are free, regardless of our circumstances, our wealth or poverty. We are unhindered, even as Paul was unhindered to preach and teach among the Gentiles.

*Lord, carry out your work in us, as you have in Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul. We give you thanks that Your words soften hearts and free us from the preconceived bondage of ourselves. Amen.*

**December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Micah 4:8-13

*Mark Chaffin, Emmanuel Baptist*

In this passage, God's prophet having foretold Judah's doom, now tells of a future return from exile in Babylon. It will be the ultimate exaltation of Jerusalem, the City of Zion. In "the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house (Zion) shall be established as the highest of the mountains." This will be fulfilled completely when the peoples shall flow to a restored and redeemed Jerusalem as the capital of the God's universal reign over the nations. Its "former dominion shall come, the sovereignty of the daughter of Zion."

As yet, they must still suffer the pains and travail of exile before God rescues them. Without competent leadership or wise counsel, and no longer walking in God's way, they will know the pain of defeat and derision that comes with it. They will suffer the loss of temple, land, and homes before God will defeat their enemies and restore all that was lost.

Their difficult lesson learned, they finally return to God's house to be taught God's ways. A return to obedient walking in God's ways and treading a peaceful, nonviolent path will ensure prosperity and redemption for God's people. Such is the purpose of God in every age and most surely in our day. The dearth of moral leadership and the seeming death of judicious counsel at the highest level places us squarely in the same predicament as the people in Micah's day.

For a return from our exile to a path of moral faithfulness and commitment to the principles of justice, we too must seek repentance and change of heart. Like our forebears, we must seek the source of divine wisdom assured that the Lord will teach us anew God's inclusive and nonviolent ways where all are shown dignity and have a share in the restored fortunes of the common good.

The advent of Jesus, the Prince of peace and God's true Messiah assures us that the promise of moral integrity is available to all who make him Lord in daily living and pursue justice in our corporate life. Through Jesus, God's people are to constitute the new Zion as Paul indicates: "we are no longer strangers and aliens, but are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation ... with Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom (we) are built into a dwelling place for God." (Eph. 2:19-22)

*With Micah, let us say: "We will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever."  
Amen.*

**December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Psalm 80: 1-7

*Michelle McIlroy, Delmar Reformed Church*

Our goats stand near the gate each morning, waiting for my father to lead them to pasture. Their eager cries for better food drifts across our farm and I smile, knowing they have a good shepherd (goatherd?) that will answer them. Psalm 80 carries itself out in a very literal way with these goats and my faithful father. I could stop there. I could say, God is a good shepherd. Just like my dad, he'll fulfill his promises to us with a new pasture, one day.

But what if this cry for restoration hits a little deeper? What if we, the individual, feel it painfully as we face invisible illness, chronic pain, grief, or unmet expectations that erode our peace? What if we, as a community, struggle with a society torn by hate that seems only growing? What if we, as a world, are drowning in fear? We cry out, "Hear us! Don't leave us in the dark! Save us!" We beg for the bread of life instead of tears. The promise is this: we are heard, and restoration is coming. Cry out, then love mercy and act justly, while knowing it is the shepherd who will ultimately open those gates and lead us into shalom.

*Lord, don't leave us crying in the dark. Restore our hearts and minds to lean into your saving grace. Feed us with the bread of life and the cup of living water, instead of our tears. Strengthen us for the waiting, and use us to give glimpses to others of the restoration to come. Help us to recognize you when you shine your face into the darkness, and to follow you faithfully toward shalom. In the name of the light of the world, Jesus Christ, who is coming again. Amen.*

**December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018**

Isaiah 42:10-18

*Judith Henningson, FOCUS Director of Food Programs*

There are days, sometimes months on end, when we may feel God is silent in our lives. In the dark, empty cavern of the heart, murmurs of fear, anger, humiliation, or grief may grow to tolling reverberations, drowning out the whispering, gentle persuasion of hope.

Friends may say, “It is always darkest before the dawn” or “In the darkest night, we see the stars,” but the hollow, aching heart is not ready for words of comfort. Those words meant in kindness may cut like knives, or bruise like hammer blows.

God is waiting for us in that silence. God waits patiently. When we struggle free from the darkness of fear, when we labor to bring forth new life after grief, God waits. While we build back our strength and find our voice, God waits. When we are ready to open our eyes to new possibilities, God lights our path, smooths our way, and offers the refreshment of new joy.

We are never alone in the wilderness. Whether we sing songs of praise or songs of lamentation, God is always listening.

*Thank you, God, for your constant, patient presence. May I sing of your steadfast love and mercy all the days of my life. Amen.*

**December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018**

Isaiah 66:7-11

*Rev. Susan Cox, First Church Albany*

It is not often in our lectionary that we encounter such strong maternal images of God.

In Isaiah 64, we hear Israel's lament, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." This cry resounds at a time when small groups of exiles are returning to Judah after Persia's defeat of Babylon in 539. They are weary, faced with hardship, famine, political in-fighting, and economic oppression. Their homes are in ruins, their temple burned to the ground.

Here God responds firmly, "has the one who delivers, shut the womb?" No, never! In this strong maternal language God assures that God will restore Jerusalem and the temple will again feed God's people, bringing sustenance to all. In verse 13 God say full out "As a mother comforts her child so I will comfort you, you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." God as mother nurtures and *delivers new life*.

In a time of random mass shootings, cruelty against certain ethnic groups, political infighting: What do you know of your own weariness, your own doubt? Can you imagine God's nurturing embrace, strengthening the tired old bones of our humanity? Can you imagine God bringing forth new life from the pain of these times?

*God of mercy and light, surround us with your loving embrace. Give us powerful faith as we await the birth of new life in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018**

Luke 1:39-55

*Belinda Quaye, FOCUS Volunteer Coordinator*

Luke 1: 39-55 is Mary's Song of Praise to God, or also known as the Magnificat. It spills out of her heart after her relative, Elizabeth, acknowledged her blessedness as the mother of Jesus.

We can read Mary's song and say, "Oh, what lovely thoughts!" But do we seriously consider what she said? When we do, we realize that the Magnificat can be unsettling. Why? Because it calls us to devote ourselves to being like Mary, a willing and humble servant of God. It reminds us that we are called to be God's servants in the world, serving others as a reflection and extension of God's Kingdom. In the days before Christmas, we can easily get caught up in mass consumption. Mary's song encourages us to step back and reflect on our values.

Maybe, this season of Advent can offer us a new way of seeking and of serving.

*Lord, in this season of Advent, help me to use well the opportunities and gifts you have placed in my hands, serving you and others for your glory. Amen.*

**December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Isaiah 9:2-7

*Rev. Lynn Carman Bodden, First Church Albany*

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isaiah 9.6

The first two phrases of this verse: “For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given” announced the birth of our first child. Perhaps it was presumptuous. This tiny baby, three weeks early, was not the Messiah. Still, this long-awaited first child, this first grandchild on both sides, aroused a joy surely mirroring the rejoicing of God’s people who celebrated the birth of a new day.

In Isaiah’s time, it may have been the birth of a crown prince. In the days of Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon, magi from the East, Herod the Great and Caesar Augustus, it was the birth of Jesus. A day to change all others dawned: a day of hope, of righteousness, of justice and peace.

These are the hopes of which we sing and for whose reality we fervently pray as we worship this night. These are the hopes for each child of God born, regardless of gender, nationality, race, creed, orientation, or ability. Each birth changes our lives — although none more than Jesus, the wonderful, mighty, everlasting true hope of the world.

*We are blessed by your coming among us, Lord Jesus. May we be worthy to receive you. Amen.*

**December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

Luke 2:1-20

*Rev. Glenn Leupold, First Presbyterian Church*

Christmas can be considered the start of Christianity, even though Easter is what makes it a religion. Christmas makes Easter possible. In the center of the Christian faith is the belief that in some way, Jesus' life and death and resurrection collectively convey the message of God's acceptance of us, long before we do anything to deserve that acceptance.

All our statements about grace, salvation, and God's will are rooted ultimately in Christmas — and they sound like we've got God all figured out. Yet Christmas is not a rational, heartwarming event. It's less Mary serenely gazing upon a baby and more the power of light cracking open a dark universe. It's the messiness of childbirth. It's the astonishment of all the poor and downcast realizing that God just may be on their side for a change. Christmas is God made flesh.

It is extraordinary. It is eternity breaking through into human history, even though God did not have to do such a thing. Instead of a precious, soft moment, Christmas is the crashing of the divine into human history in a way that still shakes creation.

On this day the power of God bursts forth, and the world is told that the one we've been waiting for has arrived. And he's born to a peasant girl. And he can be found in a feed trough. And the king is already out to get him. And he is God's own son.

Come, let us adore him.

*God of creation, we praise you for coming to us in our Lord Jesus. We cannot offer adequate thanks for your coming to us as one of us. We pray that we may never take your ray of light in a dark world for granted. May your Holy Spirit enliven our Christmas season this year like never before. Amen.*