

Advent Devotionals 2020

Mercy Community Church

MERCY COMMUNITY CHURCH  
PO BOX 8676  
Atlanta, GA 31106

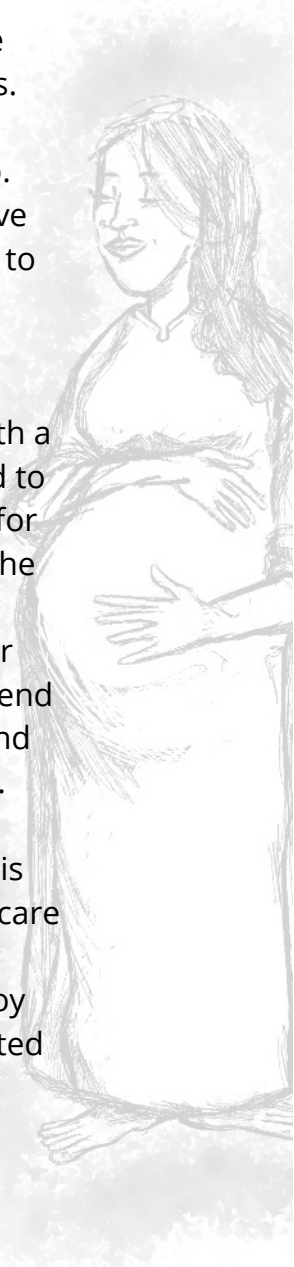
# Blessed Advent!

In our community we practice an ancient style of prayer and study of the Bible called 'lectio divina.' Through this practice, we read the scriptures multiple times together when we study and worship. The first time through we notice what words or phrases stand out to us. When we read the passage again we ask ourselves what God might be calling us to do. For this Advent and Christmas season we have compiled a number of lectio-style reflections to share with you, taken from the lectionary passages for the season.

We suggest you begin your daily devotion with a short prayer, simply and honestly asking God to speak to you for the day. Then read the text for the day before reading the reflection. Allow the reflection itself to serve as a voice from the wider community, as you prayerfully consider what God is saying to you. The prayer at the end of each reflection could be used to call to mind God's presence with you throughout the day.

The reflections and art shared throughout this devotional were created with great love and care by the pastors and community members of Mercy Community Church. We hope you enjoy them, and that they allow you to feel connected to the work and people of our community!

*Cover art and inside cover art by Chad Hyatt*



## WE'RE MERCY!

We are a grassroots church where people who live on the streets and people who live in houses worship and work together. For 15 years, we have shared food and clothing, hospitality and shelter, praised God and worked for justice. Then came 2020.

## A MERCY FOOD TRUCK

While churches have remained closed, we've found ample room outdoors to care safely for our community—a community that has doubled in size since the pandemic began. An old wooden table used to sit at the center of our community. Nowadays, it's borrowed and plastic, underneath a tent outdoors. But a table is the heart of the gospel. Like the wilderness tabernacle of old, we're going mobile with a Mercy Food Truck and dreams of building community in every neighborhood and serving safely outdoors to people across the city.



## A Mercy Food Truck



## A Home Of Our Own

## A HOME of OUR OWN

No, the church isn't a building. But when you have no home, a building sure is nice. Shelter keeps us cool in the heat, warm in the cold, dry in the rain. Buildings aren't luxuries or the privilege of some—though we too often act that way. Housing is a right. We believe now is the time for our community to have a home to call our own.

## We are only able to do our work because of your kind donations.

All contributions may be mailed to **PO Box 8676 Atlanta, GA 31106** or made online at **[mercyatl.org](https://mercyatl.org)**.

Follow us on Facebook **@mercycommunitychurch** and instagram **@MercyATL**

# Authors and Artists



Adam Bennett



Pastor Chad Hyatt



Kelvin D. Dodson



Ronald Johnson



Shayla Blynn



Anthony Barnes



Chaun Pinkston



Pastor Maurice Lattimore



Pastor Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum



Jerome Johnson



Pastor Holly Reimer



Steve Smith



John Morgan



Tracey Lynn



Herman Harris



Jimmy Holbrook



Father Praveen Turaka



David Smith



Isaiah Lewis



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## 1st Sunday of Advent Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

## Sunday, November 29

Chad Hyatt

Mark 13:24-37

### Reflection: v. 34, 'giving each one a job to do'

Bet you never thought you would live through an apocalypse, did you? Welcome to 2020, y'all. From the perspective of the church calendar, Advent kicks off a new year. And it happens while we're still trudging our way through the old. It's as if God's people are invited to become divinely out-of-synch. The realities that have come surging over the banks—a global pandemic, persisting racism, political polarization—won't simply recede because the clock ticks midnight on New Year's Eve. Things will only change because we choose to change them. And that's God's subversive invitation to us.

At a time when so many of our churches have chosen—for sound public health reasons—to close the doors on traditional worship, might we imagine worship more broadly? What if worship was a little more Isaiah 58—a down-to-earth practice where we empower and embody more just and inclusive communities that could transcend the divisions that beset us? That would mean literally making room for those who cannot shelter-in-place because they have no place to shelter. It would mean creatively organizing our congregations to share food, clothing, running water, and rental assistance—things we should have already been doing, if we're honest. Now is the time to make a new time for our world. Disruption of old patterns can embolden new ways of being together. But we can't limit our creative vision to fashioning online content.

The Advent Event itself shows us the way: God comes to us as a poor and homeless child who quickly becomes a refugee on the run with his parents. Is this not where we can still find God at work? I believe with everything within me it is. God is always to be found, graciously at work on the margins, close to suffering, in the broken places. We must creatively reimagine church as a liberating, grassroots community that makes sharing our bread with our hungry neighbors as essential to true and vital worship as sharing the bread of the Eucharist with one another. A new Advent is upon us. Let us fearlessly embrace it.

**Prayer** God of Advent, help us to see in our troubled times that now is always your liberating time. May our broken status-quo lead us to reorder our worship as justice for our neighbors.

## Epiphany, January 6

Holly Reimer

Ephesians 3:1-12

### Reflection: v. 2, 'distribute God's grace'

As I write this, the election is upon us, and I wonder what it would be like for us to cast our personal votes as if our decisions didn't just affect us—because they don't. I wonder what it might look like if we all voted in ways that acknowledge there are other, more vulnerable people in the world. During a recent walk, I found myself at a small neighborhood lake where I squatted on a rock at the water's edge. It wasn't long before a stranger called out to me, asking if I was okay. To me, this is part of what Paul meant as he was describing the distribution of God's grace. It is offering the grace and love we have received, individually from God. We can redistribute that grace to complete strangers. The distribution of grace could be to those who might have different cultural histories, sexual orientation, ethnicities, and even those who may not yet recognize the God of grace. It is knowing all of these things and still choosing to say, 'It's not just about me'—or stopping to check in on a complete stranger. Offering God's grace is easy, but we complicate it. We certainly aren't forced into these decisions. But why would we not want to respond to God's lived grace with our own LIVED grace. Grace is not something we say; it's something we do. And it is offered freely to everyone.

**Prayer** God, may we distribute your grace to all those we encounter. Challenge our own biases and privileges that keep us from doing so. Amen.



## Tuesday, January 5

Holly Reimer

Ephesians 1:3-14

### Reflection: v. 10, 'Bring all creation together'

Do you ever get tired of fighting, of being divided, of the 'us versus them' mentality? Fighting and divisiveness is exhausting and wears on our mental, emotional, and psychological well-being. We tell others and ourselves, 'but I can't give up' for fear we will lose our ground and standing. We fight to a literal death over something because we honestly believe that it is easier to fight, kill, or demoralize than it is to find peace and life. We don't want to lose what we have worked so hard to obtain. We live in fear of being 'the least of these' because there is no status or acclaim in being known as the least. Being united has always been God's plan, God's purpose for creation. No, it's not always easy, but it takes a lot less energy and resources to build a bigger table than it does to create a higher fence.

The Scripture tells us that in Christ Jesus we will see God's plan for unity to the fullest. But it is not something we are to sit idly by watching and waiting for God to do all the work. If all creation is to be joined together, we are to build relationships with one another—the least of these, the widow, orphan, sinner, tax collector, the homeless, immigrant, and transgender person. We are to be unified, which means we are called to sit with one another—especially the 'other' that we often shy away from. We are called to learn one another's names, to learn and share in their joys and struggles. Christ demonstrated all of this for us. So, as we celebrate this Christmas season, may we not be too quick to fight and to build walls, but to make peace and add a place at the table.

**Prayer** Lord, may we live most fully into your purpose for all of creation.

## Monday, November 30

Chad Hyatt

Mark 13:24-37

### Reflection: v. 31, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away'

'It's the end of the world as we know it,' R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe sang in 1987. I'm not sure I feel fine, but I do know every end holds the possibility of new beginnings. An apocalypse isn't the literal end of the world. But it may seem like it, as old systems fail us and the foundations upon which we have staked so much of our hope and security shift beneath our feet. In that sense, it may seem very much like our world is ending. As Jesus put it, it's like 'heaven and earth'—our whole universe of *meaning*—is passing into nothingness. That's certainly how those who were listening to Jesus at the time would have felt. After all, he's foretelling a Jerusalem overrun by Roman armies and the Temple of God destroyed—only days before his own violent arrest and execution. But the inevitable destruction, death, and disorder of unjust social systems can open us to new, more life-giving ways to order our lives.

And that's the key: there are ways of ordering our lives, as individuals and as communities, that may appear to be what we want, but the truth is they lead us all toward death—because those ways harm our neighbors as well as ourselves. Greed doesn't create true wealth. Walls won't keep us safe. Violence never solves problems. Addictions never cure our pain. An apocalypse—in personal or global terms—is when the lies we have carefully woven to overlay our injustices are stripped bare. Suddenly, we can see. When the false idols that blind us are exposed for what they truly are, then we can clearly see the true and living God calling us to order our lives anew.

From the rubble of an old world, we can build a new one where love for our neighbor guides us in all our relationships, communities, and institutions. That's the word of God that will never pass away. As our old idols crumble—along with the worlds of meaning we have constructed around them—that's the word of God that can create a new heaven and earth where justice makes it's home.

**Prayer** Jesus, your word lasts when our worlds fall apart. Help us to build our lives and a better world on your word: love your neighbor as yourself.

## Tuesday, December 1

Chad Hyatt

Mark 13:24-37

### Reflection: v. 33, 'Watch out! Stay alert!'

We missed it. That's the tragic truth the Gospel tells as we start Advent. God answered Isaiah's prayer—a cry that gives voice to our own fervent longing. God tore open the heavens and came down. And we missed it. We missed it then for the same reasons we are liable miss it now. God did not come to defend the status quo. God came to defend the poor. God won't protect the privilege we deny is ours but fight tooth and nail to keep. God comes to save those without privilege or place within the unjust structures we make and maintain. Jesus of Nazareth was a poor laborer from Galilee. He didn't look much like God tearing open the heavens and coming down in glory and might. Not when he compassionately healed lepers and restored them to community. Not when he fed the multitudes of the poor with meager rations. Not when he made a place at the table for the outcast. Not when he healed the sick whom others regarded as 'sinners' on account of their suffering. Not when he went about Galilee with no place to lay his head. And certainly not when he hung, tortured and humiliated, gasping for breath on a Roman cross. Church folks sometimes say God doesn't come when we want—but God is always on time. The Scriptures also teach us God doesn't come *how* we want. But God comes to save us nevertheless. The question for us is the same as it was for our ancestors: what happens when the God of our prayers comes in the person of the poor—and for the liberation of the poor? Advent is a grace-event that calls us to wake up lest we miss it all over again.

**Prayer** Jesus, you come to us again and again in the guise of the poor. Rend not the skies but our hearts, that we may see you in our homeless neighbors.



## Monday, January 4

Kelvin D. Dodson

Ephesians 1:3-14

### Reflection: v. 3, 'who has blessed us in Christ'

As the word of God starts out in Ephesians 1:3-14, it states that God has blessed us. Just as he blessed Jesus for the world, he has also blessed us. As I continued to read, I noticed the reminder that we are redeemed of our sins. For me, I think of the image of being covered in the blood of Jesus. I remember that I am made blameless and even holy. In this covering, the mystery of God's will for us is unveiled. What that big unveiling shows is that we may have everything in heaven and on earth—it's for all of us. In Christ, we have earned the inheritance! With purpose, we can live with hope and praise our God in heaven, which in turn strengthens us in faith, love, understanding, belief, trust, and salvation through the Holy Spirit. The word tells me this is our 'pledge inheritance'—to praise our heavenly Creator in heaven and on earth.

**Prayer** Thank you God for blessing us—thank you for choosing us!



Ivan Cooley

## Sunday, January 3

Adam Bennett

Jeremiah 31:7-14

**Reflection: v. 13, 'I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.'**

How many times have we needed a reassuring and living word to move us into hope in God once more? Through the trials and tribulations in everyday life, God has promised that there is a time for sorrows and for the tough times to have an end! It is a time when God lifts us up above these circumstances and turns what may have been a long and difficult moment and gives us joy through his love for us. God tells of his promises to take off the old yolk of the world and its ways, and suddenly causes a miraculous change of circumstances to fulfill God's plan in and for our lives. Our Lord and Savior Jesus will move heaven and earth to help us through a situation. He has given us life and through his life, death, and resurrection, the promises of God's will is fulfilled. Reflect on that. God gives us life, joy, and peace to come.

**Prayer** Thank you, Father God, and thank you, Lord Jesus, for your steadfast love and care. Put in us your spirit, cleanse us so that we may receive your promises of salvation and new life by Christ Jesus!



*Pastors Lattimore and Holly*

## Wednesday, December 2

Chad Hyatt

Mark 13:24-37

**Reflection: v. 36, 'Don't let him show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping'**

In our community, which has its share of struggles with addictions of various kinds, we have come to believe that we live in a deeply addicted society. It's not so much that we fail to see the disorder all around us, it's that we have allowed ourselves to become numb to it. Numbing ourselves to pain is at the heart of every kind of addictive behavior. Don't make the mistake of thinking addiction can be limited to ways we abuse substances. Addiction shows up in all the unhealthy patterns we take on to try and cope with our pain—and every addiction, however seemingly personal or private, affects our relationships with those around us. When we numb ourselves to our own pain, we also numb ourselves to the pain of others. These hurtful patterns must be named in order to be undone and new, healthier patterns established. The Bible calls this numbness 'hardness of heart.' It characterized Pharaoh as he refused to hear God's voice calling for human liberation and instead charged head long to his own destruction—and the tragic destruction of those who followed him. Naming the patterns that harden our heart and choosing new patterns is what the Bible calls repentance. If Advent is indeed a time of repentance, then we must reckon with the fact that it is our numbness, our hardness of heart, that keeps us complacent and comfortable with the world the way it is.

So Jesus calls us to rouse ourselves from this selfish slumber, to shake ourselves awake and to be clear-eyed and alert. How? Prayer is an obvious answer. Scripture, too. Community is essential, of course. But the practice that pulls all the others together into a whole are the works of mercy—direct engagement in the pain of our sisters and brothers by sharing our table, our time, and our very selves with one another. Compassion, where we feel with others their suffering and pain, is the opposite of numbing ourselves. In the face-to-face love of our neighbor as ourselves we will all find sobriety.

**Prayer** God of compassion, rouse us and awaken our numbed and hardened hearts with a lively love of our neighbors who suffer.

# Thursday, December 3

Chad Hyatt

Mark 13:24-37

## Reflection: v. 24, 'In those days, after the suffering of that time...'

The crises that could make us more compassionate, more in tune with the suffering of our neighbors, can also make us more afraid, pushing away others whom we judge to be not like us—and therefore a threat to our sense of security.

In a time of economic dislocation, we could rally around our neighbors and share our bread with the hungry. Something Jesus strongly suggests we should always be doing. Or we could lock our doors—and call the cops on statures of the Homeless Christ in church parking lots (yes, that's a real thing).

Loving our neighbors requires overcoming our fears. Loving our neighbors isn't a job we can outsource to others or shift to those we deem professionals, however well-trained they might be. Loving our neighbors—tangibly, concretely, face-to-face—is the sacred responsibility of each one of us.

The works of mercy—sharing food with the hungry, clothing with the naked, welcome for the stranger—is how we love our neighbors, especially those of us who are suffering and vulnerable.

And it is also how we can answer the Advent call to repent. As we turn toward one another in compassion and empathy, we can turn our communities away from brokenness and bitterness toward wholeness and belovedness. But we must do the turning. The crises we face provide an opportunity, but only we can choose how we respond.

Let us turn toward our neighbors who are suffering instead of turning them away. In so doing, we will embrace our own suffering and pain. Only then can we all be healed and find new life. This is the gracious promise of Advent.

**Prayer** God of compassion, you who stand with us in our suffering, turn our hearts from fear to love—and lead us to stand with all who suffer.



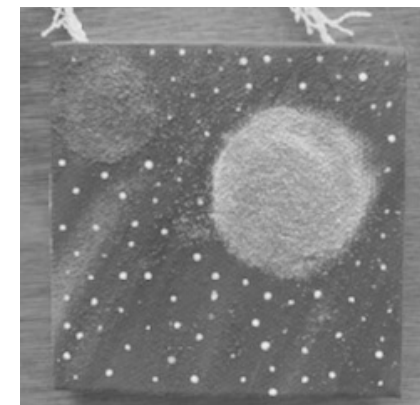
Kelvin D. Dobson



Chad Hyatt



Anthony Barnes



Tracey Lynn

## 2nd Sunday of Christmas Lectionary Readings

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalms 147:12-20

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:(1-9), 10-18



## Saturday, January 2

Holly Reimer

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

### Reflection: v. 1, 'I won't keep silent'

These are a people who are in exile—people who feel abandoned, likely betrayed, and experiencing desolation. Although it feels as though God is absent and cares little about God's people, particularly in their distress, this is a reminder that God is present in the darkness and pain. God will not be still. The prophet will not be still. We are not to be still. I have found for myself that it is easy to be paralyzed with inaction when the work to challenge oppression and injustice, a work of love and grace feels, overwhelming. We freeze in body and voice. I am reminded of the work of Stacey Abrams, who in the face of discouragement and loss, was determined to be anything but still and silent. She refused to allow defeat to paralyze her and, as a result, made space for a work of justice. This is the message, folks. We are not to be still. We are not to be silent. We have been called to do the tough work of moving one limb at a time when paralysis threatens to take over. If we are to be faithful, that means we will not be still, and we will not be silenced. It is not enough to say 'black lives matter' or 'love is love.' Be grassroots. Put your feet on the ground. Build relationships, and get to know one another—and not because you have something to gain, but because your stillness means there is something lost. Yes, the work is hard. No, we may not see the promises of God clearly in the moment. But that doesn't mean God isn't present.

**Prayer** Lord, I pray that we won't keep silent anymore. May our voices be an action that leads to peace and justice for all.

## Friday, December 4

Chad Hyatt

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

### Reflection: v. 3, 'let your face shine, that we may be saved'

How do you see the face of God? I see it everyday. I see the face of God in the multitude of faces that greet me each morning in our little community—a patch-work quilt of beautiful belovedness. Sometimes it may be weathered and weary, looking for hope like a last scrap of bread. But it's the face of God, all the same. It may have eyes wrinkled in mischief, laughing at a good joke or another crazy story of survival on the streets. But it's the face of God, all the same. It may have a brow furrowed in concentration, trying to puzzle out a piece of Scripture in a particularly hard Bible study. But it's the face of God, all the same. It may be with a mouth wide open in full-throated song as we gather to worship. But it's the face of God, all the same. It is the face of God shining upon us that saves us, the psalmist says. God saves us face-to-face. And face-to-face is the only way we can truly love our neighbors, in keeping with the great commandment. It's mighty hard to see the face of God in prayer or perhaps someday up in heaven, if we fail to see God's face in our neighbors here and now. Salvation is never just personal. It's social, too. But in an ironic twist, even our social salvation must also be personal—made possible by the lines we cross to make community in this world. If we hope to feast at the banquet of God, then we had better pull up a chair at a table where folks are hungry. And as we break what bread we have together, let us look one another in the eye—and see reflected there a thousand stories we had never imagined. Then and only then shall we see each other face-to-face. And we might just find that the face of God is shining radiantly upon us.

**Prayer** Lord, as the psalmist sang, let your face shine upon us. And save us, O Lord, face-to-face—in your company and in the company of our neighbors, especially the poorest among us.



## Saturday, December 5

Isaiah Lewis

Mark 13:24-37

### Reflection: v. 24, 'But in those days...'

It's very hard not to think of 2020 as the end of the world. A pandemic that's left nearly 1.5 million people dead and millions more sick. People's livelihoods snatched away. A rise in jingoism in half a dozen countries, including our own. Police officers murdering Black people with impunity, regardless of evidence. Protests violently suppressed. Wildfires and hurricanes. In the face of so many threats, it's hard to know what to do, let alone what to hope. So it makes sense that this is the year we'd start Advent with a rundown of the apocalypse.

The word 'apocalypse' means an unveiling or revelation of the way things are. In this passage, Jesus warns his disciples that terrible things are happening and that their job is to be attuned to the reality-changing entrance of the messiah into that chaos. In fact, Jesus even gives them four specific times to look for the presence of their savior. In their terror, though, they immediately start missing the cues. They fall asleep in the evening when Jesus goes to pray. They scatter at midnight when confronted with an angry mob. Peter denies knowing Jesus while waiting for the trial to end. And finally the whole community rejects Jesus, foisting him onto the empire to be executed.

Why is this an Advent story? I think it's because God has no illusion that things have been going well for us. We're surrounded by death-dealing power, and when we get tired and afraid, it's easy to forget what Jesus' revolutionary revelation looks like: the holiness of a baby, a teacher, a prisoner. God is a poor boy born in a barn and murdered by the state. And God is life, which no empire can destroy. Like the shepherds at Jesus' birth and the disciples at his death, we're called to keep watch.

**Prayer** Help us to keep watch for your advent, O God.

## Thursday, December 31

Herman Harris

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

### Reflection: v.11, 'the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise'

Reading this passage reminds me that I can turn the corner. I used to think that I really didn't deserve good things, because of all the stuff I've done in the past. I beat myself up a lot. And sometimes I will fall short. But I'm grateful today that I can turn the corner. I've seen so many of my friends pass away from addiction or other things. When I went to the hospital, it gave me a reality check. When they had me hooked up to all that stuff, it was a reminder that my life is important. My family was calling me, and I had people surrounding me that really cared, even when I hadn't cared for myself. Sometimes it takes other people around you who value you to make you realize that you have value. Like my community at Mercy. I come here every day to get spiritually fed, and because it is important to have people around you who care about you.

**Prayer** Lord, help me to remember I am surrounded by your love.

## Friday, January 1

Herman Harris

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

### Reflection: v.10, 'he has covered me'

I believe that God definitely wants me to be healthy. I talk to God every day. I'm designed to be healthy and clean. I'll pass by the liquor store, and there were days when I would have just went in there when I had the money, but I choose not to, because that's where I'm at today. I take it one day at a time. I have to make the same choice tomorrow—I have to choose not to. And I thank God that he helps me to do that. God is the foundation of my trying to get clean. He connects the dots for me. Every day I try to involve myself in the Bible studies we have here at Mercy—they connect to my recovery. Studying the Bible in community helps me build a foundation and gives me a reason to stay clean and stay sober. It also makes me want to live not just for myself, but to help somebody else. It's not only about me, but the people around me. Other people, if they see you've had long-term recovery, they go by what they see.

**Prayer** Lord, let my actions live out what I'm trying to do and what I believe in.

## Wednesday, December 30

Ronald Johnson

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

**Reflection: v.10, 'he has clothed me... he has covered me'**

This passage makes me think of the image of being out of fellowship, but then coming back to be welcomed and clothed with the grace, mercy, and righteousness of God. This is what being in fellowship with God is like. God wants to and can provide for all of my needs. This passage says, 'he has clothed me...and covered me.' That verse stands out to me, because it reminds me that God cares about my needs. He is giving me my basic needs, both spiritually and physically. This gives me hope, direction, and purpose. The volunteering I do with a ministry downtown gives me an opportunity to give back and to show people who have a background just like me that God is able to and wants to care for us—if he can do it for me, he can do it for you. From crack to Christ, from weed to the Word, from a six-pack to a four-pack—that's Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

**Prayer** Provide for our needs, O God, and help us to lead others to you.



*Brothers Praveen and Robert*

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## 2nd Sunday of Advent Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Psalms 85: 1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

## Sunday, December 6

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Isaiah 40: 1-11

### Reflection: v. 2, 'she has served her term... her penalty is paid'

'You are prisoners no more. Your time for freedom is now,' is written in the margins of my bible next to this passage. I am fairly certain my co-worker and fellow pastor borrowed my bible one day and scribbled these lines as the makings of a song-response for some worship service. While I no longer remember the occasion for the song, this interpretation strikes me anew in its simple truthfulness. In this particular passage the voice of God through the prophet Isaiah declares freedom for a seemingly forgotten people in exile. God speaks to God's children banished and home-less in a land not their own. God looks upon those poor exiled ones and speaks words of consolation and liberation. At the core and the crux of our biblical text is this bold and comforting notion that God desires freedom for God's people—for all of us, but also particularly for the oppressed and marginalized. As followers of this audaciously loving and liberating God, we should also be compelled to want freedom for one another. God does not want God's people locked in the cycles of broken, unjust prison systems. God does not want God's people trapped by the ugly snares of racism and bigotry. God does not want God's people caught in the endless jumping-through hoops of systemic poverty. God does not want God's people ripped from their mothers' arms to be caged, lost, and forgotten. God wants God's people to be free. May our actions and voices cry 'freedom' alongside the God we follow.

**Prayer** Liberating God, come to release your captives and guide us, your people, to work for the freedom of others.



## Tuesday, December 29

Tracey Lynn

Psalms 148

### Reflection: v. 3, 'Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars!'

I was walking my dog one evening. It was dark and cold outside. I had my jacket zipped up tight, hands in my pockets, shoulders pulled up towards my ears. My gaze settled downward and I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of loneliness as Thumper and I navigated our nightly route. With family far away and suddenly a single mom to two young daughters in a new city, the feeling of isolation was overpowering. Eventually, Thumper and I reached the corner and turned around to walk home. As we made the U-turn, I took a deep breath, glanced upwards and audibly gasped. My eyes locked on the biggest, brightest moon I had ever seen. My impulse was to reach out and touch it, even though I knew that would be impossible. Thumper and I stopped walking for a moment while I just stared and was overtaken by the moon's beauty. Praising God amid loneliness, fear, rejection, and isolation is not necessarily the first thing that naturally springs forth. But God is in everything. If we take just a moment to shift our gaze towards that which is purely of our Creator God, praise can become us. We are never alone if we are willing to glance in the direction of the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Prayer** May we trust that God will never leave us alone.

## Sunday, December 27

Steve Smith

Psalm 148

### Reflection: v. 1, 'Praise the Lord!'

This psalm reminds me that we are called to praise the Lord with all our heart, mind, and soul—our everything. It is God's kingdom that reigns forevermore. We're reminded not to ever forsake God, because God will never forsake you. God is the all, the everything. And God cares about all people—all people. This makes me want to live my life and give all the praise and glory to God.

**Prayer** Give all praise and glory to our God Almighty. Amen!

## Monday, December 28

John Morgan

Psalm 148

### Reflection: v. 3, 'praise him, all you shining stars'

My name is Johnny Morgan. I'm 65 years old, and I pray to the Lord. I pray every night. This passage reminds us to praise God. In my prayers, I like to thank the Lord. When I pray, I look at the stars at night, and I thank God. I have something to be thankful for—I might not be rich, I might not be where I want to be in life, but I know that God is with me. I thank God for the people that surround me, and I thank God for the love they show me. I thank God for the life he has given me. My Momma always said, 'Hold onto God; keep praying and hold on.' God meets my needs. Mercy Church has given me food and a place to stay, and I pray every night for these people. I praise God. I have had to learn a lot. God had to lead me away from certain people, places, and things, and get my life going. And I can see that, and I can show love now to everyone. I know the Holy Spirit is beginning to work through me, and I pray that I can feel good about it.

**Prayer** Holy Spirit, help us to feel good about the ways you are leading us!

## Monday, December 7

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Isaiah 40: 1-11

### Reflection: v. 1, 'Comfort'

For many of us, 2020 has not been the easiest year. Many of us have lost jobs or housing, navigated through the difficult decisions of how to care for our children and family members, stood witness to the reality of the racial injustices in our country, and made endless sacrifices to protect one another and the vulnerable in our community. Our church community has also had its hardships. This year alone we have lost six members—six precious and valuable lives we continue to mourn together. In the past, we would have gathered for memorials in our intimate basement church room, strung with prayer flags displaying the faces of our lost loved ones. We would have sung songs and told stories and held one another close as our tears stained one another's shoulders, giving honor to the great losses in this family we have made together. Unfortunately, this year we have also lost the ability to gather as before—to hold one another and make home for one another in our cozy crowded space. In the particular and peculiar difficulties of this season, I am thankful for a word of comfort from our God. I am thankful to remember God's enduring presence alongside us in our suffering. I am thankful to remember that our God will not abandon us. 'Comfort, O comfort my people,' God says. I am also thankful that I experience that faithful word of comfort not just in the echoed words of this old prophecy, but in the embodied solidarity of my steadfast community. We may no longer crowd together and hold one another close, but in our present sufferings we continue to stand together and show up for one another each and every day. And that, dear friends, is a great comfort.

**Prayer** Comfort, O comfort your people, O God, and may we give comfort to one another.

## Tuesday, December 8

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Isaiah 40: 1-11

### Reflection: v. 1, 'Comfort'

'Comfort, O comfort my people,' God says, speaking of God's people in exile. When we are struggling, when we are experiencing oppression, when we have been pushed down by the powers that be, when we feel forgotten, overlooked, and devalued, it is good to know that God desires to comfort us. That being said, some of us can become too comfortable sometimes. Some of us grasp to cling to our privileged creature comforts as if they will be ripped away at any moment. We prioritize the well-being, success, and needs of ourselves over others as if they are rights that only we deserve. We create a false idol of perfected suburban 'safety' and fight for it until we push out the neighbors we are called to love—but instead fear. Too much comfort and too much complacency can be a dangerous thing if it makes us oblivious to the pain and struggle of others—if it makes us oblivious to the reality of systemic poverty and racism in our city and elsewhere. Let us remember that God speaks these words to a people experiencing exile. God declares this comfort and goodness for those left without such things. It is true that there will be times when we all need God's mercy and comfort. But may the loving tenderness of our creator also urge us toward justice. May our own comfort move us toward compassion. May we seek and work for the comfort and wellness of God's hurting people and never just for me and my own.

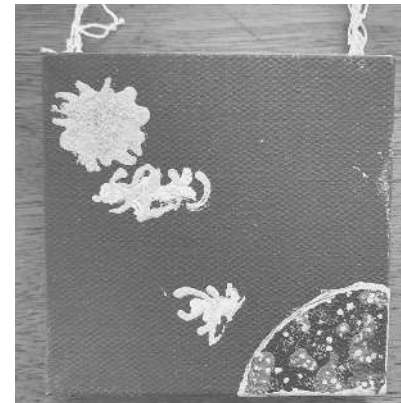
**Prayer** O Loving Creator, may your comfort move us toward compassion.



*Jimmy Holbrook*



*David Smith*



*Shayla Blynn*



*Brother Praveen*

## 1st Week of Christmas Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

## Saturday, December 26 Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

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John 1:1-18

**Reflection: v. 5, 'a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'**

Though liturgically Christmas has its twelve-day season, for many of us, today just feels like 'the day after Christmas.' For some of us the holiday season has always been difficult—it can remind us of strained family relationships, missing loved ones, or better years long past. For others of us this year in particular probably hasn't lived up to our expectations and the holidays have likely felt the same. What small glimmer of nostalgia or tradition we were able to capture from a family Zoom dinner or the promise of 'next year will be better' quickly fades today as we sit with the obvious pangs of disappointment. Maybe your existential dread, like mine, strikes deeper to the core this year. My own small sadnesses seem trivial when I think of the thousands of people who have lost someone beloved to Covid-19 this year, when I think of the loved ones of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and *so many others*, mourning their unjust and unnecessary deaths, or when I think of the families torn apart at our borders without power or promise of reuniting. Without the numbing distractions of holiday social events and ready excuses to make Target trips for unnecessary last-minute gifts, I am left only with the stark reality that the warm-fuzzies of Christmas mornings past did not save us from ourselves. I am left with the dread of the world I help to create and yet feel powerless to change—what chance does my small and flickering Christian hope have of combating the deep gloomy night of this season? My flame remains small, but I will not relinquish it just yet, even now as the dawn stretches far away. For what hope was a small baby boy born to a poor and homeless refugee family all those many years ago? I have to keep hoping that as this Scripture promises us, in all eternity, God chooses to be with us and cares about our well-being. And whatever evil looms—love and mercy and justice and hope will not be overcome.

**Prayer** Strengthen our flickering hope, O Lord, that we may see your love and justice in the world.

## Wednesday, December 9 Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

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2 Peter 3: 8-15a

**Reflection: v. 13, 'a new earth, where righteousness is at home'**

In its closing exhortations, the Second Letter of Peter paints an image of waiting with anticipation for the coming of the day of God and the promise of new heavens and a new earth. This imagery is similar to that used in the book of Revelation—the hopeful vision of all things being made new and right, a new earth wherein right-ness can find its abode. As I write this today (still one week before our next election), it is difficult to even dream of an earth where righteousness is at home. A vicious plague goes unchecked, powers and principalities, sworn to protect, instead endanger our basic human rights, wars rage, fires burn, families are wrenched apart, and our earth cries out under the pressures of climate change. Even within my own small sphere of influence in the community where I serve, I feel the dead and heavy weight of tomorrow's promised thunderstorms and the growing discomfort of privileged neighbors who would rather our community gather anywhere else but within their sight. But though right now it seems near impossible to dare to dream of something better, Peter's words to these fellow Christ-followers remind me that I must. And in that hopeful vision of a world made more righteous, I remember that that is indeed what my God desires for us. I remember that my God is steadfast, that my God stands on the side of justice, that my God loves flesh and blood human beings and will not neglect us. I remember that there will be better days, and I want to be a part of God's work to create them.

**Prayer** We hope for better days, O Lord--help us to create them.

## Thursday, December 10 Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

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Mark 1:1-8

### **Reflection: v. 3 , 'the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness'**

One of the many reasons I love our church community so much is because of the rich and diverse theological insight I witness each week I am there. Our daily Bible studies and Sunday sermon are discussion-based and incorporate extensive input from our ecumenical community—people can ask and say whatever is on their hearts and share their stories and insight in their own words. These devotionals too have become a community project that include the thoughtful contributions of many different people. When I was still in seminary, I often gave thanks for the privilege of having the perspectives of my Mercy community members informing my education alongside other scholars and theologians. Because frankly, at Mercy I have often heard good and gospel news cried out and proclaimed in ways I had never heard growing up in the institutional church. I learned hard truths and a longing for repentance in lessons the academy could never teach. Not by my own merit or righteousness, I was graced to be led out like those going out of Jerusalem, to hear voices crying out plain and true from those marginalized places we often neglect and avoid. The voices, the preaching, the theology, and the wisdom that comes out of my community continue to call me to repentance, and I am thankful and better for it.

**Prayer** Lead us, O God, to those wilderness places where your prophets still speak.



## Christmas Day Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

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Isaiah 52: 7-10

### **Reflection: v. 7, 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation'**

When my daughter Emi was born, a flurry of texts went out to family and friends—the fast-footed digital messengers announcing the joyous good news of her anticipated arrival. The after-experience of birth was quite different for poor displaced Mary and Joseph, but I can still imagine the delight they must have felt to cradle their new baby as angelic messengers announced the coming of our salvation to shepherds. Today we celebrate that Christ has come, and we are invited to embrace that good news and share in the joy of it. And no, Christmas tidings do not mean that everything will suddenly be easy or okay now. Even as God's own messengers proclaimed peace and salvation on the day of Christ's birth, the powers that be were already plotting our sweet Savior's demise. For love incarnate will always challenge the ways of the powerful and privileged and the work of bringing peace never ends. As we near the close of this uniquely challenging year, we too are faced with the task of holding in tandem our Christian hopefulness and the unavoidable reality of the difficulties and work still yet to come. Yet the truth of God's good news is no less actual for we who have waited for it. Though it is not always as we expect it, God still comes and love still prevails. The messenger has arrived, proclaiming peace and good news! It may not always feel like it, but our salvation has indeed come, so let us celebrate—and then get to work.

**Prayer** Today, O Lord, help us to find joy in your anticipated arrival. Tomorrow, help us to get to your work!



# Christmas Eve

Chad Hyatt

Luke 2:1-20

## Reflection: v. 19, 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart'

John Lennon famously said, 'Whatever gets you through the night is alright.' While I might put some limits on precisely 'whatever' might be, I can say this without hesitation: praying the rosary gets me through the night—and pretty much every time in between. It's simple, really. Just the act of holding a rosary—fingering its worn beads, tracing its looping pattern as I pray—connects me to that deeper place in my heart where I know God makes a home with me. Rosary in hand, Hail Mary upon my lips, my distracted and worried mind slows down its harried gait just a little. It's like the knotted cords of my rosary bind my heart to a deeper truth, the most profound truth of all—the grace of God's love for me and for all the world.

The rosary is a truly contemplative prayer. Sure, it's repetitious. But its repetitions aren't vain. The words themselves are a beautiful gift of our Christian tradition. These well-worn prayers have been offered by the faithful across countless centuries and cultures. But the words become a mere after-thought as the prayerful heart moves closer to God's heart. Praying the rosary stills my fears. It illumines my hope. It leads me to sit quietly in the presence of the living God.

Throughout the disruption of this pandemic, I've spent a lot of time with Our Lady of My Backyard. Sitting in a rocking chair I once recovered from the dumpster at our church, I situate myself near a little image of the Virgin Mary I purchased at the monastery. Praying the rosary is praying in the company of Mary. We contemplate her Son together. I let the long day start to roll off my shoulders, as gently I rock back and forth. I gaze up at the starry sky and sense the gentle rustle of the trees. I hear the cicada song, like a symphonic hymn of praise. Prayer should be as incarnational as the faith we confess. We are embodied, after all. We can only love God embodied. And that's the way we love our neighbors, too. Let us rejoice this Christmas that God comes to us in Jesus, the Son of Mary—embodied, just like you and me.

**Prayer** Jesus, thank you for traditions of prayer that draw us closer to you.

# Friday, December 11

Jerome Johnson

Isaiah 40:1-11

## Reflection: v. 11, 'like a shepherd'

I like this passage, because when I read it I think about God leading me. I think God is leading me because I have changed a lot since I've been coming to this church. I'm like one of God's sheep and he's my shepherd. I think God is saying that he is going to have mercy on me and that our sin has been forgiven. I am poor and feel like I'm down low in the valley sometimes, but I believe God is going to lift me up. I think God is leading me—he leads me here every day. I like listening to the word of God, and I think God is leading me to do what is right and make myself a better person. I'm working on myself, because I want to be a better person than I am. When I come here, I get strength. When I walk up, everybody gives me strength, and my community helps lead me, too. I'm working on getting me a place—housing. God is leading me there, too. In this passage, it says that people are like grass and the flower of the field, and one day we will die and fade away from this world when the breath of God has gone from us. But that's not the end, because one day God will lift us up and all people, both rich and poor, shall see the glory of the Lord together. He will lead us like a shepherd and gather us in his arms, and we will forever be with our Lord.

**Prayer** Lead us O Lord, to places of health and wellness.



## Saturday, December 12

Chad Hyatt

Mark 1:1-8

**Reflection: v. 4, 'John was... calling for people... to show that they were changing their hearts and lives'**

Advent sometimes seems like the season of John the Baptist. But what is John saying to us, exactly? When we unpacked the beginning of Mark together in a community Bible study, we started with some good questions. *Why is John wearing a camel hair coat?* He's signaling he stands in the tradition of Israel's prophets; Elijah's famous mantle was the same kind of hairy cloak. *What's up with that crazy diet—locusts and wild honey?* It resonates with scriptural imagery, in particular the Exodus story: locusts for the plague sent on hard-hearted Egypt, honey for the land of promise flowing with milk and honey—and maybe for the sweet taste of the manna God fed the wilderness wanderers. *And what about that wilderness—and the River Jordan?* It's the Exodus story, too—that long in-between as the people moved from liberation to promise and the watery way that led them to a new life. Put all these together, and the picture is clear: John is positioned as the prophetically predicted prophet who announces the beginning of a new Exodus for God's people—and for all oppressed human beings the world over. *That's* how the Gospel chooses to introduce Jesus. John is saying that the God of the Exodus is *still* hearing the cries of the oppressed and intervening in history to set captives free. Now is always the time for liberation. As we pondered this story together, one of our brothers reflected on how hard the holidays are for many of us, especially Christmas. Our culture paints gauzy images of home and hearth and family and fun, and we feel deeply disconnected from all of those things. But my brother also put his finger on the now possibility of a God who still hears our anguished cries and invites us toward a different kind of future. My brother, like many of us in our community, has made choices toward sobriety. With some clean time under his belt, he's already reconnected with family. It's a process that might seem like a wilderness, but there's a land full of promise on the other side. And that's really what repentance looks like—the choice to reconnect, to find an overwhelming and merciful forgiveness when we honestly admit our faults, and the promise of restored community in its wake. It seems John's message is good news for our day, too.

**Prayer** God of wilderness prophets, help us choose to reconnect.

## Wednesday, December 23

Chaun Pinkston

Romans 16:25-27

**Reflection : v.25, 'God who is able to strengthen you'**

Life is a series of choices, and some choices are easier to make than others. One of the most recent decisions I had to make was deciding to go back to school for a Master's degree in Divinity. As a wife and mother of three, the youngest a seven-year-old, and already having a full-time career, this was not an easy decision. On the surface, the timing was not right. I could not see how I would accommodate the challenge of school and the demands of my everyday life, but I could not ignore God's leading. I chose to pursue my degree, and somewhere amidst the uncertainty, God settled my heart. I believe that God has a way of working beneath the surface in our lives—deep within the depths of our hearts, leading and guiding us. Our current circumstances can seem chaotic. Our hearts and minds can be restless, unsure of the future, but nothing is chaotic to 'he who is able to establish you.' God can settle an uncertain heart and give peace to a restless mind. I have been in my program for almost three months now, and I am grateful that God led me to Emory and to Mercy Community Church. My life has been enriched by all the beautiful souls I have the privilege of sharing community with. God has not only equipped me with grace to excel in my program, but God has also gifted me with greater hope for the future. The message here is to pursue your hopes, dreams, and goals despite the voices of fear and doubt, to reach beyond your capabilities because you have a purpose. Place your trust in God to whom you belong. God will establish you.

**Prayer** God, give us the courage to go where you have called us!

# Tuesday, December 22

Isaiah Lewis

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

## Reflection: v.11, 'the Lord will make you a house'

I've spent a lot of my life trying to find out what God wants from me. I've read a lot of books and heard a lot of sermons about it. I even went to school to figure it out. It feels important for two big reasons: 1) because finding out what God cares about tells me something about who God is, and 2) because it seems like doing what God wants me to do will get me closer to being who God wants me to be. But ironically, even if I have good intentions, I end up constraining my ability to be in genuine relationship with God by turning it into a puzzle to solve.

I feel for David when he looks around at his palace and decides that maybe God would like it if he built one for God, too. He's thinking about what seems good to him in life and then offering it to God. (We can argue that there are probably some ulterior motives involved, but since that's usually true of us, too, we can put it aside.) David talks it over with his pastor, Nathan, who tells David to take a second look at what God has said and done so far in their relationship. God hasn't sat still in some temple, orchestrating plans at a distance. God has traveled with God's people wherever they've gone, even before they knew God existed, to love and protect them. Instead of us making a special place where God lives, God has been continually making a home with us. I can trust that I have a relationship with God not because I've cracked some theological code or tried to be a good person but because God has come to live with me and with all of God's people.

**Prayer** Make a home with us, O God.



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## 3rd Sunday of Advent Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalms 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

# Sunday, December 13

Holly Reimer

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

## Reflection: v. 8, 'I, the LORD, love justice'

Justice is something required of us, but I'm not talking about a 'wild west' kind of justice where we misuse Scripture to avenge wrongs done to us and those we love. Justice, as seen here in the prophet Isaiah, is about a social justice—something that fulfills the needs of everyone. Here's the kicker: it is something God requires human beings to do—not something we lay at God's feet and say, 'It's all yours!' We are to be participants in God's justice. So when we say, 'Black lives matter,' we aren't insinuating that all lives don't matter, or that God only cares about Black lives. But we are emphasizing the kind of justice God is bringing to light here in this passage—a justice that acknowledges there are a group of people who have, and continue to be, oppressed. When we love the 'least of these,' we are loving justice as God loves justice. Friends, we've messed up. There are an awful lot of children without parents. We've buried a lot of innocent Black men and women. LGBTQIA brothers and sisters are still shamed. Men and women are still without adequate healthcare and housing. We are still 'othering.' Enough is enough. As we meditate on Christ's birth this season of Advent, while we await the one who is to come to remind us of love and justice, may we love the kind of justice that comes from God—that is inclusive. Let us live into a kind of justice where we dismantle fences to build bigger tables.

**Prayer** Thank you, God, for a different kind of justice, one that brings peace and wellness to all. May we continue to find the strength and courage to live out justice as you have called us to do. Amen.



*Community Art, Advent Wreath*

## Sunday, December 20

Maurice Lattimore

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

### Reflection: v. 1, 'I will sing of your steadfast love'

When I read this passage of Scripture, I'm filled with an overwhelming sense of joy. I think of where God has brought me from and how today, through an act of repentance and my willingness to seek and build a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, I have been given a chance at living a better life under a new covenant. It has put a new song in my heart that I will shout to all people. I want everyone to know that my Lord and savior Jesus Christ has taken me across my past! Amen!!

**Prayer** I will forever praise and give glory to God for saving my life. Peace and love always. Peace, glory, hallelujah, peace!!!

## Monday, December 21

Maurice Lattimore

Romans 16:25-27

### Reflection: v. 25, 'Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ'

The powerful proclamation of Jesus Christ in the gospel has helped me and brought about revelations of what I now know to be true. There are many things in the Bible that I truly had never known, but I came to know. I think about the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus when they met at the well. That story lets me know that I can come to Christ just as I am because he knows all my secrets anyway. There is nothing I have to be ashamed of. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he can continue to reveal things and lead me down a better road to obedience and the manifestation of my faith through Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Prayer** Continue to reveal your heart to us, O God who strengthens us!

## Monday, December 14

Holly Reimer

Psalm 126

### Reflection: v. 5, 'Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts'

This is a beautiful psalm that offers expressions of trust in who God is and expressions of praise from the people. This has been a tough year for all of us. There have been a lot of changes and grief. We might even find ourselves wondering if we are experiencing God's wrath. Our world has been turned upside-down with the pandemic, which has also highlighted many of our biases and injustices. We look back on these last eleven months with sadness and uncertainty, remembering what (and who) we've lost. In much the same way, the psalmist is looking back on the divine wrath that has ended for Zion—and is looking towards divine restoration. Even for us at Mercy, we look back at the members we've had to say goodbye to and our beloved space that was alive with color, laughter, and memories. There is no doubt we are sad, yet we are planting a new harvest with God. We are honoring the memories of the past year with the hope of what will grow from faithfulness. Let's be clear, neither I nor the psalmist is saying that we have to suffer to find joy. Rather, our suffering will be transformed into an abundant harvest where we can play music, pray, laugh and commune with one another on a grassy lawn where nearly a hundred people gather. We are suffering, and we will suffer. But suffering will not last forever. The harvest is coming. We will be able to celebrate abundance and life.

**Prayer** Lord, you've seen our sorrows and held our tears. May they be transformed into something that brings life and abundance for ALL. Amen.

## Tuesday, December 15

Holly Reimer

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

### Reflection: v. 21, 'Examine everything carefully'

Paul is speaking here to the larger Thessalonian community, not just to one or some, but to all. Community is a word pregnant with meaning and theology, particularly as we seek and examine faith and faithfulness. We learn from other people. We need other people. Two of the things I love most about Mercy are the community itself and our community-led Bible studies. In my weaker more vulnerable moments, I like to tell myself that I don't need other people, that being an introvert works for me and I'd be good by myself. This is a lie! We live in such a driven, individualistic culture that we intrinsically believe we don't need each another. During one of our recent Bible studies, a member stood up to share the importance of community in his life and as he works on his recovery and as he seeks to find a stronger faith for himself. He said, 'I need this community.' He is not alone. We all need community—and not just for resources, like food and clothing, but for connection and encouragement. The other thing I love most about Mercy are our community-led Bible studies. It is here where we can examine everything carefully. This becomes a space where we can bring our questions, and sometimes even challenge one another. Scripture comes alive for me in the context of my community, and I am able to see who God is and what God says more clearly.

**Prayer** Lord, thank you for community. Thank you for places, spaces, and people who can encourage and challenge us. May we continue to examine your word faithfully. Amen.



*Charles "D.C." Sims using a Love Beyond Walls sink*

## 4th Sunday of Advent Lectionary Readings

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Psalms 89:1-4, 19-26

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

## Saturday, December 19

Chad Hyatt

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

**Reflection: v. 1, 'The Lord God's Spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me... to bring good news to the poor.'**

Given the choice to write just one reflection for this week of Advent, it would be impossible for me to let Isaiah pass by—not with these liberating words ringing out, like the joyful breaking of chains, across the centuries: 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me for the Lord has anointed me... to bring good news to the poor.' We know, of course, that Jesus couldn't let these words pass him by either. When he took the pulpit in his own hometown, he told all who would listen that this prophecy was being fulfilled in him.

From the Hebrew prophets to Jesus, from John Lewis to the millions who have marched this summer, these words take on flesh and blood, body and soul. And wherever they resound, from an exiled prophet to a tiny synagogue in Nazareth, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to the street corner where George Floyd was murdered, truth is being boldly told and good news is powerfully proclaimed.

Maybe I run the risk of being a little too Pentecostal, but make no mistake, it's an anointing. It's oil running down our heads, poured out by the Lord alone, coming like the rushing of God's mighty Spirit upon us. It's a messianic commission—for Jesus, of course—but also for all of God's people. It is our vocation together. It was for exiled Israel, and it is for us in our own homelessness, existential and literal. It's the power of God that confronts every other power there is, every system that exploits and destroys God's good creation, every idol that crushes human beings and robs us of our inherent dignity.

It's not even remotely apolitical. It is the authentic, revolutionary politics of the kingdom of God that demands power, resources, and relationships be reorganized according to our love for our neighbors, especially the poorest among us. The good news we celebrate this Advent—and indeed all year long—is that the God who loves us all boldly takes the side of the poor—so that every one of us can be set free. And that's the gospel truth.

**Prayer** Spirit of the Lord, anoint us to proclaim the good news of your liberation to the poor—and to live like we believe it.

## Wednesday, December 16

Holly Reimer

John 1:6-8, 19-28

**Reflection: v. 7, 'He came as a witness to testify concerning the light'**

A love that truly comes from God is one that sees the value, goodness, and beauty in each individual, for no other reason than they are the image of God. Loving in this way means we want others to be included in the goodness of God. I think about the zeal and enthusiasm of children and the ways they are eager to share good and exciting news with those around them. In their youthful joy and childlike fervor, they are not exclusive or selective with who receives this information—it is shared with EVERYONE. John has some really good news about God's presence among the people. There are those who don't believe, can't fathom, and are resistant to such news. John shares it anyway, because good news is meant to be shared. The light and love of God is meant to be shared with EVERYONE. In this particular season, and with this particular text, I am reminded of the Christmas song lyrics, 'Do you know what I know?' It is about knowing something really wonderful and the desire to share it—not because it makes the knower more important or powerful, but because we couldn't think of keeping it to ourselves. It's saying, 'I want you to feel and experience the same joy that I do, because I trust and believe that you are just as important as I am.' Brothers and sisters in Christ, I know something, and I want you to know it too. In a world of great darkness, there is an even greater light. This Light shows us who is beloved, and it isn't just the rich and the powerful, but it is especially the poor and meek. It isn't those who 'claim' to have it all together, but those who have messed up and made some not-so-great choices. This Light offers grace. Be a humble witness. Be an inclusive witness. The Light is too important for those of us who bear its witness to be anything other than humble and inclusive. What if we shared good news, not because it affects us alone, but because it affects someone else?

**Prayer** Lord, thank you for the light you have given to us in Christ Jesus. May we not do anything to attempt to diminish such a great light. Amen.

## Thursday, December 17

Holly Reimer

John 1:6-8, 19-28

### **Reflection: v. 26, 'Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize'**

Greatness often gets mistaken for power and privilege. This has not changed. The Pharisees and Sadducees are particularly thrown by John's words because they are concerned with their own power and privilege, and concerned for what Jesus might do to upset one or both. We are living in a world and a culture that tells us we are great when we reach that promotion, buy that new house, have a certain amount in our bank accounts, and can name a litany of things we possess. Those who would later have Jesus killed, missed the true greatness that was among them. They were blind from a fear of what-ifs, insecurities, and egoism. As a community, we believe that God is present among us. Christ was present with the poor and the marginalized. This is not simply why we believe God is present among us, but rather it reflects the faithfulness by which we engage one another as beloved children, as reflections of the one who created us. And yet, there are those who cannot see the beauty in our gathering, in the beauty of my brothers and sisters. Even now we are currently experiencing resistance to our gathering as a community. God is present, and yet there are those who can't see it and who refuse to see God present with us. The concern and what-ifs can rob us of the chance to see something rich and beautiful. We can become afraid that a small, faithful, ecumenical community will rise up against us and rob us, both literally and figuratively, of all the power and privilege we believe makes us great. Greatness is not present in power that oppresses but in a power that liberates the oppressed. This is the greatness John spoke of as he witnessed to Jesus. Beloved brothers and sisters, we can find ourselves on a dangerous precipice that will cause us to miss the greatness of God. May we humble ourselves, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and present to something we could never fathom.

**Prayer** Humble us, Lord, to see you in the most unexpected places and spaces. Amen.

## Friday, December 18

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

### **Reflection: v. 2, 'good news to the oppressed'**

I love the brash and revolutionary tone of the prophet Isaiah's words. As I imagine the prophet making his bold declaration to a people in need of justice, I cannot help but to think of my fellow pastor and friend, Rev. Maurice Lattimore, and the many faithful others who have been marching for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder. I think of how Rev. Lattimore has patiently and compassionately instructed and pastored people to see the hurtful truths of systemic racism. I think of his many colorful shirts and masks hand-crafted by his daughter, proclaiming words of justice and honoring the names of those killed at the hands of the police. I think of how Rev. Lattimore would not only march the streets but also show up to Mercy the next day to foster relationships and care for our community members living on the streets—prioritizing both works of justice as essential and never ever forgetting to care for the living, breathing humans standing before him. I think of Rev. Lattimore and some of the push-back and roadblocks he has faced in his steady, faithful advocacy for God's people, and I cannot help but to think of the prophet Isaiah's words. Good news for the oppressed will always be hard to accept for those in positions of power and privilege. Prophets proclaiming freedom will always be rejected by oppressors. But this is God's word. God proclaims good news to the oppressed. When I read these ancient words, I want to hear the potent challenge within them and know that they must matter to me, too. I want to hear the prophet's urgent cry in the voices of those crying out for justice today. I want to desire the justice that God longs for. As I read this passage today, I am thankful for the faithful and embodied witness and ministry of my colleague, Rev. Lattimore, who proclaims the words of God's prophets anew.

**Prayer** Liberating God, help us to listen to the voices of your prophets speaking anew!