

# Words of Comfort & Hope

*Devotions Written Especially for  
Our Homebound Members & Friends*

DECEMBER 2020



**Derry Church**  
PRESBYTERIAN (USA)



# Words of Comfort & Hope

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# The Season of Advent

*Rev. Stephen McKinney-Whitaker*



We have entered a new year in the church calendar: the last Sunday of the church liturgical year was November 22, Christ the King Sunday. We have now entered a new season: Advent.

Seasons are important. I never want to live anywhere where I don't get to experience all four seasons because the changing seasons remind me that the seasons of our lives are always changing. There's a rhythm. We all go through different seasons in life. I think for many of us this year has been a particularly difficult season. Perhaps it's been a season of loneliness or worry. Maybe it's been a season of waiting: waiting for family to be

able to visit again, waiting for activities to start back, maybe even waiting to be able to leave your room or home.

We experience seasons of life and seasons of death. We know "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). With these varied seasons in our lives comes a wide range of emotions, from joy to sorrow, anticipation to dread, stress to relaxation, despair to hope. What has this season of COVID brought you?

The Bible is an incredibly varied collection of writings reflecting an intensely diverse amount of situations, moods and perspectives. A lot like how life is, actually.

What the church calendar does is create space for Jesus to meet us in the full range of human experience, for God to speak to us across the spectrum, in the good and the bad, in the joy and in the tears in every season and time. From Advent to Lent to Eastertide or Pentecost, the church calendar reminds us that whatever we're feeling,

whatever we're experiencing, wherever we are in our heart—God waits to meet us there.

We are now in the season of waiting and preparing called Advent. Advent is about anticipating the birth of Christ. It's about longing, desiring, that which is yet to come, that which isn't here yet. And so we wait, expectantly, together, with an ache. Because all is not right. Something is missing.

I imagine these last several months during the pandemic have been filled with longings and desires for people and things that aren't currently with us. There are things missing in our lives right now. All is not right.

I think Advent confronts the difficult realities we all face with the insistence that God has not abandoned the world, hope is real and something is coming. Advent charges into the temple of loneliness with a whip of hope, overturning the tables of despair, announcing there's a new day and it's not like the one that came before it.

“The not yet will be worth it,” Advent whispers in the dark. “Better days are coming! The world is about to turn!”

In Advent, we enter into a season of waiting, expecting, and longing. We ask God to enter into the deepest places of loneliness, bitterness and fear where we have stopped believing that tomorrow can be better than today. We open up. We soften up. We turn our hearts in the direction of that day. That day when the baby cries His first cry and we, surrounded by shepherds and angels and everybody in between, celebrate that sound in time that brings our Spirits what we've been longing for: the dawn of redeeming grace.

# God is always with us

*Marie Buffaloe*



I miss seeing you. Haven't you said and heard that a lot these last months. Even if the person is right in front you, often their smile is hidden by a mask.

It's not what we expected for 2020, and this year certainly has not been one to 'golden.' It seems like a reversal of roles to now hear our children now reprimand us for going out and not being safe. Isn't that the same words we said to them only a few years ago (or so it seems).

And yet there is something wonderful in their concern and worry about our health. We've certainly kept in touch, even if they could not visit in our room, they've tried to call us, or talk through a window or sit on a patio. It's not the same, but we know they are trying. We all are trying. As Thanksgiving and Christmas come, we know things will be very different this year. Sometimes, it's hard not to feel forgotten.

I am reassured by Jesus who told his disciples that he would not leave them alone or abandon them. He said, you will not be left orphaned. This chapter follows the night of the foot washing (John 14) as he tries to prepare them for his leaving and coming death. They will not be orphaned, because the gift of the Holy Spirit is coming to them.

You see God's presence will always be with us, even with strict pandemic shut-downs, when our meals have to be eaten in our rooms, and families are not allowed to visit. As bored and lonely as we might be, the Holy Spirit is also present with the love of God. This chapter has some of my favorite verses: Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not let them be afraid. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.

I miss seeing you because you have been the strength and are the wisdom of Derry

Church. You have helped to build the new sanctuary and remodel it, several times. You have welcomed several pastors in your years; each one has been different from the last and each one supported by you. You have shared your resources and been prayer partners in our ministry. I can feel your prayers for Derry each day.

I know you would like to do more, whether it's visiting without restrictions with others or helping out at the church with all those fellowship meals at Derry we used to have. Many of you have been the volunteers at the Medical Center, with the People-Movers, food pantry and helping out in your own community. Since those opportunities are not possible, it's easy to wonder, what use am I? What do I have left to give and share?

In the New Testament, Paul shares a long list of the fruits of God's Holy Spirit. See if you recognize any on this list: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** (Galatians 5:22) I see those fruits in many of you. Can you think of ways to continue to share these gifts with others near you or who help to care for you?

Yes, I miss seeing you in person. And I am grateful to know your prayers continue to surround each one of us. But you are not alone or abandoned or forgotten. God's Holy Spirit is with you and unites us in this body of Christ, we call the church. And God still needs the gifts and love you share.

# Great is thy Faithfulness

*Pam Meilands*

The hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” has long been a favorite of mine and it has been an old favorite hymn of many folks that I know.

The lyrics for the hymn were originally written in 1923 as a poem by Thomas Obediah Chisholm. Before writing these words, Chisholm had lived a varied life. He had served as a teacher and as an editor of a local paper in his hometown of Franklin, KY. Then, after experiencing a conversion to Christianity, he moved to Louisville, KY, where he served as the editor and business manager for another paper.



At 36, Chisholm was ordained in the Methodist church but shortly after his ordination, his health failed and he had to leave the ministry. He moved to Indiana and then to New Jersey, where he opened an insurance office. In 1923, while living in New Jersey, Chisholm began writing poetry.

In all, Chisholm wrote more than 1200 sacred poems.

Throughout multiple moves, career shifts, and illness, Chisholm retained his faith in God. When, after one year in ordained ministry, an illness prevented him from living out this calling, it would have been easy to turn away and to wonder if God was truly by his side, but Chisholm remained faithful to God and trusted that God remained - and would continue to remain - faithful to him.

Perhaps rightly so, considering all of the change he endured throughout his life, Chisholm took inspiration from the book of Lamentations. Lamentations, which is found in the Old Testament, is a series of five poems through which the writer grieves a historical disaster - the 586 BCE destruction and military occupation of

Jerusalem and the deportation of many of the city's citizens by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

The poetry in Lamentations is universal, though, and can still express our grief and our hope. Chisholm took his inspiration from Lamentations 3:22-23: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (NRSV). Lamentations 3 is the most hopeful of the five poems, a reminder that even in the midst of despair, we must still have hope and place our trust in God.

God's compassion, grace, and mercy know no boundaries and have no limits.

*Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not; only  
As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be.*

*Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!*

*Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

Thomas Obediah Chisholm, 1923

# Lessons and Carols

*Grant Wareham*



As a church musician, the Advent and Christmas seasons have long been some of my favorites of the year. Yes, these months can get very hectic with all the extra services, concerts, and events, but I particularly love services of Lessons and Carols; services where the entire story is told, from the Garden of Eden to the famed reading from the Gospel of John, declaring that “The Word was Made Flesh, and dwelt among us”.

I grew up listening to the live radio broadcasts of Nine Lessons and Carols from King’s College in Cambridge, England each year, and tuning in has become an important part of Christmas Eve for me every year.

As an unending tradition, the service from King’s always begins with the carol “Once in Royal David’s City,” and a boy from the choir sings the first verse as a solo.

*Once in royal David’s city stood a lowly cattle shed,  
where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed:  
Mary was that mother mild;  
Jesus Christ, her little child.*

The text of this verse is a simple one; a baby has been born in Jerusalem, and his name is Jesus Christ. Hearing a young boy sing this text unadorned sets the stage for the whole service beautifully.

After the first verse, the organ and choir join with the boy, process to their places in the idyllic space of Kings’ Chapel, and sing the remaining verses.

*He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all,  
And his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall;  
With the poor and meek and lowly,  
Lived on earth our Savior holy.*

*Jesus is our childhood's pattern; Day by day like us he grew;  
He was little, weak, and helpless; tears and smiles like us he knew;  
And he feels for all our sadness,  
And he shares in all our gladness.*

*And our eyes at last shall see him,  
through his own redeeming love;  
For that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above;  
And he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.*

This hymn as a whole encapsulates not only the story of Christmas, but the entire story of Christ's life. I hope that today you'll take some time to meditate today on the God who cares so much for us that he would be born as a tiny, helpless baby, to bring us to heaven with him one day.

# God will see us through

*Sue George*



My husband Jim and I are on a quest to visit as many national parks as we can. There are 62 right now -- parks are still being added -- and we've visited 39 of them. It has been a disappointment this year not to be able to visit a few more, but it's a minor one when I consider the tough losses so many are facing.

Back in 2011 we flew out to Seattle in late June to add Mt. Rainier to our collection. It was summertime when our plane landed, but by the time we arrived at the lodge near Mt Rainier, we found ourselves at a snow

dusted, frosty cold winter camp. Worse yet, the top of the mountain was shrouded in a cloud layer. We asked the clerk where the mountain was. "Right out that window," he pointed into the white mist. "It's right there." We stared into a solid wall of white and tried to believe him.

For the next two days, we went on hikes and enjoyed our time outdoors wearing every layer we'd packed into our suitcases. Indoors I drank my share of hot drinks and piled on the blankets. When I look back on that vacation, "winter camp" is the first thing that comes to mind.

Since March it seems we have all been living in some version of winter camp. There's a kind of fog surrounding the COVID virus as scientists work to understand its effects and labor to discover an effective treatment and vaccine. Meanwhile we are all locked away in our homes, afraid to talk to and touch each other, not sure where the virus will pop up next. Will we get sick? Will someone we love get sick? How do we keep each other safe and healthy? How do we keep our sanity as our way of life and all that's beloved and familiar is changing so rapidly?

It's a good thing there is one constant, one thing we can count on: God loves us, God knows our pain and suffering, God is with us and for us. When I'm down, the verses I turn to for comfort are in Romans 8: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Those words remind me that God will see us through this winter camp and any others we will encounter. On the morning we left Mt Rainier to travel back to Seattle, the clouds lifted. Just as the clerk said, the glorious mountaintop that we couldn't see through the thick fog was now visible through that window. Some things we just have to trust and believe to be true, and this I believe: God will see us through.

# God rested - can you?

*Claudia Holtzman*



Genesis 2:2-3 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Exodus 20:8-10 Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.

Matthew 6:25-27 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

When Senior High Sunday School started meeting recently, we began the year by looking at Genesis. The first lesson that I facilitated dealt with rest and keeping the Sabbath holy. This is one of the commandments that I have found most difficult to honor. There is so much to do and so little time – and how do you define ‘Rest’ anyway?

Gone are the days when Sundays were spent at home, quietly reading the Bible. Friends were not allowed to visit, and loud activities were prohibited. Our lifestyles have certainly changed. Now Sundays are not reserved for church and family, even Sunday mornings are not set aside for church activities.

I interpret 'Rest' to be a change from whatever you did the other six days of the week. If I sit at a computer screen all week, then raking leaves is my rest. If I work at manual labor all week, then rest is bodily relaxation. If I am deep in thought all week then I need a day to air out my brain and think of nothing in particular.

I think we also need to rest for worry, anxiety and fear. The concerns of the day can weigh us down both bodily and spiritually. We need to rest from our worries. This is obviously easier said than done. It must be intentional. We need to remind ourselves that we are loved and that God will take care of us. We may need to remind ourselves of this many times a day.

This time of Covid has helped us discover rest - whether we liked it or not. We have had time to reflect about what is really important, time to discover rest and, unfortunately, time to worry.

Don't neglect to rest from your worries and cares. Let God take this burden and grant you rest of spirit.

Take a moment to breathe, to reflect on the past day, and to pray:

Did I search for happiness in things or in my relationship with the Creator?

Did I find ways to express my love to God and those around me?

Did I let God take the worries from my heart and enjoy His rest?

Believe that God loves you without reservation, as you seek to love God and the world with all that you are.

# Good Morning Lord

*Connie Henry*



During this time of physical isolation, we wanted you to know how much we miss you, but also how much we look forward to seeing you again as soon as safely possible. During my years growing up here in Hershey and within Derry Church, I was so blessed to have my “Granny” Henry live with us, strengthen my faith, encourage and build my belief that good things were worth fighting for, and that patience is often needed to “get there”.

One of the things I remember her doing DAILY, was to recite this poem. It remains on my bulletin board to this day as MY daily reminder. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I always do.

## GOOD MORNING LORD

*by Grace E. Easley*

*Good Morning, Lord, the night has passed,  
Just as You said it would,  
And once again I gaze upon  
Your world and find it good.  
The darkness fades, as darkness will,  
And so my heart is light,  
For You await to share my day,  
Who watched me through the night.*

*I cannot see what lies ahead,  
But I am sure you know,  
So take my hand and walk with me,  
Wherever I may go.  
No joy or pain is ever sent,  
Save by Thine own accord,  
So in the shadow of Thy love,  
I say... Good morning, Lord.*

# What do I want to give myself to?

*Dick Houtz*



With winter on the horizon, Bonnie and I have committed to clean up our garage. We've been putting it off for the last four years. And it won't be easy. I've got tools my Dad gave me that have been in our family for a hundred years – some of which I have no idea what they are. We have two workbenches – each so filled with tools and gardening supplies that you can't see the top of either one. Worse, each bench has a bottom shelf stacked with boxes of work gloves, drill bits, bolts, screws, wrenches, paintbrushes, and fertilizers. Add in the shovels, rakes, wheelbarrow, mower, snow blower, ladders – and, of course, the boxes of balls, toys, and games for our grandkids and dogs – maybe it's no wonder we've avoided tackling the D garage.

Well, over the years, I've heard a lot of older folks talk about unloading the material things they've collected during their lives – all that stuff they bought, that was once useful, but is no longer needed. Maybe it's the stuff from our careers and work that we've boxed up and hung onto, thinking we might need it again someday, if we ever go back to work. I still have a pile of boxes I'm sorting through. And yet, walking through my seventies, I'm discovering the junk I really need to toss away is not stacked in the garage or packed in those boxes of papers, classes, and sermons. Instead, what I need to chuck are those old notions of what gives my life meaning and purpose.

Recently, I ran across some words of a favorite author, now in his 80's, who posed a question that may help us discover a new sense of meaning in our lives.

*“I no longer ask ‘What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to hang on to?’  
Instead I ask, ‘What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to give myself to?’”*

He suggests the desire to “hang on” comes from a sense of scarcity and fear, but the desire to “give myself” comes from a sense of abundance and generosity.

And, you know, that phrase “abundance and generosity” has stayed with me these past few months. In fact, abundance and generosity are the gifts in life we are called to live out as Christian people. It’s the call “to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind” – the God who claims us in baptism, the God who keeps loving and forgiving us each day, the God who will make us whole and well, the God who promises to bring us all home. And it’s the call “to love your neighbor as your own” – to generously share your love and friendship with new residents in your community, or sitting with new friends at the dinner table. It’s giving ourselves away in love for God and for neighbors that truly fills all our years with abundance and generosity.

# Hope

Cyndi Camp

What a strange and unsettling year this has been. Perhaps also a sad and lonely time. How do we keep looking forward when so much in our lives seems to have stopped?

We can hope.

Maybe you remember Emily Dickinson's beautiful, metaphorical poem called " 'Hope' the thing with feathers."

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -*

*And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.*

Think of the bird in the poem as God, singing an unending song of hope into your soul, especially in the gale, the cold - the worst of times.



The Bible is filled with words of hope. God, in Christ, repeatedly says, "do not be afraid." Psalm 23, which I hadn't thought about in years, popped into my mind, in full, in 1988 just after I learned I would be having life-saving, but scary, emergency surgery. What a message of hope and comfort!

And this is my favorite, and my prayer for you:

*May the God of hope grant you all joy and peace in believing, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope. Romans 15:13*

# The Shepherds were Jesus' first witnesses

*Daniel Forslund*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' Luke 2:8-20*



When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Even as a child, I always looked forward to the Advent season as one of hope. As an adult, that's still true today. Luke's telling of the story of the shepherds' meeting our Savior has always been my favorite. It fascinates me that they became a community of believers that special night- how could they ever forget? I imagine years later, upon retelling, they remembered the names of each and every person that was there for that divine moment in time.

While going about their daily lives, miraculously, they become Jesus' first witnesses. We don't know how many there were, or much about them, but Jesus' revelation to them is very important as He is our shepherd throughout our spiritual lives.

Whatever their pasts, or their disparate futures, this one moment in time God was revealed to these particular shepherds in an intimate and powerful way. No matter our pasts, or where our futures may take us, we have community and fellowship with those who share faith in Christ's redeeming work. Even in this time when we cannot be with our loved ones as we wish, we can be encouraged knowing that Community in Christ promises us we are always together in Him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the love and community of our brothers and sisters in you, near and far. Amen.

# How is my Value Measured?

*Debbie Hough*



Luke 12:22-30

I have a friend who is my age and we retired at very nearly the same time (she is actually six months older than me so always gets to these big events first). On a phone call last week, she said something that surprised me and I've been thinking about it a lot since then.

At the time, I was helping some friends help two families who are in the midst of clearing out the homes of loved ones. The homes belonged to women who were doll collectors (like me) and we belonged to two doll clubs. Most family members don't understand the value we collectors place on the dolls we own. This hobby is a complete mystery to those on the outside. Knowing Maggie and Gladys, we knew how important these inanimate objects were to them and we had a good understanding of the value doll collectors would place on these lifetime collections. And so, we were glad to help. I was glad to help.

At the same time, I was helping another friend clear out the Presbytery Office space of furnishings, resources, equipment, etc. Again, I was glad to help and nostalgic about the days gone by when that office was a buzzing hive of activity and the resource center so used that we paid staff to manage it. (For those of you who remember, my Derry office looked like a mini-version of that resource center, so you know I valued those books, that curriculum, all that paper!)

Lately, I have been privileged to hold in my hands a lot of items that I value. And be with people that I value. So what was the surprise comment?

My friend (who is not a collector) said during this pandemic time nothing she had planned to do during this part of her early retirement period was happening.

No auction trips to see me; no around the country trips in a recently purchased RV to visit family and friends; no teaching experiences at cancelled events. She said she felt like she didn't have much value.

I had never considered this notion before – how is my value measured? Am I of value? I don't have a spouse and I don't have children so those folks do not enter into my equation. I do have lots of friends, but what if I were to outlive them – is my value gone? Where does my worth or value originate? Not surprising, I ended up exactly where I usually do in most theological or philosophical thinking – with God!

Both Matthew and Luke tell similar stories and these are good words to remember during this pandemic season, but they are wonderful reassurances in any season of our lives – "... Of how much more value are you than the birds!" (Luke 12:24) We can't depend on our value from the outside, or from what we can or can't do – our real value comes from within – from God's grace and unconditional love! Friends, this is the Word of the Lord ... Thanks be to God!

# Thoughts

*Eleanor Schneider*

Could we have ever imagined the difference between our daily lives last year and the way we live today? Masks, gloves, measured spaces, plexiglass screens, and hand sanitizer everywhere. It's not as if we are strangers to the havoc germs can cause. We know the discomfort of colds and flu, the angst of time lost, the fret of celebrations missed.

Our parents and grandparents who survived the Great Influenza of a hundred years ago are gone. They took with them a collective memory of fortitude and perseverance lived in the face of adversity caused by an uncontrolled virus. As 2020 draws to a close and we are threatened by a different virus, we find ourselves alternatively angry, bored, frustrated, sad, and impatient. It doesn't help that, for months now, this dominant television news story has been illustrated like a school textbook. There are colored maps, linear graphs, bar graphs, and blocks of escalating numbers on the screen. All of this has been numbing and frightening; safe spaces for body and mind seem to have gotten smaller. Deliberate patience has been hard to practice and, at times, feelings of joy completely elusive.



But, through the grace of God, hope, comfort and joy can always be found. Over the past three seasons my safe and joyful space, has been in my garden. I like to think that I have created a garden “room” where I can feel enclosed and peaceful. More than that, I am always aware of the sensory experiences that surround me there; the colors, smells, sounds, and textures are spirit lifting. When last year's Easter lilies bloomed in June they reminded me of Jesus' admonition in Matthew 6:25-34 to turn to God's creation when anxious, to remember that our earth is God's garden and that we, and everything in it, are precious to him. Jesus spoke of the futility of worry and the importance of trust and faith in God. So, when I watched a Monarch butterfly emerge from its chrysalis in July, I felt sheer joy and I felt privileged to share in a moment of new creation. I knew God was with me then and in hope and trust I know He will be forever.

# Prayer

*Jill Peckelun*



My mother took us children to church when I was young. My father preferred spending time in his woods, but he taught me the importance of prayer. I don't get on my knees every night like he did, but I make it a point to be stalwart in my daily devotion.

Thanks are given, of course. And after that...well I simply try to attune to the Divine. Who am I to ask for any specific outcome? I don't have the big picture; I can't pretend to know what is needed other than love. I keep it down to earth. Keep it pure. And intend that my actions, thoughts and will are attuned to God's. I pray for the wisdom and strength to be the best of me. I pray to be

filled with and surrounded by the Divine in a traditional Celtic Breastplate Prayer (God's grace above and below, before and behind, to the right and the left, all around and within). This straightforward practice keeps me balanced, keeps me purposeful.

Inevitably, as is the way for all of us, there come times that are extraordinarily difficult and I become too distressed to even focus on a prayer. It is in those times of crisis that I trust that all the work I have done before will hold me in good stead. And I trust that the prayers of all other devout folks are holding me up during those awful times. As I hope mine do for them.

Prayer is important work. Important work for both ourselves and for each other. It nourishes us. It keeps us purposeful in the best possible way. Ripples upon ripples, little whispers that accumulate to great depths and that travel far. If you choose to pray today...thank you. You are doing something that matters.

# God is my strength

*Kristy Elliott*



*I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, who made Heaven and Earth. Psalm 121*

I spent most of my life in Western Pennsylvania, where the snow started in October and often continued until March. Usually we didn't see the ground between December and February.

The mountain played a large role in this phenomenon. When lake effect snow hit the mountains, it stopped and dumped all of that moisture in the form of snow.

I'm not a fan of snow, yet when I looked up at those lovely mountains, I was always struck by their majesty and their power – just the way I feel about God.

Life is full of snowstorms but also full of lovely sunny Spring days. With each life trial or valley, God always seems to reach down from those mountains and show a small path forward.

God is my strength and His Son gives me the assurance that His strength will never end.

The mountains can be the source of snowstorms but their beauty and majesty are a steadfast reminder of this beautiful miracle of life that God has created for us.

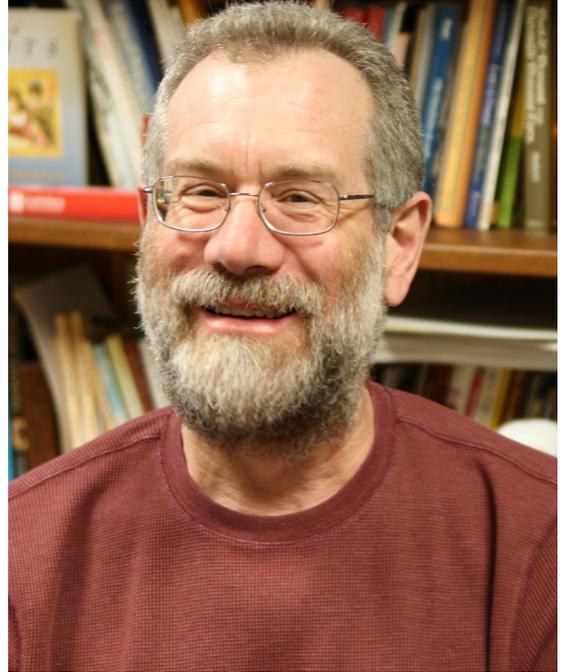
Rejoice.

# Advent

*Tom Folts*

I think we have been in Advent since March. I know that according to the Church's liturgical calendar Advent starts November 29 this year. Yet, I think Advent is where we are as a community and have been since March.

I have always appreciated the Church year. Just as the year goes through seasons so do our lives. There are times that Easter resonates well, other times that Lent speaks more deeply to us, and sometimes we are just in Ordinary times. I think the season of Advent fits our current pandemic plus situation.



The season of Advent is deeper than a countdown to Christmas. Waiting is its one word description. However, Advent is more than waiting for Christmas morning or Christmas Eve services.

Perhaps the best story to understand Advent is the Babylonian Exile. God's people have been conquered. The temple where God resides has been destroyed. The leaders have been deported to a foreign city. This is where real waiting occurs. Many of the words of scripture that we use for Advent were first written for these people in exile.

Our situation is not parallel with the Babylonian exile but there are similarities. Normal is gone. Routine broken. The future is unknown. There is fear, grief, and uncertainty. We feel isolated, alone, and forgotten. Blame and distrust are thrown back and forth.

The hymn that epitomizes Advent for me is *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. It is a mixture of lament and hope within the promise of God with us, Emmanuel.

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel,  
that mourns in lonely exile here  
until the Son of God appear.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee,  
O Israel.*

The words of Advent—scripture and hymns—are good words for us to hear. They speak to us now as we enter Advent, and we should listen to them in the months to come. Soak them up and remember them. This is more than a Christmas countdown. While there is hope for a vaccine on the horizon, we will still remain isolated and lonely, uncertain, and fearful for some time to come.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

“Comfort, comfort now my people; tell of peace!” so says our God.’ (Isaiah 40:1)

A mixture of lament and hope within the promise of God with us.

*Waiting, we are not alone.  
Fearful, God comforts us.  
In our isolation, God is with us.*

# The Light of the World

*Patti Jo Hibshman*

When I was a young adult, I learned of a short poem using the words “Ask, Seek, and Knock”. The inspiration for the poem can be found in the Bible when Jesus was teaching in Matthew 7:7-8. “Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

Several years later, I visited St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, England. I was excited to see an oil painting of “The Light of the World” inside the Cathedral depicting Jesus at the door. There are more scriptures that served to inspire the artist William Holman-Hunt to paint this scene. John 8:12. Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees. Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, ”I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” From Psalm 119:105, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” And from Revelation 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”

Jesus holds a lit lantern in one hand as he knocks at the door. He is lighting the path. There is no handle. The door must be opened from within. There are apple trees in the background making one think of Eden and the tree of knowledge. The gilded frame took months to complete with images of lanterns and light.

I was moved to see this artwork. It reminded me that Jesus is alive and He will dwell in the hearts of those who invite him.



# A Note of Good Cheer

*Shirley Sternberger*



Hi, writing you a note today of good cheer from Derry Church. I know it is not easy during this time of our lives. I also am a senior and although in my home I have lockdown by my grown children, saying where and when I should leave the house. When you go out in public it is no fun either, wearing a mask, taking sanitizer in every pocket to protect yourself and others. I prefer to stay home, looking out a window towards my backyard and watch the birds and squirrels frolicking in the wind. Spring and Summer have passed and now it is Fall. The colors outside are beautiful as always, nothing has changed from any other year. As a senior I understand the struggle of loneliness, but

we are so fortunate to have loving caring people looking out for us. The church staff has done a beautiful job of looking out for all of us no matter what our situations.

*My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*  
Philippians 4:19

God Bless you and keep you safe.

# God Loves You

*Susan Kastelic*

From the time I was old enough to remember, I attended Sunday School and church and always heard ‘God loves you.’ I memorized songs about God’s love, and I was told that “God is always with you”, in fact that God can see inside you.... that was kind of scary! Now that I am older, I hear those affirming words, not the scary ones. It is calming and reassuring to know that the God I love and the God I worship is always with me, even in those times when I cannot see or feel God’s presence. Lately it has been a difficult time for many of us facing unknowns and being separated from loved ones. Even through all the uncertainty, God is still with each of you.



Sometimes we wonder, where is God when things are difficult and frightening? I am reminded of the message preached at Derry Church by Rev. Houtz following the September 11 tragedy in 2001. Speaking to the issue of where was God that day, Rev. Houtz made the point that God was right with all of those people, right in the middle of all of them. God couldn’t stop what was happening but God was there. I find that reassuring in these times

Maybe we just need to look a little harder, believe a little more that the God we love is right in the middle with us. Hoping you find comfort in the words of Psalm 46:10 “Be still and know that I am God!”

# Jesus is the light in our darkness

*Nancy Joiner Reinert*

*If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night',  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you. Psalm 139:11-12*

The choir liked music in a major key, the kind that makes you want to stand and applaud, or dance, or feel joyful. The music director made the singers crazy in Lent because she selected music in minor keys. Lent was full of minor preludes, postludes, offertories, and anthems. The choir members said it was sad and depressing. The musician, on the other hand, didn't think it was depressing. She chose the minor tones because she thought minor keys are rich, engaging, and lovely. She contended that minor keys touch our hearts in profound ways and encourage introspection. Of course, that's all very personal and cultural, but it makes a good point that minor keys don't always mean the music is sad. Together, major and minor music reflects the fullness and variety of life.



Similarly, there are different feelings about light and dark. We often refer to sad or difficult times as dark, to evil as dark. Many of us don't like darkness. It can be depressing or frightening. We dread the long, dark nights of winter. I'm grateful that long ago a friend encouraged me to treasure the darkness for the gifts it offers: quiet time to rest, star-filled skies that invite us to consider the vastness and regularity of creation, the stillness of nature, the interesting animals that awaken in the dark, candlelight, and the comfort of a lighted lamp.

Based on the repeated poetic phrase in Genesis 1, "it was evening and it was morning the first day..." the Jews recognize the beginning of the day at sundown. Thinking of the darkening time as the beginning of a new day can instill a sense of

preparation and anticipation. And consider that God does not sleep. God is at work through our night preparing the next day for us. Like major and minor music, darkness and light, day and night reflect the fullness of creation and the balance of life.

My favorite story of nighttime in the Bible is in Luke 2. The shepherds are working through the night. It is their routine. They are used to working in the dark. Suddenly their routine is interrupted by light and angel song announcing hope: a Savior is born! Light is coming into the world. Jesus is still the Light among us. And the darkness cannot put it out.

*Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the light that breaks into our routine with hope. Remind us that you are the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. Amen.*

# God will always remain faithful

*Nicola Burke*

Early this morning, I woke up with an earworm. I had the hymn, “Great is thy Faithfulness” stuck in my head and I have been humming it to myself all morning through the monotony of my routine. I finally had a quiet moment to sit down at the piano, so I opened my hymnal and played through the hymn. I’m not sure why this particular hymn was stuck in my head. I haven’t heard it recently and it’s not one of my typical “go to” pieces to play on the piano. Yet, the words really spoke to me this morning.

*Great is thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

I am so grateful that no matter what happens, how dark and grim the world may seem, we can trust that the sun will always rise and God will always remain faithfully by our side.

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide.  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
blessings all mine with ten thousand beside!*

Those words brought me great comfort this morning as I watched the news and prayed for those suffering or who have lost loved ones. God is walking with us on this journey and can be our strength when we have none left. The sun will continue to rise and shine and reminds



us that there is bright hope and peace for tomorrow.

*Heavenly Father, Thank you for faithfully loving us and walking beside us, especially during this time of uncertainty, pain and loss. We don't know what tomorrow will bring but we trust that the sun will continue to rise and you will continue to be our strength and will remain by our side. Thank you for the many blessings that you have bestowed upon us. Help us to remember that your love is unfailing and each day brings us new hope for a better and brighter time. We remember your promise that you are with us and for us and your compassion upon us will never fail. Amen.*

# A Different and Larger Source

*Dan Stokes*



In his book, “Falling Upward”, Richard Rohr writes these words about St Francis’ spiritual journey, *“It seems to have been a defining moment when he tasted his own insufficiency and started drawing from a different and larger source-and found it sufficient-apparently even more than sufficient.”*<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “drawing from a different and larger source” brings Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman to mind. Being an outcast, she was alone at the well; others had come earlier to avoid the heat of the day. Jesus extended an invitation to a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:14). This woman’s authenticity opened the door to receive this gift.

As I seek to cope with constantly changing circumstances, I’m slow to acknowledge my limitations. My patience wears thin; my well is finite. It can be tempting to shut down. Perhaps these are the moments for openness!

Last evening’s Sanctuary Choir Zoom was a trip to the spring of living water. Mark Verner shared strength and encouragement as he recounted singing hymns in hospital rooms and care facilities. As he recited verses of beloved hymns, tears were flowing in many of our choir zoom squares, a bond of love filled our hearts, an eternal perspective surprised and renewed our spirits.

This Advent, may we be open to and delightfully surprised by a “different and larger source”.

<sup>1</sup>Falling Upward. Pg 70; Richard Rohr. Pub. 2011, Jossey-Bass

# Prayers

Dear God,

Please help us heal the world.

Bless the doctors and nurses who work so hard every day to save lives,  
and please keep our elderly community safe.

Help me on my journey of faith through this hard time.

*offered by Mina Achorn, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

Loving God give me such confidence in the power of your grace, that even when I am afraid, I may put my whole trust in you; through our Savior Jesus Christ.

God our Father, if it is your will, walk through my house and take away all my worries and illnesses and please watch over and heal my family in Jesus name. Amen.

*offered by Billy Bonifant, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

Dear God, we are in trying times. You know that.

And you know all our worries. But it seems like in the time of more worries, we pray less. We are self-consumed instead of turning to you when our world needs it most. So, Lord, hear our worries, and in all of these trials and tribulations, help your will to be done. Amen.

*offered by Joey Owsley, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

Dear God,

During this difficult time, as locked away in our homes to ride out this pandemic, we have been starved from seeing many of the marvels of Your creation. We never appreciate the wonders that You have made until we no longer can gaze upon them. Lord, let us give thanks for all the natural blessings that you have bestowed upon the world; we give thanks for the sunny days that warm our skin; the rain that nourishes the ground; and the thunderstorms that illuminate the sky. We give thanks for the

# Prayers

stars that speckle the tapestry of the night, the friendly planets that accompany the Earth, and the proud moon that has been humanity's friend since the beginning. We give thanks for the mountains that stand guard over the earth, the trees which give life to the air, and the jubilant oceans that smother the surface of the Earth. Finally, we pray for the day to arrive when everyone will be able to bask in their radiance again. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

*offered by Michael Harris, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

Dear God,

Thank you for loving and comforting us during this time of uncertainty. We put our faith and trust in you that you will guide the people caring for others that are sick, whether that be through comforting others through phone calls, working as a doctor, or simply picking up groceries or making masks for others. Thank you for guiding us in the right path. Amen.

*offered by Emma Burke, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

Lord,

Help us to remember that family is the most important value especially through these rough times. Help us to find the positive aspects throughout our daily lives, in your name we pray, Amen.

*offered by Mayangela Speicher, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

Dear God, I pray for.....

- the elderly people that have Coronavirus
- the nurses at the medical center
- the chance to see friends and family soon

All these things I ask in Jesus name, Amen

*offered by Kate Patton, member of Derry's 2020 Confirmation Class*

# Prayers

When I just can't watch the news anymore and when even muting the television sound does not help, I hear a single voice singing  
These are the words of his song:

What if I were very, very sad  
But all I did was smile?  
I wonder after awhile  
What might become of my sadness?

What if I were very, very angry  
But all I did was sit  
And never think about it?  
What might become of my anger?

Where would they go,  
And what would they do,  
If I couldn't let them out?  
Maybe I'd fall, maybe get sick  
Or doubt.

But what if I could know the truth  
And say just how I feel?  
I think I'd learn a lot that's real  
About freedom.

That voice is Fred Rogers, who says, "confronting our feelings and giving them appropriate expression always takes strength, not weakness. It takes strength to acknowledge anger, and sometimes more strength yet to curb the aggressive urges anger may bring and to channel them into nonviolent outlets. It takes strength to face our sadness and to grieve and to let our grief and our anger flow in tears when they need to. It takes strength to talk about our feelings and to reach out for help and comfort when we need it."

# Prayers

Friends, we are all in this together so reach out, play music, dance in the living room, draw or paint a picture, write a poem or a page of thoughts in a diary. Whatever works for you, let those feelings be real. Be free to feel. Be free to share. Be free to love. We need to tell each other our truth.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to deal with our feelings in ways that are truthful and freeing so we are not bound by them and free to love. Amen.

*From Fred Rogers' song, "The Truth Will Make Me Free," as he refers to John 8:31-32. The book is "The World According to Mister Rogers."*

*offered by Debbie Hough, retired Director of Christian Education at Derry.*

# Prayers

Loving God,

We feel like we are living in an upside down, inside out world. Our doctors and nurses look more like space walkers and cartoon time travelers than the kind and comforting faces we expect to see.

Our everyday lives used to take us in and out of stores, the post office, and restaurants. These once safe, secure, and reliably predictable spaces have become oddly threatening and strangely uncertain.

Our noisy, busy, exciting days have become eerily quiet, the stillness can feel lonely. We are accustomed to planning for tomorrow and next week and next year. We now find it difficult to plan for the next thing to do.

Help us to see you in the faces behind the masks, to know your touch in the hands that wear gloves. Remind us that just as you walked with those who were fearful, needy, and hurting in Galilee; you walk with us today.

Teach us patience and, through the power of Your Spirit, to persevere in finding new and creative ways to live daily life in obedience to the commandments of Your Son, Jesus.

Forgive our fears, our complaints, our selfish worries.

Enable us, we pray, to be certain of your abiding presence in our trust, in our hope, in our faith, and in our love for each other and for your body, the Church.

In Christ's name. Amen

*".....and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness."*

Lamentations 3:21-23

*offered by Eleanor Schneider, deacon at Derry*

# Prayers

Dear God, our help in ages past,

Your people down here are frightened and anxious. You know how vulnerable and fragile we are. We are indeed your beloved children, but we are also creatures of the dust. We have not created ourselves, and we cannot sustain ourselves. We break all too easily.

But you already know all this. In Jesus Christ you came to us and lived with us. You know what it is like to physically suffer, for you went without food in the wilderness. And you know what it is like to feel isolated, for even your own disciples never really understood you. And you know what it is like to be sick, for you identified with lepers and even dared to touch them. And you know what it is like to feel abject fear, for in Gethsemane you trembled before the destiny that awaited you.

Yes, God, you know what we are going through, because you have walked with us and tasted the salt of our tears. But that is the greatest blessing imaginable. Because you have walked the road with us we know that we can take all the fears and worries that plague us to you in prayer and that you will understand perfectly. Your empathy is unconditional and boundless. When we feel frightened, remind us that you are with us, and that your arms will never let us go. Nothing on heaven or on earth can separate from your love. For this we are eternally grateful. Amen.

*offered by Lee Barrett, professor of theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary, a frequent teacher in our Issues Class, and a friend of Derry.*

# Prayers

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him and the Lord will direct your paths.” Proverbs 3:5-6*

Heavenly Father: It doesn't take much to get our attention or send us into a panic -- especially now -- and so quickly! The world is in your hands, and we are reminded that you are in charge. We know you are listening to our prayers. Show us patience while you prepare the path you have chosen for us. And, in the meantime, give us the peace that is beyond understanding. Amen.

*offered by Linda Chidester, elder at Derry*

# Prayers

## FILL IN THE BLANK PRAYER

Gracious God,

On a day too cold to be normal,  
on a holiday weekend, where we can't gather as family,  
we express our longing for things familiar.....

*add your own longing to God...*

We confess we took for granted our freedoms with  
few limitations and now when we are restrained we grow angry  
and frustrated....*add your own lament....*

How long? Why can't we? I don't like this!  
we cry out...

*add your cry to God.....*

Give us memories from the past of those who sacrificed  
so much more for the protection and care of others. Give us  
generous, loving and patient hearts to care for those we don't even  
know, who may be more vulnerable than us. Many of us have enough---  
maybe more than enough, show us ways to reach out to  
one another....*add your prayer desire to God....*

Help us to give thanks for the unexpected blessings that have surprised us in this  
quarantine. We thank you God .....*add some gift that has come to you ...*

Grant us hope because we are weary after these few months, and enable us to share  
your compassion for all your children.....

*.....add your hope ...Amen.*

*Rev Marie Buffaloe offers this prayer with the hopes that you will add your words to  
make it your own prayer.*

# Prayers

Lord, as I lay here in bed, ready for sleep, I think of you and the world. We thank you for all of the blessings that you bestow upon us daily, in both peaceful and challenging times.

Please help us to remember that we live in a wonderful place where you wrap your arms around us always. Please help us to remember the strength that you grant us each day and always send us messages that we are loved by you and our family and friends.

We ask that you be with the sick and the lonely and that you enter their minds and give them the strength to know that they are loved and also that they are needed in this world.

We are your children and we need you always.

We love you. Amen.

*offered by Mark Verner, deacon, singer and musician at Derry*