THE COMING GOD

Devotionals from New Life Downtown for the Advent & Christmas Seasons
For the longest time, I thought “Advent” was just a fancy word for “the Christmas season,” a holier, maybe more spiritual-sounding word for an otherwise hectic and overly-commercialized holiday. What I’ve discovered is that Advent is not just a different word; it’s an entirely different approach.

Advent as a season is meant to make our journey toward Christmas full of meaning. It is meant to put us touch with our deepest longings and greatest hopes. It is meant to teach us to bring all of our desires together on one object: Christ. While “Christmas” as a season (properly) begins on December 25 and goes twelve days until January 6th, Advent is all about the build-up to Christmas. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and takes us right up to the glorious celebration of the incarnation.

When you journey through Advent to Christmas, you begin to see Jesus more fully. You recognize that His incarnation was the beginning of the redemption of the world and that His return is the completion of it. Advent pulls those two moments together. It overlays the joy of His arrival as a helpless babe with the hope of His appearing as conquering King. Both arrivals are anticipated in Advent.

But changing an approach to “the holidays” is a daunting task. So, along with this devotional, here are three simple suggestions for how to make the switch from simply “celebrating the holidays” to journeying through Advent and into Christmas.

1. Focus on the Longing

Advent puts us in touch with the pain in our lives. It helps us to give voice to the ache in our souls, the cry within us that says, “This is not right!” Many people find themselves hurting around “the holidays” because the pain of losing a loved one or the ache of loneliness is more pronounced. But a secularized “holiday season” does little to heal those aches because it cannot direct it toward a hope. But Advent tells us that the deep longing, the ache we have for the world to be set right, for pain to be fully healed, for death to be defeated: these things must be given voice. More than that: it must be given an Object. Advent reminds us that the hope of the whole aching, broken world is Jesus Christ.

So, instead of avoiding the pain or the ache in your soul, let it point you toward Christ.

2. Find a New Rhythm

How can you set your heart to long for Christ during Advent? A big part of the answer is in finding new rhythms that help us focus in that direction. There are many to choose from, but this devotional incorporates a few of them:

Reading books that will help focus my heart on Christ and His coming. Works like N. T. Wright’s How God Became King or fiction that awakens my heart to new worlds like Dicken’s classic, A Christmas Carol.
Praying, especially if it’s not your normal rhythm. Books like the Book of Common Prayer or an Advent devotional like this one can help us learn a language of longing.

Simplifying our schedules. One of the things my wife does for our family is eliminate things from our schedule during Advent! Rather than cluttering up the calendar, she cancels stuff! The way she says it is, “It’s about simplifying life to make space to reflect and thoughtfully experience the season.” Advent ought to be a gift of fresh Spirit-oxygen; not a busy, frenetic, string of shopping trips and meaningless parties. (Or if you’re the type of person who never gets together with others, perhaps for you Advent should be a time of feasting with friends, of living the richness of life that Christ comes to bring.)

Whatever your new rhythm is, just remember that the new “rhythm” should help focus your heart on longing for Christ...and, if you think long enough about what you’re longing for—Christ’s return!—it should also call you to repentance.

3. Don’t Get Fussy About It

As I often say about any of the historic spiritual traditions and practices, the practice is not the point; the liturgy is not the point; JESUS is the point. The truth is, we all have practices and traditions and a liturgy. The question, of course, is whether those practices actually help center us on Christ or get in the way of Christ. Our practices should be calling us to live more reflectively, more attentively to Christ, through this season. And yet...there is no reason to get uptight about all this. Following Advent more “strictly” doesn’t make you a better Christian—especially if the “strictness” has become the point. The point isn’t to take all the fun out of it or to be sad and morose. The question is simply this:

*How can you teach your heart to long for Jesus, to wait patiently—through joy and sorrow—for His saving rule to come in fullness?*

That is what Advent is all about, and we hope this devotional can help.

Then, our waiting culminates in celebration! Starting on December 25th, Christmas day, and lasting 12 days total, we celebrate Messiah’s birth, Emmanuel, God with us! You’ll see the tone of the devotionals turn from waiting to rejoicing! The last day in this devotional is January 6th, Epiphany Sunday, where we recognize that God’s salvation has been revealed to Jew and Gentile.

So, together as a church body let us wait in Advent and rejoice in Christmas!

— Glenn Packiam
SEASON OF
WAITING
Prayers for the First Sunday of Advent

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER TRADITIONAL

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER CONTEMPORARY

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Revised Common Lectionary:

Unexpected God,
your advent alarms us.
Wake us from drowsy worship,
from the sleep that neglects love,
and the sedative of misdirected frenzy.
Awaken us now to your coming,
and bend our angers into your peace. Amen.
The annual holiday blitzkrieg is upon us. The airwaves are saturated with ads and sugary songs. The mad rush to the malls has commenced. The watchwords for this season are “Hurry, hurry, hurry—buy, buy, buy.”

At the first Sunday of Advent, the church will observe the dawning of its new year. Advent is not simply a prelude to Christmas. It’s a time when we look for and prepare our hearts for Christ’s return, for His Second Advent. While our culture insists that we “hurry,” Advent invites us to be still, to watch and wait.

The lectionary prayer for the first week of Advent begins, “Unexpected God, your advent alarms us.” More than anything, this prayer captures the spirit of the season. In Advent, we confront the stark reality that God is breaking into our world. And we must ask ourselves: are we ready for Him? Have we prepared ourselves, our families, and our churches for the coming of God, for what the prophets called “the great and awesome day of the Lord?” (Malachi 4:5)

When Christ first came, He came gently—a babe born to an unwed mother who was sojourning with her husband to a distant city. Yet His people, even ostensible relatives in Bethlehem, had no room for Him. If Christ came today, how would we react? Would we have room for Him? Would we even notice?

The trouble with our cultural “holiday season” is not so much the rush and commercialization. The real danger is that our lives become filled to distraction, so consumed with trivialities and to-do lists that we leave no room for God—only to be caught unawares when He breaks in on our world again.

This, ultimately, is what Advent is about: waiting for God and, in our waiting, making room for Him in our lives and hearts. As the lectionary prayer continues, “Wake us from drowsy worship, from the sleep that neglects love, and the sedative of misdirected frenzy. Awaken us now to your coming, and bend our angers into your peace.” I pray this prayer over my own family this season, and I pray it over you, too.
From Autumn to Advent

Scripture Reading
Matthew 16:24-26

Autumn: what does that season mean for you?

Splendorous colors, the musty smells of leaves, or fires in the fireplace? Maybe it is spiritually a time of releasing, pruning, slowing, and ceasing. All nature seems to be inviting us into a season of quiet, and preparation for something new. The trees have let go of their leaves and entered into a season of simplicity and rest. The geese and hummingbirds have flown somewhere far to the south. The whole earth is much more quiet. And just as nature reminds us, our hearts also are invited into “Peace, Be still,” so that we may more fully embrace the coming of our Savior. Will you hear the invitation?

There is a spiritual discipline that is appropriate for this time. It is one of releasing and letting go, and its title is The Welcoming Prayer. The rhythm of the welcoming prayer, much like breathing, is “Lord I let go,” and “Lord, I welcome you.” This prayer involves three movements of letting go, and one movement of receiving:

1. Lord, I release my need to please people in this situation. Welcome Jesus, Welcome.
2. Lord, I release my desire for security in this situation. Welcome Jesus, Welcome.
3. Lord, I release my need to control this situation. Welcome Jesus, Welcome.
4. I receive what is. I let go of my desire to change reality. Welcome Jesus, Welcome.

The needs and desires we surrender to God in this prayer are all legitimate: He created us with needs for affection, love, security, safety, and the power to make decisions and affect change. Perhaps he created us in this way so that we could experience the joy of allowing Him to fulfill each one of these needs in his gracious, wise, loving way.

As you pray The Welcoming Prayer, make it your own. What have you been holding onto that brings stress? Often times our bodies give us the gift of recognition (in the form of sickness or muscle tension) so that we may welcome Jesus into the stressors. As we practice The Welcoming Prayer during this Advent Season, we become aware of everything coming to us as a gift. We let go of our agendas and are free to more fully trust God. We grow in our awareness of God’s presence in our everyday lives.
The holidays. They bring decorations, lights, music, gatherings, busyness, and (too much) good food. We often think of the season with excitement, happiness, and anticipation. Yet, two thousand years ago, a teenage girl found herself traveling hundreds of weary miles in her last stage of pregnancy, a pregnancy that was not without scandal, only to find no suitable place to stay when her labor pains started. She found herself giving birth in a stable, placing her newborn baby in a feeding trough. But she knew that her precious babe was the long-promised Messiah, who came for the oppressed, the broken—for her.

The holidays aren’t all sugary cheer for everyone. For many, they can be a difficult time, a time when brokenness and loss are felt more acutely. Hearts ache for things lost and for situations beyond any human ability to restore or fix.

But you see, Advent is for the broken. If we’re honest, brokenness describes each of us. Advent invites to stand against the normal holiday chaos, to slow down and engage in the glorious ache that the expectant longing for our Savior brings. To remember and know that our darkness has “seen a great light,” and His name is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.”

For the broken, Advent brings hope more beautiful, peace more pronounced, joy more full, and love that heals. “For unto us a child is born,” and we know our Savior will come again. He will “shatter the yoke that burdens” us, and “of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.”
Deeper Joy

SCRIPTURE READING
LAMENTATIONS 2:8-15

Oh the joy of Christmas vinyl records on repeat, the glorious glittering tree glowing in the corner, the fire turned on, the special Christmas mugs are out, and lights and greenery everywhere; ah, how I love the beauty and contended happiness of Christmas! One could definitely say this time of year is riveted on merriment and joviality.

As I have been learning to orient my physical time and spiritual rhythms around the Church Calendar, it has caught me off-guard (which I believe is its purpose) especially this holiday. This year, counter to personal and often cultural practice, I believe that I need to take more time to sit with the sorrow and lament of Israel’s waiting in order to enlarge my heart for the joy Christmas morning. The Christmas carol *O Come O Come Immanuel* captures this revelation and this year, for the first time, I resonated with what it’s about— longing! Amidst the cookies and decorations I think there is an invitation for me to go back into the greater Biblical narrative of a broken people longing for their Savior. Lamentations 2:8-15 writes about Israel,

“...her prophets find no vision from the Lord. The elders...sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground...”

A mournful picture of lonely exile indeed.

This year my Church Calendar-lens reminds me that joy typically comes after the longing or sorrow; even more so, the extent or depth of our joy will equal the extent and depth of our sorrow. I first began to understand this during Lent a few years ago, while fasting in preparation for His resurrection. Advent is Latin for “coming.” Can I say I’ve prepared my heart for the joy of His coming if I haven’t participated in the longing and mourning that precedes His birth?

This Advent season I desire to make room for the rhythm of sorrow and longing. Then, perhaps my Christmas morning will awaken to be one of deeper joy and celebration than I’ve known before.

Invitation: How can you make *O Come O Come Immanuel* a part of your Advent rhythm this year? Meditate on the song, listen to it daily, or read specific passages regarding the 400 years of waiting.

KAREN REEDALL
Today, we invite you into Advent devotion to the Lord through poem and song “O Come O Come Emmanuel.”
We encourage you to three movements: first read it, then pray it, then sing it.

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

O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai’s height
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud, and majesty and awe

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan’s tyranny
From depths of hell Thy people save
And give them victory o’er the grave

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death’s dark shadows put to flight

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high
And order all things, far and nigh
To us the path of knowledge show
And cause us in her ways to go

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease
And be Thyself our King of peace
Waiting Well

SCRIPTURE READING

LUKE 2:25-35

1. I’m an impatient person.
2. I spent the majority of 2017 pregnant.
3. Our first son, Ezekiel Paul, was born on September 6th, nine days past his due date.

All of these things now shape my understanding of Advent this year.

I read an article that encouraged mommas with overdue babies to treat themselves every day while they wait to go into labor. I took that seriously and had a pumpkin spice latte probably eight of the nine days. You’re welcome, coffee shops of Colorado Springs. #treatyoself

Waiting is hard. Especially when you’re so ready for the thing that you are waiting for. We were ready for baby boy weeks before he actually came. It felt like forever, even though I told myself, “No one has ever been pregnant forever.”

So, this Advent season has a whole new meaning for me as I think about waiting for Christ to come. Kind of like Simeon in Luke 2, who waited on a promise from the Holy Spirit that he would get the chance to meet the Messiah before he died. He, along with the people of Israel, were so ready for the Messiah to come and make all things right in the world.

Talk about waiting! When we anticipate the coming of Christ in Advent, we practice what our ancestors and Christ followers have done for centuries: waiting well. I like to think of it as a muscle that needs to be worked out every year during Advent. These muscles don’t get much exercise in an instant gratification world that doesn’t teach waiting.

This Advent, in what situation is God asking you to wait well?

So much hasn’t been resolved yet. Many of us sit on the edge of our seats, praying for reconciliation in that broken relationship. While we work towards a solution with others, I wait for God to do something about the abuse and neglect of children in our city. I hold on to hope that alcoholism won’t get the last word in her life. And many people are waiting and longing for a baby of their own.

I, unlike Simeon, could have waited better for my baby to arrive. But, like Simeon, once the child was in my arms, there was nothing else to do except praise God.

May we eagerly wait for the Messiah to enter our lives and the spaces where we long to see his redemption, wholeness, and peace.

AMBER AYERS
Prayers for the Second Sunday of Advent

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER TRADITIONAL

Merciful God, who sent thy messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER CONTEMPORARY

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Revised Common Lectionary:

Laboring God,
with axe and winnowing fork
you clear a holy space
where hurt and destruction have no place,
and a little child holds sway.
Clear our lives of hatred and despair,
sow seeds of joy and peace,
that shoots of hope may spring forth
and we may live in harmony
with one another. Amen.
I pad downstairs to light my Advent candle in the wee hours. Fuzzily, I sit still in the quiet darkness. We are practicing “watching and waiting” for these four weeks.

Before long, my mind’s eye turns to others who wait. Somewhere, a family waits for news. A child waits to be wanted. A woman waits to be rescued. Hope turns cold with despair, and time is running out.

Suddenly a line from the worship song “Always” enters my thoughts.

“Oh my God, He will not delay; my refuge and strength always”

Really? He doesn’t delay? Ever? Because a few biblical accounts seem to present a different story. In John 11, Jesus took his sweet time to comfort his best friends Mary and Martha when their brother Lazarus was dying.

And what about the Matthew 25 parables of the bridegroom, and the wedding party waiting for his return? People are falling out from exhaustion, and there is no mention about why things are taking so long. And Jesus claims “that’s pretty much how it is with the coming Kingdom of Heaven.”

I think about how many prayers are sent up to God in other parts of scripture, pleading, “Do not delay! Help me! Save us!”

If God never delays, then why are so many people asking for him to put on some speed? Does he rescue the oppressed now, or later? How bad does the distress need to get before he comes? In short, dear Jesus, WHERE ARE YOU, AND WHAT IS TAKING SO LONG??!!

I googled the song line and realize the writer copied the promise straight from scripture. But there is more to the song, also straight from scripture—words not meant for mere consideration, but to be whispered and prayed and belted like a rebel yell:

“My help is on the way!...His promise is true!...My God will come through, always!”

So let’s rally, Advent watchers and waiters, for the sake of those crying for rescue from their living nightmares. Lift up the battle song, even with weary hearts. For the longing is to be more than watching, and we are promised to see our faith turned to action through the Spirit’s power. Let’s pace and pray at our darkened windows, with holy Advent Hope, fueling our flickering lanterns with the oil of gladness, singing and believing, “The Rescuer IS on the way!”
I’ll be home for Christmas: Drawing Close to God in Seasons of Exile

Theme: whether we feel at peace or not, it’s important to remember that we are a people still in exile.

Have you ever been away from home for the holidays? Maybe business required you to be on the road. Maybe your study abroad had you overseas. Maybe inclement weather made it impossible to fly across the country like you planned. Or maybe, things have gotten so mixed up, you’re not quite sure where home is any more.

Whatever the reason, we all know that there is something deeply troubling about not being at rest, with the people you love, during this very special time of year. The world is supposed to slow, we’re supposed to be enjoying turkeys and hams and pies with our families, but sometimes that’s not the case.

The interesting thing is that God’s people have a history of not being home for their holy days ("holiday"). The Israelites were often wandering in the wilderness, dispersed in foreign lands, or under oppression in their own land during feast days. In our reading for today, we find Daniel after seventy years away from the home of his God and people, pouring out his heart in petition and seeking intimacy with the LORD.

Seventy years! Most of us haven’t even been alive that long.

We can find it hard to experience rest and relationship with God when even minor things are out of sorts: the bulbs on the tree went out, the driveway is relentlessly icy, or you couldn’t find that one present your kids had their hearts set on.

The fact of the matter is, whether you feel it or not, this is a season that reminds us we’re still in exile. Certainly the coming of Jesus inaugurated the beginning of the end of wandering. Things in this world and in our lives are moving towards restoration and wholeness. In a sense, the oppression, the restlessness, the homelessness is over...in another sense, it’s very much a reality we face each day.

For some, this time of year offers a reprieve from the cold. For others, a reminder of the loneliness of the journey. My hope for all of us this year-end, is that in our joys and our sufferings we’d follow in the footsteps of Daniel, offer our prayers to the LORD, leaning into relationship, celebrating the beginning of redemption, and awaiting with great hope the completion of His mighty acts.

ANDREW STODDARD
Celebration and Lament

I never liked to admit this, but at Christmas time I am filled with both joy and sadness. Our culture would say that is not ok. You don’t exactly see Hallmark Movies with that theme! There is so much cause for joy. After all, with Jesus’ birth came the Good News that is certainly worth celebrating...God loves me! God is with me! God is for me! God has restored us to Himself! Yet, I am especially torn between wanting to celebrate and feeling sad during the Christmas season.

Christmas seems to make me more vulnerable to shifting my focus off of the hope that God offers, and placing my focus onto my circumstances. I really notice all the things that I don’t have or that I wish were different. The most significant thing that brings me sadness during the Christmas season is never having children. This is never more evident than at this time of year.

I used to feel guilty for not looking forward to Christmas. I thought that lamenting during Christmas showed a lack of faith. I realize now that it is not a choice between either celebrating OR feeling sad. It is ok to celebrate AND feel sad. I find that I honor myself, and enter into the season most authentically, when I give myself permission to also acknowledge the sadness that Christmas stirs in my heart. Only after I express my heartache and negativity to God can I celebrate Jesus with honesty and integrity. After all, Jesus came to carry our hurts and heartache.

When I invite him into that place, only then can I truly celebrate who He is and all He did. I am so grateful to have a Savior that welcomes my pain and listens to my heart’s cries. He comes with compassion and mercy and redeems and restores me. That truth brings joy in the midst of my sadness!

I am learning to combine lament with celebration and at the same time, be intentional about making new traditions with what I do have in my life. We can be filled with His peace and joy in the midst of difficult circumstances! That is a gift that truly does surpass all understanding.

HOPE MYERS

SCRIPTURE READING

PSALM 22:23-24
There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost—how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky’s dome.
This world is wild as an old wives’ tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

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GK CHESTERTON (1874–1936)

The House of Christmas
When I think of the Gospel, I think about Jesus, the long-awaited Son of God, the King who came to restore all things. I think of my own life being renewed because of this saving relationship. I often think of the family of God around the world who I will get to be with for eternity. I jump right to the middle or the end of the story. But Mark leads his Gospel by writing about the “beginning” of the good news, and it started with John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist was a wild man. He ate strange things and lived in strange ways. Most of his people had given up on receiving good news, so why would they listen to a strange man? A corrupt Roman government claimed it offered good news, while the Jews experienced Roman rule as tyranny and occupation. But the wild man, John, was bold enough to still believe good news was coming. He believed that Jesus was the lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world. And he shared that good news freely.

My family “prepared the way” for Jesus in my life. They made a straight path for me to know Christ. But many people have only heard and seen caricatures of the Gospel, counterfeit versions that distract people from our Savior. As we wait patiently for our Lord’s return, many people are waiting to be introduced to Jesus for the first time. Our joy as the body of Christ in this season includes the privilege of sharing this hope-filled good news with people who have been waiting for a long time. As we wait for our Savior’s return, let us reflect on the authenticity of our own witness to the Gospel of the Kingdom. And as the body of Christ—as family—what paths might the Lord Christ be inviting to make straight so that people can see and hear the good news about our King and His Kingdom?
This season has a unique flavor for me. Eight years ago, the flavor was nothing but sweet. Christmas and all of its cultural traditions were pure merriment to me. After all, how could you not like a season full of baked goods, presents, and more baked goods given as presents? Christmas was a season of delightful things culminating in one great day of celebration on December 25th. But that was eight years ago, before my dad unexpectedly died a couple days after Thanksgiving.

That first Christmas after dad died, I did not know how much I needed a season like Advent. Instead of Advent’s message of waiting, what I heard that first Christmas was misinformed words of “encouragement.” I think the poorest of it came in a vivid memory I have of being in my parent’s living room and someone telling me, “It’s okay, your dad is dancing with the angels this Christmas.”

What?! How is any of this okay? It is not okay. I am not okay. Death is not okay!

You see, Advent gives us permission. It permits us to look at everything that is, and recognize that not everything is okay. Why? Because if we look at everything that is now, we know that everything is not what it will one day be. As N.T. Wright puts it, “We live between Advent and Advent;” between the first great Advent, the coming of the Son into the world, and the second Advent, when he shall come again in power and glory to judge the living and the dead.” He has come and is still to come. He will bring death to an end. He will put all things right.

Yet, for now, this is why Advent is so necessary. Advent doesn’t say that the sweet things of life are no longer sweet (seriously though, I love baked goods). No, Advent is so great because it encourages us to acknowledge the bitter parts of life—which in turn can make the sweet things immeasurably sweeter. If we can successfully allow ourselves to feel the pains of sin’s effect on the world, then the joys of Christmas morning will be of greater ecstasy than we could have otherwise recognized! And all the while we wait for the second Advent, the coming of Jesus that ‘swallows up death forever’ (Isaiah 25:8/1 Corinthians 15:26).
Prayers for the Third Sunday of Advent

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER TRADITIONAL

Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let thy bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER CONTEMPORARY

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Revised Common Lectionary:
O God of Isaiah and John the Baptist,
through all such faithful ones
you proclaim the unfolding of future joy
and renewed life.
Strengthen our hearts to believe your advent promise
that one day we will walk in the holy way of Christ,
where sorrow and sighing will be no more
and the journey of God’s people will be joy. Amen.
We wake up most days expecting a routine, to see the same people and do the same things. But, God...

In Luke 1, we read that Mary’s everyday was interrupted by an angel who boldly announces an unfathomable future. Mary is introduced to us with very little to recommend her, except that she is engaged to Joseph, whose lineage includes the great King David. For a young woman who wasn’t in the spotlight, who existed almost invisibly in her community, this news is nothing short of stunning. Mary had been chosen to play a critical role in the Redemption drama and yet, she never tried out for the role.

Announcements can be so banal that we tune them out most of the time. This announcer was different: Gabriel, an angel who sets out for his assignments from the presence of the Most High God. And the content was bizarre, at the very least, and gloriously exciting. He declares that Mary, a virgin, will give birth. Further, Gabriel declares her supernatural offspring will be great and will rule as the rightful King on David’s throne.

The scripture describes Mary as “deeply perturbed” after Gabriel’s greeting. That’s the one part of this story that makes sense. How could she, a virgin, conceive? What would happen when she started to show? Would she be cast out of the community? How could she explain this and who would listen to her? Would Joseph abandon her?

In the midst of piercing uncertainty, we want to be anywhere but there. We want facts, answers and a solid course of action to alleviate our anxiety. But, faith...

After all of the declarations Gabriel imparts, Mary has a declaration of her own: “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Mary’s courageous trust envelops her response. Her acceptance is not dotted with caveats, rather, it’s the essence of true faith: the substance of things not seen.

How might we be attuned to divine announcements in the mundane?

And when we sense God’s call, how might we move forward in faith despite obstacles that seem like impossibilities?
When Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy step through the wardrobe, Narnia is a place of “always winter, and never Christmas.”

The faun, Mr. Tumnus, explains the tragic circumstances of Narnia to little Lucy. It is the White Witch who has cast such a terrible spell, freezing all the land and forbidding celebration.

Do you ever feel like our world is caught in a state of “always winter, and never Christmas”? Whether it’s news of a distant tragedy or destruction on our doorstep, we can’t seem to escape the constant barrage of pain and suffering.

But before the children can lose all hope, Father Christmas bursts onto the scene to announce, “Aslan is on the move. The Witch’s magic is weakening.”

Even though all Mr. Tumnus could see was more winter, Aslan was not defeated. Although we witness brokenness spreading like a disease, our Lord is at work.

C.S. Lewis, the author of The Chronicles of Narnia, speaks to this tension we live in, often referred to as the “already, but not yet.” As Christians, we believe that Christ has “already” defeated death, but the Kingdom of God has “not yet” fully come in all its glory.

To be honest, it can be hard to inhabit this time of tension. We long for the point when our existence will be “always Christmas, and never winter.” (I should clarify for all the Coloradans; I’m speaking metaphorically, not campaigning against snow sports.)

This longing for perfection, for the one who will make everything right, is the intention of Advent. Derived from the Latin word adventus, which is a translation of the Greek word parousia, advent means “coming” or “arrival.” During this season, we eagerly await not just the coming of baby Jesus in the manger, but also the second coming of our Savior to establish a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1).

If you feel weighed down, stressed out, or heartbroken this season, be encouraged that the Father is at work here and now, and take heart that the Lord will carry his work to completion (Phil 1:6). Advent is the time to remember with hopeful expectation that God is on the move, Christ will come again, and there will one day be a place with no more “mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).
No doubt you’ve heard sermons on the unlikely cast of characters who found themselves in the thick of God’s arrival on earth. Lowly shepherds who were serenaded by angels, wise men from faraway lands, and, of course, young Joseph, and his pregnant-out-of-wedlock wife, Mary.

But what about all those who weren’t there but could have been, or maybe should have been?

Top on the list for me is Herod.

Here’s a guy who hears about the star and all the prophecies about where the Messiah was to be born and yet instead of being remotely glad becomes insanely insecure…and then brutally murderous. It wasn’t that Herod somehow missed the memo that the Messiah was born. In fact, it was precisely because Herod suspected that the Messiah had come that he acted the way he did: deceitful and murderous. Herod had manipulated people and situations, sold out friends and relatives, used his own marriage to his own political ends all to become the “King of the Jews.” He wasn’t about to let some newborn baby undo all of it. **Herod was absent at Advent because he was too afraid of losing control.**

So, here’s the question for us: Are we too in love with being in control that we might miss what God is doing right under our noses?

I remember one night years ago when our two eldest girls, Sophia and Norah, ended up in our bed right around midnight. I remember it because as I lay there half-asleep, wrestling with whether or not to strong-arm the kids and restore control in our house, I heard Sophia whisper to Norah, “Love you, Norah.” “Luvoo Fia,” came the reply. Tears welled up in my eyes. It was the most beautiful little scene. Surely God was in this place...*and I almost missed it!*

What if I had so focused on control sooner that I missed a little piece of God’s activity?

**All around us are signs of God’s arrival.** God is coming to us in little smiles and heartfelt hugs, in needy families and single mothers.

But we could miss it if we cling too tightly to control.

In a way, Herod got it right: the real King had arrived, and He had every intention of dethroning Herod. God has come, and He has come to rule our hearts. But every time we cling to control and close our fists or shut our eyes or withhold love when we have the chance to freely give, we will miss what God is doing in the earth. Like Herod, we will be absent at Advent.
Waiting for THE Consolation

SCRIPTURE READING
LUKE 2:22-33

Have you ever had an unexpected, uplifting, and fascinating encounter with a stranger? It seems as if this is exactly what happened to Mary and Joseph when they went to Jerusalem to present Jesus to the Lord. Upon entering the temple, a man named Simeon embraced little Jesus into his arms and blessed God for the salvation to ALL people. Imagine a stranger embracing your small child. Who was this man? Simeon was no stranger to God. He was a righteous and devout man, filled with the Holy Spirit. God had promised him that he would see the Savior, Jesus Christ, before his death. What a promise! What a gift!

Simeon had been waiting for the consolation of Israel (v. 25). The nation of Israel had also been waiting centuries for their consolation—a Savior who would restore their relationship with God. Waiting and the patience to wait can be so difficult, especially in this fast paced, instant gratification society that we live in. Who likes to wait for something they want? The season of advent allows us to connect with our brothers and sisters of long ago and enter into a season of waiting.

Consider what it would have been like to wait from generation to generation for the coming Christ, and for us presently, to embrace the waiting for His return. A return that will eliminate death and mourning (Revelation 21:4). A return that will forever show us that our present sufferings are nothing in comparison to the glory that will be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). A return where we will see our Savior face-to-face and live with Him forever. What great hope we possess. Oh God, help us to be faithful to the end and may we show those around us that You are the only hope worth waiting for.

Jesus is the consolation of Israel that Simeon waited for. Consolation means “to comfort” and Jesus is that comfort for all. Comfort because sin had broken our relationship with God. Comfort to face suffering and death, which sin produced. Comfort because Jesus has restored our relationship with God. Comfort because Jesus offers salvation to all—Jew and Gentile alike. Comfort for heartache, loss and disappointment. Comfort because we will live with Him for all of eternity. In what ways do you need Jesus to be your comfort, your consolation this season?

CASSIE CARRIGAN
Today, we invite you into Advent devotion to the Lord through poem and song
“O Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.”
We encourage you to three movements: first read it, then pray it, then sing it.

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.
In our age of over-the-counter medicine and online check-in for the emergency room, many of us have become conditioned to expect instant healing. When we go to the doctor, many of us are impatient patients.

My five-year-old daughter, Naomi, recently broke her arm and had to wear a cast for eight weeks while she healed. We knew that her arm would heal in the cast, but knowing that she would be healed didn’t make it easy for Naomi to endure the two months with the cast.

Similarly, even though we know that Jesus has defeated sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection, it is not easy for us to wait for the day when our corruptible bodies—and our sinful hearts—will be fully and finally healed.

The Advent season is a time of great joy. We wait with glad anticipation for Christmas when we will gather with friends, family, and fellow believers to celebrate the first coming of Jesus as a precious baby in Bethlehem. And as we celebrate the first coming of our Lord, we look forward to his Second Coming when he will make all things new.

But this Advent season, many of us are painfully aware of our need for divine healing. Perhaps you or a loved one is battling cancer, or perhaps someone very dear to you has recently died and now the Christmas table is marked by your loved one’s absence. Or perhaps you are struggling to overcome a besetting sin in your heart. As we wait for God’s healing, it is easy to become impatient. We don’t understand why God won’t fast-forward to the day when He will wipe every tear from our eyes and “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

Yet, healing takes time. If the doctor had taken Naomi’s cast off too soon, her arm wouldn’t have healed correctly. We must, therefore, learn to be patient patients. As we wait patiently for Christmas this year, we can cultivate patient hope for that great day when our resurrected Lord will finally cast off our corruptible bodies and heal our hearts. And, though we suffer, we can take heart, knowing that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3–4).
Prayers for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER TRADITIONAL

We beseech thee, Almighty God, to purify our consciences by thy daily visitation, that when thy Son Jesus Christ cometh he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER CONTEMPORARY

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Revised Common Lectionary:
Shepherd of Israel,
may Jesus, Emmanuel and son of Mary,
be more than just a dream in our hearts.
With the apostles, prophets, and saints,
save us, restore us,
and lead us in the way of grace and peace,
that we may bear your promise into the world. Amen.
SEASON OF

CELEBRATION
Merry Chirstmas!

JOHN 1 (THE MESSAGE)

The Life-Light was the real thing:
   Every person entering Life
   he brings into Light.
   He was in the world,
   the world was there through him,
   and yet the world didn’t even notice.
   He came to his own people,
   but they didn’t want him.
   But whoever did want him,
   who believed he was who he claimed
   and would do what he said,
   He made to be their true selves,
   their child-of-God selves.
   These are the God-begotten,
   not blood-begotten,
   not flesh-begotten,
   not sex-begotten.
   The Word became flesh and blood,
   and moved into the neighborhood.
   We saw the glory with our own eyes,
   the one-of-a-kind glory,
   like Father, like Son,
   Generous inside and out,
   true from start to finish.
   ...
   We all live off his generous bounty,
   gift after gift after gift.
   We got the basics from Moses,
   and then this exuberant giving and receiving,
   This endless knowing and understanding—
   all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.
   No one has ever seen God,
   not so much as a glimpse.
   This one-of-a-kind God-Expression,
   who exists at the very heart of the Father,
   has made him plain as day.
I HEARD the bells on Christmas Day
   Their old, familiar carols play,
      And wild and sweet
         The words repeat
   Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

   And thought how, as the day had come,
      The belfries of all Christendom
         Had rolled along
            The unbroken song
   Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

      Till ringing, singing on its way,
         The world revolved from night to day,
            A voice, a chime,
               A chant sublime
   Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

   Then from each black, accursed mouth
      The cannon thundered in the South,
         And with the sound
            The carols drowned
   Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

   It was as if an earthquake rent
      The hearth-stones of a continent,
         And made forlorn
            The households born
   Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

      And in despair I bowed my head;
         “There is no peace on earth,” I said;
            “For hate is strong,
               And mocks the song
   Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

   Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
      “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
         The Wrong shall fail,
            The Right prevail,
   With peace on earth, good-will to men.”
Known and Loved

I have a vivid memory of being six years old and at a friend’s birthday party. During the party I saw something on my friend’s shelf that caught my interest. It was a little red treasure chest...and I wanted it. So, being six, I took it. When my mom saw me playing with it later, she realized I had taken it from my friend’s house and my future life of criminality flashed before her eyes. She called my dad (who was a police officer) and told him I had stolen from my friend. She then got off the phone and told me “you wait till your dad comes home.” That scared me more than anything. I remember hiding behind the Christmas tree all night, waiting for dad to come home and arrest me. I convinced myself that if I can’t see him, he can’t see me. Well he got home and he saw me. I don’t know how, but he did. Instead of arresting me he took me back to my friend’s house and made me return it and apologize, but that was it!

I think about that story when I reflect on what it must have been like during the 400 years of silence between the end of the prophet Malachi and Jesus’ birth. The book of Malachi ends with God saying, “if you don’t listen to My prophet, I’ll come curse the land.” And then silence.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to live during that time? Not knowing what God’s next move would be? And your disobedience could lead to the judgment of God? A bad day, a curse muttered under your breath, an un-honoring thought about your parents...an “accidentally” stolen little red treasure chest? It makes me wonder if Israel was tempted to hide behind their “Christmas trees” and think “If I can’t see God, He can’t see me”?

Low and behold 400 years later, God’s next move was not to curse the land or smite His creation. Instead, He sent His Son as an infant child to be born to a poor couple, birthed in a feeding trough surrounded by livestock. This King who had come to offer salvation to His creation was born in the humblest way possible. He would go on to live a life of service, and He would give His own life for His creation. In light of this, I encourage you this Christmas season to come out from behind your ‘Christmas tree’. And although everything inside of you might feel like “if He really knew me, He wouldn’t love me,” know that that is just like thinking “if I can’t see Him, He can’t see me.” He does. He sees you. He knows you. He loves you.
The Christ-child lay on Mary’s lap,
  His hair was like a light.
(O weary, weary were the world,
  But here is all aright.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary’s breast
  His hair was like a star.
(O stern and cunning are the kings,
  But here the true hearts are.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary’s heart,
  His hair was like a fire.
(O weary, weary is the world,
  But here the world’s desire.)

The Christ-child stood on Mary’s knee,
  His hair was like a crown,
And all the flowers looked up at Him,
  And all the stars looked down.
Where Else?

Scripture Reading

LUKE 2:1-4

As we unloaded the bus, a cold mist seeped into our joints. Peddling children peddled encircled us. The city’s poor ensued. A minaret dominated the night sky. Across the square sat an old stone church. Minutes before, we passed through a narrow gate in the border wall. Armed guards—mostly teenagers with machine guns—waved us through. We rode slowly passed protest graffiti.

It was January 2006. I was in Israel studying with other seminary students. This particular night, we stopped in the West Bank to visit Bethlehem. We crossed Manger Square and crept into the Church of the Nativity. Constantine’s mother ordered a basilica built over the cave that contained Jesus’s first cry. Her building burned down, but Justinian had this one built shortly after—1,500 years ago.

We moved tentatively. Dim lights escorted us while the damp chill clung to us and the silence unsettled us. Eventually, we arrived at the Grotto. One by one we stepped underground and waited in line to see the inscribed silver star. “Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary.” Here...

No one spoke as we drove back to the school. We didn’t expect this and we needed time. Once it elapsed, several voiced profound disappointment with “O Little Town.” None of us hoped for imported Italian twinkle lights or red cup peppermint mochas. But we envisioned an encounter with radiating warmth, embracing peace, or animating hope. We anticipated the jubilation of Christmas morning around a bright and ornamented tree. We wanted a comfortable, sterile spiritual high. Instead, we experienced a politicized, militarized, pluralized, marginalized and unsanitized shock to our souls. When the jarring stopped, we wished Jesus had been born somewhere else ...anywhere else but there.

But the more I pondered that night the more I realized this is exactly the kind of place the Father would and did send Jesus. When Jesus arrived, Rome and its military occupied and controlled Judah. The pagan lord ordered everyone to travel for taxation purposes. Joseph and Mary trekked to an insignificant rural town where farmers hoped to eke out a living. They welcomed God’s son in an unsterile pen. Jesus entered our mess; he didn’t avoid politics, ignore poverty, or try to escape discomfort. He jumped into the muck to reclaim and renovate all of it. As we wait for him to finish his work, let’s wade in and work with him.
As we think on the Christmas season, we find our eyes going beyond the images of the manger and the wise men. While remembering Christ’s first coming, we find ourselves look longingly toward the coming day when he returns. Does this seem strange?

Maybe, but this was the climactic moment in history where God connected Creation to Redemption.

We know that sometime soon Christ will again make his dwelling with man. Christmas brings this deep longing to the forefront of our minds. Christmas proclaims “God with us!”

And yet, where do we see this God with us? We see it in the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We see it when the church responds in love for its enemies. We see it when a family digs deep to work something out. We see it when we pursue virtue in our work. We see it when we chose to be a good neighbor, even when it isn’t easy.

As did the Jews in ancient times, we too wait for Messiah to be with man again. We too look forward to the day when Jesus returns to Earth and sets all things right. While we celebrate the first Christmas and wait for Christ’s return, we can carry on the work of restoring what is broken in our families, our jobs, and our communities. Realigning what is out of joint, mending what is fractured, all while longingly proclaiming “Come Lord Jesus!”
Prayers for the First Sunday after Christmas Day

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER TRADITIONAL

Almighty God, who hast poured upon us the new light of thine incarnate Word: Grant that the same light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER CONTEMPORARY

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.
Angels from the Realms of Glory

JAMES MONTGOMERY (1821)

Today, we invite you into Christmas celebration through poem and song
Angels from the Realms of Glory by James Montgomery. We encourage you
to find and play a recording of it...and sing along!

Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o’er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation’s story
Now proclaim Messiah’s birth.

Refrain:
Come and worship, come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King.

Shepherds, in the field abiding,
Watching o’er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing;
Yonder shines the infant light:

Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations;
Ye have seen His natal star.

Saints, before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear;
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear.

Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes the sentence,
Mercy calls you; break your chains.

Though an Infant now we view Him,
He shall fill His Father’s throne,
Gather all the nations to Him;
Every knee shall then bow down:

All creation, join in praising
God, the Father, Spirit, Son,
Evermore your voices raising
To th’eternal Three in One.
It’s kind of weird that Isaiah talks about taking away mountains and valleys so that God has a highway to walk on. After all, why would God want to take away something as beautiful as a mountain? But mountains and valleys are something of a trade off. In exchange for the majestic views that they can provide, mountains and valleys are an obstacle to what’s on the other side of them.

In order to look upon Pikes Peak, I have to be blocked from seeing Divide. If I wanted to travel from Colorado Springs to Divide (without a plane) I would need to either go up over the top of Pikes Peak or travel around it. You can start to see how mountains and valleys can be as much a nuisance as they are things that inspire awe.

In this light, what Isaiah declares begins to make more sense. It is considerably easier to travel on smooth, level ground. And it is much easier to see those on a highway when there are no mountains and valleys to obstruct the view. God knows that there are mountains, valleys, and rough ground that keep us from seeing his glory and goodness. But his desire is to remove all obstacles that prevent people from seeing his glory and goodness.

That is what the incarnation of Jesus is all about. Christ’s birth is the lowering of the mountains and the raising of the valleys so that all may see God’s glory together. Isaiah declares that once the path is made straight, “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” Because of Jesus we are able to say now the glory of the Lord is revealed for all to see together. Through Christ there are no longer any obstacles to seeing the glory and goodness of God!
And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Today, we invite you into Christmas celebration through Scripture. Mary’s Song in Luke 1 glorifies the Lord for who he is and what he has done in Christ. Read, pray, and praise through this Scripture, reflecting on these truths in your life.
This year the Protestant Church celebrated the 500th anniversary of The Reformation. Church reform was entirely necessary, and much excellent doctrine and understanding resulted from Martin Luther’s nailing of his Ninety-five Theses to that door of the church at Wittenberg Castle. But I sometimes think that, while rightly keeping The Baby, we may have wrongly thrown out too much of the “birth water” (so to speak), especially regarding Jesus’ mother, Mary.

Please don’t misunderstand—I’m not advocating Mary worship or deification. I am, however, suggesting that we can learn much from her if we spend some meditation time with her this Advent. Yes, we’ve learned about how young she likely was and how difficult it must have been for her during her pregnancy, with everyone—including even her fiancé, initially—thinking the worst of her. We may have even marveled at her courage in saying “Yes” to God under these circumstances. But Mary’s “Yes” has so much more to say to us, because, you see, she is an archetype for a truly “with-God” life.

When God communicated to Mary his desire to place within her the life of his Son, she responded with “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Even after we have embraced Christ as our salvation, God continues to ask each one of us a similar question—“Will you allow the life of God to be implanted into every area of your life?” Are we willing to open ourselves to the redemptive life of God being planted within us, maturing and developing within us, and working through us for the sake of the world? Are we truly willing, like Mary was, to open up every area of our lives to be filled with life of God this Christmas? May we, like Mary, say “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” May we, like Mary, be found carrying the life of the Christ-child within us for the sake of the world. Merry Christmas!
Jesus. Emmanuel. “God with us.” Jesus came, fully God, fully human, to bring us home. He left his home in the Trinity, in heaven, emptied himself of all of that privilege, and made his home among us, on the dust of the earth which he created, in order to invite us to be at home with him. And this, dear friends, is our invitation and calling on this earth: to be at home with Him, and to bring people home with us, as we are traveling homeward.

We lived in Copenhagen, Denmark, for five years. During those years I learned to love the way Scandinavia celebrates Christmas, with its understated expressions of beauty and community. Through art, music, candles, food, and conversation, the loveliness of Christmas permeates the atmosphere. On Christmas Eve, the holiest of all the days of the year, families all around the country gather together. They’ve kept their Christmas trees fresh outside and have waited to bring them inside on the morning of Christmas Eve, then decorate them with ornaments and real candles. Yes...real candles! After their Christmas dinner they light the candles (with a bucket of water nearby...just in case) and they gather in a circle around the tree, singing “Silent Night” together. Then their solemnity turns to joy as they form a conga line as it were, dancing around the tree and then all around the house!

Jesus introduced a radically fresh new culture—the hospitable culture of the kingdom of God. There are aspects of every earthly culture that reflect truth, beauty and goodness, which lead all of humanity homeward toward God. But the more we become acquainted with this eternal kingdom culture through the lens of the love of Christ, the cultures of this world become increasingly foreign to our souls.

We are invited to live in winsome, inviting ways—seeing our neighbors, friends, and even enemies—through the lens of the sacrificial love of Christ, as fellow-travelers...all on our way home. In our conversations and interactions, we are continually leading people either toward home or away. In what ways can you enter into the life stories of others, and travel homeward together? Take time to give thanks for the gift of Emmanuel...God among us. Ask God for creative ways in which He is inviting you to initiate “homeward-ness” among your friends, neighbors, and co-workers.
Prayers for Epiphany Day

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER TRADITIONAL

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know thee now by faith, to thy presence, where we may behold thy glory face to face; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER CONTEMPORARY

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the Peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.