

The background of the cover is a faded, artistic photograph of a landscape. It features a large, leafy tree in the upper left, a path or road winding through the middle ground, and a hazy horizon under a light sky. The overall tone is soft and ethereal.

PREPARE THE WAY

ADVENT 2020 DEVOTIONAL BOOK
ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
MOUNT VERNON, WA

PREPARING THE WAY

I first heard these Isaiah readings as a 15 year old singing the “You-Sing-It” Messiah with my mom, the San Jose Symphonic Choir, and more than 1,500 other singers. I was not yet a churchgoer and still working out what I believed (though I knew that I was definitely Christian), and it was a way of encountering the texts that fixed them pretty strongly in my mind. Eventually, I would become a choir member at my local Episcopal church and hear them that way, but Handel’s *Messiah* remains the first thought that comes to my mind when I see them in the lectionary.

While I heard them first in participating in the “You-Sing-It” Messiah, I did not learn about them or their history until college (when they came up in Bible study for Intervarsity) and seminary when I took my first formal class on the Old Testament. It was enlightening to actually read the entire Book of Isaiah, to understand the historical aspect of what was going on in Judah when Isaiah was telling them to get it together, and also to learn that there are considered to be at least two (possibly three) different writers of Isaiah, especially as the book covers a span before and after the exile to Babylon. While most of the verses we are looking at are from the second half of the book when Isaiah is telling the exiled ones to come home, we have

a few verses from the beginning where Isaiah is telling off Judah for their violence and miscarriages of justice.

It seems fitting this year to be looking at these passages given that we are amid a seemingly endless pandemic and in the aftermath of a contentious election. We need to hear that God is coming, and we need to hear that hope exists. Every devotion is structured the same way with the passage at the top, the reflection in the middle, and a prayer at the end.

Advent blessings to you all!

-Jen McCabe

NOVEMBER 29

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

-Isaiah 40:1-2

Would that I could speak tenderly to Jerusalem. I guess it takes a prophet — someone possessed of the big picture. That’s not me.

Here in the present, Jerusalem seems a long way from paying for her sins, much less receiving double for them

from the Lord. Are we talking about the Jehovah that was so keen to expunge Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness? The God of Isaiah seems more forbearing and generous.

As I try to emulate God's grace, there are moments when Jerusalem softens my heart — when I think of us more affectionately, as I would my grandchildren when they are tired and willful. You just want to hug them and tell them you know it's been hard, that they're having a bad day, but they are loved, and it will get better. Maybe instead of waiting for Jerusalem to pay for her transgressions, I could try, as Christ ultimately did, to go her bail...and fulfill prophecy.

Lord, calm my agitated spirit and lift my sight toward the vision of your kingdom on Earth. Amen.

-Michael Boss

NOVEMBER 30

“A voice cries out 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'”

-Isaiah 40:3

During the 33 years I lived in Texas, I felt like a lone crier in the wilderness often during election season. At

times, literal loss of voice befell me as I spoke up loudly for issues and the rights of our society's marginalized—which often included myself. The church of my youth may as well have left me for dead. Thankfully, I no longer feel alone.

As a boy, I was taught to stick up for other kids being mistreated or bullied. What a wonderful and necessary practice! The only problem was that I was being mistreated. I was different and I knew it; unfortunately, the other little boys who bullied me knew it, too. Worst was the shame I felt when confiding in my parents the powerlessness to fight back. Peace is tough stuff, and in my experience, especially so for those who are different. The Others. The Less-Than. Thankfully, I was blest with words far larger than fists, and eventually, I grew courageous enough to use them.

Every day I'm still grateful that I found safe places to belong: music, the library, our vegetable garden. A life today without any of those three is simply unimaginable. Without drama, I can truthfully say they saved my life, and many times at that. After years of learning with several loving spiritual guides and one heaven-sent psychotherapist, I understand that the pain was never about me, but rather the brokenness of my attackers. Thankfully, the source of despair became a source of love and hope.

We're not told everything will ever be perfect—or even comfortable. But scripture reminds us that there is a way through that comes from God. Our faithfulness to the call of preparation is holy construction work, ceaselessly building roads and bridges to those who need our voice.

Dear God, help us to be brave and vocal as we cry out in the wilderness for your way of truth and peace. Amen.

-David Sloat

DECEMBER 1

"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

-Isaiah 40:4

I have to admit, this was a challenging reflection for me to write. To gain a better understanding of this short passage, I took time to reflect on several commentaries on the book of Isaiah. One of the more common interpretations of this passage is that it speaks to each of us as individuals and (metaphorically) tasks us with reflecting on our "rough places" to better prepare for the Lord. This makes sense- use prayer to reflect on our day

to day interactions and make the rough places easier to travel.

A second interpretation (one that holds more hope for me right now), is that these words point to the power of the Lord as he observes the current state of the world, nation, and communities. I am certain that the Lord is not surprised, and it is a comfort that in his time, in his way, injustices in the world (uneven ground) and obstacles (mountains) are not beyond his reach. It is easy to feel powerless (and yet still want to be responsible) in the face of the pandemic, political divisions, and economic challenges we face. I take comfort in knowing that we don't face these circumstances alone.

Lord, I ask that you give me eyes to see your work in the world around me, in small and great things. I ask you to calm my mind so that I can experience gratitude for your hand in the affairs of each day. Amen.

-Lara Cole

DECEMBER 2

"Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

-Isaiah 40:5

I cannot read this passage without hearing the magnificent choral music of Handel's Messiah bursting forth: "*And the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be reveal-ed ...*" As wonderful as Rock and Roll may be to the masses (of we "Boomers"), nothing sets my soul to soaring like the rip-roaring choral production of Handel's music. It is without peer. Period (no pun intended).

Advent is a dark and dreary season, what with short days, gray and drizzly skies, blustery winds sending the few remaining unraked leaves to dancing in the corner of the yard like manic pixies high on pixie juice, and holiday music to jangle the few remaining nerves of parents and their perpetually home-schooled broods.

I need the high tones of the classics to lift me up, out, and away from the drudgeries of a pandemic life. I need those rich and solemn tones to remind me there is a God away and beyond myself – a God who is NOT content to remain at arm's length away, but who seeks the warmth and safety of my own belly during these scary, dark days.

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And the scary part? It will not just be revealed to us. No, I believe God intends God's glory to be revealed in us and through us and around us so that the world itself may see it. Not just "some" of the world, but ALL people. I think I'd better get busy getting that manger ready!

Dear God, you want the world to see your glory. You want the world to see your glory revealed in the weakness of human flesh. I am so NOT worthy to carry this honor, but not my will, but THINE be done. God, help me. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

DECEMBER 3

"Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"

-Isaiah 40:9

I believe that one of the metrics of a life well-lived is the number of "Zion" moments you experience. They can come anytime, and they most always (in my experience, anyway) come as a surprise — "surprised by joy" if you will.

For me, the hallmark of a Zion moment is when I experience something so profound that I want to stop the world just long enough to look at it from as many angles as possible and determine its placement in the scrapbook of my life — the one I plan to thumb through before I move on past mortality. The title of my scrapbook, in big gold letters, is “Glimpses of God.”

Lord, thank you for leading me up the mountain whenever I'm covered in dust. The world you show me is proof of your majesty, and of the mystery that awaits us all beyond it. Amen.

-Michael Boss

DECEMBER 4

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”-Isaiah 40:11

When I was a little girl, I stayed with my grandma Mary and my grandpa Daddy Chuck in their third-floor walk-up apartment in Chicago for two weeks every summer. Across the alley was a huge Baptist Church where I attended Vacation Bible School for a week. Do you remember the floppy felt biblical figures that were stuck to a felt scenery storyboard? Well, one of the

stories was Jesus surrounded by a flock of sheep. I believed that picture and story literally well into my adulthood, no metaphor, just a guy in a long white gown, curly long brown hair holding a stick with sheep all around him, my mind at seven. Although I knew zip about sheep, I could see that Jesus was tender and loving to the animals and even carried a lamb gently in his arms and gazed lovingly into its eyes.

As I was reading numerous commentaries online to prepare and write this devotional, I discovered that there were other shepherds in the bible that I had forgotten or didn't realize that they were shepherds.

- One was Abel, the shepherd slain. "Abel was a type of Savior, in that being a shepherd, he sanctified his work to the glory of God, and offers a sacrifice of blood upon the altar of the Lord."
- Another was Jacob, the toiling shepherd who left and returned safely back to the Promised Land with his family and flock. Joseph was a type of Jesus reigning in Egypt for the good of his people. He had interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as approaching famines and opened the storage areas for the people to avoid starvation.
- Moses, "when he kept sheep, kept them in the wilderness, far away from all the other flocks, and when he became a shepherd over God's people, his

business was not to preserve them in Egypt, but to conduct them out of it.”

- Zechariah and Jeremiah bemoaned the idle shepherds that would scatter God’s sheep and slaughter the little flock, “and God himself identified the rebellious and apostate nation of Israel as ‘sheep without a shepherd’.
- God also calls David the Good Shepherd of Israel and promises that the coming Savior would one day arise to shepherd His little flock and in the majesty of Almighty God.

Quoting C.H. Spurgeon, “ Let us hear the shepherd’s voice. If you be the lambs, hear the shepherd’s voice which says, “Follow me”, you that are not lambs, Hear his voice”. Those of us who are His sheep, let us hear the shepherds.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word and the truth it contains. May we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest all that You would teach us and that we grow in grace and knowledge of You so that we may not be ashamed when we stand before Your Throne, in Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

-Mary Ann Taylor

DECEMBER 5

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners..."

-Isaiah 61:1

According to Matthew Henry's commentary, Jesus was "appointed and ordained ... to be a preacher, a healer, a deliverer, a comforter, and a planter." Talk about having the weight of the world on your shoulders. Often, we feel undereducated, underprepared, or under-equipped to measure up to Christ. "Why bother?" we might say. "We can't effect change."

At my college graduation, a well-known female national news broadcaster offered these words of advice: Crawl before you walk. At 22, I was incensed by her words. I was ready to take on the world! But her words are the bedrock toward effecting change. A cup of water here. A dollar there. A comment to a friend at just the right time. All the little ways we imitate Christ.

Through Christ, we can claim our power and mirror His calling by using our God-given talents to bring good news to the burdened or heal up the brokenhearted or help those captive to addiction or adultery or abuse or any other adversity.

The spirit of the Lord is indeed upon us, too.

Dear Lord: Help us to spread the good news, in small ways as well as large ways. With your help, we can do more than we imagine. Amen.

-Ashley Sweeney

DECEMBER 6

"...to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory."

-Isaiah 61.3

When I was a kid, when you saw a woman wearing all black or a man with a black armband, you knew: these people mourn a terrible loss in their lives. A former foster son of ours, Native American, once appeared with his luxurious black hair trimmed way back. He explained that he had lost a close relative, and this was a traditional sign of grieving. We know that our Mexican friends celebrate reunions with the departed on the Day of the Dead. Sometimes our culture helps us through that most difficult time of grief.

But sometimes it does not. It's a common problem: what do we say to a friend in grief? Well, we are told often these days what not to say: "Here's what you ought to do..." Oh, please no! Everyone grieves in their own way. Be a listener, affirm as valid the person's real needs, be ready in your heart to pray.

As Christians, we trust passages like Isaiah's as best as we can. We know we are called to expect healing, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. We may doubt that we will ever be whole again. But God wants to restore us, and God is patient. We need to be patient as well. It might be a longer walk than I am capable of now to get to be among the "oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory." But God walks with me: it's God's road.

Almighty God, look with pity upon the sorrows of your servants. Remember them, Lord, in mercy, nourish them with patience, comfort them with a sense of your goodness, lift up your countenance upon them, and give them peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p.467)

-Tom Worrell

DECEMBER 7

“They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”

-Isaiah 61:4

I wish you could have seen Beirut and Aleppo when we did. Carol and I were in our early twenties when work and wanderlust took us to the Middle East. We lived in Iran for several years, and our travels throughout the Islamic world between Turkey and Afghanistan took us as well to Lebanon and Syria.

Our time in Beirut, back when it was still referred to as "the Paris of the Middle East," was memorable. We had hardly been there a few weeks, visiting friends who lived just south of Lebanon's capital, when the sectarian tensions we had sensed almost on first arriving spilled over into violence. I doubt we'll ever forget the anxious taxi ride that took us safely out of Beirut as the fighting raged. Beirut had rebuilt to a point perhaps rivaling its more carefree days before the plight of Palestinian refugees brought the Arab/Israeli war to its palm-lined streets and Mediterranean shore, only to be devastated by a pandemic and a chemical fertilizer explosion with the power of a small nuclear device.

Our favorite city in the Middle East (next to our hometown of Isfahan, Iran) was Aleppo. Its architecture spanned a millennium, from Alexander the Great to the Ottoman Empire. Its souk (or, as we would say in Farsi, "bazaar") was a feast for the senses, including taste — thanks to a profusion of bakeries, kebab and falafel vendors, and coffee houses. But what we remember above all else was the friendliness and urbanity of a society that prided itself on hospitality and friendship. Pictures of Aleppo today do more than break my heart — they make me fearful of what our underlying prejudices can do when distorted, amplified, and bent to the will of an authoritarian ruler.

While I despair that I will ever see Beirut and Aleppo restored, if not to their former glory, then at least to places of safety and civility where hospitality once again reigns, I do believe it will happen...because it has happened before. This is ultimately something I leave in God's hands, but with the awareness that if we are going to be recipients of and participants in the healing and restoration of the world, then we need to give God some help.

Lord, remind us of our gospel obligation to shelter the refugee, and our country's obligation to be an advocate of peace, justice, and mercy throughout the world. Guide us toward opportunities to live into the gospel through

our generosity and shared humanity. Amen.
-Michael Boss

DECEMBER 8

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”
- Isaiah 61:10

I may be an old crotchety dude, but I still remember the births of my children. I still remember the absolute delight of holding each of those bundles of joy for the first time. They may have cried immediately upon delivery as they saw bright lights for the first time and felt the shock of a room that was well under the 98.6° they had experienced consistently for nine months. But once they were scrubbed down, weighed, and evaluated (a.k.a. fingers and toes counted), they were wrapped in warm soft blankets and handed over to Mom or Dad to be embraced for the first time *ex-utero*, and they relaxed and rested comfortably in arms that enveloped them in love and care.

One of the most amazing and amusing things I noted about my children when they were young, is when they were delighted (or not) by something, they showed their delight with their whole bodies. They didn't just smile or scowl with their lips. Their whole bodies got involved in manifesting their 'tude.

"My whole being shall exult in my God ..." says Isaiah. As a Scandinavian, I tend to be pretty stoic about most things. As I've gotten older, my Viking blood has dripped away, and I've begun to feel those weird things ... I think they're called "emotions." Blech! Nonetheless, Isaiah reminds me I need to learn to let go and allow my whole body to embrace God every bit as unabashedly as a child embraces life – indeed, allows life to embrace them. I might give it a shot this year.

I was taken out of a warm, damp, and dark space in which I had every comfort. You brought me out into the light; you washed me clean; you gave me to others to love and from whom to be loved. I doubt I'll ever understand completely, but I hope you'll help me revel in your love and learn to play with your beads. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

DECEMBER 9

“For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.”

-Isaiah 61:11

As an aspiring gardener, this verse really speaks to me. In the darkest times of winter, the catalogs arrive, and I spend hours pouring over the beautiful illustrations and descriptions and thinking about and planning for spring planting season. As the weather warms, the earth brings forth all kinds of shoots, some desirable and some not so much. (Bindweed and buttercup, really?!) I wait eagerly for the carefully planted seeds and tubers to spring up and rejoice as they grow and produce. Then comes the challenge of weeding, feeding, and watering to make sure the plants can produce. The earth and the garden may cause the springing forth, but the gardener's skill, knowledge, and hard work are necessary to ensure the harvest.

I look at God, as the creator of the Garden of Eden, as a true Master Gardener! How God must rejoice when righteousness and praise spring up before all the nations. As a part of His creation, I believe our responsibility is to foster the development of righteousness and praise through our thoughts,

conversations, and actions. As St. Teresa of Ávila so beautifully writes: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

Gracious God, we thank you for giving wonderful examples to help us follow you. Help us to live and grow in your love. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.

-Cathey Frederick

DECEMBER 10

“He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; **they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;** nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

-Isaiah 2:4

When I was in the hospital with pneumonia in February 2019, my laptop died(!) and I was bored out of my mind. I started channel-surfing on the TV in my

room and found a TV show where they were throwing homemade knives against a wall to see if they survived. It was a TV show on the History Channel called “Forged in Fire” and contestants competed to make knives and swords for a \$10,000 prize. It was fascinating to me because of the need to understand the composition of the steel they were using, the culture and history behind the knives and swords contestants were told to make, and the way they were fashioning the blade was interesting to watch. (Seeing men working in utili-kilts was also pretty fun.)

This particular verse from Isaiah 2 caught my eye when I was looking at verses to use for this devotional book because I could now understand all the work involved in "beating swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." This was before the time of the gas-powered forges that many metalsmiths now enjoy, so smiths would have to heat their metal in coal-powered forges and hammer it out on anvils. The process of beating spears into pruning hooks would involve heating the metal and shaping it into a hook by beating it around the horn of an anvil with a hammer. Beating the swords into plowshares would involve broadening the tip and sharpening it.

The thing that makes this image so amazing is the idea of repurposing an instrument of war into something useful for peacetime. Israel was usually at war with

somebody, and it would be ludicrous to repurpose a sword or spear this way. However, things are changing. The Messiah is coming, and the ways of the world are being turned upside down. Things meant for war are now only going to be used for peaceful purposes. Change is coming.

Mold our hearts, Lord, and change them as a metalsmith changes the swords and spears into something more useful for Your world. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

DECEMBER 11

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

-Isaiah 11:1

It is perilous to be a young tree on Big Lake. The beaver makes regular rounds.

Years ago, I planted a Gravenstein apple tree. The beaver chewed it to a stump. New shoots grew. I put wire around the tree to protect it from the beaver's teeth. The tree grew back, producing huge, juicy apples. Last winter the beaver climbed up the wire and pruned it again to a bare stump. This spring the injured stump

sprouted a leaf. By the end of summer, it had several healthy new branches surrounded by a wide wire cage.

Out of an injured stump, new life springs.

Over and over again, the people of God were crushed.
And new life sprang up.

Over and over again our lives, our hopes, our dreams
get crushed to lifeless stumps.

I wonder: What happens in an injured tree root before
new life springs forth?

What healing happens in us that allows new life to
spring forth in us? What happens between grieving loss
and the healing that allows new life to surprise us?
What goes on in the between time?

What has been crushed in you that you are grieving?
What helps you to heal? When have you been surprised
by new life? Where is God in your grieving, healing and
resting, waiting and watching? Advent asks us to be
quiet, to rest, to watch, to wait. We do that in the
promise that we are never alone; never without hope.

*Gracious One, in whom we live and move and have our
being, You see crushed stumps with love and hope. Hold
us in our grieving, our resting, our healing. May we wait
and watch with the assurance of your presence and in
the hope of new life springing forth in the most
surprising ways. Help us to become even more a healing,*

restoring, life-giving community to a world that needs your love. Amen.

-The Rev. Vicki Wesen

DECEMBER 12 (FEAST OF LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE)

"The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

-Isaiah 11:2

The story of Guadalupe features an Indian man 10 years after the Spanish conquest of southern Mexico, who encounters the Virgin. She sends him to the Spanish bishop to ask for a church to be built where she stands. As an Indian, he hardly has the social capital to talk to the bishop like that, and the bishop initially resists, but in the end, a miracle is wrought and the church is built. Over 500 years later the stone building still attracts thousands of pilgrims daily. It is not large or impressively decorated. It seems to gather up in its stones the memories of an encounter that stands society on its head.

The above passage refers to God's chosen messenger who will establish just rule in Israel once more. In our

day, perhaps we can see that messenger as the Indian man who obeyed the command of the Lady and forever colored the Hispanic experience of the faith. Battling against unjust social structures in the church, he nevertheless delivers the message and the church is built. The story still inspires people of indigenous and mixed-blood in Latin America. "If God talks to us through the divine mother and brings justice, we have hope."

It remains to the powerful to surrender to the work of God and follow along. I am a white, male, American citizen. I am powerful. Like the bishop's initial reaction, I can pull what I have to my bosom, fending off any who would chip away at it, or I can bend the power I have to serve what God is doing among powerless people. The story of Guadalupe places hope before the powerless and a challenge before the powerful.

Be present with your people, O God of liberation, and give us the strength to follow Juan Diego's vision of Our Lady of Guadalupe to bend earthly power to the service of your Kingdom, through him who liberates us, your Son, our Lord who with you and the Holy Spirit, live and reign in glory everlasting. Amen.

-The Rev. Paul Moore

DECEMBER 13

"Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins." -Isaiah 11:5

It seems my entire life has been devoted to losing weight. I started the year with a goal; I wanted to return to my college weight (and confess I've over half-way there). I have reached the final notch in my belt and will need to either cut a new notch sometime in the next few weeks or pray Santa will bring me a belt with a new set of notches I can begin playing with.

I used to wear both suspenders and belts (suspenders to keep the pants up and belt upon which to hang my cell phone holster), but a friend made fun of me. He said, "There is the sign of a man with absolutely no faith – wearing a belt and with suspenders!" So now I mostly wear just a belt. Yes, I was shamed into it (I ashamedly admit). Besides, I got tired of the suspender grips constantly coming unsnapped. I guess I just wasn't built for suspenders – or they weren't engineered to handle the stresses I put upon them. Either way, I buckled down, lost weight, and notched it as a victory in the end (or wherever).

It seems strange for Isaiah to mention belts, for the men of the middle east wear robes, and robes don't require cinctures. On the other hand, they did need a place for tucking in their money bag or hanging their

knife. This allowed them to keep their hands free for working the land, or testing merchandise being sold in the bazaars, or defending the flock from predators. Their belts enabled them to be safe and secure and to do right by friend and neighbor.

Advent, it seems, invites us to learn to let go and let God. It may be a season in which we live in suspense, but we are free to belt out those wondrous tunes that guide us toward the season of light and joy.

God, help me relax. Help me to know that you've got me covered. Help free up my hands that I may use them to Your glory, and to Your honor, and to the praise of Your Name. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

DECEMBER 14

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

-Isaiah 11:6

Any time I think about the kingdom of God on Earth, the painting of "The Peaceable Kingdom" by the artist Edward Hicks comes to mind. To my slightly jaded eyes, there is almost something campy about that

particular representation — not quite on par with “Dogs Playing Poker,” but in a similar hackneyed spirit.

And by the way, although we always give the lion top billing in that biblical reference, it is in fact a leopard that will lie down with a goat. The lion gets the calf and the yearling. Some misinterpretations wind up with greater credence than the truths they supplant. There's a lot of that going around these days. Which is a shame, because the "peaceable kingdom" should be our rightful inheritance as Christians. Isaiah's prophecy implies that it is incumbent upon us, whether we identify as wolves or sheep, lions or lambs, to embrace those who would seem completely inimitable to our wellbeing. It took the appearance of Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, to show us the way.

Lord, teach us loving-kindness that embraces those we would demonize, and help us to see that fear is a yoke that binds us in service to our worst instincts, while the love of Christ is what frees us to prepare for the kingdom of God on Earth. Amen.

-Michael Boss

DECEMBER 15

“The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”
-Isaiah 11:7

To be honest, I chose this verse because nobody else had selected it and it is raising my hackles as someone involved with conservation and animal rights.

The first part of the verse regarding the bear and the cow grazing reminds me of the 4 ½ years I spent living in Montana and hearing about grizzly bears being relocated for threatening a rancher's livestock, especially in the Flathead Valley where my great-aunt lives. If it was a black bear, the rancher might shoot it, but grizzly bears are a protected species. Montana Fish & Wildlife had humane traps that are about the size of a U-Haul trailer, and they bait the traps so that the bears just go in there and have the door close behind them. The bear can then be relocated to an area where they will not cause harm to livestock.

The second part is probably what raises my hackles the most. I am involved with the Wildcat Sanctuary, a sanctuary that takes in large and small wildcats and hybrid cats from bad situations. Private situations can be some of the most damaging because the cats are usually not fed an appropriate diet, and it causes problems. One of the most common situations involves

people illegally owning an African savanna cat called a serval. These cats, who look like Dr. Suess's interpretation of a leopard, need a diet high in calcium during their formative years, and many of the servals at the sanctuary have fractures caused by metabolic bone disease as a result of not getting the proper diet. These private owners fed their cats the nutritional equivalent of straw instead of the raw meat diet that they needed. (If you would like more information on the Wildcat Sanctuary and their work, please visit <http://wildcatsanctuary.org>.)

The image Isaiah is putting forth is one where the predator and its prey are coexisting peacefully next to each other, rather than one harming the other. We as humans are a significant contributor to the predator/prey issue as we build onto wildlands and displace wild animals as a result. Bears usually go after cattle because they are hungry, and the rancher has likely cleared the forestland that the bear would normally inhabit. People's desire to "collect" wildlife contributes to the captive wildlife crisis that the Wildcat Sanctuary exists to remedy. One thing we can think about this Advent is where each of us fits into this situation.

Thank you, Lord, for groups like the Wildcat Sanctuary that seek to help creatures in bad situations. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

DECEMBER 16

“The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.”

-Isaiah 11:8

Despite being terrified of venomous snakes, one of my favorite YouTube channels is Viperkeeper. Run by a gentleman in Pennsylvania named Al Coritz, the videos focus on his collection of venomous snakes from all over the world. His collection houses cobras (including a king cobra named Elvis), an assortment of mambas, boomslangs, vipers from everywhere except North America, lanceheads from Central and South America, and some Australian snakes. Despite the amount of feeding, milking, and handling of snakes he does, he has only been bitten twice in his life, and he stocks many different antivenoms because a snakebite could kill him if he has to wait for the hospital to fly in the right one from a zoo. The main reason he doesn't keep North American vipers? The antivenom is prohibitively expensive with an average dose being 20 vials at a cost of up to \$5,000 per vial (including hospital markup).

Having watched his videos, I want to flinch in horror at the idea of a child happily playing “over the hole of the asp” or a child “put[ting] its hand on the adder’s den.” What kind of parent would let their child do that when

snakes like the puff adder kill and maim many people in Africa?!?!?

The key to understanding this is to realize that Isaiah is employing some hyperbole, and he is using some imagery that would have been familiar to the people of the Levant. They all knew the danger of the various vipers and desert cobras, and they would have understood why a child playing near an asp was incredibly dangerous. In using the enmity between humanity and reptiles that stemmed from the Fall in Genesis 3, the people of Isaiah's time would have understood that Isaiah's words involved neutralizing a threat and restoring peace to the general order of things. I, for one, cannot wait.

Lord, you might not want us to handle serpents or put ourselves at risk of envenomation, but You do want us to be at peace with each other. Give us peaceful spirits and help us to cultivate peace in our hearts. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

DECEMBER 17

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.”

-Isaiah 35:1-2

In August and September 2020, the CZU Lightning Complex Fire ravaged parts of Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. 86,509 acres were burned, and I had several friends who had to evacuate in case the fire reached their towns. Among the places burned during the month-long fire were Camp Hammer, Skylark Ranch, and the edges of the University of California—Santa Cruz.

Why are these places important? Well, they are places from my childhood that were instrumental in seeing God in nature. Camp Hammer was the first camp I ever attended at 10 years old, and it was where I first learned who Jesus really was. Skylark Ranch was the Girl Scout camp I attended for a few years, where I started my counselor training, and I worked there during the summer after I graduated from high school. It was where I learned to feel at home among the redwoods. UC Santa Cruz was the first place where I

fully lived out my faith, where I learned a lot about the Bible through Intervarsity and my college church, and where I was baptized. The campus is in the middle of a redwood forest, and the view of Monterey Bay from campus is breathtaking. Being among the trees was calming to me and reminded me that there was something bigger than myself.

Isaiah speaks of “see[ing] the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” in the wilderness and desert blooming. Just as I feel that I am in God’s presence when I am in a redwood forest, others find themselves in awe at the beach, in the mountains, or even in the desert. What an amazing Creator we have!

Gracious God, thank you for giving each of us reminders of Your power and majesty in Creation. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

DECEMBER 18

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees."

-Isaiah 35:3

In a time of devastating pandemic, of political rancor so strong we can scarcely talk openly with each other, of pleas to respond to desperate needs and continuing

iniquities that seem intractable, when strength is needed to bring a better time into being a more secure humanity, and an answer to the hopes of so many...

Well, Isaiah seems to be talking about us, doesn't he?

In these times God calls us to see our neighbors, our common humanity, and strengthen our weak hands, make firm our weak knees, and get on with it. Healing needs to be offered: can we offer it? Healing needs to be received: can we accept it?

Once years ago, foolishly working alone, I was repairing a leaky roof when the rain started. I slipped and fell off a roof. Broke some bones in my back. I couldn't speak for several minutes. I was helpless. A newsboy delivering papers saw me fall and called the neighbor, who saw I was in bad shape, covered me with a blanket to head off shock and keep off the rain, and called my wife. There followed days of excellent hospital care, people stopping by to pray with me, generous support from the school where I taught. Those folks strengthened my weak hands (broken wrist bone) and made firm my shaky knees. Isaiah would have been gratified. I know I was.

Who hasn't had difficult times, times when one's shaky strength is not enough and one is grateful for the strength others lend us? And who hasn't been called to offer strength to others?

*O God, you have bound us together in a common life.
Help us, in the midst of our struggles to work together
with mutual forbearance and respect, through Jesus
Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 824)*

-Tom Worrell

DECEMBER 19

"Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'"

-Isaiah 35:4

I HATE scary movies. My dad loved them and as a child, I sat on his lap watching through my fingers too many times. Even when a resolution was imminent—sometimes a blessed happy ending—those films were never finished quickly enough!

Advent is just a little like that for me. Though I know well the end of the tale—the happy ending of Christmas, if you will—it never arrives fast enough for my inner child. You know, “God, give me patience. NOW!” As I write this, we’re in Day 4 of the post-election in-between, and comparisons are inescapable: in torture we continue waiting, following an agonizing

gestation, for the birth—we truly hope—of a new and real resolution, yet still incomplete in all likelihood. So much waiting! So much pain! And for what? More of the same?

But just as St. Francis prayed, where there is despair *we* can sow hope. The language of today's passage is unequivocal, using only imperatives: **BE** strong. Here **IS** your God. He **WILL** come and save you. No ifs, ands, or buts. This is what hope looks like in writing. And hope is always a priceless gift!

We may choose to make way for the Messiah by sowing that hope. The annual recurrence of Advent gives us the opportunity not just to wait but *with the intention* to learn and master patience. There will always be pain in this earthly life, but as God's beloved children we are afforded grace to persevere. We are called to compassion—to suffer with one another, dividing grief—just as Jesus took on the sins and suffering of the world. To hope is to not suffer alone.

It's a lot to ask of us, human and imperfect. Can we really do all that? Yes! We can! With God's help.

And we already know the ending.

God of strength and peace, help us to be strong and fearless, trusting in your promises. Amen.

-David Sloat

DECEMBER 20

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert...”

-Isaiah 35:5-6

What memories this passage evokes! I had sung Handel’s “Messiah” many times before, but this was the first time I was the alto soloist performing with an orchestra, and actually getting paid. We four soloists sat in front of the very large choir, I in my long black dress which I had purchased for the occasion. It was very exciting. These words of prophecy of the Savior’s actions sung in recitative are emblazoned in my heart and mind.

Each of the Gospels reports incidents of Jesus’ healing. Matthew 15 tells us of large crowds coming to him including the lame, crippled, blind, mute, and many others. Mark 10 relates the healing of the blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Luke 7 reports the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. John 9 relays the story of Jesus making clay with spittle, placing it on the blind man's eyes, and telling him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, Acts 9 gives us the

account of Paul's sight being restored when Ananias' laid hands on him.

Truly God wants us to be whole and restoration continues today. Sometimes we may even fail to see the miracles that occur through modern medicine and technology. God's love surrounds us and the Holy Spirit works in a myriad of ways. Thanks be to God!

Thank you, God, for your healing and restoration of the world. Help us to always remember that we are recipients of and participants in that restoration. Amen.
-Cathey Frederick

DECEMBER 21

"The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes."

-Isaiah 35:7

This passage is part of a five-verse exhortation to choose joy.

There are so many instances when this seems to be an insurmountable task. A woman I know is struggling with a long-buried hurt. Even though she recently

reached out to the person who caused her pain, and was offered forgiveness, she is unwilling to accept it and move into a new phase of her life. She just can't let go.

Another dear friend of mine recently lost her husband of 25 years to an aggressive form of cancer. Throughout their marriage, her husband had weathered four different forms of cancer until his body gave out at age 64. Although my friend is grieving a year later (does one ever stop grieving altogether?), she is building her life again. Instead of wallowing in heartache, she is tentatively stepping out to travel, meeting new people, and experiencing new horizons and adventures. Just this last summer, she purchased a boat. The name? Joy.

Dear Lord, help us to dig for joy, even amidst our sorrow. It is then that the burning sands of our souls can transform into cool and refreshing pools filled with joy. Amen.

-Ashley Sweeney

DECEMBER 22

“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.”

-Isaiah 35:8

Oh, God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son.”

Abe said, “Man, you must be putting me on.”

God said, “No.” Abe say, “What?”

God say, “You can do what you want to, Abe, but

The next time you see me comin’, you better run.

Well, Abe said, “Where d’you want this killin’ done?”

God said, “Out on Highway 61.”

-Bob Dylan, “Highway 61 Revisited”

Being the wanderer that I am, I’m a sucker for a highway song. And if you are an aficionado of pop music, you have plenty of songs to choose from besides Dylan’s classic interpretation of Genesis, set against a disorienting sense of Cold War angst.

Looking over the various Bible versions of Isaiah’s prophecy, there seems to be some confusion over whether or not fools are allowed on the Highway of Holiness. Being in that camp myself, I live in the faith that, like most epic road trips I’ve taken in my life, it’s not the traveler who defines the highway, but the

highway that transforms those — fools included — who travel it.

Lord, help me to discern the path you have placed before me, and to pay attention to those who travel it with me. Your way may be rocky and hard at times, but the horizon always beckons brightly. Amen.

-Michael Boss

DECEMBER 23

“No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.”

-Isaiah 35:9

To understand the entirety of the passage we have looked at for the last seven days, there is a bit of history you need to know. Over 14 years, the ruling parties and families of Judah were deported to Babylon, culminating in the last deportation of people in 582 BCE. This exile was punishment for the gross abuses and actions of Israel that made the poor poorer and the wealthy even more wealthy. (Does this sound familiar?) The injustices so angered the Lord that He caused Israel to be exiled to Babylon. In 538 BCE, the Persians conquered Babylon, and Cyrus (their king) was made

king over Palestine in 536 BCE and issued an edict allowing the captives to go home.

Are we caught up? Good. Moving on...

This ten verse passage (which finishes tomorrow) is the prophet Isaiah telling the exiles that they can come home. A big clue to understanding this is the word “redeemed”. When people were captured during war, they frequently became slaves to the power that captured them. Because the Persians had captured Babylon, they had the power to free them. Hence, the prophet tells the people that they had been redeemed.

John the Baptist uses these words and this imagery to announce the coming of the Messiah because they were words that his intended audience would understand, especially as they had been conquered AGAIN and were sitting under the iron grip of the Roman Empire. It had only been a little over 500 years since Cyrus set the captives free in Babylon, and there were definitely people who wanted Rome and its puppet kings out of there.

What this passage from Isaiah tells me is that God can use just about anything to redeem His people. He used a foreign power to bring the exiles home, and He sent His Son to die and redeem us from sin and death. In this season of waiting and hoping, it gives me so much

comfort to know that God can use anything in my life redemptively.

Lord, thank you for the way you work in the world and in our lives. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

DECEMBER 24

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

-Isaiah 35:10

I cannot see the word “ransom” without thinking of the O. Henry short story: Ransom of Red Chief. The child is so mischievous that the kidnappers eventually pay the parents to take him back. Without getting too all-fired theologically twisted over it, the idea of God paying God a Ransom for our salvation, and ultimately being the ransom for us (Jesus, God’s Son) almost seems the original version of the O. Henry story. Just what sort of rascals are we that God would pay to get us back safe and sound? God loves turning the tables on God’s enemies!

I receive a perverse sort of pleasure thinking of the devil standing before God, pleading the devil's case:
"Take them back. All of them! I don't want them. They're too much trouble. They're yours. And while you're at it, take everything else I've got, too. I'm glad to be rid of the lot of them!!!"

Like Red Chief, we are oblivious to the drama that unfolds, and yet the time comes we return home, singing our songs while the sorrow and sighs flee away into the night – along with the devil. Praise God!

O Lord, you want us back, we know not why / But that you do, we can't but cry / For you delight to hold us tight / you, our Lord, our Advent light! Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

DECEMBER 25 (CHRISTMAS DAY)

"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

-Isaiah 9:6

What do we call this child? Every couple who welcomes a new member of the family faces this choice, and much thought is put into it. We normally look for family

names, names that “fit together,” “flow off the tongue,” or just something we like. In prophetic contexts, names always mean something. This is a classic case. The prophet’s ecstatic writing seems to erupt with symbolic titles.

“Wonderful Counselor” speaks of wisdom, the divine wisdom of love that lays the first layers of existence in the void.

"Mighty God" speaks of the power to hold all things in the divine heart, maintaining us in being, answering the question of why we exist at all.

"Eternal Father" speaks of wise guidance and nurturing, that great ideal that far outstrips our own fathers, whoever they were with all their flaws, carrying us and all things toward the divine heart.

"Prince of Peace" speaks of presence in the troubled world, fierce in the face of injustice, and formidable in our expansiveness.

So often we feel so distant, and injustice seems to be so insurmountable. Our nation is divided. Our leaders feed off those divisions to remain in power. The system seems incapable of rising above itself to bring us all together again.

As Christians, we see the fulfillment of this passage on this day in our sacred history. The Christ Child

embodies these truths. He will go on to die by the systems of this world to live again in a "kingdom that is not of this world," yet in it. Those of us who follow him share in that divine/human existence. We are called to the wisdom that sees the universe as one; able to hold the world as sacred, actively working to shepherd all things toward the divine heart, and fiercely and formidably loving as we have been loved.

At Christmas, we give these names to Christ, and we take them as our own as we seek to live in him.

Teach us so to hear your name for us, that in naming one another in love, we might find that we are being caught up in your divine, redeeming, transforming love, and then show us, we pray, that the whole creation bears your name with and through us, through the One who is Emmanuel. Amen.

-The Rev. Paul Moore

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Christmas blessings to you all!

-Jen McCabe