

Advent Reflections for 2026

Advent was developed as a season of the church year in the late fourth century. It was widely practiced across Christian churches worldwide by the sixth century. The church developed Advent to provide an additional season of fasting and an alternative time for the final preparation of candidates for baptism. After the Roman Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the legal religion of the Roman Empire in 380, the vast majority of citizens sought to become Christian. A single season could not accommodate all of those preparing for baptism.



Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” The focus of Advent is on Christian life now in light of the culmination of all things at Christ’s *second* coming. By focusing on last things, baptismal candidates were reminded of the need for Christ to come again to make all things new as they prepared to begin their new lives in Christ.

The traditional colors of Advent are blue or purple, signifying a season of preparation and repentance. This year’s readings focus on the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is the primary Old Testament reading for Advent in Year B. I hope that these readings and reflections will guide you as you prepare your heart for the coming of Christ again into your heart. May you be blessed.

Pastor Leigh

*<https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-history-of-advent-for-united-methodists> (ed.)

Introduction to Isaiah

Our reflection companion for Advent this year is the School of the Prophet Isaiah. Although Isaiah is compiled into one book, it is almost certainly the work of a number of prophets. The writings gathered together in the Book of Isaiah span roughly two to three centuries, covering the 8th century BCE through the post-exilic period (c. 740 BCE to the 6th or 5th century BCE).

Biblical scholarship generally divides the time span into distinct historical layers:

- First Isaiah (Chapters 1–39) Rooted primarily in the 8th century BCE during the historical ministry of the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz, who lived and prophesied in Jerusalem roughly from 740 to 681 BCE (spanning the reigns of Judah's kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh). These chapters largely address the Assyrian Crisis and judgment on Judah
- Second Isaiah (Chapters 40–55) Composed by an anonymous author or school of prophets during the mid-to-late Babylonian exile, around 540–530 BCE, focusing heavily on comfort, liberation, and the end of the exile.
- Third Isaiah (Chapters 56–66) Dating from the post-exilic period (late 6th through 5th centuries BCE), addressing the return to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the Second Temple, and the broader Messianic age.

Monday, November 30, 2026

Isaiah 9:1

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

Mark Shea points out in a discussion of the Gospel of Matthew that these terms, “Zebulun and the land of Naphtali” are the old names for the northern kingdom that was the first to fall to Assyrian aggression. There must have been plenty of gloom to go around for a proud people who became vassals of a nation they considered corrupt and godless.

Contempt is very powerful. Unlike anger, which cools eventually, contempt poisons relationships. Often, things seem fine on their face. Everyone is polite, maybe even a little too polite. But underneath that facade boils disrespect and even disgust. So if God held these weak provinces in contempt, it is more than surprising that they were chosen to “make glorious the way of the sea”.

How could such a change happen? Only through deep understanding and healing. The coming of the Messiah will change all the relationships between the various regions and tribes and their God. Have you ever had a relationship that underwent such a change? Perhaps you found out something about an absent parent that explained their behavior. Maybe you found out that all the “proof” that your spouse was cheating actually pointed to an entirely different cause. Or you might have gained compassion by standing in the shoes of someone you previously held in contempt.

If this deep a relationship rift can be healed for the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, it can be healed for you, too. God who brought the people back from the Exile can bring back even poisoned relationships to joy.

Tuesday, December 1, 2026

Isaiah 38:1-6

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.' Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the LORD: 'Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: 'Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city.'

Today is World AIDS Day, a commemoration that has changed drastically just in my lifetime. I first heard of AIDS among young sailors in New London. I thought it was some tropical disease. Then a doctor friend of mine who ran a clinic for gay men told me about an illness that he could neither diagnose nor treat effectively. Soon AIDS had cut a swath through a whole community. The diagnosis was a death sentence, and many had no support system, not even their families. In my tiny parish in New Hampshire, the partner of a man dying of AIDS came to my church looking for a congregation willing to host a funeral service. Not only did my quiet, dour Yankees approve the funeral; they came to mourn and remember so that at the last, the widower was not alone. By the time I was ministering in innercity Waterbury, Connecticut, AIDS was pervasive; the annual AIDS service filled a downtown church. My clergy friends and I anointed hundreds who had just started taking medication, but were by then so poor and so sick that few of them lived.

Gradually, things started to change. Medication for the virus was improved, and people started to live with the disease instead of dying from it. Like King Hezekiah in Isaiah's story, those who live with the reality of being HIV+ are given more years to live even after their diagnosis. But like the king, their perception of life is radically altered by their illness. Many who live with AIDS feel forgotten, even though there still is no cure, and plenty of stigma. And so today, we hear God's word to the king as words of hope, even as we must not forget the reality of those living with AIDS in our midst:

Wednesday, December 2, 2026

Isaiah 5:1-7

I will sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield rotten grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a wasteland; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished garden; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!



Disappointment and betrayal. This parable used by the writer of Isaiah is full of wordplays and poetry, most of it lost to us in the English translation. But what is not lost is the profound sense of loss. Like a jilted lover listing all the ways that “she done him wrong”, the writer describes the care and love that the vineyard owner (God) lavished upon the vineyard (the people). And what was the result? Wild, sour grapes and bloodshed.

What in your life has led to disappointment and betrayal? It could be a relationship gone wrong, but it could also be a career into which you poured your energy, or a house project, or an organization. Our frustration that all our hard work has gone nowhere is a powerful force. But we cannot allow our sour grapes to embitter us. In your prayers today, talk with God about your failed dreams. God understands. The One whose Chosen People failed over and over again, will teach you how to invest again in love.

Thursday, December 3, 2026

Isaiah 5:8-12

Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.

(Bath, homer and ephah are all Hebrew units of measurement, based on the weight of an egg)
Ah, you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine, whose feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine, but who do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands!

The fast lane – every society has one. Those people who are thinner, hipper, richer than everyone else and flaunt it. The excesses of the rich have always been fodder for criticism. It's tempting to think that the world of billionaires and influencers and fancy champagne are perversions of the present age. But they are universal, because who has not, at least once, wondered what it would be like to live the glitzy lifestyle?

Isaiah points out that life in the fast lane is not so much immoral as empty. Empty houses, vineyards that don't yield, and blindness to the really rich life that God offers are the consequence.

Now most of us have neither the means nor the desire to land on the cover of *People* magazine. But we do have to ask ourselves what kind of a yield we are getting on our investment of time and energy. Has your desire for “more and better” isolated you from friends and family? Are you addicted to alcohol, or video games or checking the stock price? Are you so busy trying to look good that you don't feel good? Isaiah reminds us that those pursuits are empty, and that God longs to fill us with good things, if only we are ready to receive them.

Friday, December 4, 2026

Isaiah 10:1-4

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still.

Are these words written about the Assyrians, who are about to crush the Babylonians? Are they about some foreign nation that has sinned against God? No, actually, this is a prophecy about the people of Israel. Isaiah believes that their evil and corruption will eventually catch up with them, that God's displeasure will make itself known soon.

These words ring so true in our own time. As we watch corrupt governments, religious institutions and corporations crumble under the weight of their own greed, we can see where evil leads. No matter our political affiliation, there are acts that are so blatantly violent, so wrong, that that we cannot look away and stay silent. Usually, we have an uncomfortable feeling when the news is too good to be true, or when leaders spout hate or when an organization seems headed in the wrong direction. But sometimes, evil creeps up on us, and like the people Isaiah's time, we need a prophet to point out how far we have come from God's will.

But Isaiah also reminds the people that God condemns actions, not people. The last verse reminds us of God's forgiving presence when we as a nation or as individuals have gone down the wrong path and need the repent.

For the sake of those who are oppressed by unfair laws, for the needy widows and orphans of our time, we need to ask the tough questions, hold people accountable and see beyond the hype to the reality, as Isaiah did, trusting that God will help us make our paths straight again.

Saturday, December 5, 2026

In a few weeks, there will a lot of talk of new beginnings, clean slates, a fresh page . Listen to the writer of Isaiah talk about the Messiah Who Is To Come:

Isaiah 10:1-6

Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall. A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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.

There's a reference here that isn't clear in the English translation. The “majestic trees” in the first part of the passage are the cedars of Lebanon. Cedar trees, once felled, can't regenerate themselves. The “stump of Jesse” is understood to be an oak tree, which will put out little shoots around the place where it is cut down. The prophet is making a contrast between the Assyrian kingdom and the kingdom of David (whose father was Jesse).

In the moment, sometimes it's hard to know whether a relationship, a job, a circle of friends, are cedars or oaks. Sometimes we have to grieve a loss and just move on. But sometimes, something new and almost miraculous can grow out of the stumps of our dreams. In fact, often, something in our life needs to die to make room for what is new.

The holidays are often a time of reflection, a marker in our year that helps us evaluate where we are and where we have been. Have you grieved the fallen cedars in your life? Are you looking for little sprouts that might be just now coming into view? Are you ready for the Messiah?

Sunday, December 6, 2026

Isaiah 58:9-12

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am." If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Often, when we think about spiritual renewal and spiritual practices, we are tempted to focus on ourselves, on changing something within ourselves. Today's reading reminds us that the work of justice is itself a spiritual practice.

By this point in the history of the people of Israel, they have been through numerous ups and downs, mostly downs. And yet, the prophet is reminding them that the route to spiritual wholeness is through right relationships with one another and their surrounding community.

The behaviors leading to their gloom are pretty clear; blaming, lying, neglecting the poor and those in poor health. But the prophet does not just condemn these actions; he also suggests what will relieve the gloom. Doing kindness for others is a tried and true solution for a spiritual funk. Not only does it re-focus us from our own misery, it leads us into new understandings of where our true gifts may lie.

Dr. Anthony Fauci (quoting Lauren Morrill, to whom the quote should be attributed) famously said "I don't know how to explain to you that you should care for other people" This passage reminds us that in caring for others, we are healing ourselves.

Monday, December 7, 2026

There are very few alive today who remember “the day that shall live in infamy”, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. They have been called the Greatest Generation; the people who stared down Nazi violence, who rebuilt a world economy, who paved the way for the next generation. We honor them because they brought order out of chaos. The people of Isaiah's time were looking for someone to lead them out of chaos. They had had enough of boy princes and makeshift wearers of the cloak.

Isaiah 3:1-6

- For now the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and staff—all support of bread, and all support of water— warrior and soldier; judge and prophet, diviner and elder, captain of fifty and dignitary counselor and skillful magician and expert enchanter. And I will make boys their princes, and babes shall rule over them. The people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the base to the honorable. Someone will even seize a relative, a member of the clan, saying, ‘You have a cloak; you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule.’

But the other will cry out on that day, saying, ‘I will not be a healer; in my house there is neither bread nor cloak; you shall not make me leader of the people.’

In this time, we, too are looking for leaders to bring order out of chaos. In the midst of war and the decline of democracy, we want someone to be the healer. Like the people of Isaiah's age, it would be tempting to hand leadership to anyone who has enough money to cloak them. But as most of them will tell you, the Greatest Generation were not extraordinary people. They were ordinary people who rose to leadership by their faith in spite of their fears. The question is, who will lead now? Could it be that **you** are meant to be *warrior or soldier, judge or prophet, diviner or elder, captain of fifty or dignitary, counselor or skillful magician or even expert enchanter?*

Tuesday, December 8, 2026

Isaiah 19:18, 23-25

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

The first part of the book of Isaiah has chapters and chapters of dire predictions against the various "frenemies" that surrounded Israel. For generations, the leadership of the Hebrews had been making alliances and trying to play off one world power against another. But in the end, all their political maneuvering did no good; the Babylonians carried them off to Exile. So the end of this chapter is fairly astounding; Isaiah foresees a time when God will not only forgive all these foreign powers, but gather them in as family.



What amazing love! It would be as if a modern day Isaiah proclaimed that from now on, the Taliban and the Soviet Union and the nation of Israel were one happy family, equally loved by their Creator. We can scarcely imagine such a world. I suspect that it was just as unbelievable to the people of Isaiah's time.

How would we act differently if we believed that those whom we fear could be gathered into God's family with us?

Wednesday, December 9, 2026

Isaiah 17:1-8

An oracle concerning Damascus. See, Damascus will cease to be a city, and will become a heap of ruins. Her towns will be deserted forever; they will be places for flocks, which will lie down, and no one will make them afraid. The fortress will disappear from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus; and the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the children of Israel, says the LORD of hosts. On that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean. And it shall be as when reapers gather standing grain and their arms harvest the ears, and as when one gleans the ears of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten— two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, says the LORD God of Israel. On that day people will regard their Maker, and their eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel; they will not have regard for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not look to what their own fingers have made, either the sacred poles or the altars of incense.

There was a time not too long ago that this oracle concerning Syria would have been ripped from the headlines. Syria was devastated by civil war. And now these images match the situation in Gaza. The misery created by war and conquest fall hardest on those who have the least power. But even in these scenes of devastation, Isaiah points to fruit left on the tops of trees and in the fields; the “gleanings” that might be just enough for to keep a starving person alive for a day. In the midst of their misery, Isaiah reminds the people that seeds of the future are all around them. He reminds them that those last few olives or ears of corn are a gift from God – more powerful than the ritual objects being used to try to conjure up some sort of power from an idol.(the poles and altars).

If you are feeling barren right now, where are the gleanings on which you might feed yourself as you move from a lean time into God’s glorious future for you? Or do you know someone who life has been laid low by life circumstances that needs a reminder that God has something better for them? Sometimes, our loving care is the gleaning that will offer someone else the nourishment they need in a hard time.

Thursday, December 10, 2026

Watchman, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are.
Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height, see that glory beaming star.
Watchman, does its beauteous ray aught of joy or hope foretell?
Traveler, yes—it brings the day, promised day of Israel.

Watchman, tell us of the night, for the morning seems to dawn.
Traveler, darkness takes its flight, doubt and terror are withdrawn.
Watchman, let thy wanderings cease; Hie thee to thy quiet home.
Traveler, lo! the Prince of Peace Lo! the Son of God is come!

This familiar song is based on a little snippet of a prophecy from *Isaiah 21:11-12* *The oracle concerning Dumah. One is calling to me from Seir, "Sentinel, what of the night? Sentinel, what of the night?" The sentinel says: "Morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; come back again."*

The hymn suggests that the news is good; that the promised day of Israel is coming. But this precisely is the difficulty of this season. We wait for the Savior, knowing already that He will be born among us. But the future into which He is born is nowhere near that clear. We know that we have been promised the Prince of Peace, but not when. We know that we have been promised joy and redemption, but we don't know when. We have been promised that the tiny seeds, little sprigs, various remnants will all grow into something strong and beautiful. But we have no timetable for that process. In fact, the message of Isaiah is that we wait in hope because we cannot know the future. But we need to keep asking.

These are hard words for us, as they were for those in Isaiah's time. Like little kids on the way to Grandma's house, we want to know "are we there yet?". We want signs, a timetable, a flow chart, a money-back guarantee that things will go the way we wish they would. But we have none of that.

What we have is God's presence, hovering among the Christmas carolers, manifesting itself in deeds of kindness, speaking words of peace in a violent world, whispering hope in our despair. As we get closer and closer to Christmas, we need to wait ever more intently for the sentinel's call, and keep inquiring.

Friday, December 11, 2026

One night, the prophet had a dream like this:

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

You might be the kind of person who has very vivid dreams like this, or you might have only a vague idea of some images when you wake up, but most of us have something; a dream, an image, an experience, that has motivated us to do the most important things in our lives. The problem is, those dreams fade, or at least, we allow ourselves to forget the feelings that went with the dream. The writer of Isaiah saw himself as being called and made holy for his life's work. He was well aware that he might be unqualified for it, that he might have "unclean lips". And yet, in the dream, he is cleansed and healed. Maybe you have had a similar experience.

But often, we trade the work we feel called to do for the work that presents itself to us. Are you doing what you feel called to do? If not, is there some way you can respond to your dreams during this Advent season? You may not be able to follow them in the way you had originally planned, but is there some way you could work the energy of that original vision into your daily life now? Our dreams are gifts from God that we should use to bring joy and passion into the lives we lead. Today, reconnect to your dreams and be thankful.

Saturday, December 12, 2026

Isaiah 5: 24, 26-28

Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. ; Here they come, swiftly, speedily! None of them is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a loincloth is loose, not a sandal-thong broken; their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind. Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions they roar; they growl and seize their prey, they carry it off, and no one can rescue. They will roar over it on that day, like the roaring of the sea. And if one look to the land—only darkness and distress; and the light grows dark with clouds.

Isaiah's theology was that the Jews were constantly being overtaken by stronger nations because they had sinned by following foreign gods. That is not the theology that most of us espouse today; there were plenty of geo-political reasons why the Hebrew tribe could not sustain self-determination. But we do need to learn from their example. A society that allows the wealthy to neglect the needs of children, elderly people and the poor, is ripe for violence. Eventually, people who are oppressed seek relief.

Listen to these chilling words from Muslim activist Eboo Patel in 2005, talking about why he had dedicated his life to working with youth across religious divides:

“So when people say to me, 'Oh, Eboo, you know, you run this sweet, little organization called the Interfaith Youth Core, and you do such nice things. You bring kids together.' I say, 'Yeah, you know, there's another youth organization out there. It's called al-Qaeda. And al-Qaeda's been built over the past 25 years with lots of money, and with lots of strategy, and with lots of ideas of how you recruit young people and get them to think that this is the best way they can impact the world.’”

Who are the prophets who are pointing out the dangers of our societal choices today? Where have we rejected the instruction of the Lord to care for others? Where is there darkness and distress?

Sunday, December 13, 2026

Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Today is the feast day of St. Lucy, or Santa Lucia, (whose name means “light”); a winter solstice holiday which is celebrated particularly in Scandinavian countries where the winters are long, cold and dark. Her story is gruesome, but moving.. It could be a plot from “Bridgerton”.

Lucy was raised by her mother as a Christian. After the death of her father, Lucy’s mother, who suffered from ill health, wanted to marry Lucy off to a non-Christian man. Lucy, however, was determined to give her wedding dowry to the poor. After a vision during a pilgrimage, her mother consented to the change in plans. The scorned fiancé denounced Lucy for having broken her marriage promise, and denounced her to the government. When government officials ordered Lucy to make a sacrifice to the Emperor, she refused, and was put to the death. In some versions of her story, her eyes were removed and miraculously restored. Especially in Scandinavian countries, the day is symbolized by a young girl with a crown of candles who comes to bring her family sweet breads and treats.

Human beings need light. We need it physically to create Vitamin D and we need it psychologically to maintain our joy. We need to have reminders that no matter how dark our lives may seem, God is offering us light and life. Today, light a candle, or sit in front of a wood stove, or find some light streaming through a window. Soak in light and warmth. Look to the Light and find God’s glory to sustain you through the dark times. Jesus is coming!

Monday, December 14, 2026

Isaiah 24:1-2

Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor.

Besides all the nation-building and scattering that happens over the chapters of Isaiah, there are many descriptions of significant natural disasters. Floods and windstorms in particular were common occurrences, as well as drought and fire. The people of Isaiah's time attributed all these, of course, to God's wrath. But even with a more scientific explanation of weather events, it is worth reflecting on how natural disasters affect communities and individuals, sometimes for generations.

If you have ever been in the center of a natural disaster, you know that it shapes your thinking about daily weather in a profound way. The memories of a hurricane or tornado or flood can make people anxious even years later. Recovery from such an event is financial and practical, but also psychological.

Pray today for those who are experiencing natural disasters, whether it's people close to you, or those a half a world away. If you are still in recovery from a weather event, how is that recovery going? Is there a particular group of people to whom you might donate money or offer volunteer services? UMCOR, the United Methodist relief agency, has opportunities to go somewhere yourself to aid in disaster relief, or to help assemble kits that are used in first line disaster recovery. As this passage reminds us, natural disaster can happen to anyone, rich or poor. Through UMCOR, we can be among the first to help.

Tuesday, December 15, 2026

Isaiah 3:12-15

My people—their oppressors extort them, and creditors rule over them. O my people, your leaders mislead you and confuse the course of your paths. The Lord rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts.

Poverty. It is the flip side of the beautiful music and decorations, the groaning tables and delectable sweets of this season. The stark reality of poverty is built into the Christmas story. Mary gives birth not in the midst of a circle of female relatives, but in a barn, because some ruler somewhere wanted a tax enhancement. Shepherds hear the angels not because they are under a good roof, around a fire, but shivering out in the fields with their flocks. And after the birth of Jesus, an angry monarch decrees that hundreds of innocents shall die.

Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” in part because of his poverty. Maybe, like me, you have felt guilty and uncomfortable enjoying the splendors of this season knowing that there are many who lack even the basics of human existence. Should we be celebrating at all?

In this passage, God Almighty rises as the Prosecutor to make the case against those whose actions result in the poverty of others. We may not see ourselves as the authors of poverty. Certainly, none of us intended such an outcome. And yet, as participants in the economy, we need to acknowledge that some of the goods and services we enjoy come at the expense of others.

During this season, we need to ponder how we can be responsible to those who work the hardest and are paid the least. We need to consider what we could change in our daily routine to better reflect our values. We need to meditate on the life lived by the very poorest in our community, and how we could live in a way that would lift them up, too.

May we live so that others may live more fully.

Wednesday, December 16, 2026

Isaiah 10: 13-15

“By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found, like a nest, the wealth of the peoples, and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth, and there was none that moved a wing or opened its mouth or chirped.” Shall the ax vaunt itself over the one who wields it or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it? As if a rod should raise the one who lifts it up, or as if a staff should lift the one who is not wood!

This passage is a reminder to the reader of who God is. As progressive Christians, we may not ascribe every incident in the natural world to directly to God. But that does not mean we can arrogate to ourselves the power that belongs to the Creator.

So often we can fall into the trap of believing that the solution to every problem can be found in our own hard work or a new kind of tech or some action that we can do. But in fact, even in the modern world, there is deep mystery. Why do some ecosystems repair themselves and others do not? What is the real genesis of cancer? Why does a set of circumstances not turn out the same way every time?

There is much that we cannot know. And so in this season, we turn to God who created all that is and look at the mystery of the Love that incarnated Jesus. What should we learn from Jesus' life and death? What does it mean for Jesus to be fully human and also fully Divine?

What gathering action is God doing among us? Who is being brought off a throne? And are we in danger of being the ungrateful axe or saw or staff? Ponder today where you fit in God's great Creation.

Thursday, December 17, 2026

This tends to be a season when we look back. Nostalgia reigns. But listen to the prophet:

Isaiah 43:18-21

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

The theme here is fresh water. It springs forth, creates rivers in the desert and drink to God's chosen people. Obviously, people who live in the Near East pay a lot of attention to water, as truly fresh, potable water is at a premium. In fact, it's miraculous. In most places, desert water has to be treated to be drinkable. And I think "miraculous" is the mood of this text. So often, we tend to assume that what happened in the past is going to happen again. But what if God did something completely different? What if unlikely animals like jackals honored God? What if ostriches stopped running and fighting long enough to pay attention to God? What if the water of our spiritual experience was not brackish and smelly but truly new and fresh and life-giving? Ponder today what a really fresh, nourishing spiritual experience would be like for you. What would slake your deepest thirst? grown stale? What could you do to memories are lovely, we are called to try taking human form at Christmas.



Where has your spiritual practice experience something new? While new ways of being, as Jesus did in

Friday, December 18, 2026

Isaiah 4:2

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.³Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, ⁴once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. ⁵Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. ⁶It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

This passage follows a description of a beautiful nation made ugly by sin, and then redeemed. Redemption is a powerful theme in Isaiah, and it makes for great novels and movies. But most of us would prefer perfection to redemption. After all, who really wants to go through the misery of losing it all, sitting in the mess of our own making and being saved? How embarrassing!

But that process is exactly what is required to be “beautiful and glorious”. When we try to avoid it, we either invest enormous energy in trying to hide our failures, or live so narrowly that we leave no room for failure.

So, what will it be? Are you ready to be saved? Will you submit yourself to a spirit of judgment and allow God to burn away what is holding you down? Can you acknowledge to yourself and others your failures and allow God to spread the pavilion of forgiveness over you?

Only then will you be strong and beautiful. Our scars make us who we are, but they do not define us.

Saturday, December 19, 2026

Isaiah 2:1-5

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 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 any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

The image of Israel as the light and teacher to the nations was a powerful one for the leaders who envisioned the United States. This passage (which is repeated in the prophet Micah 4:3) was particularly important to George Washington. Following the hardships of the American Revolution, Washington utilized this Biblical imagery to express his deep desire for lasting peace and a return to domestic, agricultural life. He famously wrote of his hope *"that the swords might be turned into plough-shares, the spears into pruning hooks—and, as the Scripture expresses it, the nations learn war no more."* Even Thomas Paine, who was a radical Deist, rather than a traditional Christian, echoed the sentiment behind Isaiah 2 when writing his political pamphlets, hoping his generation's struggles would guarantee a future of peaceful cultivation for their children.

May we, who are heirs of the covenant promises of God in Scripture and the legacy of the founder of our nation, reflect deeply in this season on the things that make for peace.

Sunday, December 20, 2026

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” Then Isaiah said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

This is a fairly familiar passage, but its setting is not. This is God’s response to King Ahaz who was increasingly anxious about the threat of the rival kingdoms forming treaty alliances. This is one of the passages in which God is portrayed as frustrated and maybe even a little snarky. The prophet, speaking for God, offers the nervous king a sign that will calm his fears, saying that there would be clear proof of God’s favor in the birth of a child under certain conditions.

Notice that there is no real talk of virginity; the assumption that this sign would be a regular birth like all others, but that the baby born would be precocious, understanding good and evil as soon as he was weaned. Curds and honey were standard toddler fare in that time.

In that very short period of child development, all the worry about foreign alliances and treaties will have evaporated. What worries are consuming you that could well never come to pass? Where could you trust God to send you a sign for your comfort?

Monday, December 21, 2026

Isaiah 12:1-6

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

This passage is an epic story in a few verses. Have you ever come to the realization that you were on the wrong road and needed to repent and change your life? It's not always something criminal or dramatic. Perhaps you realize that you have your work/life balance seriously skewed. Maybe you realize that you have been holding on to a grudge that is poisoning a relationship. Maybe you have come to the realization that what was the dream job ten years ago isn't really for you anymore. Or you might be struggling with depression, substance abuse or an unsustainable lifestyle.

Our temptation, in the face of serious realizations like this, is to be angry with ourselves for not seeing the truth sooner. But rather than beat ourselves up, God's love and forgiveness can be a model for how we talk to ourselves. Isaiah reminds us that even when we need a complete change, as the people of his time did, God's love undergirds us and encourages us. We are promised that it is possible for us to find joy and draw water from the wells of salvation, if we trust the Divine Love to guide us into healthier ways of living. If this season has you thoughtful about change in your own life, remember that God loves you, and will be your strength.

Tuesday, December 22, 2026

Isaiah 49:1b-5

The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God." And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength.

Children develop personalities even before birth. For Mary, who was carrying a first baby, it might not have been obvious that this little one was special. Isaiah understands his call and the call of his people, to be so deep as to be pre-natal. In looking for a Messiah, Isaiah imagines a skilled and compelling speaker, and worries that he himself is not up to the task of being a prophet. And yet, he trusts in God to supply the qualities he did not have at birth.

What about your personality and abilities do you wish you could change? Is it possible that those characteristics are the very qualities that make you uniquely gifted to fulfill the work God has given you to do?

Ponder what you were born with, and what you need now, and ask God to give you the gift of grace to trust that everything you need will be supplied by the God who knew you in the womb.

Wednesday, December 23, 2026

Peace. And stillness. Ironic, isn't it, that we rush around and spend money and exert ourselves so much for a holiday whose epic moment is "Silent Night"?

The power of that moment still amazes. Year after year, the venue changes, the faces change, but the moment remains. Peace is so elusive in our society, and stillness even more so. Sometimes it comes unbidden; a surprise at the end of a busy day, or gift in the midst of hardship. Some years, that peace seems to be the natural progression of Advent. Some years, we can hardly believe that such peace is possible.

Isaiah 57:18-19

I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them.

But we must watch for it, and wait for it, and be ready to respond when it happens. It's easy when the moment happens at the end of the church service with the candles lit and the choir singing. It is a little harder to recognize as you rock a croupy child, or fix the heating system, or wait in line. "Silent Night" moments are to be honored. When we have awareness of God's presence in the midst of our lives, when Heaven comes to earth before our eyes, and the Imperishable touches this world, we need to stop and honor that moment.

Pull off to the side of the road, turn away from the computer, close the door; the Savior has come. All is calm, all is bright. It is in these moments that we get the strength to go on. God will "repay us with comfort", not because we deserve it, but because God loves us and desires to heal us. Let us turn aside and see the "radiant beams from Thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace" and give thanks.

Thursday, December 24, 2026

From Isaiah 11:1-6

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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

I have always loved the legend that on Christmas Eve, the animals receive the gift of speech to praise God for baby Jesus. I love it so much that I almost believe that it is possible. Old European folklore treated midnight on the winter holidays as a mystical hour when nature briefly shifted, allowing farm animals or household pets to talk among themselves, predict the coming year, or reveal hidden truths. Since the Christmas story in Luke recounts that Mary laid Jesus in a feeding trough, most of us imagine the Holy Family in a barn, receiving the shepherds and the sheep. Many Nativity sets include all sorts of animals; sheep and goats and dogs and cats. Ours also includes a bull that was given us years ago. Somehow, he seems to fit.

Every year, in those last still moments before I fall asleep after a very long day doing Christmas Eve services, I listen. The stillness is deep. And yet, I still half expect that our dog will break out into an Alleluia, instead of chasing rabbits in his sleep!

This image, of a world at peace and without violence, is one of the most powerful images we are given by Isaiah. May it be so, in your household, and all over the world, in the New Year to come!

