

A stylized illustration of a nativity scene. The background is a dark blue night sky filled with small white stars and two larger, multi-pointed white stars. In the center, a dark silhouette of a stable with a thatched roof is shown. Inside the stable, the words "Be Not Afraid" are written in a white, cursive font. At the bottom of the stable, there is a silhouette of a manger filled with hay.

Be Not Afraid

2020
Advent Devotions

Presbyterian Church USA -- Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren

November 29

First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24-37

The gospel passage from today's lectionary—Mark 13:24-37—announces Advent with a great roar. Coming in the back half of what scholars refer to as Mark's "Little Apocalypse," the passage shifts between great, cosmic scenes (a darkened sun, a lightless moon, falling stars) and small, local ones (a fig tree, a doorman keeping watch). The effect is intentionally disorienting, shaping us to feel, if only weakly, the same kinds of confusion we should expect to feel at Jesus' arrival. It pushes us to recognize just how overwhelming Jesus' return will be and, therefore, just how important it is that we stay attentive.

As we move further into Advent, we will encounter the more domestic and quieter scenes which we associate with Jesus' arrival: shepherds watching their flocks by night, babies in mangers, "Silent Night, Holy Night." Such scenes are familiar, touching, and family friendly. Today's passage, though, reminds us not only that such scenes are taking place against a backdrop that is far larger and more theologically and morally complicated than we often attend to but also that those scenes only become truly meaningful once we are willing to locate them within that larger backdrop. The roar of Mark 13 may be replaced by the whispers of Luke 2 in the lectionary, but we will still carry its ringing in our ears.

And what might that that ringing push us to attend to? Not only the coming of a great King but the recognition that this King is working out the pursuit of profound justice in a world filled with great need. No wonder that today's gospel passage is paired with Isaiah's prayer for changes that are truly earth-shattering: that which is worst about the world does need to (and will be) shattered when the King of glory and righteousness comes.

Mark Douglas, Columbia Theological Seminary

NOVEMBER 30

Waiting at the Well

Genesis 29:1-14

John 4:4-15

This advent season we are asked to wait. To wait expectantly for God—Emmanuel—to reenter our lives. To come and make all things new. But that seems hard as our globe faces increased lockdowns and shelter in place orders. As we are encouraged or mandated to keep distance from beloved friends and family keeping us from the traditions we know best, causing us to wait another year for joy to fill the air. COVID-19 has changed everything we know about waiting all while showing its importance at the same time.

Similarly, as we are asked to continually shelter in place at varying intervals the thought of place and its importance often comes to mind. Is God with us no matter where we are or who we are near? How do we feel, see, and touch God when we have to worship from home rather than in our churches? This advent as scripture is read, I am reminded that God is in all places. Places of historical importance such as at the well with Jacob, Jesus, and the Samaritan woman. But God is also with all those people as they move from place to place. As they set-up camp on the mountain top, and as they wander through the desert anticipating what God has in store next.

This advent season we find ourselves in a similar place as our biblical ancestors. We are waiting for our world to return to a sense of normal, we are hurting from the numerous griefs 2020 has inflicted upon us, and we are wondering what will be next as we embark on this a new church year.

May we wait, in place, with expectant hope that God is in our midst wherever and however we find ourselves. May we wait, wandering, with expectant hope that God goes with us. May we wait, rest assured, with expectant hope that God responds to our every need before we ask. May we wait, with the expectant hope that Emanuel, God with Us, is coming once again to make all things new!

Prayer of the Day: God of the waiting, wandering, and expectant peoples enter our lives once again. Fill us with new hope as we anticipate the future you are calling us towards. In Jesus' holy name we pray, Amen.

Christina Cosby, Presbyterian World Mission

DECEMBER 1

Revelations 18:1-10

Micah 4:6-13

Psalm 74

Advent means light. This is the season that prepares us to meditate on our preparation for the birth of the Christ Child. A joyful time of the year!

I read the lectionary for the day. How did I get this scripture? This is not for Advent! Gloom! No joy! Even an angel of bright light announces doom. Babylon is in ruins. Everyone is losing their livelihoods. The people are crying out for help! There is nothing positive in Babylon...only, Darkness in everyone's life.

Wait! Light leads us through darkness. Perhaps we should struggle in the darkness during this Advent time. Does this darkness speak to the life that surrounds our lives?? ...death, hunger, poverty, homeless, refugees, corruption, greediness? Are we extinguishing the light or perhaps even causing a burning fire so that these conditions exist in our world?

In the midst of all the gloom and doom in Babylon, God promises His people a land of peace and no fear. He gives a glimpse of what the future will bring.

How do we follow the God who has made a promise of light to the people?

Should we look at "self" first? How do we connect all of God's people and bring ALL into OUR family of God? God is the light of the world!

We are the flock blessed with the Shepherd who gives us hope filled with mercy, forgiveness, and promise. Let us search for this light.

PRAYER:

God, our guide in darkness;

Thank you for the great blessings which we sometime forget;

Often, your flock roams in the pasture,

Center us on the Lord who tells us not to fear and promises peace;

Help us to examine our "self" and actions;

Care as you have cared and love with compassion, forgiveness, grace and mercy as you have loved.

Let our lives bring light to the world as you promised.

Betty McGinnis, Czech Mission Network, First Presbyterian Church, Annapolis, MD

December 2

Luke 21:34-45

³⁴ But be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day close down upon you suddenly like a trap.

³⁵ For it will overtake all who live on the face of the whole earth."

REFLECTION

What does dissipation and drunkenness have to do with worries about living? Aren't they rather opposites? Both burden us, both make us, in a way, blind (verse 34).

I have three daughters at home. As far as worries are concerned, we - the parents - are more trapped in them than the children are. Especially now when schools are closed.

A few years ago, we sent our youngest one, Marie, when she was a little preschool girl, to visit her grandmother on her own. She had to travel there on her own for the very first time.

By bus to Prague, the journey without stops, a transfer to the metro with grandma waiting at the appointed station. Maruska and I went through the route several times, everything was arranged, all the mobile phones were on call.

I escorted Marie to the bus, waved to her, and confirmed the start of the event to all involved by phone call. Everything was perfectly organized. Except for one small thing. I let Marie take the wrong bus. The bus also went to Prague, but some other place. The cell phone she carried with her was out of charge at the critical moment. A disoriented preschooler, alone for the first time in a city, lost with a dead cell phone in her hand. Eventually, she miraculously arrived at her grandmother. In another way than the one that had been so carefully planned.

And the lesson? There is definitely a need to organize things well. But nothing can be organized in such a way that an unexpected scenario does not occur. Smaller changes, but also larger ones, will certainly always happen. Trap?

We cannot, after all, arrange the future. We must keep a decent portion of hope and faith. It is wise also to keep a space for a miracle.

PRAYER

Never stop praising, no matter what happens, there is nothing better. Thanks for everything given to us - Glory to the Lord for all that He gives us every day (*from a church song, words Tomas Najbrt*)

Lucie Slámová, Diaconia Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (ECCB)

December 3

On the change

Psalm 85:1

"O Lord, you showed favor to your land; you restored the well-being of Jacob."

People often say that "change is life". I think they say it more when they are losing something familiar and certain. They express their acceptance of the fact that things are changing. It sounds to me like passivity and resignation. As if such a change was just an expression of coming to terms with something negative.

But change can be thought of differently. For example, as hope. Change can represent new possibilities, new paths, a return from humiliation, a release from misery. Change can be positive.

I think we have had enough of anxious longing for change all over our planet this year. Maybe we are looking forward with the same hope in this year's Advent. It is in connection with the Advent message that we can realize one important matter that is associated with change. The important matter is our active participation in change.

This is pointed out by the prophet Isaiah at the beginning of the sixth chapter. In spite of his misery and lostness, in spite of the fact that he is a man of unclean lips, in spite of the fact that he lives among a people of unclean lips, it is he to whom it resounds: Go and act. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy (according to 1 Thessalonians) also took on this active role and, with thanks to God on their lips, went out to find their sisters and brothers abroad.

The apostle Paul also significantly shows us where the motivation to get up and to go lies, in actively pursuing change. The source of this is, in fact, that God does not cease to show favor.

It is God, and his active approach, it is God and the messengers sent by him, who can fan our hopes, which will turn into active change. Thanks to God's passionate love, we can discover enduring hope and show active faith. Thus, we can be active carriers of positive change. Let us live such hope.

PRAYER

Merciful God, please show us your favor, change what lies ahead of us, strengthen our hope that we can be active bearers of change that in faith and love transforms our world into your kingdom.

Štěpán Brodský, Diaconia ECCB

December 4

Prayer for December 4th – the one-time Saint Barbara's Day

Gracious and ever-living God,
we pray for a world that you envisioned, when all will live in shalom:
And then all that has divided us will merge
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both men and women will be gentle
And then both women and men will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another's will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life's creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth
And everywhere will be called Eden again. Amen
(quoting a poem by Judy Chicago)

Barbara Renton, Czech Mission Network

December 5

Ezekiel 36:24-28

"For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. "And you will live in Israel, the land I gave your ancestors long ago. You will be my people, and I will be your God."

Back in the days when I attended General Assembly meetings of the PCUS and later the PCUSA, I remembered the debates over our polity as to what we should do and what we must do in fulfilling our responsibilities as pastors and laity. To put this topic into slightly different language, it became a matter of what I will do over against what I may do. In the text from Ezekiel for today, we know God's people are scattered, they are living under foreign rule. They are afraid, not knowing if they will see their beloved Jerusalem again. They are as strangers in a strange land. But to those fears, God speaks words of commitment to them all. Through the mouth of his prophet, God says, "I will gather you up ...;" "I will bring you home...;" "I will give you a new heart, one which is tender and responsive;" "I will put my Spirit in you that may follow me and be obedient to my decrees;" "I will be your God."

In this time of uncertainty; a time of a pandemic which does not seem to be easing anywhere in our world, fear clutches at our hearts for ourselves and those we love. We look for certainty in an uncertain world. Yet on this Advent day in the year 2020, we hear God's words of certainty; his words of commitment. For God, it is never a matter of what he "may" do; it is always a matter of what he "will" do: I will bring you out of this time of uncertainty; I will be your God and nothing can separate you from my love for you through Jesus Christ my Son and your Lord.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, as we move through these Advent days, remove from our stubborn hearts the fears which often paralyze us. Help us to see the way forward, putting our trust in your firm commitment to bring us home. We do pray for that Spirit which will allow us follow in your ways and obey your commandments. Amen.

Jerry Hurst, First Presbyterian Church, La Grange, TX

December 6

Second Sunday of Advent

Psalm 85.7 (NRSV)

"Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation."

Today we celebrate the second Sunday in Advent. We will light the second candle on the Advent wreath. The theme of the second Advent is the second Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is our Christian hope that Jesus will come again and with him the kingdom of God, in which all suffering, sin and death end. It is to be a time of love and righteousness, as Psalm 85 beautifully describes in verse 10: Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. It is a beautiful hope in a world where suffering and death prevail. And this year we are especially aware of the coronavirus, which complicates life for almost everyone in the Czech Republic as well as in the USA, and we remember the many who have fallen victim to this insidious disease. That hope, even in the current circumstances, gives us strength from our Lord to live this hope.

The psalmist prays: Show us, O LORD, your mercy, and grant us your salvation. At all times, we live by God's mercy; we live by God, having a big heart that opens to all who are in need. We are reminded of this today by St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, who still inspires us to think about the needy. Nicholas (ca. 280-345) was Bishop of Myra, in present-day Turkey, and is known as a man who lived his whole life for the needy. In the Czech Republic, we have a nice tradition that, on December 5th, the eve of the feast of St. Nicholas, St. Nicholas, wearing a long white beard and accompanied by angels and devils, walks in episcopal attire to a household with children. This group distributes presents, the angels representing God's love, and the devils the symbolic punishment and intimidation of naughty children. Probably few people in today's secular society think that originally Nicholas, as a persuasive Christian, preached God's mercy and helped those in need.

PRAYER: Lord God, we thank You for being merciful and having a great heart for us. Open our hearts at this time of Advent to see those who need our help and those who help us. Amen.

Gerhard Frey-Reininghaus, ECCB

December 7

Psalm 27:3 (NIV)

"Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident."

REFLECTION

This is a strong confession of a brave psalm writer. I don't know what I would do myself when looking into a barrel of a submachine gun. If such a war picture is difficult to imagine, let's place as enemies something else than an army: illness, bad news, worries about what will happen next, pain from guilt or disappointment. I can't say that in such a situation my heart will not be afraid. It will, of course, be afraid. The fear will be huge and bitter. That is why the second part of the verse sounds clearer and more sober: I will hope.

The anxiety that one may be falling under fear's weight is a part of life. Confident shouting, saying that I am not afraid, is often more a cover for uncertainty. On the other hand, to say that in the midst of fear and trouble I will, in spite of everything, trust brings hope even for those who are not counted among the rank of confident people.

Yet I will keep on hoping. But in what? We often ask this in extreme situations, but it also applies to everyday life. What is the hope beyond our diaries, the cycle of days and weeks, the efforts to combine work and personal life, common worries in caring for children or ageing parents? What hope is there in uncertain times, quarantine, lockdown and solitude?

Maybe there is an answer in the coming of Advent and Christmas, as a time reminding us of an essential event. Even if church buildings remain closed and meetings are forbidden during the holidays, this does not mean that God's love has not come into this world, into all the fears and worries of what will happen next, into all the loneliness, the quarantines and lockdowns, to all the greyness of the shortening days.

We do feel fear when a present-day army of enemies attacks us. Maybe we are not confident people and sometimes we buckle under the onslaught. It's natural. But in all this we remain children of God. It's what helps us carry on, what enables us to hope.

Prayer: Lord of the whole world, please let us hear and feel again these days that you have the world and our lives firmly in your hands. Amen.

Pavel Hanych, Diaconia ECCB

December 8

Acts 11:1-4 (The Message)

„...The news travelled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: “What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?” So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step...”

Week after week there is an internet show in our country. They invite English speaking guests who are served dishes which we consider to be typical Czech meals. They expect their honest opinion. Some guests have to push themselves to eat, some of them are picky, some of them don't even touch the plate. Not everyone enjoys slice of bread with lard and onions; smelly cheese; “drowned man” – pickled sausage; or cabbage, dumplings and pork. One girl when she saw one meal which we call “Spanish bird” pushed the plate away saying: “I ain't gonna eat bats in these times”. There is also a chap in the show. His stomach handles everything and his look and face say everything. He is always happy, never afraid of the plate which is in front of him. He enjoys all meals...sometimes he eats with his hands, he is always funny, and he makes jokes every time. You would buy him a beer for that.

Well, I think Christians shouldn't be picky. The Law, history, distances, dogmatism, myths and superstitions, suspicion of other people – ALL OF THIS WAS OVERCOME BY JESUS AND HIS SACRIFICE ON THE CROSS. I want to sit at one table with all of you and everyone, I want to celebrate Lord's Supper with all people. I want to be at heavenly banquet with all mankind and creation – if it is God's will. I pray for it. I want the happiness to be seen by people on my face or, better, in my heart.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Master and Teacher, teach me to love brothers and sisters, old neighbors, guests and newcomers, teach me how to love friends and foes. Give me happiness and peace and relieve me from my fears. Amen

Rev. Petr Peňáz, ECCB

December 9

Dwell

Psalm 27:4-5

"One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock."

Where is the place you go for rest and renewal? The place where you feel most at home, most yourself? It is the place where you feel safe and loved, the place where you can breathe a little easier. For me that place was always my grandparents' home. It was a place of sanctuary from the instability of life with my mother who struggled with addictions. Each month I got to spend one glorious weekend with Grams and PopPop. We would cook, play games, watch musicals, do crafts and homework... all the normal childhood activities. The beauty of those weekends was I was free to be a child. I did not realize the magnitude of that gift at the time, but in hindsight those weekends were a saving grace in my life... one which lasted into adulthood.

When David writes of the one thing he desires more than any other, it is this desire to be in a place of comfort and safety. Aware of life's struggles and the opposition of his enemies, David says the thing he longs for most is to be in the Lord's presence. It is here, in God's house (if you will), that David finds stability and the freedom to be himself.

Prayer: Loving Father, as we wait for Jesus to come and establish His Kingdom, may we be aware of Your Spirit in our midst and discover the peace of being "at home" with You. Amen.

Rev. Tara R. Thompson, Southminster Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA

December 10

First and Second Things

Philippians 3:7-11

"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."

Advent is a season of anticipation, but it is important that we set are conscious of what it is we are anticipating. Are we anticipating the celebration of our Savior's birth, or something else? Christmas is a time celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike, and some of the things celebrated have been intertwined to the point that we forget that this is a season of setting our eyes toward Christ.

C.S. Lewis writes about what he describes as the principle of "first and second things." We must learn to treat first things as first things, and second things as second things. If you treat a "second thing" as if it is a first thing, you cannot enjoy it properly. Put simply: If we do not learn how to properly order our hearts' desires than we cannot love God or the people and things in our lives properly. If you love your job above all else, you will not properly love your family. Family and people are a "higher thing" than a job. But above all else is God. It is only by loving God properly and first that we can learn to love other things properly.

Paul is writing to the Philippians about counting everything in his life as loss. All his titles, accomplishments, and "things": loss. Why? Because all of them kept his eyes from the Lord. Certainly, Paul still had titles once he found Jesus. He still had things. But those things can draw us closer to God or pull us further from Him. Paul counted everything as loss because nothing could top what he gains by knowing Jesus Christ. As we continue through this season of Advent with so many things pulling our attention right now, let us learn to order our loves and anticipate the coming Jesus!

Prayer: God, guide our hearts and minds so that we can see you in what seems most ordinary and mundane today. Amen.

Mike Creamer, Sewickley Presbyterian Church

December 11

Philippians 3:12-17

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

In many ways, 2020 has felt like a constant work in progress. We wait as the world's scientists and public health leaders work to understand effective treatment and prevention strategies for COVID19. In the wake of this summer's racial reckoning in the US, people of all backgrounds felt called to join the work of dismantling systems of injustice and oppression. The church works to adapt and find new ways to 'be the church' and worship together while physically distancing in each new season. Daily, families work to create new routines in response to changes in the structure of school, work, and leisure activities. And as we enter these dark winter months, we all work to find ways to maintain our physical and emotional wellbeing amid the uncertainty of what is to come.

It is hard to imagine what the world will look like when the pandemic is over. What will the church look like? What will we, as Christians, look like? As Paul writes, we are *on the way*, striving toward the goal of knowing Jesus. Our hope comes from knowing that one day we will see the fullness of God. The advent season is an opportunity to prepare our hearts for that day. It is a time to remember the mystery of all that He has done for us in the birth of his son, Jesus Christ, and to pay attention to all the ways he is at work in us and in the world.

As Paul has done for the Philippians in this letter, may we too find ways to support and love one another as we work toward the goal of knowing Him and his call on our lives more deeply.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the work you are doing in and among us. Be with us on this day as we seek to know you and your will more fully. Amen

Deborah Murdoch, Sewickley Presbyterian Church

December 12

Although the Fig Tree Shall Not Blossom, I will Rejoice in the Lord

Habakkuk 3.17-18

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat, the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Advent turns the look forward, leads to anticipation and preparation. That's where this pre-Christmas time is unique. I find myself, on the contrary, returning to what was used to be the case in the current situation, under normal circumstances. Maybe that's the case with most of us. We want the normal rhythm of life to come back, for things to normalize. So, the question bears on me: Is it the return of something lost what concerns us or the coming of something new that is associated with the coming and presence of Jesus Christ? This year's Advent is so strangely messed up. As we can't plan anything, any forward view fails. What can we do when the situation is out of our control?

In a way, we can only wait.

And isn't that what Advent wants to bring us to? To stop, however forceful it is in a very drastic way, to wait, to perceive what we are like in our defenselessness and to experience God's presence in this way? Do not hear only as the phrase: "God comes to save his people", but really experience it, rely on it?

As Habakkuk writes along with the entire Bible, God is moving towards us, to me, capable of changing our lot. In the Psalm 126 it is mentioned once as a statement, the second time as a request. I know God can do it, so I ask Him to do it again and again. And I have hope that things will move and change. Coronavirus or Advent- waiting may not be a resignation, but a view of God's active coming. In this is the current crisis a chance: to move away from my abilities and the belief that I will help myself to everything. And re-accept that life-giving power comes from else.

Yes, the power that brings life comes from somewhere else. May we maintain such a view as first and last certainty for our lives. We can place our helplessness and hope in the hands of Him who comes to change our lot and our hearts. "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat, the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

"Although..." - Although the living conditions shall be any, although we fall on our mouths, I will praise my Lord and Savior. The world and times can be upside down totally, I will praise my Lord, who is my strength and salvation.

Prayer: I believe in the sun even when I can't see it. I believe in love even when I can't feel it. I believe in God even when I can't see him. I don't understand everything, but you, Lord, know about me and you are my strength. I praise you for that. Amen

Rev. Marek Zikmund, ECCB Přerov

December 13, 2020
Third Sunday of Advent

1 Thessalonians 5, 16-24

At times I feel overwhelmed by circumstances. The virus is everywhere, I must wear a face cover and teach online. The political situation is miserable. Where are the honest and decent politicians who were handing out baseball caps in the campaign? On top of that, my body sometimes hurts a little, the boss doesn't smile at me, and the annoying colleague wins praise...

And then I take a walk through the town of Prostejov and, completely involuntarily, I come across the stones of the missing people. Paving blocks with a brass surface set into the sidewalk in front of the houses of Holocaust victims. This is where Fanni, Josefina, Stella and Ruth Brenner lived. There are the dates of births and also deaths - in concentration camps. Ordinary women. People like me – the same joys and worries, except that somebody pinned a star on their coats and gave them a ticket to the journey with no return. And I get terrified. I feel horror and shame. The horror of the thought that something like this could have happened. If this was happening today, would I have the courage to speak out? I'm ashamed of how petty my problems are. How insignificant.

All at once, the apostle Paul comes with a kind and clear word. With the word just for me and just for today. Rejoice ever more. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. This is not a call for naive optimism, for superficial joy. This is the inner setting of the believer. It is independent of circumstances and is based on the belief that this is the will of God in Christ Jesus. Paul advises me on how to deal with problems every day. He doesn't forbid anything. Prove all things, he advises. Hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. Clear words, firm attitude. Man, bow your head in humility and pray. There are things that go beyond you. In spite of that, your life is important and can be fulfilling. God knows about you and he cares about you. Give thanks, there is plenty to be thankful for. God is faithful.

Prayer: God, give us peace. Let not our hearts be frightened but rejoice and pray. Help us know what to hold on to and what to avoid.

Šárka Zaccpalová, ECCB Přerov

December 14

The Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10–17

¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.¹² For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.¹³ Therefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

A person's life is seldom a walk through a rose garden, so it often misses a strength not only to overcome all difficulties, but also to fight between our better part of personality and our worse one. The individual often strives to follow a broad way, paved with self-centeredness and sin. He also often does not realize that he cannot lead his fight against human enemies, but against evil as such.

The devil wants to control us and uses all available means to successfully achieve it. Fighting evil is not easy. We must fight it every day, every moment. We must always look for the right way. We must neither take the broad way that leads to hell, nor turn to blind crooked paths, but remain on the way of faith, accompanied by the word of God, the shield of faith, having our loins girt about with truth, and on the breastplate of righteousness

However, where else do we find a strength to fight not only one's own egoism, but all the wiles of the devil, than from the Lord, from his great power? All other resources where strength seems to be are only temporary and soon depletable. We also often do not find the right strength in them, but only a kind of substitute, a crutch that can turn against us and can lead to our spiritual and physical destruction.

Prayer: Our Lord, thank you for the indication of the right ways to go to us. You want to show it to us not only at Advent time but every time. We give thanks for our faith and for you giving us the strength to fight evil and our worse part of personality. Thank you for not continuing to protect our families and our brethren.

Eva Jehlarova, ECCB Přerov

December 15

Psalm 125

They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth forever. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is round about his people from henceforth even forever. For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity. Do good, O LORD, unto those that be good, and to them that are upright in their hearts. As for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, the LORD shall lead them forth with the workers of iniquity: but peace shall be upon Israel.

This Bible verse fits into this very tough time. Our Lord tells us that those who hope in Him don't have to be afraid of anything if they are as strong in their faith as the mount Zion. The Lord loves those whose heart is fair and open. And He promises to all of us that He will be with us forever.

But He will drive away offenders of wickedness with all those who dodge through their crooked ways.

Nowadays we live in a very tough time which is marked by a new unknown disease for us – covid bringing a lot of grief, suffering and death all over the world.

But the Lord says: “Do not be afraid, I am here with you! “

We must trust in the help of the Lord. Just like the first disciples of Jesus, who announced the kingdom of the Lord and Jesus to people believed. The Lord gave us His son Jesus Christ to lean on Him anytime, to believe in Him that he came to the world to expiate our sins and to help us to find the only right way leading to the kingdom of the Lord.

Let us have Jesus in our heart. Jesus comes to us to cheer all unhappy people and to give us the new hope.

Jesus sets us free from evil within, even from evil coming from outside, to rid us from all addictions.

And to forgive our failures. To give us the joy from helping and giving to others the way as He did. Jesus came to us to make sure that the Lord loves us that nobody exists pushed aside, alone unloved at His presence.

And this is the reason of the Christmas joy that comes from immediate and never-ending presence of our Lord. This is the pure, immediate joy. The joy of a man going with his empty hands to the very big meeting.

Prayer: Lord, help us not be afraid of our life, save us from all the bad. Forgive us our guilts and lead us by the Holy spirit to act wisely according to Your will. Let our soul to be joyful and clear in Your arms.

Dagmar Sottnerová, ECCB Přerov

December 16

Mark 9:9–13

The disciples who descend with Jesus from the mountain of miracles wonder what it means to rise from the dead.

I was used to going to church from an early age, so I, after all, always knew that Jesus simply gets up, sits down, the angel rolls the stone away, Jesus goes out, talks to the disciples, especially to Thomas, and then he takes off up above. Good has triumphed over evil. It doesn't actually sound strange to a child, remember?

Later, this belief became problematic. As students of theology, we addressed this topic in our discussions. Questions of historicity, facticity, mythology. Philosophy and religion were gradually added. Later biology and physics. And doubts. Childlike faith, under the other onslaught of everyday real life, somehow disappeared.

At my grandfather's funeral, it flashed through my mind that I was saying goodbye to him forever. I wouldn't see him again. I didn't really count on the resurrection; I didn't believe in it. I had grown up and accepted the human destiny of transience, frequent meaninglessness, pain...

Only this awareness and other blows of life forced me to reopen this topic. It is strange how we take some things for granted today. How often we are incredibly sure. We pretend to know. That we know about life, that we control it. That we understand everything. That we determine everything.

And yet we don't really know much about the nature of life. It remains a secret to us. If we really go into it deeply then we must admit that we do not know what the substance is, who we are, who God is. Is this a reason for despair and hopelessness? Or the opportunity to humbly confess all this and open ourselves in trust to what transcends us? Open myself to the secret of Being?

If there is a miracle of life, why couldn't there be a miracle of resurrection? Maybe not as we imagine it, but as prepared by the Lord of wholeness for us.

Prayer: Let this gospel mystery work upon us at this time of Advent.

Jan Soběslavský, Diaconia ECCB

December 17

Hebrews 1: 1-4 (NIV)

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

My older brother Viktor, a university professor – a biologist, recently went with his colleagues on a botanical expedition for several days. One evening in the tent he suddenly felt chest pains, symptoms of a heart attack. His colleagues called an ambulance. They had to carry him from where the tent was in the forest to the ambulance. In the end, two ambulances arrived. Do you know what my brother was praying at that moment? "Lord, let me be really having a heart attack, so that the ambulances haven't come unnecessarily." He wasn't worried about himself, that something would happen to him, but he was worried about bothering others unnecessarily. Our mother remarked, when hearing about this incident: "It's obvious we taught you something. I just think it was overdone."

Children, whether we like it or not, whether our parents are great or not so great, will always be a reflection of those parents. It is just as Christ is (in verse 3) a reflection of God's glory and an expression of God's essence. He is the reflection of his Heavenly Father, who is also our Father.

What do our lives reflect? Dear neighbors, especially in this Advent time, let us adjust our daily life, as much as possible, from morning to evening, at work and play, so that it reflects the glory and the essence of God at work in our lives. Let us enter an Advent time of purification. Surely, especially at this time of coronavirus, we will take away unnecessary fear from those who meet us shining this way.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for all the prophets who gave themselves so that we could live a good and peaceful life. Above all, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we can be cleansed. May we, too, live lives that reflect your essence. Amen

Dan Žárský, Diaconia ECCB

December 18

2 Sam. 6:12–19

It is a weird story about the advent (arrival) of the ark of God to Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, the ark of God stands for God's holiness that abides in the world. According to the Bible, the ark moved with the children of Israel around the desert. A times, it may have resembled a fetish supposed to protect the people from enemies. After a period, when the ark was captured by the Philistines, it is now about to enter Jerusalem. Yet the encounter with the Holy one, joyous as it may be, brings about a crisis. The problem starts with a priest called Uzza. As the cart bringing the ark began to sway, Uzza took hold of the ark so that it wouldn't topple. According to 2Sam 6:7, "God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark". Why did God do this? I read this story as a warning to "spiritual insiders", ministers and active members of the church alike, who may think that God's holiness needs our assistance and our embellishment. After three months of a quarantine, David plucks up his courage and finally brings the ark to Jerusalem. This time he proceeds with all due respect and joyful festivity. From the perspective of David's wife Michal though, his "leaping and dancing before the Lord" was shameful. We can imagine that a raw followed that evening, when David returned home from the 'Advent party'. God's Advent in this world may indeed sometimes bring about quarrel.

Prayer: Holy God, in your Son Jesus you entered this quarrelsome world as a vulnerable baby. Have mercy on us, open our eyes for your Advent in this world and transform our hearts so that we may expect you with respect and joy. Amen

Rev. Petr Sláma, Ph.D., associate Professor of Old Testament at the Charles University in Prague

December 19

I am a Rescuer

Judg. 13:5 (Net bible)

Look, you will conceive and have a son. You must never cut his hair, for the child will be dedicated to God from birth. He will begin to deliver Israel from the power of the Philistines.

Sometimes God chooses people as His servants that no one would expect. Such as Samson - a man, harsh, wild, irritable, in constant dispute, a man who succumbed to the deception of beautiful girls, could not keep a secret and his poor qualities caused the end of his service and eventually cost him his life. Despite all this, he judged and administered Israel for 20 years.

Sometimes God chooses people as His servants that no one would expect. But even one person, when seized by the Spirit of God, can fight against overwhelming numbers of the wicked. The truth is that human weakness sometimes hinders God's task. Thus, Samson was not able to fulfill fully his commission for the special task of creating a life of liberty. Despite all this, we can read his story in the Bible to this very day.

Sometimes we ourselves have doubts about our lives, about our qualities. We think that we are not worthy, that we are not perfect. Yes, we are not perfect, nor are we worthy, and doubts about our qualities are accurate. But nowhere is it written that God chooses only the perfect ones for His purposes. God seems to value other things and other considerations as important human equipment.

Namely, that despite all the imperfections, we can find something good in ourselves. Maybe this is what is more important to God than perfection. It reminds me of Jesus' saying: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. So also I, the sinner, can be a savior. With what I find good in myself, I can serve among people in the name of God. That's not a little thing. May it last us as long as possible.

PRAYER

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

(Prayer of Saint Francis)

Štěpán Brodský, Diaconia ECCB

December 20
Fourth Sunday of Advent

2.Sam 7: 1-11,16

Pardon me? So, you want to build a house for God? What a nonsense. Pfff ... who would have thought to build a house for God? After all, no one can bind God, you can't appropriate God by closing him in one house.

But when you think about it further, it does make sense. For most of us, the house is the most important and dearest (in every sense of the word) thing we have.

We return home tired from work. We take our friends home to celebrate and rejoice together. We can decorate the home in our own way, at home we can play the kind of music we want, at home we can dance in the bathroom in front of the mirror. Maybe that's why David wants to build a home for God. Where does the God live? This is one of the most common questions that children ask. I would say that David does not think badly, he simply wants the best for the Lord. As a king he can afford to build a luxurious five-star home for God. A temple.

God reminds David that he does not need a house. We humans do - we need a place where we can return, a place where we can rest, a place where we are accepted. The Lord offers us all this. David wanted to offer the Lord an expensive temple, but he gives us something much bigger and more beautiful.

We can already feel the closeness of God's kingdom - so don't be afraid.

Marta Slámová, ECCB

December 21

John 14: 1-6

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

There is an interesting staircase in our new house. Of course, there are stairs in almost every house, they are also in other houses in which I lived. Nevertheless, these are special, because there is no window. I learned them by heart, I know there are two sets of nine steps with a short break on the mezzanine. I could go through them with my eyes closed, however, I can't help myself and I always have to shine light on these steps.

This is not a big problem in the end, but I feel caught in a certain amount of disbelief. Shouldn't I be ashamed of it? Today we have the Day of the Apostle Thomas in the church calendar. The unfaithful or doubting Thomas. He loved his Lord and Savior so much that he was willing to die with Him. (J 11,16)

However, when Jesus encouraged his disciples and friends to trust and courage, when he assured them that He would prepare a place for them and then return for them, Thomas demanded of Him something as a topographical assurance. He asks where to go, which direction, which way. Thomas also needed to shine a light on the steps. And Jesus explains that clearly to him again: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* Once again, Thomas will need a similar lesson from Jesus. Once again, he will force a light on the steps.

It's fantastic to have such a real Flashlight in our life. That perfect Friend and the Lord. I am even not ashamed to listen again and again as He on my paths clearly tells me: *I am the way. You won't get lost with me. I'll lead you. I'll bring you to the Father. Don't worry, everything is and will be as it should be. In Me is your true peace, the true reality, the essence of life. I am also light. Do not be afraid and do not be ashamed to shine My light on the steps of your life.*

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You are on your way to us, You are coming. We also walk, we follow You and at the same time we go towards You. But it's dark around. Shine on our path, Lord, and give us a good meeting. Amen.

J.Wiera Jelinek, pastor of the ČCE in Ratiboř, the founder of the ensemble „The Good News Bells“

December 22

Luke 1:46-47

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

The first line of Mary's prayer is commonly referred to as "The Magnificat". It is a reminder of Mary's extraordinary example in humbly submitting to God's plan for her life. God sent an angel to tell an obscure young girl that she will bear the Savior of the world. What kind of reaction would you expect to such an announcement?

Mary begins by "magnifying" the Lord. What does that mean? To magnify means to seem to make greater in size or to enlarge. After receiving this news there are many things that could be magnified! What will the neighbors think? How can I explain it to Joseph? Who will believe me? Why me?

Mary chose to magnify the Lord when the angel shared the news. She reflected on what she DID know: God is good, God is kind, God is merciful, and God is always faithful to his promises. Knowing that God was with her, she was able to rejoice in God her Savior.

How do we respond to unexpected news? Do we magnify our fears and worries, our circumstances and our questions? Do we begin with "Why me?" Perhaps we should follow Mary's example and magnify the Lord and His promise to always be with us. Let this season be a reminder that He is always there for us.

Prayer: Lord, help us to always magnify You. Help us to lay our worries and fears at Your feet. Let us all rejoice in You, Your mercy, Your kindness, and Your faithfulness. Let us all rejoice in Christ as we prepare to celebrate His birth. Amen.

Rich Pinkerton, Minister of Music, Southminster Presbyterian Church

December 23

Mark 11:1-10

In this tale, Christmas and Easter blend together. The Glory is already shadowed by a menace of death, not blinding and striking the eye, but hidden behind surprising scenery. This life is endangered by the human malice and desire for power from the very beginning until the very end, yet it is firmly put into the hands of God in a determination to fulfill His eternal design. Humble and silent king comes on a colt to open our hearts to a life in love and service. Therefore, he doesn't come on a horse, on an animal belonging to the war victors and strong kings ruling with a hard and merciless hand, but on an animal that is the most common. In addition to that, promises from a deep past are bound with him, so that they who would give this remarkable entrance a thought, have a chance to understand that indeed, here comes the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the long expected Messiah. And there also is a welcoming joyous crowd here that projects its own images and hopes in him, and neither doesn't understand nor comprehends him, after all. Yet is it necessary to always understand everything to the last drop and letter to let the Truth and Love carry us away? These very stories prove how stirring and motivating could be the obvious prophetic act, or the right word said in the right time. At that compelling moment, Jesus made no gesture, he didn't give the command everybody was waiting for to stand by his side in the decisive battle against all the enemies of Israel. No, he stays silent and humble until the very end, without the claim on the secular reign and power advantages, without the demand on subjection of large territories, just with a desire to change our hearts with his Love and to renew them through his Spirit. And therefore, the jubilation gradually dies away and our Lord enters Jerusalem like a common wanderer from the country, not different from the others.

Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem was ambiguous. It created a tension between unfulfilled expectations of people and what was the real mission of Christ. Yet this ambiguity is already contained in the promises of the deep past. The prophets described the coming of Messiah either with the clouds of heaven or on the colt. The rabbis explained that the way of coming of the God's Messiah would depend on the behavior of his people. If the people would have enough of credit, then their Savior would come with the clouds of heaven, in his supreme splendor. But if the people wouldn't be worth it, then He would come prostrate and on a colt. It surely is one of the possible explanations and we don't have to take it too seriously. Yet it brings us to a serious question: Are we willing to acknowledge that we really are without any credit and have no right to expect Messiah to come to and for us? And if he still comes to save us, to reconcile us with God – are we ready to accept his modest way, his humbleness, meekness and poverty? Are we willing not to get offended by a Savior who even today, still surpasses our ideas and doesn't fit into our prepared boxes? Are we able – in spite of it all – to recognize the King of Kings in him and to plead to him? Are we ready not to stop in praises and prayers and benediction, although our Lord may have prepared a way for us, different from what we dreamed of - for which we wanted to sacrifice everything?

No, these are not easy questions. And many times, we must fight through prayers to get the answers to them, many times, we have to go against ourselves. The temptation of might and

power is always strong and actual, ever again. And although we are ready to join the crowd joyously cheering at the coming of Messiah, we still cannot void of the thought deeply engraved in our minds: that everything could have gone differently. Not in Jesus' life of course – so much is clear to us since the time of our confirmation. But why couldn't it be different in our lives? How many times do we think that we are in the right and all we need to do is just to put our foot down a little, to press and threaten a bit for the events to take the right direction...

But he comes on a colt, humble and silent. And we have nothing for which we deserve his salvation. We can rely only on his mercy. Thus, comes the Blessed one, in the name of God. In him, in this suffering Messiah, there is our future – ours and of the whole world. Therefore, also we should join in with our Hosanna!

Prayer: Our merciful heavenly Father, we confess that it is difficult for us to understand your ways and that many a time, we don't even try to. It is enough for us to know about Your love and to rely on Your mercy and forgiveness. We wander through our lives in trust in your help and we don't really try to prove our faith with factual acts, to actively participate on Your might, to become tools in your hands when building Your kingdom. Please, forgive us and help us to know Christ in the humiliated and silent people around us through Your holy Spirit, and give us the courage to plead to Him with words and dedicated acts of help and reconciliation. Amen.

Jiřina Kačenová, ECCB Letohrad

December 24 Christmas Eve

She laid him in a manger

Luke Chapter 2

In December 1995, Glasgow's main newspaper had the headline: 'Anger at theft of baby Jesus'. The crib in the city's George Square had been raided. Was nothing sacred anymore? Was nothing safe? The baby Jesus was, of course, replaced in the manger – this time accompanied by a security camera. Security, however, is not what Christmas is about.

Perhaps we come closest when we put the portrayal of Christmas in the hands of the children and their nativity play. We do this, I think, not because they look 'sweet' (though sometimes they do), and not because 'Christmas is for the children' (though it is for them too). It is because we run the risk that things will go wrong.

In one church where I served, as the Virgin Mary took the baby Jesus out of the manger, Jesus' head fell off and rolled across the floor.

In the primary school which our children attended, the little girl portraying Mary went to the manger, only to discover that the baby was not there. At this point baby Jesus came sailing through the air from the wings – and (a miracle!) landed perfectly in the manger prepared for his arrival.

Allowing children to tell us the story is not safe or secure. It is full of risk, full of anxiety and worry, full of parents who cannot decide if their predominant emotion is one of pride or of dread. And there is more biblical truth contained there than can ever be secured by security cameras.

Perhaps it is only when we abandon our safety and security, and lay our lives open to the one who comes in risky love for us, that we find the true joy of Christmas – the joy of risky love for the world, and passionate involvement with its people.

Prayer:

Lord God, you tell your people that they should not be afraid. Let us never be afraid to risk for the sake of your kingdom, to love for the sake of your Son, to go wherever you call us. Amen.

David Sinclair, The Church of Scotland, Mission Partner to the ECCB

December 25, 2020
Christmas Day
Nativity of the Lord

Isaiah 62: 6, 11

Titus 3: 4-7

The Great Wall of China's is an impressive engineering feat built by humans. On a tour of the Wall, I stood at a sentry point and tried to imagine a soldier, thousands of years ago, standing in that same spot. He would be scanning the horizons and valleys for any sign of an advancing enemy. What he was looking for would bring death and destruction. It must have been a sight he dreaded, especially if he had the night watch.

Today, visitors go to the Wall for a more positive scene. Some even go before the sun comes up, in pitch darkness, to wait and watch. What they look for is a spectacular view of a stunning sunrise, or of silent waves of fog gliding through the mountain ridges. Certainly, a wait filled with eager anticipation of glowing light.

Several of the Bible passages for Advent describe both of these views when describing the future. Israel was warned by prophets of a coming time when there would be much death and destruction from their enemies because of their sins. However, they were also to keep watch because in God's time a Savior would come, "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. . .so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3: 5-7).

The advent hymn, "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night", is a dialogue alternating between a traveler and a watchman. It parallels the coming of dawn and the birth of Christ. Now we are the watchers who look for the second coming of Christ. There may be times of despair, but as Christians we know Who has won the final battle. We are to be watchful, hopeful and "...not be silent".

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for the gift of Jesus, and our salvation through Your grace. Help us to be watchful, hopeful, and ready to joyfully share Your good news with others. Amen.

Linda Smith, First Presbyterian Church of Cumberland, Maryland