

Devotions and Prayers
for the
Season of Advent
& for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day
& the Feast of the Name of Jesus

Collected from candidates for public ministry, deacons and pastors
serving congregations & ministries within the Virginia Synod
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Contributing Devotions and Prayers:

Pastor Kelly Beyer Derrick	Office of the Bishop, Virginia Synod
Pastor Stephen Bohannan	St Michael, Virginia Beach
Vicar Brian Coffey	St Michael, Virginia Beach
Chaplain John Connolly	USS America, Saporu, Japan
Pastor Timothy Crummitt	St Paul's, Hampton
Pastor Heidi David-Young	Caroline Furnace, Fort Valley
Pastor John Ericson	Reformation, Newport News
Deacon Lisa Geiger	St Michael, Virginia Beach
Pastor Cheryl Ann Griffin	St Stephen, Williamsburg
Pastor Harry Griffith	Our Saviour, Virginia Beach
Pastor David Gunderlach	Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center
Bishop Bob Humphrey	Office of the Bishop, Virginia Synod
Vicar Bryan Katz, PhD	Shiloh/New Mt Zion, Blacksburg
Pastor Anne Jones Martin	Christ, Fredericksburg
Pastor Tina Melusky	Trinity, Newport News
Pastor Phyllis Milton, DMin	Gloria Dei, Hampton
Pastor Cathy Mims	First Lutheran, Norfolk
Pastor Scott Mims	Good Shepherd, Virginia Beach
Pastor Joel Neubauer (ed)	St Mark, Yorktown
Pastor Viktoria H Parvin	St Mark, Charlottesville
Pastor Suzanne Stierwalt	St Andrew, Portsmouth
Andy Taminger, candidacy	St Mark, Yktn/The Well, Va Tech
Pastor Jeniffer Tillman	Apostles, Gloucester
Pastor Leslie D Weber	Grace, Chesapeake
Pastor Alex Witt	Our Saviour's, Norge
Pastor Chris Wulff	Peace, Charlottesville

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

—Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

Shared with love in this two-thousand twentieth year of our Lord.
Edited by Pastor Joel Neubauer

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Advent 2020

Friends in Christ and Advent pilgrims—

These daily devotions have been prepared by and collected from many public ministers of congregations and ministries within the Virginia Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, sharing our pilgrimage of faith not only within the bounds of our local calls and assemblies, but in the wider scope of the one body we are in Christ Jesus our Lord. In light of so many of these recent months – which have for many been marked by isolation and fear, anxiety and distress – it is a joyful thing to dwell in God’s Word richly as God’s broad family.

Leading to blessings of Christmas – blessings of God who dwells in flesh among us – we consider the pilgrim journey of Joseph and Mary through the difficulties of distrust and confusion at the mystery of Christ’s conception by the Holy Spirit.

In such times we perhaps need good news to be its best: God holds us safe – Jesus.

I add my personal thanks for those who have worked and reflected to share their devotions and prayers with us this Advent. Their offerings reveal a corner of the deep devotion of God’s household, as certainly each of our siblings – public and private – has a voice in Emmanuel Jesus to proclaim God’s glory in the highest and to pray for peace to God’s people on earth, yet “if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen” (John 21:25). O come, o come, Emmanuel. Amen indeed!

Peace in Christ, peace in this family of faith,

Pastor Joel Neubauer

... and he named him Jesus.

—Matthew 1:25b

God's teaching – *God's Torah* – teaches us: God holds us safe. God's prophets likewise prophesy: God holds us safe. And psalmists sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs for the joyful, good news: God holds us safe. After a long, hard year – ahead of whatever comes our way now – it may sound simplistic, but it is our hope and trust and faith and promise: God holds us safe; God is our safekeeper; or – in a word, *the Word* – Jesus. Jesus – “he will hold us safe from our brokenness” – is the hope we scour all faith to find. The one who holds us safe from pandemic and plague, from division and damnation, from yesteryear and yesteryear: now Christ Jesus reveals what it means for God to be gracious, for God to be love.

Martin Luther introduces us to Israel's hope like this: *“I beg and really caution every pious Christian not to be offended by the simplicity of the language and stories frequently encountered (in God's word), but fully realize that, however simple they may seem, these are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the majesty, power, and wisdom of the most high God. For these are the Scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11[:25]. Therefore ... think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them”* (LW 35:236). God's Word is this manger holding the mystery we cherish in the birth, in the life, in the gift, in the grace, in our God, in the name: God holds us safe, who holds us safe from our brokenness, Jesus.

Today we face all life we will face together in peace, in safety, in Jesus.

Surrounded by such true and gentle powers, so wondrously consoled and without fear, thus will I spend with you these final hours and then, together, enter a new year. By gentle powers lovingly surrounded, with patience, we'll endure – let come what may. God is with us at night and in the morning, and certainly on every future day. Amen.

—Pastor Joel Neubauer (editor), St Mark, Yorktown
Prayer: Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1944

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.

—Matthew 1:18a

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. Wow! Has a more profound sentence ever been uttered?! I know some may read that sentence simply as an introduction. But really, the fullness of God's love for all humanity is wrapped up in that one small sentence: “The birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” Seriously y'all, the birth of Jesus Christ! Ponder for a moment the profoundness of the birth of Jesus – God with us. The God of the universe, the God who created everything, the God of the stars and the moon and the sun, the God who created the smallest microbe, the God who created us, the God who created the mountains and the seas and the awesomeness of everything. That very same God has been born among us. Wow! God has chosen to come and live among us, to be born as a baby in a manger, to be born as a human being. God has chosen to take on our flesh and blood and to be born of an unwed, teenage mother. That God has come and been born at all is truly miraculous! God! Born as a human being. Wow! It's such phenomenal great news! Such amazing, fabulous, fantastic news that the birth of Jesus Christ happened at all! That God's love for humanity is so great, so wide, so deep, so amazing that God chose to come and be born among us.

The birth of Jesus is the very embodiment of God's love for all humanity. The birth of Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace and peace, of God's mercy and forgiveness, of God's hope, of God's steadfast, unending, everlasting love for all of us and for each of us. The birth of Jesus is God's holy presence with us and God's holy promise to always be with us. The birth of Jesus is God's amazing gift of life and love in the life, death, and resurrection of that very same Jesus who was born so humbly and majestically among us. Wow! What a phenomenal, tremendous gift that the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way!

Holy God, we thank for your birth among us – granting us life and love, grace and mercy, peace and hope. We thank you for your profound love for us, shown so majestically and so humbly in the birth of Jesus the Messiah. We thank you for his birth and for his life, death, and resurrection. Thank you! Amen.

—Pastor Kelly Bayer Derrick, Office of the Bishop, Virginia Synod

Second Day of Advent: November 30

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph...

—Matthew 1:18b

Mary and Joseph were engaged.

At that point in history, engagement “was a binding arrangement between people already legally considered husband (v. 19) and wife (v.20), so that unfaithfulness was considered adultery, and could be dissolved only by death or divorce (1:19)” (*The New Interpreters Bible Commentary Vol VIII* p.134). Marital engagements in our time and society do not tend to be considered as serious.

However, there is also another definition of the word “engaged;” it can also mean “busy” or “occupied.” Advent is an interesting time of year to consider what we are engaged in—what we are busy with and occupied by. Usually this time of year is one of preparation.

We prepare for the coming of Jesus in a threefold manner: in history (remembering his birth long ago), in mystery (present among us now), and in majesty (his second coming at the end of time).

We might be preparing to host or to travel, we might be preparing special meals and treats, or we might be preparing to give gifts and decorate dwellings. Sometimes the latter preparations enhance the former, and other times they are wholly separate. And this year, being in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic, our preparations will probably look wildly different than years past.

Nonetheless, I hope that whatever things you are engaged in and with during this season and throughout the year are life giving and connect you to God and God’s creation. If they are not, maybe it is time to disengage from them. Or maybe it is time to engage with God and God’s creation in a new way.

The good news is that even when we are disengaged from God or simply over engaged in other things, God always remains engaged with us. God demonstrated that by taking on human form, by continuing to dwell among us, and by promising to come again, so that we might all be able to engage with the eternal and abundant life by God’s grace.

Immanuel, God with us, we thank you for the ways in which you have engaged with humanity throughout history, always striving to be in relationship with us, even when we disengage from you. Help us to stay engaged with you and the wellbeing of your creation, even when we are feeling stressed, scared, or stoic. In your holy and precious name, we pray. Amen.

—Pastor Leslie D Weber, Grace Lutheran Church, Chesapeake

Christmas Day: December 25

... but Joseph had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son...

—Matthew 1:25a

One of the great stories of faithfulness in The Bible is, of course, the story of Mary. In response to the angel Gabriel’s truly unbelievable announcement of what was about to happen to her, she responds, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38 NRSV). Throughout the life of Jesus, Mary was there, she risked everything and loved her son to the very end.

But here, in this small glimpse into the most private aspect of their relationship, we discover the faithfulness and deep respect of Joseph, as well. We cannot imagine his thoughts, but his restraint here and boldness in the years that follow tell us of yet another ordinary person, like so many throughout scripture, whom God inspires to help bring about the good news we proclaim on this holy day.

Mary gave birth to a son who was loved and protected, not only by God’s presence, but through the FAITHFUL + BOLD + SERVING ways of those called by God to put aside their own interests and who did everything they could to love and follow Jesus. It was never easy. It was seldom the glow captured in a painting on a Christmas card. It was confusing, messy and sometimes downright dangerous. Today is not so different, is it? Let’s be honest. Our world is a mess in many ways, pandemic, injustice, prejudice, hunger, poverty, dangerous division, hatred, cruelty and war – just to name a few. So... on this Christmas Day, I wonder if we can still discover the “Wow!” Can you hear the voice of the angels calling us to put aside our own interests in order to follow Jesus and find ways to repair the breach, rebuild the cities (Isa. 58:12) and proclaim to the world that Christ is not only born, but risen, indeed!

You may say, “I can’t respond like Mary. I can’t follow like Joseph.” I agree. You can’t. I can’t – Alone. But, with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). On this celebration of the Holy Nativity, I give thanks for you. I give thanks for the salvation God had provided to us along with all people and the creation itself. A Child is born! The Child is born! Alleluia! Amen.

Lord God, creator, redeemer and sustainer of all. Receive this prayer for our lives; our families and friends; our communities of faith; our nation and world. You sent holy angels to guide Mary and Joseph. Send your Holy Spirit to us – that we may rest in your salvation and eagerly rise to follow you wherever you lead. But, above all, we give thanks for your beloved only child, Jesus. In the incarnation, life, teaching, miracles and parables we glimpse your kingdom. In Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection we are given new life and hope. Let this day be filled with our worship and renewal. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

—Bishop Bob Humphrey, Office of the Bishop, Virginia Synod

Christmas Eve: December 24

... Joseph took Mary as his wife...

—Matthew 1:24c

When Gabriel announces to Mary that she “will conceive in (her) womb and bear a son, and (she) will name him Jesus” (Luke 1:31), God’s word comes as a creative and life-changing fact, not as a mere invitation to ponder and perhaps refuse. So Mary’s words in response – *her famous* “*Let it be*” – is not her agreement to participate, but her acceptance of what is.

We do not have an option to refuse God’s word in our lives: the Holy Spirit will come upon us; the power of the Most High will overshadow us (Luke 1:35). So what of personal agency? Where do we meet the love and respect and dignity God has promised us? Do we not dream of freedom?

Any dreams Mary entertained of a worldly-respectable wedding were all shattered by God’s word in her womb. Joseph had dreams too — dreams of exercising his privilege to quietly dismiss God’s direct – and directive – word from his life in order to keep his old law and order. But Joseph was not free to do as he willed. And Joseph was given no more an option than was given to Mary: God spoke facts to the face of Joseph’s dreams: “She will bear a son and *you will* name him Jesus.” No ifs, ands, or buts at all.

Yet “for freedom God’s word has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). No, Mary is not given an option to refuse God’s word being borne from her life, yet she does – *filled with grace* (Luke 1:28) – freely chose to hold this holy child, to name and embrace and stay his mother. Joseph too cannot undue the work of God’s word in his life with Mary, but he is invited to freely let go of all fear and take hold of his place in this holy family. Mary and Joseph, commanded to deliver Christ – *God’s word in flesh* – to the world, express their agency by clinging to one another and to God-with-them. They not only deliver the child, but find love, respect and dignity in the family they raise up freely with Jesus. Now we take Christ as our own. Whom do we find but the freedom of love God has created and insisted to be our life?

Holy Christchild, you are the birth of God’s family, the birth of my freedom, the birth of love. You come not as an option but as a promise. Freedom is not my will against yours, but my will embracing you and yours. Raise me in your family, in your name. Amen.

—Pastor Joel Neubauer (editor), St Mark, Yorktown

Third Day of Advent: December 1

***And he came to her and said,
“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”***

—Matthew 1:18c

Advent is the beginning of our Church year. It marks a change from the old as God does a new thing with us. Advent is a season of waiting and anticipating, and not getting in a hurry to open our presents. The amazing thing is that God blesses us and showers incredible wonders upon us in these times of waiting and anticipation. The year 2020 has felt like one great long period of “before they lived together” — the isolation and separation have been extreme. We have not been able to gather, to sing the hymns of our faith, to share the peace as we are accustomed, to feel the intimacy of the sacraments placed in our hands. It has felt like a dry and parched land. Yet God was present with the Children of Israel in the wilderness. God was present with Elijah, alone, and afraid in a cave. God was present with our Lord Jesus Christ in the wilderness and on the cross. Take a moment to reflect on how the Holy Spirit has come upon us in our time of separation as Joseph and Mary experienced some two-thousand years ago. God’s church has not died, but instead we have seen the rebirth of our faith in ways we have not in many generations, because we have waited and anticipated — and because the Holy Spirit has inspired us with new ways to love one another. Now serving in Japan with my beloved wife and daughter in Virginia, we are living out “before they lived together” in a whole new light. We are discovering new ways to experience our love on opposite sides of the planet. How will the Holy Spirit come upon us, and bring new life and hope, not despite our time apart, but through our time apart?

I cannot answer that, but I trust that God will help us to love one another in ways never before envisioned, even in our time apart. Trust the fact that our God is bigger than time zones, six-foot separations, and limited connections in our lives. God is with us in our waiting.

Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the hearts of your faithful with the fire of your love during our periods apart. Be with us in our waiting, in our time apart, and in our journey that we may grow in love and service to you and all whom we encounter. Form us and shape us as we anxiously await the Advent of your Christ in our lives. Amen.

—Chaplain John Connolly, USS America, Saporu, Japan

Fourth Day of Advent: December 2

***... she was found to be with child
from the Holy Spirit.***

—Matthew 1:18d

If I am honest, I tend to gravitate toward Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus. I am deeply moved by Mary's involvement, her prayer, her praise. To the point that my favorite hymn is based on her Magnificat – *The Canticle of the Turning*. She's an active and willing participant in the incarnation of Christ. Even when I read Matthew's account, I tend to blend the stories in my mind and insert Mary's action into this story.

Here, instead, we get a matter of fact statement – *Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*. Mary is a passive participant in the story of the incarnation. And when I lay aside Luke's narrative, that is striking. And it makes me uncomfortable. Here, we have no idea if Mary was a willing participant in this incredible part of God's story. I find myself wanting, yearning to hear her voice. Yet there's a gift here. There's room to wonder. To sit with Mary and with her silence. To go behind the text and to imagine the range of emotions that this surprise pregnancy can bring. Awe. Amazement. To be sure. But also fear. Uncertainty. Trepidation. Nervousness. How does one mother a child from the Holy Spirit? Maybe even anger – this wasn't how her marriage to Joseph was supposed to start, this wasn't how her life was supposed to go. I find this to be a gift – because it allows for my whole range of emotions when I encounter God's action in my life. Because if I'm honest, sometimes my reaction to God's action in my life and in the world isn't the pure joy and acceptance of Mary's Magnificat in Luke. Sometimes it is. But sometimes it is anger at upended plans. Sometimes it is fear. Fear to go where God is calling me to go, to be pushed outside of my comfort zones. And sometimes it is all of it at the same time. There's permission to be human with all of the emotions that being human in relationship with God can bring. The God who became human can take our whole humanity & the promise is that Immanuel is God with us and for us in all of it.

God of surprises, we do not always know where we are going, but we trust that you are leading us and guiding us. We sit with you in our humanity, with all of the emotions your activity in our lives brings us. Today, we lay down our emotions before you, your cradle and your cross. Help us place our trust in you, God-with-us, Immanuel. Amen.

—Pastor Alex Witt, Our Saviour's, Norge

Twenty-fifth Day of Advent: December 23

... he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

—Matthew 1:24b

Imagine being asked to fulfill a request that you originally opted out of, like helping a friend move into a new apartment or water said friend's plants during a weekend getaway. We might begrudgingly do so for the sake of familiarity at the very least and Christian charity at the very center (I'm writing for Christians, so I can say it), but you know that the world won't come to an end if you skip a day to water the plants or duck out early in the middle of the move due to an "emergency" arising while you work. What if the task was beyond reasonable?

Joseph is penned to be a righteous man, opting out of marrying Mary who is not yet great with child. During these times, a man could legally have many children out of wedlock while punishing a woman to the letter of the law should she be anything but virginal before the wedding night, especially with a child as proof of the biblical nature of her pre-marital liaisons. Instead of having poor Mary stoned for her supposed infidelity, he chooses to call off the wedding. This act of righteousness would give her the opportunity to venture towards the Ancient Near Eastern equivalent of "South" to give birth and have her baby raised by a childless couple who can offer stability and comfort.

This righteous plan is thwarted when an angel of the God visits Joseph in a dream to strongly encourage him to take Mary as his wife and raise the baby as his own. We don't know what emotions that Joseph expressed between the margins of this text, all we know is that "... he did as the angel of God commanded him." Just as Mary in the Gospel of Luke rises to the occasion and says "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." When God calls upon us to take care of the things that we would rather quietly dismiss, how will we respond? More importantly, will we respond?

Blessed and beloved Creator, you are my way and call to answer.

*I wait to hear the sound of your Word, Guide my path, O Holy Lord.
Though trends loose touch with the culture's zeitgeist, May I forever follow Jesus Christ.
Be there for me in my most dreaded hour, Renew my baptism with your power.
Mend the wounds of my broken heart. Never from you will I part.
Craft my words and enlighten my soul, Holy Spirit, keep me whole.
Raise me up to see you face, And keep me closer to your grace.
I place my trust in you God of all, Teach me how to answer your call.
In the name of the Creator, Spirit, and Son, let it be, God, Three-in-One. Amen.*

—Pastor Jeniffer Tillman, Mission Developer, Apostles, Gloucester

When Joseph awoke from sleep...

—Matthew 1:24a

When I was a small kid growing up in Chicago, I had a tricycle. My friend Andy had a tricycle, too, and we would ride our tricycles together up the sidewalk, down the alley & between the houses. This happened before I was six years old. On Sundays, we left the tricycle at home and walked to church and Sunday School. Every time I recall those days I smile. The memories are clear, and good. Now I'm older than six. Those additional years have brought extra perspective from life experience, and perhaps a small sprinkling of wisdom. From this vantage point, the world looks different. Lately I've wondered if those early years may have taken on a dreamlike quality: simplicity later shrouded by experience and "maturity." If so, maybe I'm now more "awake." Like Joseph? Yes. Dreams sometimes have a way of helping us see things that, left to our own devices, we would completely miss.

Joseph knew two things very well: Mary was pregnant – *unexpectedly* – and he was afraid. Let's give the poor guy some credit here: who wouldn't be afraid? But in his fear and unbelief, says Prof. Bob Bertram, Joseph "hadn't even considered the third alternative the angel proposes (to take Mary home with him as his wife), let alone the angel's preposterous explanation (the fetus had come from the Holy Spirit.)"* [sic] Presented with the angel's statement, we too are incredulous, even humiliated. But that's precisely where our recovery begins, says Bertram, except that the humiliation is no longer ours alone. Not even ours first of all. Look who is now humbled in our place: "God with us." *Immanuel*, that watchword of Advent. With us, when we're cooped up by Covid-19 (*in our homes, on Zoom, or both*). With us, in our dreams when we, like Joseph, can't even begin to fathom God's third alternative. With us, in our supposed "maturity," and in the realization that our maturity isn't as mature as we may have thought. With us, in the water of baptism and at our last breath. Oh yes, and with us on our tricycles.

For dreams, O Lord, do we pray, even as we thank You for the Word made flesh, revealed in the scriptures and given to us in water, bread and wine. For the peace that passes understanding, a fertile and quiet and holy place for dreams to take root. For quietness of mind and heart, gift of nurture. When our dreams have accomplished your work in us, let us awaken with renewed clarity and joy for God's unimaginable presence. Amen.

—Pastor David Gunderlach,

Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center, Newport News

* crossings.org/matthew-1-18-25-fourth-sunday-in-advent/ (accessed November 11, 2020)

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man...

—Matthew 1:19a

Righteous...

What does it mean for someone to be described as "righteous?"

Merriam-Webster defines the word rather simply: "Acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin." But if you crack open any biblical dictionary you will find that pages are devoted to just this single word. Entire scholarly books are devoted to understanding righteous, or righteousness in regards to God. Interestingly, the Greek word, δικαιοσ (dikaios) means more than just righteous. We see this same root word translated as justice, purity, blamelessness, judgment, mercy, and compassion. That is a whole lot of meaning for just a few letters!

In Scripture, the word "righteous" is usually found in connection with the activity of God. God is the one who is righteous, and it is God's activity that becomes the focus in the story. Time after time in the history of Israel, God, exercising God's righteousness, works to restore and save the people who have turned away from God. In our everyday culture, being self-righteous is seen as being the type of person who turns their nose up at others, someone who is more likely to judge a person than to treat them with kindness.

Which brings us to our man Joseph. We often see interpretations of this story which claim that because Joseph is a righteous man, he must dismiss Mary. But what if it is just the opposite? Because Joseph is a righteous man, he makes the same decision that God has been making-to be compassionate, to be merciful, to bring about true justice in the world. So, with all these different definitions for the word righteous, which one will you pick?

Righteous God, just as you have never given up on your people, help us to never give up on others. Inspire within us the hope and compassion that within the heart of one man changed the world forever. Help us to lead lives worthy of your righteousness, and let us never turn away from your love. Amen.

—Pastor Timothy M Crummitt, St Paul's, Hampton

Sixth Day of Advent: December 4

... and unwilling to expose her...

—Matthew 1:19b

Poor Joseph! What a crisis he had on his hands. His fiancée Mary had seemingly betrayed him by becoming pregnant with another man's baby. I can only imagine the disgrace, shame, and anger he must have felt. The crisis, though, would be even worse for Mary if he made it known to everyone what she had done. He does not want to disgrace her in front of the whole community. I imagine that he thinks if he calls off their engagement quietly, Mary can save some of her reputation, maybe she can even get married to the actual father of the baby before she gives birth. He was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." Initially, Joseph has no idea God is hidden in this apparent disgrace. Joseph, himself, seems quite grace-filled toward Mary in this disgraceful situation. "Disgrace" is an interesting word: dis – meaning *the opposite of* – grace. Mary's pregnancy was the opposite of grace for both her and Joseph. It was shame, dishonor, and perhaps even exclusion from the community. Until, of course, angels came and told them each otherwise – that this disgrace was actually the Ultimate Grace – God coming to earth as Jesus to live among us, to die for us, and to live again so we, too, might be free and live again. God often behaves this way: hiding God's grace within disgrace. I think of times of disgrace and have sure and certain Biblical hope that God's grace is hiding within, maybe just not quite visible yet, just as the baby Mary was carrying was not quite visible as the ultimate means of grace. I think of our current situation and the disgrace we are experiencing: the disgrace of Covid-19 killing more than 240,000 people in our country alone at current count, the disgrace of racist actions still perpetrated daily in the United States, the disgrace of humanity at having so abused creation that creation now revolts with climate change catastrophes. It all feels shameful, dishonorable, and immoral. Yet God's grace hides within our human disgrace. God's "yes" is hidden in the "no" we create. We see God's grace hidden in a baby, born to a virgin, who was nearly exposed to public disgrace because of her pregnancy – only to see the very Light and Life of the whole world brought into being through her! May God use our disgraces to bring about even more abundant grace so the whole world may be healed!

Dearest God of our disgraces, we bring our shame, dishonor, anger, and immoral behavior to you. We confess how disgraceful our lives have become. You alone can turn our disgrace into something beautiful, whole, and grace-filled. Help us to trust that you are continually doing so in our individual and collective lives and help us to see and experience your healing. Help us not to fight your grace, but be active participants in accepting it. Help us to find comfort, hope, mercy and grace in the Advent of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Pastor Heidi David-Young, Caroline Furnace, Fort Valley
Director of Resource and Program Development

Twenty-third Day of Advent: December 21

"... which means, 'God is with us.'"

—Matthew 1:23c

This Advent season is like no other.

This birthing time, this waiting time,
this struggling to finally breathe time,
is one that none of us have ever experienced.

There are so many unknown factors floating around,
and it's really easy to let it all consume us —
to feed into all that's wrong in the world —
and to focus on our heavy hearts:
"How long, O Lord, how long?
Will we ever get back to normal?
We cry out and question, are we really being heard?"

Yes, my beloveds. God hears you —
and God is with us in the midst of *all* of this —
whatever "this" you are experiencing. God. Is. Here.

God is with us. Just as sure as God
was with Mary and Joseph in their uncertainty, God is with us in ours.

As we journey to the manger, with all of that is unknown,
through the twists and turns of life, we can rest assured that we are
fully known,
fully loved,
fully valued as beloved children of the Most High.

We too are surrounded by holy angels who urge us to share our stories
and to tell the world that God with us, Emmanuel is alive
in our hearts and is as close as the air we breathe.

*Loving God, as we cry out to you in this sacred time of waiting,
may we be reminded that no matter where we may find ourselves,
you are always with us. Amen.*

—Pastor Suzanne Stierwalt, St Andrew, Portsmouth

Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 20

“... and they shall name him Emmanuel...”

—Matthew 1:23b

As a child I remember being confused about the naming of Jesus. The angel told Joseph to name him Jesus, but then the angel said his name will be Emmanuel. Why didn't Joseph name Jesus, Emmanuel? In chapter seven of Isaiah, the prophet says, “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” In both instances, Matthew tells us what these names mean. Jesus means God is savior and Emmanuel means God is with us.

In the first chapter of Matthew, Jesus is also called the Messiah or the Christ, which means anointed. Humans have names for everything; there are a lot more names and titles we use for Jesus. We often hear another text from Isaiah this season, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” It's easy to get confused about Jesus. He's a paradox but the name Emmanuel really gets to the heart of the matter. Who is coming? God is coming. How is God coming? God is coming through the birth of the baby Jesus? When is God coming? The time is already pregnant. Get ready.

Advent is a time of preparation that anticipates God's coming among us. The way God comes says a whole lot about the God we are receiving into our lives. From the questions of my childhood, I'm not sure I'm much closer to understanding God. But that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, has been angelic news throughout my life. This has kept me in wonder and amazement, that from eternity and the infinite vastness of creation would come to you and me. I don't understand it, but I live in that wonder, mystery and promise every day.

By coming among us, God showed the lengths to which God would go to show God's love. While God will remain beyond our comprehension, Emmanuel means that God knows us and our life. God knows you because, God is with us. When you sing it, when you say it, when you hear it, I pray that God wraps you up in Jesus, gifting you into the world as one that bears Jesus' name and filling you with wonder, joy and the experience of God's love.

Let us pray. Emmanuel, I give you thanks that you are with me. Prepare me to see you in the world, in my neighbor and in my life every day. Fill me with anticipation and hope, because you are a great God, and the whole world is filled with the miracles of your hand. Join my hand to yours and lead me through this day. Help me to discover something new in the world, in my neighbor, and in myself today. With your love to guide me and your presence to accompany me, may my life proclaim that you are my God and I am your child. In Jesus' name. Amen.

—Pastor Stephen Bohannon, St Michael, Virginia Beach

Seventh Day of Advent: December 5

... to public disgrace...

—Matthew 1:19c

Our culture seems to have renewed the custom of public shaming. When someone is caught up in some sort of illicit behavior our first inclination seems to be to pile on with our expressions of moral outrage. This is certainly not a new custom. Even in Jesus' day such behavior was often dealt with in the most extreme ways. “If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death” (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).

I'm not sure exactly what is meant by “public disgrace” in Matthew 1:19, but surely it would have been exceedingly harsh. Most of the commentaries on this passage seem to point to Joseph's honor and compassion in response to the news that Mary had become pregnant, as if he had a right to publicly disgrace her. This seems to be a continued notion: the right to publicly disgrace another.

We know Mary had done no wrong: she had been obedient to God. But what if the story had been different? What if Mary had made the whole thing up? Who could blame her for doing so? No one wants to be a public disgrace.

What if there was a new ethic — a new way of dealing with one another when we fail to live up to what we imagine is the moral thing to do. The irony of this Advent story is that Joseph will in fact take Mary as his wife and the child born to them will grow up to offend the moral sensibilities of just about everyone he meets. He will become a public disgrace, he will be mocked and killed like a common criminal. This all seems to be part of God's plan to change how we live, judge, and navigate a broken world.

God seems committed to the principle that God would much rather receive the shaming of the world than to dish it out, to bear the violence that most often accompanies moral outrage rather than to inflict it. Maybe there's something in your life, as I know there is in mine, that wouldn't hold up well to the scrutiny of the world. God's response is not to disgrace, but to love. May we join in that commitment this Advent.

Lord Jesus, you came into this world to bear in your own body the violence that this world is so in love with, the scorn that we so often have for our neighbor. You did this that we might be reborn with your commitment to grace, that we might begin to see as you see and to love as you love. May it be so, Lord! May it be so! Amen.

—Pastor John Ericson, Reformation, Newport News

Second Sunday of Advent: December 6

... Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly...

—Matthew 1:19d

Joseph is remembered as a kind man, a righteous man and a just man...

...but mostly as the husband of Mary, the mother of our Lord.

Perhaps it's a trick of growing older, but there are times when I wonder how I will be remembered once I am gone. Will my memory be of a kind person, a righteous person ... or will I be remembered as one who followed Jesus, even to places I never thought I'd go?

Like Joseph we are all confronted with situations which on their surface might seem to point us away from holiness rather than towards it. To Joseph, Mary's unexplained pregnancy was the clearest evidence imaginable, not of her obedience, but rather of her flagrant disobedience to the Law. Joseph judged Mary's condition against his limited insight and began the process — at least mentally and emotionally — to distance himself from her.

Yet think what might have happened if he had? Rather than moving closer to his God, had he walked away from her he would have found himself further away. His memory would've vanished like dust. And who knows what might have become of Mary in a place and time that equated abandoned, unwed, pregnant women with exile, suffering and likely death?

May we in this time of Advent be especially careful when we find ourselves tempted to distance ourselves from those who, on the surface, seem to be far from God. Perhaps these are the very people God invites us to move closer to, to the blessing of all.

Dear God, in this sacred time of active waiting and hope, help me to recognize and remember that you are God and I am not. Open my eyes and heart to see situations and people as you see them and perhaps not as I see them, limited as I am. Give me the strength, courage and compassion to walk towards others in humility and love when I might rather walk away. Amen.

—Pastor Chris Wulff, Peace, Charlottesville

Twenty-first Day of Advent: December 19

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son...”

—Matthew 1:23a

Sometimes, in order to face the present, it helps to look back to what God has done in the past. Take today's verse for example. Originally spoken by the prophet Isaiah to king Ahaz of Judah, these words from Isaiah 7:14 were part of God's promise of deliverance at a time when it looked like certain doom for Jerusalem and its people. Their situation seemed impossible! Only a miracle could save them from the armies camped outside the gates, and yet, with God, nothing is impossible. And indeed, as God through Isaiah promised, in the end the city was saved.

So it was then, that nearly seven-hundred years later, Matthew points back to this moment in history in order to make sense of an even greater miracle of salvation – the Incarnation. “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son...” we hear, and to our wondering minds it sounds impossible to be sure. To echo Mary's own words from Luke's telling of the story, “How can this be?” Yet, as we look back over the whole sweeping arc of God's creative and redeeming activity – including the events of Isaiah – we are reminded that it really isn't impossible.

At least, not for God.

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son...”

Advent is, in part, a season of remembrance that nevertheless draws us forward in hope. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior in these waning days of 2020, there is quite likely more on our hearts and minds this year than ever before. So much has happened ... so much has changed. Even so, we are reminded that, even as “heavy” or dark or impossible as things may seem right now, there is One who is more powerful still: One who is, indeed, with us.

Loving God, nothing is impossible with you! As we face our own moments of uncertainty and fear, help us to listen once again to your Advent messengers. Through them, remind us of both your love and your power. Guide us this season, that we may live in confidence and hope, as we prepare to celebrate with joy the birth of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

—Pastor Scott Mims, Good Shepherd, Virginia Beach

Twentieth Day of Advent: December 18

*... to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord
through the prophet...*

—Matthew 1:22b

When something is “fulfilled” what do you think of? Maybe the following ideas come to mind: to make it happen, or to become a reality, or to achieve something that was promised or predicted. If you were asked the question – “When do you feel fulfilled?” – you might provide answers of life situations where things seem to be complete, where life seems to have finally fallen into place. When an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph – *telling him that Mary would have a son, that the son would be conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that the son’s name would be Jesus* – all of this took place to fulfill a promise. In other words, Jesus would become a reality, just as predicted. To the Jewish people who were waiting for the Messiah, the birth of Jesus would have felt like things were truly falling into place.

The prophet that the verse is talking about is Isaiah. In Isaiah it is written, “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” (7:14, NRSV). A common translation for Immanuel is “God is with us.” God’s words were spoken through the prophet Isaiah and, with the birth of Jesus, Isaiah’s prophecy would be fulfilled. However, Jesus’ birth was not simply a fulfillment for the Jewish people at the time Jesus was born. Instead, Jesus continues to be a fulfillment of God’s promise to you and for all people!

During this advent season, reflect and pray for the ways that God sees that you are fulfilled. Give prayers of thanksgiving for the wonderful gifts God has provided to you through the everlasting gift of Jesus as well as friends, family, and all loved ones who give you feelings of fulfillment.

Gracious God, creator of all things, thank you for fulfilling your promises to your people throughout all ages. Through your servants Isaiah, Joseph, and Mary, you would foretell the ministry of Jesus and send to us a king who would dwell among us. During this season, continue to fill all your people with hope through the promise of the incarnate Jesus Christ. Provide comfort to all who need it and help us all to see that your plans are coming together as we prepare for the celebration of our Savior’s birth. It is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray all of these things. Amen.

—Vicar Bryan Katz, Shiloh/New Mt Zion, Blacksburg

Ninth Day of Advent: December 7

But just when he had resolved to do this...

—Matthew 1:20a

By itself, this piece of scripture is mysterious and intriguing. Who are we talking about? What has he resolved to do? It reminds me of a quote from a novel we would find on the front jacket cover to catch our attention; to make us want to pick up the book and read the story to find the answers. Of course, this intriguing phrase comes to us from Matthew’s gospel, and it is Joseph who has *resolved* what he believes is the right course of action regarding the news of Mary’s pregnancy. The word “*resolved*” jumped out at me. The NRSV translates the original Greek text as “resolved,” while every other translation uses “considered” or “pondered.” “Resolved” communicates a strong intention to me, and that a decision has been made. It seems to me that “considered” or “pondered” more accurately reveals the heart and character of the Joseph we find in Matthew. Joseph’s pondering, like Mary’s in Luke’s gospel, is where the Holy Spirit enters in, and provides another path. Though little is written of Joseph in Matthew’s gospel, and even less in Luke’s gospel, I believe we still have great insight about his faithfulness, and how we might learn from his example.

By Deuteronomic law, Mary’s pregnancy outside of marriage was grounds for capital punishment; for being publicly stoned to death. But Matthew tells us that Joseph “*planned to dismiss her quietly*” so Mary will not be publicly disgraced, let alone face capital punishment. Here we find Joseph, the righteous, religious man of God, to be much more interested in the spirit of the law than the letter of the law. Joseph displays incredible grace and humility. Joseph took the time to *consider* what God might have him do. He is then visited by the angel who announces the miraculous, almost unbelievable news about Mary’s pregnancy. The *resolution* we find in Joseph is in his faithfulness, his openness, and his obedience to God’s will. Joseph *considered* the laws of man, and then is led by the Holy Spirit to do God’s will. In a world where so many are resolute to harm and disgrace others, where actions are loud, harsh, and very public, perhaps we too should consider our own actions and words, and strive to model the faithfulness, justness, and gracefulness of Joseph as we find him in the gospel.

Advent is a time to reflect on our need for Christ our Savior; a time to be open to how and where God is calling us. May this season fill you with hope and peace as we wait for the celebration of Christ’s birth among us.

Gracious, heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of Jesus, our Savior. As we consider & ponder the mighty acts of our Lord Jesus Christ this Advent, help us to see in the lives of your servants, like Joseph, humble hearts, ready to hear and obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

—Deacon Lisa Geiger, St Michael, Virginia Beach

Tenth Day of Advent: December 8

... an angel of the Lord appeared to him...

—Matthew 1:20b

Angels always appear when we are lost in some way. All of the angel appearances in the Bible are unexpected and yet life-saving. These angels, who sometimes are mistaken to be simple visitors or gardeners, come with a message that we need to hear in a moment of crisis. This year, like all the years before, I will take out little glass angels and put them on the Christmas tree as a reminder that they are real. Angels say: “Do not be afraid” – “The Lord is with you” – “Rejoice” – “Take courage.” These words, so simple, strike the hearts of those who hear it. Sometimes I imagine that an angel’s voice sounds like a small child or a loving parent. What if God used your voice to bring the good news?

The word “angel” means messenger in the literal translation. I often wonder if we can step in as messengers so God does not have to send another angel. We can say the words angels need to say because they are so simple and yet life changing. What might be those angel words that we might send into the world so full of darkness and fear? They are needed very much, especially this time and this year.

Right now, there are people who are afraid of the future, and you can say “Do not be afraid” when all is frightening around them. Right now, there are people singing *Joy to the World* in a nursing home, hospital, or prison just like the angels. Right now, someone is buying or wrapping a gift for a family who cannot afford gifts so that they can celebrate the greatest gift that is Christ. Right now, someone is visiting a friend in a hospital with cancer and sharing a holy meal together. Right now, someone is comforting a family whose home was lost due to fire or a hurricane or an earthquake. Right now, someone is saying the only good news that we can have in these situations is that God’s voice is alive and proclaiming his care and love for us. Would you be an angel if God calls you?

Loving God, you send us angels so we would never feel alone or distant from you. Your Spirit fills us and our communities, and we are forever connected to you, our source of life. Show us your presence when we feel anxious or alone. Give us the voice to be messengers of the good news. Amen.

—Pastor Viktoria Halmagyi Parvin, St Mark, Charlottesville

Nineteenth Day of Advent: December 17

All this took place...

—Matthew 1:22a

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien tells the story of Frodo Baggins, a hobbit who embarks on a dangerous journey to save his land from a powerful evil. Having survived several frightening and life-threatening events, with still so far to go, Frodo contemplates his situation & shares his reservations with the resident wizard: “*I wish it need not have happened in my time,*” said Frodo. “*So do I,*” said Gandalf; “*and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.*” ... There is so much about 2020 that we might wish had not happened in our lifetime: a pandemic that destroyed the lives of millions, as loved ones died alone & others experienced serious side effects; unemployment rose to historic levels & many small businesses were closed; all of us adapted to live new ways. In a chaotic election year, vitriolic political maneuverings exacerbated the country’s stress, despair & anger. We have experienced extreme weather: mega-wildfires; massive flooding; devastating droughts; temperatures variable in records-setting ways. This year has been rough, communally and personally. ***All this took place...*** I suspect that Mary and Joseph were a bit bewildered by the sudden turn of events in their own lives. Was there ever a time they asked why they were the ones chosen to be the parents of God’s Son? Did they ever contemplate the scandal their lives had become and wonder if they were up to the task given to them? They had been asked to believe the impossible, to venture forth on a journey that held all sorts of unknowns for them. They decided, in the time given to them, to step out in faith and trust God. ***All this took place...*** The path that Mary and Joseph’s life took and their willingness to enter into God’s future were all wrapped in the promise of Emmanuel, God with us. Their courage led to the fulfillment of promise for all Israel – indeed for all the world. ***All this took place...*** and from all that took place God brought hope & life. We will have times in our lives, like all of 2020, that we wish we did not have to go through. ***All this took place...*** We may sometimes be called into situations that require a level of courage we do not think we possess. ***All this took place...*** When all that is taking place is the exact opposite of what we want, when it all seems hard, awful, or fear-inducing, know that God is with us. ***All this took place...*** and God brings forth hope and life when we trust his promises, when we willingly act with courage, when we decide, with the time given us, to step out in faith and trust.

Emmanuel, enfold us in your promises & presence, that when life seems to spin out of control or we are called to paths for which we see no end, we may go forward with courage, knowing you are forever with us & will guide our lives into goodness & grace. In your precious name: Amen.

—Pastor Cathy Mims, First Lutheran, Norfolk

Eighteenth Day of Advent: December 16

“... for he will save his people from their sins.”

—Matthew 1:21c

From the moment that Joseph was given the directive to name the child, Jesus, the identity of the Messiah was revealed. The Gospel writer clearly tells us the naming story with the implication “that the etymology of Jesus’ name means ‘Yahweh saves’” (Matthew/Mark Commentary New Interpreters Bible, p.135). In the Incarnation, the moment when God takes on flesh and bones, God’s plan of deliverance is inextricably woven into our human existence. God’s plan to dwell among us complicated and challenged two of the very people for whom God’s salvation plan was also intended.

I marvel at the amount of faith, as trust, that Joseph and Mary had to proceed forward with the angelic plan without much of a plan of their own. God’s salvation comes to us as it did for Mary and Joseph, not always at times of convenience when we are in the right place to accept it, but at specifically at our times of need. For Joseph this takes place because, as the Gospel narrator discloses earlier, he, “unwilling to expose her [Mary] to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (Matthew 1:19). While Joseph was completely entitled to this seemingly noble action, God’s plan to save us and to free us opened Joseph as it does us to a completely new and different way of life. Instead of taking an action that would have protected Joseph’s heart and allowed him to move forward with little regard to Mary and the child, God intervenes through an angel (messenger of good news is how the word literally gets translated from the Greek) to encourage Joseph to embrace a new life that, while uncertain, would be filled with hope and responsibility.

The Christ who is breaking into our world yet again this Advent season reminds us of the language we gloss over because we are used to reciting it each week. Our pastors proclaim for us that “in the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.” Perhaps we become immune to the power of these words and the human context in which the story is partially embedded. Since 2020 is an opportunity, given the play on words one can make from the year to see clearly as in 20/20 vision, I would encourage us to reflect upon how our forgiveness as a people comes not only from the God made flesh in the child Jesus, but also from the profound faith and trust of Mary and Joseph. They have reminded us that the gift of freeing the people from their sins is more than just an albatross being lifted because of human action, but also provided the context to what the gift of new relationship can be out of this angelic proclamation. For this pastor, I will always see confession and forgiveness, while a part of our liturgy each Sunday, as the precursor to hope rooted in an Advent promise. Amen.

—Pastor Nathan Robinson, Emanuel, Woodstock

Eleventh Day of Advent: December 9

... in a dream...

—Matthew 1:20c

In the context of their full verse, these words — “*in a dream*” — rest among words of comfort: “But just when [Joseph] resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’”

Mary was Joseph’s dream girl, the one with whom he would create a perfect life, and a perfect family. Visions of children and dogs running around in the yard filled Joseph’s eyes and heart. Their future together was full of hope. Then Mary told him the news. She was with child. Joseph knew it was not his child, and couldn’t quite understand what Mary was telling him. But he loved her. After much deliberation, he decided to divorce her quietly. His anguish and broken heart left him exhausted, and so he curled up to sleep. He hoped that his dreams would take him to an easier place.

Sleep. Dreams not expected. Dreams not restful. Dreams real, and yet not real. An angel of the Lord, speaking into Joseph’s reality. Marry her. God wants you to. Shattering the plan Joseph had so thoughtfully and carefully crafted. Forget the life that you had envisioned, and then re-visited. Life will be like walking through a dream. Surreal. Out of your own control. Blessings and curses. Trust your dreams, for in them God speaking.

This Advent season is placed in the middle of a pandemic—a unique unusual time for us. There is isolation, and uncertainty, and much “we’ve never done it this way before.” Listening to Joseph’s story, we are assured that God is present with us, speaking into our reality, assuring us that there is no reason to be afraid. God is present with us, leading us into a future of both delight and challenge. Listen, and rest well.

God of our hopes and dreams, thank you for your presence with us. Thank you for whispering in our ears. Thank you for your assurance that, through you, all things are possible. Amen.

—Pastor Cheryl Ann Griffin, St Stephen, Williamsburg

Twelfth Day of Advent: December 10

... and said, "Joseph, son of David..."

—Matthew 1:20d

Joseph, son of David, captured my heart as a father after my third child, a son, was conceived. So much so, in fact, that I later chose "Joseph" as my Benedictine Oblate name, holding close the example of his servant's heart to Mary and Jesus.

It was an odd "sensation" as a Lutheran to feel the press of a saint upon my heart and mind. It was influenced perhaps by the fact my father's middle name was Joseph; his death immediately preceded my discovery of Benedictine spirituality. In any case, I've made the person of Joseph a spiritual mentor of sorts over the years. I particularly enjoy visiting churches named in honor of Joseph, pondering the biblical story as retold through liturgical art, reflecting upon my own journey as a father.

So little is written in scripture about Joseph that most reflections on his life of faithful service are conjecture. Why did Joseph change his plans and remain with Mary instead of divorcing her? Was the angel's address to him as "son of David" a call to duty of sorts, reminding him of his historic lineage? Regardless of his motivation, he followed through to take on roles of husband and father, provider for the Holy Family. His hiddenness alludes to a quiet, protective strength that undergirds the family story and allows Jesus to grow and thrive. We can only imagine their relationship together – its laughter and its tears – yet its quiet persistence can serve as an inspiration to all fathers in every time and place.

Jesus my Lord, what was it like growing up in this world with an earthly father who loved you as his very own flesh and blood – despite knowing that you were conceived by the Holy Spirit? We know so little of him, yet his love, devotion and decision-making shaped your life and provided a protective environment in which you could grow into adulthood. You know the struggles of his heart and his personal sacrifices more than anyone. Bestow upon us who bear the vocation of fatherhood a measure of his wisdom, strength, and courage in our own life's journey so that we may be for our children the kind of dutiful and devoted fathers who Joseph was for you. In your most holy and precious name, Amen.

—Vicar Brian Coffey, St Michael, Virginia Beach

Seventeenth Day of Advent: December 15

"... and you are to name him Jesus..."

—Matthew 1:21b

What's in a name? A name is more than just something to be known by. That's why expectant parents spend so much time thinking about and researching potential names for their newborn. Names can be passed on from generation to generation. Names can describe a unique feature at birth, honor a favorite hero, or may even be as simple as a favorite food. A name can reveal a great deal of information about the expectations of the persons who named you and who they hope you become.

In biblical times, a person's name could sum up the reputation, the personality and the essence of the individual. A person's name could encapsulate that person's character and nature. And to know a person's name could mark the beginning of a relationship.

Joseph and Mary didn't have the stress and anxiety of making sure each side of the family was represented in the process of trying to select the name their child would be called. In this case, an angel of the Lord, in a dream, relayed explicitly to Joseph what to name the child to whom Mary would give birth, "and you are to name him Jesus." Jesus, which means "the Lord is salvation" ("for he will save his people from their sins") defined the objective of his mission: salvation, that dynamic act of snatching one from serious peril; salvation, the rescuing of a life from evil; salvation, the preserving of one who is in danger of destruction. We experience this salvation through the waters of baptism: the waters that deliver us from the forces of evil; the waters that put our sinful self to death; the waters that give us new birth and makes us members of the body of Christ. We have Good News because of His name! Because of His name, the One who saves us, we have a new name! His name gives us a new identity. His name gives us a new purpose. His name gives us a new relationship, child of God!

God of Love, we are grateful for your desire to be connected to us in such an intimate way and that you would entrust humanity to deliver to the world your gracious gift of love. Help us share this Good News in our words and in our actions. In the name of the One who saves, we pray. Amen.

—Pastor Phyllis Milton, Gloria Dei (Church & School), Hampton

Sixteenth Day of Advent: December 14

“She will bear a son...”

—Matthew 1:21a

From the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel to the end of it, there is an overarching promise: “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23; Matthew 28:20)

The son Mary will deliver is Immanuel, the incarnation of God’s promise to be with us. The quotation from verse 1:21 – “She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus” – could be translated as, “She will deliver a son and you are to name him God is our deliverer.” It defies logic that the child within Mary – the child that she will labor for and give new life to – is the One who will labor for her on the Cross so she and all the world can be born anew. God acts through the power of the Holy Spirit in Mary’s life in a most remarkable and holy way — and she, with her particular voice, gifts, and context, answers God’s call to prepare the way for the Lord. Mary is an exemplary model of faith for her life of discipleship and service that point to the liberating power of God’s action in Jesus Christ.

Consider now that Christ Jesus makes our congregations, our workplaces-schools-homes (which are all often the same places now), and our very hearts, the womb in which his love grows, takes form, and is carried into the world. Christ lives within us, abides in us, and we are called to bear his light, give birth to his hope and peace, and deliver his love in a world that is groaning in labor pains for healing and restoration (Romans 8:22). Jesus, the One who delivered us from our sin and brokenness, calls us to be co-laborers in the world for him.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit and God’s gift of grace in our lives, we respond in faith using our particular and diverse voices, gifts, and contexts to point to the liberating power of Christ Jesus, who brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). In our labors we are not alone, for Immanuel is with us. Prepare the way of the Lord!

Immanuel, God with us, grow and increase Christ’s light, hope, and peace within us, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we may bear his love in the world. Amen.

—Pastor Anne Jones Martin, Christ, Fredericksburg

Thirteenth Day of Advent: December 11

“... do not be afraid...”

—Matthew 1:20e

“Do not be afraid.” When an angel appears before Mary offering those words of comfort, I cannot help but think about the terror Mary must have experienced during the unexpected visit. Not only is a visit from a servant of the Lord Almighty a scary experience, but Mary’s life was about to completely change. Change is scary. It’s uncomfortable. It’s annoying. It’s unwanted; and unfortunately, it’s inevitable.

Recently, I was sitting with a friend in a local coffee shop, talking about an environmental science class she was taking. Her professor assigned two papers, and their combined prompts asked the following question, “How do things change, and how do we create a more sustainable future in the face of an uncertain world?”

One of the major themes of her class was that positive change comes from making a personal difference in someone’s life. Change comes from making things applicable and relevant to someone’s daily routines, personal interests, and interpersonal spheres of influence.

Positive change does not come from shouting competitions on two sides of the street. The 2020 election taught us that. Change starts with the grassroots. This is the way Jesus built his mission. Jesus did not spend his entire time here on earth arguing with Pharisees in the synagogues and temples. He spent his time with people, listening to them, helping them, and teaching them how to make a difference in this world through love.

Mother Mary had no idea what she was getting into. Honestly, Christians don’t either. Whatever the future holds, “do not be afraid” of change, because change brings opportunities to spread love and hope. The world does not change because of its leaders. It changes because of its people. So, share some love and be the change in someone’s life today!

Awesome God, our Caregiver, Parent, and Friend, comfort us in our fears and help us to be agents of change in your incredible Creation. Amen.

—Andy Taminger (candidacy), St Mark, Yorktown/The Well, Va Tech & Caroline Furnace, Fort Valley, 2020 Summer Co-Program Director

Fourteenth Day of Advent: December 12

“... to take Mary as your wife...”

—Matthew 1:20f

All military members take an oath to “obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me...” The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) Article 90 clarifies that the duty is to obey “the lawful orders of his/her superior.” This has been interpreted to also mean a military member has the duty to not obey an unlawful order.

Joseph of Nazareth received his orders. He pondered whether if that order was lawful. Was he obligated to obey an unlawful one? Mary had explained that she was with child. Joseph, as her betrothed, had the right to divorce Mary because her pregnancy was a violation of the marriage contract according to the law of Moses. Joseph had decided to divorce Mary discreetly to avoid her public shame, but then his order came. Joseph was visited by an angel, a messenger from God: “Take Mary as your wife,” he said. This volunteer invitation came from the highest Authority and modified the law of Moses. Joseph taking Mary as his wife did not mean that the law of Moses was wrong; the world needed this divine intervention and Joseph’s cooperation for its salvation.

Joseph took Mary as his wife, not because he was threatened with the wrath of God. His dream was where he received his order, God revealed His love for his family and for the world. Joseph took Mary as his wife because this new order was given to the world out of love. He understood from the angel’s message from whom this new order had come. It was from God, the same God who delivered his people from bondage and exile and from various rulers and their misguided ways — from a loving God who did not manipulate lives, but did the impossible so that his love could be manifested. Joseph took Mary as his wife because as a man of faith he trusted God. God’s orders are always to promote His love. As we approach the Nativity, we look upon the Christ child in the manger. Let us also look at his parents: two people like us who face the world and continue to face it with difficult decisions. Mary and Joseph would wonder at times, asking themselves “Did we do the right things?” Their answer was their faith by following God’s loving order that will bring life according to his plan.

We wonder at times, God, if we have done what is right in this life. Guide us to dream of your service, and answer us always with faith to serve your loving order. Amen.

—Pastor Harry Griffith, Our Saviour, Virginia Beach

Third Sunday of Advent: December 13

“... for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

—Matthew 1:20g

As though this little phrase should make Joseph feel infinitely better.

As though this little phrase sums everything up perfectly and succinctly, tying it up in a neat package which makes the entire chaos that Joseph’s life has been turned into make complete sense all of the sudden. His fiancée is pregnant, but he shouldn’t panic or worry or honestly freak out because the child that she’s pregnant with is from the Holy Spirit. Totally makes sense, no questions need to be asked there, he can go about his merry way, perfectly content that everything now is crystal clear.

The world we live in doesn’t always make sense, and sometimes we want to just paint a really simple coat over it to help it make sense ... things like *God’s plan* or *God’s will* or *the work of the Holy Spirit* ... but those things, while soothing, while comforting, do not make necessarily make things any easier. They don’t make them simpler to live through. Joseph still had to face the very real reality that he had to figure out what to do about his relationship with Mary, what to do now that he was going to be a dad, how do explain this his family, their friends, the world. Knowing the child is from the Holy Spirit doesn’t make it any less complicated....

However, it does provide a very real promise that God abides, that God remains, that the Holy Spirit moves through even the most complicated and messy of situations. Into the chaos of life, the Holy Spirit moves through us – and with us – to guide us through the hills and valleys of what the world brings. This time of year brings with it its own unique brand of chaos and worry, and so we cling to this promise, that the Holy Spirit abides; in the midst of all that the world will throw at us, in the midst of all that we go through, the Holy Spirit remains as a guide, as our hope, as our promise. The world may not make perfect sense right now, but we trust that even in the imperfect the Holy Spirit breathes with us.

Holy Spirit, our life, our breath, abide with us through this sacred time. Help us to see and feel the way you move with us and guide us ever towards the light and presence of Christ. Amen.

—Pastor Tina Melusky, Trinity (Church & School), Newport News