

A photograph of a cobblestone path at night, covered in a light layer of snow. A street lamp on the right side of the path is illuminated, casting a warm glow. Snow is falling from the sky, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. The path is bordered by a low wall on the left and a dark fence on the right. In the background, bare trees and a building are visible under a dark sky.

*Journey
through
Advent
2018*



A Disciples Seminary Foundation Devotional



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An Invitation:

We are pleased that you will be journeying with us through Advent this year. In these challenging times, it is important that we all take time to reflect, remember, and prepare for the One that is born anew in our hearts each Christmas, the One we call Christ. The devotions that you find inside these pages represent the beautiful diversity of the DSF Family. You will find words from DSF staff, students, graduates, and board members and a diversity of theological, cultural, and social perspectives.

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Christians, get ready! The first Gospel reading in Advent opens with vigorous, even violent, language: distress in the nations, signs in the cosmos, shaking of the heavens. This does – and should – bring about a gasp from us! Advent means *coming*, and in Luke 21:35-36, Jesus makes no bones about the nature of the coming of the kingdom. It will make you shake in your boots. This passage is part of Jesus’ thunderous speech in the shadow of the temple, causing us to sweat even from the comfortable distance of 2,000 years.

The gap on the two millennia closes with an audible snap with the words “people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” The heavens shook 2,000 years ago, and they shake right now from an empire that would put Jesus to death, widespread poverty, the erasure of girls and women, and more. Jesus’ speech urges me *to be uncomfortable* and to witness the shaking of the heavens. This speech calls to stare directly into the shaking heavens.

Jesus spoke an eternal truth to followers in any time: the powers that threaten to shake the heavens will always be present. This is tough to hear. As a Christian, am I called only to witness destruction? By no means – Jesus reminds us vividly here that we cannot *ignore* destruction.

Another eternal truth is present in this passage: the power of redemption. Jesus assures his followers that “redemption is drawing near” and that his “words will not pass away.” The heavens shake, but they do not tell the final story. *Redemption* does. Just like the fig tree signals bounty, the shaking heavens signal redemption. We know redemption most deeply when we have witnessed loss; they are flip sides of the same coin. Jesus urges us to pray for strength to one day stand before him. I sense a call to action here – I pray for the strength to witness destruction and to participate in redemption.

Prayer: *Christ, in your coming, give us the strength to bear witness to that which makes the heavens shake. Shape us into people who work for the redemption of the world. Amen!*



Rev. Dr. Katy E. Valentine is the DSF Director of Online Learning, an ordained Disciples of Christ minister, and a New Testament scholar.

Isaiah 1:10-20 begins with an allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah—cities found in Genesis 18:16-19:29. This Genesis text interrupts Abraham and Sarah's struggle to receive God's promise of an heir because of their barrenness. Instead, what we find in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is God struggling with the lack of hospitality offered in these city gates by their violent interaction with the strangers in their midst. Such a response to the foreigner is a stark contrast to Abraham and Sarah's welcome of the men in Genesis 18:1-15. Isaiah 1 marks the first of 46 references to Sodom and Gomorrah in First Isaiah. The prophet is trying to remind those who encounter this message that there is something sinful about the failure to welcome and care for God's people. God is not concerned with Israel's ritual practices. Instead, God's focus is on how a community cares for the people in their midst. If injustice is present in Judah—and particularly in Jerusalem—no sacrifice that the people offer God will be sufficient.

In this season of “migrant caravans” and detention centers, Black Lives Matters, and #MeToo, the social and political problems of Judah should be a cautionary tale to people of faith. There is no church big enough, no financial offering sufficient enough to grant us license to ignore the plight of our sisters and brothers. God has created us to care for one another. We don't get to choose who is worthy of human dignity. Our borders, our race, our gender identity, our sexuality, our socio-economic status; none of these things insulate us from God's urging to seek the welfare of ALL of God's people. A community that invokes God's name should not do so to offer pietistic, lofty notions of purity. God's name is to be invoked for love, healing, and compassion. As we move into Advent, may we all be called to be mindful, present, and active in caring for the stranger in our midst. May we all be compelled to participate in caring for God's people and be active participants in eradicating poverty, eliminating violence, and calling people together rather than pulling them apart.

Prayer: *God, please forgive us for all the ways that we have used your name as a means to violate the dignity of others and ignore human suffering. In this season, continue to remind us that we are called to be agents of peace and provision. Amen.*



Rev. Yolanda M. Norton is the DSF Director of Student Formation in Northern California. She is a Disciples minister who serves as Assistant Professor of Old Testament and H. Eugene Farlough Chair for Black Church Studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary. She is also the creator and curator of the Beyoncé Mass.

Over 25 years ago, members from Church of the Valley decided to visit youth at Sylmar Juvenile Hall on Christmas Day. Out of that experience, a ministry was born! “Just People” is a non-profit group that tries to offer some hope and encouragement to the many boys and girls detained in our area’s juvenile detention centers by delivering handmade holiday cards to youth on Christmas Day. I have participated in this ministry almost every Christmas for the past 17 years. For me, Christmas Day has become synonymous with visiting youth in juvenile hall—one just doesn’t happen without the other. And the season of Advent has become a time to enjoy fellowship with people of all ages as we sit around tables and make handmade cards for the youth who are locked up during the holidays.

The cards get passed out to all the youth and staff at Sylmar Juvenile Hall on Christmas Day by a large group of adult volunteers who are escorted around the facility. The group enters the various units of the facility singing carols while personally distributing the cards to each person. Joining the volunteer group are therapy animals and their owners. Many of the youth don’t receive a visit from their family on Christmas Day or any other day while they are in the detention centers. Therefore, the youth (and staff) are usually overwhelmed with mixed emotions when they receive furry hugs from animals and beautiful handmade cards. The visit and the messages of encouragement in the cards are a great way to let them know that someone cares.

In Psalm 146, we are reminded of God’s faithfulness to *everyone*. As we praise God during this Advent season, may we continue to find hope, peace, joy, and love in Jesus’ invitation to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, comfort the sick, and visit those in prison.

Prayer: *Faithful God, we lift up all the people who are in prison and the people who work with them—prison staff, volunteers, chaplains, and clergy. Help us to remember the love of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do not only during the season of Advent, but always.*



Pastor VeAnn Clark is the Assistant Minister at Church of the Valley in Van Nuys, CA (covtoday.org). VeAnn is a DSF/CST (M.Div./Interfaith Chaplaincy) student who will graduate in May 2019. VeAnn is forever grateful for the educational opportunities that have been provided by DSF.

What a difficult passage we have in Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica! Let's note from the outset, an unfortunate translation of *Ioudaioi* as "the Jews." To hear this message of hope, we must first reckon with this seeming obstacle to peace. We cannot responsibly set aside the reference to "the Jews" in light of the unspeakable horrors wrought in dark centuries of ghettos, propaganda, and pogroms, of work camps and gas chambers. Make no mistake: Paul was a proud, practicing Jew—as was Jesus. Where this translation opts for "the Jews," we should read "Judeans" instead, and more specifically, we should note Paul gesturing towards the religious leaders in Judea. Paul is speaking to a small congregation resisting a powerful group; he is not writing of Gentiles resisting Jews. In fact, Paul calls the Thessalonians imitators of these Judean-Jewish Christians who stood tall before the religious authorities in Judea. Now we are ready.

The Apostle Paul was especially proud of the Thessalonians; he called this congregation of Jews and non-Jews his "crown of boasting." In a strange statement, he declares himself orphaned from his own children! Paul clearly misses the church that received his message for what it really was: God's word. God's word is said to be at work among the believers, believers who have made Paul proud inasmuch as they both heard God in Paul's preaching and imitated the churches in Judea. We should expect to encounter God in the message, to be touched, healed, or called to account. Are we listening? With Paul, we await the Lord's arrival, ready to show off a faithful congregation.

Prayer: *El Shaddai, the very breath you breathed into us bursts forth in song for the One who wraps Himself in light, who stretched out the watery sky setting it above the mountains, atop Your good creation. How odd is it that we would stand in awe of Your might even as we draw near to find comfort and salvation gathered under Your humble, motherly wings—You, who wraps Himself in light. Let our worship make You proud Mother, Father. We sing Your great deeds, Your limitless mercy, and Your unfathomable love into the very winds that You set in motion to carry the good news of Your coming kingdom. Come, Lord Jesus!*



Thorne Ridge Cassidy is a DSF/Iloff student (M.Div.) and the Teaching Pastor and the Pastor of Local Outreach and Missions at Central Christian Church in Denver, CO. By God's grace, Thorne is seven years clean from drug addiction and is now ministering to the homeless, addicted, and incarcerated.

As a kid in computer class, I was taught to hit the “return” button on my old school Apple computer. Other brands mark this button as “enter.” This is also the button I push when I “send” a quick message or need to “return” to the beginning of the next line to “start” a new paragraph. If you look closely at this button, it usually contains an arrow that looks like this ↵. This arrow symbolizes the movement that was used by typewriters when it was time for a line to move down and go back for a new paragraph. It is a button that seems to say, “Okay... that part is done. Now, what is next?” That button creates space for a new response and a new message to become part of the conversation. It allows a moment of pause before building upon the previous foundation of the messages and ideas before. ↵ “Return,” “enter,” “send,” and “start” are difficult, faithful, and active responses. Every day, however, many of us hit this button without much thought of its theological implications. ↵ When you hit the ↵ button, a person is *returning* to a *starting* point. They are finalizing one thought and *starting* a new approach to build upon previous thoughts and activities. This one button combines beginnings, endings, and space in between our written ways of communication. There is power in a button that can *return, enter, send, and start*. ↵ The prophet Malachi is hitting the ↵ button. The message he is *sending* says we will *return* to better ways when we *enter* into a new time. The new paragraph that is coming makes the story better. The people writing it will improve upon all that has happened before. They will help the people *return* and *enter* into a more sacred way of being (or *starting*) in/a relationship with God. ↵ While most of us know the direction the story goes, it means that in our faithful lives, we are to *return* to the stories, *enter* into their messages, and *send* what we learn and our love out into the world. Therefore we can continuously *restart*, retell, refine, and renew the power of those who came after the messenger Malachi. Today, we must ask ourselves about what we will write in our faith stories, “What’s next?” ↵

Prayer: *God who provides us space to return to our past, enter into our present, and think about our future, as we return to the story of your son Jesus, let us enter into this starting point in a way that sends the message of your great love to a world that needs your strong messages. ↵ Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Olivia Bryan Updegrave is a DSF/CST graduate (D.Min. with an emphasis in preaching). She is the Minister of Family & Children’s Ministries at Disciples Home Mission and a Part-Time Pastor at Independence Christian Church, KY. She has an M.Div. from Lexington Theological Seminary. She has three children’s books published, “What is God?” “Who is Jesus?” and “Where is Holy?” <http://revoliviabryan.wix.com/whatisgodstories>, and docfamiliesandchildren.org.

Before Jesus' birth, God first informed his family of what was to come; planting a seed of belief and possibility in Zechariah that displayed how God planned to be with us.

The way Jewish Law was interpreted at the time was reliant on tangible, proved ways of obedience. For this family, the Spirit of God reveled Godself to them and broke the barrier between the divine and the physical world by the children to be born.

In this season of Advent, I challenge you to remember how your journey is not your own. You are a culmination of all the visions and imaginations of the generations that have come before. You are made up of the wisdom and insight gained from the journey of those that flattened the pathway you now walk. Our experience with God leaves a legacy in our collective body. One that makes a path for us to recognize where God brought us from, and to observe that God remains faithful to promises "of the old," even among new life. The promises of God have been given to our first ancestors and we have been building on that vision of how to best represent God with what we have been given while also envisioning how, based on our history, we can move forward in our belief.

After time spent observing God's movement in his family, Zechariah was able to articulate that God is real and has been caring for us—saving and expanding our lineage of promises, throughout history. Despite how we are human and show up in history, God will still be the God that has been, is and will be.

Prayer: *I pray that we can join Zechariah in praising God for always being present, keeping God's promises, and allowing humankind the insight to envision ways to build toward future ways of being in the world that advance present and future generations to continue being and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.*



Jasmine Epps is a first-year DSF/CST MA student studying Womanist Theology and Black Church History. She also has her M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary and is severely passionate about trees.

❧ Saturday, December 8, 2018 ❧
Philippians 1:3-11

Although far removed in time and location, Paul's prayer in Philippians 1:9-11 has such relevance for us today. The prayer follows Paul's assertions of thanksgiving through prayer and of confidence in his fellow Christians (1:3-8). He prayed "that [their] love may overflow more and more with knowledge and insight" (1:9). The "love" Paul refers to here is *agape*, which I interpret as affection between people. He correlates this love to knowledge and insight. While I am inclined to cite the clichéd association between knowledge and power and responsibility, Paul's correlation is unique: *with knowledge comes an overflow of love for one another*.

In addition, Paul recognizes how that abundance of love positively affects one's ability to discern (1:10). I interpret his reference to moral discernment as "prudence." Paul furthers this notion of prudence in relation to righteousness and the "day of Christ" (1:10-11). Thus for Paul, knowledge gives way to an abundance of love for one another, which subsequently cultivates prudence that ultimately produces righteous living. In all this, the "day of Christ" is of central concern. While the temporal aspect of the "day of Christ" might seem ambiguous, I think its analogy to the season of Advent holds. Both anticipate a future of communal love and ethical living that is centered in Jesus Christ.

As we consider Paul's words during the season of Advent, let us think on the relationships he posits between knowledge, love, prudence, and righteousness. While love is the affection that Paul promotes, another type of expression has become prevalent in our world today. The hate rhetoric that permeates our socio-political climate contrasts Paul's notion of love: hate comes from a lack of knowledge; it promotes violence; and it fosters injustice. Furthermore, hate is not concerned with a future day or with communal living, but with the present and with the individual. For the season of Advent, let us ask ourselves: Is our knowledge sufficient to imbue an overflow of love?

Prayer: *May God to grant us sufficient knowledge and insight to produce an abundance of love that leads to prudent and ethical living.*



Rev. Pasesa Sapolu is a DSF/GTU Ph.D. student (Biblical Studies). He is from American Samoa and is an ordained minister in the Congregational Christian Church of American Samoa. He is a member of the First Samoan Congregational Christian Church of Alameda DOC.

Advent feels like it's speeding up, as it seems to do every year. We're just a couple of weeks out from the "big day" and there is plenty to keep us occupied. We have meals to cook, a house to clean before guests come over, pet-sitters to secure before we travel to see family. We have worship services to attend (or to plan), and people to visit. Preparation is all anyone seems to do in December. Busy busy busy, prepare prepare prepare.

But none of that is what John the Baptist preached, exhorting the people to change their hearts and lives, asking God to forgive their sins. John was called to help people turn toward God, so they'd be ready to follow when Jesus called them. They were baptized to show their commitment to this re-orientation of their lives, and they followed him in preparation for the earthly ministry of Jesus.

The painful truth is that in the last two millennia, we've lost our understanding of what it means to prepare for the incarnation, for God's presence on earth. We have replaced it with cookie baking and tree trimming and haven't left much room this season to live into that call for repentance. We have built mountains out of our busyness and created winding paths filled with self-interest and looking-the-other-way.

What would it look like if we let go of some of what the world is telling us to do in Advent, and focused instead on the kingdom of God? What can we let go of to help clear the way for Christ to enter our hearts and turn us toward living lives worthy of our calling?

Prayer: *Holy God, open our minds and hearts so that we can hear you calling us to repentance, to preparation for Christ's presence. Encourage and embolden us so that we can respond in both thought and deed, bringing hope of salvation to all people.*



Robin Robinson is a second-year DSF/CST (M.Div.) student in the hybrid program. She lives in central Illinois with her family and is in-care for ordination with the Illinois-Wisconsin Region.

“Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.” – Anne Lamott

Isaiah highlights a phenomenon in which the self-interest of a few people becomes the goal of an entire system. The Law had made accommodations for the people in which land and property would be passed down through the household in perpetuity to safe guard the welfare of the people. Yet, this is not the reality Isaiah describes. Instead, there is a great amassing of land and houses to the exclusion of others in the community, the vineyard and fields do not produce (perhaps from neglect?), and frivolity is more important than the work (or Law) of Yahweh. The consequence of such self-interest? “My people will go into exile.” Historically, Isaiah hints at the literal, eventual exile and destruction of Israel during the Assyrian conquest.

Spiritually, I think of relational exile — separation, disconnection. When self-interest is the focus, empathy becomes almost impossible because there is no room for anyone but the self, the ego. I believe that lack of empathy is a root of suffering. If I believe in scarcity and meeting my needs first, then the needs of others matter less. If my worldview is the only one that matters, the experiences of others matter less. Isaiah says Sheol opens its mouth — the darkness of death swallows up everything. Self-interest swallows up the potential for empathy, leaving, at best, a kind of sympathy that just makes excuses.

I am reminded of Isaiah’s words in chapter 9: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The hope of Advent is the celebration of the incarnation, not just as is often recognized in the form of a baby in a manger, but in the stranger, the other, in you and in me. We can make the choice to contribute to the darkness of our own self-focus or we can choose to shine the light of Christ in us — the hope of glory.

Prayer: *Holy God, may this season be one that invites us to empathy. May we better live Your light of justice and love in our communities. May we be gracious with ourselves in our failures and remain humble in our successes. Amen.*



Rev. Brittani Alexander is a DSF/American Baptist Seminary of the West (M.Div./2017) graduate. She serves as a chaplain with St. Francis Hospice Hawaii as well as Kapi’olani Women and Children’s Medical Center.

One of the best things about the season of Christmas is that we all know the songs, and we're not afraid to sing together. Even Buddy the Elf knows, "The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear!"

As a singer myself, I love that aspect of this season. But the purpose of the psalmist's praise is not spreading holiday cheer and proclaiming the value of the trappings of the season. This song is about revolution. This song is about God's justice and creative energy. This song is meant to be heard.

Sing! Give thanks! Play! Shout joyfully! Singing praise to God is a testimony to God's saving power. We respond to the LORD's love, charity and justice, kindness and creative energy by offering whatever sound of praise our bodies can express.

The lyrics of this song are memories and hopes that the people of God know well. They are words of praise rooted in the memory of what God has done, and words of expectant hope that God will act again. The psalmist sings: "Our souls *wait* for the Lord...our hearts *will* rejoice." During Advent, we look forward to the day that the fullness of God's justice and peace will reign. And while we wait, we hope. And we sing.

In this season of memory and hope, while we remember the saving acts of God through the old stories and sing the old songs of our ancestors, we light candles to illuminate the way, and we wait. A new song rises within us. A song of trust and hope, a song of praise that will change the world.

Prayer: *God of unfailing love, be with us even as we put our hope in you. Fill our hearts with songs of praise and rekindle our hope in Christ's coming. Amen.*



Rev. Kara Markell is the Director of Pastoral Formation at DSF Seattle and a D.Min. student at STM. Kara pastors Lake Washington Christian Church in Kirkland, WA and is chair of the Northwest Region's Commission on Ministry. In her spare time, she shares the gift of music wherever she can.

Wednesday, December 12, 2018

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 – The Promise of Joy and Relief

There is a lot to glean from this chapter. It brings us a powerful message of encouragement while also highlighting the very real pain and difficulty the church was experiencing. Advent is the season of anticipation, of waiting and of hope. Some of us purchase or make advent calendars to count down the days until Christmas! The day in which we celebrate with jubilant glee that the Christ child came and that love was embodied physically for the whole world! But just as people experienced very real pain and fear then, people continue to feel this way today. How can we wait with anticipation when so many lives are threatened and harmed by senseless violence and systemic oppression? Is there hope, and can we find joy in times such as these?

This passage clearly shows the writer acknowledging how the church has not only continued to grow during such turbulent times, but verse 3 tells us that their faith grew abundantly and they grew in love for one another! The writer ends verse 4 by stating that “we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all of the persecutions and afflictions that you are enduring.” Though many commentaries skip over the very challenging and apocalyptic portions of the proceeding verses, I believe the writer is trying to convey the promise of relief.

God suffers with us. God is moved by our pain and our joy! Though the language is difficult, it removes vengeance from the hands of humans and places justice and restoration in God’s care and power. Divine justice and wholeness is a gift for all. Advent can be a difficult time for many but this passage holds the promise of relief, restoration, and of hope for all. It makes a way, opening us up for joy while holding space for the brokenness and pain so many of us carry.

Prayer: *Loving God, during these trying times may we hold on to your steadfast promise of joy and restoration. Help us to share this with the world. Amen.*



Pastor Tanya Lopez is a second-year DSF/CST M.Div. student and currently serves as the Disciples Women Coordinating Minister for the Pacific Southwest Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She is married to Rev. Al Lopez and together they are parents to Avery (7) and Kaylee (4) who are their most favorite people in the entire world.

☞ Thursday, December 13, 2018 ☞
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Zephaniah most likely wrote in the opening days of the 7th century when Israel was a poor, small, vulnerable nation controlled by others. I wonder how his original audience heard his words of hope and praise. They must have thought he was crazy.

Those 7th century BCE listeners probably thought of Zephaniah the way we think about anyone in our time who speaks those same kind of words. After all, anyone can see that this promised future is nowhere to be seen. We're divided. Racism is coming out of the woodworks. The Cold War is getting hot again. White men are vainly clinging to power. No, I don't see any fortunes being restored. I don't see God's world of renown and joy.

I am tempted to be jaded and cynical believing that any talk of a restoration or celebration escapes the reality of our world. But that's when we get it. God's call is to live in hope – even when hope seems to be a joke. We must live in hope. To quote our former General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, we have to “practice the discipline of hope.” Even when it seems that the entire world has gone mad, we have to believe in God's future. Even when it seems that the world is going to destroy itself, we have to believe in God's future.

Living in hope is not easy. It requires real commitment and practice and perhaps that is one of the major gifts of Advent. Advent reminds us that God is still working in the world and is pushing us toward peace and justice. Advent reminds us that one day the dreams of God will indeed be reality. Advent reminds us that our calling is to be hopeful even when we don't feel hopeful.

Prayer: *Creator God, in a world of division, hatred, and violence, help us to live in hope – believing in your future. In Christ. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Larry Snow is a Pastor at Murray Hills Christian Church in Beaverton, OR, where he has been for 15 years. Larry also currently serves as a DSF board member. He holds degrees from Northwest Christian College and 2 from Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. He and Joan have been married for 44 years and have two children Melissa and Chris.

One of my fondest memories of my childhood is visiting my maternal grandmother's farm nestled in the hills of Floyd County, Virginia. I enjoyed playing with my cousins in the lush fruit orchard that generously rewarded our tree climbing efforts with delicious fruit. Saturated with perspiration from our activities, we excitedly drank the cold fresh water drawn from the pool that formed at the natural spring. I was intrigued as I watched the water cascading down the large rocks from the wooded hill, forming a pristine pool of water that not only relieved our thirst, but provided natural refrigeration in the spring house for the milk and other perishable goods extracted from the farm. Water redirected from the spring provided water for the livestock, the gardens and the orchard. That naturally abundant water source satisfied the thirst of every living thing on the farm. Although the farm no longer exists as in my childhood, the water is still flowing and the spring is still "going."

As we proceed through the Advent season, Isaiah's hymn of trust reminds us that in spite of our current condition, God is continuously providing us with living water drawn from the springs of salvation that shall never cease. As we remember the tremendous gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, we are compelled to thank the LORD, call on God's name, and proclaim the glorious things He has done. God's marvelous springs never cease to flow to us, His children. God is our inexhaustible source of strength, our protective shield from the onslaught of despair, and is indeed, our salvation.

Prayer: *Precious Lord, may our hearts and minds focus on your provision of your living water for our thirsty souls. As we thank you and speak of your wonderful blessings, may your living water in us overflow to others who need a spiritual refreshing from you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Lisa Enders Tunstall is Associate Pastor of McCarty Memorial Christian Church, Founder and President of Broken, Mended & Restored, Inc., and a DSF Board member.

❧ **Saturday, December 15, 2018** ❧
Philippians 4:4-7

Advent is a season of waiting, a season of preparation. During this season, we prepare our churches, families and especially our hearts to celebrate and commemorate the birth of our savior Jesus Christ.

I want to invite you to prepare your heart just as this passage invites us; first to rejoice, to have an attitude of joy and expectancy. Many times, our expectancy tends to be clouded by the activities and preparations for this season. However, the Apostle Paul reminds us to leave in God's hands our troubles, preoccupation and everything that is bringing tension and anxiety to our lives and present our needs before God, for He holds us in his hands.

The statements on this passage are not telling us to add more activities to our busy lives. This is an invitation to rest, to set our trust in the Lord, and to have an attitude that invites God to come and abide in our hearts. Advent ends up with the commemoration of the birth of Jesus, who came to bring peace, salvation, redemption, and hope to a world that was troubled and desperately in need of a savior that could bring transformation to this world. Today, as we await and prepare for this season of hope, we must invite Jesus to abide within us.

The peace of God transcends all understanding. This is peace that can only be found in Jesus, a peace that will guard our hearts and minds, a peace that will help us through difficulties and will center us on our source of love, joy, and hope.

I want to invite you as you prepare for this season, to be mindful of Jesus; be mindful of God's promises, be mindful of his works of compassion and love. S Especially be mindful of the works of Jesus in your life; meditate in his goodness towards you and from that point be grateful and share his love.

Prayer: *Lord, as we prepare to celebrate that you came to this world in the greatest and most beautiful act of love, help us to have an attitude of thanksgiving, peace, love, and mercy. Sharing with the ones around us your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.*



Daniel Delgadillo is a member of Centro Familiar Cristiano Restauracion (DOC) where he serves as the Music Director. He is a DSF/CST M.Div. student and is in the ordination process in the Pacific Southwest Region.

HE'S BACK! He, of course, is John the Baptist. Courtesy of The Common Lectionary, he always shows up! Some might say he intrudes during Advent when the majority of the Christian community is rushing headlong to Christmas. Who wants to focus on an itinerant preacher whose words are critical of the status quo when there's a baby's birth to celebrate? Not many, if not most who are God's people! However, John the Baptist reminds us that celebrating the birth of the Christ Child requires preparation if we are going to be ready for Him and His way. The preparation needed is specific. If we take John's words literally, we are called to re-order our priorities.

What other word than re-order can one use when John says these things?
 . . . Those of you who have two coats, give one away to someone without a coat!
 . . . Those of you who have food, give it to those who don't have any food!

John is clearly telling those who would welcome the Christ Child that they are expected to give priority to meeting the needs of those who are poor, hungry, and homeless. By implication, he is reminding us that our Lord, who began his life as an infant in a manger, literally in poverty, was the ultimate "man for others." Those who would follow Him need to be like Him. They need to be "people for others," not just at Christmas, but 24/7!

Enjoy the wonder of Christmas. After all, in many ways it is, as the popular Christmas song declares, "the most wonderful time of the year." However, amid all the glitz of the season take time to listen, once again, to John whose purpose as the forerunner to the Messiah was to "prepare the way of the Lord." He did so by reminding us that addressing the needs of the poor, the hungry and the homeless—indeed anyone in need—is the only way to celebrate Jesus' birth! And, we are called to do this every day, not just a few days before, or after, December 25.

Prayer: *God of Advent, giver of the Christ Child, we are grateful for this, your incredible gift. Challenge and empower us to be like the mature Christ—people for others. Amen.*



Rev. Dr. Ed Linberg is a retired Disciples' pastor, living in La Verne, CA. He is a DSF/CST graduate (D.Min./1974) and served on the DSF board in the 1980s.

EXPERIENCE THE GLORY - The reality of what is lived today by many people around the world, which includes people who are very close to us, and even closer than what we may think, have experienced, are experiencing, and will experience what Isaiah states that the people of Israel experienced in the lands of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, by the invasions of the Syrians in the years 700's BCE. Looking for answers, people receive many ideas, based on the common and popular ways of avoiding, escaping, or making it through distress, anguish, and darkness in their lives. Isaiah refers to those actions or beliefs as foolish, as he writes about consulting the necromancer. But Isaiah also writes about "the children whom the Lord has given" him as signs. A writing that the author of Hebrews uses (Hebrews 2:13b) to apply it to Jesus as our flesh and bone brother whom is the answer to all who are experiencing distress, anguish, and darkness. This is why we then read "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." This glory refers to no other than Christ Jesus. Born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, but His Glory became known by the time he was living in Capernaum by the sea, territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (Mathew 4:13).

As Christian believers, we know by the time the season comes around to acknowledge, celebrate, and worship the coming of Jesus to this world, we may have the opportunity to see His Glory manifested in our lives and in the lives of all who experience the distress, anguish and walk through the gloom into darkness.

Prayer: *Dear God, may we always be willing, ready, and intentional at observing your Glory arrive to all who experience the distress caused by being in need, the anguish caused by injustice, the darkness caused by sin and evil in this world. May we be able to not only observe but to experience your Glory and help others experience it also.*



Rev. Xosé G. Escamilla is husband to Ofelia Escamilla, father to Daniel and Priscila, and grandfather to Ariana and Nathan. He is the Senior Pastor of Casa de Oracion Christian Church and Director of DSF's CMS and DMS programs.

Amidst profound injustice and evil, the psalmist laments concerning Israel. Psalm 94 is the Hebrew communities petition for God to address the arrogance and oppression of the wicked. To rectify the wrongs done to Israel. The psalmist asks, “How long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?” (v. 3) They pour out their arrogant words. They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the stranger. They murder the orphan and say, “The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.” (vv.4-7) The psalmist’s question emerges from fear and frustration, which has gripped their heart and mind and would even enslave their soul if not for their confidence and trust in the Lord.

“Be Still and Know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10) It is in the stillness that the psalmist realizes God’s refuge. As the psalmist overcomes their fears, they realize that humanity is fully known by God, that God has the ultimate knowledge of humanity. Only those who are the dullest of humanity, the wicked, the proud, the evildoer, would disregard or reject this ultimate divine truth. “When I thought my foot was slipping,” your steadfast love, O Lord held me up. (v. 18) But the Lord has become my stronghold and my God the rock of my refuge.

A most certain joy emerges as the psalmist centers themselves in God and not in the dullness of those who disregard, dismiss, or reject God. It is not in the strivings, the cravings, and the materialistic desires of our day where a most certain joy is found but in the stillness of a heart, mind and soul centered in the all-pervading presence of God where a most certain joy is found.

Prayer: *Great God of our refuge and salvation, amidst the hustle and bustle of this Advent season we center ourselves in you. We know that joy is not found in the strivings, cravings and materialistic desires of our day but in you, O God. In you our joy is made real, complete, and everlasting. During this Advent season may we share a most certain joy found in you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Rev. Monica Joy Cross is a DSF/PSR (D.Min.) student and author of *Reflections of a Prophet without Honor* and *Authenticity and Imagination in the Face of Oppression*.



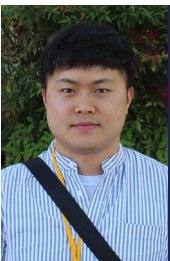
When I was young, my grandmother used to tell me stories about scary monsters. I tried to be a good child so I wouldn't be taken away by monsters. Our imagination is stimulated today by words in today's Scripture—angel, dragon, Devil, Satan, beasts, the lake of fire, and so on. These are quite familiar images, not only in our fantasy world but also in our reality.

In my Korean context, I have witnessed and experienced a lot of demonizing, not only in the church but also elsewhere in society. By demonizing and stigmatizing a person or a group as sinners or heretics or whatever else, we establish and strengthen our self-identity and, in doing so, boast about how righteous we are compared to others. Without throwing others into a bottomless pit, locking them in with a great chain, and sealing it over them (v. 3), we can't feel secure and at peace. Satan has always been around for those who want to feel superior to others.

In the gospels, the images of the Messiah held by the followers of Jesus never match what Jesus teaches and manifests. In the same manner, whoever we think of as Satan might be the ones Jesus wants us to love. By paying too much attention to who the Messiah is and what *parousia* looks like, we might miss what we need to be taking care of.

The scripture ends with the defeat of evil, and this is what John, the author, and his audience might expect. However, this is not a story of revenge and judgment but instead is a story of encouragement and hope, both for those two thousand years ago and now for us. There has always been hope as the birth of Jesus occurred under the terrible misgovernment of Herod Antipas. Now, let's sing a song of hope together, instead of cursing others, in this Advent season.

Prayer: *And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you. (Psalm 39:7 NRSV)*



Byongho Lee is from South Korea but someday hopes to be able to say that he is from "Korea." He is a DSF/SFTS (M.Div./2017) graduate and is working as an intern at Forest Hill Christian Church in San Francisco.

“And he shall be the one of peace.” Someone who is to bring peace and be peace. Someone who will exude peace in all that they are and all that they do. That is something profound to think about and imagine. How can it be? When will it be? Who will it be?

During this holiday season, peace is greatly desired and greatly needed. It is craved in family situations, work environments, communities, the country, and the world. Essentially peace is needed absolutely everywhere. There is good reason for that. Peace changes relationships. It brings unity. It creates justice. It encourages understanding, love, compassion, all that results in growth and light.

I know when there is peace around me I am in a different state. I am more centered and aware of the presence of God. I am more able to be present for others. I am better able to listen and work towards a common goal, the common good. Peace is valuable. We know this and yet, when we look around we see how it is lacking in so many ways. We witness and experience discord, tragedy, injustice, and war. We know the short-term and long-term effects for ourselves and our neighbors. We are lost when this is our reality.

So here we find in Micah a message bringing good news, bringing hope and bringing a new reality. It is the message we need to hear, to tell and to live. It is that message because peace is not an out there way of being that we are waiting for someone to bring. It is already present within the God whom we worship and within our very beings. It is there. Peace is present. It is our responsibility to live that peace and be that peace, now and always. It is what will effect change. The time is now. May peace be what rules.

Prayer: *Peace giving God, help us to live peace in ways we have not yet even imagined. Amen.*



Rev. Alicia Speidel is the minister at Hood River Valley Christian Church in Hood River, Oregon. She is a graduate of DSF/PSR (M.Div.). Married to Geoff they have two children, Kailey and Jackson, and two crazy cats.

Extended periods of trouble and debilitating events along with protracted suffering and misery may cause us to turn upward and outward in desperate search for relief. No doubt, there have been times when we wondered if God knows what we are going through. We may ask, “O God, do you really care about us?” The refrain, “restore us, O God,” expressed in Psalm 80 reflects the anguish of a broken people. Yet, the psalmist believes God will not abandon us if we remain connected to our Creator. Conditions beyond our control create appropriate times to look up and out for salvation and deliverance. We may ask, “O God, will you help us through this unbearable situation?”

These days, many people feel out of balance. They point to the political climate and policies that polarize the nation and pit family members against each other. The holiday season does not provide a respite from the fray and division within households. Instead, it becomes a time of forced gatherings when clans are separated and silent. Fragile feelings are assaulted and love dissipates. Disagreements and rampant madness parade through your life. We may ask, “O God, how long must we endure?” Fortunately, the psalmist has provided a timeless prayer to apply when life is hard and the way forward is blurred. Trapped in the now of an unwelcomed experience that lingers like spoil milk, we seek to resolve the dilemma that disturbs our peace and wears on our nerves. We are acutely aware this is more than we can bear alone. Yet, we caution against joining forces that will serve only to deepen and harden the distinctions that can easily become camps for contention and combat. We may ask, “O God, what must we do?”

This Advent, let us be bold enough to face reality and look upward and outward to know with assurance God is listening, watching, and still speaking in response to our needs and desires.

Prayer: *Thank you, God, for restoring me and lifting me up when I am down. Thank you for reminding me each day with every sunrise you are within me and guiding my every step. Thank you, God, for believing in me. Help me to believe in you even more. Amen*



Rev. Dr. Art Cribbs is Pastor of the Los Angeles Filipino American United Church of Christ in Eagle Rock, CA. He serves on the DSF Board of Trustees. He has two sons, three daughters, a grandson, and a granddaughter.

In this time of Advent, we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a time for joy and happiness. Let's take advantage of this time to remember the sacrifice made by this child who was born in Bethlehem.

In Hebrews 10: 5-10, we can reflect on when Christ came into the world. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says that Christ received a body prepared by God to eliminate all the sacrifices that were made in the past. This is the body that God placed in Mary, and where Christ lived. This is the body that God used to be born, grow, and used as a pleasing sacrifice to God. It is the body of Christ that abolished all past laws that ordered sacrifices. These sacrifices were only temporary, but the body of Christ was used to once and for all take all the sin away from the world.

In the Last Supper, Jesus used the bread and wine to represent the sacrifice that was going to happen to the body that God gave him. As you take the Eucharist during this time of Advent, remember that the bread and wine represent the sacred and perfect body that Christ used to forgive our sins, and love us for eternity. The sacrifice of Christ was a reflection of obedience in doing what God wanted. Christ was obedient to his purpose and his plan.

May we imitate Christ and do the will of God. Let's enjoy this new plan of God, since through the sacrifice of his body we have been sanctified. Our past is behind us; we are new creatures. We have a new life in Christ. May Christ be born in our hearts every day.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you because you sent your son Jesus Christ to live among us in a body that you prepared to abolish the past and guide us towards a new tomorrow. May at this time we see your will in each of our lives. Amen.*



Alexis Cruz-Benitez grew up and lived most of his life in Naguabo, Puerto Rico until 2012, when he and his wife Yamilka moved to Phoenix, AZ. They currently serve in Templo Cristiano Central as music teachers and worship leaders. Alexis is a DSF/CST (M.Div.) hybrid student.

When was the last time something *huge* happened to you? Who do you run to? Your bestie? Your relative? Co-worker? Pastor or mentor? In Luke 1:39-55, here's Mary, alone with the Angel sent by God. She is blessed with the gift of the Lord of All in her womb. Mary is a single woman, not even married yet. With God's instructions, Mary runs to her relative Elizabeth, the one the Lord has put in her heart to trust with her deepest secrets.

Can you imagine what Mary was thinking as she set out to Elizabeth's home? How was she going to explain this one? Yet, when she arrived, the child in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy. She even had Mary stay with her for her first trimester to take care of her.

Has anyone ever come up to you with the most exciting news and your insides are already excited just by the glow on that person's face? I imagine that is only a sliver of the feeling Elizabeth felt for Mary, as she sung a beautiful song of praise for God Almighty. Our God almighty, the one who brings us through all of our trials and tribulations. Mary was a simple woman, and nevermore will she be. She is now the Mother of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There are times in life when we believe we are simple, times our lives feel barren. Then God gives us a gift to remind us we are Glorious in God's eyes. We are amazing and deserve to feel exalted. Think back... to that last huge event, what was it?

For me, my last huge gift was being accepted into seminary. My education was barren, I had no real education skills, yet they said yes. God knows, and God has a plan for our lives even when we don't believe we are worthy. We are reminded, yes we are, because we are God's.

Prayer: *O, Holy One, let us be in thanksgiving for the gifts you grace our lives with, that we may sing praise in your name above all. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



Renae Earl is a DSF/American Baptist Seminary of the West (M.Div.) student. She also serves as the Facilitator/President of the Christian Church Northern California/Nevada Disciples Regional Women's Ministries Council.

☞ Monday, December 24, 2018 ☞

Isaiah 35:1-10

In 2017, Californians experienced a winter's reprieve from a five-year drought and in March of that year, people rushed out to the wilderness to view the spectacular superbloom, an event similar to what is described in Isaiah 35. Yet, there were no reports of people gathering in the agricultural fields that fall to celebrate the bountiful harvest. It is as if people forgot the cyclical nature of life; yet knew subconsciously that flowers now mean food later.

The people of the ancient world knew this cyclical nature intimately, and so we read that the Hebrew Bible actually prescribes a fall celebration, Sukkot. A time in which the people may celebrate the salvific exodus from Egypt and the continued blessings bestowed upon them by YHWH. Cycles are not merely annual, we also see historical cycles. Both types of cycles are described in Isaiah 35. According to Marvin Sweeney, it was written as a Sukkot liturgy read during the dedication of the Second Temple altar, as the postexilic Jerusalem community celebrated a second exodus, this time out of Babylon.

Isaiah 35, however, is not merely a reminder of fulfilled prophecy. It continues to hold a spiritual relevance. In reading multiple translations of this chapter, one of the linguistic delights of this poem is hinted at, that is its multivalent reading as present and future. For those who are experiencing the glory, comfort, and healing of YHWH, it is a present call to act expressed as “let...”; for those who have not yet felt these joys, there is a promised future expressed as “will...”

Christmas Eve is in the cusp of winter - neither spring with flowers, nor fall with harvest are anywhere in sight. It is itself a time when life withdraws from the world - the darkest time of the year. On this night, we meditate on the promise of the glory, comfort, and healing of YHWH, described in Isaiah 35, and embodied in Jesus, the bringer of living water.

Prayer: *Creator, I praise you, even in our darkest days. I praise you for the living water of Jesus that will bring forth the blossoms of spring, themselves reminders of the nourishing harvest of fall. I am grateful for this, your annual reminder of my salvation. Amen.*



Rev. Leah Laird is the Director of Initiatives and a student at DSF. She is finishing her Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible in Claremont, California.