



THE POWER OF
YES

Advent Devotional

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Original Reflections and Content

by Rev. Natalia Terfa

Wednesday Blessings from








Ordinary Blessings for the Christmas Season

by Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

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Weekly Outline

 SUNDAYS	Worship
 MONDAYS	Reflection on weekly text
 TUESDAYS	Activity
 WEDNESDAYS	Blessing from Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson
 THURSDAYS	Activity
 FRIDAYS	Reflection on weekly text
 SATURDAYS	Sabbath - reflect, wonder, wander

Advent is a great time to set apart a little time each day for reading and reflecting on the stories in this season, of which there are many. Our theme this Advent is “*The Power of Yes!*” Each week, we’ll focus on a different yes that was spoken by someone in the Christmas Story, and how each yes made a difference. Could God have used other people? Yes. They all had a choice. They all could have said no, but they said yes, and their yes had power. So does yours.

On Sunday, we hope you’ll find your way to worship, or light a candle in your Advent wreath and sing a song. Monday through Friday, we will have a combination of devotions, prayers, journal prompts, poetry, etc. Saturday, we invite you to participate in a Sabbath practice, taking time to reflect on the week that has passed, wonder about your place in this story, and wander your neighborhood, spending time with others or in nature. Sabbath was created for us to reconnect to who God created us to be, and our own yes to participating in the story of God.

We hope you find meaning in this season of anticipation and waiting, as light overtakes the dark, and we are praying you might find your own yes as we move into what is next.

Sunday, November 30

Worship

Go to church, in-person or online, take a walk, take a nap, listen to music or a podcast, meet friends, share a meal, etc. Worship in whatever way feels best to you.

Monday, December 1

Reflection on Luke 1:78-79

*because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1:78-79)*

It's Advent. I love this season of preparation and reflection. It's a time to slow down and get quiet and still. And it's a season for songs, especially in the scripture that surrounds this story. Mary, Simeon, Zechariah - they all sing songs when they hear of the coming of the savior of the world. And those songs are anything but quiet and still. They are defiant and hopeful and talk about toppling systems and life without fear and rescue of the oppressed.

The verses above are from Zechariah's song, and I think they are particularly hopeful for this time of year, or in history. We're all exhausted. Hope is at a minimum. And in the first week of Advent we light one candle to represent the tiny flicker of hope that just won't give up. And Zechariah sings about the light coming from heaven to shine on us who live in the shadow places, those of us who are trying to live each day with only a flicker of light to guide us. He sings about sunlight shining and illuminating every dark place.

Well.

That's quite a song to sing to people who are in the midst of hard times. To people who are exhausted. To people who are struggling to keep the tiny flicker of hope alive. That God would come and obliterate all the darkness is kind of an audacious hope isn't it? The contrast for me here is so stark - my one candle, barely making it, drowning in the puddle of melted wax, and Zechariah sings about God just showing up with full bore brightness, overloaded sunlight.

Maybe I don't believe it's coming. Maybe you don't believe it's coming. I know that it's hard to hear a song like this right now, much less sing it yourself. But even if you can't sing this song this year, Zechariah already has. He sang the song we can't sing and it's still true this year. Zechariah says a big no before he says a big yes, but still - God is coming. Christ is coming. To shine on us who are living hard days with the brightest light we can imagine.

So for now your one candle is enough. It's more than enough. It will light the way for the one who will shine on everything.

Tuesday, December 2

Activity: Silent Night Indeed

It turns out Zechariah uttered quite a big no before he offered his yes. When he didn't believe that his wife Elizabeth would be able to bear a child, he was struck mute for months. He carried a tablet to write on, in the cases where his words were needed, but mostly he was just ... silent.

It was the silence that helped Zechariah get from disbelief to belief. From no to yes. He didn't go on a retreat; he was still doing his everyday, normal activities, but didn't talk. I often wonder what these months were like for Zechariah. I wonder a lot what these months were like for Elizabeth, too, but particularly for Zechariah, how did he react? Did he get frustrated? Did he gain a new appreciation for the people around him? Did he learn a new appreciation for being an observer? What happened in between his no and yes?

How do you feel about silence?

How often do you find yourself quiet?

Today, carve out a little time for silence. Just a little. Not 6 months like Zechariah, but some amount of time that feels do-able for you. Maybe you create silence around you, or maybe you find silence within you. Either way, for just a moment or two, take on the characteristics of a Zechariah and see what happens. If you like to journal, write a little reflection on what you felt and saw and heard in and around you, otherwise, just be.

Wednesday, December 3

Blessing: For Elizabeth

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

She flings wide the door
and saunters outside
to bless her little cousin
to announce what is already true
to add her delight to God's
and celebrate how good it feels to embody the impossible
and take up space in the story.
She opens her arms wide
so they can embrace with
shoulders, bellies, and voices
that bear witness to how much
God trusts women to carry
what is dangerous and holy
for the sake of generations still forming inside us all.

Thursday, December 4

Activity: One Small Flame

Elizabeth and Zechariah had long since accepted that they would never be parents. They had given up hope. It's fitting that we light the candle of hope in this first week of Advent and reflect together on Elizabeth and Zechariah's yeses. It's a good time for us to think about the ways we have lost hope. To reflect on the things we have accepted as our lot that are maybe not God's dream for us.

Take some time to think about or write any hopes that you have lost. Be honest, no one will see this but you. Then, find a quiet spot, get a candle and a lighter or matches, and turn off the lights. Sit for a moment in the dark. When you start to get fidgety, take a few deep and calming breaths.

And then, light the candle. Imagine it is the hope of this first week of Advent. The hope of God's coming yes to you, and to the whole of creation. Stare at that flame for a bit. Breathe. Sing. Sit. Whatever feels good or right.

Let the hope of that little bit of light shine through.

Friday, December 5

Reflection on Luke 1:44

*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.
(Luke 1:44)*

When Mary was still newly pregnant, she took a trip from Nazareth to the hillside town of Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When announcing her pregnancy, the angel Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth had also been surprised by an unexpected pregnancy, so I wonder if maybe there would be the understanding and comfort there for Mary that she was not getting at home. We don't have details of course, but based on Joseph's initial reactions, I'm guessing Mary was feeling not only the weight of what was to come but also the judgment of those around her.

So off she goes. I had a colleague once say that in this part of the story, Mary reminds us that we don't need to stay in places that aren't good for us, we are allowed to go where we will be welcomed with joy and love and mutual care. Mary didn't have to stay in Nazareth while Joseph decided if she was worth staying married to, or while people whispered about her, or while she tried to process the news that had been spoken to her. It was a lot. So she went in search of a safe place to land.

And she found it. Elizabeth meets Mary at the door with the biggest yes she has maybe ever experienced. Elizabeth greets her and tells her she is blessed and that the child in her womb is blessed. Can you imagine what that must have felt like for Mary? To hear that she was blessed and the baby was blessed when everyone else in her life was likely saying very different things?

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Joy loves company. The baby in Elizabeth's belly leapt for joy when Mary arrived because joy loves company. Sometimes all we need is someone who loves us and sees us clearly enough to name our blessedness and name the joy as well as the fear. Mary comes to Elizabeth, Elizabeth says yes, calls her blessed, and Elizabeth's child leaps with joy. It is then, and only then, that Mary sings her Magnificat (don't worry, we'll get to it later). Mary sings after being seen, loved, blessed and welcomed with joy. She sings because she is safe.

I wonder how we might be a little more like Elizabeth this year.

How might we say yes to the unexpected?
How can we create places for people to be safe enough to sing?
How might we see and name the blessings of those around us?
How can we welcome people we love with joy?

Saturday, December 6

Sabbath

Use today to reflect on the first week of Advent: how Elizabeth and Zechariah said yes. How their yes is a part of the Christmas story, and how it is still a part of yours. Take time today to wonder and wander, whatever that looks like for you.

Sunday, December 7

Worship

Go to church, in-person or online, take a walk, take a nap, listen to music or a podcast, meet friends, share a meal, etc. Worship in whatever way feels best to you.

Monday, December 8

Reflection on Isaiah 40:3

A voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. (Isaiah 40:3)

It's Advent, a time where we also are preparing the way for Jesus to come. Come into our lives yet again. The great already and not yet. I love Advent. I love the beauty found in this darker time of year. I love the imagery of dark skies and dark rooms and light breaking in. And this year, Advent feels even more like a wilderness. More than usual anyway. And each year, at the beginning of Advent, we light candles and read this verse from Isaiah.

It's quoted in all four Gospels, (John 1:23, Mark 1:2-3, Luke 3:4 and Matthew 3:3, if you want to look it up) during the story of John the Baptizer, but it's from the book of the prophet Isaiah. A voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Notice that I haven't put any punctuation in this verse. It feels almost clunky without at least a comma in there doesn't it? I included no punctuation because in Hebrew there isn't any punctuation in this sentence. Interpretation and translation over generations led to decisions around this verse, and that includes decisions about punctuations.

General scholarly consensus has not agreed on a single way to understand this verse, but instead has two:

A voice cries out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord.

OR

A voice cries out: in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

Either one is possible, and it's an interesting (i.e. nerdy) exercise to read it both ways and find which one speaks to you most.

This year in particular, I find the second one to be more profound than ever. It is in the wilderness where we hear the voice telling us to prepare. It is in the wilderness where preparation is even possible. It is in the wilderness where the work of preparing for God to enter in, begins.

Wilderness? Check. Truly it feels like things are very wilderness-like right now. But if we listen, we too hear the voice crying out to tell us that it is here, in the midst of things that are wild and unknown and terrifying, it is here, to us, that God comes.

Prepare the way. Even in the wilderness. Even when we don't have all the tools and supplies we usually have at our disposal. We can prepare for God to come. Come again, and come anew.

Tuesday, December 9

Activity: Wild Places

John spent much of his time in the wilderness outside of Judea. So, despite today being a Tuesday, no matter where you live, or what the weather is like today, find a moment to step outside into some wild place.

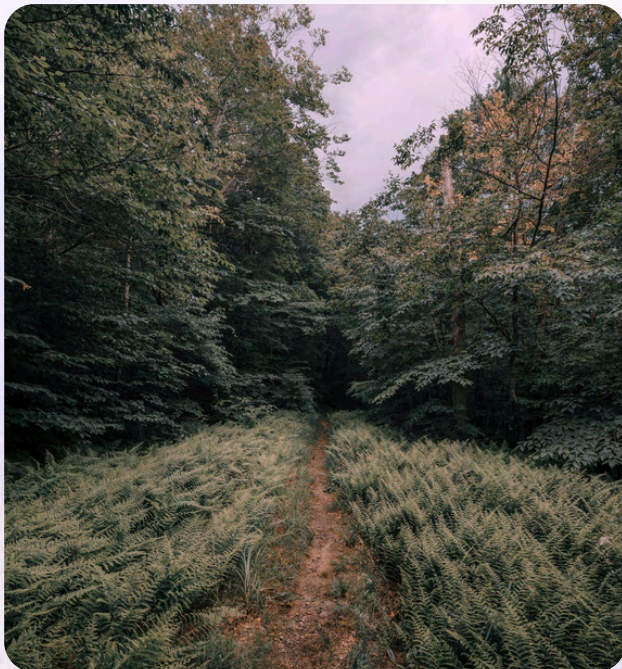


Photo by Clay Banks on Unsplash

Maybe it's a trail near your house or work that you have never explored before.

Maybe it's finding a local or county park and taking a little drive.

Maybe today your wild place is just a brisk moment with your face to the sun or to notice the patterns frost makes, or maybe it's waiting until dark and finding somewhere to see that the stars seem brighter in cold weather.

Whatever it is, find a little wilderness today, and see what might be calling out to you there.

Wednesday, December 10

Blessing: For John

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

He blazed a trail into the wild places
away from the center of status quo,
the restraint and preservation of holiness
a weathered sense of how it had to be.

He cried out with a voice that dared
to prepare a way into the unknown
for the One they'd been waiting on
for things they could not imagine all alone.

He was the beloved son of an old priest
who preferred temples among the trees and washing in rivers
to the pomp of what had already been tried and true.

He stood between one age and the next,
called fool and nuisance and threat since
his is strange and humble work
in a world of folks who would rather be the One.



Photo by Annie Sprat on Unsplash

Thursday, December 11

Activity: Prepare Him Room

As has been mentioned already this week, John's role was to prepare the way for Jesus. That's kind of what this whole church season is about, if you think about it. Everyone's yes gets us one step closer to the arrival (the "advent") of Jesus in the world. John's yes places him in the wilderness, calling to people to get themselves ready for what is coming. He knows who is coming, and he knows we have some work to do beforehand. No one prepares in the same way, but there is preparation for all of us to do.

So the question to think about on this day is:

What can you do to, as the Advent hymn "Joy To The World" sings, "prepare him room?"

Jesus is on the way, and our task in this season is to prepare to receive him. Take some time today, and journal or reflect on these questions:

- What is yours to do?
- What can you do to clear out space for God to enter in?
- What is in your way?
- What is holding you back?
- What do you need to prepare for the arrival of the baby Christ?

P.S. If you need some background music while you reflect or journal, check out "Joy to the World" by Amanda Opelt, which uses the familiar hymn lyrics with a different tune to help us hear it anew.

Friday, December 12

Reflection on Matthew 3:1-2

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:1-2)

John's "yes" isn't recorded in scripture like so many others. We don't hear about John's childhood, his growing up, or his call story. In Matthew's Gospel, we first encounter John as an adult, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. He is telling people that they should get themselves ready for the coming of God's kingdom. I've always wondered how John was so effective in getting his message across. Matthew's Gospel says "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan" were going out to where he is, in the wilderness, and getting baptized.

As far as I can tell, John's strategy is to be as far away from people as possible, so that it's an inconvenience for them to find you. He is wearing clothes made out of camel hair and eating honey and locusts - not the latest fashion - and he calls the church higher-ups a "brood of vipers." AND YET he baptizes everyone? That is wild.

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John's role in this story, as I mentioned earlier, is to prepare everyone for the coming of God into the world. He is not the main character, but he sets the stage. John's message is one of repentance.

The word used in the Biblical Greek here is one of my favorite Greek words: metanoia. It literally means to turn oneself around or to change. We don't often think of Advent as a season of repentance, but here it is, being shouted by John in the wilderness as the way we can get ourselves ready for God.

Preparation then, in this season, isn't just about getting the decorations up, or lighting candles, or singing songs. Preparation includes repentance. Repentance as a way to, as we reflected on yesterday, "prepare him room." We have a few ways that we do this repentance, as people of God, but all of them involve acknowledging the ways we mess up and do harm, and then being forgiven. Confession and forgiveness as a key part of Advent? Yes!

John points people to Christ with supporting character energy and yet doesn't let people go without an experience that changes who they are. The kingdom of God is near! He says. Get ready.

Saturday, December 13

Sabbath

Use today to reflect on the second week of Advent: how John's yes put him solidly in the supporting role and not the main character. Think about how John's yes is a part of the Christmas story, and how it is still a part of yours. Take time today to wonder and wander, whatever that looks like for you.

Sunday, December 14

Worship

Go to church, in-person or online, take a walk, take a nap, listen to music or a podcast, meet friends, share a meal, etc. Worship in whatever way feels best to you.

Monday, December 15

Reflection on Luke 1:46-48

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." Luke 1:46-48

The name we give to the song Mary sings in Luke 1 is "The Magnificat." It gets that name because Mary begins her song by saying that her "soul magnifies the Lord" and in the Latin that word is where we get Magnificat. It's really, really worth going to read the song in its entirety, and I hope you do.

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But it's important to note what kind of a song this is. It's not Mary, meek and mild, singing here. This is a song of praise AND resistance. It is a song of justice and right-sizing power. It's about breaking oppression and tearing down the oppressors. She sings it at Elizabeth's house, still newly pregnant, still very scared about what comes next. Elizabeth, who opens her home to receive Mary, blesses her, and gives her room. AND THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

Ya'll, look what can happen when we make space and receive people with joy! Mary doesn't sing her song, this particular song, until there is welcome, and blessing, and joy. When those things show up first, this kind of resistance and truth to power can finally be sung. Listen to what she sings:

*God has shown strength with his arm; has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.*

Don't you want this to be the way the world will be? Don't you want this to be what Jesus brings when he comes? I do.

You see, Mary is singing about what God is growing. What is about to be birthed in her and through her. I have no doubt she was scared. Any of us would be. But she sang about this kind of future anyway. She didn't just know what was happening, but felt the need to declare it, out loud, and in song.

Sometimes you are the one creating space. And sometimes you're the one who needs to sing it. Either way - God's promise is on the way, and is about to change everything.



Caravaggio, Italy - Mosaic: Annunciation of Virgin. Picture August 24, 2017.

Tuesday, December 16

Activity: Bodies

Our bodies are wise. They always have things to tell us, but sometimes we get caught up in the hustle and bustle of life, especially this time of year, and we override, ignore, or drown out what our bodies are telling us. So today's activity might be out of the box for some of you, but it's a practice to help us reconnect with our body's wisdom. I think body practices are especially powerful this time of year, when we are reflecting on what it means that God chose to come into this world in a body, through a body, vulnerable and weak as well as wise and wonderful.

Read the simple instructions below, and then once you know what comes next, take just a few moments, maybe even five minutes, and go through the practice below.

Find a comfortable seat, sitting tall and feet planted on the ground.

Close your eyes.

Place one hand on your heart, the other low on your belly.

Take four deep breaths in and out. No rush.

Try to fill up your lungs from bottom to top and then reverse.

After those 4 breaths, let your breath come to its natural rhythm, and spend the rest of your time mentally scanning your body, from head to toes. (*crown of your head, forehead, cheeks, chin, jaw, ears, neck, throat, etc etc, side to side, top to bottom*)

As your thoughts pass each place, notice if it's tight or tense, if it's relaxed or loose. Notice if thinking about it changes how it feels (*I always feel my jaw unclench and my shoulders drop when I do this*).

When you're done with the whole scan, slowly open your eyes, and ask yourself how you feel. Write that first word down. Just for you.

If this was challenging for you - I'm so glad you gave it a try! Way to go! If you enjoyed this practice, you can come back to it any time, maybe even on our set apart Sabbath days.

Wednesday, December 17

Blessing: For Mary The Mother of Jesus

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

Every year, folks with the,

"Mary Did You Know?"

Yeah, she knew. An angel told her.

She opted in without asking for
permission from her father
or quietly convincing her fiancé.

She sang an earth-shaking prophecy
and had (stretch marked) skin in the
game.

She knew. She super knew!

Her youth and virginity
paint our telling of Mary
as vulnerable and mild.

But do not forget God's favor
for her power and good courage.

It has been there all along.

Thursday, December 18

Activity: Meister Eckhart

14th Century German theologian Meister Eckhart once wrote: *"We are all meant to be Mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born."*

Today, find some time to reflect on this quote. Think about it, journal about it, have a conversation about it, but don't stop there. This time, we're going to let these words inspire our inner artists. Draw something, write a poem, get out your paints, find some clay or playdoh, have fun and create something inspired by what it means that you are a Mother of God, or that God is always needing to be born, or anything that makes you think about Mary's yes. This isn't being graded. You aren't turning it in. Let yourself be free to create for the sake of creating, not of perfection, and see what happens.

Friday, December 19

Reflection on Luke 1:38

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Luke 1:38

There's a song called "Let it Be in My Heart" by the band Liturgical Folk, that has a mic drop first line: "God's word is not hard to hear," the song says, it's that "it's hard to take to heart."

It's hard to take it in, to believe it, to trust that it's true. I think this is true for literally everyone in history, except for Mary. When Mary hears God's word through the angel Gabriel that she will bear the Son of God, she doesn't respond like you'd expect. She is young, poor, unimportant, and unmarried. Any one of those things could influence her ability to believe what she is hearing. But she does exactly the opposite of what this song says: she takes it to heart. She replies, "Let it be in my heart as it is in your will."

What a lovely way to phrase a yes. With openness and no predetermined expectations but just - yes. Let it be. Let what will be, be.

I don't know about you, but I am not very good at "letting things be." I'm more likely to plan out all the potential scenarios in my head so that I can be prepared for what's coming next, no matter what it is. I like to be prepared, to plan, to control.

I'm guessing Mary didn't know what to expect from this call on her life, but it was almost certainly not in her plans, and not in her control. But she says yes anyway. At great cost, she says yes to growing and birthing and raising God. I believe, in my heart of hearts, that she didn't have to. I believe she could have said no, and God would have found another way. But she didn't. She said yes. "Let it be in my heart as it is in your will."

This week, as we think about Mary's yes, I pray that this too might be your song - your prayer - as you listen for God's presence to be made known in your life.

P.S. The full lyrics to this song are on the next page, but you can look it up and listen too - which is a lovely way to experience this song, and the prayer that we too might be courageous in our yes, just like Mary.

continued...

Let It Be In My Heart

by Liturgical Folk

REFRAIN

Your word, O Lord, isn't hard to hear;
It's hard to take to heart.
Your call is open; it's clean and clear
To those who play their part.

VERSE 1

If you should send your Angel to pass
along your word,
Or should it be a quiet little bird,
Let it be, let it be in my heart
As it is in your will.

VERSE 2

Don't want to be like Sarah, laughing
under breath,
Nor Gideon, who tested what you said.
Let it be, let it be in my heart
As it is in your will.

VERSE 3

Like simple Ananias, may I trust your plan,
Then answer with a brimming, "Here I
am."
Let it be, let it be in my heart
As it is in your will.

VERSE 4

Now may I with Mary hear your call today,
And, though I am afraid, clearly say,
Let it be, let it be in my heart
As it is in your will.

Saturday, December 20

Sabbath

Use today to reflect on the third week of Advent: how Mary's yes changed the course of the whole world. Think about how Mary's yes is a part of the Christmas story, and how it is still a part of yours. Take time today to wonder and wander, whatever that looks like for you.

Sunday, December 21

Worship

Go to church, in-person or online, take a walk, take a nap, listen to music or a podcast, meet friends, share a meal, etc. Worship in whatever way feels best to you.

Monday, December 22

Reflection on Matthew 1:19

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)

This part in Matthew's telling of the Christmas story has always caught my attention. Joseph is described as an "upright man" who is engaged to be married to Mary. When word gets to him that his betrothed is pregnant and he knows it's not his baby, the thing that an "upright man" would do is divorce her quietly. Marrying her was out of the question. Having her ridiculed or even stoned to death was expected. But Joseph is an "upright man" so he is going to do the upright thing, which is a quiet divorce.

The Greek word used here is: *dikaios*, which means righteous, or virtuous. So what Joseph was planning to do is used by Matthew as proof of his upright-ness, as no one else in his situation would have done. But an angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him to marry Mary, and raise the child as his own, knowing that this little one would be the Son of God.

It was a big ask, even for the best of men, which it seems like he was. Instead of being known as a good and "upright man," Joseph is opening himself up to ridicule, and he is going to be called foolish, shameful, sinful, and wrong.

But Joseph said yes. He said yes anyway. He offered protection and care to Mary during her pregnancy and delivery. He doesn't have a single word of dialogue in Matthew's entire Gospel, but he does what the angel tells him to do, and in doing so, becomes the leader of not just any family, but the holy family.

We can learn a lot from Joseph. I keep thinking about all the ways we are taught to put our reputation first. Over anything else. Sometimes even over the safety and security of those around us. How we're so afraid of rocking the boat, or being cancelled, that we just stay quiet and careful. Here we have the story of this paragon of virtue who simply says yes, does not back down from his promise, and doesn't prioritize his personal brand over everything else. Maybe it really is that simple.

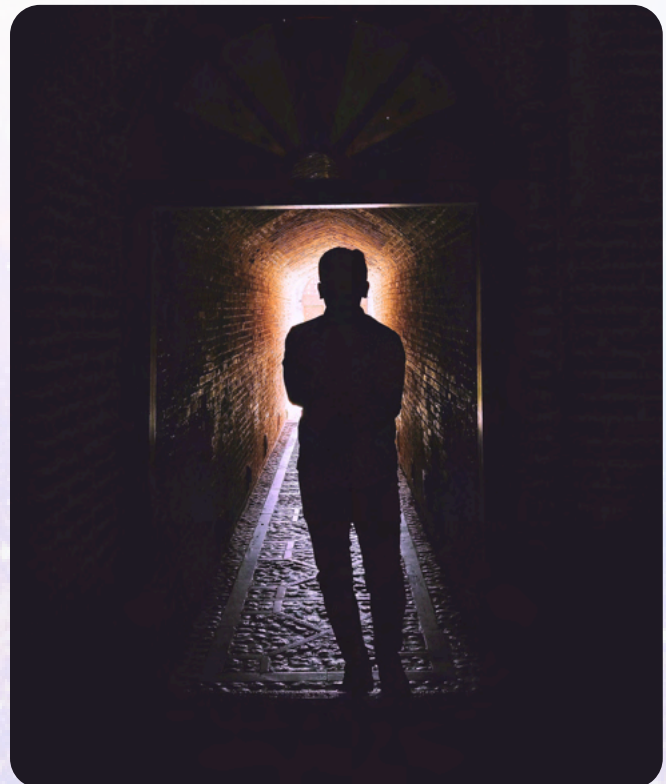


Photo by Nasim Keshmiri on Unsplash

Tuesday, December 23

Blessing: For Joseph

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

This blessing wonders
about a father who does not get a spoken word
and declared love incarnate anyway

about his code of honor and shame,
norms weighed by drama and duty
to keep him in line and deciding quietly

about a man who couldn't imagine
a future in which they belonged to each other
until a dream interrupted what he knew

about a partner who brought her home
and a parent who saved his newborn son,
a servant who believed dreams come true.

Wednesday, December 24

Reflection on Luke 2:9

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Luke 2:9

One of my favorite and often missed details of the Christmas story is in the story of the shepherds. They were just out there in the fields, far outside of the city limits, doing their job, and an angel appeared, telling them that Jesus was born. Along with that angel, the “glory of the Lord shone around them” Luke tells us.

I love this detail. Because this is the way the presence of God was described. God's place in the temple, called the Holy of Holies, was said to house the “glory of the Lord.” So then, when the shepherds are just out there minding their own business, the presence of God appears alongside the angel. God's presence LEAVES THE TEMPLE and heads out to be with the people who were least likely to be welcomed into the presence of God anyway. I mean, shepherds couldn't even go into the temple. They couldn't go be in the presence of God. So God came to them. It's a MOMENT.

And we jump so quickly to the multitude of angels coming to sing GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO that we miss out on the part about the presence of God being right there for all of it. God shows up where God is least expected and tells the ones least likely to hear it first that everything has just changed.

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Recently author and pastor Nadia Bolz Weber wrote a blog post about her favorite Christmas hymn, "O Holy Night." In her post she went through the hymn line by line, reflecting on why it is and always will be at the top of her list. She of course, spoke of my own favorite lyric from that hymn - "and the soul felt its worth."

I can't help but attach this feeling to the shepherds. That they had this moment - them, of all people - hearing that good news in this way? Woooooeeee I imagine it DID SOMETHING to them. That maybe, for that small moment, this good news sunk in and they felt WORTHY. Like they were enough. Even though their culture had been telling them something else for ages, they were enough.

The soul felt its worth. Does yours? The message to the shepherds is to us as well. The good news that the angels brought along with the very presence of God also comes to you. You are worthy of receiving this good news on this day. You are loved. God is here. That's enough. May you hear the message of Christmas as one of the shepherds, and may your soul feel its worth.

P.S. In case you need to get in the spirit, my two favorite versions of "O Holy Night" are 1: by Brandi Carlisle, and 2: by Christina Aguilera (it is extra in the best way)

Thursday, December 25

Reflection on Luke 2:7

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room (Luke 2:7)

There is much that can be said about the Christmas Story - and you have likely heard a lot of it. Songs and hymns and sermons and movies and pageants and on and on. We hear this story in many forms every year, year after year. I think it matters, then, to notice what stands out to you in a new or different way each year, since something almost always does.

This year, for me, I can't stop thinking of how unfathomable it is that God showed up into the world as a baby. So small. So fragile. So vulnerable. I almost can't make my brain comprehend it.

Incarnation is a fancy church word that we don't hear all that often outside of this time of year, but it's the word that we use to describe this very thing that is blowing my mind this time around. The idea that God, creator of the universe, chose to show up as a person, in the same way that all of us show up as people.

So this year, I hope you'll take a moment with me to ponder this tiny baby, the truth wrapped up in him as tightly as the swaddle his mother wrapped around him.

This week, I came across this poem I had forgotten existed, titled "*The incarnation is no tame thing*" by Quinn Caldwell. It's a reminder of the ways that this story beckons us to come near, and when we come, we might wonder - what are we here for? I hope it makes you ask this question too - and offers some answers on this holiday weekend, however you celebrate God's incarnation.

continued...

The Incarnation Is No Tame Thing.

By Quinn Caldwell

If you came to this place expecting a tame story, you came to the wrong place.

If you came for a story that does not threaten you, you came for a different story than the one we tell.

If you came to hear of the coming of a God who only showed up so that you could have a nice day with your loved ones, then you came for a God whom we do not worship here.

For even a regular baby is not a tame thing.

And goodness that cannot threaten complacency and evil is not much good at all,

And a God who would choose to give up power and invincibility to become an infant for you, certainly didn't do it just so you could have dinner.

But.

If you came because you think unwed teenage mothers are some of the strongest people in the world.

If you came because you think that the kind of people who work third shift doing stuff you'd rather not do might attract an angel's attention before you, snoring comfortably in your bed, would.

If you came because you think there are wise men and women to be found among undocumented travelers from far lands and that they might be able to show you God.

If you came to hear a story of tyrants trembling while heaven comes to peasants.

If you came because you believe that God loves the animals as much as the people and so made them the first witnesses to the saving of the world.

If you came for a story of reversals that might end up reversing you.

If you come for a tale of adventure and bravery, where strong and gentle people win, and the powerful and violent go down to dust, where the rich lose their money but find their lives and the poor are raised up like kings.

If you came to be reminded that God loves you too much to leave you unchanged.

If you came to follow the light even if it blinds you.

If you came for salvation and not safety,

then, ah, my friends,

you are precisely in the right place.

So what are you here for?

Friday, December 26

Blessing: For Shepherds

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

This blessing keeps watch
with the ones who work
in the fourth watch and late nights,
who fight wolves and skip showers
and love God's creatures by name.

This blessing keeps watch
with the ones we take for granted,
who center the outskirts
and feel stormy weather in their joints,
who are often the last to hear,
but the first when news is this good

Saturday, December 27

Sabbath

Use today to reflect on the final week of Advent: how the Shepherds' yes got the word out and began to turn the world upside down. Think about how their yes is a part of the Christmas story, and how it is still a part of yours. Take time today to wonder and wander, whatever that looks like for you.

Sunday, December 28

Worship

Go to church, in-person or online, take a walk, take a nap, listen to music or a podcast, meet friends, share a meal, etc. Worship in whatever way feels best to you.



*Modern day shepherd boy in Pakistan
by Tamhasip Khan on Unsplash*

Monday, December 29

Reflection on Matthew 2:13-14

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-14)

For a guy who isn't recorded saying anything in this story, Joseph has some pretty important yeses. This is his second big yes of the story of Jesus, and in following the instruction of God, Joseph saves the life of Jesus during a dark part of this story (more on this tomorrow). I'm caught by how Joseph doesn't ever get a face to face meeting with the angel of the Lord like Mary does. He doesn't get a chorus of angels in the heavens telling him what is happening, like the shepherds do. He doesn't even get a star in the sky telling him where to go, like the Magi do. What Joseph gets are dreams. We don't know why, but the angel of the Lord shows up to Joseph in his dreams. And the wild part, at least to me, is that Joseph trusts his dreams!

I'm sorry, but if I dreamt of an angel telling me to move my family I'd probably wake up and tell my spouse about it but like it was one of those vivid crazy dreams but not because I thought we should put our house on the market. My dreams seem to be unmoored to reality, and are often forgotten as soon as I awaken. So this story feels particularly foreign to me.

I am in awe of Joseph's trust. Not just of his own knowing, but of how God shows up to him. He trusts God will tell him what he needs to know. He trusts the mode of the message as well as the messenger. Do I? Do we?

This is what I'm thinking about this week, as we reflect on Joseph's second yes. I want to trust the mode of God's message as much as I trust God. I don't know if God still chooses to show up in dreams, but I do believe that God still shows up, in people and places and moments, if only I have the trust to notice when God does.

Tuesday, December 30

Activity: Refugees

All through the past weeks we've heard beautiful yeses from each character in the story: Mary said yes to growing and birthing and nursing the baby savior. Joseph said yes to marrying Mary and losing his upright standing. The shepherds said yes to going to see and welcome the new king. And even though they haven't arrived yet, the wise men have also said yes to following the star to see what it means.

But Herod? Well - he hears of this new king and offers a quick and harsh no. Herod's instinct to preserve his power kicks in and he acts. He acts as anyone afraid of losing power acts. His way of dealing with this threat to his power is to order every male child under the age of two to be killed. He eliminates the risk. And it's horrifying. Not merry, not peaceful, not joyful at all. But he does not succeed in killing Jesus.

Joseph had said one more yes and moved his family to another country. They had taken Jesus and fled. Knowing what was about to happen, as it was told to him in a dream, Joseph took Mary and Jesus and they escaped across the border into Egypt.

Jesus, son of God, was a refugee.

We like to think of the birth of Jesus like a warm happy glowing Christmas card. Peace on earth, goodwill toward all. But in reality, Christ comes into the world and then is run out of his home because of violence and hatred. It's a quick transition from the soft warm glow of Christmas eve to the stark reality of violence and power in the world.

We cannot set up Nativities one week without continuing the story in the next. The Holy Family is still holy, even when they leave the manger and flee to Egypt. God isn't just WITH the refugee, with the migrants, with those fleeing for safety, God IS the refugee, IS the migrant, IS fleeing for safety. And that says something to us today as well.

Today, I invite you to take a little time for some research. Find out who (either individuals or organizations) is helping refugees and migrants. See what action you can take to care for the other families who are also holy in this time and place. Make a commitment to give, serve, or support refugees and migrants during this week when we remember that Jesus and his parents were also refugees.

Wednesday, December 31

Blessing: For New Year's Eve

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

Before resolutions, reflection.
Last year merits a moment
for setting free both grief and gratitude
for what has already been,
things within and beyond my control.

Remembering grants time to ask,
Am I running away from what was
or toward what still might be?
Perhaps this year's resolve is to heal who I already am.
My person does not need fixing or replacing
so much as mending and gentle attention.

This requires deeper promises,
a sacred acceptance of the one
who deserves so much more than this annual beatdown,
this withholding of grace and tenderness.

Begin by reacquainting yourself
and confessing the fear of being truly known.
That is resolution enough
today and every day.

Thursday, January 1, 2026

Reflection on Malachi 3:2

For God is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. (Malachi 3:2)

Happy New Year, everyone. I think we're all happy to see 2025 in the rearview, and yet, the difficulties of this past year have not just magically disappeared because of a turn of a page. Don't we wish.

Early this week I heard someone call this period of time a "refiners fire." My initial response was to recoil STRONGLY from this comparison. I know it comes from scripture (it's used a few times actually) but it's often used when talking about a kind of test that God gives to God's people. To test their strength, or even more often, a test of purity.

Well EEEW. I don't like that at all. I don't think our present difficulties are some test that God has thrown at us, as if we're a part of some diabolical experiment to see who can withstand it, and whoever is left is more "pure" for having been through it. Gross. And yet, I want to understand what this means. Why does this phrase "refiner's fire" show up so often as a kind of net positive in scripture. Yes, we want God to come and save us, to be with us, and yet I wonder how that fits with this comparison to God's presence as refiner's fire and fuller's soap. It shows up in scripture more than just in Malachi. I've been wondering. And struggling. What does this even mean?

Fuller's soap is what was used to clean sheep's wool, after shearing. If you've ever seen sheep, you know they aren't actually all that clean up close. They live outdoors, so obviously they are going to get dirty. You need a strong soap to clean it without ruining it. Fire that refines refers to a process of purification of gold and other metals. When it was melted down in fire, impurities would rise to the top or sink to the bottom, depending on their weight, and they could be separated out, leaving a purer form of metal behind.

We can't ignore the number of times this analogy appears in scripture, and I wonder if it has applications to this particular time in history. If there is a refiner's fire burning now, what is it burning away? And, maybe more importantly, what remains?

Things are going to be challenging for a bit yet, I fear, but at the start of a new year, we have a chance to look at the things we have lost and gained over the last year and wonder what we might let be burned away for good. How much time have you spent thinking about what you care about most over the past year? How often have you doubled down on your morals and values and caring for the people you love and for your neighbors in need? How many of us have felt newly inspired to build beloved community instead of tearing each other down?

As the calendar turns, once again, we have a choice. We have a choice to remove some of the noise that takes away from the abundant life God calls us to. It is so easy to think about all that is not right with the world. And it's a lot. This past year has been scary, and heartbreaking, and frustrating and a lot of it was awful. But it did make me narrow my scope on what matters most. That, dear readers, is refining.

So, on this first day of 2026, I invite you to commit to forgoing resolutions, and to instead wonder: What do I want to be left with when the refining is done?

Friday, January 2

Activity: Bodies (again)

It's been a few weeks since we did a body practice. If you loved the last one, go back to the December 16th activity and redo it there. Otherwise, if you'd like a new one to try, keep reading.

If feelings had temperatures, I think gratitude would be warm. A radiant warmth, like sitting by a fire or under a cozy blanket.

Today, after all the gathering and celebrations are done, and that weird week between Christmas and New Year's has passed, let's take a few moments to reconnect to our bodies and what they have done for us so far.

We'll do this using our own warmth, that we build by rubbing our hands together briskly, until you build a little heat.

Then, place them on your body where you feel like it needs a little gratitude and care.

Take a deep, deep breath.

Say thank you to that part of your body that has served you well or that is telling you something by how it is feeling.

Repeat as often as needed.

Here are some suggestions (but you are not limited to these):

- over your eyes, if you're tired
- on your belly, if you've eaten yummy foods
- on your neck or jaw if you have held any tension there lately
- on your temples if you have a headache
- hands on opposite arms (like a hug) if you need a little care
- on your feet if you've done a lot of travel
- on your heart if you have loved or been loved well

Saturday, January 3

Sabbath

Use today to reflect on the first week of Christmas. Think about how Joseph's first and now second yes are both a part of the Christmas story, and how they are still a part of yours. Take time today to wonder and wander, whatever that looks like for you.

Sunday, January 4

Worship

Go to church, in-person or online, take a walk, take a nap, listen to music or a podcast, meet friends, share a meal, etc. Worship in whatever way feels best to you.

Monday, January 5

Reflection on John 1:9

The true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world. (John 1:9)

I know this year has been difficult for many of you, in many different ways. Christmas often has us feeling moments of melancholy in the midst of joy. There is something so honest and true to the first Christmas that the world in which Christ is born is not all that different today than when it happened the very first time. There are still plenty of things to be afraid of.

This verse from John's Gospel is a reminder that the Christmas season is about the light coming into the world, for the whole world. It is the kind of light that touches everyone and everything, like candles being lit one by one. I find this image particularly hopeful right now, and it brings to mind a poem by Howard Thurman, called "*I Will Light Candles This Christmas.*"

Thurman wrote that despite all that has been happening, he will still light candles this Christmas. I love this. It's felt so awfully dark this year, and somehow lighting candles has become a defiant act in the midst of it.

Thurman also wrote about the work of Christmas beginning after everything has settled, which seems extra true as we are in the last day of the "official" Christmas season. Even if you have put the decorations away and have moved on, it's still Christmas. So light another candle or three today, to celebrate the light.

*I will light Candles this Christmas;
Candles of joy despite all sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.*

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.*

continued...



A few years ago, composer Kim Andre' Arnesen set this poem to music, and the St Olaf Choir sang it at their Christmas Festival. I can hardly listen without tears and full goosebumps. (If you want to look it up, you can listen as part of your devotional time today).

Light candles, even today.
Candles despite all that has happened.
Candles to drive the darkness away,
Candles to represent the coming of the light, the true light for everyone,
the light that has come into the world.
Merry Christmas (still).

Tuesday, January 6

Activity: Star Words

Where is the child who has been born king? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage. (Matthew 2:2)

It's Epiphany! Epiphany is the celebration of the arrival of the magi to visit Jesus. And how do they get there? They follow a star. They trust themselves to know that something is happening, trust their deep knowing, trust their inner voice, and they end up experiencing God in a very unexpected place, in a form they did not expect God to be in.

Epiphany, for me, had for a long time been a transition season. The time in between Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. But over the past years I have really learned to love it on its own. The word Epiphany means revealing. This season is a revealing. A way of us learning who God is, and who we are too.

The stories we hear in church during this season give us early glimpses into what "God with us" will be about, and we get to find our own place in that same story of God's work in the world. If you can't tell, I've learned to love this season. It fits the time of year where I live, deep winter, where we have time to hunker down and wonder a bit about the changes that have come and are still on the way. Epiphany gives us a chance to be still and observe the way God is revealed. Revealed in the world and in us.

For a few years now, I've been participating in a practice of Star Words on this day. It's when I am given a word for the year, something that I then use to guide me for the year. Just as the star guided the magi, so this word guides me. It's not so much that it's a prediction, but a way of focusing my energy towards something. Ideally, it will lead me to places and people that I did not expect, where I can encounter the holy.

I couldn't find a good "star word generator" to send you - but I did find this "word of the year" generator and if you want to try it out, and see how that word might guide you this year, I encourage you to follow the link and see what happens! Maybe you too will be moved to encounter something holy and unexpected.

<https://www.wordoftheyear.me/>

Scan this QR code
with your camera
app to be taken to
the word generator



Conclusion

Blessing: For Magi

By: Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson

Just when we think
we have a handle on
the boundaries of a blessing
a timeline worth trusting
the full meeting of a scene and story

witnesses arrive
with scents and sage
from so far off
we can't make sense
of how they knew
or why they came all this way to worship

so we make room for magic
receiving the gifts with grace
pondering these things
in the depths of our hearts
and changed by the scope of love
and another road home.



Brussels, Belgium - Adoration of The Magi by painter L. Vosterman from Saint John the Baptist church on June 21, 2012 in Brussels.



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