

**2023**

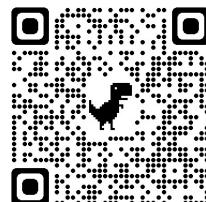
**Advent**

**Devotional**



**'It can be argued that Advent, more than any other season of the church year, is immediately relevant to our concrete lives as individuals, to the concrete life of the church under stress, and to the concrete headlines in the newspaper. The reason for that is that Advent tells us about our own lives as Christians, here and now. Advent is where we live, work, play, laugh, struggle, and die. Advent is the Time Between —between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and dawn, between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. It is not the time of fulfillment; it is the time of waiting. It is not the time of seeing face-to-face; it is the time of seeing 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Cor. 13:12). It is not the time of triumphant victory; it is the time of bearing the cross.**

**To help us through this Time Between, we offer the following reflections by the Grove Park staff and their families. You can interact with our reflections in one of two ways. You can read through this printed copy of the booklet, or, if you scan the QR code at the bottom of this page, it will take you to the electronic version of this booklet on the GPBC website. Whatever format you prefer, we encourage you to tarry with each devotion and listen for the voice of God in His Word and these reflections.**



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*Daily Readings for Year B: Revised Common Lectionary.*

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**Isaiah 64:1-9**

*1 Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence—  
2 as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
4 From of old no one has heard  
or perceived by the ear,  
no eye has seen a God besides you,  
who acts for those who wait for him.  
5 You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;  
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?  
6 We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
7 There is no one who calls upon your name,  
who rouses himself to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.  
8 But now, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
9 Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,  
and remember not iniquity forever.  
Behold, please look, we are all your people.*

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*In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?* What a great question Isaiah asked in his day, and we must ask it in ours. As we prepare ourselves to remember the coming of the Savior in Bethlehem's manger and the return of the Savior in the clouds, we need to be honest about our spiritual condition. We struggle with sin every day. Some days we overcome, and some days we don't.

Thankfully, Isaiah doesn't stop there. He reminds us that we still belong to God. He is our Father, and we are the work of His hand. He does not remember our sins forever but looks upon us with the love that He always has for us.

As we prepare during this Advent, let us deal honestly with ourselves. Let us remember our sins, so that we can learn from them. And let us remember His love, so that we can move past our guilt into His grace.

**Micah 4:1-5**

*1 It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the Lord  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and peoples shall flow to it,  
2 and many nations shall come, and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
3 He shall judge between many peoples,  
and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore;  
4 but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,  
and no one shall make them afraid,  
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.  
5 For all the peoples walk  
each in the name of its god,  
but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God  
forever and ever.*

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As I write this thought, it is mid-October, and so many wars are happening around the globe. Ukraine and Russia are slogging through a difficult season, with so much loss for so little gain. Somalia, Sudan, and Syria are fighting amongst themselves in ongoing civil wars and terrorist insurgencies. This past weekend we witnessed the terrible explosion of long-simmering hostilities between Israel and Hamas. By the time you read this, we will most likely be talking about even more fighting.

Let us pray that God will speed the coming of the events Micah describes in this passage. We know that the first coming of the Savior made it possible for us to have peace with God. Scripture teaches us that the day is still coming when the Savior will return, when God will say "Enough!" to all our battles, and when He will lead us into His eternal peace.

As the next-to-last verse of the Bible says, *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!* (Revelation 22:20)

## **Micah 4:6-13**

*6 In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame  
and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted;  
7 and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation;  
and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore.*

*8 And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion,  
to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem.*

*9 Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you?  
Has your counselor perished, that pain seized you like a woman in labor?*

*10 Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in labor,  
for now you shall go out from the city and dwell in the open country; you shall go to Babylon.  
There you shall be rescued; there the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies.*

*11 Now many nations are assembled against you,  
saying, "Let her be defiled, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion."*

*12 But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord;  
they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor.*

*13 Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion,  
for I will make your horn iron, and I will make your hoofs bronze;  
you shall beat in pieces many peoples; and shall devote their gain to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of  
the whole earth.*

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In 1984 Amy Grant released a song, *The Now and the Not Yet*. I won't quote the whole song, but here is the chorus:

*But I'm caught in between  
The now and the not yet;  
Sometimes it seems like  
Forever and ever,  
That I've been reaching to be  
All that I am,  
But I'm only a few steps nearer,  
Yet I'm nearer....*

Micah understood this. He talks about the nations assembling against the people of God and that they will know defeat for a while. But, although they will go to Babylon, from there they will be redeemed.

We struggle. We want to be so much closer to God, but we're not there yet. When we look back at where we've been, we can see some progress, even if it's not as much as we like. But we have so far to go.

Advent reminds us that God is working to accomplish His plan for the world and His plan for us. It may not go the way we think it should or with the speed we would prefer, but God will not be defeated.

As we prepare for His coming, let's remember that God is still working, we're still moving closer to Him, and He will bring about His Kingdom in us, around us, and through us.

## Micah 5:1-5a

*1 Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;  
siege is laid against us;  
with a rod they strike the judge of Israel  
on the cheek.*

*2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old,  
from ancient days.*

*3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has given birth;  
then the rest of his brothers shall return  
to the people of Israel.*

*4 And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth.*

*5 And he shall be their peace.*

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“What can I do? It’s just me. There’s only one of me. I’m not strong. I don’t have any real power to speak of. People don’t notice me when I’m in a public place, except maybe for a passing glance. I’m just a regular person—nothing special here.”

Does that sound familiar? Do you say such things about yourself, either out loud or to yourself? If so, today’s passage has something to say to you.

Bethlehem was a small town, with not much to say for itself. According to Micah, it was too little to be counted as important. No elaborate buildings, no famous citizens. Just a regular, small town.

In reality, it turns out that this small, unimportant town was so much more than anyone thought. The town with no elaborate buildings actually contained a very important building, even if it was just a barn. The town with no famous citizens became the birthplace of the One who would be *great to the ends of the earth*. The reality was much bigger than people realized.

That’s true in our lives as well. We may seem small, even unimportant. But, just as Jesus changed His hometown, He changes us.

Let this message find meaning in your life this Advent. Remember that your life is important and valuable, because Jesus has come into you. Your life has meaning. You have purpose. You matter.

Today, think of yourself as Bethlehem.

## Hosea 6:1-6

- 1 "Come, let us return to the Lord;  
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;  
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.*
- 2 After two days he will revive us;  
on the third day he will raise us up,  
that we may live before him.*
- 3 Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord;  
his going out is sure as the dawn;  
he will come to us as the showers,  
as the spring rains that water the earth."*
- 4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?  
What shall I do with you, O Judah?  
Your love is like a morning cloud,  
like the dew that goes early away.*
- 5 Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;  
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,  
and my judgment goes forth as the light.*
- 6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*
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This is a somewhat puzzling passage. The people have decided to return to the Lord. They are trusting Him to change His ways, to stop hurting them and instead to heal them—to stop striking them and instead to bind their wounds. They are trusting Him to make things better. That's a good thing—right?

The response they get is the puzzling part. With what I take as a tinge of sadness, God responds by asking, "What am I going to do with you?"

I've heard that response before. Usually, when someone said that to me, they were expressing some frustration. They were saying that they had been down that way with me before, that it didn't end well last time, and that they didn't have much hope that this time would be different. "What am I going to do with you?"

I hope that God isn't saying that to us this Advent. I hope He isn't watching us make the same mistakes we've made in the past, saying we'll act better but not really willing to change our hearts.

The good news is that there's good news. God doesn't give up on us, like people may have done in the past. Because of His mercy, He is always willing to help us choose a better path.

God wants real love from us. He wants us to love Him sincerely, not with a temporary "I'm going to do better" but with a heart that truly wants more of Him.

This Advent, let's not just want more from God. Instead, let's earnestly strive to want more of God.



## **Jeremiah 1:4-10**

***4 The word of the LORD came to me, saying,***

***5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”***

***6 “Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”***

***7 But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.***

***9 Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”***

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What an awesome thought that before we were formed in the womb, God knew us. We were all made for a purpose. Each of us was made with our own unique traits and gifts. God is calling us to use these gifts for His purpose. Jeremiah was not quick to say yes to God's calling. He used the excuse that he did not know how to speak, that he was too young. We may have excuses of our own. We are too old. Our health is not good. It is not the right time. I have too much to do. I have to take care of my family. The list goes on. God's response to Jeremiah is that He will be with him and will give him the words to speak. God will give us what we need to fulfill His calling.

As we look further in scripture, we read of someone else who was young and had a calling from God. That was Mary, the mother of Jesus. We do not know what her specific gifts were but we do know that she had a willing, open heart to God's call. This was a call that was difficult for her, but she remained faithful.

During this Advent season, let us remain open to God's call knowing that He will give us everything that we need.

## **Ezekiel 36:24-28**

*24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. 28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

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Wow! What a great message of hope and mercy! This is one of those passages that should be planted in all of our memories or taped to our mirrors or posted on our refrigerators.

Look at how the people are described:

- Scattered among the nations
- Spiritually unclean and practicing idolatry
- Stony hearted
- Skipping down the wrong paths

What is God promising to do with these messed up people?

- He will bring them home.
- He will cleanse them from their uncleannesses and from their idols.
- He will give them a new heart and a new spirit—no more stony hearts.
- He will put His Spirit in them and will lead them to walk in His ways.
- He will make them His people, and He will be their God.

This is not just a promise He made to Israel during the old days. No, His promise is for us as well. Just as He said He would do for them, He longs to do for us as well. And it's not just that He wants to. He will do these things for us and in us.

He will bring us home. He will cleanse us. He will get rid of all the things that keep us from Him. He will give us His Spirit, to help us want and do His will. He will keep on making us His people, and He will be our God.

These aren't just things God wants to do. These are things God promises to do.

So what's keeping this from happening in our lives? It's not a lack of ability or willingness or effort on God's part. Rather, if these things aren't happening in us, it's on us. God will not force us to do things against our will, but He is ready to work in us to the extent that we're willing to open ourselves up to Him.

Please don't hold God back from doing His work in your life. A deeper life with Him is always available to us. Don't fight Him on it. Give in. Accept His love. Allow Him to work with you as He sees fit. He will accomplish everything He intends to do in you; that's His promise. You won't regret it.

## **Isaiah 40:1-11**

***1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.***

***2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.***

***3 A voice cries:***

***"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.***

***4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.***

***5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of  
the Lord has spoken."***

***6 A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"***

***All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.***

***7 The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.***

***8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.***

***9 Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news;***

***lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not;  
say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"***

***10 Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.***

***11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.***

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To get the full impact of this passage, you need to consider where it falls in the book of Isaiah. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are primarily (but not exclusively) filled with messages of judgment. The prophet calls out the people of Israel for their sinfulness, criticizing them for turning away from God and declaring to them that destruction is coming. It's pretty painful to read because of the reality that we, like they, have fallen short of God's standard and because of that, we face judgment.

Then comes Isaiah 40:1-2. Go back and read it again. Let the message of comfort and forgiveness sink in, especially in the light of the previous message of criticism and judgment. I'll wait.

Let us always be thankful that our iniquities are pardoned, because indeed Jesus has received double for all our sins. Let us remember that He will gather us in his arms, carry us close, and gently lead us ever more into His presence.

That's a message worth sharing this Advent season!

## **Isaiah 26:7-15**

*7 The path of the righteous is level; you make level the way of the righteous.*

*8 In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you;  
your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul.*

*9 My soul yearns for you in the night; my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.*

*For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.*

*10 If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness;*

*in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the Lord.*

*11 O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it.*

*Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them.*

*12 O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all our works.*

*13 O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone we bring to remembrance.*

*14 They are dead, they will not live; they are shades, they will not arise;*

*to that end you have visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them.*

*15 But you have increased the nation, O Lord, you have increased the nation; you are glorified;  
you have enlarged all the borders of the land.*

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When we are young, we look forward to Christmas because we anticipate what we will get. Our wish list gets longer with each new thing we see, and we can't wait to see how it will turn out.

When we get older, we look forward to Christmas because we anticipate getting together with loved ones. It's not so much about what we get as it is about what we give to people we love, and we treasure the time we get to spend with them.

When we get older still, we tend to look backward at Christmases past. While we (hopefully) remember some special presents, we treasure more the memories of people we love but can no longer be with in person.

This Advent season, let's take time to remember what is most important. The presents are nice, the gatherings are wonderful (hopefully), and the memories are treasured. But, Isaiah reminds us in verses 8 and 9 to wait for Him and to let His name and remembrance be what our souls truly desire. Let our hearts yearn for Him and earnestly seek Him, especially during these days. Let us not be guilty of missing His hand at work, but let us see His majesty all around us. Let us make ourselves available for Him to bring glory to Himself through us.

## **Isaiah 4:2-6**

***2 In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. 3 And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, 4 when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. 5 Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. 6 There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.***

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This passage may seem a little puzzling, until you remember the history of the people of Israel. When they left Egypt, God led them through a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. When the pillar moved, they moved. When it settled, they stayed put. This was how they knew where to go and when to camp; God directed them in an obvious, visible way.

It is a sign of God's grace that the pillar of cloud and fire continued to be there, even when Israel grumbled and when they rebelled. Even at their worst moments, He did not remove the pillar. He did not leave them to find their way on their own, lost in the wilderness, but He continued to guide them and provide for their needs.

This passage refers to Jerusalem after the destruction that was coming. Notice that it talks about the *survivors of Israel...he who is left in Zion*. Their *filth* and *bloodstains* have been removed, albeit through a very painful process. (This is yet another reminder that God's forgiveness is free but very costly.)

Now He is promising to give them the same provision that He did back in the beginning, when they were moving through the wilderness and were totally dependent on His provision. By taking them back to that time, He will help them to understand once again who He is and how much He loves them.

This season, allow God to take you back to Christmases past. Through the events of your life and your history, let Him show you how He has been working in you and around you all your days. Permit Him to teach you of His grace and provision which was working then and is working still. And, give Him the freedom to show you what He wants to do next. He's not done with you yet.

## **Malachi 2:10-3:1**

***2:10 Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? 11 Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. 12 May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts!***

***13 And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14 But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 16 "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."***

***17 You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"***

***3:1 "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.***

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Being faithful is something we expect from the people around us. When someone says they will do something, we expect them to do it. When they make a promise, we expect them to keep it. It's that simple. This is conventional wisdom: "If you say it, do it. If you're not going to do it, don't say it."

Malachi is charging Israel with unfaithfulness. They promised to worship God, but they thought it would be ok to worship other gods along with Him. They made promises in personal relationships, but they thought it would be ok to break them if they changed their minds. They promised to follow God's directions about how to live, but they decided that none of it really mattered because God would accept them no matter what they did.

Even though Israel was terribly unfaithful, Malachi's message was that God would restore them. Though they were seriously mistaken in their beliefs and practices, God would send His messenger to them.

As humans, we would expect God to send a messenger to wipe out this unfaithful people. And He did use the armies of Assyria and Babylon to punish them for their sins by removing them from their land.

But, in the verses that follow Malachi 3:1, the prophet explains that the coming messenger would prepare the way for God Himself to come—not simply to judge and punish, but to refine and restore. That's why Jesus came—to refine us by removing our sins and to restore us to right relationship with God. Praise God!

## **Habakkuk 2:1-5**

*1 I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower,  
and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

*2 And the Lord answered me:*

*“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.*

*3 For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie.  
If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.*

*4 “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.*

*5 “Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest.*

*His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough.*

*He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples.”*

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The prophet Habakkuk is a perfect text to read during Advent, especially for those of us who are plagued by continual questions concerning God’s actions in this world. Why is God doing this or why is God not doing that? When is God going to act on this matter and why must I continue to wait? It’s the waiting on God that is so difficult is it not? And yet, Advent calls us to wait, wait in God’s seeming silence and inaction, wait in the growing darkness, enveloped in the chaos of personal crises and particularly in the situations of a world gone seemingly mad. Habakkuk understood our plight and asked these very questions of God in Habakkuk 1. Habakkuk 2 opens with a rather smug prophet thinking he has posed questions that God can’t answer, that Habakkuk has placed God in a vice-like conundrum.

And what is God’s answer? Quite simply it is I have not forgotten you. Indeed, God tells Habakkuk and us, remember what I’ve already said. Write it down, write it down on tablets so large that even in your haste you can read it and be assured that I cannot lie. You are worried about timing, God asks, what I have already stated is panting to be unleashed, the timing is just not right. It will be on time and it will most definitely come, until then, don’t be like the smug Chaldeans, live by faith.

Yes Beloved, we eagerly wait for God’s intervention in our lives and our world, but God’s response to Habakkuk proves that God is also eager to intervene. Yet, God does not desire that intervention to be deficient in any way. We must understand that all the factors, especially those that are shielded from our sight, must be perfectly aligned that God may be most glorified, for that should be the ultimate yearning of the righteous. And so we wait. We wait and walk in faith, yes blind faith, but blind faith backlit presently by the glow of God’s faithfulness in the past and assurance that God’s intervention is speeding toward us in the future. We wait in expectant and confident faith in the God who is always our answer.

## **Habakkuk 3:2-6**

*2 O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear.*

*In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.*

*3 God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah*

*His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.*

*4 His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power.*

*5 Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels.*

*6 He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations;*

*then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways.*

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Historically, indeed until very recently, the difference between Advent and Lent was the number of days it was observed. It has only been in the last century that the focus of Advent has shifted from that of introspection and penitence to hope and expectation. You may be thinking, “big deal, aren’t they linked together?” Well, not really. Hope and expectation are an encouragement to keep pressing on, to move forward, which we all need thanks to the hectic pace of modern society. Introspection and penitence however, look backwards to reflect on where we have already been, to see those events that tripped up our progression forward, and make corrective adjustments to see that they do not occur again. More importantly, our glance backwards should show us clearly the evidence of God’s handiwork in our lives and world and compel us to ask ourselves where is God’s hand presently at work?

It is to such reflection that Habakkuk’s prayer in our text calls us and why we would do well to treat Advent more like Lent. We journey through Lent in the shadow of the Cross, seeing the horrific affect those previously mentioned tripping moments in our lives have in the life of Jesus. We journey yes, but we also rest assured in the greater light emanating from an empty tomb and I fear that makes our penitence more lackadaisical. Hence, my assertion that Advent should return to being more like Lent, for the shadow cast from a helpless babe in a manger should arrest us in our tracks. Habakkuk reminds us that God is powerful, for at God’s direction nations shake, hills sink, and seemingly immovable mountains are scattered. And yet, this all powerful God cast aside such power, splendor, and might to become a helpless babe. Stop for just a moment and hear the gentle breathing of the babe sleeping in Mary’s arms and ask yourself is there any sin or imperfection, any tripping hazard that you may hold on to, that is equal to the baby in the manger and how can you persist any longer in it?

Beloved, the manger’s shadow is a not so subtle reminder that God’s character always points to remembering mercy and when we remember that, through introspection and repentance, we are reviving and making known the work of God in our times. Can our prayer today be that of Habakkuk’s? Can we use these last days of Advent to adequately prepare ourselves to stand with the shepherds at the manger in awesome reverence of the mercy of God, knowing that God’s undeserved mercy is given all for us? I am confident that if we do, the approaching new year will be one in which we will see the immense work of God in our world revived and known afresh.



## Habakkuk 3:13-19

*13 You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed.  
You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. Selah*  
*14 You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,  
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.*  
*15 You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters.*  
*16 I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound;  
rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me.  
Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.*  
*17 Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,  
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*  
*19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.*  
*To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.*

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The message of Habakkuk is a double edged sword. Yes, God emphatically asserts, the Chaldeans will be made to pay for their destructive greed and blood lust. Good news for Judah, right? Unfortunately no, for the other edge, God says, is that the Chaldeans will first be the instrument by which judgment is rendered on Judah for its faithlessness. Sadly, the reforms that arose from the ministry of Zephaniah have melted away and as God foretold, time was up. Habakkuk's reflections on the mighty power of God and the knowledge that this power will be unleashed against Judah and Babylon has rightly left him trembling as he "quietly waits" for the day of trouble. Yet, is he all that quiet for he immediately writes a stirring hymn of praise to God? We should pause and understand that "quietly wait" is better rendered "to settle down" so that we would not receive Habakkuk's song as one of resignation.

Beloved, we live in challenging times, times that often leave us quite disquieted, and we would do well to make our song that of Habakkuk as a means to settle us down that we might thrive in the midst of uncertainty and challenge. You see, Habakkuk's hymn opens with a slow stripping away of the things in which we place great value. First go the figs, symbolizing the delicacies of life, followed by the fruit of the vine, which was the means by which they had daily drink for their water sources were often unclean, then there goes olives and their ability to aid in cooking and as a source of light. Here we might say enough, but Habakkuk continues and tells us there is no food and zero wealth, as the herd in the stalls was the way in which they established wealth. I can hear you thinking now, that leaves nothing! Well, not quite.

Habakkuk gently reminds us that when we have lost seemingly everything, we still have God. God, who is the source of our salvation, and though we may be withering away because we have not food nor drink, delicacy or even light, God remains our strength and so we sing. We sing with full throated vigor and joy because God remains when all else passes away. Pythagorus had his theorem,  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ , on how to determine the length of a right triangle's hypotenuse and transformed mathematics, Einstein's theory of relativity,  $E = mc^2$ , birthed the modern age, and Habakkuk's theory of settled quiet in the midst of unprecedented turmoil would serve us well to recognize. And what is that theory? Nothing + God = Joy and Abundant Life. As the nights continue to lengthen and the world rushes head long toward destruction, can we memorize and employ Habakkuk's theory in our lives that we may find rest? More importantly, will we share it, which is the implication of Habakkuk's final instruction to the choirmaster, that others may find settled rest as well and join us in singing praises to God?

**Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11**

*1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

*8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

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When this world is in despair, what does God do? He sends Himself in human form into this broken world to bring good news and to rebuild us.

So much has been happening in our world. We have had extreme weather conditions causing innumerable suffering, loss of homes and death. There has been war causing casualties on innocent people including children.

Today's scripture says that in times like these, God comforts those who mourn. He builds up the ancient ruins and raises up the former devastations. The Lord loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing.

Verse 11 tells us that God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.

During this Advent season, let us thank God for the hope that we have Christ Jesus during times of despair.

## 1 Kings 18:1-18

*1 After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." 2 So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. 3 And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, 4 and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) 5 And Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals." 6 So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.*

*7 And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" 8 And he answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'" 9 And he said, "How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? 10 As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, 'He is not here,' he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. 11 And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here.'" 12 And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the Lord will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the Lord from my youth. 13 Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, how I hid a hundred men of the Lord's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water? 14 And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here"; and he will kill me.'" 15 And Elijah said, "As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today." 16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah.*

*17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" 18 And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.*

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Our text today is often overlooked as it is sandwiched amongst a great number of miracles ranging from the ravens serving as an ancient form of DoorDash at the Brook Cherith, to the endless buffet at the widow's house in Zarephath, to the coming showdown on Mt. Carmel. And yet, we rush from Zarephath to Carmel at our peril if we do not pause and converse with Obadiah. We do not tarry in order to find the real "troubler of Israel," rather we pause to hear a testimony of faithfulness in the dark. Ahab's reign was one of unadulterated evil and the times were exceedingly dark. They grew darker when God called Elijah to announce a coming drought upon the land, a drought that lasted three and a half long years. It seems virtually impossible that in the midst of unrelenting, baking sunlight there could be darkness, but that is what abounded as terror in the form of Queen Jezebel, chased down and destroyed any and all who gave witness to the light of God, only added to the people's misery. Yet, in the midst of such darkness let's focus on the light.

You see, Obadiah is the embodiment of light in our text. Obadiah worshipped God and so when the lights of God, the prophets, were being put to death Obadiah went at great risk to his own life and hid 100 prophets in two caves and fed and watered them. Think about it for a moment, here's Obadiah, during a time of dwindling resources of food and water, taking enough to feed and water 100 souls. To be sure, someone had to question at some point why Obadiah needed so much food and water and yet, he faithfully persisted. He persisted in being light in the midst of ever increasing darkness. He persisted in nourishing and sustaining the lights of God hiding in caves so that when in God's good time Ahab and Jezebel's reign of terror came to close, the light of God could shine ever brighter. Imagine the impact Obadiah had in the lives of those 100 prophets lives in years to come as they testified to God's faithfulness to them through Obadiah's faithful persistence.

Beloved, we are called to let our light shine in a dark world, to be the Obadiah of our times. We are called to persist in nourishing and sustaining the other lights of God amongst us that together we may shine brightly and when called upon push back the darkness just as Obadiah and the 100 prophets did. We must not rush to see the fire fall from the sky at Carmel, though awesome it may be, rather we have to tarry here in the dark and be a testimony of faithfulness as we shine brightly. We wait and we shine in the dark, that's what Advent is all about.

## **2 Kings 2:9-22**

*19 Now the men of the city said to Elisha, "Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." 20 He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. 21 Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, "Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." 22 So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.*

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We pause just days away from the Winter Solstice and we look out our windows at what used to be bright mid-afternoons and see now only the lengthening shadows of dark winter. Some may reflect that the lengthening shadows are apropos of our the situation facing our community. Things are "pleasant" enough as we are told they are in Jericho in the text. And yet, there is this dis-ease among us arising from the unfruitfulness of the land. What are we to do?

Elisha would tell us to pour some salt in the water. Now, you may be thinking that we do not have access to enough salt to pour into Lake Macintosh to make the situation of our city better, but we do if we just shift our gears a little bit. Sadly, while we may still testify to the sweetness of the living water that is Jesus, too many of our neighbors have encountered imitation "salt" and let it poorly flavor the taste of the living water. Far too often, this imitation "salt" has forgotten the fact that salt is meant not simply to flavor, but to impede and limit the work of death, in other words it's a preservative. Unfortunately, rather than allowing grace, mercy, love, compassion, and all the other attributes of God that true "salt" is to embody, the imitation "salt" has failed to preserve lives because of hate, prejudice, unreasonableness, gracelessness, and all the remaining attributes that are foreign to the character of God.

Beloved, yesterday we were reminded that we are to be light and now we hear afresh the other half of that call, to be salt. Salt that is true to the character of God and the mission of Bethlehem's babe, salt that preserves and yes heals. We must pause and reflect on how unfruitful we have become and ask God to revive our saltiness so that by our new found witness we may enable our neighbors to once again taste the living water of Jesus and find that the Lord is good. By doing so, we change the scene outside our window from the bleak mid-winter, to the bright promise of spring. We change the situation of our city from simply pleasant to magnificent and reap the abundant fruit that will grow from soil nourished by the living water.

## Malachi 3:16-4:6

*16 Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. 17 "On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. 18 And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.*

*1 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. 2 But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. 3 Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty. 4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."*

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God remembers. As a person whose mother suffered for years with dementia, it scares me when I forget things. These are usually small things, mainly coming up with the name of a person or a title from time to time. Then there is the occasional walking into a room and wondering why I walked in there. However, I do remember events as if they happened yesterday. The fact that God remembers and knows each person amazes me.

What does God remember? He remembers our work, our words, our tears and our desires. What does God not remember? Our sins. Colossians 2:14 says that our sin debt was nailed to the cross.

During this Advent season, let's thank God for remembering us and for His grace. Let us thank Him for sending His Son who canceled our sin debt.

## **2 Samuel 6:1-11**

*1 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. 3 And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, 4 with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark.*

*5 And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. 6 And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. 7 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. 8 And David was angry because the Lord had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. 9 And David was afraid of the Lord that day, and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" 10 So David was not willing to take the ark of the Lord into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 11 And the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the Lord blessed Obed-edom and all his household.*

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How does the holy become commonplace? How does the mystery of God become unmysterious? It happens little by little, each day. For twenty years, the ark of the covenant dwelt in Uzzah's family household (Uzzah was the son of Abinidab where the ark was brought when recovered from the Philistines). He lived with it each and every day. It became, to him, a commonplace item. David decided to move the ark to Jerusalem but ignored God's instructions on how to move the ark. It was to be carried on poles by hand but they put it on a cart. When the oxen stumbled, Uzzah reached out to steady the ark and God's wrath burned against him. The ark was holy and was not to be touched. Uzzah and David ignored God's instructions and God was not pleased. They treated the holy as commonplace.

Advent is a holy time, a time to prepare our hearts. Yet to many of us the story of Jesus' birth has become commonplace. We lose the holiness of the moment when God came to Earth, when God took on flesh. This Advent, remember the holy. Take time to read the Christmas story and to marvel at the mystery of Jesus' incarnation. Do not allow the business of the season to make the holy commonplace. Think about your traditions at Christmas and be intentional about taking time to recognize the holy of this season.

## **2 Samuel 6:12-19**

*12 And it was told King David, "The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. 13 And when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. 14 And David danced before the Lord with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of the horn.*

*16 As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart. 17 And they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it. And David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. 18 And when David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts 19 and distributed among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins to each one. Then all the people departed, each to his house.*

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What a picture of worship! David had failed on his first attempt to move the ark to Jerusalem but that was not the end of the story. David was given a second opportunity and he did not waste it. He moved the ark correctly this time and he recognized the holiness of the moment. After six steps, he made a sin offering by sacrificing the bull and calf. David also recognized the joy of the moment. He danced before the ark while the community of faith shouted and played the trumpet. The passage reminds us that Michal despised David's worship. She thought a king should act differently, with more royal dignity. Yet nothing could stop the joy of David and the community.

This Advent season may our worship of God reflect this passage. May it be filled with intentionality as we marvel again at the gift of God in sending His son, Jesus. Ask God to guide our hearts in understanding the holiness of this season. Guard our hearts, oh God, that we would not be like Michal, despising others' joy. And may we not allow the opinions of others to dim our joy in this holiday season. Rather make our prayer that we would dance like David and shout like the community at the good news that the Savior has come!

## **Judges 13:2-24**

*2 There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. 3 And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. 4 Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, 5 for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." 6 Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name, 7 but he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'"*

*8 Then Manoah prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come again to us and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born." 9 And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field. But Manoah her husband was not with her. 10 So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me." 11 And Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to this woman?" And he said, "I am." 12 And Manoah said, "Now when your words come true, what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission?" 13 And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. 14 She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. All that I commanded her let her observe."*

*15 Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you." 16 And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord.) 17 And Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?" 18 And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" 19 So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. 20 And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.*

*21 The angel of the Lord appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. 22 And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." 23 But his wife said to him, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these." 24 And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him.*

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There are 2 things we'd like for you to remember from this passage:

1. There is always hope. We may not see a way forward through our situation, but as Ephesians 3:20 reminds us, God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think.
2. Don't be surprised when God does something that we've never seen before. He excels at that!

This Advent season, give God the freedom to do whatever He wants in your life. He may just surprise you!



## 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

*1 Now when the king lived in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, 2 the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." 3 And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you."*

*4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, 5 "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. 7 In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"' 8 Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. 9 And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house....*

*16 "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."*

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We are a day away from the big day, so let's pause a moment and remember where we've been. We have travelled some difficult roads in Advent's darkness and along the way we have paused on the side of the road and looked deep at our reflection in the living water and quite possibly noticed that it was our reflection and not the living water that had grown cold and frosty. Hopefully, the radiant heat of the approaching light of Bethlehem has thawed our frostiness and made our reflection a bit truer. Maybe though, the light's warmth has fueled our zeal and now we wish to tackle some great task for God.

Our text today tells us the story of David at rest after many difficult years battling Saul and now in the warmth of that reflective rest, David wants to tackle a truly great task. He wants to build a permanent home for God to dwell. To be sure this is a noble task, right? Well, there is a slight problem the text tells us, as neither David nor his spiritual advisor Nathan bothered to ask God about the construction project. And so, God will awaken Nathan in the middle of the night with the news that the construction project was neither wanted nor even asked for. It would behoove us before such a wake-up call occurs in our life to ask ourselves whether what we wish to achieve for God is something God wants? We all want to do great things for God, or at least we should, but sometimes the greatest thing we can do is be faithful to the small things to which God calls us for in God's economy all are important. The shepherd's journey from the fields to the manger is no less important than the Wise Men's journey from the Orient, for both testify to the faithfulness and majesty of God. Can our Advent birthed zeal burn as bright for what some may consider small things as it can for what others may deem great things?

Furthermore, we would be remiss if we did not recognize that our zeal may cool in the growing ferocity of winter's howl, but the promises of God remain true even when our zeal wanes. God promises David that the House and Throne of David shall be eternal in the presence of God. God promises this to David not at the end of David's life after all of David's mistakes are made. No, God promises this before David is derelict in his duty as commander and king, before David conspires with Bathsheba, before David orders his pregnant lover's husband to be killed, and before David fails to punish Ammon for the rape of Tamar and thereby plants the seeds of Absalom's dissension. We might declare such a promise as the one God made to David null after such behavior, but God who is rich in mercy and abounding in love, fulfilled this promise at the incarnation of his own Son, Jesus. Tonight, as we celebrate the fulfillment of this promise, we should also resolve that in light of God's faithfulness, our faithfulness would never dim, but counter the prevailing chill by growing brighter as we follow God's call to small and large things.

## 1 Samuel 1:1-18

*1 There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. 2 He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.*

*3 Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. 4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. 5 But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb.[a] 6 And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. 7 So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. 8 And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"*

*9 After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. 10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. 11 And she vowed a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head."*

*12 As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. 14 And Eli said to her, "How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you." 15 But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. 16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." 17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him." 18 And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your eyes." Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.*

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Happy Christmas, we have made it to the end of our Advent journey. We arrive many times after long journeys to a bevy of questions from friends and family. How was your journey? Did you make good time? Were the roads bad? Did you see anything really neat? And so, as we arrive at the end of this Advent journey, Hannah's story provides us a few questions to ponder.

First, has the journey caused your to pour out your heart's deepest needs and desires to God as Hannah's desire for a child did? If so, what promises have you made to God? Hannah promised to give God the thing she craved the most, her long sought child. Hannah made her promise not knowing if God would hear her petition, but she made it in faith. If you haven't made a promise to God, as we have reflected again and again throughout this journey on God's unfailing faithfulness, what's holding you back? We should understand that our promise though should not be contingent on God doing something for us, but in light of all that God has already done through the promise of Jesus, it is the least we can offer back.

Secondly, have you seen anything that has moved you to action? Eli had never seen anyone pray with such ferocity based off his perception that Hannah was drunk and so he intervened. Her story moved him to further declare the God would give her a child. Beloved, have you seen something in the narrative of God's promises that has caused you to act? Such action may not be anything seen, but a quiet change of understanding that has caused you to grow closer in your relationship with God. Undoubtedly, what Eli saw changed him and Hannah and the same should be true for us as well.

Finally, has the hope of God fulfilling the promises elicited joy in your life such that folks can see it on your face as it did for Hannah? We are to joyfully bear witness to the hope brought through God's fulfilling his promises through Jesus not simply on this most auspicious of days, but on the least auspicious of days. It is easy to do so today as the gift wrap rustles and the tree lights twinkle. The question that demands an answer is whether our face shows that we are no longer sad, but joyful through our relationship with Jesus long after everything has been packed up and put in the attic until next November. Only then, can we keep this day in our heart every day.

Thank you for journeying with us this Advent and once again, Happy Christmas.



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