

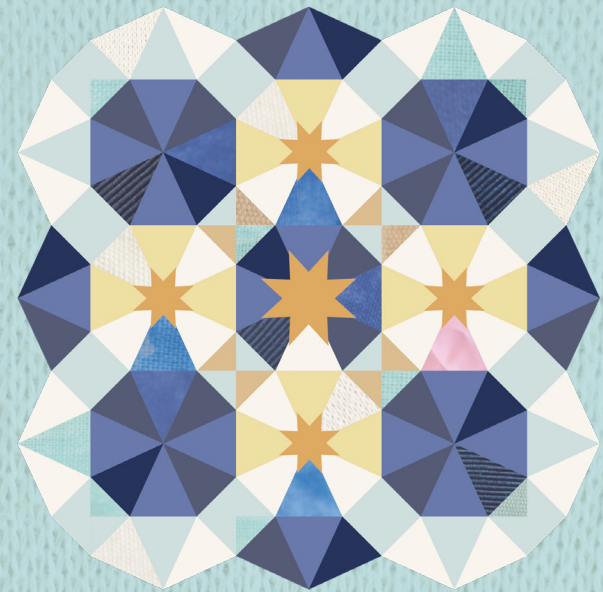
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AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

Art, Poetry, &
Reflections
for Advent



Epiphany | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
THE ROAD ISN'T STRAIGHT

READ Matthew 2:1-12

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

They come from afar. I imagine the Magi as queens of wisdom, wealth, and power, bringing their entourage, a vast number of people, to care for them. They protect the Magi on their journey over the dunes and around the twists and turns, ensuring they arrive safely.

They come to pay homage to the baby, the holy child. In this *Words for the Beginning* series, I began each painting with a circular energy. There is a central focus to each design. Each painting has an original quilt square pattern which repeats as the border. The center design is a different iteration of the same idea. For this design, the main motif is the star of Bethlehem. The Bible pages of Matthew 2 are torn apart and glued as a texture within the star points, representing our need to constantly break down fear in service to the God who calls us into a fearless life of love. The star pattern is overlaid in chalk and soft pastel, reiterating the power of God as our guide—who, in this text, is showing the way home by another road.

In our own lives and communities, each of us is vulnerable to political corruption. How are we responding? Whom do we follow as our guide? God calls the Magi home by another road, and their choice to heed the call opens space for Jesus' ministry within the community, which will demonstrate the power of steadfast love. Shortly thereafter, God calls Mary and Joseph to journey to another land, to protect the Messiah until they are safe to return home. What parallels do we see in our own systems, and in our own lives?

In this text, the Magi are dreaming my dreams. The imperial power threatens to kill the long-awaited Messiah. These kinds of threats exist in our own lives too. The Magi seek another way home. I dream of the winding road that is God's call. The road isn't straight. Can you see your next bend?

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



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Star of Bethlehem | Hannah Garrity
Acrylic painting with mixed media on canvas

Advent is a season of endings and beginnings. As the calendar year comes to a close, a new church year begins. Christ's birth ushers us into new ways of living and loving; and yet, the world as we know it spins madly on. In many ways, pregnant Mary was surrounded by endings—large and small, personal and political. But Mary proclaimed hope in a God who was and is making all things new. Christ's birth offered a beautiful new beginning for shepherds and Magi alike—all the while, King Herod tried to bring Christ's story to an end. When we ourselves navigate seasons filled with endings and beginnings, we need reminders. We need words that can feel like steady ground, like a path for our feet to find as we step forward into the unknown.

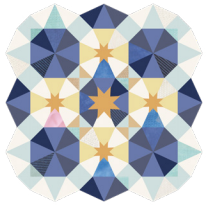
This devotional is shaped around several reminders we all need from time to time: *you are a blessing; we can't go alone; do the good that is yours to do; hope is worth the risk; love knows your name; don't forget to laugh; the road isn't straight.* These reminders root us in the fundamental truths of our faith. Many of them are life lessons we teach to children—lessons that adults continue to learn and relearn. They may resemble the blessings we impart to loved ones during special ceremonies like weddings or baptisms. And so, we invite you to move through this Advent season as if you are entering a sacred new chapter, holding fast to the reminders that will bolster you for the journey ahead.

Read, look, and sing your way through the pages of this devotional. Each week offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns to give you strength, courage, and grace. As you journey through this season, may you find words for belovedness and hope. May you find words for beginning again. For no matter what you are facing, no matter what this new day brings, love is your beginning.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed
Hannah Garrity
Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
Rev. Anna Strickland



ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM

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Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (*she/her*) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist) and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. Her faith is rooted in creative practices that help her break free from perfectionism and control and participate in creating a more whole, just world.

REV. LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren (*she/her*) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, linoleum carving tools, and her trusty Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. Visual exploration offers her a holy space to ask questions, find her voice, take risks, and make bold statements.

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REV. ANNA STRICKLAND

Creative Partner | Operations Support

Anna Strickland (*she/her*) looks for the Divine in the everyday like treasure in clay jars and first encountered God in the integration of her spiritual self and artistic self. She is a former teacher and college minister, a proud Texas Longhorn and graduate of Iliff School of Theology, a Baptist to the core ministering in ecumenical spaces, and a lover of chaos anchored by the belief that the Spirit is most active in the spaces between us.

Isaiah 43:16-21 testifies to this truth with a powerful promise: *God makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.* This prophetic assurance paints a vivid picture of God's active presence in our lives: creating paths where none seem to exist and inviting us to embrace the new things God is doing. It's a divine invitation to move forward, learn from the past, and step into new possibilities.

We are never alone in our journey.

Like the Magi, we are often called to take unexpected paths and find new ways. Every journey carries risks and revelations, but God actively carves paths in the wilderness, guiding us through uncharted territories with the promise of making all things new.

Each movement forward in faith brings us closer to where we truly belong. This perspective empowers us to face the uncertainties of our journey with courage, knowing God is with us in the detours.

In this new year, may you find comfort knowing that, like the Magi, a light will guide you home. Rest in the hope that you never truly go alone—the love that knows your name goes alongside you and before you. Let this assurance fill you with peace and courage, open to the new and unexpected paths that God may reveal in the days to come.

BLESSING

It's okay if your journey hasn't looked like you thought it would. As you navigate twists and turns, stay curious and open to where God might be leading. May you find the courage to explore new routes and the wisdom to follow the One who will never leave or forsake you. May each new path be a chance to trust God and discover deeper truths about the love that will never let you go.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *Each twist and turn*

EXHALE: *Invites me to follow you.*

THE ROAD ISN'T STRAIGHT

READ Matthew 2:1-12 | Isaiah 43:16-21

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

As we embrace another new year, we often look at what *was* so that we can more surely enter into what *will be*. Our paths are rarely linear, woven with threads that twist and turn unexpectedly.

The timeless tale of the Magi from Matthew 2:1-12 paints a vivid picture of this truth. These wise travelers from the East didn't follow a straightforward path to find Jesus.

Guided by dreams and stars, their journey was filled with royal encounters and unforeseen detours.

Their experience teaches us a comforting lesson about our winding paths: *feeling uncertain or lost is okay*. We don't need to have everything figured out.

Sometimes, the most profound moments in life come from taking a courageous turn that leads us away from our meticulously-planned routes.

King Herod, steeped in ulterior motives, directed the Magi to report back where the Christ child was. But after being divinely warned in a dream, the Magi chose not to return to Herod, opting to leave “by another road.”

Their decision to embrace alternative paths challenges us as we think about our own journeys. The Magi were willing to have their assumptions challenged and plans changed. The same is true for us: We don't have to have all the answers or an obstacle-free path because hope is what empowers our journey.

Often, the straight and narrow ways we *assume* are set before us are not our only options.

As we go forth in faith, we'll have opportunities to decide between conforming to external expectations and following God's path. Following the Spirit's stirrings may lead us down twists and turns that lead us out of our comfort zones but fit us into a divine path of truth, justice, and peace.

We don't have to know where we're going to know that God is with us.



ABOUT OUR GUEST CONTRIBUTORS



GUEST WRITER Kayla Craig

Kayla Craig (*she / her*) is a former journalist who brings deep curiosity and care to her writing. She's the author of two books: *Every Season Sacred: Reflections, Prayers, and Invitations to Nourish Your Soul and Nurture Your Family throughout the Year* and *To Light Their Way: A Collection of Prayers & Liturgies for Parents*. Kayla graduated from Drake University with a B.A. in Magazine Journalism from Drake's well-known School of Journalism & Mass Communication. She minored

in Sociology and English, and has been writing professionally for more than 15 years. With a poetic, prophetic voice, she created the popular “Liturgies for Parents” Instagram account, which Christianity Today named an “essential parenting resource.” Kayla's nuanced and accessible reflections, essays, and prayers are featured in various books, devotionals, and Bible studies. Kayla lives in a 115-year-old former convent in her Iowa hometown, where she hopes to create spaces of welcome alongside her four children, two dogs, and husband, Jonny. kaylacraig.com | [@liturgiesforparents](https://www.instagram.com/liturgiesforparents) | [@kayla_craig](https://www.instagram.com/kayla_craig)



GUEST ARTIST Rev. Nicolette (Faison) Peñaranda

Rev. Nicolette “Nic” (*she/her*) is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America serving as the Program Director for African Descent Ministries. Nic is the creator of MONadvocacy, a racial justice resource grounded in play, as well as the “Talks at the Desk” series which celebrates the voices of leaders in the ELCA African descent community: livinglutheran.org/2022/02/a-love-letter-to-african-descent-communities.

She is passionate about queer Black liberation, cultivating diverse leadership in faith spaces, and the art of creation. She is also the illustrator of *God's Holy Darkness*, written by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick (Beaming Books, 2022). The book deconstructs anti-Blackness in Christian theology by celebrating instances in the story of God's people when darkness, blackness, and night are beautiful, good, and holy. She resides in the Chicagoland area with her spouse, two daughters, and two cats, Penne Pablo and Rigatoni Braxton.

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WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING DON'T FORGET TO LAUGH THE ROAD WINDS EVER ON



Scan to hear
the tune!

DIVINUM MYSTERIUM ("Of the Father's Love Begotten")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

Plainsong melody, 12th cent.



Fears of stray - ing from the path - way Plant - ed deep
All our best laid plans can sha - tter Leav - ing us
A world con - stant - ly in mo - tion E - vades our



in child - hood Come to haunt us when the road ends
to mourn the loss Of the fu - ture we im - a - gined
at - tempts to know What may be a - round the cor - ner



And the way a - head is ob - scured Then the Spi - rit
And feel like our life is on pause At the edge the
Or where a - ny road will go So the Spi - rit



wraps a - round us To pro - tect and re - as - sure
Spi - rit's wait - ing There to fer - ry us a - cross
stirs with - in us To be car - ried by the flow



And the road winds e - ver on _____



FIELD NOTES

With tears in your eyes,
 you name all the bumps
 and zigzags your life has taken.
 With clenched teeth
 and a hummingbird pulse,
 you wake up
 and wonder—how did I get here?
 In the last 40 days of
 desert wandering, you say
 you haven't heard God's voice once.
 You say you miss when God was close,
 when God used to sing the harmony line.
 So you yell at the sky,
 begging God to drop a pin,
 to name the road,
 to draw you a map.
 You lament the way this life isn't easy.
 You ask me—was the road ever straight and narrow,
 or was that all a lie?
 But then you crest the mountain,
 and I don't hear from you for a while,
 because God was growing
 in the lilac field
 on the other side of the hill.
 God was scattered
 among the pebbles
 of the road you never planned to take.
 Isn't it amazing, you say,
 there are a million roads home
 and God walks every single one of them.

*Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*



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LOVE KNOWS YOUR NAME

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PROMPTS FOR REFLECTION

Throughout the season, return to these prompts to reflect on the Advent reminders in this series. Use these questions to guide your journaling or discussions with others.



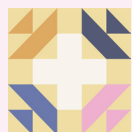
YOU ARE A BLESSING

You are a beloved child of God. What helps you remember that this is true? When do you doubt this truth?



WE CAN'T GO ALONE

Reflect on a time when you experienced loneliness. What practices might help you break free from isolation? How can you support others experiencing loneliness and isolation?



DO THE GOOD THAT IS YOURS TO DO

What is the good that is yours to do? How do you discern what is your work to do and what is not?



HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK

When you dare to hope, what other emotions come up? Why does hope feel vulnerable and risky?

Christmastide | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

DON'T FORGET TO LAUGH

READ Luke 2:10, Matthew 2:10, Isaiah 9:2-3, Psalm 148, Psalm 126:1-3, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Isaiah 55:12-13

FROM THE ARTIST | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

This quilt square collage shows the ripple effect of joy dancing throughout all creation.

In the nativity story, the birth of Christ is meant to bring universal joy and good news to all people, especially those like the shepherds who might be estranged, undervalued, or marginalized (Luke 2:10). Joy greets the Magi during their long and arduous journey; when the star stops, they know they are close (Matthew 2:10).

In addition to the Christmas story, this piece is also inspired by the rich poetry of praise found throughout many Hebrew scriptures. For those enduring exile, God brings exaltation that multiplies (Isaiah 9:2-3). The psalmist sings praise for the God of the mountains and hills as well as the highest heavens and starry skies (Psalm 148). The prophet Isaiah casts a new vision of people returning home as the trees clap their hands and the mountains and hills sing shouts of praise (Isaiah 55:12-13).

For the focal point of this design, I chose an eight-pointed star, which is symbolic in many cultures and religious traditions.²¹ In Judeo-Christian traditions, the number eight symbolizes new beginnings, as seven is the number of completion. The eight points can also represent the four cardinal directions combined with the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth. For many, an eight-pointed star means harmony and balance.

In this image, I wanted the landscape to feel refracted, perhaps like a prism, or even a broken mirror. The land rejoices despite forces that try to break it. The horizon expands into all directions. There is no east or west, north or south—the arms of creation reach into the cosmos. In between stars and moons, fruit trees bear their harvest and clap their hands.

In many ways, this piece is a song of praise as well as a song of resistance. Creation cannot be quieted. If praise is not on your lips this day, do not fear, for we can trust that all of creation is dancing on our behalf.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

²¹ In the process of creating this piece, I learned that the eight-pointed star quilt is integral to many Native people of North America. Learn more from Dakota quilter Gwen Westerman by watching this video: [youtube.com/watch?v=4WYiLZOPl0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WYiLZOPl0)



Lisle

Let All Creation Dance | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Ink dyes and gold resist on silk, with digital collage



LOVE KNOWS YOUR NAME

God is not a stranger, but a divine love that knows you by name. In what ways do you draw near to God?



DON'T FORGET TO LAUGH

When has laughter liberated you? When has it helped you embrace play, creativity, and fun?



THE ROAD ISN'T STRAIGHT

Life often unfolds in ways that surprise us, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Have you felt God's presence when your life took an unexpected turn?



JOY AND CELEBRATION

You are a blessing.
 If you hear nothing else,
 if the wind howls,
 if your brain runs amok,
 if rebuttals and denials line up like little toy soldiers,
 then hear *this*—
 you are a blessing.

I knew it the first moment I met you / heard your name
 / learned there are 7 billion of us
 on this planet.
 I knew it in my bones,
 the way my feet know the way home.
 You are a blessing.

For our creating God
 breathed life into your being.
 And there is simply no way that,
 along with that life,
 some of God's goodness
 didn't slip right in.

So tell the rebuttals to rest.
 Tell the toy soldiers to find another hill,
 because this one is reserved for joy and celebration.
 You are a blessing.
 Breathe it in.

Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Similarly, the Magi, guided by the light of a star, discovered not just a newborn king but the joyful fulfillment of ancient prophecies. Joy invites us not to turn our faces from the harsh realities of our world but instead gives us strength for the long and winding journey. The Magi's journey culminated in worship and laughter in the presence of Jesus, symbolizing the profound joy in realizing one's long-held hopes. As Matthew 2:10 tells us, "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

Isaiah 9:2-3 enriches this imagery, depicting the joy of the people as they witness God's *light piercing through profound darkness*. Compared to celebrating a bountiful harvest or sharing the spoils after a victory, this joy is both a divine gift and a human response.

Your joy matters, allowing you to let go of control, trust in the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit, and open yourself to the sacred joy that forms. Often, we are focused on what seems possible and realistic, but joy flows from the impossible.

If God was revealed to stargazers and day laborers, what might God have in store for you?

We have a God who became an infant gurgling and giggling, a toddler tickled and erupting into laughter. Sue Monk Kidd once reflected on seeing God as a playmate, a revelation that shattered her "over-grown-up seriousness" and liberated a joyful child within.¹⁹ If we allow it, joy can simplify our perspectives and make us more receptive to the wonder and playfulness of God.

What would it look like to embrace laughter as a spiritual practice this week? Try watching a comedy show or spending time with those who make you laugh. Play with children. Build a snowman. *Make room in your heart for delight.*

Joy is a sacred invitation to shed our self-importance and wrap our hearts in the gladness and gratitude that come from knowing Christ is at the center of our lives. Deeper than fleeting happiness, joy sustains us with the hope and love that envelop us in all circumstances.

This joy calls us to shed our self-importance and wrap our hearts in the gladness and gratitude that come from knowing Christ is at the center of our lives.

And that's no small thing.

After all, the joy of the Lord is our strength.²⁰

BLESSING

As you navigate the cold complexities of our weary world, wrap yourself in joy's warm embrace. May you accept the invincible joy that Christ freely offers—a joy that assures you that you are known, loved, and forever held within God's compassionate embrace. May the joy of the Lord be your strength, helping you stay awake to wonder and awe when the darkness of the world closes in.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *Fill me, O Lord,*
EXHALE: *Let joy overflow.*

¹⁹ Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* (HarperCollins, 1990), 186.

²⁰ Nehemiah 8:10

Christmastide | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
DON'T FORGET TO LAUGH

READ Luke 2:10 | Matthew 2:10 | Isaiah 9:2-3

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

As we move through the anticipatory journey of Advent and step into the celebratory aftermath of Christmas, it's easy to overlook one of the most vibrant threads woven through our spiritual fabric: *joy*.

As refreshing and unexpected as snowflakes caught on our tongues, laughter doesn't just lighten our spirits; it invites us to see the world through a lens of divine playfulness.

Happiness is fleeting, but joy is a deep-seated feeling that comes from something bigger than ourselves. Joy remains even in the face of adversity, reminding us of the hope and love that surrounds us at all times and in all circumstances. Joy is a sacred invitation to lessen our self-seriousness and remember that the God of all things often subverts our notions of what is holy.

In our cold world, joy is a sweater we can wrap ourselves in, offering comfort and protection against the elements. If we refuse to wear the joy that Christ extends us, what does that say about who we find most important in our lives? It centers ourselves, not Christ. The One who is compassionate and knows every sorrow also knows we are not meant to absorb every ache of the world. A posture of joy releases control and allows God to be God. Yes, we must be present to the pain, but we are also invited to an invincible joy that is freely given.

When we let go of our self-importance and allow joy to cover our hearts with gladness and gratitude, we bring Christ back into the center of our lives.

In scripture, joy and laughter are presented as responses to God's action and imperatives that invite us to celebrate the divine playfulness in creation. Consider the shepherds in Luke 2:10 and the Magi in Matthew 2:10. *Profound joy punctuates their encounters with God.* Their reactions to the news of Jesus' birth are more than moments of happiness. Their reactions are transformative experiences, theological revelations that invite them—and us—to view the world and our place in it through a lens of *wonder and delight*.

The shepherds, often overlooked in society, were bathed in heavenly light and received the joyous news of a savior's birth—a message meant especially for them, reminding us that joy often chooses the least likely recipients. Their immediate, uncontainable joy bubbles up and over as they spread the good news of what they've seen and heard, embodying the contagious nature of divine delight.

Can you imagine the ridiculous spectacle of a gaggle of shepherds (society's outliers) pulling up to the place where Jesus was born? In faith, they suspended any self-seriousness they might have had in order to burst into the de facto delivery room to see if what the angels said *really* was true.

And what do you know? It was.

Joy is for everyone, regardless of their status or position.

WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
YOU ARE A BLESSING

**IN CASE NO ONE
EVER TOLD YOU**

LOBE DEN HERREN ("Praise to the Lord, the Almighty")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

Music from the *Praxis Pietatis Melica*, 1668



Scan to hear
the tune!

In case no one e - ver told you or
You are the mas - ter - piece born of God's
You are u - nique - ly cre - a - ted for

4
you have for - got - ten You are a bless - ing and
i - ma - gin - a - tion E - ven the parts that are
love and be - long - ing For - cing your - self to be

9
have been since you were be - got - ten
cry - ing out for res - tor - a - tion
some - one you're not is ex - haus - ting

13
Fash - ioned from love Sent to the earth from a - bove
All that you are Born out of star - dust and scars
You are a gift There is no box you must fit

18
You're no - thing short of a god - send
Re - flects God's per - fect cre - a - tion
Let your be - lov - ed - ness blos - som

YOU ARE A BLESSING

READ Luke 1:26-38 | Isaiah 43:1-7

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

The Advent journey unfolds like a well-worn quilt, each patchwork piece lovingly threaded across time and space. In each thread, we find blessed assurance that with every sacred stitch, God has been moving toward us all along.

This season reminds us that, what some may see as discarded scraps, the Maker of heaven and earth calls beautiful and blessed. Mary, an ordinary girl from the obscure corners of Nazareth, was not cloaked in power or prestige—but was blanketed in belovedness.

And that was enough.

Advent invites us to reflect on how we, like Mary, are invited into God’s redemptive narrative—no matter how ordinary or small we might feel—for each of us has the potential to carry God’s love into a weary world.

In Luke 1:26-38, the story of Mary and the angel, Gabriel illustrates how God selects someone the world might overlook to be part of something beautiful. Gabriel’s message, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” isn’t merely a formality but a declaration of Mary’s essential place in this divine quilt.

Mary’s encounter with Gabriel, a pivotal moment in the Advent story, marks the unveiling of a promise and a prophecy of a miraculous birth that subverted every expectation of what a coming King’s arrival might look like.

Mary’s response—“How will this be?”—is profoundly human.

In this moment of divine mystery, Gabriel offers a blessed reassurance: “Do not be afraid.” When we wonder if our quiet worries or loud wonderings matter in the vast expanse of the cosmos, these words remind us that God *knows* our wandering hearts, acknowledges our fears, and moves toward us.

Isaiah 43 echoes this comfort, promising we will not be alone when we pass through deep waters or face the fires of trials: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

LET JOY BE YOUR COMPANION

GO TELL IT (“Go Tell It on the Mountain”)

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

African-American spiritual



Scan to hear the tune!

Refrain


Let joy be your com - pan - ion Let laugh - ter ring out ev - ery - where

5


Let joy be your com - pan - ion For joy's a gift from God



With eu - lo - gies and scrip - tures The
As pro - test - ors as - sem - ble, Their
In an - xious nights spent fret - ting When
When deep fa - tigue has sett - led In -

11


mour - ners say good - bye A sto - ry sparks the
griev - an - ces to bring Yes, e - ven in their
chan - ges feel im - mense The dawn is yet ap -
to your ver - y bones Let strength come from the

14


laugh - ter That in - ter - rupts their cries
an - ger They find a song to sing
proach - ing The sun will rise a - gain
mem' - ries Of all the joy you've known

to Refrain



HOLY & UNHINDERED

I am sure it is important to close your eyes, to pray on your knees, to fling yourself into deep reverence and even deeper humility. I am sure the Spirit is close when we dress up, when we sing the descant line, when we murmur the words with a sincere and hopeful heart.

And I am sure that when you moonwalk through your living room in soft wool socks, when you cackle loudly enough for the whole restaurant to hear, when you squeal into the phone and make pancakes for dinner, when you plunge your hands into the dirt and talk to the sparrows, when you make a mess of Communion breadcrumbs all around the Table, or when you allow yourself an undone, unhindered, unpolished sort of joy—that the Spirit loves that just as well.

The angel said, *Do not be afraid; I am bringing you joy.* We humans have spent a lot of time focusing on the fear. Don't forget: God is also in the joy.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

In a world often drenched in pain, suffering, and injustice, it is a gift to remember that we are formed and made by a God who loves us and doesn't leave us.

We often feel compelled to *earn* our worth and belovedness, but the One who grants each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God's infinite love, we are beloved, the very fibers of our being woven with care. We can't work our way to receiving God's compassion. It's already there—as present as the twinkling stars in the sky, as near as the clouds of breath on a cold night.

You are a blessing because the One from whom all blessings flow sees you, knows you, and calls you by name.

When you are facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it's not your productivity or power that will push you through, but the grace of God. This divine assurance doesn't clarify every outcome or guarantee a life of ease—Mary's path, like many before and after, was fraught with challenges. Yet this promise of Love that makes a way when there is no way offers us hope that we do not face our challenges alone. As we journey into the Advent season, may you rest under the warmth of these truths.

By embracing our inherent blessedness as a starting point, we open our hearts to recognize and affirm the blessedness in others, which transforms our interactions and communities. God's perfect love invites us to live out our belovedness by transforming our world with love and entering into the good work God's hand began weaving many years ago.

This Advent, consider your sacred place within the divine quilt.

BLESSING

You are a blessing—known, chosen, and called for a purpose. May you boldly live into this truth, recognizing and cherishing your inherent worth so that you may honor God's image in others. Trust in your belovedness as you enter the redemptive work God has invited you into this Advent season.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *In you, O God,*
EXHALE: *I find my worth.*

Christmas Eve | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
LOVE KNOWS YOUR NAME

READ Luke 2:1-20 | Isaiah 9:6

FROM THE ARTIST | Nicolette Peñaranda

Before I started this piece, I went to the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts and Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina.¹⁵ As our guide explained some of the architectural features of the building, I learned that abolitionists used to hang quilts outside of their homes to signal safety for those on the underground railroad. A few minutes later, I walked into an exhibit of large quilts draping the vibrant exhibit hall with explicit stories from slavery, 1990s ballroom culture, and an interpretation of Greek mythology. I was mesmerized by the manipulation of fabric and the storytelling that took place within each stitch. Are quilts symbols of resistance?

This trip inspired me to take a different approach to creating art for the Christmas story. While I typically produce maximalist canvases with overwhelming details, this piece is toned down and more precision-oriented. As someone who has never been able to draw a straight line, creating this quilt design out of paper was a discipline in and of itself. Creating it made me think of the kind of diligence and patience needed to sew a fabric quilt. These are projects made with love. The hands that sew them should never be taken for granted.

It is for this reason that I titled this piece, *Abolition Baby*. Even though we are over 150 years removed from the Civil War, abolitionism is still relevant today. The United States is only 4% of the world population, but it contains nearly 25% of the world's incarcerated population.¹⁶ According to the 13th amendment, slavery is illegal in the U.S. with the exception of incarcerated individuals. Some of the largest prisons in states such as Louisiana and Georgia are former plantations.¹⁷ Prison labor is used by major corporations where they pay Black and Brown people pennies on the dollar.¹⁸

I will not declare Jesus an abolitionist, but I will note that Jesus would grow up to call out any society that created environments where people are forced to commit crimes or work in unprecedented fields in order to survive. Mary was excited to bring Jesus into the world because she believed in the promise of liberation for her people. Jesus' birth was a symbol of hope for the future, for a freed people. Love knows his name. And it is freedom.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Favored One | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

¹⁵ ganttcenter.org

¹⁶ [washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/04/30/does-the-united-states-really-have-five-percent-of-the-worlds-population-and-one-quarter-of-the-worlds-prisoners](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/04/30/does-the-united-states-really-have-five-percent-of-the-worlds-population-and-one-quarter-of-the-worlds-prisoners/)

¹⁷ dailyjstor.org/slavery-and-the-modern-day-prison-plantation

¹⁸ news.uchicago.edu/story/us-prison-labor-programs-violate-fundamental-human-rights-new-report-finds

YOU ARE A BLESSING

READ Luke 1:26-38

FROM THE ARTIST | Lauren Wright Pittman

At an early age, I learned that because I am human, I am sinful, and by my very existence, I am unsuitable to be in God's presence. Without Jesus to intercede on my behalf, my unworthiness was untenable to God. Needless to say, this was not good for my self-esteem or self-image, and there is a lot of lingering self-doubt—bordering on self-hatred—that I have yet to root out.

I originally created this image for Sojourners Magazine. I was invited to create an illustration based on Natalie Wigg Stevenson's reflection on the Annunciation through a queer theological lens.¹ Stevenson's writing stretched me beyond my limits, and once I got past my discomfort, I became grateful for this challenge. Her commentary broke open my perspective and rebuilt it with affirmation, agency, consent, and pleasure. She notes that Mary is affirmed by the angel: "Greetings, favored one!" (v. 28), Mary exhibits agency: "How can this be?" (v. 34), and offers consent: "Here I am . . . let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38). She introduced a question I had never considered: *What if Mary experienced pleasure?* This notion proved incompatible with my internalized shame. It challenged my deep-seated feelings of unworthiness and threatened to overturn the construct of a God who is repelled by anything human. The exercise of sitting with this thought felt revolutionary.

As I attempted to create imagery to accompany her work, I found myself in tears. What if my fully embodied self, including the most human parts of me, are not only acceptable but beloved by the creator of the universe? What if because of my me-ness, God couldn't stay away, and chose to come near and take on flesh too? As I drew, I felt a few steps closer to accepting the steadfast, limitless, unconditional love of God that I claim to believe in, but have yet to fully receive.

What resulted was an image of Mary and Gabriel in a warm, intimate embrace. Mary has a peace to her that is like a wave of relief over her whole being. A kaleidoscope quilt pattern surrounds them and patterns Mary's clothes. If we could open ourselves up to receive the incomprehensible love of God, maybe we would constantly feel wrapped up in a soft, cozy, lovingly-stitched-together quilt. Favored one, God delights in you—every single bit of you. Never forget: you are a blessing.

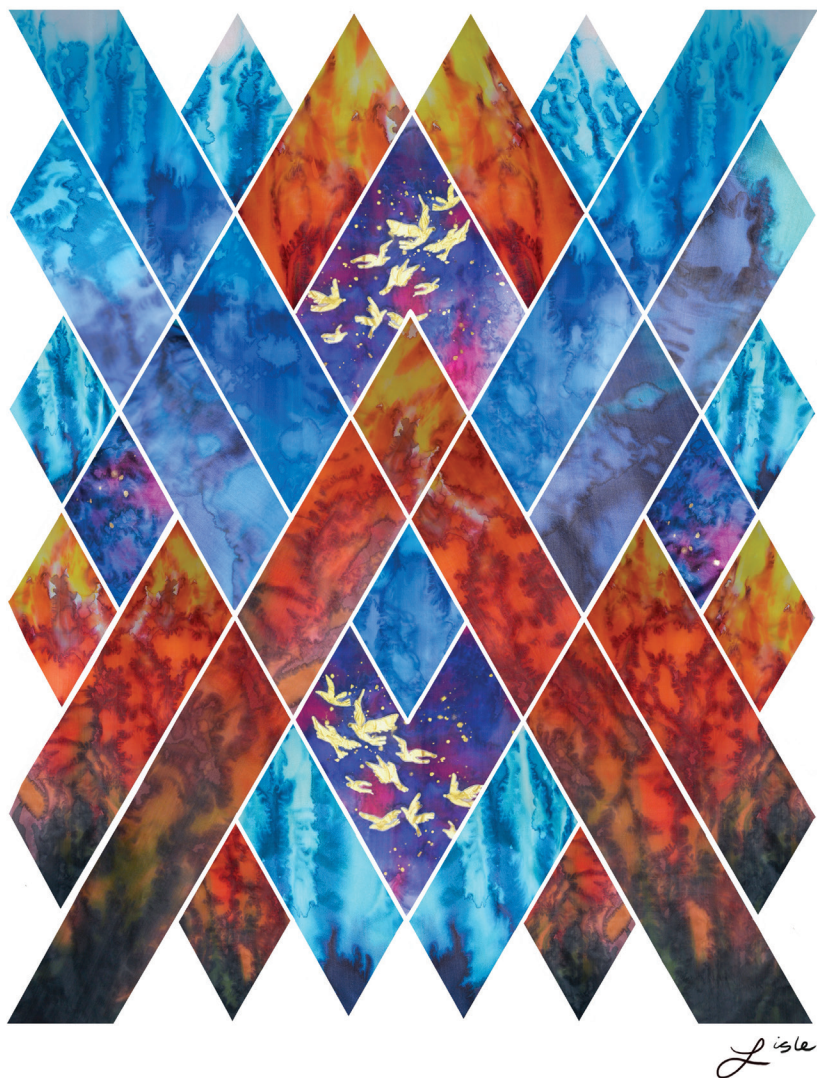
PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹ <https://sojo.net/magazine/december-2023/how-queer-theology-can-invigorate-advents-anticipation>



Abolition Baby | Nicolette Peñaranda
Paper collage on canvas



When You Pass Through the Waters | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Ink dyes and gold resist on silk, with digital collage

The paradox of *might* and *mercy* in the angels' proclamation reminds us that God's presence in our lives often challenges our expectations. When love breaks through, it invites us to see the world and our paths within it differently, like contrasting colors and patterns enhancing a quilt's beauty.

Isaiah 9:6 describes the coming Messiah as the *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace*. These titles show us just how powerful Christ is, yet we're invited to know him as a friend and to know ourselves through his closeness to us. God recognizes and responds to us with a deep, abiding affection that transcends names and titles, binding us together in the fabric of divine love.

Jesus' humble birth in a manger, celebrated by the heavens and earth alike, underscores a radical reordering: in God's kingdom, the last are first, the humble are exalted, and the meek reign. The shepherds' response to the angelic announcement—spreading the news of this great joy—underscores how we, too, are called to live in light of our cherished place in God's heart.

Vicki Black reflects on this in her exploration of the Church year, noting, "In historical time, Christmas happened over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem; in theological time, Christmas happens now, in the mystery of God choosing to dwell within humankind, a mystery that transcends all time."¹⁴

God was with the shepherds and the Magi then and is with us now. What a marvelous reality—love made a way to be near us when there was no way. In Jesus, love has a name. As candles flicker and carols are sung, hold close to the truth that love knows your name.

BLESSING

God knows you completely and loves you fully. As you draw near to Jesus, rest assured that you are not a mere face in the crowd but a beloved child of God, known and called by name. In light of this glorious truth, may you be a bearer of peace and harbinger of love today and forevermore.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *Time after time,*
EXHALE: *You call me by name.*

¹⁴ Vicki K. Black, *Welcome to the Church Year: An Introduction to the Seasons of the Episcopal Church*, (Morehouse Publishing, 2005).

Christmas Eve | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
LOVE KNOWS YOUR NAME

READ Luke 2:1-20 | Isaiah 9:6

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

On Christmas Eve, we celebrate a moment when God's vast love broke into our world through the birth of Christ, changing the course of history and how we understand our place within it, much like a thread weaving through the fabric of time.

God's love is not a distant concept but a deeply personal reality tailored to each of us.

As our faces warm against the gentle glow of Advent candles, our hearts turn to a profound truth illuminated by the story of God made flesh, of hope coming down and calling us by name. The infinite God who orchestrated the cosmos, who set each star in the sky, is the same God who crafted the uniqueness of each of us—from the swirls of our fingerprints to the dreams nestled deep within our souls.

Christ's birth makes the vastness of God personal.

Often overlooked and undervalued, shepherds were the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth. The angels' announcement, "To you, a savior is born," was profoundly personal, a divine message weaving those who are often unseen into the grand tapestry of God's cosmic plan of redemption and renewal. God gave this declaration to workers who had dirt under their fingernails, not gilded rings on their fingers, which shows us the accessibility of Jesus' birth to all people, regardless of their status or background.

No matter how small or insignificant we may feel (or have been made to feel), we are intimately known and dearly loved by God, each of us a unique patch in the quilt of humanity. Our individuality is not lost in the vastness of creation, but is cherished and celebrated by the One who calls us by name.

God's love extends to each of us today. God sees all facets of who we are and all we hold, weaving our sorrows and joys into a larger design of grace and redemption.

Consider the magnitude of that night when a "multitude" of angels—described by a word that also means "army"—filled the skies. Though their presence evoked fear in the shepherds, the message the angels brought was peace on earth. Imagine the rush of emotions the shepherds must have felt to hear this unexpected blessing in a moment of sheer panic.

The shepherds were known by God, and as we see in Luke 2:17, God's divine love propelled them to go and make known what had been told to them about Jesus. When we are known by God, we extend that light to others.

The First Sunday of Advent | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
YOU ARE A BLESSING

READ Isaiah 43:1-7

FROM THE ARTIST | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

When we began working on our Advent theme, we were inspired by the storied tradition of quilting. Though I am not a textile artist—and can hardly use a sewing machine—I turned to the fabric medium I enjoy: painting with ink dyes and gold resist on silk. As I read through my assigned scriptures for this series, I created a list of the images and patterns I found in my texts: water, fire, spirit, fruit trees, mountains, stars, sky. Then, I stretched my silk and began to paint, creating a series of 6 small banners.

Next, I moved into a digital space. I photographed my silk banners and then began drawing quilt patterns with my stylus pen onto my iPad, collaging the photos of my silk paintings into the designs. As I digitally stitched together patterns and geometric shapes, I realized I was quilting, just in my own unique way.

This piece is meant to be a visual prayer, inviting you to internalize and personalize the words of blessing from Isaiah 43. And so, I invite you to take a deep breath in, then let it out, and pray with me:

*"When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you."* (Is. 43:2a)

Rest your gaze on the art, following all the shapes with water imagery. Notice the textures and the colors. Offer a prayer for all the ways you feel as if you are drowning or being overcome by forces beyond your control. Now pray for God's waters to nourish you. Ask for a raft. Imagine you are floating gently down a river.

*"When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze."* (Is. 43:2b)

Look again at the art. With your eyes, trace all the areas you see fire imagery. Offer a prayer for all the people and places in the world experiencing devastation and destruction. Now ask God to renew all the earth. Ask for healing. Ask for protection for those who are hurting.

Lastly, inhale deeply, and release. You are precious in God's sight. Imagine God gazing upon you, delighting in all that you are. You are a blessing. Let that truth buoy you as you breathe each new breath.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



"WHEN WILL YOU BE BACK?"

Yesterday I visited an old man in the hospital.
 I was not the only one. We talked on the elevator
 ride down—
Has he gained any weight? Will he stay in that room?
Does he like the food? Has he called?
 All the man wanted to know was, *When will you be back?*

We ask that question in a thousand different ways
 every single day,
 our hearts leaning over themselves,
 bending to get closer to love.
We say, Text me when you're home.
Call me when you're free.
One more kiss!
I love you all the time.
When will you be back?
 What we really mean is—
 I can't go through life alone.
 Please don't let me go through life alone.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Scan to hear
 the tune!

LOVE BROKE FORTH

IRBY ("Once in Royal David's City")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

Music by Henry J. Gauntlett, 1849

1
 Love broke forth in ra - diant fa - shion and God
 Love broke forth in - to a bo - dy gent - ly
 Love broke forth to know com - plete - ly who you

3
 called cre - a - tion good God made hu - mans in her
 laid on Ma - ry's chest See him swad - dled in a
 are and who you'll be Gath - er - ing in - to one

6
 i - mage to be loved and un - der - stood Then God
 man - ger, Migh - ty God now po - wer - less Giv - ing
 bo - dy all of our hu - man - i - ty Ten - der -

9
 took on flesh and bone all of hu - man life to know
 up his throne on high to ex - per - i - ence this life
 ly Love speaks your name, your be - long - ing to pro - claim



"HEY LOVE"¹³

My grandmother was strong. That's what they tell me. She played piano and clipped coupons. She raised four kids. One was sick. One never would, never *could* grow up. But she loved them all. And when life fell apart in brand new ways, she bought books. She went back to school. She started over again. She was the kind of strong that reminds you of a live oak. The kind of woman, the kind of tree, you'd want to crawl up into and whisper, "Tell me how you did it. Tell me how you survived the storm."

She was fifty-one when a vessel in her brain burst, blood coloring outside the lines, blood stealing large swathes of her strength with every pulse. After that, she never did play piano, read, or clip coupons. After that, she never could find the words. Nouns became things to point out. Names became numbers. Conversation creaked and slowed, but one word stayed.

The name of my baptism never crossed her lips, but when my grandmother saw me, she'd say—*Heeeeeeey Love.*

My grandmother and God have this in common. Both know my name. Both call me Love.

Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

¹³ For Nana: Margaret Are.



Scan to hear
 the tune!

TO BE KNOWN

WALTHAM ("I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

Music by John Baptiste Calkin, 1872

Re - call the truth that we once knew:
 For in the gar - den God de - clared
 In ev - ery age hu - man - i - ty
 Both you and I are in - ter - twined

We were not made for sol - i - tude
 That our brief lives on earth be shared
 Re - lied on mu - tu - al - i - ty
 The warp and weft of hu - man - kind

We need com - mun - i - ties of faith
 With part - ners, friends, and fam - i - ly
 Our God - breathed spi - rits weren't de - signed
 So please don't try to go a - lone

Where we can feel God's warm em - brace
 Who hold us in our joy and grief
 To be di - vid - ed and con - fined
 Your hu - man heart needs to be known

WE CAN'T GO ALONE

READ Ruth 1 | Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

As nights grow longer and the world seems to hush under the weight of winter, we often find ourselves cloistered and secluded as we wait for the world to thaw.² But the season of Advent whispers an ancient truth: *We were never meant to journey these paths alone.*

In a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps culture, choosing communal life is both radical—and deeply faithful.

We see this in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth, a Moabite woman, could have returned to her birth family after her husband's death, following the expected path. Naomi, overcome with loss and steeped in grief, initially pushes Ruth away. She even renames herself “Mara,” meaning “bitter,” reflecting her belief that her life has been marked by divine disfavor. Instead of leaving, Ruth chooses a radical commitment to her mother-in-law, saying, “Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go.”

Ruth's choice wasn't merely about devotion. It was the formation of a new family built not on blood but on *kinship*, on the daring belief that our lives are better intertwined.

Sorrow can make us shrink into ourselves, believing that solitude is safer than the vulnerability of connection.

When the weight of loneliness makes you feel forgotten and you wonder if your place in this world matters, it's easy to get sucked into a cascade of lies.

You start thinking you're the *only one* carrying this weight of loneliness, the *only one* on the outside looking in. And it snowballs into other struggles like inadequacy, insecurity, and insignificance.

Recent studies show that 1 in 2 Americans struggles with social disconnection. This leads Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, to call loneliness an “epidemic.” Loneliness not only hurts us on an individual level, but negatively impacts society as a whole. Feelings of isolation hurt our mental *and* physical health. Research has shown that loneliness can take the same toll on our bodies as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.³

Cultivating compassionate community is the antidote.

“If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being,” says Murthy. “And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country.”⁴

We're better together, and deep down in her bones, Ruth knew it. Naomi's grief doesn't deter her. Ruth keeps moving toward Naomi, embarking on a journey to a new beginning. As much as Naomi needed Ruth, Ruth needed Naomi—a beautiful picture of mutuality, which is deeply needed in our fractured world.

HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK

READ Luke 1:46-55

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

The central image in this quilt square design is of Mary's soul, an abstract and concentric shape that begins to look like an eye. It originates as an outward spiraling abstraction of the soul magnifying God. For Mary's soul magnifies her creator. In her song, Mary honors her God who mirrors the life her son will live: lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, coming to the aid of God's people, bringing down the powerful, sending the rich away empty, and scattering the proud.

One Advent, the art team at my church created a set of banners based on the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke 1. In the design, Elizabeth (Mary's cousin) stood, full with child. Surrounding her were patterns of tablets and writing tools (representing muted Zechariah's need to communicate through writing) and patterns of hands (representing Elizabeth's caretaking in raising up her son, John). The banners hung in the sanctuary throughout the whole Advent season. On December 24th, the pastor told me, “It's Christmas eve; I have to preach the Magnificat. Elizabeth will have to be Mary today.”

It occurs to me that we are all Mary today, dreaming of a better world and working toward it through right relationships and healthy communities. So why does it seem that the world keeps falling apart? Where is the “arc of justice” of which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke?¹² Can you see it? Can you feel it? Why does it seem so far out of reach? Like Moses on the mountaintop, can you see the promised land? As global politics heat up, it feels so far away.

Mary is on the verge of delivering God's depth and beauty into the world; God will be embodied by a child. Mary, the earthly mother of our incarnate God, can see it. She can see hope, justice, and right relationships. In the Magnificat, she speaks the way of God into being, just before Jesus is born. Like my mother whispering in my ear when I was a child, calling forth whom I shall become, Mary speaks her dreams into existence.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹² “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from his speech, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” delivered at the National Cathedral, March 31st, 1968.



Magnify | Hannah Garrity
Acrylic painting with mixed media on canvas

Ruth and Naomi's journey to Bethlehem, mirroring another future trek to the same town by Mary and Joseph, is a pilgrimage of faith. Both journeys hold discomfort and uncertainty, yet the travelers take it on *together*. This kinship echoes through the lineage of Jesus himself, as Ruth, a woman who embodied the strength of connection over isolation, is named among his ancestors.

We aren't meant to do it alone.

The season of flickering candles and twinkling lights can have a shadow side filled with loneliness and grief. For many, it feels like *anything but* the happiest time of the year. And yet, this season offers ample opportunity for kinship and connection—to reach out to the grieving, to invite the lonely into our homes and hearts, and to show that in God's family, no one has to face their sorrows alone.

What would it look like to foster deep connections in this season—not just gatherings marked by exchanging pleasantries but by sharing your messy, holy, complicated life?

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes reminds us, “Two are better than one . . . for if they fall, one will lift up the other.” Though often heard at weddings, this wisdom speaks to the fundamental human need for connection, no matter the relationship or what season of life we're in.

You can't go alone, nor were you meant to.

In each other's companionship, may we find the reflection of the One who, in becoming flesh, chose to be with us, to share in our humanity, and to show us that we need each other.

BLESSING

Beloved, you are not alone on this winding journey. May the companionship of fellow sojourners reflect the love of the One who—in becoming flesh—chose to journey alongside us. May the quilt of life warm you from the chill of isolation, and may the Spirit move you to compassion as you cultivate community, even in times of uncertainty.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *Light in the darkness,*
EXHALE: *Guide our paths together.*

- 2 If you are reading these words from the southern hemisphere, we hope you will still receive this invitation to resist isolation, regardless of the seasons.
- 3 “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” by Dr. Vivek H. Murthy. A publication from the U.S. Public Health Service, 2023. [hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf)
- 4 Ibid.



Turn your booklet 90 degrees to the right to view the art.

Binding Braids | Nicolette Peñaranda
Acrylic, markers, paper, and mixed media collage on canvas

The Fourth Sunday of Advent | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK

READ Matthew 1:18-25

FROM THE ARTIST | Lauren Wright Pittman

The angel holds Joseph as his dream unfolds in quilted vignettes. At the top, Mary gazes ahead, pondering her role in welcoming the Son of God into the world. Below, a squishy baby Jesus peacefully rests as his glory shines on a longing world eager to soak up the light of Emmanuel. Just as a dream holds layers of meaning, this image reflects more than the sum of its parts.

I'm fascinated by symbology. Stars have come to represent both Mary and Jesus in liturgical art, so I decided to research stars in quilting. It turns out that quilting holds its own wealth of symbology through choices in color, shapes, patterns, etc. A star quilt holds significance in a number of different cultures, including the Lakota. Star quilts are given at important moments throughout one's life, including birth, and the eight-pointed morning star "represents fulfillment, the release from darkness, [and] ushering in a new day."⁹

This brings me to another fascination of mine, Biblical numerology. One of my most well-worn resources is a glossary of common liturgical symbols in European Christian art called, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art*. In it, the writers describe that the eight-pointed star is often used in imagery of Christ as an allusion to the eighth day of creation when Christ rose from the dead, "a beginning of days outside of time."¹⁰ It delights me that this eight-pointed star is made up of triangles with three sides. The number three references the Trinity, and therefore, the communal fullness of the Divine.

In researching imagery for Mary, I realized that both stars and lilies are often used in European art to celebrate Mary's purity. My glossary reads: "Her bearing of Christ without loss of her virginity is seen as similar to stars sending out their light without loss of brightness."¹¹ Of all the things we can lift up about Mary, such as her courage, strength, or steadfast love, why emphasize her virginity? This feels incredibly limiting and dismissive and misses how incredible and multifaceted Mary is. In my image, I want to reclaim the imagery of stars and lilies to represent how Mary is a brilliant, shining example of radical faithfulness in the face of every possible earthly fear. Lilies are resourceful, hearty plants which represent rebirth across cultures. I would argue that Mary is resilient in the face of an impossible task, and in many ways, the entire story of the people of God is reborn through Mary's bravery.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁹ A quote from Kevin Locke, Lakota Sioux. nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/evolution-expression

¹⁰ Appleton, LeRoy H, and Stephen Bridges *Symbolism in Liturgical Art*. New York: Charles Scribner, 1959. Pg. 97

¹¹ *Ibid.* 96.

WE CAN'T GO ALONE

READ Ruth 1

FROM THE ARTIST | Nicolette Peñaranda

When I was a child, my mother used to give my older sister and I a unibraid down our backs. She was never particularly good at doing our hair. We always had flyaways and little bits of frizz at our edges accompanying our bright big smiles on picture day. It wasn't long until I started braiding my own hair. At the tender age of nine I would spend hours in the bathroom staring at myself in the mirror with two hands to heaven. The more I did my own, the more I noticed others' braids as well. I would learn to appreciate our shared kinship. Our braids were our ancestors, our heritage, and our culture. Our designs were our creativity and our individuality. Braids bind us in ways that go beyond the physical—we are forever entwined.

Ruth and Naomi find themselves bound by their widowhood and familial grief. And while Orpah made the choice to return to her village, Ruth bound herself to her mother-in-law: "Where you go, I will go." They too have spiritual connections that are deeper than the surface. To the left, Naomi is embodied by purples, yellows, and greens. While purple is most commonly associated with royalty, here it's meant to hold her grief. The deep color reflects her processing the loss of both of her sons and husband while the contrast of the yellows and gold represent the glimmers of hope she finds in companionship with Ruth. Her chest holds a subtle landscape detailing her and Ruth holding hands while journeying back to Naomi's native land. The image is soft like the clouds surrounding her, as if her story is suddenly easier now that Ruth is with her.

To the right, Ruth is filled with blues, oranges, and greens. Whereas Naomi's portrait holds grief and duality, Ruth's color palette is meant to feel more hopeful and vibrant. There is something pure about her as reflected in the pearls around her neck. In the middle of the canvas, Ruth and Naomi's braids are woven into each other. The two of them are also portrayed on opposing sides of the braids, seeking each other while also latching onto their bond. Ruth and Naomi are also the two hands pressed upon each other like a prayer. It feels like two worlds are colliding with the rounded waves and galactic triangles surrounding them. Above the hands is an omnipresent moon, as if God is looking over their bond.

This piece conveys several different forms of connection over a blanket of decorative textiles quilted together. It is meant to invite the audience into an otherworldly, fluid space for biblical wonderment.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Joseph's Dream | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on patterned paper



From the Three | Hannah Garrity
Acrylic painting with mixed media on canvas

Mary's response to her calling is equally revolutionary. In light of all that has been foretold, she sings a hopeful anthem for the ways God turns our world upside down and brings it right side up by bringing down the mighty, exalting the humble, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away.

As she sings, Mary weaves a vision of the world as God intends it, stitching together a pattern of justice and mercy in her words. Her hope in the promise of God transcends time and space, extending a sacred invitation and inspiring us today to live out our faith in tangible, transformative ways. Mary's words hark back to imagery seen throughout the Hebrew Bible. Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes: "The hope articulated in ancient Israel is not a vague optimism or a generic good idea about the future, but a precise and concrete confidence in and expectation for the future."⁸

Reflect on how you can embody hope in uncertain times. How can you, like Joseph, use your influence to protect and uplift? How can you, like Mary, voice a hope that challenges the status quo and sings of a reality where justice and mercy reign?

As you light the final Advent candle, let it symbolize the hope that Christ brings into our world—a hope not just for peaceful times, but also for moments of darkness and difficulty. May the steady flame of hope renew your courage and inspire you to act as you enter into an extraordinary story of redemption and love.

In this season of hope, may you find the courage to hold onto hope and act on it, to let the divine trust of Mary and Joseph weave through the fabric of your life.

BLESSING

Lies of cynicism are loud, and so are the voices of others—but, beloved, hope is worth fighting for. May the Spirit of God surround you this season so that you might trust like Joseph and sing like Mary. The same hope they held is still alive today, transforming creation into God's will for justice and peace. As you prepare your heart for Christ's arrival, may you make room for God's presence, and may your actions reflect God's hope for humanity.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: Lead me, O God,
EXHALE: My hope is in you.

⁷ Michael Curry and Sara Grace, *Love Is the Way: Holding onto Hope in Troubling Times*, (Avery Publishing Group, 2020), 73.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002).

HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK

READ Matthew 1:18-25 | Luke 1:46-55

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

Hope isn't flimsy—it's a force that propels us toward God's presence and redemptive plan for all creation, for all time.

It's vulnerable to hope. The more we hope, the more we can be disappointed. For those of us who bear scars from the hurt of this world, hope can feel scary—too risky, too unrealistic. Cynicism seems like a safer, more straightforward path. But cynicism doesn't change the world—*hope* does.

Hope challenges us to declare, “It can be better,” and empowers us to make it so.

Our weary world doesn't need any more cynics and scoffers—but as wars rage and divisions heighten, we desperately need hope-bearers who point us to a better way, one where life is made new and lies of shame and fear don't have the final say. Our hope is a reflection of God's plans for the world—plans for renewal and restoration in the face of death and despair.

Joseph and Mary hoped against hope. In the face of impossibilities, they believed in the possibility of a better world. They placed their trust in God alone. Their stories, as recounted in Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:46-55, are testaments to the transformative power of hope still accessible to us today. Joseph acts with hope. Mary proclaims it. And their choice to trust God has reverberations that echo into eternity.

When an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he is told not to fear taking Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Joseph's decision to embrace this divine assurance—rather than succumb to societal expectations to untangle himself from his pregnant fiancée—is a radical act of hope.

“The language of a dream is the language of hope,” writes Bishop Michael Curry.⁷ Propelled by this hope, Joseph uses his position not just for personal faithfulness, but as an act of profound communal responsibility by choosing to protect and stand by Mary. Instead of living out of fear for what others may say or think, Joseph places his hope in something bigger than himself.

Every day, we have the chance to choose hope and enter into God's redemptive dream for the world—even when it disrupts our understanding and expectations (perhaps especially then).

WE CAN'T GO ALONE

READ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

At the end of this Ecclesiastes text, we read that the threefold cord is not easily broken. I had a piece of twine, which when I pulled it apart, broke into four sections. I sistered two into one, making three. I filmed myself pulling apart and re-weaving the twine. Then I drew this quilt square design from the still images in my video.

I dislike the final energy in the central motif of this artwork. It feels discordant. Perhaps that's the point. When I read this scripture, it seems to focus on strength—but in the rope itself, I find weakness. It was so easy to unravel the cord and create weakness. Its strength lies in the weave, in the interwoven fibers coming together. Without that interweaving, the fibers are weak.

As I continue to watch our communities come together and splinter apart, it is always through the aspirational and the altruistic that the re-weaving begins. This discordant quilt square calls us to sit in the tension of the in-between, to weave our lives together rather than pulling them apart. And yet, I hate it, the asymmetry of it all. I want the art, the community, and the collective life to be simple, symmetrical, and full of order. But in Ecclesiastes, our practical God emphasizes that two are better than one and three are stronger than two. A three-ply cord isn't easily broken. This offers a very trinitarian way forward in the messy, interwoven, beautiful, and powerful collective.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Third Sunday of Advent
WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

DO THE GOOD THAT IS YOURS TO DO

HARVEST

Maybe none of it matters.

Maybe you can't make a difference.

Or maybe that watermelon seed you spit out over the summer will grow into a green orb, full of sticky sweet fruit. Maybe the rain will nourish it. Maybe your mother's hands will pull it from the vine, slice it into wedges, and place it on the dining room table. Maybe the neighbors will come over and chomp into that soft pink fruit, juicy water running down their chins. Maybe you will laugh at the shared experience, at this garden-grown communion, and maybe the stars will shine brighter that night.

People say the problems of the world are too big to make a difference, but surely those people have forgotten the fruit that grows from one little seed.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK



Scan to hear
the tune!

HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK

NOËL NOUVELET ("Sing We Now of Christmas")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

Traditional French melody



Col - lege stu - dents ga - ther pro - tes - ting for peace
Young girls in I - ran to pro - test the re - gime
In Tai - wan the dream - ers flood the streets with blooms
Li - ber - i - an wom - en scarred by ci - vil war
Eth - nic mu - sic rings out from the Bal - tic Sea
Age to age and coast to coast peo - ple have stood



Stand - ing firm in spite of vio - lence from po - lice
Take off their hi - jabs to let their hair be seen
Sun - flow - ers and li - lies li - ber - ty's per - fume
Keep the peace talks go - ing by bar - ring the doors
As the peo - ple sing their right to li - ber - ty
Risk - ing some - thing big in hope of some - thing good



Em - pires will fight with force or pol - i - tics



Still the Spi - rit whis - pers, "Hope is worth the risk"

Author's note: This hymn was written in the midst of the Popular University for Gaza movement across college campuses in the spring of 2024. Spending time with the students at the University of Texas day after day, I witnessed the many creative ways they protested on the South Lawn, from screen printing to poetry workshops. None of this made the news, as those in power benefit from the narrative that protestors are violent. Wondering what other narratives have been similarly silenced, I was inspired to learn and write about creative acts of nonviolent resistance, highlighting the hopeful risk-takers across the world.



The Fourth Sunday of Advent
 WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
 HOPE IS WORTH THE RISK

DESPITE IT ALL

What's to love?
 she asked.
 I understood the question.

I've seen the riot gear,
 the tear gas,
 the names of children
 wiped from this
 war-stained world.

I've seen the spray paint Swastikas
 and the Proud Boys with their flags.
 I've heard grandmothers at church
 pray in urgent, desperate whispers.
 And I've watched young mothers cry,
 because teachers carry guns.
 I've felt the tremor of an earthquake.
 I've felt the heat of climate change.
 I've seen the temple curtain tear in two.

But despite it all,
 the bell that wouldn't stop tolling,
 the words that won't stop clanging through my heart,
 are, *so much*.
 There is so much left to love.
 So much left to hope for.

Poem by
 Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
 DO THE GOOD THAT IS YOURS TO DO
 DO THE GOOD THAT'S
 YOURS TO DO



Scan to hear
 the tune!

TEMPUS ADEST FLORIDUM ("Good King Wenceslas")

Words by Anna Strickland, 2024

Music from the *Piae Cantiones*, 1582



Peo - ple came from all a - round just to see the tea - cher
 "Tell me, John, what should I do as a tax col - lec - tor?"
 Some are called to of - fer care, some to ex - hor - ta - tion



Liv - ing in the wil - der-ness, speak-ing to the see - kers
 "Take on - ly what's yours to take; don't a - buse your debt - ors"
 Some to hos - pi - tal - i - ty, some to ed - u - ca - tion



He had no pre - ten-tious-ness; he would tell you blunt - ly
 Sol-diers, shep-herds, fish - er - men asked him the same ques - tion
 All our gifts col - lec - tive - ly work to bring sal - va - tion



So they sought out his ad-vice on how to live just - ly
 John re - spond - ed all the same, "Share all your pos - ses - sions"
 Do the good that's yours to do with de - ter - min - a - tion

The Third Sunday of Advent | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
DO THE GOOD THAT IS YOURS TO DO

READ Luke 3:7-16 | Isaiah 58:9b-12

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

Headline after headline, creation groans. Our world's labor pains seem compounding and never-ending. In the overwhelm of daily responsibilities and the barrage of global crises, it's easy to feel like anything we do or say is simply a drop in the ocean.

Yet, in this liturgical season of expectant hope, we must remember that the good we do in the world has ripple effects beyond what we can see. We are not the world's saviors, but we move toward the One who invites us into the work and who labors alongside us.

Advent reminds us that Christ came into a world fraught with the very same issues of injustice and inequality that we face, and he did not turn away. Instead, he showed us a way forward: engaged action rooted in compassion.

We may think, "I'm just one person. What can I do?" Yet, as followers of Christ, we're invited to consider a different question, one rooted in hope and action: "What is *mine* to do?"

This week's scripture calls us to a profound yet simple truth: "I can't do it all, but I can do something that matters."

When approached by various community members—each grappling with their role in a society marked by inequality and injustice—John the Baptist gives practical advice that speaks across centuries. To the crowds, he says, "Share what you have." To the tax collectors, "Take no more than your due." To the soldiers, "Do no harm in pursuit of personal gain."

Each instruction differs, yet the core message is the same: Do the good that is yours to do.

After John shares this wisdom, he shares a second part: He points people toward Jesus. We labor in vain if we are only relying on our own strength. With God's help, we are able to do the work that is ours to do.

John's directives resonate with the words found in Isaiah 58, where the prophet calls us to be the "repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to dwell in." This passage invites us to bring forth restoration through ordinary actions: feeding the hungry, serving the oppressed, and comforting the afflicted. It's about the cumulative power of small acts that weave together to create a fabric of communal flourishing.

A popular quote stems from the Hebrew Bible's admonition in Micah 6:8: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."⁵

The Third Sunday of Advent | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
DO THE GOOD THAT IS YOURS TO DO

READ Isaiah 58:9b-12

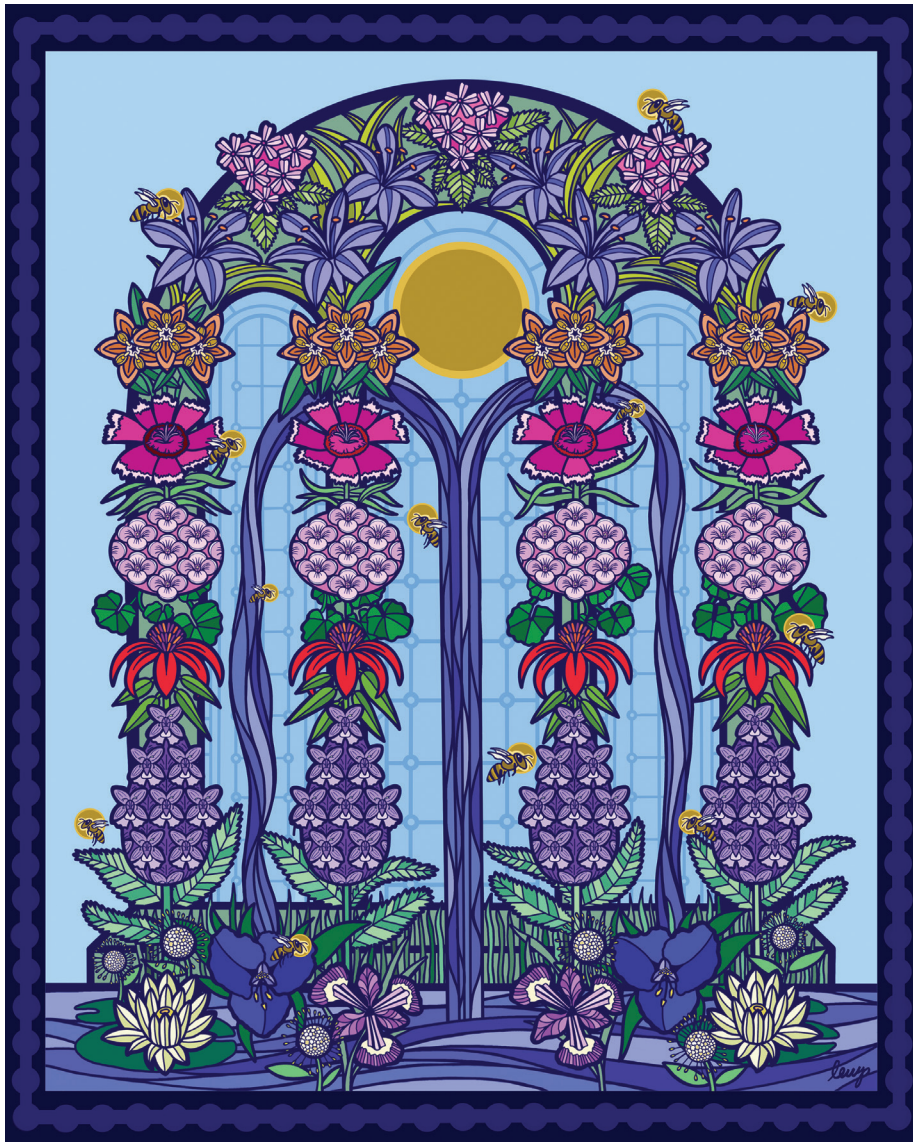
FROM THE ARTIST | Lauren Wright Pittman

After repeated readings of this text, I began to see a garden bursting out of a spring. I imagined the flowers working together to build a beautiful arched structure in a parched place. For me, the structure came to represent the rebuilt ruins in the text which create a safe space for restored communities to thrive. I began creating the piece by finding both drought-resistant and water-emergent plants to create the structure. The water-emergent plants lay the foundation in the midst of the gurgling spring: lotuses, birdbill dayflowers, blue flags, and buttonbush flowers. Building from there, drought-resistant plants craft the strong bones and arches of this rebuilt ruin; from the base to the top of the shelter are: catmint, coneflower, geraniums, dianthus, butterfly weeds, agapanthus, and verbena. Metaphorically speaking, the health of the garden depends on the hard work of gardeners culling weeds (which in the Isaiah passage could be represented by removing the yoke, the pointing of fingers, and the speaking of evil). The garden also depends on adding necessary nutrients to the soil (offering food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted). This is the good that is ours to do.

I have a difficult time considering an image complete without a person as the focal point. As I worked on this piece, the flowers and structure alone felt insufficient to represent the fullness of life I was hoping for, so I decided to add bees floating and fluttering throughout this restored flower sanctuary. The community garden shelter provides nourishment for the twelve bees, which in turn provide for the whole ecosystem. When we do the good that is ours to do, our work in discipleship raises up the foundations of many generations. The whole community is uplifted when we lean into God's will in our life and share that goodness with others.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Full Life in the Emptiest of Places | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

What is holding you back from taking these words to heart? Consider your unique gifts, perspectives, talents, and resources. How might these uniquely situate you to move into action in your actual, everyday life?

This Advent, in the quiet spaces of our hearts, where God's still, small voice speaks, we are called to discern what is ours to do. Frederick Buechner articulates this discernment: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁶

As you light the third Advent candle, consider what specific opportunities you have to contribute to your community. *What makes you come alive? How does that meet a need?* Maybe you can extend hospitality to a lonely neighbor, volunteer at your local school, or do the personal work of healing that prevents the passing on of generational wounds.

We are all called to participate in God's restorative story—a plan set in motion from the creation of the stars.

The work of our hands and our hearts takes time, but that doesn't mean our labor is in vain.

Our work might seem small or insignificant, but when we look at the lineage of Christ and the history of God's people, we see lots of ordinary, flawed people giving their small and shaky "yes" to God. *Could they have fathomed that their lives were part of an extraordinary story where heaven breaks through and alters the course of history?*

Labor pains of the world are real and often feel never-ending. But as we journey toward the birth of Christ, we must remember the promise that new life can spring from pain.

Each good work, no matter how small, is a thread in the fabric of God's ongoing creation story—one where love overcomes, peace prevails, and new life emerges.

This Advent, remember that your efforts, though they might seem modest, are part of a larger, divine tapestry. With God's help, may our acts of love and works of justice lead to the flourishing of all people.

BLESSING

You are uniquely situated to bring light into the world. May you find courage this season to do the good that is yours to do. It matters. May you see the ripples of your actions expand outward, touching lives and mending the fabric of our shared humanity.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *God of goodness,*

EXHALE: *Guide the work of my hands.*

⁵ Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*, (Harmony/Bell Tower, 1995), 41. This is a paraphrase of Rabbi Rami Shapiro's interpretive translation of Rabbi Tarfon's work on the Pirke Avot 2:20. The text is a commentary on Micah 6:8.

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, (HarperOne, 1993).

The Third Sunday of Advent | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
DO THE GOOD THAT IS YOURS TO DO

READ Luke 3:7-16

FROM THE ARTIST | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

As John the Baptist preaches about transformation, he receives the same question three times from those gathered by the river: “What, then, shall we do?”

His responses are straightforward and practical, but also particular. He tells the crowd to share any excess clothing and food with those who have none. He tells the tax collectors not to use their position of power to launder and steal money. He tells the soldiers not to coerce and threaten, and to be satisfied with their wages.

In other words, he tells them what not to do, which leads me to assume that those showing up to be baptized are carrying some things they need to atone for. And yet, they have shown up. They have journeyed into the wilderness to be baptized and transformed. They long for a new beginning.

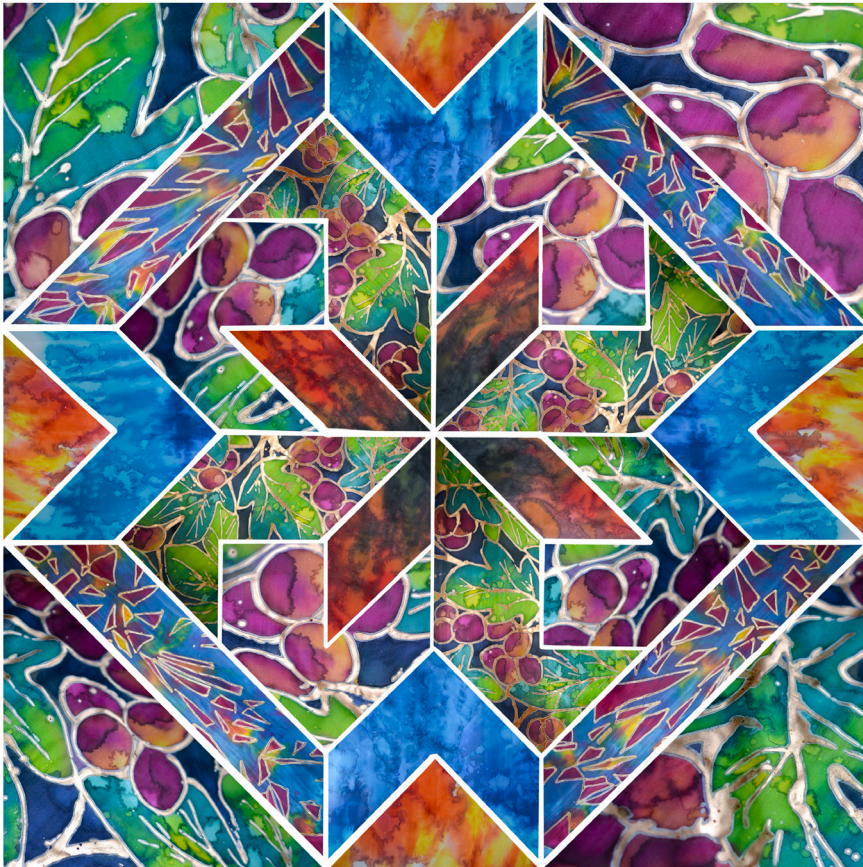
At the center of this quilt square collage, a pinwheel of fire spins. It represents the Holy Spirit impelling the world to turn. Surrounding it are four petal shapes that bloom like a flower. They are each filled with branches of fruit. When we align ourselves with the movement of the Spirit, we can do the good that is ours to do. Our actions can bear good fruit.

The petals and pinwheel are encapsulated by the outline of a blue cross. Four walls of the cross contain broken fragments. In stark contrast to the lush fruit, the fragments are like shards of glass. They symbolize the sins John the Baptist sees present amongst the crowds: extortion, coercion, and the hoarding of power and resources. And yet, these fragments are linked together by blue arrows filled with the waters of baptism. There is a way to begin again.

From each cardinal direction, a triangle of Holy Spirit fire faces inward, pointing us to baptism and transformation. When we do the good that is ours to do, we bear good fruit—fruit that repairs and nourishes, fruit that grows into the four corners of the earth.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Good That Is Yours | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Ink dyes and gold resist on silk, with digital collage