

A series of Advent Devotions



For the past five years, the presiding bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, The Anglican Church of Canada and The Episcopal Church have met to share with one another, provide worship observances for the 10th Anniversary of Full Communion agreements, to advocate for creation and the environment and to call members to prayer for situations of war and turmoil.

At their most recent meeting, the leaders agreed to provide Advent devotions for the four churches. Members are encouraged to use and share these devotions in congregations or individually during the season of preparation for the coming of our Lord.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton provides the devotions for the first week of Advent.

Advent 1

Isaiah 64:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37



*God beyond time, help us to live in the tension
between what you have done and
what you will do, and into the truth
that Christ will come again.*

Amen.

by Elizabeth Eaton

THE BURPEE SEED CATALOGUE is the epitome of beauty, grace and proportion. Its pages display the Platonic ideal of which my garden is a poor reflection. Leafing through the catalog I have been beguiled by images of perfect vegetables and beautiful flowers.

I remember my first encounter, my first brush with the excitement and danger of the Burpee's catalog, a phone and a credit card. It was the page with the fields of lavender. I could turn our Columbus, Ohio house into Provence! But the fact that our lot was small enough to mow the lawn with a weed whacker brought me back from the abyss. I decided to order tulip bulbs instead.

Tulip bulbs must be planted in the fall. (They also must be planted right side up I discovered, but that is another story.) We all know how autumn is in the parish: the start-up of Sunday School, choir rehearsals and committee meetings. I didn't plant in September or October.

Finally, toward the end of November, I took my tulip bulbs, bone meal and trowel and set out to transform the backyard. Soil in Ohio is often clay. It was cold. It was raining. It was muddy. My husband would look out the back window and shake his head. After a while even the dog left me. By the time I had finished it was dark and the backyard was a soupy, lumpy, clay-ey mess. But all I could see were rows of brilliant red tulips warmed in the spring sun.

Advent is an odd season. It isn't culturally accessible. It doesn't lend itself to retail. There are no made-for-TV movies telling heartwarming stories about the great and terrible day of the Lord. It is an unsettled season that holds in tension the now and the not yet, longing and hope, judgment and redemption. This is clear in the readings for the First Sunday in Advent.

In Isaiah, the people of Israel are languishing in Babylon. The nation had been defeated, the Temple destroyed, Jerusalem sacked and the people forced into exile. Israel had experienced the liberating power of God in the Exodus. Israel was waiting to be set free from exile in Babylon by God with that same power. The people are pleading with God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence” (Isaiah 64:1). They were caught between the first Exodus and waiting for the second exodus, this time out of Babylon.

In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory. “Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:27). But Jesus does not give a timeline. To his disciples, to the early church, to us, Jesus is not talking so much about *here* as about *near*.

We have celebrated the first Christmas. We know that the babe in the manger grew to adulthood, inaugurated the new age of the reign of God and was crucified. We are on the other side of the first Easter, the resurrection, the triumph over sin and death. We confess, “Christ has died. Christ is risen.” But we find ourselves in the muddy, lumpy mess of a fallen world.

Scripture tells us that “God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). We have heard Jesus’ promise from the cross to the criminal: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). And yet we live in a world still marred by sin. What a terrible tension: we stand between two Edens, the one at the dawn of creation and the one at the close of the age.

Now we can see the beautiful logic of Advent. Where the culture (and my heart, too, if I am honest) celebrates and holds on to the manger and the star, the shepherds and wise

men, to Mary and Joseph and the Christ child, the church calls us to look for the return of the King. Advent deepens the tension between what the world was created to be and what it now is, between what God has done and what God will do.

To our muddy, soupy, lumpy mess — when we walked in darkness — God sent God’s midnight Son. Because of Emmanuel, God with us, we can stand in our clay and see glory. Advent is the season when we can say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. *Christ will come again.*”

In the meantime, we plant tulips and wait for spring.



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Anglican and Lutheran churches in full communion

Advent 2

Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8



*God of holy patience, help us to offer a compassionate witness
against the fear and despair of our time.*

Amen.

by Katharine Jefferts Schori

The world seems like a miserable and tragic mess this year — there is war all over the Middle East and strife in Eastern Europe; western nations are increasingly divided between abject poverty and obscene wealth; Ebola is spreading; our globe is warming, seas rising, and species disappearing. Woe, woe, woe, everywhere we turn.

In the face of that sort of invitation to despair, Isaiah cries, “Be of good cheer. Even though you know the perfidy of humankind, God is working his ancient promises out. The path to the Reign of God is emerging even now, even in the midst of dark despair.” (Isaiah’s use of “comfort” implies “be strong.”)

Peter tells a similarly despairing community to be patient and to be at peace. Whence cometh patience? Whence cometh my help? Patience is above all the ability to abide, even when it hurts like hell, knowing that God’s road keeps rolling out ahead of us, leading onward to healing, wholeness, and the holy peace that passes all understanding.

Patience comes from a root that means to *suffer* or *endure*. It can be painful to wait, especially if we are eager for the birth of a child, anxious to have an onerous task completed, or a wound healed. The deeper origin of the word lies in a root that means to hurt, injure, blame, revile, or damage — the word *fiend* comes from the same root. In some deep sense, patience is the virtue needed in the face of the fiendish and whatever is hostile to life.

As Peter puts it, we wait for a new heaven and a new earth, in spite of all the forces that stand in the way. We wait patiently, confident that God is working his purposes out. Yet patience does not mean total passivity. Perhaps surprisingly, *passive* originally meant that one was capable of suffering; today it often implies that one is unfeeling and unresponsive.

To live as Jesus did is to embrace the world's suffering — in as full a way as possible — and yet to endure, knowing that God is still in our midst, and in the heart of the pain. Patience in this season of waiting is not just about putting up with delay, but having deep compassion for all who wait for justice, healing, and peace. It is about solidarity, and suffering-with (which is the literal meaning of *compassion*).

John the Baptizer is announcing the presence of compassion in the flesh — and reminding his hearers that God's road builder toward that future is coming. Not only will a fellow sufferer stand with you, but he will help unfold that path to a healed world. The pathway isn't finished yet, but if you'll turn around, you will see it and become part of it.

In this season of patience, what suffering claims your heart? What do you wait for, in solidarity with another? Will you join in building that road through the wild and fearsome darkness?

Our capacity for patience can be expanded. The ability to sit or stand or rest quietly can be cultivated, and short arrow-prayers can be helpful: "Let me rest in you, O God," "Hold me in the palm of your hand," "Let me be still and know that you are God." Some find it helpful to practice giving thanks in each breath, remembering with Dame Julian that God is as close as our breath and as enfolding as our clothing. The confidence and deep awareness of God's intimacy is the source of patience, and it gives rise to courage and strength to endure and act in solidarity with the suffering.

In this season of Advent we wait expectantly not only for the birth of a child but for the birth of a new and enlivened body of God's creation. Expectant parents never know exactly what is coming, and in many parts of the world the mother justly lives in considerable fear for her own life and that of her child. As with Elizabeth and Mary, solidarity can relieve those fears, building a bridge of trust, knowing that

others have endured, and that we are never alone. We are seeing bridges like that being built in the midst of Ebola fears, as the bold and brave stand with the ill and dying. The whole body of God's creation awaits the resurrected life for which all were made. Where will you build that road of solidarity through fear and despair?



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Advent 3

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28



*God of our present age, stir up in us a longing for justice
with compassion and prepare us for the
in-breaking reign of your love and peace.*

Amen.

by Susan Johnson

In the Gospel reading we hear John the Baptist say, “I am the voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.”

The passage from Isaiah captures what that voice in the wilderness is crying for:

to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

These words from Isaiah are what Jesus reads aloud in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry, going on to announce, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

These readings underscore for me our need to offer prophetic voices crying in the wilderness — in the town squares, in the halls of government, in the courts of law — on behalf of all those who are marginalized and oppressed and in need of justice.

Is it just me, or do you also feel like the list of those in need of justice keeps getting longer and longer?

Our present age includes wars in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, South Sudan, Nigeria, Central African Republic and elsewhere; the greatest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the history of our planet; racial tensions made vivid by the death of Michael Brown and the subsequent and sometimes violent demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri; the growing number of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada; hunger and poverty around our world and in our own countries; homelessness; domestic violence; human trafficking; more.

The list is long.

Yet we are called to be like John the Baptist, crying out and working for justice, following the example of Jesus. We do this as churches, individually and cooperatively.

This past September, the leaders of the Anglican Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Episcopal Church issued a joint pastoral letter on climate change. This was an important national and international effort. But we are called to cry out and work for justice individually and in our local context as well.

We work for justice through our heartfelt prayers and our offerings to support the work of the wider church. We work for justice as we petition our elected leaders, letting them know of our concerns. We work for justice as we volunteer in local ministries whether through our churches or through such community agencies as food banks, out-of-the-cold programs, homeless shelters and more. We work for justice when we take to the streets in silent vigil or loud, non-violent protest.

How is this true for you? How are you crying out for and working for justice? What more could you, your congregation, your community, your church be doing?



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Advent 7

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38



*God of courage and fulfilment, help us to make Mary's Song
our song — the song of our lives and of our work;
the song of the Church and its life and work in the world.*

Amen.

by Fried Hiltz

Like you, I am always glad to come to this fourth Sunday of Advent and its focus on Mary's role in God's plan for the redemption of the world. Mary is chosen by God to carry the holy child in her womb. Mary is both favoured and troubled by the angel's message.

Gabriel assures Mary that what is to be conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Called to be the very vessel through whom the word of God becomes flesh of our flesh, Mary will be known through every age as *Theotokos* — the one who bears God. Through Mary, God will inhabit the world in the likeness of our human form, walk this earth and announce the reign of divine reconciliation, justice and peace for all people.

Of this moment of annunciation, much has been offered by way of commentary through the centuries.

I am personally intrigued by how Marie Azzarello, a sister of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame religious community in Montreal, speaks of the moment in her book, *Mary: The First Disciple*. She writes: "... in many analyses it is a moment of consent. She did consent but it is important to note that she freely gave her consent. Otherwise we see her only as a passive, docile, obedient woman rather than a strong and courageous woman, prepared to live with the Holy Spirit working in and through her life, one in whom the purposes of God are fulfilled not only for her own moment in time but indeed for all time".

Mary's moment of annunciation is followed quickly by her visit to Elizabeth. As they greet one another, one's word becomes known in time as the Hail Mary and the other as Mary's Song or the Magnificat.

Of Mary's Song "it would be taken," writes Herbert

O'Driscoll in *Portrait of a Woman*, “from her lips and be augmented into a mighty anthem echoing in basilica and cathedral. In the centuries long monastic round of daily offices it would be the song that welcomes the approach of evening, the center point around which a jewel called English evensong would revolved. Yet it would also be a dark and terrible song of revolution quoted in societies moving through political turmoil, or continents seething with a desire for change.”

Truly it is the song of so many in our day.

Of Mary's Song, Azzarello writes, “to pray the Magnificat each day as a disciple of Jesus is to pray in union with Mary in joy, faith, and thanksgiving to God as the source of our being; it is to sing of God's everlasting love and mercy which extends from age to age and to proclaim Mary's hope in the fulfilment of the divine promises in favour of the whole of humanity... To pray the Magnificat is an expression of our desire to be honest about the state of our world and shows our conviction that the kingdom of God that Jesus preached is not a vision for an end time but a vision that begins now, in this world...”

This is strong commentary and it is a challenge to live the gospel of which we sing.

It leaves me pondering to what extent Mary's Song is truly my song; the song of my life and my work; the song of the Church and its life and work in the world.



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