



# Advent

December 2020  
Greendale Ecumenical Group  
Worcester, Massachusetts

Sunday, Nov. 29, 2020  
First Sunday of Advent

## Advent-Quest

Isaiah – God’s Word Translation

*1 If only you would split open the heavens and come down! The mountains would quake at your presence.*

*2 Be like the fire that kindles brushwood and makes water boil. Come down to make your name known to your enemies. The nations will tremble in your presence.*

*3 When you did awe-inspiring things that we didn’t expect, you came down and the mountains quaked in your presence.*

*4 No one has ever heard, no one has paid attention, and no one has seen any good except you. You help those who wait for you.*

*5 You greeted the one who gladly does right and remembers your ways. You showed your anger, because we’ve sinned. We’ve continued to sin for a long time. Can we still be saved?*

*6 We’ve all become unclean, and all our righteous acts are like permanently stained rags. All of us shrivel like leaves, and our sins carry us away like the wind.*

*7 No one calls on your name or tries to hold on to you. You have hidden your face from us. You have let us be ruined by our sins.*

*8 But now, LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are our potter. We are the work of your hands.*

*9 Don’t be too angry, LORD. Don’t remember our sin forever. Now look, we are all your people.*

Where does change originate from? Doesn’t it come, for real, only after anyone honestly figures out what’s not right, or could be made better? And a person, or some group, moves forward (hopefully with some enlightenment) toward a new reality.

The third prophet known as Isaiah is voicing an honest assessment of humanity’s, well, certainly the Hebrew people’s, calamitous ability for collectively living into the Godly promises with conviction and authenticity.

How are you and I doing right now? I mean, has this pandemic, and other life pressures, knocked us off “our game”? Are we holding close to the promises of Grace and Mercy that are the Essence of God; are we embodying this in our living, authentically, or have we gone astray?

The prophet ruminates how he hopes God isn’t too angry with us when we fail to honor the gift of life.

We are looking forward to the promises of God fulfilled in the person of Jesus, this is the focus of Advent: time for us to consider how we’ve been doing, where we are going, and to wonder at God’s boundless compassion, persistence and love for each and every person’s wholeness and wellness. This is a time to prepare for the bursting-in of the Almighty to our busy-ness, coming to reclaim the Law and the Prophets that center us in love of God and love of neighbor, and by extension all that this engenders.

In every generation, change is required in some quarter or another. Dare we say this year of 2020 is over-full of needed change for bringing the human community together through justice measures and respect for the other? Can we pray and work for reforms that cut across human-constructed boundaries and divisions, to be one in heart, mind, and soul as the children of the genetically affirmed source parents of our species?

May we trust in the Essence our lives require to be whole and well, and let the Spirit lead our hearts and souls by faith in *the Way* that honors creation in this small corner of the 'Verse on planet Earth!

– Pastor Andrew Borden  
Zion Lutheran and Bethel Lutheran Grace Ministries

Monday, Nov. 30, 2020

## The Narrative Must Change

Psalm 79

**T**he narrative must change. Every year when we approach this season and these texts, the context changes. Never has there been an Advent like 2020, or 1964, or 1931. The context and narrative always change, even as the texts themselves remain the same.

As we begin this devotional, pandemic, election, racism, inequalities, and climate change will likely be heard over and over. Those are the words that have been filling the sound waves and bandwidth that connects our homes and smartphones. The narrative has changed since Advent 2019, but the holy scriptures do not change.

The thoughts expressed in Psalm 79 remind me of just how complex we are as God's human family. Within the same Psalm we ask that God punish our enemies; no, we demand with a vengeance that God rub out these foes, yet go easy on us. We are ruthless in wanting revenge, say in verse 12, but count on forgiveness in verse 9. How could this be? We are a two-sided group of people speaking one thing here, another there.

Whatever the narrative that takes up your life, it is the God of Abraham to whom we look to help sort things out. It might take both vengeance and forgiveness, but God is the only one who can sort it out with true justice.

– Rev. Mark Nilson  
Salem Covenant Church

Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2020

### **"I Will Gather You ..."**

Psalm 79; Micah 4:6-13; Revelation 18:1-10

*6 "In that day, declares the Lord, I will gather the lame; I will assemble the exiles and those I have brought to grief.*

*7 I will make the lame my remnant, those driven away a strong nation. The Lord will rule over them in Mount Zion from that day and forever.*

*8 As for you, watchtower of the flock, stronghold[a] of Daughter Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem."*

**T**he Prophet Micah speaks words of comfort and healing to a people who have borne great suffering. This year, these words carry special meaning for so many: the jobless, those who grieve the loss of beloveds from COVID-19, those who bear the brunt of our pandemic response as front-line workers, those who suffer the isolation of social distancing.

This year Advent brings a sense of urgency for release from all that has plagued us. Following a rancorous election season, we long for release from all that has occupied our attention. The message is clear. A new day will dawn. We have only to stay the course and witness to the love that is so very much available to us through acts of kindness, support for each other, and the willingness to listen beyond words to the deep longing which is at the heart of our lamentations. The day is coming when we will rejoice again. Patience, steadfast service, compassion and comfort, be these things that are Divinely inspired in you. Stay awake.

– Rev. Aaron Payson

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*

Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2020

### **Lamb and Shepherd**

Psalm 79; Micah 5:1-5; Luke 21: 34-38

**D**avid called out for God's vengeance and wrath. God turned David's heart to thoughts of atonement instead. What keeps us feeling separated from God, especially when we're lonely, tired, hungry, angry, or scared? How did that tiny Bethlehem babe overcome it all? Certainly not by avoiding all that strike, though I remember that He was tempted to do so. With prayer and fasting, Jesus was both the Lamb and the Shepherd. He invites us to follow in His footsteps, take up our own crosses, and rest in the midst of our storms on the promise to be with us always. With each step, through thick and thin, *at-one-ment* with God manifests little by little in and through us. God's promises are always sure and true.

Come into my hear, Lord Jesus. Amen.

– Pam Sutton  
Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus, Auburn, MA

Thursday, Dec.3, 2020

## A Vision of Hope

Hosea 6 – New International Version

*1 “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us; he has injured us, but he will bind up our wounds.*

*2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.*

*3 Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”*

*4 “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.*

*5 Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth — then my judgments go forth like the sun.*

*6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*

December 3 is always a date that causes me pause. Twenty-one years ago today, the city of Worcester suffered a great tragedy. I was in middle school, but I remember it like it was yesterday and mark it every year. I, like many, can delineate the city before that night and the Worcester rose from the ashes of the Cold Storage fire.

The days that followed were covered with a dark cloud. The air outside seemed heavier — maybe because it was turning to winter, but more likely because the weight of it all was palpable. You couldn't escape the faces of the fallen heroes or their families. Stores closed, school was canceled. Every resident of the “heart of the Commonwealth” was, well, broken-hearted.

This passage from Hosea speaks to our city following that night. We were torn to pieces. We were injured. We needed reviving. It's in these times of great tragedy that we need faith the most.

The Worcester Telegram & Gazette printed a photograph of the warehouse being flooded by fire hoses from all directions. The flames and smoke are reaching high above, and seem to take the shape of a firefighter. Some accused the photographer of doctoring the image, although he did not. The majority looked at this image as a sign, as if God were reaching through the lens and saying, “It's going to be OK, I have them now.”

Even though it felt as if we would never make it through, as if the sun would never rise again, it did. This year, many have that same weight. That inescapable dread. I pray that we can once again see the figure protecting us, reviving and restoring us.

– Stephanie Harms  
Grace Ministries

Friday, Dec. 4, 2020

## Prayer

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

**P**salm 85 is a prayer for deliverance from national adversity — a group lament. No matter what “side of the aisle” we sit on, it can be agreed that we have been experiencing national adversity. Though the coronavirus is a global pandemic, that, combined with national divisiveness, racial injustice, record numbers of hurricanes, wildfires ... American have had much to lament.

All of us are worthy, and should talk to God through prayer every day. However, Psalm 85 is a group lament asking for God’s favor to be manifested in their present difficulties. Let us not forget the importance of community as described in the book of Acts 11:19-27: “So it was for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people — and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’” Psalm 85 ends with the words of promise, steadfast love, faithfulness, and peace. As a community, we ask God for forgiveness and restoration. Thanks be to God.

– Jackie Walsh  
Grace Ministries - Bethel

Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020

## Fear & Authority

Mark 11 – God’s Word Translation

*27 Jesus and his disciples returned to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple courtyard, the chief priests, the experts in Moses’ teachings, and the leaders came to him.*

*28 They asked him, “What gives you the right to do these things? Who told you that you could do this?”*

*29 Jesus said to them, “I’ll ask you a question. Answer me, and then I’ll tell you why I have the right to do these things.*

*30 Did John’s right to baptize come from heaven or from humans? Answer me!”*

*31 They discussed this among themselves. They said, "If we say, 'from heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'"*

*32 But if we say, 'from humans,' then what will happen?" They were afraid of the people. All the people thought of John as a true prophet.*

*33 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."*

*Jesus told them, "Then I won't tell you why I have the right to do these things."*

**T**he elders, chief priests and scribes — the most powerful leaders of the Hebrew people in Jerusalem who settled disputes, handled political and financial affairs, questioned Jesus as to his authority. This was the group that was only mentioned once before in Mark 8:31 as the group who would put Jesus to death.

Jesus refused to debate about his credentials, as the group he was dealing with was legally and politically charged. So, Jesus turned the spotlight onto their credentials by asking them about John the Baptist. The people believed John was a prophet, but much of the temple leadership was worried about John's presence, because he didn't encourage the people to make offerings or sacrifices in the temple. Instead, John called the people to have an encounter with God directly. John died on the orders of King Herod, so the temple leadership was not worried. But they didn't know what to do about Jesus.

Jesus asked the group about whether or not they believed John to be a prophet. They could have said either John was a prophet or that he could have been a popular person whose following was no larger than the people he had attracted. But the group only answered they didn't know because they did not think John's authority came from God. They were afraid to say so because they were afraid of the people. Jesus was offering them an opportunity to repent. And they were afraid to act for God.

How about you? Are you afraid to stand up for God and Jesus?

– Roberta Briggs  
Grace Ministries

Sunday, Dec. 6, 2020  
Second Sunday of Advent

## Get It Started!

Mark 1:1-8

**M**ark is the gospel that is always in a hurry. "Immediately" is one of his favorite words. In the words of Eugene Peterson, the word is so good that the sooner you get it, the better. So it comes as no surprise that the first words of Mark are, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." Let's get to it. Let's get it started, because there's no time to waste.

In the midst of this pandemic, we are all looking for the "Baptist" roaming

around our terrain. Look carefully because God's sentinel might come in clothes and demeanor totally different from what we anticipated or were looking for. We all have our own narratives running in our lives. "This is how it will be. This is how life is supposed to go." However, the promise is frequently located in different narratives, requiring us to stretch our imaginations and open our minds to the new.

This will be a good Advent. All the signs point to a new revealing of Emmanuel. Keep the faith as you watch and wait.

– Rev. Mark Nilson  
Salem Covenant Church

Monday, Dec. 7, 2020

## Overcoming

Acts 2:37-42 – God's Word Translation

*37 When the people heard [Peter state that Jesus, whom they had crucified, came from God], they were deeply upset. They asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"*

*38 Peter answered them, "All of you must turn to God and change the way you think and act, and each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift.*

*39 This promise belongs to you and to your children and to everyone who is far away. It belongs to everyone who worships the Lord our God."*

*40 Peter said much more to warn them. He urged, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."*

*41 Those who accepted what Peter said were baptized. That day about 3,000 people were added [to the group].*

*42 The disciples were devoted to the teachings of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.*

**J**ohn the Baptist states, according to the gospel of Mark: "The time has come, and God's kingdom is near. Change the way you think and act, and believe the Good News."

The translation stands more correctly as, "Heaven has been present all around us from the pillars of earth's foundation. What are you going to do about it? Hear the Good News and believe!"

Peter told the Hebrew people that they had basically become overwrought and ignored God's "breaking-in" with the Good News through Jesus as the errant Temple leadership corrupted their attitudes through manipulation

What is manipulating us, here, now?

What gets in the way of our relationship with God?

He went on to state how our Creator God is still hoping for us, looking for us to give ourselves over to that which is more substantive than any logic or mentality of this ear, that through trusting in faith and following Godly commands we are saved from ourselves, and better equipped to overcome the world, not the world overcoming us!

This is the promise of God from the pillars of earth's foundation unto infinity. So, why would anyone not respect the patient persistence and devotion of the Creator toward us and see the benefit and blessing of relationship?

Thus, we ponder extravagant Grace, that with Mercy are the Essence of the Divine, forgiving all sin, even grievous ones, as we look forward to celebrating the incarnation.

– Pastor Andrew Borden  
*Zion Lutheran and Bethel Lutheran Grace Ministries*

Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2020

## Listen and Learn

Psalm 27; Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 11:1-18

Peter told them the whole story:

*5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down where I was.*

*6 I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beast, reptiles and birds.*

*7 Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'*

*8 "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'*

*9 "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'"*

**P**eter responds to the judgement and questions of his critics with a story of awakening. That which has divided humankind for so long has been cast aside. "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." He recognized that as one who is faithful, he has been called to witness to the love and light that is available through devotion to all that is Divine. The spirit came over him, and he found himself crossing the barriers of the culture he sojourned with.

It is a vision of the potential peace that is available when we let go of old hatreds; dare to listen to each other's stories; witness to the humanity that has been blessed beyond our divisions. This is a story of courage and faithfulness.

During this season, might we all find the courage to transcend that which di-

vides us; listen to each other with the love of God in our ears and hearts; welcome the Spirit which calls us together and transform our communities, country, and world into the Kingdom that is already available if we only keep the faith.

– Rev. Aaron Payson  
*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*

Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020

## God's Timing, Not Ours

Luke 1:5-17

Sometimes God's answers to prayer come in unforeseen circumstances and with unexpected timing. In Luke's gospel, Zechariah and Elizabeth are both introduced as being of priestly descent and "righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decess blamelessly." Luke 1:6. This did not mean they were perfect and without sin, but that they walked consistently as faithful, believing people, living in fear of the Lord. Elizabeth, however, lived with the sorrow and suffering of being childless. Because of their advanced years, Zechariah and Elizabeth had all but lost hope of ever having a child, but this did not hinder their devotion or silece their prayers before God.

As we read, Zechariah, as part of his priestly duties, served at the temple for two one-week periods each year. There was a great number of priests, and a system of lots was used to determine who would have the honor of offering the burning of incense at the altar of the Holy place. Zechariah was chose by lot, and while he offered the incense, the worshipers assembled outside in prayer for the deliverance of Israel. An angel appeared by the altar of incense and announced to Zechariah that Elizabeth would bear him a son, and he will be called John. He will bring joy and be great in the sight of God. The hand of God will be upon John (the Baptist), and he will fulfill his mission by preparing the way for the coming Messiah, as foretold, calling the people of Israel to turn from their own ways.

Let us remember that God will do as He promises in His own way, no matter how impossible it may seem to us. When we walk in obedience before the Lord, He will use us, and turn our sorrows and difficulties into pathways of revival. As we reflect on this truth, let us ask, "How will God use us in these difficult times of the pandemic, natural disasters, and civil unrest to bring about His purpose?" Let us pray upon this and seek God's will in our lives and point us toward the Christ-child, who has come into this world that all may be delivered. Remember, it is God's timing and not ours. Blessing may come today for prayers lifted long ago. Let us give thanks to the Lord. Amen.

– Marie Sturdevant  
*Grace Ministries, Bethel*

Thursday, Dec. 10, 2020

## Advent 2020: A Season of Waiting

*“Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You, too, be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” James 5:7-8*

**I**t has been a year of waiting. One of the most difficult years of all. It is a time of crisis; a pandemic reaching across the world. We have waited for wellness, special occasions, election results, a vaccine, etc. We have been tried, perhaps more than ever. Our lives seem so chaotic. We are like the people of old who awaited a Savior.

Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time to be patient, knowing that our Savior will come and be heralded by the angels and greeted by the Magi. Perhaps the angels of today are the front-line workers, and the Magi are the scientists who are guiding us. Perhaps our time of waiting is teaching us patience like the people of old.

Await and be patient, for the coming of the Lord is near.

– Dianne Mann

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*

Friday, Dec. 11, 2020

## Joy Remembered, Joy Anticipated

Psalm 126

**T**his has been a rough year by any measure or rubric. So when we hear a psalm so filled with joy that it becomes the dominant emotional tone, we just might want to memorize the psalm in its entirety and carry it with us the entire day, week, or even season.

“Restore the fortunes” doesn’t have the same punch in English as it does in Hebrew. The Hebrew is much more robust in expressing a radical change of circumstances that is brought about by way of the divine. It means there has been some kind of restoration of that which had plagued a people, some earlier situation that has been rectified and now has life to it that was once dead. It is about the restoration of Zion, the communal and spiritual center of the people after the years of exile. It was like a dream, an experience that is the exact opposite of what was reality.

In the midst of our own exiles of this day, can you imagine the joy that would come to our lips? It was like the CDC giving us the green light to go out and party

with as many people as you could fit in your church. It was like emptying out the Intensive Care Units around the globe and taking off our masks, revealing our genuine smiles.

God does act in such radical ways. Watch for it as we make our way through Advent.

– Rev. Mark Nilson  
Salem Covenant Church

Saturday, Dec. 12, 2020

## What Are You Waiting For?

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:13-19; Matthew 21:28-32, 1:17-25

“**W**hat are you waiting for?” We have all been asked that question at different times in our lives. As children, during morning rush to school or maybe when a chore was left undone ... as teens, when we began to take responsibility for our own paperwork, schedules and first jobs ... as adults, when family or friends prodded us on to make important decisions ... and, most importantly, in our Spiritual lives as we ask ourselves what we hope for and we wait for direction and answers from God to our prayers. We know that God hears our prayers, and so by faith we wait. We look for signs, for opportunities and grace to discern those moments when we are certain that the time is right to have courage and trust God, often when we feel most vulnerable and afraid. During those “interim times,” we are waiting in the dark, not knowing what lies ahead, maybe in need of healing, or finding a job, or forgiveness and restoration in a relationship. In our humanity, we are frail and in need of God’s Light to dispel the darkness.

And so we enter Advent, in the darkest time that most of us can remember. Waiting for the Light to come ... Immanuel, God with us. Each scripture listed for this devotional tells a story of God’s people waiting. And while they are waiting, they remember what the Lord has done for them in times past, so their hearts are strengthened and they are able to believe the promises they have been given and patiently wait by faith for salvation and restoration.

In Psalm 126, we read the “Song of Ascents,” the story of remembering a happier time when the Lord restored the people’s fortunes and there was laughter and shouts of joy in the air. The people shared those stories and uplifted each other with reminders of the great things God had done. And then they prayed again, sowing seeds of faith, until the time of harvest would come around again.

In Habakkuk 3:13-19, again the people are encouraged to remember a time when God protected his people and saved them from their attackers. Even though

fear was rampant and there was no evidence that the seeds they had sown will survive, yet they believe and wait in faith. It seemed that everything was failing: the fig tree did not blossom and there was no fruit; the olives could not be eaten; the flock was cut off from the fold; nothing was going right. Certainly we can identify with these laments after living through 2020 with fear and death and destruction all around, having to isolate and quarantine and be cut off from our families and friends. Even so, we will remind each other that faith is the substance of things not seen, remember what God has done for us in times past, and look ahead. Christmas is coming. The Light will dispel this darkness. Good News to comfort us with Joy on the way to wipe away our tears.

Matthew 21:29-32, the parable of the Two Sons, begins with another question: “What do you think?” As we hear the story and discern which of the two sons did the will of his father, it is clear that God asks everyone who has ears to hear, to simply believe and “pay it forward.” God asks us to be steadfast in love no matter the circumstance, so we will keep our eyes and ears open. Let your light shine, wherever you are, all of the time. God will renew our strength with the oil of the Spirit. It may be that we can offer a word of kindness or share encouragement at just the right time, be an unknown blessing to someone. We may be entertaining angels unaware.

As we go forward along our Advent journey in a year that has taken a toll on each of us, we will let go of the darkness and wait with anticipation and hope for the Light that is surely coming soon. Immanuel ... God with Us. That's what we are waiting for.

– Lynne Orsted  
Salem Covenant Church

Sunday, Dec. 13, 2020  
Third Sunday of Advent

## Relating

1 Thessalonians – God's Word Translation

*16 Always be joyful.*

*17 Never stop praying.*

*18 Whatever happens, give thanks, because it is God's will in Christ Jesus that you do this.*

*19 Don't put out the Spirit's fire.*

*20 Don't despise what God has revealed.*

*21 Instead, test everything. Hold on to what is good.*

*22 Keep away from every kind of evil.*

*23 May the God who gives peace make you holy in every way. May [God] keep your*

*whole being — spirit, soul, and body — blameless when our Lord Jesus Christ comes.  
24 The one who calls you is faithful, and will do this.*

**I**n teaching confirmation to young people, a premise is in helping them recognize what this faith-thing is in the tradition we ascribe to, how it is rooted in scripture and example. Then we hope to impart to them how to test everything, determine how their faith understanding and rootedness informs about themselves and the world; how they should engage life in being faithful to Divine will.

As we lean into the middle of our Advent season, with our eye on celebrating Jesus' birth, are we taking time to be God's people, embodying Grace and Mercy in and through all we say and do, or has the busy-ness of the ramp-up to the holiday seduced us into a different mode of operation?

The Spirit reaches out every moment of every day to assist and guide us in our life-walk. By the Spirit, God seeks to center us, keep us out of trouble, provide paths to joy and wholeness. Saint Paul tells us we can trust this being for real, because God is ever faithful for each and every one of us.

Let us "test" everything by the command to love, and whether justice, respect, honesty, Grace and Mercy center the person, the discussion, legislation, whatever we encounter, so that we find what is and what is not truth.

May we hold onto the hope that is God, let the Spirit move our thoughts and hearts, so that the blessings of the Divine become manifested in the kingdom through our engagement with creation.

– Pastor Andrew Borden  
Zion Lutheran and Bethel Lutheran Grace Ministries

Monday, Dec. 14, 2020

## **Make Good Trouble**

Psalm 125; 1 Kings 18:1-18; Ephesians 6:10-17

*After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." 2 So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.*

**D**uring the Divine journey that Elijah takes on behalf of God, he encounters a faithful one who is worried about his own well-being should he follow the prophet's instructions.

How many of us have had this kind of Elijah moment: When we feel in our heart of hearts the call to do something out of the ordinary that causes those around us to worry about the consequences. Every call to serve the Divine involves the risk of being misunderstood. Every act of faith requires an extra measure of

courage to transcend the ways in which we have learned to protect ourselves. To serve that which is larger than any of us requires an act of self-emptying, a moment when we are required to transcend our own worries, anxieties, and excuses in order to do what we know in our heart of hearts is required, by faith, of us.

Obadiah is one such person who must greet the opportunity to be a herald of “good trouble” and risk his reputation (and life) in the process. How many of us, this year, have done just that, overcome fear and anxiety in order to meet what the moment requires of us as faithful people. During this Advent season, it is this journey toward more courage, compassion, and witness to the truth of our own faith that surfaces as a primary spiritual discipline.

Let us take courage, then, from the prophets and their messengers.

– Rev. Aaron Payson  
*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*

Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2020

## Use Your Power to Heal and Not to Harm

Psalm 125; 2 Kings 2:9-22; Acts 3:17-4:4

The story in 2 Kings of Elijah’s ascent into the heavens is well-known. Lesser considered are the actions of Elisha following the disappearance of his mentor. Two things stand in juxtaposition.

First, Elisha’s reaction to the disappearance of his friend when he strikes the water with the prophet’s cloak. In his grief and anger, the water divides. Miracle or the way of rage, which can be division. Not all anger is destructive. But this lashing out, which becomes a sign of the power of the prophetic, is tempered by the second thing, mentioned above.

When Elisha returns to community, he discovers the water well is bad and works a miracle with salt, ancient method of purification, still in use today, and heals the water. Perhaps this image of water divided and water healed is as profound a lesson for all of us who have been touched by grief and anger, and who have the capacity to reach beyond ourselves and become a means of blessing for the communities that we call our own. The proof this day is perhaps most apparent in the words of the author of Acts:

24 “Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days.

25 And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’

26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

– Rev. Aaron Payson  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester

Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2020

## Everything's OK

Psalms 125

Every once in a while, we just need to know that “all is well.” The 15 Psalms of Ascent that are cataloged as Psalms 120-134 have a familiar theme: Stick with God and things are good; veer off track, and life begins to fall apart.

It is thought that “ascents” refers to the journeys made by pilgrims to the three annual festivals observed in Jerusalem. These ancient hymns could have been used ceremonially by those who were on the journey. Often these psalms reflect the concerns of everyday life and are preoccupied with two concerns: protection and blessing. We pray for past protection and trust that we will be provided for in the future. The world of ancient faithful was filled with affliction. As the faithful gather together in great numbers to worship, their hope is rekindled and strength for the journey is gained. It is not unlike our communal worship in our communities of faith. When we gather together with our minds and hearts united in praise, we are mysteriously buoyed up. Life feels doable again. There is less heaviness to our spirits. Everything is OK again.

– Rev. Mark Nilson  
Salem Covenant Church

Thursday, Dec. 17, 2020

## Faith Opens Doors

Hebrews 1 – God's Word Translation

*1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors at many different times and in many different ways through the prophets.*

*2 In these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. God made his Son responsible for everything. His Son is the one through whom God made the universe.*

*3 His Son is the reflection of God's glory and the exact likeness of God's being. He holds everything together through his powerful words. After he had cleansed people from their sins, he now holds the honored position — the one next to the majestic God [the Father] on the heavenly throne.*

*4 The Son has become greater than the angels since he has been given a name that is superior to theirs.*

“Hebrews generally introduces the Old Testament texts with some version of ‘God says,’ demonstrating the Living Word of God as actual speech directed to real listeners.” Lutheran Study Bible

God “speaks” to create and sustain life. God spoke in a variety of ways through the Old Testament people. God speaks in a new and final way — through Jesus in our scripture about his transformation in the Christ, risen for the sake of the world. God continues to speak today. In John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word of God, and the Word was God.”

The name that Jesus is referred to is “Son.” In the gospels, Jesus is declared “Son” at his baptism. The word means “messenger,” one sent by God.

“Jesus is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being and sustains all things by his powerful Word.” Lutheran Study Bible

**J**esus’ sacrifice on the cross points toward God overcoming the world through the resurrection; how through faith, God helps each of us overcome the world’s pressures and challenges. We are reminded how faith opens the doors to the most that life can be.

– Roberta Briggs  
Grace Ministries

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020

## Dance Like David

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:12-19; Hebrews 1:5-14

**A**s a parent, one of the important lessons I have taken to heart over the years is that dancing in front of my children is always an embarrassment for them. They simply don’t appreciate my moves. I think about this when I read the scene from Samuel depicting David “leaping and dancing before the Lord.” What joy must have been in his heart that he freed himself from the royal persona enough to simply celebrate his faith in joy. What does he do then? He feeds his people with burnt offerings and bread. The joy of his faith leads him to honor the well-being of

all who accompany him. This seems to me the heart of the message of the scriptures for this day. The Psalmist is right to remind us:

*1 I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.*

*2 I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.*

*3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant,*

*4 I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations."*

This year, with all that we have struggled to endure, seems a strange time to be urged to dance. But perhaps it is precisely because we've made it to this point in the year that our joy is more important than ever. We, who have survived so much, are bidden to dance, in faith, for all of those who have gone before us and now surround us in spirit. We are the ones left to tend the communities that we love and who help to give us the strength to endure. So, when bidden to dance — dance.

– Rev. Aaron Payson

Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester

Saturday, Dec. 19, 2020

## Truth

John 7:40-52 – God's Word Translation

*40 After some of the crowd heard Jesus say these words, they said, "This man is certainly the prophet."*

*41 Other people said, "This man is the Messiah." Still other people asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee?"*

*42 Doesn't Scripture say that the Messiah will come from the descendants of David and from the village of Bethlehem, where David lived?"*

*43 So the people were divided because of Jesus.*

*44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but they couldn't.*

*45 When the temple guards returned, the chief priests and Pharisees asked them, "Why didn't you bring Jesus?"*

*46 The temple guards answered, "No human has ever spoken like this man."*

*47 The Pharisees asked the temple guards, "Have you been deceived too?"*

*48 Has any ruler or any Pharisee believed in him?"*

*49 This crowd is cursed because it doesn't know Moses' teachings."*

*50 One of those Pharisees was Nicodemus, who had previously visited Jesus. Nicodemus asked them,*

51 *“Do Moses’ teachings enable us to judge a person without first hearing that person’s side of the story? We can’t judge a person without finding out what that person has done.”*

52 *They asked Nicodemus, “Are you saying this because you’re from Galilee? Study [the Scriptures] and you’ll see that no prophet comes from Galilee.”*

When we get some thoughts into our heads, it can be hard to shake them. This is exactly pointed up with the response to Nicodemus’ statement from the scripture above.

In the sitcom *Last Man Standing*, the Mike Baxter character, played by Tim Allen, constantly preyed upon his eventual son-in-law Kyle’s trusting nature to sow untruths in his head, so he could enjoy the fruits of the misinformation wreaking havoc in the workplace or at home, sadistic behavior that we all get a kick out of watching in a comedy.

But real life is not a comedy, and this happening on a large scale in the public sphere can have catastrophic repercussions.

The truth is how God has been constantly working to meet humanity in all generations, from Adam and Eve all the way through to our generation, with truth. But not everyone has been able to “hear” or know this Presence that pervades all things due to alternate truths holding people captive.

What Jesus spoke is truth. However, we have seen that within society, alternate truths can be stated, and if they resonate with what people feel, they can find a home, and it is difficult to impossible for those so affected to acknowledge anything counter to that viewpoint.

That is exactly what we see unfolded in our scripture today.

The Good News, though, is how God is persistent in continuing to love humanity, each of us, despite our shortcomings at times with narrow-mindedness; stiff-necked in the Old Testament description of stubborn Hebrew people.

Each year, Advent provides us the opportunity to ponder the Grace that is God at ALL times; the Divine capacity to look past our shortcomings to the possibilities each of us holds with our talents and skills, our abilities and insight to be a blessing for each other and the world.

As we ponder this Mystery our creature sprang from through clay and Breath, the Incarnation within flesh and bone as a defenseless infant blows the mind in the trust God had for his developmental oversight in Mary and Joseph, readying for his ministry of Grace and revelation and truth with our race.

Perhaps we can share our thoughts on Grace with others who might not yet know the truth, which can set everyone free.

– Pastor Andrew Borden  
Zion Lutheran and Bethel Lutheran Grace Ministries

Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020  
Fourth Sunday of Advent

## Fear Not

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

*The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*

“Fear not!” This is a recurring command in the stories of Christian scripture leading up to the birth of Jesus. We hear it in the voice of angels whose sudden appearance causes us to recoil, to momentarily retreat into ourselves.

Fear, which is the perception of the presence of threat, is often our first response to anything that catches us, literally, “off guard.” During this time, when so much seems to threaten our well-being, is is a command that is worth remembering and embodying. “I mean you no harm” is not only a verbal necessity sometimes, but the way in which we appear to each other is also symbolic of that command.

Consider the use of personal protective gear during this time of pandemic as the exact opposite of the way in which so many reflect the necessity. Instead of it being a symbol of what we fear for ourselves, the use of such resource is actually an act of compassion that communicates to those who encounter us, “I mean you no harm.” What if the way we learned to handle this moment in our life together as an opportunity to reflect our desire to enhance and protect each other’s well-being instead of the call to “mask up” as an infringement upon our personal liberty? Advent is a time when we ponder the story of how it is that we will learn to be with each other. We are given opportunities to reflect an ethic of isolation, “There is not room for you here,” or an ethic of invitation, “Fear not.”

What will you embody this season?

– Rev. Aaron Payson  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester

Monday, Dec. 21, 2020

## The Mighty Things God Has Done

Luke 1:41-42

*When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice, she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”*

**M**ary and Elizabeth were cousins and both pregnant with sons, as foretold in Scripture and announced by visitations from an angel of God: Elizabeth,

mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, mother of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Elizabeth, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, recognized that her cousin Mary was carrying the Lord, which was something that could be revealed to her only by the Holy Spirit when John leaped for joy in his mother's womb.

Mary, a young woman of humble estate and extraordinary godly character, expresses her deep trust in God's will for her life. Through two humble and God-fearing women, Mary, a young virgin betrothed to Joseph, and Elizabeth, a woman of advanced years and previously unable to bear children, God is changing the course of human history. Here is where we witness the greatest moment in history, when God incarnate comes to us and restores our relationship unto Himself.

This pronouncement by Elizabeth leads Mary to respond out of humility and praise for the mighty things God has done. Mary, so deeply moved by this gift that God has bestowed on her, breaks out into song that has come to be known as the "Magnificat." As we read Mary's song of praise, think of what an inspiration it is for ordinary women today, that their deepest calling comes from a life of service to God and to others. Let us rejoice in God's breaking into humanity through His humble servant, and filling us with His grace and mercy through the Holy Child who delivers us from sin and sorrow. Amen.

– *Marie Sturdevant*  
*Grace Ministries, Bethel*

Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020

## Magnify

Luke 1:46b-55

As I write this devotion, our family awaits the birth of our first great-grandchild. Science, medicine, and technology allow us to know so much more before a baby is born. Through ultrasound and amniocentesis, we know this baby is healthy, and that she is a girl! She already has been given a name (four of them), and a due date of Nov. 5 has come and gone, today being Nov. 13. Some things only God knows, and we must trust His timing.

We also must trust the way God often works through the unexpected, unlikely, and lowly. In the songs and praises of Hannah (I Samuel 1:19-28), Elizabeth and Mary express their belief that God has been faithful to His promise to Abraham. Mary's song of praise "The Magnificat" expresses hope that God will act in both mercy and justice.

May we join with these women in praise and thankfulness for the promises God has made to us.

– Jackie Walsh  
Grace Ministries, Bethel

Wednesday, Dec. 23, 2020

## Timeless Promises Fulfilled, in Time

1 Samuel 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55; Mark 11:1-11

**H**annah and Mary are heroines of faith, humility, and courage. When I read their songs of “rejoicing” in the Scriptures for today, I was struck by how similarly these two Hebrew women expressed their prayer and praise to their God, the God of their spiritual and social culture, even though they were separated by a thousand years of time. The timelessness and interconnectedness of God’s perfect Love for us is demonstrated time after time. Here again we see it manifest.

Without Hannah’s son Samuel, young David would not have been anointed king, a king whose son subsequently built the Temple of God’s Presence in Jerusalem where Mary’s son, the Lord Jesus, entered, in humility, to the shouts of “Hosanna.” In just this one example, we can be encouraged to have hope and rejoice as we wait for God’s plan for each and all of us to unfold. Let us keep the faith, our spiritual heritage, glowing brightly “with hearts and hands and voices.”

Dear Spirit of Hope and Promise, strengthen our faith and grant us courage in these uncertain times to center our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus as he leads us from any darkness into Light.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

– Pam Sutton  
Grace Ministries, Bethel

Thursday, Dec. 24, 2020

## Presence

Luke – God’s Word Translation

*1 At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census of the Roman Empire.*

*2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*

*3 All the people went to register in the cities where their ancestors had lived.*

*4 So Joseph went from Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a Judean city called Bethlehem. Joseph, a descendant of King David, went to Bethlehem because David had been born there.*

5 Joseph went there to register with Mary. She had been promised to him in marriage and was pregnant.

6 While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to have her child.

7 She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there wasn't any room for them in the inn.

8 Shepherds were in the fields near Bethlehem. They were taking turns watching their flock during the night.

9 An angel from the Lord suddenly appeared to them. The glory of the Lord filled the area with light, and they were terrified.

10 The angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, a message that will fill everyone with joy.

11 Today your Savior, Christ the Lord, was born in David's city.

12 This is how you will recognize him: You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly, a large army of angels appeared with the angel. They were praising God by saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those who have his good will!"

15 The angels left them and went back to heaven. The shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see what the Lord has told us about."

16 They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph with the baby, who was lying in a manger.

17 When they saw the child, they repeated what they had been told about him.

18 Everyone who heard the shepherds' story was amazed.

19 Mary treasured all these things in her heart and always thought about them.

20 As the shepherds returned to their flock, they glorified and praised God for everything they had seen and heard. Everything happened the way the angel had told them.

I don't know about you, but when I read today's gospel, I had the image of Linus on the empty stage. Charlie Brown is trying his best to put on the Christmas pageant, and the rest of the Peanuts are giving him a hard time. Like a true best friend, Linus and his trusty blanket step in to stop the barrage and share the true meaning of Christmas. *Lights, please.*

Some people turn the calendar to December, see the 25th looming and immediately think, "Presents!" Shopping for the right presents, buying presents, wrapping presents, giving presents, undoubtedly returning or recycling unwanted presents.

This year has been unlike any before. Weddings, birthdays, family gatherings — all of these have either gone virtual or been postponed. Traditions are transformed. Celebrations are canceled. Get-togethers are glitching. We are isolated. We need connections, and I don't mean just a stronger WiFi signal.

What if, instead of spending money, we recognized that this year is unique?

What if we shifted our focus off of gifts and onto “presence”? This could take many forms:

- \* Reaching out to loved ones who live alone or who cannot go out yet.
- \* Greeting neighbors in a safe and socially distanced way.
- \* Asking someone if they need anything when you go to the store.

Like Linus and Luke said, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” This year especially, let’s focus on sharing that Good News and spreading the love that Mary wrapped in swaddling clothes and lay in a manger. That is one gift that will last.

– *Stephanie Harms*  
*Grace Ministries*

Dec. 25, 2020  
Nativity of the Lord

### **What a Gift!**

Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-7, 8-20

Titus

*4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,  
5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.  
6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

**S**pirit of Life, God of great and abiding love, grant us this moment of joy as we remember the gift of life and love that has been made manifest in the birth of a child, sign of hope, Divine gift of generations whose life and faith have brought us to this moment. Help us remember our worth is not measured in what we have, but in who we are. Remind us this day of the gifts freely offered us with the awareness of all we have and are, which we have not earned and do not deserve for our actions, but only that we are life itself, renewed through us. Beyond the gifts purchased or received, might we more deeply appreciate the life which has been given to us; divine in origin, human in form, bound by the Spirit of all that animates and awakens us to meaningful life.

Amen and Blessed Be.

– *Rev. Aaron R. Payson*  
*Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester*