



*Lord of Life Lutheran
Church*

Advent Devotional

“New Beginnings”

Introduction

Welcome to the first and hopefully annual Lord of Life Advent Devotional. You hold in your hands a labor of love put together by many, and it is with great joy and delight that I get to now offer it to you.

Here at Lord of Life our mission as a congregation is to deepen and enrich our connection to Christ, our community, and each other. It is hoped that the booklet we have created will strengthen, deepen, and enrich our bonds with one another. They are writings of fellow members in the congregation and also in the larger body of Christ outside our congregation, who are yet one in mission with us.

Advent is many things to many people. For many it is associated with preparing, gift-gathering, decorating, socializing, baking, and much more. For the church, it is the beginning of a new year and a time dedicated to both looking backward at the gift that Jesus coming into the world was, but more importantly, looking forward to the promised new beginning that our faith in Jesus offers us. That's why the theme chosen for this year is New Beginnings. Each of the verses and its accompanying devotion encourages reflection on some aspect of beginning that reflects this time of beginning for our church. There is so much going on in our world. Conflict, corruption, and cantankerousness all around cause us to yearn for something new. Thankfully with faith in Christ, we have the hope of beginning again.

I'm exceedingly grateful for everyone's contribution. Within these pages, you will find the reflections of many members of Lord of Life, names that will likely be familiar to you. To each of you, I give thanks.

I would like to especially thank those outside our congregation who contributed: Bishop Amy Odgren and her Assistant, Susan Williams, serve us and all other congregations in the NE MN Synod. Mike Girlinghouse is a friend from my campus ministry days and also now a former bishop. Maddie Elliott is the Executive Director at Luther Crest Bible Camp. Krista Anderson serves us as a regional coordinator—and is also a regular attendee in our congregation.

Additional thanks go to our own Donna Salli for her editorial work, guidance, and companionship throughout this project. Tyler Jensen has also done the work of assembling and printing this for you.

Finally, I'd like to thank you—the reader—for your part in and support of our mission and ministry. I pray blessings upon you during this season of darkness in which we celebrate the light of Christ coming into the world.

Steven Rye, Senior Pastor
Lord of Life Lutheran Church

Sunday, December 3rd - Hope
“What God Has Done”
Deacon Susan Williams

“He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”
- Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NRSV)

Our verse for today reminds us that we see only a fraction of God’s plan for the world. We see enough to know the story of Jesus, and what his life, death, and resurrection mean for us. This is an amazing gift, and yet God’s plan is even bigger than what we can see and understand. Our glimpse of grace through Christ is just the beginning.

Advent is a preparatory season, and the word literally means “coming.” We wait for Christ’s arrival, and this is not just an event in history that we remember, it is a current time of waiting as well. We await Christ’s return, preparing ourselves for God’s full restoration of creation. This is an “in between” space, a liminal time. We don’t know when it will come, but we are to live our lives in a state of preparedness. We can’t fathom God’s plan from beginning to end, but we know enough.

Eternal God,

We know your plan for creation is bigger than anything we can imagine. We give you thanks for sending your Son to live with us and to die for us. We anticipate with longing your promise of resurrection. May this season of Advent be one of preparation, even as we are aware that only you know the beginning and the end. Amen.

Monday, December 4th
“Greening Hills”
Gary Engelmann

“But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.” – Malachi 4:2 (NRSV)

I was born early on Easter Sunday morning in 1961. As my dad drove my four sisters to Easter Sunday services in our one-room country church, they would have seen the newborn calves running and leaping on the greening hills of our family’s ranch.

I’ve always loved the new beginnings that the spring Easter season brings. Newborn calves, greening hills, crocuses poking their heads through the last patches of snow, the sound of geese, cranes and ducks all heading north, and on Easter morning the rising of the sun and the Son. From the day we’re born through the day we die, God offers us new beginnings. What’s yours? A new friend, a new group, a new hobby, a new job or maybe a new relationship with God? My literal new beginning was on Easter 63 years ago. Maybe God is offering all of us a new beginning today. Look for it!

God, we are thankful for the new beginnings you offer us. No matter where we are in life, we ask for the wisdom to see them and the strength to follow them. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Tuesday, December 5th

“God’s Waterfall”

Carol Rodseth

“and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” - Romans 5:5 (NRSV)

Have you ever visited Niagara Falls? Over 3,000 tons of water pour over this precipice every second! It is a wonderful and magnificent sight. This unceasing and powerful flow of water is abundant and seemingly never ending.

This image comes to mind as we consider the pouring out of God’s love toward us in verse 5. His love is not the occasional trickle of His Spirit to help us in time of need! It is the mighty and endless flow of His love toward us that gives us hope.

The preceding verses to today’s passage (verses 1-4) lay the groundwork for our sustaining hope through Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Despite our hardships and challenges in this life, we can be sure God’s love is unceasing and plentiful. Even in those most painful experiences, “the overwhelming, never ending, reckless love of God” (from the song “Reckless Love,” by Cory Asbury) is poured out like a waterfall upon us. His mercies are new every morning. “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” - 2 Corinthians 4:16 (NIV).

How do we appropriate this promised hope and love? We need to remember daily to stand under God’s waterfall and allow ourselves to get soaking wet! It will refresh our perspective and give us a new beginning each and every day.

O God help us to keep in mind your overwhelming love for us. We are often anxious and fearful, thinking that we are in control of life’s events. Remind us of the gift of your Holy Spirit that would keep our minds and hearts in Christ Jesus.

Wednesday, December 6th
“Brighter By Far”
Anne Laechel

“Your future will be brighter by far than your past.” - Job 8:7 (CEV)

My least favorite season, Winter, has arrived again. Waking up in darkness – going home in the same. As someone who feels the effects of Seasonal Affective Disorder, winter sucks the energy from my body. But winter also brings the season of Advent, the hopeful anticipation for Jesus’ arrival. Amid the darkness, we have twinkly lights, candles, festive decorations of red and green, crackling fireplaces and warm mugs of hot chocolate. The little things about Winter help to raise our spirits.

Maybe you’re in a bad mood because something didn’t go your way. Maybe it is more serious: the loss of a loved one, the layoff you didn’t expect, a relationship that ended, the effects of seasonal affective disorder, anxiety, or depression. It gets better. Spring always comes again. Jesus will come again. They came to Earth to love us, teach us, and support us. They are the friend that never leaves, loves us unconditionally, steers us in the way we should go, and wants what is best for us. And Christmas is a time to celebrate all that they have done and will do to make our future brighter than our past.

Jesus, thank you for being a light in the darkness, giving us hope, and showing us the way to a better, brighter future. Amen

Thursday, December 7th
“Three Words”
Julie Johnson

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.” - Proverbs 3: 5-6 (NRSV)

I have always liked new beginnings. I still remember my childhood days of school shopping for new supplies. How fun (says the nerd within me)! Over my life, I have experienced many new beginnings. Some are developmental such as: adolescence; young love; career changes; marriage; and parenting. Other new beginnings in my life have involved things less measurable such as: trying one more time after repeated failures; repairing relationships to the best of my ability; asking for forgiveness (again and again).

Whatever the new beginning, scripture makes it clear that God wants us to consult with Him first. To pray, then plan. My need for control makes it too easy to first plan, then plead, then whine and only then to remember to pray. I could save myself a lot of stress if I just remembered three words. God knows best!

My most recent new beginning is to travel with my spouse around the southern states with all we own in a small trailer. We will be seeking out new places, people and adventures. I understand that your new beginning may look a lot different (as we have been told we are crazy). However, what, where or whom your new beginning involves, I hope that it starts with God first.

Dear God,

You are a kind and loving Father that delights in us and wants to celebrate new beginnings with us. Father, through the gift of Your Holy Spirit, please remind us to pray first. We humbly ask our Lord Jesus Christ to help us discern what is in Your will. Your thoughts are not our thoughts, and Your ways are not our ways. Thank you, Father, for always wanting what is best for Your children. Amen

Friday, December 8th
“Signs of Spring”
Shirley Hansen

“Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.” – Psalm 23:6 (NLT)

Since Paul left me in 2012, one of my projects has been keeping the deer away from my flower gardens. An electric fence surrounds the garden, I spray, and I have a fence around the hostas. Each fall, my neighbors Arv and Jan, who help me, will be busy preparing the beds for the colder weather we call winter.

Regardless, the deer do not totally disappear, and when the snow is gone and we are seeing signs of spring, we'll be back, preparing our flower beds for a new beginning. We do not give up. God does not give up on us either. He gives us a faith we carry with us. One that is so strong it cannot be taken away.

Dear Lord, let me remember You are always here, no matter where I am. Amen.

Saturday, December 9th
“Little Sponges”
Pastor Steven Rye

Psalm 121 - A Song of Ascents

Steve Schultz, an elementary school teacher and my friend, once told me how he begins the first teaching moment on the first day of every year. The kids are in their seats; school supplies are tucked away. At that moment, they are all tiny little sponges, ready to take in whatever the teacher will say. There is never a moment for the rest of the year when they are that attentive.

All of them.

He uses that moment to say: “My name is Mr. Schultz . . . and I care about you.” He lets those words hang, for maybe half a minute. Then says again, “My name is Mr. Schultz . . . and I care about you.” They may forget a lot of things that he says to them throughout the semester. He doesn’t want them to EVER, EVER, forget that.

The psalmist begins by asking, “Where does my help come from?” The whole psalm describes God’s caring presence. God cares. About you. When you begin all new things—when beginning each day—may you be reminded again and again God cares for you. May you take a moment to share the words, “I care about you,” with those around you.

God, though you sometimes seem distant, we look afar—expectant, confident you will be near to us. You are faithful. Thank you for your care. Amen.

Sunday, December 10th - Peace
“A Quiet House”
Darcy Dwyer

“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” - John 1:12 (NRSV)

This fall we became empty nesters. Andy and I are taking time to slow down and enjoy a new beginning as our home is strangely quiet. As I get ready for the Advent season, I realize how much I am a creature of tradition. The process of preparing my heart and home has been filled with beloved family time and activity. Decorating and prepping together always brought us one step closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus.

What is it about special traditions that create the buildup to the birth in Bethlehem? It all leads up to a special moment. As I sit in a quiet house, I stop to remember that it's about the journey. My journey may be different this year, but I know the story is the same. It makes me wonder how quiet was the trip to Bethlehem? Whatever your tradition and preparation, take in the quiet. Remember the beautiful birth that fills us with hope, faith, and peace. Quiet is good. A new beginning is good. This Advent season I stop to reflect that a new beginning is what Jesus has brought to all of us. Peace to you.

Gracious God, help us take in the quiet. Let us enjoy the journey and keep us wrapped in love of the anticipation of the season. Remind our minds and hearts that while life keeps evolving your love never changes. May we embrace new beginnings and appreciate the start of something new and celebrate the gift of the birth of Jesus. Amen.

Monday, December 11th
“There Once Was Stone”

Maddie Elliott - Executive Director, Luther Crest

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” - Ezekiel 36:26 (NRSV)

In college, I auditioned for my school’s elite concert choir. The auditions were cutthroat, and eventually, it came down to me and another girl. She got the spot, and I was devastated. I built her up in my head as an awful person for taking my place. The following semester, we had a class together and ended up being partners on a project. We had great conversations and found out we had a lot in common, including our love for choir. As I got to know her better, I could feel God doing something in me. My heart was softened, and I started thinking of her as a friend. Where there once was stone, God had made flesh. God can create something new where we have created barriers; a new beginning is always possible with God.

God of redemption and restoration,

We pray that you grant us a new heart and a new spirit each and every day. Remove any hardened hearts and replace them with hearts of flesh. Help us to be kind, compassionate, and understanding towards one another. May we always seek to soften the barriers that come between our communities. Amen.

Tuesday, December 12th
“2,000 Years”
Deb Bergstrom

“Love the Lord, all you Godly ones! For the Lord protects those who are loyal to Him. But He harshly punishes the arrogant. So be strong and courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord.” - Psalm 31: 23-24 (NLT)

In writing this devotion, I noted that in the study notes the verses were explained as the Psalmist having renewed awareness of our Lord’s goodness. It also explains that there is a great reason to be strong and courageous, amongst all who put hope in the Lord!

The definition of Advent is the arrival of a notable person or event, and each year at this time we look forward to the birth of Jesus. It amazes me that we continue to be full of hope and joy for an event that happened over 2000 years ago!

The Psalmist teaches us that he was renewed by the Lord’s goodness, so let us enter this Advent season with renewed hope that God will continue to care for us.

Heavenly Father,

What a great reminder that Advent is not only a time to ponder the miracle of Jesus’ birth, but also to renew the hope that if we remain faithful, we receive Your loving care. Bless us one and all, in your Holy name. Amen.

Wednesday, December 13th
“Morning Light”
Krista Anderson, ELCA Regional Coordinator

*“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.” - Lamentations 3:22-23 (NRSV)*

In the winter, the morning light breaks through the darkness, but it arrives later and later. Waking up when it is still pitch-dark outside can be unsettling; the cold and darkness seem to linger, and there are moments when we're unsure if daylight will ever return. Yet, nature's faithful rhythm unfolds each morning, gradually lightening the sky, offering a new day filled with fresh promise and possibility.

God's unwavering love, embodied in the birth and life of Jesus, provides light in all seasons of our lives. Even during those times when the cold and darkness persist, the promise of God's love shines through each day, offering assurance and comfort for the journey ahead. We are reminded that God's steadfast love never ceases; God's mercies are new every morning. In the midst of life's winters, we find hope and solace in the promise that God's love, like the morning light, will always break through, guiding us through each day.

Gracious God, in the midst of life's winters, we find solace in your unwavering love. May your light break through the darkness, guiding us with fresh hope each day. On those days where the darkness lingers longer than we would like, help us embrace the promise of your love, Amen.

Thursday, December 14th

“Chapters”

Kennedy Niska

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” - Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV)

After reading this verse, I reflected on all of the places a person may live, the occupations they may hold, and the people they may meet. The future has so many possibilities that it can feel intimidating. How do we decide which path is right for us? When do we know we’ve found the right path?

My experience brings me from my hometown of Virginia, MN, to Moorhead for my college years, and to the Brainerd lakes area for my first teaching position. I relocated to the communities of Breckenridge and Wahpeton on the MN-ND border for two years before returning to the Brainerd area.

Looking back, I realize that I found a great amount of joy and purpose in previous chapters of my life. For each chapter, the particular people, places, and experiences were just what I needed at the time. I think that’s the key: with all of life’s variables, we can accept that we’re on the right path as long as we are feeling joy and purpose in our daily lives.

It seemed that the stars aligned to bring me to my present, and I have since realized that I’ve landed exactly where I should be and am doing exactly what I should be doing.

I ask you to think about the chapters of your life and the aspirations you have for the future. Does the Lord have plans for you? Do you think you’ve realized those plans or are they still unfolding?

Dear Lord: Help us to recognize our gifts and identify opportunities to utilize them. With your guidance, may we have faith in a future that feeds our souls and provides us with value and purpose. Amen.

Friday, December 15th
“Paul and Hilda”
Donna Sallí

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” - Romans 8:18 (NRSV)

My grandmother Hilda was funny and plain-spoken. I remember her telling me, when I was a child, that she loved the Apostle Paul. As I got older, I puzzled over her love for Paul. He had, after all, said women should stay quiet in church. I can't think of a woman I'm close to who would be content to stay quiet anywhere.

Still, I'm with Grandma Hilda. Paul's life offers rich reflection. It's quite an arc: from violently opposing Christians, to meeting the risen Christ in a vision while on the road to Damascus, to traveling the world as His champion. Talk about a new beginning.

What I love most about Paul is his open struggle. When he says in Romans that the good he wanted to do, he didn't do, I identify. I'm thankful for the mind and example of Paul—who also said that the Spirit groans for us as we wait for what will be revealed. I'm grateful, too, for my grandma Hilda, who spoke her heart so honestly and plainly, I can still hear her.

Risen Christ, Who meets us on whatever road we travel, may we feel You as a steady pulse alongside us as we move through this Advent season. Thank you for those who traveled before us and lit the way. In Your holy name, Amen.

Saturday, December 16th
“When You Thought You Had None”
Pastor Erika Nilsen

“He will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you.”

– Deuteronomy 7:13 (NRSV)

So often in life, we assume that being “blessed” is about success, abundance, fruitfulness, and the “good things” that happen in life. And indeed, those are blessings, and in these verses from Deuteronomy, God is promising such blessing to God’s people. What a gift—especially after having survived generations of being enslaved in Egypt and years wandering in the wilderness. But in Jesus, God also promises to bring blessing in the most unlikely of circumstances and to seemingly unlikely folks. In Matthew’s gospel, the 5th chapter, we hear Jesus say this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are the meek . . .” Jesus turns our typical notion of “blessing” on its head and invites us instead to see and know the presence of God when we least expect it.

Take a moment to consider what’s happening in your life right now—can you see God—not in the “good things” that are occurring—but in the tough things? A phone call from a friend. A smile from a stranger. A moment of strength when you thought you had none. A deep breath.

Maybe there’s a new way to imagine the blessings in your life.

Loving God, for all of the blessings, we give you thanks. We also ask for eyes to see the blessedness of each moment we live and each person we encounter—that we might know we are in the presence of your love. Amen

Sunday, December 17th - Joy “The Perfect Tense” Bishop Amy Odgren

“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little.” Luke 7:47 (NRSV)

Simon the Pharisee, a religious leader, has invited Jesus to dine in his home. Suddenly, an uninvited, unnamed woman appears who is described simply as a “sinner in the city.” Without speaking, she weeps, wets Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with perfumed oil. Simon failed in his duty as a host by not offering such hospitality. The woman, who had (presumably) never actually met Jesus, had a deeper connection with him than Simon who had. She “got” what Jesus was about. There was a deep drama playing out in her. Simon was so worked up about propriety that he missed the sacred drama unfolding before him.

This is a story of extravagance and generosity. The ointment was expensive—and so was the alabaster jar. The woman whom nobody wanted near the table, or at the feast, was extravagant in love. Somehow Jesus’ forgiving love had gotten through to her, and she responded as best she knew—giving something precious and expensive—her way of giving all. Jesus saw beyond the sin and behind the oil to the love.

Jesus ignores the peanut gallery complaining about his actions and continues speaking to the woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” “Being saved” is in the perfect tense, suggesting that it has already happened. Jesus is affirming for the woman (and for us) that she has already received salvation and forgiveness. Forgiveness and salvation are already ours—truly a new beginning each and every day!

Forgiving God,

Too often we take your forgiveness for granted. Too often we cling to our sin, believing that it is our right to harbor resentments and hatred. Be merciful to us and show us the depth of healing and the new beginning that is offered when you forgive, for the sake of the one who recognized total surrender to forgiveness and offered it willingly, Jesus Christ our Lord and healer. Amen.

Monday, December 18th

“One Day”

Greg Bennett

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”- Revelation 21:4-5 (NRSVUE)

Just a few years ago, a friend of ours posted that her son had won the battle. This was on the day that her young son had passed away from a courageous battle with childhood cancer. She went on to say, no more pain, no more suffering and no more tears. He is disease free in the comfort of our god. These words hit me so hard. Just a couple of years before this, I had lost my mom to early onset dementia and I was still feeling the pain—the hurt and the tears flowed easily. I struggled with my feelings.

But my friend was right—her son and my mom were with God. For them, the pain and sorrow are gone. There is no weeping in heaven, only comfort and glory. I will continue to miss my mom and so many others, but knowing that they live in his glory in eternal life gives me comfort and excitement knowing that one day, we will all be together because of his sacrifice.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your sacrifice to take away my sins so that I may have an eternal life full of glory and light. Thank you for taking away my tears, my sorrow and my pain. Your promise of a life everlasting gives me hope, joy and comfort. Please continue to hold me and all others in your hands. In the name of the Father, I pray, Amen

Tuesday, December 19th
“A Different Picture”
Michael Girlinghouse, Bishop Emeritus

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” - 1 John 4:18 (NRSV)

How do you picture God? Is it the image of an angry judge sitting enthroned upon the cherubim? Is it of a sweet grandfatherly figure with kindly eyes? Or how about a wish-granter who responds to our prayers like the genie in the bottle? How do you picture God? The Old Testament paints a picture of God as both fearful and loving. Hebrews says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God (10:31). But 1 John paints a different picture. A picture of God’s perfect (total, complete) love for us casting out fear. Fear of judgement. Fear of a fear-filled world. Fear of death. God demonstrated that perfect love in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The promise of Jesus is the promise of overcoming fear. It is the power of that promise that helps us face the all-too-real fears in our lives. The birth of Jesus reveals the fullness of this love—a love so powerful that even death cannot overcome it. Living in the hope of that perfect love doesn’t erase our fears, but transforms how we relate to them, to one another and to the world around us.

Loving God, reveal your perfect love to us and give us the faith to live in that love as we engage with our families, our neighbors, our communities and your world now and always, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20th
“Old History”
Wendy Adamson

“Forget about what’s happened, don’t keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand new. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is! I’m making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands. - Isaiah 43:18-19 (The Message)

When you hear Isaiah’s words admonishing us to basically “get over it” and “move on,” what comes to mind? Hurtful words from friends or loved ones? A perceived injustice at work? An encounter with a short-tempered cashier at the grocery store? Often what comes to mind is a personal relationship that has been harmed. While these occurrences are valid, perhaps Isaiah is talking about something broader that impacts society as a whole. Specifically, I’m thinking about marginalized members of our society. LGBTQIA2+, different ethnicities, differently abled persons, the incarcerated, the mentally ill, the poor, refugees, the unemployed. Our society and our church were built on a foundation that provides privilege to people who are white (usually men), employed, healthy, and heterosexual. Perhaps this Advent as we ponder new beginnings, God is urging us to move beyond our comfort zones and create relationships with people who are marginalized. LOL supports the Sharing Bread Soup Kitchen and The Bridge on 7th Overnight Shelter. Is this the year you volunteer? Perhaps the “something brand new” Isaiah is talking about is within you. Is God making a road in your heart to learn about people and groups who live differently than you? Lord of Life’s Micah group has a wealth of resources and is continually providing opportunities for growth that may challenge your perceptions and beliefs. Is God calling you this Advent season to take a walk on a new road? Don’t be afraid. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it?

Creator of all. Help us this Advent Season to let go of old ways of being that are hurtful to people we don’t understand and are perplexing to us. Help us to admit that beneath our lack of compassion is often fear of what we don’t know or understand. Create in our hearts a space for those who challenge us to show compassion, and fill that space with courage to be the hands and feet of Jesus, here and now, creating rivers flowing with love. Amen

Thursday, December 21st
"Beyond Imagining"
Darrell Pedersen

*"but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."
- Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)*

I took Dad for a ride tonight. Just before dark, we scouted for deer coming out to raid gardens. We had a wonderful time, spotting deer and reminiscing about days gone by. No, it wasn't Dad. It was John.

I took Dad out shopping last week. I know his grocery list by heart. Oatmeal for breakfast every day. Lots of bananas. Stories about what we ate as kids. No, it wasn't Dad. It was Harold.

Dad died twelve years ago. When I take John or Harold out for a ride, I remember the time spent with my dad in his later years. Not enough time. So, to kind of make up lost time, I share rides with John and Harold. Both men lost their wives to cancer. Dad lost Mom to Alzheimer's. All three deeply grieved their losses. All three are believers. All three count upon the love and grace of God to bring their beloved wives and themselves home to God's house when our last day comes.

In the meantime, we go for rides, remember good days gone by, and look forward to the great reunion to come. And somebody is carrying us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Dear Father, God, you have loved and cared for us without fail. We have also known the love and care of family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers. Treasures beyond imagining. Thanks for your love, their love, and our love. And thanks for the promise that love has no end. Amen.

Friday, December 22nd
“Traditions”
Connie Fordyce

“I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.” - Psalm 89:1 (NIV)

As a daughter and a mother, my thoughts turn to Mary, especially during Advent. She was surely steeped in the traditions of her faith, but was she taught the scriptures as the boys and men were?

OH! What tremendous faith and love she had for God! Did she pray the psalms?

Read Psalm 89:1-4. “I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, ‘I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.’”

Thanks be to God!

Saturday, December 23rd
“A Pull at Your Heart”
Tim Slinger

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

– Philippians 4:6-7 (NRSV)

It starts as a pull at your heart. It's an opportunity, a chance to explore something new. Excitement grows with the possibilities that are ahead of you. You just need to take that step, make the move, give it a try. But then, the questions begin to race in your mind. What if I'm wrong? What if I do not know what I'm doing? What if I fail? What does this mean for my family? What does this mean for me? The list of questions racing inside of you can be overwhelming. The excitement can soon be weighed down as you wrestle with the nervous energy inside of you.

In today's reading Paul is writing to the people of Philippi and the early Christian church. This was a new beginning and an opportunity to spread the good news about Jesus! One that I'm sure was filled with all of the emotions including: excitement, worry, doubt and fear of the unknown. I am drawn to these words: do not worry, prayer, and God's peace that surpasses all understanding from Paul's letter.

As new opportunities come our way, let us listen to these words from Paul as we seek understanding and wisdom for what to do next.

Dear God,

As we encounter new beginnings in our lives, help us calm all of the emotions that race within us. We pray for understanding for what may be ahead of us and may we find peace that only you can give us! Amen!

Sunday, December 24th - Love
“Again, and Always”
Patricia Dickson

*“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” - 1 John
4:16b (NRSV)*

My Creator has provided me with life in an earthly environment that takes care of my daily physical needs. I am privileged to share it with human companions—family, friends, and neighbors. God’s creation was not intended for harm. Yet, this intention meets with interference when I fail to regard all of creation as sacred, when I cause harm to other humans, and when I neglect to protect my environment—accidentally or intentionally. With harm as the result of my actions, God abiding in me becomes buried in the unwelcome debris that collects in my mind and my heart. Enter hope . . .

. . . hope for harmony and love to redefine the way I live. Hope is sometimes dim and hard to feel, yet persistently whispers to imagine harm transformed to love. Hope blooms brighter, now again, when Advent calls me to prepare again—and always—to recognize God’s love abiding in me and everyone else and in all earthly environments—yea throughout the universe.

Thank you, God, for my life and your care and for abiding in me so that harm does not have to interfere with love. May my good intentions for abiding in your love for your creation be fulfilled. May I be more mindful of abiding in your love and, thus, abiding in you. Amen.