

St. Paul's Advent Devotional 2021

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

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1066 Washington Rd.

Mt. Lebanon, PA 15228

www.stpaulspgh.org

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An Invitation to the Advent Devotional 2021

Welcome to the first Advent Devotional written by St. Paul's parishioners! I am so excited to share these reflections with you to help you prepare your hearts for this season of anticipation.

Each week is written by a different member of our parish and the format of the entries varies by author. My hope and prayer is that these reflections would help you sit in this season of waiting in a new way. Thank you, Ann Coffaro, Wayne Williams, Jill Gordon and Steve Comstack, for all of the time and effort you put into these entries! They are a huge blessing to our community.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Laura Di Panfilo

Assistant Rector, St. Paul's Episcopal Church

About the contributors:

Ann Coffaro describes herself as having a deep spiritual longing and at St. Paul's, has been fortunate to fill this longing with special relationships formed in St. Ignatius, study of the mystics, and small groups that have expanded her journey. She wrote this fictional "midrash" from the perspective of Mary, mother of Jesus.

Wayne Williams joined St. Paul's in February 2020 – also the Chancel Choir, the Stephen Ministry team, and Eileen Sharbaugh's small (book study) group - continuing nearly 50 years singing in church choirs, 5 years as a Stephen Minister, 4 years as a Stephen Leader, and a life-long student at age 74. He is happily married (52+ years) to a retired United Methodist deacon/pastor.

Jill Gordon is mom to three daughters, Step-mom to a son and daughter, and Grammy to eight. Jill is married to David Boyd and lives in Monongahela. Retired from 25 years as a department director at Friendship Village, Jill also writes fiction and has taught both fiction and non-fiction, and facilitated life-writing groups. She's been a member at St. Paul's for two years.

Steve Comstock was born and raised in South Alabama. He works as an auto mechanic. He has attended St. Paul's since 2019.

Sunday November 28, 2021 *offered by Ann Coffaro*

Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."
"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

This thing that has happened to me. I am the unlikeliest of women to have esteem from God. I live a simple, ordinary life. I am not brave. I am faithful to God, but I know many that are more. I spend my days working to learn to care for a family and a home. I have seen my friends have children and I want children too. I am soon marrying a good man, Joseph. I am on a path, and I have tried to make it a path of which my Lord would be well pleased.

Today I had a vision (or was it a visit?) of an angel. An angel from God! It was as clear as speaking to my friends, and I believed it to be true from feeling deep inside my being. I was frightened; I am frightened. To believe God has esteem for me is unthinkable. How does God know my name? I am no one. A face in the village.

The angel had a message that I would give birth to a holy child. It was a request, really, and I said yes to God's path for me and a different life than I ever dreamed I would have for myself. I did not need to think; I knew what to do. I was reeling with fear... but in a moment of clarity I felt courageous, and I sanctified God's request to be fulfilled.

How is it I have courage when I am not brave; to accept a path ordained by God? How is it that the right choice, the holy choice, leads to an abyss? And I jump willingly. As I say yes to God I plunge into the unknown and feel afraid.

I sat with my anger long enough until she told me her real name was grief. ~Isaac Rowe

Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. ~ Isaiah 54:2

Monday November 29, 2021 offered by Ann Coffaro

Isaiah 43: 2

Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end—Because I am GOD, your personal God,

I am in agony, pacing the floor, wringing my hands, stomach in knots.

My torment is due in part to the pain that my decision to carry this child will bring to my family and my betrothed, Joseph. My village will see my growing belly. Will they believe that I am pregnant because I am a favored one of God? I think not. Will my child grow up in shame? I have ruined my future chances of ever marrying. That is not the worst of it. The worst part is the shame I feel for not fully embracing the servitude of God. I want to be a servant of God. I want to accept this path ordained, without question, without fear, and without regret. I have my marching orders, and in this moment of unease and uncertainty, where has my God gone? The flames of this anguish have filled my heart so full there is no room left for breath, prayer, or the presence of God.

I do what I must and move through my day, sweeping the floors and tending the garden. The rhythm of the work allows me to calm, and I breathe in. With each breath the flames of anguish are fed, pulling in the Holy Spirit, and slowly quieting the flames until they are but embers of grief.

The embers of grief are still here, smoldering, for a long time (forever?) but the Holy Spirit has room in my heart now to enter. I pray for guidance.

I said: What about my eyes?

He said: Keep them on the road.

I said: What about my passion?

He said: Keep it burning.

I said: What about my Heart?

He said: Tell me what you hold inside it?

I said: Pain and Sorrow

He said: Stay with it. The wound is the place where the Light enters you. ~Rumi

Tuesday November 30, 2021 offered by Ann Coffaro

Luke 1 39-43 Luke 1:56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

There is nothing like a solid visit with a sister friend, and that is what I need. The embers of grief continue to quietly burn in me as I walk to Judea to see my Elizabeth. She had a wondrous and

strange experience- becoming pregnant herself after a vision with the Holy Spirit, and I need to see her and share my story. Inside I feel a servant of my Lord, and yet outwardly my anguish is palpable.

My beloved Elizabeth greeted me, took my hand, and placed it on her growing child. We both felt the child move like lightning across her middle. It brought joy to both of us, and we cried and held each other. Then she looked at me with the most open, loving expression. It was the experience of looking into the eyes of someone and seeing the whole of myself, loved, and accepted without reservation. I am reminded of the wholeness of God's love. God's love includes me, the faithful servant, my grief, fears, and doubts. I needed this reminder. I breathed in and felt the very presence of the Holy Spirit holding me just as Elizabeth is holding me now.

I spent the next 3 months with my dear one, Elizabeth, resting, laughing, eating, soaking, and mostly locked together, whispering love to our unborn sons. I am indebted to Elizabeth for bringing me to this place of God's love. God knows all of me.

For Presence

Awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet moment of your own presence

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.

May anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.

Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

~John O'Donohue

Wednesday November 30th, 2021

offered by Ann Coffaro

Matthew 1 19-24

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

A part of my ongoing sadness and grief is that my decision to be a servant to God and carry the holy child, will bring disgrace and sorrow to Joseph.

I ask myself how it will be for him. He lives his life in an honorable way. He is good to his parents, hardworking and follows all laws of our faith. There is pressure when one is righteous, I think. Pressure to not only do what is honest, honorable, and just, but to appear to do so. Our laws are many. My prayers each day and night are that Joseph will follow me into the vulnerable, free space that the Holy Spirit has called us to. That Joseph will find interior freedom. That he will make the right and

righteous decision that may appear to him entirely counter to the life he so carefully leads. The right decision may even lead to scrutiny and embarrassment in our village.

I hear through the young boy that brings us word from the village that Joseph is at the temple each day, deep in prayer. I am full of hope.

“Strip me of the consolations of my complacent spirituality. Let me give up on trying to convince myself that my own spiritual deeds are bound to be pleasing to you. Take all my juicy spiritual feelings, Beloved, and dry them up, and then please light them on fire. Take my lofty spiritual concepts and plunge them into darkness, and then burn them. Let me love only you, Beloved. Let me quietly and with unutterable simplicity just love you.”

~Mirabell Starr (in expressing John of the Cross’s humility and longing)

Thursday December 2, 2021

offered by Ann Coffaro

Luke 2: 1-5

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So, Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David’s town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancé, who was pregnant.

I am at the end of my time and walking away from everything I love... my home, my family, and the life that I know. I pray to God to watch over Joseph, the baby and me during our pilgrimage to Bethlehem.

It is a hard journey being so pregnant. We spend our days mostly resting and we walk as the sun lowers in the sky. The night has been clear and black, and we have a sky full to the brim with stars to light the way. It is in this fashion with our slow pace, and our restful days, that we have time together to laugh and dream about our life to come with our baby, who we will name Jesus. I share my vision of the Holy Spirit with Joseph, and he surprises me by sharing one also with me. We are both servants of God and feel a connection and purpose that I can only describe as from God. We spend time talking about who our son will be for our people. The angel vision said Jesus would save us. What could that mean? Will he be a King like his ancestor David? Will he have great strength and fight big battles? How will peace come to the land and the law fulfilled? We talk for days about our future and God’s will for our son. We do not know what is in store for us or for Jesus, but we have great faith.

Isaiah 30:21

And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

Friday December 3, 2021

offered by Ann Coffaro

Luke 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Most women in my village take joy in recounting their birth story and surely, I am no different. First, I will say that God's peace that passes all understanding was with me when I give birth to our baby Jesus.

I told Joseph that our son would be born this day. There was no room for us to stay at the inn, or perhaps the innkeeper found us unworthy. I am unsure and do not give it weight of care. Joseph was distraught that there would not be a soft bed or a midwife to guide me, but I knew that whatever was to be, God was present.

It went as most births do and then He was born, and I was holding Him in my arms. His cry was the most perfect sound I have ever heard...strong and loud. And the hair...oh my, lots of tight brown curls covering his head.

The animal cave is quiet and peaceful now as it was during the birth. The animal bodies keep the cave warm for us and there are grasses to make our beds. I am resting with Jesus at my breast and Joseph at my side and as we look around us, we see the momma animals busy caring for their babies, preening them, and nursing them. God has brought us to this unlikely place. We feel deep gratitude and praise God from whom our blessings flow.

"It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes, or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more." ~Dr. Seuss

Saturday December 4, 2021

offered by Ann Coffaro

Matthew 2: 7-12

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt and paid him homage. Then, opening treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Tension is building. King Herod is not the man my Joseph is. He is known to be cunning in his ways and cruel in his intentions. And so it is that the wise ones knock on our door.

They told us they had walked from their lands and followed a star to meet baby Jesus. They expressed their joy and gave Jesus gifts from their lands. They spoke quietly with me and Joseph about their impressions of King Herod. They warn us of danger for Jesus. Again, the sense of an abiding God was with me and as Joseph took my hand, I was not afraid. We knew we would leave Jerusalem soon, away from King Herod, and allow Jesus to grow and realize his destiny.

What happened next was magical. The wise ones rested and returned in robes such that I have never seen before. Robes of reds, oranges, purples, and the color of the sunset. Two of the robes were intricately sewn with tiny bits of abalone shell. The shell bits acted like tiny prisms, catching light and reflecting it in all directions like a rainbow of colors. One of the coats had bits of ore chipped from the cave ceiling hanging from threads that spun and shook as the wise one moved.

After a meal, the wise ones gave their blessing to baby Jesus with song and dance. These were not the quiet chants and movements of praise songs from my village or that I have seen before. The blessing songs were beautiful, filled with joy and loud, rhythmic calls and responses among the participants. The wise ones whirled and twirled, dancing in stomps, whoops, and movement that showed their unspeakable joy for our son's life. They chanted in languages that I did not know and words that I could not understand. The celebration was a remarkable sight, and Joseph and I will never forget it.

Later, in a quiet moment of thanksgiving and praise to God, I realized the depth and breadth of our son's holy life was beyond my imagining and certainly beyond my Jerusalem. Jesus would be important for people of other lands that did not look like us, speak the language we speak or pray as we know to do. I trembled and took a deep breath.

1 Corinthians 12:13

Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

Sunday December 5, 2021

offered by Wayne Williams

GOD USE THIS

"... And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever (people) may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."

God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Here is a very brief and very useful prayer: "**God...Use This**". It can be used when:

- reflecting on the latest "breaking" news from somewhere in the world
- trying to comfort someone engulfed in grief
- confessing something we have done or left undone in dealing unlovingly with others

Pray: **God...Use This** when "*everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it*".

Bonhoeffer was a German pastor during the rise of the Third Reich. He knew how difficult things would, get; he was eventually imprisoned and executed as an anti-Nazi dissident. Up to his death, he was convinced that no matter how great the evil, how deep the pain of humanity, that nothing is beyond God's ability to use it for good.

2,000 years ago, in what is now Palestine and Israel, people lived under cruel Roman occupation, just one of many that they had experienced in their history. Yet here God entered into the deepest darkness and used it to bring the deepest love and joy for God's creation.

"God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment." Observing the suffering of the people, God planted the seed of liberation. Observing the cruelty of the Roman Empire, God said: I can use that.

- And use it, God did.
- And use it, God does.
- And use it, God will again.

As we sit with those grieving loss or battling grave illness, as we read or hear the daily news, as we confront the ways we have fallen short, recall Jesus, born in a manger to become one of us. God has and can turn difficulties and failures into opportunities of Love, Mercy, and Grace. This Advent season, remember to pray: **God...Use This**, and wait and watch for what God will do.

Monday December 6, 2021

offered by Wayne Williams

GOOD NEWS

Isaiah 61:1 NRSV

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor*

At times during Advent, we may pray "Stir up Your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us." But what happens when that power does come among us?

Isaiah sure had the recipe for stirring things up:

- Good News to the oppressed is not welcomed by the oppressors
- Liberty to the captives is not received well by the captors, nor prisoner releases to their jailers
- Proclaiming the year of the Lord guarantees stirring things up so that the proclaimer ends up in a heap of trouble

Isaiah found it preaching liberation to a captive Israel. John the Baptist found it as the voice crying in the wilderness. Jesus found it while preaching this text in his first sermon in Nazareth, his hometown.

So, what might **we** be called upon to "stir things up" this Advent season? Who are the brokenhearted we can reach out to? How can we continue to proclaim the year of the Lord to a world, and a nation, in desperate need of God's **Good News**?

Tuesday December 7, 2021

offered by Wayne Williams

JOY

Luke 2:8-14 NRSV

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

During Advent, we hear the retelling of the story of the journey to Bethlehem by Joseph and Mary, and of the birth of Jesus in a manger. It is the story of the insertion of God, fully human and fully divine, into creation.

The story continues with the shepherds – just ordinary folks (like us) doing regular, ordinary things in their lives. Today, not many of us are shepherds tending their flocks, but we have jobs to put food on our tables and we care for our flocks – our families and other in need.

The angel and the Heavenly Host came to the shepherds praising God and proclaiming good news and joy for all the people. How would we react? Would we pinch ourselves to be sure we were not dreaming?

Now, more than 2,000 years later, the good news may not be delivered by angels, but through the living Word of God and people we interact with regularly. With open hearts, someone this season will receive “good new of great joy”.

Especially during this Advent, let us follow the example of the shepherds and share with others the good news through our words and actions.

Luke 2:17-18

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Wednesday December 8, 2021

offered by Wayne Williams

LIGHT

John 1:1-5 NRSV

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Candles on the Advent Wreath are part of the preparation for the coming of the Light of God's Love into the world in the person of Jesus – the refugee baby born in a manger because there was no room elsewhere for his marginalized family.

The darkness of violence, of hatred, of extremism, and of bigotry has dominated our national discourse for too long. The darkness is real; as Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that."

In this time of bleakness, our Hope is manifest in the candles of the Advent Wreath. Theologian Howard Thurman wrote about these candles:

- they are candles of joy despite all sadness
- they are candles of hope where despair keeps watch
- they are candles of courage for fears ever present
- they are candles of peace for tempest-tossed days
- they are candles of grace to ease heavy burdens
- they are candles of love to inspire all our living

Robert Fulghum (author of Everything I Ever Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten) tells the story of a Greek philosophy professor who ended each lecture by asking "Are there any questions?". One student jokingly asked "What is the meaning of Life?". The professor pulled out a small mirror and answered with this story [note from Wayne: my distilled version so as to fit this space]:

"As a child living during the war, one day I found broken pieces of a mirror. Keeping the largest piece, I began to play with it as a toy and found it fascinating to reflect light into dark, inaccessible places.

When I grew to be a man, I then understood that I am not the source of light, but light – truth, understanding, knowledge – is there and will only shine into dark places if I reflect it. With what I can reflect into the dark places of the world, some things may change in some people. This is what I am about, this is the meaning of my life."

Let us savor each moment while waiting and preparing during Advent and remind ourselves of the power of the Christmas promise: the coming of the Light of God's Love into the world, and our role in reflecting that light into our lives and the lives of others.

Thursday December 9, 2021

offered by Wayne Williams

LOVE

Luke 1:39-45 NRSV

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Although it is an enduring problem world-wide, it is still difficult to observe the recent proposed, and enacted, legislation in increasing numbers of our "United" States – legislation directed against women designed to limit their access:

to healthcare
to voting
to childcare which would enable them to join or rejoin the workplace
to wages equitable with their male counterparts

The scripture describes another place and time when Mary, expecting the birth of her first child, travels to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also expecting the birth of her first child. Both women likely faced malicious gossip and suspicion due to their circumstances surrounding their pregnancies.

For a moment, can you imagine their reactions to each other from this surprise visit: their wonder, their feelings of “could this be real”, their eyes wide open in astonishment, their hands on each other’s bellies, the great tenderness shared between them?

In a world that denigrates and denies women safety, it is often in female relationships that women experience the safety, the care, and the tenderness that God desires for them. These relationships nourish the spirit and prepare the soul for birth and rebirth.

As we wait during this Advent season, we also long for LOVE to be born / reborn within each of us.

Friday December 10, 2021

offered by Wayne Williams

PEACE

Absence of war and armed conflict unfortunately does not bring peace to peoples world-wide who still face poverty and critical insecurity of food, water, shelter, health care, and education. Peace eludes those facing these dire obstacles to their existence.

We daily experience and fall prey to the many stresses of current life locally such as:

- the Covid pandemic
- school onsite, online, or blended
- uncertainty around availability of goods and services
- unemployment
- employment onsite, online, or blended
- the lack of civil discourse on almost every topic

•
to name just a few obstacles to our feelings of peace.

There are things we can do to help prepare us for less stress and more peace:

- taking time to discern what truly “must” get done vs. what we want or think we must get done
- carving out time for us to relax
- replacing the noisy sounds of everyday life with music for the soul

You may be familiar with one of the church anthems by contemporary composer John Rutter: A Gaelic Blessing. If not, you can hear a rendition on the internet [here](#).

A Gaelic Blessing

Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the gentle night to you

Moon and stars pour their healing light on you
Deep peace of Christ the light of the world to you
Deep peace of Christ to you

May we each find moments of “Deep peace of Christ” during this Advent.

Saturday December 11, 2021 *offered by Wayne Williams*

TALK LESS. LISTEN MORE.

Read: Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Luke’s Gospel contains the story of Zechariah, a priest in the Temple. The angel Gabriel comes to give him news that his wife Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son. (Gabriel was also busy telling much the same to Mary.) And, like Mary, Zechariah replies “how can this be?”. As a result of his doubt, Gabriel strikes him mute. (Gabriel cuts Mary a lot more slack.) He remains silent until after the child’s birth and is named in the Temple: John (later known as The Baptist).

Now here is a real Christmas miracle / dilemma: a man (and a priest!) actually stayed silent for months. This might be good counsel for us, as well, year-round: “Talk less. Listen more.” Reliving Zechariah’s quietness, we leave ourselves open to not simply receiving, but fully hearing, God’s messages that could change our lives.

Remembering to talk less and listen more, we can:

- witness sacred stories in the lives of others
- hear perspectives enabling us to catch glimpse of Christ
- catch things we might otherwise have missed hearing
- leave space for God to move and speak and sing in our lives

On the surface, it might appear that Gabriel cursed Zechariah, but if we reflect on and practice Zechariah’s “talk less and listen more”, we may discover that the angel actually blessed him. A blessing that can be ours if we but have the presence of mind and prayerful souls to remember it.

Sunday December 12, 2021 *offered by Jill Gordon*

Luke 3:1-6

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler[a] of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler[b] of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler[c] of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*5 Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke 3:2 The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness: Are you familiar with the idea of reading the scripture using Lectio Divina? If I look at the above scripture in my usual way, I'm seeing wild images of John, skinny, dirty, unshaven, and dressed in torn animal skins. I might think of John's experience as a moment of epiphany--we are in that season, after all--moments when God speaks and hopefully, we hear. But unless I work at it, a skim reading of that scripture brings up John's relation to his cousin Jesus, the baptism, the dove, and eventually John's unfortunate end, but not a lot more.

If I read the passage more slowly, though, and repeat it several times with quiet between, and look for those words which catch me in the moment, those words this time are 'the word came in the wilderness'. Then I 'translate' the passage to fit me in my present state. The word came to John in the wilderness, when God spoke and John heard, and knew without question what he was supposed to do next. The word can come to me in my wilderness, too. One would wish for, I suppose, the fairy-tale type Christmas, where everything fell perfectly into place without real effort. But we all know that not to be the case. Christmas in our culture can honestly be a big pain.

My husband David uses the "Danger, Will Robinson" phrase from the early TV show "Lost in Space", to jokingly draw himself back from the edge of going the wrong way--and our culture's holiday season is surely one of the times when we might need to draw ourselves up short from imagining that anyone has the season down to perfection.

Those warm fuzzy advertisements are a **plea**-- for us to buy in order to fulfill our Christmas wishes--while we know already those can only bite us in the behind. Yes, I decorate the house, I like the warm twinkle lights and evenings by the fire, surprising the grandkids with a gift--no apology. But I can also easily get caught in the 'wilderness' of expectation--when what really drives me is the market.

Danger, Will Robinson! I have to catch myself, again and again at the precipice, and come back to paying attention and looking for the word in the wilderness, I know I need to stay open and expectant enough to recognize God in that wilderness.

The Word is always in the wilderness--whatever shape that wilderness takes--and we only need to realize it, to stop and listen. And surprise, there God is, again.

Monday December 13, 2021

offered by Jill Gordon

Luke 3:3

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Was John the Baptist a teacher? A preacher? Usually, we think of him as a prophet.

A little bit of internet searching found something St. Thomas Aquinas said about prophecy, "a knowledge which divine revelation engraves in the mind of a prophet, in the form of teaching." So, in some way, a truth becomes very, very clear to us, and it's engraved in a way that there's no turning back. Bible stories when God's truth is being revealed can be very dramatic--the burning bush, the Ten Commandments (literally engraved).

Jesus' baptism by John is equally dramatic. Three gospels write directly about the baptism: Luke, Mark, and Matthew's accounts all tell of the dramatic opening of the skies, the dove, and God's voice, loud and clear.

Sometimes, maybe especially in prayer, we wish to hear God's voice like that, the unmistakable answer. Maybe we imagine we'd even be willing to put ourselves out there and prophesy, if only God would give God's answer, be clear with us, we'd eat honey and locusts and go about telling everyone, even if they thought us crazy.

But does recognizing God and God's truth always come in dramatic ways? Do we know Godly truths that haven't been announced from the sky? Of course, we do.

God has already provided the lessons. If we're impatient with others, haven't we asked, "how many times do I have to tell you?" As God's children, should we keep expecting to be told again--or does it have to do with the way we are listening? Maybe the key is good reception--we receive what we're being taught. It gets engraved.

Yet, there are those times when we forget, we're blinded, feeling around for the message we've been given. We've pushed God aside, acting as if the Word isn't written on us already. Even then, when we have to learn God's truth all over again, sometimes every day, God still loves us. When you think about it, that's the big drama.

Tuesday December 14, 2021

offered by Jill Gordon

Luke 3:4

...as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

This passage from Luke about John the Baptist begins with the above phrase from Isaiah. And how else would we describe the world and our lives these days, if not the wilderness? A friend from my Ignatian group recently mentioned 'the wilderness inside us,' not anything 'out there.'

What we cry out for in our present wilderness is surely not all that different than what humankind cried out for in Isaiah's day, or in John's, or for long before.

Wilderness can be a place or a state of mind, but wilderness can also point us to finding God in the midst if we're willing to struggle through it. Wilderness can definitely be a place of discernment, of hearing the call of God. Witness some of the biblical wilderness:

"The wilderness is a locale for intense experiences—of stark need for food and water (manna and quails), of isolation (Elijah and the still small voice), of danger and divine deliverance (Hagar and Ishmael), of renewal, of encounters with God (Moses, the burning bush, the revelation of the divine name, Mount Sinai)." (<https://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/wilderness-babel/midbar-ara-bah-and-eremos-biblical-wilderness>)

Jesus himself chose the wilderness as a place for listening, for teaching himself to struggle against voices counter to God's. The lessons of the desert brought deep understanding of God's call. How else would Jesus have been able to abide the questions of the Garden of Gethsemane?

As with so many New Testament stories, Jesus patterned for us the struggle of the wilderness, the times that it feels as if we've been abandoned by God.

When we find ourselves closed in by fear, worry, impatience, resentment, anger, or doubt, it can feel like the total absence of God. We're living in the wilderness, and it becomes necessary to remind ourselves that even so, God is there, no matter the circumstance, no matter if we can sense God's presence or not. God is there.

Psalm 100 and the Jubilate in our prayer book repeat the sounding joy: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, come into his courts with praise. Give thanks and call upon God's name. For the Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever."

Wednesday December 15, 2021

offered by Jill Gordon

Luke 3:4

Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight.

What does it mean to prepare, to make God's path clear?

John is prophetic--literally saying 'get ready'. When something is coming, something special is about to happen, we pay attention. What needs doing? What takes precedence? Say a guest is coming to dinner. We imagine what that person might like, what food, what wine. Then we shop, we cook, we set the table, light the candles. We get ready.

When I try to make sense of John's message for my life--*get ready, make God's way clear*--the 'get ready' is a pretty regular and consistent message as I find myself still struggling to find God's path. When I'm centered, paying attention to my desire to make God's way central in my life, I'm able to make Psalm 5:8 my fall back--*Lead me Lord*. It's a reminder that I'm not in control. Because mostly, I act as if I am.

I act as if I only need more discipline, or to find the perfect program for time management, the perfect solution to a problem, or to read the right book, find the right boots--whatever). I begin to imagine *if only this happens*, my path will be straight ahead, clear. Clear to what or where, though, is the question. And acting as if anything other than staying in God's presence will fix or solve or give me total understanding, that's control, right? My control isn't in the realm of God. Sure, I can plan and execute a nice dinner, but make God's path straight, not so much. Unless I seek God first, continually, in the midst.

Lead me Lord, lead me in your righteousness. Make your path straight before me. The Psalmist's phrase can become a repetition, a prayer--because there's a constancy in our need for God's direction. How, then, do we prepare God's way on a daily, even momentary basis? John's message for me is to first, pay attention, and notice God's presence, and then to ask, *what is my next right step?* Even though we often don't get it right, we're asking to be led.

Thursday December 16, 2021 *offered by Jill Gordon*

Luke 3:5

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low...

These words always ring in my head as phrases from Handel's Messiah--first, years of my father listening to our LP albums in the dark, then translated into my own small obsession. I hear the repetitive phrases of tones and words and begin to see drawings of hills and valleys straightening themselves out, or to see nothing at all but feel some deep and true vibration of things to come--prophecy.

Reading and interpreting scripture can fall into another category I've learned about at St. Paul's in our Learning to Pray and Ignatian groups, called "imaginative prayer", when we drop ourselves into the passage with no particular expectation and imagine what is happening, with us as part of it. (It can be powerful--try it!)

This passage, of course, might be more difficult than one where there is a storyline (seeing myself as a shepherd at the birth of Jesus, for instance) because it's one of those that relies on images, on metaphor. Luke is referring to the original prophecy of Isaiah (Chapter 40), a chapter which is profoundly mystical, and imagining what's happening is a challenge--unless we're willing to step out of trying to make sense in our heads and allow ourselves to rely on the mystical effects of music!

Scholarly interpretations of this passage seem right on: because of John's willingness to call the message out loud all over the wilderness and put himself at risk, and then because he's right, and *Jesus will and does* comfort and raise up the lowly, and humble the proud, and teach us the way, if we listen--because of all that, what's been prophesied *IS*.

There's a part of me, though, that doesn't want to leave it at that, to search hard for meanings, to define, to dust my hands and proclaim, *well, I've got that one*.

This part wants only to rest in the resonance of what isn't all locked down in the head--trying to be exact--to nail the meaning, to 'get it'. God's voice comes to us in a myriad of ways and thank God for that. So sometimes I'll just listen to the music and wait.

Friday December 17, 2021

offered by Jill Gordon

Luke 1:17

And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

In the above passage, Luke explains the role John the Baptist was to take on, preparing us. John and Jesus were in the same family, related in the long lineage that Luke cites in that same Chapter 1.

Can we imagine that John and Jesus knew one another well as they grew? Jesus might have been about four years old before it was safe for Joseph and Mary to return to their homeland, which was still many miles from where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived. How much did the two boys know one another as they grew?

We don't really know. They weren't far apart in age. In Luke's account, when Mary says yes to her angel visitant, becomes pregnant and leaves to visit the distant Elizabeth--also pregnant with John--Elizabeth is six months pregnant and feels baby John leap inside her, both of them being filled with the Holy Spirit.

To Elizabeth, there's no question. She immediately (mystically and prophetically) recognizes God's presence as the coming Messiah inside Mary. The account says she cried aloud--not any sisterly whisper, not a refined, respectable pronouncement that might be expected because of her lineage, but a loud shout--I imagine a witness that couldn't be contained, much as John's witness came to be. So if a child grows up with a mother who allows herself with confidence and certainty to be an outfront, loudmouth witness, and a father who can't speak because he doesn't quite believe he can father a son at his age (and is only given his speech back when he's forced by Elizabeth's sure and absolute pronouncement that John's name would be John)--given those circumstances, what might you have in a son? That's a pretty amazing birth story.

Midrash stories try to fill in the gaps, one being that Elizabeth and Zechariah die before John is fully grown and he ends up being taken in by the Essenes, a group of scholarly cave-dwellers who studied the scriptures, and who apparently didn't recognize Jesus as Messiah.

Most scholars now assume the Essenes had some sort of influence on John, but that he continued to listen for the direction of God, and thus chose another path. John's belief in Jesus as Messiah was so certain, so absolute, he saw no other way but to move about the world and say what he had to say (ditto his mother).

What allows us to grow in our encounters with God until we are so certain of God's message through Jesus, that *we* can say what we have to say, or *do* what we have to do in God's name--whether that witness is in a loud voice or a quiet manner? What is it that makes a witness?

Saturday December 18, 2021 *offered by Jill Gordon*

Luke 3:6

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

I'm guessing if Jesus were wandering among us in these times, he'd have a fairly direct message about how we get to "see the salvation of God." We are, after all, in the "all flesh" category that Luke is talking about. Don't we sometimes imagine that if only we could see God in the flesh, meet Jesus in the here and now, all would be solved? All flesh would be able to "see the salvation of God." We could only wish.

Yet, that already happened, and we still don't see. Even the poor disciples couldn't quite put their finger on exactly what "seeing" God's word in Jesus meant. They struggled, too.

During the Advent season we are pulled in many directions. We complain about the pressure, saying "*I'm beside myself,*" or "*I'm so busy I can't see straight.*" And yes, we all understand one another about trying to find the specific gift our kids or grands want. We'd like to meet their every need, or at the very least, not disappoint them.

We are surely challenged by the list of what needs doing--which these days seems like all the time--not just coming up to Christmas. And not to forget the challenge to stop and listen for God as often as we can, in the middle of everything, to *clear our paths*. This brings us back to our center.

This negates phrases like, I can't see straight, or I'm beside myself. Only our clear path lets us see straight, lets us come back to our true self, wrapped in wonder at the love of God--not the false self standing out there *beside* us by our own admission, and most likely wrapped in anxiety.

Can we set our to-do list or our Christmas list aside for a bit, and instead specifically name for ourselves each thing that pulls us away from God? It's a different kind of Christmas list, and a different kind of Christmas gift.

It can lead, though, to a more constant hold on the Christmas message. Good God came in the flesh to live among us and to feel what we feel--even more than we feel, because the birth story leads directly to this baby's eventual suffering and death, and finally to the promise of the resurrection. "Then all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

It reminds me of the Taize song, "Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart." Find it on YouTube, put in your earphones and listen. Then make your new Christmas list. Wait for the Lord. Keep watch, take heart.

Sunday December 19, 2021

offered by Steve Comstock

What are *you* waiting for? *Who* are you waiting for? What good is *waiting* for? I'd like to encourage you to think about these three questions over the course of this week. Allow me to use today's meditation to show you the blueprint; think of it as the punchline before the joke. Over the next week I'd like to put on a fictional approximation of the eyes and hearts of those who waited in the original advent story. You see, I'm a storyteller at heart. I've never been the kind for exposition. I've never been the kind for scientific query. I like stories because I like people, with their messy yarn-ball emotions and their humdrum days, and the way they can get so happy when it all comes together; when the rabbit is let out of the hat.

That's what this week is going to be about if you care to come along; people. Folks who waited, just like you and me. Do you think they knew they were all waiting for the same thing at the end of the day? Do you think we know that today? Sometimes I wonder if we are spoiled by having "been there and done that". We know what happens at the end of this season. We have peeked at the Christmas presents in their hiding places. We have forgotten the joy of delayed discovery.

This is a week to revel in the anticipation. Waiting is a holy thing, and devotional. I think if you take note of *how* you're waiting, you can often discover powerful truths about what you are really waiting for. The Spirit certainly *moves* but I believe he sits, and I believe I'd like to sit and visit. Here, in the holy now, where we are all taking part in the creation of tomorrow.

Monday December 20, 2021

offered by Steve Comstock

Zechariah; Silently Waiting. (Luke 1)

A silent Zechariah returns alive from the sanctuary (a minor victory, this wasn't always the case you know). The other priests tending to the other duties have the same questions they do every year; "What happened in there Zechariah?" "What's the sanctuary really like, Zechariah?" He's got nothing to say.

It wasn't painful really. He didn't notice any changes in his jawline, no tightening of the throat. He just had nothing to say. His wife, Elizabeth, has fixed his supper. She's full of news from around the neighborhood; babies and marriages, someone's goat has gotten into their cellar again. He just had nothing to say.

After some time, he became comfortable with the silence. He noticed Elizabeth again. He began to remember how to listen. Alone, after supper one evening she took his hands and told him the news: a baby. She just knew it was gonna be a little boy. He cried his quiet old man tears, and she cried her happy mama ones and they sat in the silence together not needing anything else.

He watched her go through a mama's changes. He watched her grow. He got her lamb skewers from the little stall down the street when she was craving them. When the child decided it was time to arrive, he listened to the midwives who had been through all this before and wondered why their skill and knowledge had not impressed him like this before.

An argument; about the child's name. Elizabeth had chosen John, but all the family said a boy ought to be named for his daddy. Zechariah looked at his wife as his cousins and her aunts; one neighbor tried to change her mind. Finally, he had something to say. "The boy's name will be John."

Tuesday December 21, 201

offered by Steve Comstock

The Shepherds - When You Don't Know You're Waiting at All. (Luke 2)

Every shepherd worth his salt has got himself a call. I know this ain't what you're looking to hear about. You wanna know about the angel. You wanna know how we knew where to be and what we were waiting on, but I gotta explain this part to get to that one. Some fellas say "yew, yew," and their sheep know it. Some fellas will just say "Sheep, sheep" and theirs will know it. When that angel said, "do not be afraid", well I knew that was a kind of sheep call too.

I been working with sheep my whole life. My daddy was a sheep man, and his daddy was a sheep man. Me and my cousins got us a herd which we take grazing all along the outskirts of Bethlehem. Of course, I *knew* about the Messiah, I went to synagogue and had heard the prophecies. I guess I always kinda figured that was more of a metaphor.

I'd like to tell you there was something special about that night (before the angel I mean), but there just wasn't. I'd like to say we knew something was coming and we were faithfully waiting on the word, but it just wasn't like that. We were moving the herd over a hillside, "yew, yew" when this fella showed up in white from head to toe. "Don't be afraid", is a pretty good thing to lead with when you're glowin' like a camp coal! Then it was the angel choir and the good news, but you've heard that part before.

When I say we flew, buddy I mean we flew. We didn't even bother dropping the sheep back home, just took 'em along. "Yew, yew, c'mon sheep, pick it up."

Look, the whole thing I'm trying to tell you is I guess sometimes the good news hits you when you didn't know it was coming. I guess it don't really matter how long you were looking for it or how patient you were. When you hear that sheep call, you better heed it or you might miss some real good grazing.

Wednesday December 22, 2021

offered by Steve Comstock

Joseph - Hard Time Waiting. (Matthew 1)

Joseph is in his workshop. Pine and cypress stock, leftover from earlier projects are lining the back wall. He turns a small knotted leftover in his hands. The sun is just starting to spread itself across the landscape of Nazareth, but he's been up for hours now. There was this dream. This angel. A promise. The words of a prophet. "Emmanuel."

He really loved her. This whole thing had come as a shock. Betrayal. Pain. "Why'd this angel just show up now? Couldn't he have had this dream before? Before his neighbors knew his fiance was pregnant? Before Mary told him about the baby. Before he had to feel his heart in his throat? And now what, he's just supposed to let all that go because of a promise?"

He had always planned for this workshop to be a family thing. He had already started to accumulate extra tools. He had dreamed of showing his kid the ropes, teaching him the pleasure of a level plane, the satisfaction of a finished product. It had all been shattered in a moment, and now he had to figure out what to do with the pieces. That takes longer.

"Emmanuel", he thought. God with us. "Here? What kind of place is this for God? What kind of a way to show up? No announcement. A mess."

A mess, in the corner. Sawdust from yesterday's table. He had forgotten how beautiful the finished thing was. He stares at the shavings in the corner and breathes in the smell they leave behind. He thinks of the way his Mary looked at him when he told her how he'd send her away. Everybody's got pieces broken off.

He whispers underneath his breath, "Alright Lord. Your pieces. Your project."

Thursday December 23, 2021

offered by Steve Comstock

Anna - (Luke 2)

I'm an old woman now. I know this because my bones remind me. My knees will yell out, "old woman, old woman". My elbows too. I'm an old woman but let me tell you about the last time I danced.

I got married when I was young. It seems so long ago now. I only had 7 years with him before the Lord called him home. It took a little while to figure out my place in this world without him. When I did figure it out, I knew it was a calling. The Lord had called me to the Temple, plain as day.

I sat outside that temple day after day, year after year, decade after decade. I took all that love in my heart and poured it out for the Lord. I fasted and prayed. Mornings came and evenings came, night time came and I would sleep, or I wouldn't. It was all the same. The Lord had called me here and he said he'd meet me.

Folks got to know me here. Every once in a while they'd come by and the Lord would give me a word to help them. Or else they'd ask me to pray for their little baby or their great aunt or their wheat crops. All those prayers I'd lay before the Lord and whatever he gave me I gave them back. I knew he'd meet me there eventually.

Simeon got to him first. I saw Simeon bolt in through the temple doors and I figured I had to follow. I saw Simeon hold this little baby boy. It was him. My knees and elbows were yelling out at me, but there was no doubt about it. This was him.

I leaped, and I danced, I might have even whirled! If the Lord promises to meet you somewhere, he'll meet you there, even if it's late by your estimation.

Friday December 24, 2021

offered by Steve Comstock

One Hour - (Matthew 26)

I'd like you to picture a section of green woodland. It's only half cultivated, on the edge of being overgrown. There are pine trees and cypress trees here. There are tufts of grasses here and there, and rock formations reaching out from the hillside.

There is a man waiting here, deliberating. He is pacing back and forth and whispering at times, at other times crying out loudly. His friends are here too, some ways off, sleeping. He falls to the ground and spreads out his arms and legs. He cries and whimpers. He is sweating even in the cool of the night. He is crying large tears which splash onto the ground in front of him in big, muddy circles. His friends are still sleeping, and he is alone.

Finally, he wakes them. His voice is nearly gone. "Please", he says, "please, stay awake with me. I am in anguish, I am alone." He falls back onto his knees and cries out, "if there is any other way! If there is any other way let this cup pass from me" and goes back to crying. His friends have fallen back asleep.

Once more, he wakes them up, "Can you not wait with me one hour?" he says, hurt and alone. "Could you not wait with me one hour?"

Saturday December 25, 2021

offered by Steve Comstock

In my imaginative little way I have tried to encourage you to recognize a theme in the gospels, particularly in reference to the advent season. Waiting is not always an easy thing, but it's a necessary one. We are living in the now, in the present. However, the present is only a placemark on the way to the actualization of The Not Yet.

Here and now, we are all waiting for something. We are waiting for justice. We are waiting for equality. We are waiting for the resolutions of our personal conflicts. We are waiting for the Kingdom of God. But that Kingdom isn't just a distant star. That Kingdom exists here and now in the shared, communal commitment to hold God to his promises.

I have taken you to the waiting at the beginning of the story. I have taken you to the waiting at the end. There is one more meditation I would like to leave with you. In Matthew 1:23, Christ is given the name “Emmanuel”, which means “God with us”. We aren’t waiting alone. Unlike the eleven disciples in the garden, we won’t find Christ sleeping as we watch. There is sweet fellowship with him in the patient act of waiting. When it gets hard, when it gets messy, when it takes too long, when we forgot we were even waiting for anything at all; he’s been there all along.

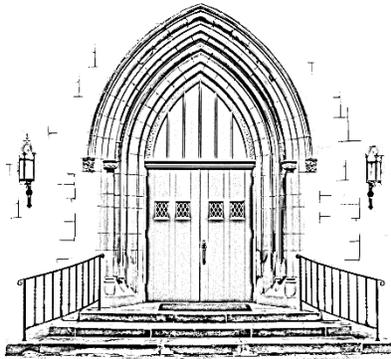
In the country church I grew up in there’s this old gospel song we sang called, “Right On Time”. I’d like to leave you with some lines from its second verse.

*“I’ve struggled through life's deserts; They were so hot and dry
Till it seemed all hope was gone and I would die
And I wondered where was He? Is He still a friend of mine?
Then coming down the road was Jesus
Right on time.”*

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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
1066 Washington Rd.
Mt. Lebanon, PA 15228

www.stpaulspgh.org