

OPEN OUR HEARTS, O GOD
WELCOMING THE HOLY MYSTERY



Advent & Christmas 2020
saint mark's episcopal church, palo alto

PRAYERS WHEN LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH

Week 1

Wondrous, Holy God, now we begin our time of Advent waiting. Help us to take time in the busyness of this season for quiet reflection. Help us to be surprised by wonder and set aside time to offer quiet thanks. Shine the light of your love upon us, we pray, and fill us with hope as we make our way toward the stable, the cradle, and the birth that changed everything. May we welcome Christ into our hearts and go forth into the world filled with hope. Amen.

Week 2

Holy God, we have forgotten what it is to be at peace. As we eagerly anticipate the birth of your Son, prepare our hearts to be transformed. Wherever you lead us, wherever you need us, give us the faith to trust your guidance. Pursue us in the busyness of our days and grant us the beautiful respite of peace. Our world desperately needs it. We desperately need it. Amen.



Week 3

God of surprises, fill us with the kind of joy that cannot be contained, but must be shared. Help us see your grace and goodness in the world around us. In trees, and fields, and the beauty of creation, may we find deep joy. Let us speak and sing to the care you have for even the least among us. Open our hearts to be transformed by your joy, hope and peace. When the night seems too long and the darkness too strong, light the way for us. Bless us on our Advent way as we await the birth of Jesus. Amen.

Week 4

Gracious God, giver of life, magnify your love within us. Help us to seek you not in a long ago stable, but in the people we meet and in the depth of our own hearts. When the turmoils of the world seem overwhelming, may we abide in you and feel nourished in your grace. As we await the final joy of the coming of the Christ may we outdo one another in showing love. Amen.

The word Advent means “coming.” During this first season of our Church year, we prepare our hearts and our lives for the coming of Jesus. We slow down, we wait, and we open ourselves to the promises of God. The season of Advent begins in the holy dark, in silence, anticipation, hope, and lament. But even as the days grow cold and our waiting tests us, we remember that no grief, pain, or loss is too deep or grievous for God if we open ourselves to God’s healing presence. This year, we will contemplate what it means to open our hearts, and keep them open as we wait and watch for the Messiah. How do we move beyond the sorrows and hardships of these days, and embrace the love that God offers us? How do we as people in Silicon Valley get through these difficult times as a community, as a country, as a world? Our hope is that this booklet, with each Sunday of Advent paired with poetry, readings, and Scripture, will offer encouragement and blessing as we journey towards Jesus’s once and future arrival — the glorious culmination of our hopes.



ADVENT I WHEN YOU SEE THESE THINGS

Collect of the Day

Creator God, from whose womb the sea burst forth: Be with us now as we seek with your grace to give birth to a new creation filled with justice and peace, harmony and concord, unity and love for all; in the name of your Child whom we await, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Preacher Debie Thomas

Reflection On this first Sunday in Advent, our Gospel reading challenges us to open our hearts to the present moment -- even when the moment is perilous. In prophetic language that sounds strikingly contemporary, Jesus describes a world reeling in pain. Roaring seas, distress among nations, people fainting in fear. "When you see these things," Jesus says, don't turn away. Don't hide. Don't choose apathy, numbness, or despair. Why? Because it's only when we embrace reality — when we open ourselves to the truth of the world as it is, and look for Christ even in the grimmest and least likely of places — that we experience the nearness and tenderness of Emmanuel — God with Us. As Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge reminds us, "Advent begins in the dark. It is not a season for the faint of heart." Whether we like it or not, the invitations Advent

offers us are hard-edged; they don't always look pretty on greeting cards. But they are essential and life-giving lessons, nevertheless. They help us open our hearts to what is real and true. They enable us to find redemption in the most startling places.

Poem Beginnings

by Edwina Gateley

Beginnings—
just tiny stirrings
which disturb our even surface,
prodding us into new and different shapes...
claiming their place
on our horizons—
stretching us
where we would not go—
yet we must.
Driven by life forces
deeper than our dreams,
we dare to rise
and grasp towards
the new young thing—
not yet born—
but insistent—
like a tight seed bursting
for life,
carrying within it
all the power
of a woman's
birthing thrust.



ADVENT II INTO THE WILDERNESS

Collect of the Day

Life-giving God, in whom we live and move and have our being: Kindle your love within us as we await the coming of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, that we might humbly serve others in his name, both now and for ever. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Preacher Bishop Marc Andrus

Reflection On this second Sunday of Advent, we read that the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. Why the wilderness? Why such a barren and desolate setting? If you have any experience in real estate, you know the mantra: “Location location location.” Location is key. The place where we stand, the terrain we occupy, the space from which we speak — these things matter. In the wilderness, life is raw and risky, and our illusions of self-sufficiency fall apart fast. To locate ourselves at the outskirts of comfort and power is to confess our vulnerability in the starkest terms. In the wilderness, we have no choice but to wait and watch as if our lives depend on God showing up. In the wilderness, we readily turn to God in hope, need, and repentance. What does God want to show us this year in the wilderness? How shall we confess what we have done and what we

have left undone, and open our hearts to the Messiah who will come?

Poem Advent Calendar

by Rowan Williams

He will come like last leaf’s fall.

One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud’s folding.

He will come like frost.

One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.

One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,

will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.

He will come like child.



ADVENT III GOD HAS LIFTED UP THE LOWLY

Collect of the Day

O Hidden, Eternal, and Self-giving God,
who became human for our salvation:

Open our minds, liberate our hearts, and
strengthen our souls, that we may live into
the fullness of your desires for us; in the
name of the Source, the Word, and the
Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Luke 1:46b-55

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Preacher Rev. Liz Milner

Reflection On the third Sunday of Advent, we hear the “Magnificat,” the fierce and beautiful song of praise from our mother Mary, as she proclaims a new kind of world order where the lowly are lifted up, the powerful are brought down from their thrones, and the hopes of the oppressed and the marginalized are finally realized. Mary envisions a world where God’s restorative justice reigns, where the vulnerable are protected and the hungry fed, where lament fades and hope rises. In a world that can feel so far from this vision, how do we open our hearts to the beauty and power of Mary’s prophetic song? How do we catch holy glimpses of a world restored in a world that is still broken? How do we participate with God in ushering this new and glorious kingdom into being?

Poem Advent Credo

by Allan Boesak

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—
This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—
This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—
This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.



ADVENT IV
LET IT BE WITH ME AS YOU SAY

Collect of the Day

Blessed Jesus, born of our sister Mary, the first and most perfect disciple who fully accepted the will of God and acted upon it: Give us the faith to accept your will for us and the strength to carry it out, to the honor and glory of your name. Amen.

Scripture Readings

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Psalms 89:1-4

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Preacher Rev. Nikky Wood

Reflection On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Gospel of Luke gives us the story of Mary and the Angel Gabriel. We watch and listen as Mary ponders the holy mystery of the Incarnation, and says “yes” to God, opening her heart and her life to profound transformation. How do we, like Mary, say “yes” to the work of God in our lives? God’s call required Mary to be bold and counter-cultural, to trust an inner vision that flew in the face of everything her community expected of her. Where and how is God calling us to do the same? What will it look like for each one of us to give our consent as courageously as Mary did? “Let it be with me as you say.”

Poem Annunciation

by Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren’t there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.

More often
those moments

when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from

in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite
them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child—but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked
a simple, ‘How can this be?’
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel’s reply,
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power—
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love—

but who was God.

This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, ‘I cannot. I am not worthy,’
Nor, ‘I have not the strength.’
She did not submit with gritted teeth,
raging,

coerced.
Bravest of all humans,
consent illumined her.
The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,
and the iridescent wings.
Consent,
courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.



THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

CHRISTMAS EVE: TREASURE THE CHILD

Collect of the Day

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Preacher Rev. Matthew McDermott

Reflection On this high feast day of Christmas, we welcome the Christ child into the world and into our hearts with joy and celebration. We sing with the angels and express our adoration with the shepherds. Our Gospel reading tells that the shepherds “made haste” to find Jesus when they heard the angel’s call. We read, too, that Mary “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” Can we, like the shepherds, make haste to worship Jesus? Can we, like Mary, treasure the Word who has come to us in such beautiful simplicity and vulnerability? Can we open our hearts to the One who has come, and will come again?

Poem In the Bleak Midwinter

by Christina Rossetti

In the bleak midwinter,
frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him,
nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when
He comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, Whom cherubim,
worship night and day,
Breastful of milk, and a mangerful of hay;
Enough for Him, Whom angels fall before,
The ox and ass and camel which adore.

Angels and archangels may have
gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

