



# INTO THIN PLACES

SEEKING THE  
HOLY MYSTERY

**Advent  
& Christmas 2021**  
saint mark's  
episcopal church,  
palo alto

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SEASON

*Advent, the first season of the Church year, draws us into what Celtic Christians call a “thin” or liminal place, a setting where we seek and encounter God in new ways. At the mystical threshold between shadow and light, conception and birth, the already and the not-yet, we yearn for the Messiah who yearns for us, and wait for God’s generative love to transform our hearts and heal our world. In Advent, we wonder, listen, lament, and hope. In expectant silence, we look for the Savior who is surely coming. Like seeds waiting in the nurturing darkness of winter soil, like the slow, steady turning of the earth towards the sun, like the baby mysteriously forming in her mother’s womb, we prepare for the joy that awaits us in God’s promise of deliverance. As we move together into this liminal season, may this devotional booklet – filled with scriptures, reflections, poems, and prayers – offer encouragement and blessing. As we journey towards Jesus’s once and future arrival, may the God who meets us at every threshold guide us towards the saving light.*

## **Advent Moon** *Angier Brock*

Let the coming of the One  
who arranges Orion and the Pleiades  
begin in darkness.

Let the night be cold, with drifts of snow.  
Let there be one lily blooming,  
and whispered messages, and kneeling.

The fierce earth spins in expectation  
beneath the long night’s moon, Advent moon.  
Like the restless fox crossing frosted meadows,  
the silvered owl in focused, silent flight,  
each of us is hungry.  
In rooms of untold longing,  
we sing our seasoned carols,  
watch, and wait.

Let the coming of the One  
who kindles fires of hope,  
whose faithfulness runs far beyond our sight,  
be like the coming of a child.  
Let there be milk, forgiveness, quiet arms.  
Come quickly, Love, our dearest deep  
and sweetest dawning.  
Come, fill us with your light.

# 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 to 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 your love. 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 shadows too strong, light the way for us. Bless us on our Advent journey as we await the birth of Jesus. 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 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.





E. Vuillard

ADVENT I **THERE WILL BE SIGNS**

## 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

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

## Sunday Preacher Debie Thomas

**Reflection** Liminal spaces aren't always easy to occupy. Our scripture readings for this first week of Advent remind us that while God's promises of justice and healing are trustworthy, we still live in days of turmoil, oppression, and sorrow. When we see or experience brokenness, we might be tempted to flee. But God calls us to stay. To be mindful, alert, and prayerful, anchored in the hope that deliverance is ours in Christ Jesus. Thin space – tender and difficult as it is – is rife with signs of God's coming kingdom. It is, as spiritual writer Richard Rohr explains, "the ultimate teaching space":

*"The Latin word limen means "threshold." Liminality is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where people can begin to think and act in genuinely new ways. It is when we are betwixt and between, have left one room but not yet entered*

*the next room, any hiatus between stages of life, stages of faith, jobs, loves, or relationships. It is that graced time when we are not certain or in control, when something genuinely new can happen. We are empty, receptive, an erased tablet waiting for new words. Nothing fresh or creative will normally happen when we are inside our self-constructed comfort zones, only more of the same. Nothing original emerges from business as usual. It seems we need some anti-structure to give direction, depth, and purpose to our regular structure. Otherwise structure, which is needed in the first half of life, tends to become a prison as we grow older.*

*"Much of the work of the biblical God and human destiny itself is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough to learn something essential and genuinely new. It is the ultimate teachable space. In some sense, it is the only teachable space.*

*"For most of us who cannot run off to the wilderness or the hermitage, the older religions offer temporary and partial liminality in things like pilgrimages, silent retreats, periods of fasting, and desert solitudes. Once-a-week church services do not normally come close to creating liminal space. It takes that long for you just to stop wondering whether you turned off the stove and begin to get your kids—or your errant emotions—under control. There has to be something longer, different, and daring, even nonsensical, to break our comfortable sleepwalk and our compulsive trance..."*

*"The bubble of usual order has to be broken by a bit of whimsy, holy uselessness, deliberate disruption or displacement, learning to walk in the opposite direction. In liminal space we sometimes need to not-do and not-perform according to our usual successful patterns. We actually need to fail, fast, and deliberately falter to understand the other dimension of life. We need to fast instead of eating, maintain silence instead of talking, experience emptiness instead of fullness, anonymity instead of persona, pennilessness instead of plentifulness. What could break more assuredly our addiction to ourselves?"*

*(Richard Rohr, Adam's Return, Crossroad Publishing, NY, 2004, Chapter 12, pp 135-139)*

### **Justice Connection**

This episode of the podcast "Total SF" features reflections from San Francisco Chronicle reporter Kevin Fagan, and what he's learned covering our city's homelessness crisis – as well as his own experience with homelessness. It's one thing to look at the world's brokenness through our own eyes. How might the world's brokenness look through the eyes of our unhoused brothers and sisters? How does that broaden or change your perspective? Hold this close to your heart throughout the Advent season.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/total-sf/id1316784981?i=1000482853425>

### **ADVENT** *Pamela Cranston*

Look how long  
the tired world waited,  
locked in its lonely cell,  
guilty as a prisoner.

As you can imagine,  
it sang and whistled in the dark.  
It hoped. It paced and pattered about,  
tidying its little piles of inconsequence.

It wept from the weight of ennui  
draped like shackles on its wrists.  
It raged and wailed against the walls  
of its own plight.

But there was nothing  
the world could do  
to find its freedom.  
The door was shut tight.

It could only be opened  
from the outside.  
Who could believe the latch  
would be turned by the flower  
of a newborn hand?







ADVENT II  
CRYING OUT IN 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

Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

## Sunday Preacher

The Rev. Matthew McDermott

## Reflection

The wilderness is an oft-mentioned liminal space in the Bible. Many of the great stories of divine encounter and spiritual transformation we cherish in scripture happen in the aridity and isolation of the desert. On this second Sunday of Advent, our Gospel reading invites us to join John the Baptist in the wilderness, and learn from him the lessons of repentance, renunciation, and healing honesty. What do we need to confess in this sacred season? What do we need to let go of? How shall we confront the conflicting realities of our hearts as we prepare for the coming of the Lord? Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor describes the paradoxical gift of John's prophetic voice in the wilderness:

*John was scary alright. He was uncivilized. He was from another planet, but he spoke*

*about the one who was coming as if he were repeating what God was saying to him right at that moment, one sentence at a time...*

*Dressed in animal hair with a piece of tanned hide around his waist, his breath heavy with locusts and wild honey, John proclaimed that Someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough simply to hang around waiting for him to arrive. It was time to get ready, to prepare the way, so that when he came he could walk a straight path right to their doors.*

*That was the good news that John was the beginning of. He was the messenger, and the message lit him up like a bonfire in the wilderness. People were drawn to him, apparently, not because of who he was and what he said but also because of what he offered them - a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were someone else and start over again, by allowing him to wash them off...John's baptism bypassed the temple and all its rites. Setting up shop in the wilderness, he proclaimed his freedom from so called civilization, with all its rules and requirements. He called people to wake up, to turn around, so that they would not miss the new thing God was doing right before their eyes.*

*The gospel always begins with a messenger, whether it is an angel whispering in Mary's ear or a parent telling a child a story or a skinny prophet standing knee deep in a river. What strikes me about this messenger is that he was*



nowhere near a church, and those who insisted on staying inside the church never heard his message. Only those who were willing to enter the wilderness got to taste his freedom, and many of them were still there when the spectacular Someone arrived, far from the civilized center of town.

*I reckon every one of us has some idea where our own wilderness lies, as well as a long list of all the good reasons why we should not go there. We are comfortable here, after all. We know the ropes and we know we will be fed. Why should we hunt God anywhere else? I cannot imagine, unless it is that voice crying out in the wilderness, the one you cannot quite make out from here. If we only listen for God in church, we will miss half the message. The good news is always beginning somewhere in the world, for those with ears to hear and hearts to go wherever the way may lead.*

*(Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way, Cowley Publications, 1999.)*

### **Justice Connection**

The NPR podcast “The Outsiders” covers the homelessness crisis on the West Coast, despite a time of historic economic growth and prosperity. What needs to change, turn around, and begin again to make a real improvement for our unhoused brothers and sisters? What needs to change about our society? More poignantly, what do we need to change in our own hearts?

<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/795090517/outsidere>



### **The Place Where We Are Right** *Yebuda Amichai*

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.

ADVENT III  
WHAT SHOULD  
WE DO?

**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**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

**Sunday Preacher** The Rev. Nikky Wood

**Reflection** One of the questions we ask in liminal spaces is the question our spiritual ancestors asked John the Baptist so many centuries ago: “What should we do?” Given the brokenness of the world, the challenges of our current circumstances, and the inevitable failures in our own lives, how should we act, react, think, and speak as followers of Jesus? What is our vocation in these messy in-between times? In a reflection written to the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry invites us to become witnesses. To notice, wonder, embrace, and listen. To become, like John, brave voices in desolate places. Truth-tellers, justice-makers, pain-bearers, healers:

*It is not for you to know all the ins and outs of life. That’s just the way it is. Some things you can know, and some things you don’t. Like my grandma used to sing,*



*we'll understand it better by and by. But this much you can count on: You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea, in Samaria, in first-century Palestine, and in the 21st century world of a global pandemic. Of a world struggling with itself profoundly, and maybe of a world where something is trying to be born. Who knows, but you'll be my witnesses. And maybe that's enough.*

*I want to suggest that Jesus has given us wisdom to be his witnesses, to witness to his way of life, his way of love. Whatever mistakes you make, whatever ways you err, however you fumble the ball, you will be Christ's witnesses, and that's enough.*

*You are not God, you're witnesses. You are not perfect, you're witnesses. You don't have all the answers, you're witnesses. Come and see. We are becoming—we're not finished yet—but God help us, we are becoming a new and re-formed church. No longer centered on empire, no longer centered on establishment, no longer fixated on preserving institutions, no longer shoring up white supremacy or anything that hurts or harms any child of God or God's creation. By God's grace we are becoming a church that looks and acts, and maybe better yet, that loves like Jesus. A church that witnesses to his love and not to ourselves.*

*(The Most Rev. Michael Curry, opening remarks for Executive Council: October 25, 2021)*

## **Justice Connection**

As we consider “what we should do,” we invite you to consider Abode Services, a Bay Area nonprofit focused on finding housing for low-income, un-housed people, including those with special needs. There are plenty of ways to support their work, as a

volunteer or by donating.

<https://www.abodeservices.org>



## **First Coming** *Madeleine L'Engle*

He did not wait till the world was ready,  
till men and nations were at peace.  
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,  
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.  
He came when the need was deep and great.  
He dined with sinners in all their grime,  
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.  
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin  
and doubt.  
To a world like ours, of anguished shame  
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,  
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.  
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh  
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane  
to raise our songs with joyful voice,  
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!



ADVENT IV  
MY SOUL  
MAGNIFIES  
THE LORD



## 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

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

## Sunday Preacher The Rev. Liz Milner

**Reflection** Our Gospel reading for this fourth week of Advent essentially describes the first Christian worship service in history. Mary and Elizabeth meet at both a literal and metaphorical threshold, a thin place where the young and the old, the unmarried and the married, the socially established and the socially vulnerable find common ground in their love for Jesus, and their heart for exuberant worship. In this intimate story of solidarity, hospitality, and connection, a shared liminality opens out into powerful prophetic witness. Jesus is coming. God is on the move. The high places will be leveled, the low places will be exalted, and God's restorative justice – a justice of sacred reversal and renewal – will reign over all. In this breathtaking context, Episcopal priest and womanist scholar Wil Gafney invites us to honor the life and witness of Mary:

*"We celebrate all of the layers in the life, legacy and ministry of the mother of our faith, the mother of our Redeemer whom some would call the Matrix of Redemption and others the Theotokas, the God-Bearer, the Mother of God and, the Mother of Sorrows.*

*"Young Miriam of Nazareth, on the cusp of womanhood, innocent and wise, ordinary and extraordinary, and on her way to being the kind of woman, wife and mother the scriptures often overlook when heaven and earth collide in an angelic annunciation. She draws on the sacred songs of her people. She seeks the company of her cousin like so many young girls who find it easier to talk to a favorite aunt about sex and sexuality and unexpected pregnancies. And there she hears the words that will follow her through the ages as they had followed others: Blessed are you among women. "Today, we remember and commemorate and celebrate a woman who is more than a two-dimensional Christmas card. We remember a life of joy and sorrow, faith and discipleship, a woman who loved God enough to say yes to the unimaginable, a woman who speaks across the ages and bids us come and follow Jesus and do whatever he tells us to do knowing that we too may come to our death and in so doing, yet live."*

(Adapted from: <https://www.wilgafney.com/2020/08/16/mary-of-god/>)

## Justice Connection

Mary's justice song reminds us that God's eyes are on the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering, and that God invites us to focus our gaze in the same way. When was the last time you walked through San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood? You may have done so quickly, avoiding eye contact with the folks sitting on the sidewalk. You may have done so gingerly, avoiding the needles littering the ground. In the Tenderloin, it's not difficult to see things that need transformation. But step through the doors of the St. Anthony Foundation, and you see that transformation happening in real time. You see folks in need getting a meal, or a change of clothes and a shower. You see folks in recovery, or connecting with medical help and vital social services. Transformation is happening in the Tenderloin – and you can choose to roll your sleeves up to be a part of it.

[www.stanthonysf.org/](http://www.stanthonysf.org/)





## A Blessing Called Sanctuary

*Jan Richardson*

You hardly knew  
how hungry you were  
to be gathered in,  
to receive the welcome  
that invited you to enter  
entirely—  
nothing of you  
found foreign or strange,  
nothing of your life  
that you were asked  
to leave behind  
or to carry in silence  
or in shame.

Tentative steps  
became settling in,  
leaning into the blessing  
that enfolded you,  
taking your place  
in the circle  
that stunned you  
with its unimagined grace.

You began to breathe again,  
to move without fear,  
to speak with abandon  
the words you carried  
in your bones,  
that echoed in your being.

You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing  
is that it will not leave you alone,  
will not let you linger  
in safety,  
in stasis.

The time will come  
when this blessing  
will ask you to leave,  
not because it has tired of you  
but because it desires for you  
to become the sanctuary  
that you have found--  
to speak your word  
into the world,  
to tell what you have heard  
with your own ears,  
seen with your own eyes,  
known in your own heart:

that you are beloved,  
precious child of God,  
beautiful to behold,  
and you are welcome  
and more than welcome  
Here.



# THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

## CHRISTMAS EVE: WELCOME 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)

### Services

4p Pageant and Eucharist\*

9p Hymns and Anthems\*

9:30p Eucharist\*

Preacher The Rev. Matthew McDermott

On this high feast day of Christmas, we welcome the holy child, the Incarnate Son, the Redeemer of all things, into the world and into our hearts. We enter with awe and joy into the marvelous thin place of the stable, the manger, the hushed holiness of a Bethlehem night two thousand years ago that changed the world forever. We sing with the angels and express our adoration with the shepherds. We ponder with Mary, and keep watch with Joseph. We treasure the gifts we have received in the liminal spaces of Advent, and give thanks for the sacred birth that ever makes us new. Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner describes the paradoxical gift of Christmas this way:

*“Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant’s child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too. And this means that we are never safe, that there is no place where we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from his power to break in two and recreate the human heart, because it is just where he seems most helpless that he is most strong, and just where we least expect him that he comes most fully.*”



*"For those who believe in God, it means, this birth, that God himself is never safe from us, and maybe that is the dark side of Christmas, the terror of the silence. He comes in such a way that we can always turn him down, as we could crack the baby's skull like an eggshell or nail him up when he gets too big for that. God comes to us in the hungry people we do not have to feed, comes to us in the lonely people we do not have to comfort, comes to us in all the desperate human need of people everywhere that we are always free to turn our backs upon. It means that God puts himself at our mercy not only in the sense of the suffering that we can cause him by our blindness and coldness and cruelty, but the suffering that we can cause him simply by suffering ourselves. Because that is the way love works, and when someone we love suffers, we suffer with him, and we would not have it otherwise because the suffering and the love are one, just as it is with God's love for us."*

*(Frederick Buechner, The Hungering Dark)*

### **Justice Connection**

If you have not already done so, please consider supporting our Giving Tree partners, Project WeHope in Palo Alto and CIC Ministries (Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy of Santa Clara County).

[saint-marks.com/give](http://saint-marks.com/give)



### **On the Adoration of the Shepherds**

*David Brendan Hopes*

God is born tonight in the next town.  
Be serious. Who wouldn't go?  
Lock the back door. Turn the furnace down.  
Throw a handful of food at the dog. Blow  
off the dinner with the couple you really like.  
Riffle through the bills for those  
which absolutely will not wait. Take a hike.  
The way? The consequence? The point?

Who knows?

Select a path, an avenue, goat trail, a turnpike,  
on through the twilight and the early snows.  
Angel voices are, of course, a plus,  
but go in dark and silence if you must.  
Remember to seek the narrowest  
wretched door.  
Prepare to diminish, resign, dispense, adore.

# PRAYERS FOR LIGHTING A CHRISTMAS CANDLE



## Christmas Eve

God of promises fulfilled, we thank you for this night. For the grace and hope that have entered into this world filled with troubles and despair. May your love shine in every corner of the world, bringing your peace. May every heart show forth your goodness. Be with us and stay near us, O Christ. Amen.

## Christmas Day

Christmas God, because you came to us as a helpless little baby, we are reminded that each of us, young and old alike, are your children. Through the incarnation of your Beloved, Jesus the Christ, the Word has been made flesh and has lived among us, full of grace and truth. Open us to your revelation once again. Call us to come and see where Christ leads, that we might know your presence and walk in your way. Amen.

**First Sunday After Christmas service**  
12/26 – 10a Eucharist \*

\* All services will be held in person (inside the sanctuary), and will be livestreamed on YouTube.



[https://www.youtube.com/c/  
StMarksEpiscopalChurchPaloAlto](https://www.youtube.com/c/StMarksEpiscopalChurchPaloAlto)

## Prayer and Image Credits

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Advent Collects: Rev. Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, *Women's Uncommon Prayers*

Reflections: Debie Thomas

Christmas prayers: adapted from Rev. Andy James and Rev. Stephen M. Fearin, LiturgyLink

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## saint mark's episcopal church

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