

The Heart of the Work

2020 Advent Guide



An Advent Guide for Lectionary Year B from
the North Carolina Council of Churches



First Sunday of Advent – Mark 13:24-27

But in those days, following that distress,

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken*

At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Apocalypse means unveiling or uncovering. This word is well-suited to the realities of 2020. This year, our eyes and hearts have been uncovered. The deep pain of 2020 is a result of our broken relationships with all of God's Creation—including each other. Right now, we are looking at the world with clear eyes.

As COVID-19 began to make its mark on our country, with millions contracting the virus alongside a shortage of tests and Personal Protection Equipment, we saw clearly that our healthcare system needs reforming. Following the murders of Ahmaud Arbury, Sean Reed, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, we saw clearly the need to proclaim and affirm that Black Lives Matter. As fires raged across our west coast, burning more than 500,000 acres and causing the same number of people to evacuate their homes in Oregon, we saw clearly the need to address climate change in bold ways. Over the past few months, our eyes and hearts have been uncovered. What we do with this “2020 vision” matters—which brings us to Mark’s passage today, “The Little Apocalypse.”

On this first Sunday of the Advent season we receive an apocalyptic telling of Christ’s second coming. In the context of Advent this story invites us to imagine our “collective uncovering” and the work we are called to do. Advent invites us to prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Jesus. We prepare ourselves to welcome the Christ child that the inns and hostels of Bethlehem would not. We prepare ourselves to make room for the kind of love and hope that Jesus embodies that the world often ignores. This preparation is work that our world desperately needs.

The world needs us to speak boldly and act lovingly. The world needs us to see clearly the ways we have harmed each other and imagine possibilities for repairing that harm. The world needs us to be broken open by pain. We must commit to this work together.

Loving God, help us to use our sharpened vision, our eyes that have been uncovered, for the good of all your Creation. With clearness of sight, help us to act as beacons of love, peace, and justice. As we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ child, help us also to prepare our hands to hold each other up and our feet to carry us on the journey. May we love as you have taught us to love. Amen.

**Sarah Ogletree
Program Coordinator, NC Interfaith Power & Light**

Second Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her*

*that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,*

*that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

A voice of one calling:

*"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.*

*And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

*A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.*

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.*

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."*

*You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.*

*You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,

and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him.

He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms

and carries them close to his heart;

he gently leads those that have young.

The people of Judah are exiled, traumatized by war, and reluctant to trust any sign of hope. They witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and Judah. The prophet is begging listeners to find reassurance in God, proclaiming that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (v. 5). Yet, when they look around, it feels unlikely. Still, the exiled people listened.

In our own periods of exile and fear, it is impossible to imagine how “every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level” (v. 4). In all the arduous landscapes that we face: systems of oppression, diagnoses, difficult relationships, trauma, loneliness, anxiety, and more - one struggles to listen and believe that God is moving the terrains that make up our lives.

Have you ever felt exiled by your own body? By your health? A health concern can evacuate all normalcy from our lives. In our health, when we are in the wilderness of the unknown, we may feel exiled, grieving and dealing with new normals. It is not part of the plan when life deviates from the expected path and we find ourselves in the wilderness. We are lost. We are looking for home. We are looking for God.

Yet in the waiting, in the wilderness, in the seeking, in the fear, God is still with us. When valleys are lifted up, mountains and hills lowered, and broken ground is made flat - it is a shock to the environment. This is a major overhaul to a landscape. Such is the same during our own painful seasons. It can feel like surgery as we move through grief, pain, and loss. We are lifted, lowered, made flat, and more. This is what it means to be alive. In our hardest seasons, we are still learning, growing, and mountains are moving within us.

It is easy to miss God in the hyper-focus of pain and the loneliness of exile. We naturally zoom in on what needs our attention and try to fix it as quickly as possible. Try to get back to normal. But we can miss God if we avoid pain. Even when it does not feel intended for us, or far from us, the love of God is near. God remains God, even in our own exile and pain. When we make it through those difficult seasons, we are able to look back at that wilderness and realize how resilient we are for surviving it. We made it with God. Even in our exile, we are delivered.

Jessica Stokes

PHW Associate Director, Mental Health Advocacy

Third Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.*

*They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations...*

*For I, the Lord, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the Lord has blessed."*

*I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.*

Someone once told me, "God gives us everything we need to survive and flourish in this world, but God

expects us to figure out how to share it." Surely, sharing is a major part of the vision offered by Isaiah in these words addressed to people who have spent the previous generation living in exile. If we wonder what exile might be like, we have only to look to one of the thousands of refugee camps scattered across the globe. Or we could look at an ICE detention center to find people forced into exile. This would be more in keeping with the people to whom Isaiah speaks. They were forced into exile by the Babylonians, who raided their workplaces and homes, separated parents from their children, and created punitive laws that changed all the time.

Under such dire circumstances people focus on survival in the moment and only later turn to visions of restoration. Isaiah provides a vision for those who have made it through the terror of immigration—I mean exile. In this vision, God promises that we won't need borders to wall out those we have taken advantage of to create our own wealth because we'll understand that all we have comes from God and returns to God. In this vision, God promises that the time will come when those who have more will share with those who have less because at the end of God's time, it all belongs to God anyway. (Did you think the poverty and crime of Mexico and Central America was not the result of American corporate greed propped up by American foreign policy?)

God offers these visions through the words of God's prophets to remind us of God's first call to love God and love our neighbor. Surely the best way to love God and neighbor is to share the great gifts God has given us with our neighbors, whether those neighbors come to us from the south, across the oceans, or only from next door. In such sharing no one goes without. Words like oppressed, captive, broken-hearted, prisoner no longer hold meaning.

It's no accident that today's reading is the scripture upon which Jesus based his first sermon with the opening line that echoes throughout history: "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:21).* The one for whom we wait in this third week shows us by his life and teaching that these are not pipedreams. The vision offered by Isaiah nearly 500 years before Jesus preached about it is still possible for us 2,000 years after Jesus preached about it.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations (v. 11).

We just have to figure out to how to share it.

**Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director**

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55

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.

And Mary said:

*"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."*

This is one of those stories that many of us treasure when Christmastime comes around. We love the story of a supernatural being sent to a human being with a special message and she's a "highly favored"

woman. We have all the makings of a superhero movie. The day came when Gabriel's words, "Greetings favored one" sounded differently to me; less specially chosen superhero movie-like with all the warm fuzzy Christmastime feelings and more like words that were calling Mary to work. Mary didn't ask "Why am I highly favored?" nor did she immediately accept what was told to her. At first she was troubled. After hearing Angel Gabriel's response, she was very practical, "How can this be?" Yes, she was betrothed and there would be questions. Yes, she was young and a woman in a specific cultural context where her worth was very much defined by her fertility. In her response I hear the echoes of many women's voices when unexpectedly faced with a job, a task, something that needs doing and in the most challenging way. Voices that ask "what is it that needs doing and why me?" Women know work when they hear it, paid or unpaid, no matter how specially chosen they may be.

Mothers, caretakers, working women, essential workers and frontline workers know work when they hear it. They know that unpaid work and paid work are important. They also know when they are being asked to sacrifice. Mary's final response in Luke 1:46-55 reflects the responses of many mothers, caretakers, working women, essential workers and frontline workers when they are called to work. They find meaning and purpose, not because they value themselves less, but because they know their worth.

Knowing your worth is a powerful thing when the world you live in has different values, when unpaid work is seen as less important than paid work, when workers are paid less than a living wage, when the color of your skin means you earn less on average, when farmworkers work extra long days and still can't feed their families, when seniors are put out to pasture because they are deemed as less productive in a system that values productivity and consumption.

God chose to be incarnate among the least of these, the willing of these, and not among the most powerful. This divine manifestation speaks volumes about what God values most. Know your worth.

Nicole Johnson
PHW Associate Director, Denominational Support

Christmas Day – Luke 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while [a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Hope and imagination are in short supply these days. Most of us are more comfortable with facts and figures than dreams and visions. We keep close to what people call the real world. Of course, when we begin with the assumption that real only refers to what can be touched, counted, and recounted, then reality shrinks. Our hopes for what can and cannot be done, for who we can and cannot be, get scaled back considerably.

Our preoccupation with computers may be evidence of our lack of imagination. The modern world has convinced itself that we have a scarcity of facts. No matter what the problem we think we need more data. We too easily give up our imaginations. We stop being surprised by hope.

But imagination leads us to a bigger story. When we read Moby Dick, we feel seasick. When we read Lord of the Flies, we look at our neighbors suspiciously. When we read Go Set a Watchman, the neighbors look at us suspiciously, wondering what we are thinking. And when we read scripture, we

imagine a better world.

In the unimaginative, unsurprising world, people buy gifts for their friends that they hope will cost about as much as the gifts their friends give them. As the body of Christ alive and at work in the world, we give to people who will not give us gifts in return because we have imagined a world where people who have enough share with those who don't.

In the unimaginative, unsurprising world, poor families face bleak prospects. December is darker than November and nobody expects to hear angels sing. But in the body of Christ, imaginations will give voice to the songs of angels and the hope of faith. We imagine, hope, and pray for peace for everyone in the whole world.

In the unimaginative, unsurprising world, people are told to face the facts. We at the North Carolina Council of Churches are here to imagine with you a brave new world. Imagine that tomorrow is not closed but is open to God's surprises. Imagine your life caught up in a hope bigger than you are. Imagine. Christ the Savior is born. Alleluia! Amen.

Sean Allen
Director of Finance & Administration

First Sunday after Christmas – Psalm 148

Praise the Lord.

*Praise the Lord from the heavens;
 praise him in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels;
 praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon;
 praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heaven,
 and you waters above the skies*

*Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for at his command they were created,
and he established them for ever and ever—
 he issued a decree that will never pass away.*

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
 you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
 stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills,
 fruit trees and all cedars
wild animals and all cattle,
 small creatures and flying birds
kings of the earth and all nations,
 you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and women,
 old men and children.*

*Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.*

*And he has raised up for his people a horn,
 the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.*

Praise the Lord.

Writing an Advent devotional for an early October deadline might present seasonal challenges. Truth is, I can contemplate the birth of Christ on the hottest day in July. What I am finding to be a challenge as I consider Christian unity, the theme for this week, is the disunity of the first presidential debate. Given the divisiveness it represented, the notion of “unity” seems a contradiction in terms. This might be equally true regardless of the upcoming election results.

This is why I am so thankful for the Psalms. These collected songs are like a mansion of 150 “rooms” where we can retreat to engage our lament, our fear, our sense of injustice and anger. And where, in

spite of all those things, we are given the words to offer praise to the One who is the source of all life. The One – the Unity – who holds our dis-unity and dysfunction for us, until we can find comfort and joy; awe and wonder. Restoration.

Psalm 148 is among the last five of the psalms, each of which contains the words “praise the Lord” in both the first and last verses. And praise is the single action here, the only requirement. All that is, all the earth, is called to praise the Creator.

In this universal song, there is no disunity among God’s creation; because whatever its inhabitants’ boundaries or spheres or status or “categories,” we are united in that one action of praise. Furthermore, it is clear that humanity does not hold a sovereign position within Creation. Only God is sovereign and humanity is on equal footing and in partnership with the rest of the Creation—not above any of it. And finally, in their unified, collaborative outpouring of praise, all creatures, all beings, all spheres, all that exists, reflect the wholeness and oneness of God’s own being. In their praise, they become truly “made in God’s image.”

In this time of disunity when we look around and see so much contentiousness and “otherness,” perhaps we inflate our own selves, and our own positions, to a sovereign place we have no right to inhabit. Perhaps, in our fragmentation and dis-unity, we feel much more like offering up a curse instead of praise – because we stubbornly insist no praise will be forthcoming till we get what we want. Till those “others” become WHO we want . . .

Yet, maybe we could . . . follow the instructions. Or The instruction. If we have the courage and the humility and the eyes to see all that is glorious and praise-worthy and grace-filled in this world -- and the image of God in each other – maybe we could offer up that first tentative note of a song of praise. Or maybe, when we can’t even quite manage that – we could just listen.

Listen closely: Do you hear the song of praise rising from Creation?

**Karen Richardson Dunn
PHW Associate Director, Healthy Aging**

Second Sunday after Christmas – John 1:(1-9), 10-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and [a] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Here we are, it's 2021. We've gotten through an unusual holiday season, where hopefully you've found a way to immerse yourself in celebration. In any year, looking forward is a combination of anticipation and anxiety. For many, fatigue and confusion is added this year. As we turn to scripture, it's interesting that on this Sunday each year we explore the first chapter of John. Last year you might have focused on discovering the gifts God is offering you. Next year you could be considering the kind of life that results when we live by these gifts. But this year, amidst the chaos we're experiencing, perhaps we should focus on the obstacles that prevent us from receiving those gifts. Gifts that include a vision of unity in a world of division, and a moment of clarity about who and whose we are in the midst of confusion.

John's gospel was written to a community in conflict between those who affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah and the Jewish authorities who disputed that notion. There was tension and excommunication, prompting John to focus on the internal life of the community. This would account for us finding Jesus portrayed in John's writing as a source of comfort, healing, and support. What I love about the focus on this Second Sunday after Christmas is the invitation to explore the blessing placed within us. It celebrates the God who is at work in us and around us. We are forgiven, lavished with grace, taught the mystery, given an inheritance, so that we might live for the praise of God. It is about living a life of praise, of celebration for what God has done and is doing in us. I hope these are the words you need to hear today. We live in a culture that revels in both fear and instant gratification. I invite you to remind yourself that

you are to live your faith. Not just think about it, but to live it fully and wholeheartedly. Sit with this list of blessings and consider what obstacles in your life prevent you from finding comfort, healing, and support through the forgiveness and grace born to us once again in this season. Let us live each day in celebration of mystery and hope.

*May the blessing of the deep mystery we name God –
Source of life, love and hope,
be with you this day and all your days.*

Vanna Fox
Development Director

Epiphany of the Lord – Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.

May the mountains bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.
May he defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
may he crush the oppressor.
May he endure[a] as long as the sun,
as long as the moon, through all generations.
May he be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.
In his days may the righteous flourish
and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.

May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
bring tribute to him.
May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.
May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.

For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.
He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.
He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.

Epiphany is here and it's time to feast and celebrate. The wise men have visited Jesus bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, giving honor & recognition that Christ is born!

At the NC Council of Churches, we aim to sing in tune with how the incarnate One calls us to do justice and establish a reign of peace and righteousness for all of creation. Through this work we envision a stable climate where humans live in right and just relationships with one another, but also interconnected with a healthy, thriving, natural world. We attempt to accomplish our mission by encouraging a culture shift towards environmental justice and creation care, while underscoring the importance of climate action for people of faith and conscience as a moral imperative.

Psalm 72 is not only praise for the one who rules in God's name, but is a mandate for all believers to dedicate ourselves to environmental justice, racial justice, economic justice, and criminal justice as a moral imperative. Here is the place where our personal praise puts on boots and walks toward God's

justice. We are those who advocate with our vote, our voice, and sometimes our protesting presence when those who make the laws for our nation are not responsive to the laws of our faith.

Praise of God and recognition of the One who comes in God's name compels us to analyze the social and political power dynamics in our communities. It compels us to evaluate the economic systems and wage structures that determine human flourishing. It compels us to examine our stewardship of natural resources entrusted to us on behalf of all who will follow. Once we have analyzed and evaluated and examined these systems, we are called to advocate in those places where the systems have fallen short. To praise God is to do no less than to work for vision of justice God holds before us all.

As we celebrate the Epiphany of Christ, let us reflect on how well we are living into our convictions. Let us give thanks and praise for this Epiphany and the liturgy of Psalm 72, as we are reminded of the glory of God and what we are called to do as people of great faith.

Susannah Tuttle
Program Director, NC Interfaith Power & Light