



Dare to Dream

AN ADVENT & EPIPHANY DEVOTIONAL COMPANION
United Methodist Ministries of Mecosta County

FROM THE PASTOR

Advent is a season of daring. It asks us to dream again, even when the world feels uncertain, to hold hope as a way of life, not a wish, to look at the world as it is—and still believe that God is doing something new.

This devotional companion follows the same path we'll walk together in worship this season: *Dare to Dream*. In a time when trust feels fragile and divisions run deep, daring to dream means opening our hearts to God's imagination. It's an act of courage and of faith—choosing to see light where others see shadow, and possibility where others see endings.

Each week, we'll listen to the dreamers of our faith, whose stories remind us that God's dream isn't distant—it's being born among us still.

- Isaiah, who envisioned a world of peace.
- John the Baptist, who prepared the way for change.
- Elizabeth and Mary, whose joy and courage shaped a new story.
- Zechariah, whose silence became a song.
- Anna, whose faith spanned generations; and
- Joseph, whose obedience protected a fragile promise.

Each day's entry includes a passage of Scripture, a reflection, an action (practice), questions to ponder, and a prayer. Let this be a rhythm of renewal for you. Some days may speak softly; others may challenge you. All are meant to draw you deeper into the mystery of God's love made flesh in Jesus Christ.

May this season awaken your holy imagination. May it remind you that to follow Christ is to live as people of vision, people of hope, people who dare to dream.

Grace and peace,



Rev. Jeremy Wicks

Executive Pastor

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HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

This devotional companion accompanies our Advent–Epiphany sermon series, "Dare to Dream." Each week aligns with Sunday's theme, allowing you to continue reflecting on what you've heard in worship throughout the week.

You'll find seven daily readings for each week. Each day includes a Scripture passage, a reflection, a spiritual practice, three guiding questions, and a prayer. Use the questions to go deeper. Try the practices in small, mindful ways. Pray the prayers as they are or let them lead you into your own words.

There's no wrong way to use this devotional. You might begin your morning with it, use it as part of family time, or close your day in quiet reflection. If you miss a day, simply jump back in—grace is built into the rhythm.

Most importantly, use this time to make space for wonder. Advent and Epiphany remind us that God's dream is not finished—and neither is ours. Together, let's dare to dream of a world made whole.

WEEK ONE: VIGILANT HOPE (ISAIAH'S VISION)

Primary Texts: Isaiah 2:1–5 and Mark 13:24–37

Hope is not wishful thinking. It's not blind optimism or denial of reality. Hope is vigilance—it's keeping our eyes open for light even when the night feels long. In a world weary from division, violence, and cynicism, Isaiah dares to dream of a time when swords are reshaped into plowshares and nations walk together in peace.

Jesus echoes that same invitation when he says, “Stay awake.” Not out of fear, but out of readiness. The light is coming—not only at the end of time, but in every moment when love takes root, when justice finds a voice, when compassion interrupts despair.

This week, we practice *vigilant hope*: the kind that pays attention, waits faithfully, and works quietly for transformation.

□ First Sunday of Advent – The Mountain of the Lord

Isaiah 2:1–5 (NRSVUE) – “The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. ‘For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!’”

Isaiah’s dream is breathtaking in its simplicity—nations streaming to a mountain not for conquest, but for communion. A future where we unlearn the habits of harm. A world where power bends toward peace.

This vision doesn’t ignore the world’s pain; it faces it with holy imagination. Isaiah dares to say, “What if?” What if we lived as though God’s ways were already shaping us? What if light could reach even the places that feel unchangeable?

Advent begins not with answers, but with imagination. Before the manger, before the angel’s song, there’s this mountain—steady, luminous, calling us to come and see what could be. Vigilant hope begins there: believing that the dream of peace is not naïve, but necessary.

Practice: Spend five quiet minutes picturing Isaiah’s mountain. What would it look like for your community to “walk in the light of the Lord”? Write one concrete image or word that comes to mind.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where do you see signs of peace already emerging in small ways?
2. What “swords” in your own life might God be inviting you to reshape into tools for healing?
3. How can imagination become a spiritual discipline for you this Advent?

Prayer: Holy Dreamer, lift my eyes toward your mountain of peace. When the world feels heavy, teach me to look for your light. Shape my heart into an instrument of your hope. Amen.

□ Monday – Stay Awake

Mark 13:24–37 (NRSVUE) - “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.”

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Jesus’ call to “stay awake” isn’t about predicting the future—it’s about paying attention to the present. The apocalyptic language of stars falling and heavens shaking isn’t meant to frighten us but to jolt us awake to the sacred now.

Advent is about learning to live awake—to notice tender branches and quiet signs of renewal. Hope isn’t a far-off event; it’s the daily discipline of watching for God at work in the ordinary.

Maybe being awake means seeing beauty in small mercies, or naming truth when it’s easier to stay silent. Maybe it means trusting that even when we can’t see the whole story, the Author hasn’t stopped writing.

Practice: Today, practice mindful noticing. Set aside five moments throughout the day to pause, breathe, and ask: “Where do I see signs of life?”

Questions for Reflection:

1. What keeps you spiritually asleep or distracted?
2. How might alertness to God’s presence change the way you move through your day?
3. What “tender branches” of hope are budding in your life right now?

Prayer: Awakening God, stir me from complacency. Help me see your nearness in what I might overlook. Keep my spirit alert, my eyes open, and my heart ready to respond. Amen.

□ Tuesday – The Light That Draws Nations

Psalms 122 (NRSVUE) - I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.” For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

The psalmist rejoices at the invitation to come together—to step into a space where gratitude and justice meet. “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” they sing, not as a political slogan but as a spiritual practice. To pray for peace is to align ourselves with God’s heart for wholeness.

Jerusalem becomes a symbol of belonging: “Our feet are standing within your gates.” In Advent, that’s what hope feels like—a homecoming into God’s vision of unity.

To dare to dream is to believe that God's peace is not limited by borders or tribes or ideologies. The light that draws nations is not coercive power but radiant love—love that binds, heals, and gathers.

Practice: Offer a prayer for peace today, not in general but specifically—for a person, place, or community where reconciliation feels impossible.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does “peace” mean to you beyond the absence of conflict?
2. Where might God be inviting you to seek the good of others, even across difference?
3. How can gratitude become part of your peace-making practice?

Prayer: God of all nations, let your peace begin in me. Draw us together in your light until we learn to see one another as kin. Teach me to seek the good, to love deeply, and to hope fiercely. Amen.

□ **Wednesday – Paths of Peace**

Romans 13:11–14 (NRSVUE) – “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Reflection: Paul's urgency is palpable—wake up, he says, because the dawn is already breaking. Hope is not something we wait for passively; it's something we step into. “Put on the armor of light,” he writes, as if light were something we could wear into the world.

To live honorably is not to live perfectly—it's to live aware. The imagery of shedding the works of darkness is really about choosing alignment with love, not fear; with mercy, not resentment.

Advent invites us to clothe ourselves with Christ—to embody compassion, integrity, and courage in the everyday. The day is near, Paul reminds us, not someday far off but right now. Hope is not only a destination; it's a way of walking.

Practice: When you get dressed today, pause and imagine “putting on” light—patience, kindness, attentiveness—as part of what you wear into the world.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What habits or attitudes feel like “darkness” that you need to release?
2. How might “putting on light” shape your choices today?
3. Who in your life shows you what it looks like to walk honorably in love?

Prayer: Light of the world, wrap me in your radiance. When shadows grow strong, let your brightness guide my steps. May I wear your peace with humility and grace. Amen.

□ **Thursday – The Tender Branch**

Jeremiah 33:14–16 (NRSVUE) – “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Reflection: Jeremiah's vision grows from the soil of exile and despair. His world was in ruins, his people scattered, and still he speaks of a “righteous Branch” springing up. Hope, he seems to say, is rooted in God's faithfulness, not our circumstances.

This tender branch is a symbol of restoration—fragile but alive, small but unstoppable. Advent hope is just like that: vulnerable, yet resilient. It doesn't erase pain, but insists that God's promise is still germinating beneath the surface.

To dare to dream is to trust that the smallest signs of justice and renewal are not random—they're reminders that God's story is still unfolding, even when ours feels uncertain.

Practice: Find something growing—a tree, plant, or even a weed—and spend a moment considering how life persists. Offer thanks for resilience, both in nature and in yourself.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where do you see new growth emerging in unlikely places?
2. What “branches” of justice or renewal might God be nurturing through you?
3. How does this promise of a living, growing faith speak to your own spiritual journey?

Prayer: Faithful God, when everything feels cut down, remind me that your promises still take root. Teach me to trust your slow and steady work of renewal. Amen.

□ Friday – Waiting in the Dark

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 (NRSVUE) – “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

This psalm is an honest cry from people who have waited too long. They have wept, prayed, and still the silence lingers. And yet—even here—they ask God to “shine forth.”

Hope does not deny the dark; it dares to name it. The refrain, “Restore us, O God,” is both a plea and a declaration of trust. Even in the shadows, the psalmist believes that God's light can break through.

Waiting in the dark is sacred work. It's where faith deepens, where we learn that restoration isn't about quick fixes but about presence—the quiet assurance that God has not abandoned us.

Practice: Light a candle in the evening and sit in its glow for a few minutes. Let the small flame remind you that light is strongest when the night feels longest.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How comfortable are you with waiting?
2. What does “restore us” mean to you right now?
3. How might you find God's presence even in moments of silence or uncertainty?

Prayer: God of the long night, hear my longing for renewal. When I grow weary, let your light sustain me. Restore me by your presence, and teach me to hope in the dark. Amen.

□ Saturday – Watching for Dawn

Matthew 24:36–44 (NRSVUE) - “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Jesus’ words here aren’t meant to inspire fear, but readiness. The call to “stay awake” is a call to live present to God’s unfolding work. Advent hope is less about prediction and more about participation.

Like the first light of dawn, God’s presence often arrives quietly, without fanfare. The faithful posture is not anxious watching, but attentive living—ready to recognize the holy when it appears in the ordinary.

To dare to dream is to stay awake to possibility, to expect that God might surprise us with grace in the most unexpected places.

Practice: Tomorrow begins a new week in Advent. Set aside time this evening to reflect on what you’ve noticed, where hope has surprised you, and how you might stay awake to God’s presence in the days to come.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do you typically respond to the unexpected?
2. Where in your life might God be quietly breaking in?
3. What does readiness look like for you in this season?

Prayer: Unexpected God, awaken my heart to your presence. Keep me open to your surprises, alert to your grace, and ready to join in what you are already doing. Amen.

WEEK TWO: PROPHETIC PEACE (JOHN THE BAPTIST'S STORY)

Primary Texts: Matthew 3:1–12; Malachi 3:1–6

Peace is one of the most misunderstood words in Scripture. We often imagine it as calm, comfort, or the absence of conflict. But the peace John the Baptist announces—the peace of God’s kingdom—is anything but comfortable. It’s peace that tears down injustice, confronts hypocrisy, and prepares the world for transformation.

John’s cry in the wilderness echoes the prophets before him: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” True peace, he reminds us, requires preparation. It means clearing the clutter of self-interest, softening hardened hearts, and realigning our lives with love.

This week, we listen for the voice crying out in our own wilderness. Where might God be calling us to repentance—not as shame, but as renewal? How might our lives, our words, and our witness become pathways of peace for others?

□ Second Sunday of Advent – The Voice in the Wilderness

Matthew 3:1–12 (NRSVUE) – “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John doesn’t fit our image of peace. He’s wild, blunt, and barefoot in the desert. Yet his message is pure preparation—strip away the excess, clear the path, open the heart. His words unsettle us because they insist that real peace begins with truth.

Repentance isn’t punishment; it’s permission to begin again. When John speaks of fire, he’s not describing destruction but purification—the clearing away of what no longer serves love.

Advent’s invitation is to look inward and ask: What needs to be leveled so that God’s peace can move freely? The wilderness may seem barren, but it’s where the straight paths of hope are laid.

Practice: Take a quiet walk outside. As you move, imagine preparing the path of your own heart—what stones of resentment or pride might need to be cleared away to make room for peace?

Questions for Reflection:

1. What emotions surface when you hear the word “repent”?
2. Where in your life might God be calling you to start fresh?
3. What kind of peace do you long for—the comfortable kind, or the transforming kind?

Prayer: God of holy beginnings, help me hear your call through the noise of my own wilderness. Clear my heart of what hinders love, and prepare in me a path for your peace. Amen.

□ Monday – Refining Fire

Malachi 3:1–6 (NRSVUE) – “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

Fire can terrify or transform. In Malachi’s vision, it does both. The refiner’s fire burns, but it burns with purpose—to restore what is precious, not to destroy it.

This is what peace looks like from God’s perspective: not passive calm, but active restoration. God’s refining love exposes what has been hidden—oppression, dishonesty, neglect—and calls it to account. But it also redeems, making what’s dull shine again.

When we invite God to refine us, we’re really asking for clarity—to see ourselves as God sees us, with truth and tenderness. And when communities invite God’s refining work, justice becomes not a slogan but a way of life.

Practice: Light a candle and watch its flame for a few moments. As you do, invite God to purify your motives and warm your compassion.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What parts of your life feel like they are being “refined” right now?
2. How can you trust that God’s fire is about healing, not harm?
3. What injustices around you might God be calling you to help set right?

Prayer: Refining God, make me transparent to your light. Burn away what keeps me from loving fully, and kindle in me a fire for justice and peace. Amen.

□ Tuesday – Preparing the Way

Isaiah 40:1–5 (NRSVUE) – “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah’s cry begins with comfort, not condemnation. God’s peace starts with tenderness—with words that heal rather than shame. The work of preparation isn’t just about clearing obstacles but about believing that glory will be revealed in the midst of our ordinary deserts.

Advent is a wilderness season—a place between what has been and what is coming. Yet Isaiah’s promise is that even here, the road is being built. Valleys lifted, mountains leveled—God is making a way through the rough places.

Sometimes daring to dream begins with daring to hope that our crooked paths can still be made straight, and our weary hearts made whole.

Practice: Take time to write down one area of your life or community that feels uneven or rough. Pray for God to show you one small way to begin making it level.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What “rough places” in your life need God’s leveling grace?
2. How does the image of a highway in the desert speak to your current season?
3. What would it look like to speak comfort rather than critique this week?

Prayer: Tender God, speak comfort into my wilderness. Make straight the paths of my heart and reveal your glory in the places I least expect it. Amen.

□ **Wednesday – The Peaceable Kingdom**

Isaiah 11:1–9 (NRSVUE) – “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah’s image of peace is radical—it isn’t merely the absence of hostility, but the reordering of creation itself. Predators and prey share the same space. Power yields to innocence. Even danger becomes safe under the guidance of a child.

This vision is almost too beautiful to believe, and yet that’s the point. Advent peace invites us to believe in something the world still finds impossible. It dares us to trust that divine harmony can break into human history.

When we live toward this peace—treating enemies as neighbors, wielding power for service rather than control—we become a glimpse of that kingdom. Peace isn’t passive; it’s prophetic.

Practice: Think of one relationship or situation that feels divided or tense. Offer a prayer for reconciliation—not to win, but to understand.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What part of Isaiah’s vision moves you most deeply?
2. What would a “peaceable kingdom” look like in your home, community, or church?
3. How can you embody peace that disrupts injustice rather than avoids conflict?

Prayer: God of holy harmony, let your peace take root in me. Teach me to seek reconciliation, to choose understanding, and to live as though your kingdom were already here. Amen.

□ **Thursday – Bearing Fruit Worthy of Repentance**

Luke 3:7–14 (NRSVUE) – “John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’ And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax

collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

John’s words sound harsh until you notice what follows. The people don’t recoil—they ask, “What then should we do?” He answers with simple, practical instructions: share what you have, act with integrity, treat others fairly.

Repentance, for John, isn’t about guilt—it’s about growth. It’s a turning of the heart that leads to action. The fruit of repentance is tangible: generosity, honesty, compassion.

The same Spirit that stirred in John stirs in us now, inviting us to let peace take root in our choices. Advent calls us not just to believe in transformation but to participate in it.

Practice: Do one small act of generosity today that costs you something—time, comfort, or convenience—and dedicate it as fruit of repentance.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What kind of fruit do you want your life to bear?
2. How might repentance free you rather than shame you?
3. Which of John’s instructions speaks most clearly to your current situation?

Prayer: Merciful God, help me turn from self-interest toward your way of love. May my words and actions bear fruit that nourishes others and honors you. Amen.

□ Friday – The River of Renewal

Psalm 72:1–7 (NRSVUE) – “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

Psalm 72 imagines leadership not as domination, but as compassion. Justice and peace flow together like rivers that water dry ground. The psalmist dares to dream of a world where those in power defend the poor and the land itself becomes fertile with goodness.

The Advent message of peace is deeply connected to justice—because peace without justice is just silence. When righteousness flourishes, peace follows like rain.

Our calling, then, is not to wait for peace but to help it grow—to become streams of mercy that refresh the world.

Practice: Pray this psalm as a blessing over someone in leadership—local, national, or within your church—asking that they be guided by justice and compassion.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do you define justice in the light of God’s peace?
2. What does this psalm teach you about leadership and responsibility?
3. How might your own actions “water the earth” with peace?

Prayer: God of justice and mercy, let righteousness flow through me like living water. Make me a channel of your peace in every place I serve. Amen.

□ Saturday – The God Who Draws Near

Philippians 4:4–7 (NRSVUE) - Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul's letter ends our week with gentleness rather than thunder. "The Lord is near," he says—not as a threat but as comfort. Peace, in this light, is not something we earn but something that holds us.

The peace of God "guards" our hearts not by removing our worries but by transforming the way we carry them. It's the quiet assurance that we are never alone.

To dare to dream of prophetic peace is to believe this truth: God's nearness changes everything. Even when the world trembles, love remains steady.

Practice: Write a brief prayer of gratitude for one place in your life where God's nearness has brought peace. Keep it somewhere visible this week.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What practices help you remember that God is near?
2. How might gentleness become your act of resistance in a harsh world?
3. When have you experienced peace that "surpasses understanding"?

Prayer: God of peace, draw near to me now. Quiet my fears, steady my heart, and remind me that your love holds all things together. Amen.

WEEK THREE: UNEXPECTED JOY (ELIZABETH'S STORY)

Primary Texts: Luke 1:39–55; Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Joy often arrives unannounced. It slips into ordinary places, catching us by surprise—like laughter breaking through grief or sunlight after days of gray. This is the joy of Advent: not the shallow happiness of pretending everything's fine, but the deep gladness of discovering that God is at work, even when we can't see it.

Elizabeth's story is one of unexpected joy. After years of disappointment, her womb becomes the birthplace of promise. When Mary visits, the child within her leaps—a physical response to divine presence. It's as though creation itself recognizes joy before words can.

This week, we dare to believe that joy can coexist with uncertainty. That hope can grow even in waiting. That love's movement in the world is reason enough to sing.

□ Third Sunday of Advent – Joy Leaps Within

Luke 1:39–45 (NRSVUE) – “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.”

Joy begins with recognition—Elizabeth sees in Mary not just her cousin, but the presence of God's promise. Before words of doctrine or songs of praise, there's a leap of life, a spontaneous reaction to holiness arriving unannounced.

Elizabeth's joy doesn't erase her past pain. She carries years of unanswered prayers, yet still she welcomes the new thing God is doing. That's the kind of joy Advent invites us into: honest, grounded, contagious.

Joy is not naïve. It's resilient. It grows in the soil of faith that has learned to wait. It leaps at every sign that God is near.

Practice: Offer a word of blessing today. Speak life or encouragement to someone who might need to hear that God's promise is still at work in them.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What makes your spirit “leap” these days?
2. How can you hold both joy and sorrow without feeling like one cancels out the other?
3. Who has recognized God's presence in you, even before you saw it yourself?

Prayer: God of joy, help me notice the holy moments that make my heart leap. Fill me with gratitude for your quiet, unfolding presence in the everyday. Amen.

□ Monday – The Song of Mary

Luke 1:46–55 (NRSVUE) – “And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Mary's song is revolutionary joy. It's joy that doesn't ignore injustice but names it, then sings of its undoing. Her praise is not polite—it's prophetic. She rejoices in a God who topples hierarchies and fills empty hands with grace.

Joy, for Mary, is inseparable from justice. It is the music of a world being turned right-side up. Her words invite us to see joy not as escape but as fuel for change.

To dare to dream like Mary is to rejoice not only in what God has done, but in what God is still doing—lifting the lowly, feeding the hungry, keeping promises that never expire.

Practice: Read Mary's song aloud today. Let its rhythm fill your space. Pay attention to the phrases that stir something in you, and consider what kind of joy they call forth.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What lines of Mary's song resonate most deeply with your life right now?
2. How can joy and justice exist together in your spiritual practice?
3. Where do you see God lifting the lowly or filling the hungry today?

Prayer: Mighty and merciful God, teach me to sing with Mary's courage. Let my joy be bold, my gratitude prophetic, and my faith grounded in your steadfast love. Amen.

□ Tuesday – Beauty for Ashes

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 (NRSVUE) – “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, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 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.

Isaiah's prophecy pulses with joy that rebuilds ruins. This isn't denial—it's defiant hope. The same Spirit that anointed Isaiah's words and Mary's song is the Spirit that moves through us today, binding the brokenhearted and planting new life where despair once grew.

“Beauty for ashes” is more than a poetic phrase—it's the heart of Advent joy. God exchanges the symbols of grief for the garments of praise. The transformation is slow, sometimes imperceptible, but it's real.

We are called to participate in this restoration—to rebuild, repair, and reimagine the places that have been devastated. Joy becomes the strength that sustains that holy work.

Practice: Spend time today naming what feels like “ashes” in your life or community. Then, write one sentence of hope that imagines what “beauty” could grow from it.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does “beauty for ashes” mean in your own experience?
2. How does God’s promise of restoration challenge your perspective on despair?
3. What part of your life needs to be “rebuilt” through joy and faith?

Prayer: Restoring God, trade my ashes for your beauty. Plant joy in the soil of my sorrow, and let your Spirit make all things new within me. Amen.

□ Wednesday – Joy in the Waiting

Psalm 126 (NRSVUE) – “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

This psalm captures the paradox of Advent: joy remembered and joy still awaited. Israel rejoices in what God has done, even as they plead for restoration again. It’s the rhythm of faith—laughter mingled with longing, hope held in tension with heartbreak.

“Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.” Joy doesn’t erase our pain; it redeems it. The same tears that water our grief can nurture seeds of promise.

Waiting is never easy, but Advent joy teaches us that the waiting itself can be holy. God’s laughter is already echoing in the distance, and it will not stay distant forever.

Practice: Think of something in your life that feels unfinished. Offer it to God not as frustration, but as a seed planted in hope.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do you hold space for joy and sorrow together?
2. What past experiences remind you that God restores what feels lost?
3. How can your tears become part of your testimony of joy?

Prayer: Faithful God, thank you for joy that grows in the waiting. Teach me to trust your timing and to believe that laughter will return. Amen.

□ Thursday – The Strength of Joy

Nehemiah 8:9–12 (NRSVUE) – “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Joy often shows up in moments of deep conviction. When the people of Israel rediscover God’s word, they weep—grief and gratitude intertwined. But Nehemiah reminds them that holiness isn’t about staying in sorrow. It’s about celebrating grace.

“The joy of the Lord is your strength.” Not your achievements. Not your certainty. Joy itself becomes sustenance—the inner resilience that allows us to live faithfully, even in rebuilding seasons.

Joy is strength because it resists despair. It insists that God’s goodness is still at work, even in what feels broken.

Practice: Make a point to share something good today—a story, a meal, or a moment of gratitude—with someone who needs encouragement.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How has joy given you strength during a difficult time?
2. What helps you move from guilt to grace?
3. How can celebration itself become a form of worship for you?

Prayer: God of grace, let your joy be my strength. When I am weary or unsure, remind me that celebration can be holy work. Amen.

□ **Friday – Singing in the Night**

Habakkuk 3:17–19 (NRSVUE) – “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s, and makes me tread upon the heights.

Habakkuk’s prayer is one of defiant joy. Everything around him has fallen apart—crops, herds, stability—but his spirit remains rooted in trust. Joy, in this sense, is rebellion against despair.

To rejoice “though the fig tree does not blossom” is to declare that our hope is not tied to outcomes. It’s anchored in God’s enduring presence. This kind of joy isn’t loud or flashy; it’s steady and strong, like the sure-footed deer navigating rocky heights.

Joy in the night doesn’t deny the darkness. It lights a candle within it.

Practice: If you’re facing something uncertain, whisper Habakkuk’s words aloud: “Yet I will rejoice.” Let that become a quiet act of faith today.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does “defiant joy” mean to you?
2. How do you cultivate joy when circumstances don’t seem joyful?
3. Where has God been your strength in recent days?

Prayer: God of steadfast joy, even when my world feels uncertain, teach me to rejoice in you. Make my feet sure on the path of faith and fill me with courage to keep singing. Amen.

□ **Saturday – Joy Made Complete**

John 15:9–12 (NRSVUE) – “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus links joy directly to love. “Abide in my love,” he says—not as an abstract concept, but as a way of life. His joy becomes ours when love becomes our posture toward the world.

Complete joy isn't individualistic; it's relational. It grows through connection, through compassion, through the daily practice of choosing love even when it's costly.

As Advent moves toward Christmas, this is the joy we anticipate—the joy that took on flesh, walked among us, and taught us that love is the truest form of rejoicing.

Practice: Choose one act of love today that embodies joy—write a note, volunteer, or simply listen deeply to someone who needs to be heard.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it mean to “abide” in love for you personally?
2. How has love deepened your joy?
3. What would “complete joy” look like in your faith right now?

Prayer: Loving Christ, fill me with your joy. Help me abide in your love and extend it freely, so that others might taste the goodness of your grace. Amen.

WEEK FOUR: MERCIFUL LOVE (ZECHARIAH'S STORY)

Primary Texts: Luke 1:57–80; Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26

Advent moves us from anticipation toward arrival. But before the manger and the angels' song, there's a quiet story of mercy that unfolds in Zechariah's life.

When Zechariah is struck mute in the temple, it's not a punishment so much as a pause. In the silence, he learns what words cannot teach — that mercy is at the heart of everything God is doing. And when his voice returns, the first sound is praise.

Zechariah's story reminds us that love doesn't rush. It waits, listens, softens. It restores us not by power but by mercy. This week, we explore how God's love liberates — freeing us from fear, healing what has hardened, and opening our mouths to bless again.

□ Fourth Sunday of Advent – Mercy Speaks

Luke 1:57–66 (NRSVUE) – “Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Zechariah's silence ends with a word of obedience: “His name is John.” No protest, no hesitation — just trust in what God had promised. And that trust opens his mouth again.

When mercy enters, the first language we learn is gratitude. Zechariah's story shows that sometimes we need the gift of stillness to rediscover the power of praise.

The people around him witness something holy: a man freed by love, a community caught up in wonder, a child whose life will prepare the way. Mercy doesn't just restore Zechariah; it ripples outward.

Practice: Spend five minutes in silence today. Let go of any need to produce or perform. Simply rest in God's mercy and breathe in gratitude.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where in your life is God inviting you into silence or stillness?
2. What does it mean for you to “speak praise” after a season of waiting?
3. How has mercy changed your story?

Prayer: Merciful God, when my voice falters, teach me to rest in your grace. Let your love free my heart from fear and fill my mouth with praise. Amen.

□ Monday – The Song of Zechariah

Luke 1:67–75 (NRSVUE) – “Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our

ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

Zechariah’s first words after months of silence aren’t about himself—they’re about God’s faithfulness. His song, known as the *Benedictus*, is a hymn of redemption and mercy. It connects past promises with present fulfillment.

Notice how his tone shifts from fear to freedom: “that we might serve him without fear.” Mercy does that. It turns anxiety into assurance.

When we receive God’s mercy, we become part of the song. Our lives echo with gratitude, our hearts realign with purpose, and our words begin to bless again.

Practice: Write your own short “song of mercy.” It could be a list of things you’re thankful for, or a few lines of praise in your own words.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How has God’s mercy shaped your understanding of freedom?
2. What does “serving without fear” look like in your context?
3. Why do you think Zechariah’s first words were praise instead of explanation?

Prayer: God of faithfulness, fill me with your Spirit as you filled Zechariah. Let mercy reshape my heart until praise becomes my first response. Amen.

□ **Tuesday – Light for Those in Darkness**

Luke 1:76–80 (NRSVUE) – “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Zechariah blesses his newborn son with words that stretch far beyond their family’s story. John’s life will be a beam of dawn light — guiding weary feet toward peace. And that dawn, Zechariah declares, is born of God’s *tender mercy*.

Mercy isn’t weakness. It’s light that refuses to yield to shadow. It’s the heart of God breaking open for the world. Even before John begins his ministry, the promise is set: the world will change because God’s compassion is on the move. That same dawn still breaks upon us every morning.

Practice: Rise a few minutes earlier than usual. Watch the sunrise or the first light of day, and pray Zechariah’s words: “Guide my feet into the way of peace.”

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does “tender mercy” mean to you?
2. Where in your life do you need light to break through?
3. How can you be a bringer of dawn for others today?

Prayer: God of new mornings, let your tender mercy awaken me again. Shine your light in my shadows and guide my steps in the path of peace. Amen.

□ Wednesday Morning –CHRISTMAS EVE– The Covenant of Love

Psalm 89:1–4 (NRSVUE) – “I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: ‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’”

The psalmist begins where Zechariah’s song leaves off—with praise that remembers. God’s love is not fleeting; it’s covenant love, the kind that lasts through generations and keeps its promises even when we don’t.

This is the love that Advent celebrates—a love that shows up again and again, choosing mercy over judgment, renewal over rejection. To sing of God’s steadfast love “forever” is to trust that no season, no silence, no failure can undo it.

Mercy doesn’t erase the past; it transforms it. Covenant love gathers up all that has been broken and turns it toward wholeness.

Practice: Reflect on one way you’ve experienced God’s faithfulness over time. Write it down and thank God for love that endures longer than your uncertainty.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How have you experienced God’s steadfast love in your own story?
2. What does “covenant love” mean to you in this season?
3. How can remembering God’s faithfulness strengthen your trust today?

Prayer: Faithful God, remind me of your promises that never fail. Help me trust your steadfast love even when I can’t yet see its fullness. Amen.

□ Wednesday Evening – CHRISTMAS EVE – Embodied Promise

Luke 2:1–20; Isaiah 9:2–7 (NRSVUE)

Tonight, on the threshold of Christmas, we hear again the story that reshapes the world — not with spectacle or might, but with the quiet courage of a young mother and the fragile cry of a newborn. The world called for order and control through a census, but God answered with disruption: a birth in a barn, a Savior in swaddling clothes.

Isaiah calls it light breaking through darkness — not someday, but now. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The promise has already begun its work. The Infinite becomes an infant. Divine love takes on breath and bone, not demanding attention but whispering hope through vulnerability.

Mary shows us that incarnation is not simply a moment in history; it is a continuing invitation. God still desires to be born in us — in our bodies, our relationships, our choices, and in the ways we care for a weary world. Love is not an abstraction; it’s something we can touch, tend, and live.

The shepherds remind us that the first audience of this good news was not the powerful but the overlooked. Heaven breaks its silence not in palaces, but in fields. The message is simple and tender: *Do not be afraid*. Christ is born for all people — especially for those who feel unseen.

And Mary’s response, treasured in her heart, teaches us that the holy needs both proclamation and pondering, both witness and wonder. In this night that holds so many emotions — joy, longing, grief, hope — we are invited to receive Christ again with the honesty we have and the faith we can hold.

Tonight, God’s dream takes on skin again — in us. In our gentleness, our courage, our small acts of mercy, the Christ-child grows.

Practice: Light a candle in the dark this evening. Hold something small — a keepsake, a hand, a pet, or even your own breath — and give thanks that God chooses smallness to reveal greatness. Whisper: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

Questions for Reflection

1. What does the vulnerability of Jesus’ birth reveal to you about divine love?
2. Where do you sense God inviting you toward gentleness, humility, or presence tonight?
3. Who are the “shepherds” in your life — those who need to hear good news first?
4. What moments from this season do you want to treasure and ponder in your heart?

Prayer: God of the manger, thank you for entering our world not with force but with tenderness. Shine your light into our shadows tonight and let your peace find room in us. Help us to recognize you in ordinary places — in smallness, in stillness, in love born again. Make us bearers of your hope to those who feel forgotten. Christ, be born in us this night. Amen.

□ Thursday – CHRISTMAS DAY – Strength in Gentleness

Psalm 89:19–26 (NRSVUE) – “Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one and said: ‘I have set the crown on one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him. The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him. I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted. I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’”

On Christmas morning, this psalm sings with new light. Once spoken over David, these promises now echo in the birth of the One who comes from David’s line — the Messiah born not into power, but into poverty; not into a throne room, but into a manger.

God’s idea of strength has always been different from ours. Psalm 89 imagines God’s strength as presence: “My hand shall always remain with him... my faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him.”

On this day of Christ’s birth, we see that promise wrapped in cloth and held in human arms.

The child born in Bethlehem will embody a strength that conquers not by force but by love — by healing, lifting, forgiving, restoring. The Savior comes not to overpower the world but to remake it through mercy.

Christmas reveals that divine strength is always gentle, always faithful, always near.

Today, as we celebrate the birth of Christ, we remember that the strongest power in the universe arrives among us in vulnerability — to accompany us, not to crush us.

Practice: Hold a moment of stillness today. Let yourself be quiet enough to feel God’s nearness. Whisper a simple prayer: “Christ, be my strength.” Let gentleness guide your words and actions as a birthday gift to the One born this day.

Questions for Reflection

How does the gentleness of Jesus’ birth reshape the way you understand divine strength?
Where are you being invited to trust God’s faithful presence today?
How might you embody Christlike gentleness in your interactions this Christmas?

Prayer: God of strength and tenderness, on this holy day when Christ is born, remind me that your power is made known in love. Hold me steady in your faithfulness, guide me in compassion, and let the gentleness of Jesus shape the way I live and love. Amen.

□ Friday – Fearless in Love

1 John 4:16–19 (NRSVUE) – “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.”

“There is no fear in love.” Zechariah’s story proves it. Fear initially kept him from believing; love freed his voice. Fear shrinks our world. It makes us cautious, suspicious, small. But love expands it. When we abide in love, we find the boldness to live fully and the peace to trust deeply.

This is what Christmas will soon declare: love embodied, fear disarmed. Advent’s work is to prepare our hearts for that freedom—to make room for the kind of mercy that drives fear out.

Practice: Notice where fear has been guiding your decisions lately. Offer those places to God in prayer, asking for the courage to choose love instead.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where in your life is fear holding you back from love?
2. What helps you remember that you are already loved by God?
3. How can you embody fearless love toward others this week?

Prayer: God of perfect love, free me from fear. Help me trust your presence so deeply that I move through this world with peace, courage, and compassion. Amen.

□ Saturday – A Song of Mercy

Micah 7:18–20 (NRSVUE) – “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing mercy. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.”

Micah ends his prophecy with awe: “Who is a God like you?” The God of Israel, the God we meet in Christ, is not defined by anger but by mercy. “He delights in showing mercy”—what a breathtaking phrase. Mercy is not God’s reluctant response; it’s God’s joy. To show compassion is God’s deepest nature.

When we sing Zechariah’s song, when we practice forgiveness, when we choose grace over grievance, we reflect that same delight. Love rejoices to heal.

Practice: Think of someone who needs mercy from you—someone who has hurt or disappointed you. Pray for them by name and ask God to soften your heart toward them.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does it change your view of God to imagine God *delighting* in mercy?
2. When have you felt God’s mercy most personally?
3. How might your own mercy become a witness to God’s love?

Prayer: God of compassion, thank you for delighting in mercy. Help me mirror your joy in forgiveness and your faithfulness in love. Amen.

□ FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS – GENERATIONAL PRAISE (ANNA’S STORY)

Luke 2:36–40 (NRSVUE) – “There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

Anna’s faith spans decades. She waits and watches through the long arc of her life, and when the moment finally comes, her response is pure joy. She praises, and she tells others what she’s seen.

Her story is a reminder that God’s promises stretch across generations. Her faith, once quiet and unseen, becomes the first public proclamation of who Jesus is.

Anna teaches us that faithfulness is never wasted. Every prayer, every act of devotion, every moment of steadfast waiting contributes to the song of redemption.

Practice: Reach out to someone from an older or younger generation this week. Listen to their story, share your own, and thank God for the ways faith endures through time.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Who in your life has modeled steady, enduring faith for you?
2. How does Anna’s long faith encourage your own waiting?
3. How can you pass along hope to the next generation?

Prayer: God of all generations, thank you for those whose quiet faith has paved the way for mine. Help me, like Anna, to live in praise and to share your story with joy. Amen.

EPIPHANY: COURAGEOUS DEFIANCE

Primary Texts: Matthew 2:1–15; Exodus 1:8–2:10

Epiphany is the moment when hidden light becomes visible — when revelation meets courage, and when God’s dream breaks into the world through ordinary people daring to trust it. This week, we encounter not just one dreamer, but a whole community of holy disruptors who embody God’s hope with their lives.

We meet the Magi, who refuse to be instruments of Herod’s fear and choose another road — a quiet act of rebellion that protects a vulnerable child. We remember the midwives of Exodus, whose holy defiance preserves life in the face of Pharaoh’s violence. We see Moses’ mother and sister, who dare to imagine a future for him when every law said he shouldn’t survive. We see Pharaoh’s daughter stepping outside the empire’s script to rescue a Hebrew baby from the reeds. And we return to Joseph, who listens deeply to the dream God plants within him and carries his family across borders as refugees.

Across these stories, a pattern emerges: daring to dream means daring to act. God’s dream is never passive. It calls forth courage, compassion, and creative resistance. It asks ordinary people to protect life, challenge oppressive power, and trust that love can carve a new path even in the shadow of empire.

Epiphany teaches us that revelation is not simply something we receive — it’s something we live. The light shines, and then we decide what we will do with it.

This week we remember that God’s dream is still being born through those who refuse to surrender to fear, who choose mercy over compliance, and who embody courageous defiance in the name of love.

□ Sunday – Following the Star

Matthew 2:1–12 (NRSVUE) – “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

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 its 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 down and paid him homage. Then, opening their 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.”

The Magi’s journey is both mystical and defiant. They follow a star instead of a system, and when truth demands it, they refuse to obey Herod’s deceitful command. Their worship becomes an act of rebellion against empire.

Epiphany calls us to that same kind of discernment—to listen for God’s direction even when it challenges authority or expectation. The Magi remind us that wisdom is not just knowing, but *going*.

Every journey of faith eventually requires us to take another road—one that leads away from fear and toward freedom.

Practice: Spend time reflecting on a decision before you today. Ask, “What is the road that leads toward love?” and choose the path that aligns with peace and integrity.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What “stars” guide you when clarity feels distant?
2. How do you recognize God’s voice in the midst of competing powers?
3. What might it mean for you to take “another road” this year?

Prayer: Guiding Light, lead me beyond fear and into truth. When the familiar path feels safe but wrong, give me courage to follow your star toward love. Amen.

□ **Monday – Flight into Egypt**

Matthew 2:13–15 (NRSVUE) – “Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.””

Joseph’s obedience is immediate and unhesitating. He doesn’t argue or ask for certainty; he simply acts. That’s what love does—it moves to protect, even when the cost is high.

This moment is not dramatic but deeply human: a father carrying his family into the unknown, trusting that God’s voice in the dark is enough. It’s a story repeated throughout history—families fleeing violence, searching for safety, clinging to hope.

God’s presence travels with the displaced, the refugee, the weary wanderer. In Joseph’s courage, divine compassion takes flesh again.

Practice: Pray today for those forced to flee their homes—refugees, asylum seekers, and all who travel by night seeking peace. Consider one tangible way to support them in your community.

Questions for Reflection:

1. When has faith required you to act before understanding everything?
2. How does Joseph’s courage inspire your own response to fear or injustice?
3. What does it mean for you to trust God “by night”?

Prayer: Protecting God, be with all who journey through uncertainty. When I am afraid, help me to move in faith and to carry your compassion wherever I go. Amen.

□ **Tuesday – Remembering the Midwives**

Exodus 1:8–17 (NRSVUE) – “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor.

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

Before Joseph, before Jesus, there were two women—Shiphrah and Puah—who defied empire with compassion. Their holy disobedience saved lives and preserved the dream of God's people.

Epiphany reminds us that revelation is not only seen in stars but embodied in acts of courage. Sometimes the most faithful response is refusal—to reject systems that harm and to choose life instead.

These midwives remind us that the work of redemption begins in the hands of ordinary people who dare to love when fear demands obedience.

Practice: Reflect on one situation—personal, communal, or global—where love might call you to resist injustice. Pray for wisdom and courage to act with compassion and integrity.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where might God be inviting you to a holy kind of resistance?
2. How can compassion become a form of defiance in your context?
3. What role do ordinary people play in God's extraordinary work?

Prayer: God of courage, thank you for those who choose mercy over fear. Give me the strength to stand with love, even when it costs me comfort or approval. Amen.

□ Wednesday – Moses in the Reeds

Exodus 2:1–10 (NRSVUE) – "Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said.

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him.

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Moses's story is one of fierce, maternal courage. Every woman in this passage defies the system—his mother, his sister, even Pharaoh's daughter. Together, they create a hidden network of resistance through compassion.

Like Joseph's family centuries later, they act quietly but decisively, trusting that protecting life is worth any risk. The basket in the reeds becomes a vessel of divine defiance, carrying the promise of liberation.

God's dream has always depended on the courage of those who refuse to let fear have the final say.

Practice: Pray for those who nurture hope in dangerous places—parents, teachers, caregivers, and advocates. If you can, send encouragement to someone quietly doing this holy work.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What do these women teach you about courage?
2. How might God be calling you to protect or nurture life around you?
3. What “baskets” of hope can you build right now, even in small ways?

Prayer: God of liberation, give me the courage of those who act with compassion against cruelty. Help me protect life and carry your dreams into the world. Amen.

□ **Thursday – Dreams That Protect**

Matthew 2:19–23 (NRSVUE) – “When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

Once again, Joseph dreams—and once again, he obeys. His life is guided not by control but by listening. He moves when love requires movement and waits when wisdom requires caution.

This is what faithful defiance looks like: not reckless rebellion, but steady obedience to the voice of God that speaks through dreams, intuition, and discernment.

Nazareth becomes the unlikely place where salvation takes root because Joseph refused to let fear dictate the story. His courage is quiet but world-changing.

Practice: Pay attention to your inner life today. What nudges, whispers, or insights might be God's way of guiding you toward peace and protection?

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do you discern God's guidance in times of uncertainty?
2. What helps you balance courage with wisdom?
3. How can you be attentive to God's “dreams” for your life and community?

Prayer: Still-speaking God, help me listen with the heart of Joseph. Give me ears to hear your quiet directions and courage to follow where you lead. Amen.

□ **Friday – The Wisdom of Refugees**

Leviticus 19:33–34 (NRSVUE) – “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Israel's memory of exile becomes a command for compassion. “You were aliens in Egypt,” God reminds them—therefore, love those who seek refuge among you.

Joseph's family once fled across borders for safety. That story becomes the foundation of a moral truth: those who have known vulnerability are called to protect the vulnerable.

To love the stranger is to recognize our shared humanity. The God who came as a refugee child still dwells among those who wander, waiting to be welcomed.

Practice: Find a way—big or small—to practice hospitality this week. It could be donating to a refugee organization, welcoming a newcomer, or offering a meal or kind word.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does this passage teach you about memory and empathy?
2. How might you “love the stranger as yourself” in practical ways?
3. Where have you experienced welcome that shaped your understanding of God?

Prayer: God of the displaced, open my heart and my home to those who seek refuge. May my compassion reflect your boundless love. Amen.

□ **Saturday – The Dream Lives On**

Scripture: *Matthew 2:16–18 (NRSVUE)* – “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

The Christmas story does not end without tears. Behind the angel songs, there is mourning. Herod's rage reveals how deeply threatened the powers of this world are by love that refuses to bow.

But even amid grief, God's dream persists. Rachel's cry is not the final sound; redemption continues through the lives spared, the compassion awakened, the courage reborn in every generation that chooses love over domination.

Epiphany reminds us that light does not deny darkness—it defies it.

Practice: Light a candle in remembrance of all who suffer because of violence, fear, or injustice. Let your prayer be a commitment to keep the flame of love alive.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does acknowledging pain deepen your understanding of faith?
2. What injustices in our world make you want to “keep the light burning”?
3. How can lament become part of your worship and witness?

Prayer: God of compassion, hold those who weep and strengthen those who act for peace. Let your dream of love outlast every shadow. Amen.

□ **Sunday – The Courage to Dream Again**

Isaiah 60:1–3 (NRSVUE) – “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Epiphany ends as it began—with light breaking through. The journey that started in waiting now becomes a call to action: *Arise, shine*. The dream does not belong only to Isaiah or Joseph or Mary—it belongs to us.

The same light that guided the Magi, protected the child, and carried Israel out of Egypt still glows in the people of God. We are not passive observers of that light; we are its bearers.

To dare to dream is to believe that love still transforms, peace still heals, and mercy still wins. The dawn has come—and it's our turn to shine.

Practice: End your Advent–Epiphany journey by naming one dream God has placed in your heart for the world. Write it down and commit to nurturing it in the year ahead.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What “light” do you feel called to carry into the world?
2. How has this season changed your understanding of courage?
3. Where do you see God’s glory rising in and around you today?

Prayer: God of new beginnings, thank you for every glimpse of your light. Give me the courage to live your dream—to arise, to shine, and to love without fear. Amen.