



2021 Advent Devotional



Welcome to Advent

Advent is a four week season culminating with Christmas. For as many as 1,500 years, Christians have used this time to prepare themselves and their church communities for Jesus' arrival and all of what that means to the world. This Advent devotional intends to do the same. Consider it a companion to the services at NSCBC, as it includes reflections on the same passages we will read on Sundays and Christmas Eve and it provides background on the sanctuary art installation. It was designed to be both beautiful and versatile: you can read it as a book or take it apart and display the pages as one large piece. When displayed 4 pages x 4 pages (as a large square), the design that runs through the book becomes a visual reminder of the stump installation in the church sanctuary. Display it in a location in your home where you will return to it often. Let this visual queue prompt you to pray, meditate on the readings, or consider the reflection questions posed throughout the book. It is by and for our church family. Many thanks to those who prayerfully crafted the reflections, poems, artwork and to all who lead us in welcoming Jesus, as he lives in and through our community.



Sanctuary Art Installation: A new branch emerges

The smell of evergreens and sparkle of lights against their boughs are familiar sights of Christmas for us. This year, you will find a different sort of tree at the center of the sanctuary. The sculpture, and also the design of this book, directly borrows from an image in the book of Isaiah:

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1)*

A Christmas stump? Like all good art, it is provocative and even jarring. This reflection aims to prepare you to receive this image well.

Familiar on the landscape and essential to everyday life, trees offered a convenient metaphor for ancient peoples: as went the vineyards and orchards of the land, so went the health and vitality of the people. The prophet Isaiah lived and preached at a time that this image would have landed. Israel was an independent nation. God liberated their ancestors out of slavery, graciously planted them in their own land, and gave them wisdom to conduct the nation in the way of peace. Practicing love of God and love of neighbor, Israel would stand out on the landscape like a mighty tree, revealing God's nature and kingship to the nations.


However, Isaiah could see that below the surface of a functioning economy, religious system, and kingship, the tree was withered and dry. The king made foolish alliances with other nations. The wealthy oppressed the poor. Idolatry flourished. As a result, exile was on the horizon. The political alliances would fail. The country would be invaded and the painful, violent disaster would end with large-scale displacement into a foreign country.

In the sanctuary installation, you may notice that the trees in the background are scorched, with a felled tree in the foreground. This stump is the image Isaiah gave



Sanctuary Installation Sketch

Meredith Free



the people to visualize their corporate life. While it may seem extreme, consider that the nations who presented a military threat to Israel were known for committing acts of environmental genocide, clear-cutting and scorching the orchards of the land they invaded. This stump represented a very real embodiment of the people's fear. For us to understand Isaiah's hope, it is important for us first to gaze on this bleak portrait. Having lived through a period of global pandemic, perhaps you can relate to feeling as if the forest is burning. If not, use your imagination.

Where in the world today can people relate?

Headed into exile, the people needed hope that God would someday replant them in the land and restore their corporate vitality. Isaiah proclaimed that God would make a tender shoot—a new King—spring out of the seemingly hopeless stump of their nation. This new branch would grow and produce fruit, providing a source of flourishing new life.

Unlike the kings Israel had known, this King would fully live by God's Spirit and embody all of God's wisdom for leading the people in the way of peace and justice. The structure of his kingdom offered hope for the poor, the faithful, and the humbled.
(Isaiah 11:2-16)

This is the hope of Christmas. This is the image that lived in the hearts and minds of Mary and Simeon when they caught their first glimpses of young Jesus and burst into song, proclaiming:

*My eyes have now seen your salvation (Luke 2:30) and
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. (Luke 1:52)*

The sculpture was installed in the sanctuary this year hoping that God's Spirit would use an ancient image to refresh your modern imagination! As you spend time in worship over the next four weeks, ask God to plant this image deep in your soul. Where might Jesus' kingdom yet sprout in our midst? Ask God where our community needs the hope that Jesus' arrival offers.

-Sarah Bartley & Ellie Wiener
-Sanctuary Artists: Emmy Short & Meredith Free

Songs of the People

Open the gospel of Luke and you may be forgiven for thinking it is a musical. The first two chapters are full of song. Jesus' mother Mary, John the Baptist's father Zechariah, a choir of angels, devout old Simeon—each one sings a song to celebrate Jesus. Their songs are not out of place in the Bible. Many years prior, on the safe side of the Red Sea, Moses and Miriam sang about God's deliverance out of slavery and into freedom. Hannah sang about the nature of God's power when she became a parent. These songs express the relief of people who have patiently waited for God to vindicate them and heal their community. They are the songs of people who long for a new world order, when power is turned right side up and people live from the inside out. Each one has caught a glimpse of what Jesus' kingdom will be like. Their poems are far more than rhetorical flourishes to skip as you read Bible stories! They are more like lampposts casting light on the meaning of God's activity. From them we learn to anticipate Jesus' arrival among us and to celebrate the shape of his kingdom. His arrival is unexpected to the masses yet deeply satisfying to those whose watchful eyes and yearning hearts have learned to recognize and wait for it. We have called these poems the *Songs of the People*. They embody the hope of people who are ready to welcome Jesus and his kingdom into their lives. May the light of their words illuminate your own and our collective experience of Jesus' kingdom this Christmas.

Moses' & Miriam's Song

Exodus 15:1-21 | Brian Indrelie

History is usually told by the victors. With resources, victors have no trouble becoming the heroes of their own stories. Had God not intervened, we might simply remember the Pharaohs of Egypt as the great builders of a mighty civilization, and would likely know nothing of the Hebrews, on whose backs some of that civilization was built. That is why the remarkable event of the Exodus elicited such joy from Moses and Miriam. The power of Egypt, measured in chariots and horses, had been decisively smashed by God, liberating an oppressed people, conquering the conquerors.

Standing with the people, on the safe side of the sea, Moses and Miriam sing songs that reach both backward and forward to declare God's salvation. They sing of waters being gathered in a heap, which recalls creation, where God separates the waters from the dry ground. They sing of the waters as a flood, alluding to the cleansing of the earth from the violent empires of ancient times in the days of Noah, and the subsequent re-birth of creation. Their song is later recalled by the Apostle Paul, who speaks of this event as Israel's baptism. (1 Corinthians 10: 1-4) So foundational is this event, that throughout the Old Testament, the word "salvation" chiefly refers to the Exodus. In this moment, Israel became the winners of history not because they had taken the scepter of Pharaoh with their might, but because God had redeemed them from their slavery.

In every era after, Israel is admonished to remember. The practice of Passover helps them continue identifying with the Exodus generation, even after the memories fade. They were to be kind to foreigners living among them, treating them as if native-born, because they themselves had been mistreated foreigners. (Leviticus 19:34, Exodus 22:21) They were to support the poor without any personal gain, for God had redeemed them when they were poor without any personal gain. (Leviticus 25:35-37, Exodus 22:25) Because they had been hungry, homeless, and in chains, their mandate was to "loose the chains of injustice," to "break every yoke," to share their food with the hungry, and to "provide the poor wanderer with shelter." (Isaiah 58:6-7) The meaning of the Exodus baptism was that they were redeemed to forever identify with and serve those like them.

While some of us may experience discomfort for our faith, few of us face the oppression described in Exodus, making it difficult to join in Moses' and Miriam's joy. Take time for this guided reflection:

- Remember your own baptism. Re-read this song as you recall how it felt to be lifted out of the water. Imagine yourself identifying with the people saved through the waters.
- Reflect on your planned holiday celebrations. What practices will help you capture the joy of this song? What practices will help you repent of (or avoid) becoming lost in the love of comfort and convenient narratives?
- Ask God's Spirit to point you toward opportunities to work for justice to be realized.



Hannah's Song

1 Samuel 2:1-10 | Andrew Rennekamp

“Do not be dismayed,” disappointed, stressed, or afraid. Be strong and courageous. These are biblical commands, and Moses’ parting words (Deut. 1:21,31:8) echoed by Joshua (Josh. 1:9, 8:1). The people of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land of blessing, relief, and rest. And yet, they *still* needed encouragement against disappointment. Merely crossing the Jordan River wouldn’t be enough; they had a slog ahead of them in the place “flowing with milk and honey.” *It wasn’t that their spies had been dismayed for no reason.*

God’s people had to continue to exercise faith in him as Provider and Deliverer, following the terms of his covenant with them. But the triumphs of Joshua turned into a downward spiral in Judges, where the people did what was right in their own eyes: worshiping other gods, abusing their women, and ignoring their agreement with their heavenly King. This is where we find Hannah, in the opening chapters of Samuel—suffering—*with many good reasons to be dismayed.*

When a Levite’s concubine was raped, murdered, and dismembered at the end of Judges, the atrocity may hit close to home. Both women were from Bethlehem, married to Levites practicing polygamy. Perhaps Hannah wondered if it could have been her. Hannah was also barren, and the other wife in her household reveled in her pain. When seeking comfort at God’s House, the High Priest, blind to the sin of his own sons, labeled her as a worthless drunk.

Despite many good reasons to be dismayed, Hannah leans into God. She boldly asks God for a child, boldly (yet respectfully) corrects the High Priest, and boldly believes God’s word of blessing to her. Even more remarkable, her song points forward at the work God will do to elevate the humble and establish his Anointed. Despite her violent context, Hannah boldly declares that, “not by might shall a person prevail.” This woman displays deep insight into God’s character and the nature of his rule. Hannah’s song tells us how a remarkable unremarkable woman from Bethlehem Ephrathah could be strong, be courageous, and fight off despair by reflecting on the nature of God’s power and plight-reversing salvation. Her song would inspire Psalm 113 and Mary’s song (Luke 1:46-55) and offers a light for us when all seems dark.

In the midst of your deepest longing, Hannah invites you into her joy, to experience the One who laid the foundation of the earth and to meet the promised Son he gave away. Come to the One who became poor so you could be rich, broken so you could be strong, and barren so you could be filled.

I, too, invite you this week, whenever you notice Christmas lights, to pause and peer deeply into the darker voids between the lights—and to remember that the God of reversals and contrast *will not leave you dismayed.*

Mary's Song

Luke 1:46-56 | Sunday Service: 11.28.21 | Laura Range

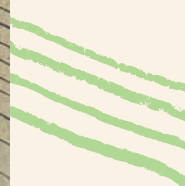
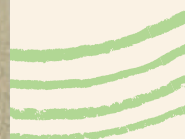
'Tis the season for high-end retailers to market Christmas décor to me. The endless nativity sets appearing in online ads have a lot in common—meek and mild characters in neutral colors, priced for people with disposable income. These gilded figurines are emblematic of how many imagine the nativity: a cast of venerated characters who trace their way through familiar plot points until they reach their peaceful, idealized destination one silent, holy night. Perhaps this is why Mary's song is rarely read. Her words seem unfitting of meek, mild, gilded Mary. And yet, hardly an aberration, Mary's song and story shine a bright light on the nature of God's kingdom.

Mary's story reflects the mystery of a humble king. We cannot let the familiarity of Mary's story overshadow how radical it was. In the small, rural town of Galilee, a young, unmarried Hebrew woman living a subsistence lifestyle is about as powerless as you can get. Her community is dominated by Roman rule, which promised peace, but delivered it by oppressing the people it conquered. An angel appears to announce that God is eager to bind himself to humanity and that he wants to do it through her. It is in this context that Mary sings about a beautiful mystery—that the God of the universe will partner with her to deliver the long-awaited King. He hasn't chosen her despite who she is, but because of who she is. Through her son, God reverses the way power is used—not to dominate, but to lift up.

Mary's song points to a greater upheaval to come. Throughout the Christmas story, this pattern of the divine visiting and even binding itself to humble people and places continues to repeat as majestic angels appear to shepherds and the promised savior of the world is laid in an unsanitary feeding trough. Mary's song announces that Jesus' life—his teaching, his death, and his continued life through the early church—is the way God will begin to turn the world right-side-up.

Mary's song gives both hope and exhortation. Mary's song has long sustained communities who, like her, wait for God's kingdom to address the use and misuse of power, but it may not seem like good news to the rich and the well-fed. It exhorts us in humility and the fear of the Lord, that we may be renewed in the image of God who lifts up the humble.

Our lives sing a song of what God's kingdom is like. As you reflect on *Songs of the People*, ask God to show you what song he has given you to sing. Does your song sound like this kingdom? Do you keep your song to yourself? Pray that the Lord will give you opportunities to sing of the surprising and hopeful nature of his kingdom.



Mary's Jubilant Praise
Priscilla Chow



Mary's Jubilant Praise

Luke 1:46-55

Upon receiving the news, Mary's chosen response is a posture of praise. The lines of the drawing capture the energy of Mary's jubilant song. I imagine Mary jumping up and down, singing, and holding her hands to cradle her future son while the Spirit of God encircled her.

Zechariah's Song

Luke 1:67-79 | Sunday Service: 12.05.21 | Ben Friedman

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the mythical land of Narnia is stuck in perpetual winter, languishing under the oppressive rule of the White Witch. Near the beginning of the book, the Pevensie children encounter Beaver, who informs them: "They say Aslan is on the move—perhaps has already landed." Beaver, steeped in the prophetic lore of his land, knew that Aslan, the lion, and Christ-figure in the story, was the one who would bring an end to the sorrows of Narnia, and usher in spring again. Though the story was only just getting started, Beaver's ears were tuned to any news of the redeeming movements of Aslan.

In Luke 1, the gospel was only getting started. Shortly after John the Baptist's birth, his father, Zechariah broke into prophetic song, extolling the Lord of Israel with truly grandiose and decisive statements: "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David*" (Luke 1:68-69).

What is striking is how *little* has happened so far, in the narrative of the gospel. John's birth was no small miracle, but here Zechariah celebrates good news of redemption for the whole nation. And yet, what had really changed for God's people at this early point in the story? John—himself only the forerunner to the redeemer Jesus—was but eight days old. Mary was only twelve weeks pregnant with Jesus, who, tracking six months behind his cousin, would have weighed ½ oz and measured 2 inches long inside her womb. Was Zechariah celebrating too soon? Shouldn't he wait a bit...just to be safe?

Zechariah wasn't celebrating too soon. Like Beaver, he knew the story of his people. He knew the character of his God. Perhaps he heard Mary's song. And he knew concrete promises that God had made to them—which is why he could sing about God coming to "show the mercy promised to our fathers" (1:72). He knew that prophecy was being fulfilled, and that when God had set the ball rolling "in the fullness of time," nothing could stop it.

The more we become acquainted with the heart of Jesus, the story of our faith, and the promises of God, the more we, like Zechariah, can celebrate even the first tremors of his redeeming movements. What small beginnings can you celebrate this week?

Song of the Angels

Luke 2:14 | Sunday Service: 12.12.21 | Melissa Zaldivar

There's a funny sort of thing happening here to these shepherds. They are ordinary men—perhaps the very most ordinary. The very most overlooked and forgotten. The very least feels more accurate when considering them from the perspective of those around them.

The days are long and the nights are cold and the work is hard. Sheep aren't particularly smart animals and have a propensity for getting themselves into danger, but the shepherds are there to see it happen and act accordingly. They watch all of the sheep and know when one is missing or struggling. The shepherds are the ones who notice.

Of course, it doesn't take much effort to notice a sky full of thousands of angels singing praise. Anyone would have noticed. But the fact that the witnesses of such a magnificent thing would be shepherds? That seems unlikely at best. Surely those who proclaim the glory of God would arrive before the Kings and Queens, the diplomats and the wealthy. They would show power to power as a way of setting things in order.

But no. That's not how this kingdom works. Everything in the kingdom of God is upside down—or perhaps I should say everything is right side up?—and it shows. These strong and silent types are seeing the beauty and volume of heaven touching earth and I can't help but wonder what I am missing when I don't look to the ordinary when searching for Jesus.

After all, the glory is at the ground-level.

Sometimes I want to show Jesus that I am brave enough or competent enough or simply *enough* enough to be His. I assume that I have to offer my winsomeness to Him in order to prove that I am worthy of His presence or time or affection. But the truest and strangest thing is that He makes himself known and does not hold back to the smallest and the seemingly most insignificant. He will find me right where I am. Like a sheep that wanders and is noticed by no one except the shepherd. It's as if the angels appear to the Shepherds because they reflect the heart of God—our Good Shepherd—so he's not coming to strangers, but to his very own. Glory to God, indeed.

Take a moment to reflect on how you may try to prove your importance to God. What would it look like for you to spend time simply receiving his love?

Simeon's Spiritual: Longing for the Upside-Down

Jessi Colund Rennekamp

My paintbrush sweeps over the canvas
Bright, swirling colors over stark blackness
A candle lit as though in a vigil
I paint in faith as my eyesight fails

I've always known my home is over Jordan
Because the sirens drown out my voice
And the hospital turns a deaf ear to my pain
Sending me out the door and into the cold

I'm finding my own way home
As the snow falls all around
I'm longing for the upside-down
Where I'm heard, believed, known

Lord, I'm waiting for your salvation
A new Simeon creating while I'm waiting
Long hours hoping for my reward
I know I'll see it on the other side of the door

I ain't got long to stay here

Lord, I paint the world as you'd like it to be
A little brighter, a little freer
A world without pain
That listens to my name

Lord, I'm longing for the upside-down
A place where solace can be found
Where my struggle matters
Where all your children can snuggle 'round

As my eyes grow weaker
And the world grows darker
I can see your kingdom clearer
The horizon's coming nearer

I wait, I create
You create in me
A new heart
A new hope of glory
And my upside-down
Is your right-side up

I ain't got long to stay here

Simeon's Spiritual: Longing for the Upside-Down

Luke 2:29-32 | Image: Hertz Nazaire

This poem was written in honor of Hertz Nazaire, a sickle cell warrior, artist, and fellow believer who passed away in late October 2021. Despite dealing with daily debilitating pain, crushing racially based stigma, and a healthcare system that didn't understand or care enough, he maintained his hope and faith in God and knew that Jesus' coming kingdom will look much different than the injustices and pain he experienced in this world.

In faith, he painted a world without pain. As he painted for hours on end, while he was going blind from his disease, he knew he was working on his final painting—his magnum opus. He completed it just days before his death. "You may now dismiss your servant in peace," I imagine he may have prayed.

Advent is a season of waiting and meditating on our longings for Jesus' salvation – the world as he created it to be, not the world as it is. It's a reminder that he "increases the power of the weak," sees the overlooked, heals the sick, fights for the downtrodden. I pray that this song, which weaves in language from traditional African-American spirituals, reminds all of us that we can find our hope and our home in the values of Jesus' upside-down kingdom.



Simeon's Song

Luke 2:29-32 | Sunday Service: 12.19.21 | Kara Dry

I live and work in a majority immigrant neighborhood just outside Barcelona. Two years ago, I knew I was relocating to engage in cross-cultural ministry, but I did not expect to experience such a diverse Church. God is growing my appreciation for the richness and fullness of his kingdom as I dance alongside Latino friends, pray with faithful Nigerian families, and listen to the bold, truthful preaching of a Scottish sister.

These are the people with whom I gather each Friday for worship. Last week, I arrived late and as I opened the door, I was greeted with a blast of chatter and the sight of kids happily chasing one another. The beauty of this gathering gave me pause: I noticed an older Venezuelan woman speaking Spanish with a young mom from Egypt, a middle-age Scottish woman speaking Arabic with a young Moroccan girl, a red headed woman from New Jersey, and a Canadian of Chinese descent. A 7' tall man bent low to speak with a young Egyptian boy and a Moroccan youth. At that moment, I was struck with the question, "*What god would gather a group like this?*" That evening the gospel was proclaimed in English, Spanish, Egyptian Arabic, and Moroccan Arabic.

Apparently, Simeon was promised an opportunity to see the Messiah. The amazing thing about Simeon's song is that he celebrates not simply the fulfillment of God's promise to him, but the salvation of all nations! Simeon held in his arms "the light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel" (Luke 2:31-32). During the Christmas season we reflect and celebrate the fulfillment of a promise that was given not to one man, not to one people group, but to all nations. It follows that this hope, anticipated from the first chapters of Genesis, will be expressed in and through the full diversity of languages and cultures of the world. Jesus reveals the way to the Father for the Egyptian family, the young Moroccan girl, the Venezuelans, for me, and for you.

As you sing carols in church next Sunday, can you imagine yourself joining Simeon in praising God for the hope Jesus offers the entire world? Take this forward by making time over the next few weeks for a conversation with a friend from a different country or ethnic background. If they are Christian, ask them what Jesus' kingdom means to their community. If they aren't, ask them how Christians in their country celebrate Christmas. Be prepared to share how and why you celebrate. If you don't know anyone from a different country or ethnic background, take the first step of contacting the church and asking to be connected with a World Partner so you can learn how Jesus' kingdom is arriving to communities across the world.

Joy to the WHOLE world! The Lord has come... Let EVERY heart prepare Him room.



Abiding

Sarah Bartley

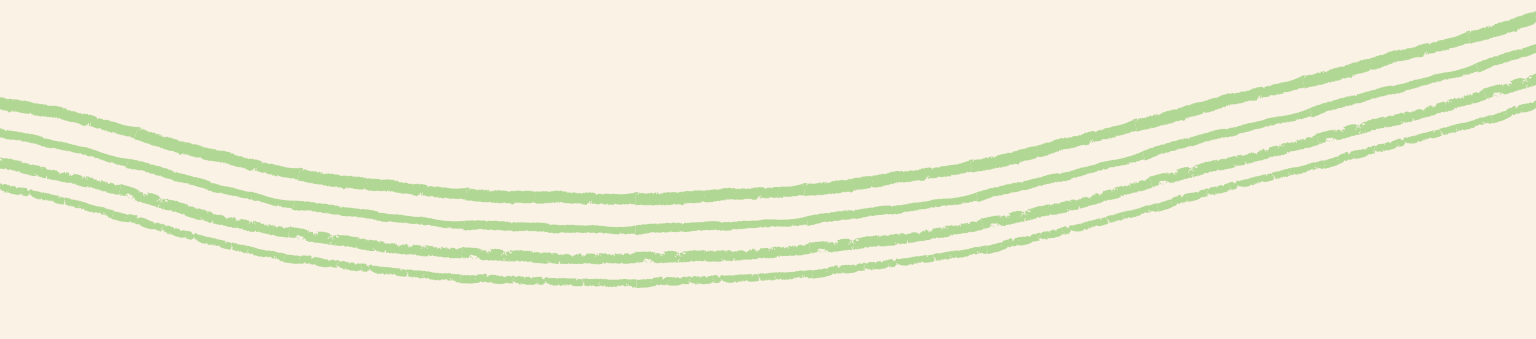
Dwell on the upside
before it turns round

Long for the wholeness
most aren't missing

Break ground on structures
that produce a return in people

Sing about dignity
preceding recognition

Weight flips it to rightside
and peace will abound





Abiding

My industry responds to the impact of a housing economy that succeeds in producing and preserving wealth but not in providing dignity to all people or infrastructure for diverse communities. Reflecting on the wisdom of the *Songs of the People*, I wrote a poem while in the audience for a groundbreaking ceremony for a new building that will provide shelter and single-room occupancy apartments for men and women experiencing homelessness. The poem imagines the world-order as one of those playground toys that spins 'round when a child sits down and adds their weight to one side. I used this image to explore how Jesus' kingdom turns the world right side up—the values and practices that produce a different kind of world than the one we know.

Contemplation, Creative Expression, Action.

There is a long and beautiful history of Christians who merge contemplation, creative expression, and social or community action. In this tradition, the three distinct ways of worship combine as a single movement of God's Spirit through people out into the world, extending love, beauty, truth, and justice into communities. Jessi's poem is a beautiful example. As she contemplated the *Songs of the People*, the death of Hertz Nazaire catalyzed her creative process. The poem she wrote promotes understanding of Nazaire's experience, provides an enduring witness to his hope, and has become a gift that is blessing his family and friends. The backside of this page is purposefully blank. You are invited to use this space for your own creative expression. Try writing a poem or sketching an illustration that explores the themes you have contemplated. If you aren't sure where to start, these prompts aim to catalyze your creative expression and action.

- How are you preparing to receive Jesus with an open and thankful heart this Christmas?
- Who else might be drawn to these songs? How are they longing for Jesus' kingdom to arrive?
- How does Jesus make your heart sing? How has he sustained you this year?
- How have you applied the prompts within this book? your identity? relationships? work? civic and community engagement?