



# Advent in Durham

Longing for Home in **Exile**

2022

## Acknowledgments

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Listen to recordings of these reflections and sign up for daily Advent emails at [www.durhamcares.org/advent](http://www.durhamcares.org/advent).

The mission of DurhamCares is to foster collaboration, develop leaders, and educate the people of our city to care for their neighbors in holistic ways.

We envision a city where everyone loves their neighbors.

## Our Values

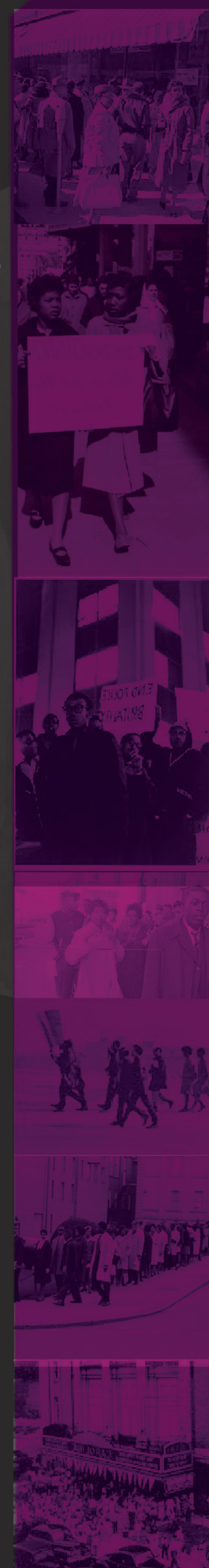
We are motivated and guided by the life and work of Jesus Christ.

We listen to all voices, particularly those on the margins.

We value collaboration that is inclusive, equitable, and holistic.

We educate, train, and equip others.

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# Introduction

## Finding Our Home in Exile

Two years ago we created our first *Advent in Durham* daily devotional. We compiled reflections from Durham authors who were writing from a particular time and place: Durham, NC in 2020. It's easy to abstract the coming of Christ and lose the very real sense in which he comes to our streets, our neighborhoods, our friends and families, and all the weights we bear together. Advent in Durham is a way to join God's story with our stories in the place we call home.

But indeed, home is elusive for all of us. Through the dozens of pilgrimages we've led at DurhamCares since 2016, we have seen that often the most prominent theme of lament that participants identify in Durham has been the loss or restriction of home - from colonialism, to slavery, to redlining, to urban renewal, to fleeing conflict, to mass incarceration, to gentrification. Not to mention the hundreds who literally don't have a roof over their heads or who live in emergency shelters.





What is sometimes overlooked is that those who ostensibly benefit from our displacement-laden society are not at home either. For the privileged, home is often somewhere further away: in the next house, the next neighborhood, the next promotion, the next credit on the balance statement.

As we return to *Advent in Durham* in 2022, our theme, “Longing for Home in Exile,” helps us remember the way in which God’s people of Israel were longing for home as they waited in exile for the Messiah. We join our stories with theirs as we consider not only their longing for home, but also the way in which the Word truly did become flesh in Jesus Christ, who made his home among us so that we might find our home in him. And as we continue to wait for our eternal home to come to earth, we seek the peace of the city, joining God’s work of making it a place where we all can find some glimpse of home amid all our displacement.

**Rev. Reynolds Chapman**



# Knowing What We Know

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”* This is a tall order, knowing what we know.

We know about the struggles of the human condition, with its at-times violent ends. We know about climate cataclysm. We know about the sin of racism and sickness of white supremacy ailing our institutions and country. But we also know that the God who calls us is faithful.

Our faithful God tells us that we need not be threatened by those who call us to a higher and better way when we are summoned to change. And we need not fear the influence of false prophets when we are standing in the light of God’s love and bearing witness to that love with our lives.

When the burdens of our times pile heavy on our hearts as they do, the God of peace sanctifies - offers an empowering, restorative soul cleanse - for those who hold fast to good; for those who, knowing what they know, hold fast to God.

To make these words our personal mission strategy each day is to abide in joy. This is not the empty calorie joy peddled by the commercial machinery cranking out wares for Christmas day. This is the joy of Emmanuel: the good news that our faithful God is with us as we peer into the manger, go to the cross, leap from the empty tomb and live as new creations day after day. Knowing what we know, let us rejoice!

**Rev. Dr. Katie Crowe**



# Setting the Table

What shall we do today? What shall we offer today? What's the forecast? Is it raining yet? Should we cancel? There's no one here! Let's just set the table and see what happens.

Just as that word was spoken, a young man came and sat down, patiently waiting. The truck rolled up and a group of men walking down the street stopped to offer help. As the truck is unloaded, more people arrive and patiently wait for the day's sermon and then... the food!

Every Sunday is a blessing. The food is provided. Sometimes we are not sure if we'll have enough and, low and behold, someone brings a donation of food! EVERY Sunday is a BLESSING. A resident walks by and we call them over to get a plate. They are hesitant. We know that look so we add... it's free! A smile comes on their face! It brings a smile to our face to see a resident recognize that they will be able to eat today.

It is a joy to be able to feed people each Sunday. At the same time, it is concerning to see the numbers in need continue to grow. We believe that we will have enough to share as long as we adhere to the final words Jesus said to Simon Peter:

*"Simon son of John, do you truly love me...?  
"Yes Lord," he said, "you know I love you."  
Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

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**Rev. Dorothy Clark**



# Dormant, Growing, Blooming

Summer is near ... an interesting concept to consider when it seems like the warm weather and sunshine have slipped from reach. Perhaps many of us are dreaming of summer as we are wrapped in our blankets, rather than embracing early darkness and cold brisk temps.

So who is thinking of summer as something that is near?

Fig trees.

As a farmer who is also a minister, Advent and this season of farm life for me are the same. They represent a time of hope, and present an opportunity to prepare for the arrival of new life.

Fig trees bear fruit in the summer months. Before that, they sprout leaves in the early spring months. But prior to that, fig trees lie in a state of dormancy, often defined as a period where growth stops. In the dormant life of fig trees, it stops bearing fruit, and the cells of the tree retract water from the leaves in order to protect the limbs of the tree from freezing temperatures. The bark on the limbs of the tree becomes rigid in order to maintain a barrier of warmth inside. And while the tree appears not to be growing, deep beneath the earth, the roots of the tree are growing deeper, and stronger, in preparation. Much like the spirit of Advent, the fig tree is waiting in Hope. Waiting for the Son (sun) to come out, and doing the internal work necessary to be prepared to bloom in the Son's (sun's) presence.

Take heart, knowing that as we and the earth lie in dormancy, hope is working in and through us, deepening our roots, and preparing us to bloom.

**Rev. Amber Burgin-Brothers**





# The Position of Hope

Ps. 80:1-7; 17-19

A memorable lesson we gain from science is the difference between kinetic and potential energy. Kinetic energy is energy in motion, while potential energy is energy at rest. A piece of matter has potential energy because of its position, nature, or its arrangement of parts. Just as energy has two states, our belief has two states as well. Kinetic belief can be defined as faith, while potential belief can be defined as hope.

The psalmist's words in this psalm provide a glimpse into why the believer can have hope or potential belief. The psalmist expresses their hope with a knowledge that God is positioned to assist them. Even while Israel is experiencing dark days, the Lord of Hosts is positioned to deliver them from their affliction.

Just as the psalmist understood this principle, we as believers should know that we have hope. We must always believe that we can seek God's help in trouble, confidently request his grace, favor, and deliverance from trouble, and understand that the results of our accepted prayer are the peace and protection that God assures us through his word.

Therefore, as we experience the darkness present within the earth, may we consistently look to the Lord of Hosts with the knowledge that we are positioned close enough to God for him to aid us in our time of need.

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**Elder Stephen M. Poulson**



# Our Hope Lies in Simplicity

In Advent, we have all the time in history and eternity to travel the simple, earthly road to the kingdom of Christ's beloved.

I recently rode a bus 15 hours to Philadelphia: partly to reduce my carbon footprint; self-righteously ... to imitate St. Francis. I could have flown. Instead, I crowded on with other men and women—several with children. Unreliable air-conditioning. Stops on neglected edges of town. A smartphone, wi-fi, and movies didn't make the trip faster or easier.

On her iconic journey to Bethlehem, Mary would have traveled simply. She probably went by foot, like most people along that road. Scripture doesn't even mention a donkey. Certainly, a lot of stops, but few comforts or accommodations. Would anyone offer a bumpy break on the back of a cart to an expectant mother?

Our movement in life is our pilgrimage to the kingdom. From privilege I'm hoping for earth-saving technology, but what about just... traveling simpler? There's nothing romantic about poverty, but those who must think about when ... or how ... or even if they can travel impact our planet the least yet bear the greatest burden of environmental neglect.

Durham offers free travel on local buses, but my time seems too precious. Perhaps for me time *is* precious. But ... so, too, for the poor ... and most certainly for the earth. It takes time to journey simply, to walk with those in poverty, and tread more lightly on the earth. But that's the path to Advent hope.

**Father Hugh Macsherry**



# Advent of Hope in Durham

## Isa. 64:1-9

In one of the largest prophetic books, sometimes called the “fifth gospel,” we hear a unique prayer of hope. This prayer is surrounded by condemnations with an all-surpassing understanding of the nature of God. In the final chapters of Isaiah, we hear directly from the remnant in captivity, the ones that made it through the adversity. We hear their story, we hear their hopeful cry for God to “rend the heavens...to come down...” We hear their repentance, acknowledging humanity’s imperfectness using the atrocious illustration of “...filthy rags.”

In our nation that incarcerates nearly 2 million people with the largest percentage in the state prisons, their cry is similar; for God to not only hear them but to see them. However, their cry on the inside of the prison is not so much different than those on the outside. Sadly, there are many on the outside that are in another type of prison. Therefore, we all can put ourselves in this category of unclean and filthy rags.

I was sitting in a meeting the other day and two out of the twelve were justice-involved. Both together served over 76 years in prison. Both were sentenced to life in prison, and both were released in miraculous ways. We listened to their story of victory in the struggle, of injustice and of hope. In this meeting, they reminded us that we all are the clay, God is the potter, and the Father is not done molding us. May you know that God does hear our hopeful cry, not only in Isaiah but also in the birth of His Son, Jesus.

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**Rev. Dr. Louis Threatt**



# Oaks of Justice/ Arboles de Justicia

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Lately, God has been stirring my spirit to intercede in those indecipherable murmurs and groans too deep for words. The prayers in my heart are about the poor, the brokenhearted, those who grieve, and those who mourn. The passage of Isaiah calls us to give good news to those who suffer, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to proclaim the year of Adonai's favor. It mentions oaks of justice, "Arboles de Justicia" (Isaias 61:3). In my prayers and meditations, I often look to trees, to oaks that are potent, resilient, globally present, and the most adept and adaptable to climate change. I notice the beauty of connection, lineage, and bountifulness of generations impacted by a seed.

A seed is a promise covered by soil that received wholesome water and learned to break the ground when it was ready to sprout. Growth is the work of restoration, and it calls us to speak and walk with an ethics of care and love. To "value loyalty and a commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement" (bell hooks). To lead courageously and to lift all burdens. "If all public policy were created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children, or addiction" (bell hooks).

Many children feel defenseless and powerless in systems that don't tell the whole truth about who they are, leaving them vulnerable to erasure, deprivation, and oppression across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. We have to be willing to participate with one another and bear witness to someone else's experience.

We are not just us; we are how we interact with others, not just with our families but with neighborhoods and communities. God wants the broken to receive garments of praise and to experience the everlasting splendor and joy of being connected to eternal Love. May God's Spirit fill our hearts and lungs with deep gratitude, understanding, and love that lift his people. God does hear our hopeful cry, not only in Isaiah but also in the birth of His Son, Jesus.

**Alexandra Valladares**



# The Peace and Prosperity of Durham

*“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” -Jeremiah 29:4-7*

First things first: these ancient words from Jeremiah were meant for Jews who’d been dragged into exile by their enemies. Second things second: when my family arrived in Durham twenty-one years ago—by choice and not force—we did all the things: we bought a house in Duke Park and settled down; we ate from neighbors’ gardens; we adopted a child, increasing in number. And Jeremiah’s words were for us, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you...Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you will prosper.”

Each one of us is in Durham, today, for different reasons. Some of us are descendants of the people who were enslaved at Stagville. A friend of mine was born on Berkeley Street, in Walltown. Some of us migrated here through institutions of higher education. And new folks are arriving daily to work in the Triangle. And today Jeremiah’s words are for us.

Each one of us in Durham stands in the rich line of those who have sought the peace and prosperity of our city: Virginia Williams, of the Royal Ice Cream Parlor sit-in. Mill workers who sold Brunswick stew to raise money to build Blacknall Presbyterian Church. John McClendon, who shaped the game of basketball at today’s NCCU. Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis, who learned to seek the peace and prosperity of our city together.

Today God is calling you, and me, to seek the peace and prosperity of Durham.

**Margot Starbuck**



# God's Peace

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In 1 Chronicles, Chapter 22, we have King Solomon tasked with the assignment of building God's Temple. His father, King David, gave him access to abundant materials, skilled workers, and dedicated leaders to complete the job. King David gave his son the strength of community to build a new future.

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However, what David could not give Solomon was peace. King David was a man of war – an army general who was undefeated on the battlefield. These wars brought many enemies that presented a constant threat to burn down any temple Solomon tried to build. The peace needed to build this temple and sustain it could only come from God.

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In 1 Chronicles, God not only names Solomon as the Temple's builder, but also as "a man of peace and rest," and declares he would have "rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign." After a generation of war and bloodshed, God is promising a generation of peace and rest.

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I pray this kind of peace upon our city today.  
After a generation struggling with displacement and gentrification,  
I pray our city finds rest.  
After a generation of fighting the noise of systemic racism,  
I pray our city finds quietness.

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After a generation fearing violence in our streets,  
I pray our city finds peace.  
I pray all our children are blessed with the kind of peace our ancestors weren't able to have.  
This is a peace that only God can provide – one that passes all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ (Phil 4:6).  
Amen.

**Delvin Davis**



# Walk in the Waiting

We can look to John the Baptist as an example of how to live in peaceful expectation of the coming of Christ. He was the one prophesied of in Isaiah who would call from the wilderness, “Prepare the Way of the Lord” (Is 40:3).

In waiting, John lives an interesting path. He does not run to the Sanhedrin, charge upon the Romans or their vassal, Herod. No, John went to the wilderness, to the countryside, to proclaim the coming of Christ.

What can we take from this? Must we live in seclusion as we wait? Is that the only way of peace? That doesn't seem right. So what can we take from this seeming retreat of John's?

I believe that no matter where we live, off a back road by the Eno or smack dab in the middle of Tobacco Road, there is an aspect of the life of one waiting for the coming of Christ that will always be like living in the wilderness.

Till Christ returns and this broken old world passes away, we will face trials of all manner. In this wilderness, as we partner in God's mission, taking up the causes of the oppressed, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, comforting the mourning, welcoming the stranger, we can have peace because our ultimate hope is the return of Christ.

If, like John, we carry an assurance of the coming Christ, we can walk the way of peace as we proclaim the good news of Christ in word and deed.

**Rev. Dana Williams**



# All Things Are Possible with God

Advent celebrates a season of great expectancy, reminding us that all things are possible with God.

Luke's gospel transcends ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries and presents Jesus as a savior who came for all people. Luke provides both salvific and social empowerment for people pushed to the margins, while also condemning the social system of marginalization.

As a religious and ethnic minority, Mary's song of praise, also known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55), is her response to the realization that all things really are possible with God, as she celebrates her unlikely assignment to give birth to the savior.

Reminiscent of the song Hannah sang in anticipating Samuel's birth (1 Sam. 2:1-10), Mary's Song speaks to God bringing together both past and future in the present moment of Mary's joy.

While referencing a fulfillment of messianic promises (v. 55), the Magnificat shifts in tense as God looked (past) with favor on Mary's lowliness, such that all generations will (future) call her blessed (vs. 48-49).

Mary's spiritual fortune shows that God's blessings flow to all who fear God (v. 50), with a reversal of fortunes (v. 52), as the most important blessing God could ever give will flow through Mary, a poor teenager from the working-class town of Nazareth.

We should all share Mary's excitement, as the Magnificat celebrates infinite possibilities. Ending food scarcities, undoing systemic racism, and achieving gender equality are all possible with God. Indeed, all things are possible with God.

**Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine**





# Sitting with God

2 Samuel 7 gives us insight into King David's life...which is an advent life!

David was gifted and successful, yet lived a sinful and broken life. While those things were true, he still received the promise of a forever-lasting kingdom! He's a very accurate picture of the human condition....

We're a mixed bag of beauty and brokenness, and in and through Jesus, God has promised that we are recipients of His promised forever-lasting kingdom.

Eugene Peterson remarks that in this passage King David is about to cross the line from being full of God to full of himself as he tells God he'll build God a house. But God in His love intervenes and declares "I am going to build a house for you!"

David allows God to halt his building plans, and then 2 Samuel 7:18 says, "Then King David went in and sat before the Lord." David gets out of the driver's seat and places himself before the loving, faithful-to-His-promises God.

One of the reasons I fell in love with our beloved city is that it has always had people filled with holy anger to do things for our King and His Kingdom. BUT, there are moments, far more frequent than we suppose, when the gospel thing to do is to sit before the Lord. This is God's world and we need to stop and sit before Him and be reminded He is the beginning, center and end...not us!

David is not passive or slothful...David is prayerful, allowing the love of God to fill him so that he then lives in and out of God's love. This Advent season, may we find ourselves sitting with God in His love, trading in our plans for God's plan, letting our enthusiasm to do something for God be replaced with a willingness to give witness to what God is already doing!

**Rev. Daniel Mason**



# Turn to the Light

## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

*“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”*

Paul’s words for the Church at Thessalonica seem very fitting for us today as we move from the time of loss and uncertainty that was the Pandemic, into a future that God continues to create before us. The words hold specific guidance for us as we move forward. Rejoice!! Pray!! Give thanks!!

These are our instructions in all circumstances, even when the journey gets hard or uncertain. As we wait for God’s Kingdom to unfold and for Christ to return, we are to turn away from all evil and hold closely to all that is good.

We are to rejoice in God’s love for us. We are to pray continually for the Church and all of God’s people and we are to give thanks for every blessing. As the Magi followed the star to the Christ Child, turn your face to the Light. Shadows of darkness fall away and the Peace of Christ will surround you with joy.

*Prayer: Almighty God, creator of all good things. We thank you for the gift of your Love and for every opportunity to share the Gospel message to a hurting world. Give us courage to step into the future you are creating with grace and unending joy.*

**AMEN**

**Rev. Carolyn Schuldt**



# The Joy in Advent

## Psalm 30:5b

*“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”*

In this post-pandemic world that we live, pleasant emotions in people are exceedingly rare. The response to a simple “good morning” is answered by people with accolades of despair. It makes one ponder if anyone has anything good to say.

Suddenly, the spirit of hope begins to vibrate in the wind as it leads you to a person filled with peace as they share their testimony of days filled with calamity and months filled with famine; yet, they still have joy.

This passage challenges us to not allow the sorrow that is in our heart or the tears that fill our eyes persuade us to lose our trust in God. So go ahead and let the tears flow. It’s okay if you find yourself weeping. Just know that the favor of God is resting upon you and at any moment during your night season He is going to turn your situation around in the morning.

Brothers and Sisters, I admonish you to hold fast to the Joy of the Lord which is our strength. Through His joy we will find inner peace and contentment in this Advent season. The reason the person in the example above could articulate their suffrage without a hint of resentment is the gift of joy resting upon them.

It takes consistent fellowship in our relationship with Christ to get us to this place of intimacy or oneness in Him. David grew to that place; that’s why he could write so eloquently, **“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”** Many challenging situations will come to test and strengthen our faith, yet I encourage us to remain in the position of joy which is a good advent recipe of hope, peace, and the spice of unconditional love.



**Bishop WL Jones II**

# Steady as the Sunrise

## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

*“Our joy and our hope can be as steady as the sunrise even when the happenings around us are transitioning from wonderful to tragic.” -author unknown*

I was blessed by a dear, dear friend with an annual subscription to the publication, Bits and Pieces, <https://bitsandpieces.biz/>. It is filled with quotes from famous celebrities to regular folks like you and me. Several years ago, I found the opening quote to this Advent reflection in one of the Bits and Pieces volumes. I was so moved by the quote that I included it at the bottom of my email signature line.

*“Our joy and our hope can be as steady as the sunrise even when the happenings around us are transitioning from wonderful to tragic.”*

Verse 24 of the benediction that is 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 evokes an eerily similar feeling for me as the Bits and Pieces quote, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” This makes me want to clap and leap for joy! Peace, sanctification, wholeness, all creation is eternally good and these envelope our destiny as the children of God.

I’ll be the first to confess how difficult it is to rejoice in the midst of so much pain and misery in the world. Everywhere we turn there is death and destruction, and yet we are compassionately exhorted to cling to a joy and a hope that transcends real suffering.

We are not called to ignore suffering, but to strive to make our attention undivided, holy and wholly focused on the God who suffers with, sanctifies us through and through, and salutes us with silver and gold blessings that are as steady as the sunrise, because His Son rose. Selah my siblings, Selah for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Rev. Dr. Keith Daniel**



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# Breaking up the Tension

Psalm 126 is ascribed as a Song of Ascent. Used for worship, this text is one that can sound like that of remembering and of hope, which is the spirit of Advent.

God's faithfulness is evident in this Psalm as the writer (and worshippers) recall God's deliverance and trust the faithfulness of God for what is still desired for their future. Having been delivered but still needing to be delivered is the friction found in this Psalm. But alas, the tensivity of living in what was and what is to come gives way to "shouts of joy."

It is not said where the writer was when joy engaged them at the intersection of the already and not yet; but it breaks the tension and transforms the worshipper's imagination.

Joy is a divine disposition given to us by the Spirit. Worship is the stimulus. The gift of joy leaves a knowing and satisfaction which surpasses our temporal perceptions.

It's Job's "I know my Redeemer lives..." and Mary's "My soul magnifies the Lord..." In joy, the heart is lifted and instigates a response from the inner-being. Joy removes staleness, stagnation, and stress – it interposes a new interpretation of how to speak of our past, present, and future.

How might joy provide a new revelation for what is seen around you? How might it transform your past or what is in your purview? Advent is given as a catalyst for joy, may it lead you to worship and shout!

**Rev. Miriam Phillips-Stephens**



# Joy in the Truth

My heart sank when I got Reynolds' directive that this year's Advent devotions would be on the theme of joy. Maybe it's because I'm not feeling particularly joyful. When DurhamCares makes us look at sad situations in Durham, when one considers the suffering of the Ukrainian war, gun violence, on and on, not much joy in that. Indeed, to be joyful in the face of such sadness looks insensitive and uncaring.

Moreover, the Advent scriptures that the church traditionally reads – fierce John the Baptist telling folks they better repent or they'll burn, the prophets speaking of God's judgment and wrath upon God's unfaithful people – not much joy in that.

And yet, can we not rejoice that, (1.) in a world of deceit, calloused uncaring, evasion of harsh realities, can we not rejoice that at least the church (and ministries like DurhamCares) cares enough about God's justice to tell us the truth about the ways we fail to measure up to God's expectations; (2.) in a culture in which we too easily worry most about ourselves, focus upon our own aches and pains, guard our resources as our own, at least the poor old church gives us responsibility for someone other than ourselves. God cares about God's world. God judges us, commands and expects us not only to love our Creator but also our neighbor.

So, rejoice. Get ready, God is coming. We're about to hear the truth of our situation, whether we like it or not. We're about to have the God we couldn't come to, come to us and love us by telling us the truth we can't tell ourselves. Rejoice!

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**Rev. Dr. William Willimon**



# Incomprehensible Joy

## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

As I consider the words of Scripture this season in Paul's letter to the Christians at Thessalonica, I can only imagine that the joy (not happiness) he expresses – "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" – might sound strange.

This is a time of difficult persecution but Paul's exhortation of joy, though incomprehensible, is reflective of their commitment to community and caring for each other. I'm also reminded of the strong sense of unity that we sense about this community.

As I walk around my adopted home, Durham, I "see" this joy expressed in our community, despite whatever folks may be going through! I feel it in the warm smile and "Good Morning" of someone who may be just starting a long work shift or in the "Praise God!" of one who is celebrating the end of a challenging day. Certainly, I feel it in our communal prayers.

May we remember this Advent season to "give thanks" **in, not for, but in** all circumstances, for our hope and joy is built on the soon coming of Christ. Though we may have some good days, and plenty of bad days, **we rejoice always** because God still holds Durham.

Indeed, we celebrate because God does sanctify this city and is faithful. I foolishly once thought I chose Durham to be my new home but as I continue to be loved by this great city, thank God, Durham chose me.

**Rev. Michael Jones**



# Step Beyond the Waters

## John 1: 6-8, 19-28

We are baptized by the water and by the Spirit through the faith of Jesus Christ in the grace of our Lord. This moment in the book of John signifies a preparation for Emmanuel, he who dwells among us.

Not only was John preparing the people for Jesus's arrival, but he had also spent his entire life heralding the Christ. This honey-eating, wild-haired man was ready when Jesus the Christ began his journey to the cross.

John is an object lesson for the people: this announcing and preparing, this baptism by water, this being brought into a new path in life is a mere echo of what is to come. He directed the people's feet toward Jesus, as he himself followed after his cousin, the Christ.

John was joyous. John was fulfilling his life's mission, supporting a loved one, and he was joyfully preparing the road that Jesus took. John understood the momentousness of the occasion. After all, that was his first preparation: understanding.

How will you greet the Lord this holiday season? Where will you find joy in the arrival of the Christ-child? Will you prepare yourselves and seek God, pointing your toes toward our Creator, joyfully ready to take a step beyond the waters of baptism and into life with the Christ? Who will you bring with you?

You are invited to delve into holy joy this season, knowing this is a momentous time, and we are on the road ahead together, with Jesus.

J

O

Y

**Rev. Breana van Velzen**





# Joy Unspeakable Joy!

## Psalm 126

While sharing what it means to have joy, I must acknowledge the tumultuous year that we have endured, especially a year of so many incidents of mass violence around our country, in our neighborhoods, congregations and even in our schools.

How can these families feel the same joy we feel right now? I direct your attention to the familiar scripture that tells us in Psalm 30:5, “for his anger endureth but a moment, in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but JOY cometh in the morning.”

Despite all that has transpired and because we trust God totally, there is good in every tragic situation. We may not understand why God does what he does and when he may do it, however, we can rely on his unconditional love, grace and mercy to see us through these difficult times. God can restore our joy permanently while our tragic occurrences are only temporary.

During this Advent season, may we fully engage in the reality that God is the source of our strength and he will bring joy to every home, congregation, school, workplace, etc., so that we may experience his peace that passeth all understanding.

Joy is contagious, therefore may you experience unspeakable joy this season and continue to share the joy of the Lord with everyone that you may come in contact with on your journey.

JOY TO THE WORLD!

**Rev. Dr. Michael D. Page**



# Love Beyond...

## Psalm 89

There is nothing that exposes love like distress. The distress of feeling forgotten, the distress of feeling alone, and the distress of brokenness.

These aforementioned circumstances and emotions are often-times birthed out of unrealistic expectations. One author calls this false expectation, suggesting that these expectations are conceived out of the belief that somebody is going to do what you think or expect them to do in your head. People desire to be loved, carnal love, and when not received there is pain, there is distress because of the failure within our own expectations.

However, I submit to you today that although people may let you down, although people may fail you whom you expected to love you, there is no greater love that surpasses our expectations than the love of God.

As we approach Advent, Psalms 89 helps us to understand love, God's love. A love that was so unique, powerful, and real that he sacrificed a part of himself to save ourselves. Psalm 89 reminds us that God's love is so special and strong that he deserves our praise even in the midst of our circumstances and frailties.

*God, we thank you for your love  
We thank you for your protection  
We thank you for promising us a future and hope,  
to strengthen us in times of trouble  
We thank you for perfect peace with a steadfast mind.  
God thank you for allowing the disappointments of carnal love.  
Why???*  
*Because through those disappointments,  
I received your Agape love.  
Amen and Amen...*



# God will Supply

A few weeks ago, I was in Food Lion shopping. I noticed a young mother and her son having a difficult shopping experience. The mother was completely exhausted by her son's energy and just stood there fumbling with her EBT card.

"Let's try this," she said, as she inserted the card.

She was having financial difficulties and wasn't sure if the amount she had on her card would be enough. The situation immediately triggered my own trauma of being a young, single parent in a grocery line, picking up items and putting them back once I saw the price, and balancing my needs with what I had in the bank. In Luke 1:53a, in Mary's Magnificat, Mary exalts the Lord with an exhaustive list of God's actions toward the poor and rich, the high and low, the mighty and powerless. She sings,

*"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant...He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."*

This is love, God's love. God loved the young mother and son so much that though she had to put a few items back, she left the store with what she needed. God's love is a promise for those who live in poverty to know that God will supply all of our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

**Rev. Angela Taylor**



# Together, With All the Lord's Holy People

L

In Durham, there is a church on every corner. The first mainline churches line the streets of downtown; the next generation surrounds Duke University. New congregations reclaim old buildings in the heart of the city, and church plants meet in schools and storefronts in North Durham and down south by the mall.

O

What do you think when you pass by multiple churches on a short drive? Does the profusion of churches memorialize the strong religious impulse of bygone days? Does it reveal a church that has been disjointed by race, class and denomination?

V

The Apostle Paul prays for the church, "...that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph. 3:17-18). I have long appreciated the image of God's immeasurable love; only recently have I noticed these important, introductory words: "together, with all the Lord's holy people."

E

God's love is something we grasp together, not in isolation. We cannot know the full measure of God's love as an individual or even as a single congregation. We need each other to know the love of God. This advent, as I pray for the church, I pray we would be united by a need to know the immeasurable love of God in Christ. Let's make Durham a place where every street is marked by the power of God's love.

**Rev. Goodwyn Bell**



# God is Love

Psalm 89:1-4

*I will sing of the Lord's great love forever;  
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known  
through all generations.  
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,  
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.  
You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to David my servant,  
'I will establish your line forever  
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"*

This reminds me just how good God is if we come to know him. We can take him at his word. He promised that he would be faithful to us and that we must do the same.

In verse one it says it all for me. I love God for all that he has done for me. Sometimes we feel like he has abandoned us, but he is right there. I will sing his praises to everyone who wants to know about him. I will lift up my voice to those who want to listen. The songwriter says this in one of my favorite hymns,

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be*

My Grandmother taught me growing up that we must love and show love to one another, but we don't have to like what they do. Love can go a long way.

God does not change. We must love and care for one another. It may not be easy but God is right there. Trust God's word and get to know that man named Jesus.

**Rev. Annette Love**



# A Mother's Love

## One Bull City Mother's Reflection

Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55

L

I reflect on Mary, the Mother of Jesus, during this Advent season. With the eschatology of the already and the not yet of Advent—I concede the harsh realities and the current crisis of this world while hoping for liberation. I hope for a safe world for the unborn black boys destined to live in this world. As the Angel Gabriel tells Mary, “do not be afraid,” I imagine that Mary experienced that very thing—fear.

O

Remembering the courage of Mary, Mother of Jesus, helps me navigate beyond my fear. Mary's courage to love and nurture God's gift to us and the world while witnessing the cruelty and brutality Jesus endured grounds me. The tension that mothers of black boys have, protecting and sheltering their sons from racism, which seems to disproportionately threaten the very existence of black boys who become black men, propels us to love beyond the limits of our fear. Living here in Durham, North Carolina, my son was born here, matriculated through school here, and now as a young man, carries the cross or the target of being a young black man navigating God's plan for his life. It is that same tension that many who belong to the global majority hold with the belief that liberation, equality, and justice will reign soon.

V

E

An eschatology of hope sets the tone for a mother's love. Reading Mary's Song [of Praise] reminds me of the Love the season of Advent symbolizes.

Mary's praise to God and her love reflected the prophetic declaration of who Jesus would be—the Messiah. I imagine I, like many other mothers of black boys, hold the same praise and love—and expectant faith from the prophecy of the womb through the birth and maturation of our sons.

**Rev. Deborah Williams**



# Love Us, For Us

I love Advent. I love this season of preparing and waiting. It's driven by the hope of what is to come, and full of active anticipation, as we try a little harder to love those around us.

We seek out the presence of those who love us. We write letters to those we love from afar. We try to transubstantiate butter, sugar, and eggs into baked loved for any and all. But why do we mark Advent in these ways?

It's because Advent is a season for coming to our senses. A season where we sit up, covered in muck with our mouths watering for pig slop and remember – “wait a second, why am I serving this master that starves me, when I could at least serve my father who will treat me justly.” And, with our wits about us, we turn back, and head home.

We head home knowing that the God of Creation is there watching the horizon, holding their breath, waiting for our return - so they can embrace us, celebrate us, enjoy us – love us, just as we are. Because that is what God does. Love us, for us. Not for our potential. Not for our shiny parts. But for us, exactly how we are, right now, all the Prodigal children of God.

In fact, God loves us so much, that thoughts and prayers for our return is not enough in this season. As soon as the smallest glimpse of the tippy top of our head appears along the horizon on our journey home – God totally freaks out, and starts putting on flesh, becomes incarnate, becomes Emmanuel – God with Us, and runs through the cosmos towards us – just so they can embrace us and kiss us, and tell us they love us.

**Rev. David Crispell**



# Christmas Eve

## O Come Emmanuel

The season of Advent gives us occasion to pause and reconsider the depth of meaning of the gospel, the good news that the word was made flesh to dwell among us, that God the Son became incarnate, born in a barn in Bethlehem, with the announcement made by angels to shepherds tending their flock in a field. Shepherds were considered to be among the lowliest of persons in that day and culture.

I am reminded of a day many years ago when I went to the county jail to make a pastoral visit. I had no clergy identification, so the jailer proceeded to give me the runaround. Up and down, back and forth he sent me.

It so happened that on one of my trips to the floor, a jailed man sweeping the floor behind the bars began to converse with me. He was not restrained or confined to a cell because the jailer knew him. He was the “drunk” everyone knew.

Sometimes he would get locked up for his protection, or to have somewhere to spend the night, away from the cold and the dangers of the street. Somewhere to sleep it off.

The jailer looked at me, then turned to the man and asked, “do you know him?”

He answered, “yes.”

He called me by name and said where I preached. I was granted entrance on his word.

Advent is a time of preparation for visitation from God who comes to embrace us and give the witness that disregards what the world says of rank and station.

We all are in need of the salvation that comes only by his visitation

O come Emmanuel.

**Rev. Dr. William C. Turner, Jr.**





# Christmas Day

## A New King Reigns

*Isaiah 52:7 (NRSV)*

*How beautiful upon the mountains*

*are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”*

The meaning of Christmas has drastically shifted in the last few generations. Christmas now seems to be a season of joy and excitement about presents under the tree, festive lights, ugly sweater parties, gifts, and family gatherings. The true bliss of Christmas seems to have gotten lost in the throes of a capitalistic society—which has commercialized a season built on hope, peace, love, and joy found in and through the coming of Jesus Christ.

Beloved, there is a reality we must be willing to face. Christmas is not a joyous day for many who are living on the margins. There are many here in Durham who are hoping for peace and relief to come. The concept of holiday cheer is far reaching for those in our community who may be dealing with possible eviction and homelessness, food insecurities, health care disparities, racial injustices, and serious financial constraints. People are waiting for liberation from the oppression that is keeping them from flourishing. People are waiting for salvation from powers and principalities which do not see them as part of the imago Dei.

Cont.



# Christmas Day Cont.

Isaiah speaks of the messenger who stands on the mountains to announce peace and salvation and brings the good news of a coming King who reigns. This year, instead of focusing on the commercialized excitement of Christmas, which lasts temporarily—maybe we should focus our hearts and minds on regaining the true joy of Christmas. The joy we need is birthed from a declaration that salvation is nigh. Beloved, this is the true delight of Christmas, and what our focus should be as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ.

I am reminded of one of my favorite Christmas hymns in the Black gospel hymn tradition by John W. Work: “Go, Tell It on the Mountain.” This hymn helps to remind us of the real joy of Christmas day. Jesus Christ, the one who came down through 42 generations to fulfill the prophecies of a divine King, has come to set free, heal, and deliver all who are oppressed! The joy of Christmas is not in the gifts or the tree, but joy comes in knowing that the birth of Jesus is the basis of our joy. Our Lord reigns over every circumstance and situation! Our Lord reigns over every power and ruler and authority in the earth! Our Lord, Christ Jesus, he reigns forever!

So, “Go tell it on the mountain,  
over the hills, and ev'rywhere;  
go, tell it on the mountain  
that Jesus Christ is born.”



**Rev. Sheritta Michelle  
Williams**



# Thank You

## 2022 Contributors

