



ADVENT IN DURHAM Watching for Your Dawn



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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

We are grateful that you are journeying with us for our third Advent in Durham devotional. Advent in Durham is a way of drawing near to God and being attentive to the Advent season in a particular place: Durham, NC. It's a way of affirming that the coming of Christ was and is tangible, embodied, and material. This collection of reflections by Durham authors stirs us to draw near to God as we draw near to the ground we're on in the place we live.

When, after John was born, the Spirit filled Jesus' uncle Zechariah and his tongue was loosed, he finished his song of praise by saying "Because of the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78–79). Just as Zechariah was watching for the dawn of God, we watch for the dawn from on high to break upon us.

As we see increasing wealth disparity, decreasing affordable housing, disinvestment in what makes us well, investment in what does us harm, and deadly violence continuing in our city, we watch with vigilance for the dawn from on high. On this side of the incarnation we have seen the light of Christ break through, but we continue to watch for his return as we join the work of his kingdom in our city and pray, "Lord, guide our feet in the way of peace."



Rev. Reynolds Chapman



Waiting is Worship

Luke 1:38a

"Then Mary said, behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."

When we think of waiting, worship doesn't always come to mind. Waiting can make us anxious, fatigued, and edgy... nothing like what we expect worship to be. Mary lived in a time of great tension – her people were oppressed, pushed to the periphery, and ruled by the iron fist of Rome. It is not known what her expectations were before the angelic visit, but Gabriel's words changed the trajectory of her life.

Israel had been in waiting for their Messiah – and now, even in God's word and promise to Mary, she had to continue to wait. The long expected Jesus would come in God's appointed time – in due season. And amid the word spoken over her life – Mary had to trust God for the timing and bringing his word into fruition.

Instead of fret, Mary began to worship – her faith was in God keeping God's word. It was not up to her but God. Her moment of waiting turned into worship – her "let it be…" is an Amen! It is receptivity to God's plan in God's way.

Oh, that we would be like Mary and live in the promises that God has spoken concerning the plans for your life. Put an AMEN after receiving the word of the Lord, believe God's report – let worship fill your life as your wait, and then exclaim, "let it be!"



Rev. Miriam Phillips-Stephens



The world is experiencing such brokenness, and God hears the cries of his children. My prayer throughout this incredibly heartbreaking time is for the glory of God to sustain all of us. Prayers and meditations provide an oasis, a divine sanctuary, amidst arid wilderness and strife. As we journey through Advent, may we remember God's provision and guidance throughout history. From leading his children to the oasis of Elim to revealing Christ's divine glory on the mountaintop during the Transfiguration, as recorded in Matthew 17:1-8, God has shown us time and again that even in lonely times, there is hope for abundance and restoration. He guides us through life's challenges, nourishes our souls, and reminds us that His Spirit bridges heaven and earth, uniting us as believers across time and space in divine connection. May we continue to come together in prayer and common purpose, supporting efforts to build a stronger and more supportive community.

Today, grassroots organizers and community leaders help build earthly bridges of support in our beloved communities as we work toward justice and equality for all. Food distribution initiatives in Durham, such as those at trailer parks, communities, and apartment complexes, play a vital role in addressing food insecurity and ensuring access to essential resources. Volunteers and organizers with Iglesia La Semilla UMC work tirelessly to distribute much-needed help to those in need. God's glory is present in heart-driven efforts.

This Advent, may we inspire and encourage our commitment to the challenging yet redemptive work of creating a more just and equitable world, one oasis at a time, as we hold fast to God's glory, guidance, and provision during difficult times.



Alexandra Valladares



What's In a Name Isaiah 9:6-7

Often parents take much care and thought in choosing a name for their children. This passage from Isaiah precisely prophesies the coming Messiah, whose name is Jesus the Christ. Within his name, we find the opulence of the Savior's character. Though written hundreds of years before Christ's birth, Isaiah provides us with significant details that were fulfilled in the Messiah's description.

This child is clearly more than a mere man, as he is given divine titles. He will be called Wonderful Counselor – speaking of his wisdom and ability to guide and direct God's people. He is also called Mighty God – pointing to his deity as the second person of the Trinity. As Everlasting Father, he provides eternal salvation and is the source of all fatherly care and protection. And as Prince of Peace, he establishes God's kingdom of peace and righteousness.

His kingdom and rule will be ever-expanding and everlasting. It will be established through justice, righteousness, and peace – qualities of the perfect kingdom of the Messiah. He will sit on David's throne, yet his kingdom surpasses any earthly kingdom. It is an eternal kingdom of peace.

So in these short verses, Isaiah succinctly and powerfully prophesies the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah-King, who would save God's people and establish his everlasting kingdom. Jesus fulfilled these prophecies perfectly through his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. May we remember the safety and security found in Jesus' name.



Rev. Stephen Poulson



Psalm 126

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.

Restoration is the feeling of the morning dew on one's face after a long illness. It is laughter bubbling up unbidden and free that says "I am healed." It is looking at one's community and knowing "this is going to be okay" or "look at how far we have come, together". It is consistently having enough food for family and friends. Restoration is the moment after we all attempted to return to life before COVID-19, which is impossible, and I was bored from the routine of office rhythms. There was still quiet healing happening for us all; there were still signs that we have been under a pandemic; but I spent that day silently grateful for my boredom, rejoicing that we were here, we had purpose, and God had continued to guide our steps. Our church was full of students and staff coming in and out of the building. We were not frozen in grief as yet another person was taken from us. We simply were. That brought me great joy.



Restoration is not always the blazing glory of all things made new or restored to exactly what they were. Being restored means that while we will never be the same, we can be whole. We can heal. We can experience joy, laughter, abundance, and grace as part of life. We are not beholden to death, and so we live. The Lord has done great things for us. The Lord continues to do great things for us, even when all may seem lost. God keeps God's covenant. God wants us thriving. Let us celebrate the abundance of this season, in whatever way that abundance takes shape. What has God restored for us in this day? For our community? Amen



Rev. Breana van Velzen



Isaiah 64:1, 4 NKJV

Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence—

For since the beginning of the world Men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, Nor has the eye seen any God besides You, Who acts for the one who waits for Him.

As I read these words, I'm sitting outside enjoying an early fall fire. This brief respite that I have afforded myself is needed, although there is much work still to be done. This passage continues the plea of the remnant found in Isaiah 63 that God will intervene from heaven. This past year in Durham has been filled with moments of the earnest pleas of God's people that God might tear open heaven to make God's presence known. Isaiah's imagery of fire – "As fire burns brushwood, as fire causes water to boil (verse 2a)" – causes me to consider the biblical significance of fire. Here I sit with fire for warmth, but in Scripture it represents God's presence and divine judgment. As I sit here waiting – yes, waiting – I am reminded of God's presence. I consider the daily acts of kindness and love that happen and are often not reported in the news or on social media. I'm reminded of the ways that Durhamites continue to show up and "Love their neighbors." In so doing, we continue in the knowledge that God will indeed come again.

Yes, God! Come down and bring your peace and healing to our community and this world.



Rev. Michael Jones



"¿Porque hay flores de plástico en la área de juegos, mami? (Why are those plastic flowers at the playground, mami?)," my then 5-year-old daughter asked. I was quiet for a moment. I did not know how to explain to my daughter that bullets had penetrated a young man's body and taken his life at our neighborhood playground, but I did not want to lie to her, so I told my daughter that a young man was killed there and that his family and loved ones had created an altar with artificial flowers to honor his life. For some communities, flowers symbolize the life cycle from birth to death. However, the artificial flowers at this altar symbolize that a young man's life was taken from this world prematurely and that his loved ones are mourning his death.

After that conversation, she noticed the altars at the entrance of our neighborhood, on our way to school, and all around Durham, reminding us that someone's loved one breathed for the last time in that place. Each time we drive by one of these altars, we pray for the mother, father, children, siblings, friends, family, and community mourning their loved ones.

This Advent season, in which we prepare for the coming of Christ, and celebrate the hope, joy, and peace his incarnation brings to humanity, let's pray for those suffering the premature death of a loved one and for the safety of the people in our beloved Durham.

God, our comforter, may those who have lost a loved one experience your presence and peace amid their suffering during this season of Advent and always.

God, our creator, protect our community from violence and other dangers, especially our children, youth, and young adults. May they live their complete life cycle and continue blessing this community with their light and divine gifts. Amen.



Rev. Dr. Alma Tinoc Ruiz



Hope

Back in March of 2020, Ruby Tuesday in Durham closed for good, and I was very worried, because I was waiting to sign the paper for my house. Habitat for Humanity needed to verify my work and salary history. At that time, Ruby Tuesday transferred me to Mebane, NC.

Two days after Ruby Tuesday closed, Habitat for Humanity called and received the information that they needed to close on my house. We set the closing for April 3rd, not knowing that our world was about to turn upside down. Three hours before the house closing, the lady from Habitat called and said the lawyer was closing his office and not receiving any more clients. COVID-19 has come to town and shut everything down and pushed my house closing back almost a year. As time moved forward, I found myself driving from Mebane's Ruby Tuesday to Raleigh's Ruby Tuesday, to stay in compliance with Habitat Humanity's full-time work and salary requirements for the house.

From the time Habitat picked me to be a homeowner, I knew it was God working in my favor, and a particular Scripture kept playing in my head.

Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

From the first day I accepted him as my Lord and Savior, this Scripture has been the driving force in my life, regardless of the circumstance and situation I found myself in.



Mr. Lafayette Perry



Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, in the mystery of your passion, you have established the new covenant of reconciliation. We say to you, you are our Lord, and we have no other help but yours. We suffer, Lord, when we run after other gods: gods of money, gods of power, gods of food and pleasure. Forgive us, Lord, for you alone are our portion and our cup. You give us security and peace. Our borders are set up in pleasant places and you have given us an inheritance. We praise you, O God, because you instruct us and counsel us so that our feet won't slip. We're happy inside and out, because you have canceled our ticket to hell! You've put our feet on the right path. Ever since you took our hand, we're on the right way.

I prayed this prayer during a morning worship service last year. The prayer derived from **Psalm 16**, which says:

5 Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure.
6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.
7 I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.
8 I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

As I think about racial, economic, environmental, and social reconciliation for the people of Durham, it gives me peace to know that our inheritance is tied up in the God who was and is and is to come. During this Advent season, we can know for sure that if we keep our eyes always on the Lord, God will give us security and peace. We will not be shaken. Come, Lord Jesus.



Rev. Angela Taylor



When Highway 147 was built, it tore through the heart of the Hayti community. White Rock Baptist Church was destroyed, a black church torn down and relocated to make way.

Today, when I drive on 147, it doesn't escape my attention that, at the point in the highway where 147 heads directly toward my church, Duke Memorial United Methodist Church, it suddenly bends, making a way for the white church while making no way for the black church.

Do we have proof that this bend in 147 is racially crooked? No. Is it the case that, again and again, white privilege makes a way for itself where there is no way for others? Yes.

As we prepare for the coming of Jesus, the Prophet Isaiah calls to us, "In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God…. rough ground shall become level…rugged places, a plain. The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together."

In Advent, we are invited to make paths straight in ways that remove obstacles, without destroying lives, and create a highway for God to enter all lives, that all might have life abundant. This invitation is spiritual. It is also as concrete as Highway 147. Jesus' incarnate call is to make a way for all.

This December, drive on 147. And at the bend in the road, ask God, "Where am I creating rugged places for others? What needs to be leveled in me? How can I make the way straight so others can participate in the fullness of Durham life? of Christ's life?"



Rev. Heather Rodrigues



Romans 16:25-27 Living Bible

I commit you to God, who is able to make you strong and steady in the Lord, just as the Gospel says, and just as I have told you. This is God's plan of salvation for you Gentiles, kept secret from the beginning of time. But now as the prophets foretold and as God commands, this message is being preached everywhere, so that people all around the world will have faith in Christ and obey him. To God, who alone is wise, be the glory forever through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As I was reading this Scripture, I was thinking that we all have a choice to make in life. We either chose to hear the message from the messenger that God sent, or we chose not too.

We must go through Jesus before we can get to God. God had a plan for ALL people and he did not discriminate. It was a message of repentance, salvation, his death and resurrection.

You see, as men and women of God and God's messengers, we must go out in the hedges and byways (let me break this down for you in terms of today) the streets and communities to preach and teach God's words to everyone.

Sometimes we will find that people are not ready and will reject the word of God and the messenger, but we still must go forth. I believe the rejection will come because we do not have a relationship with him. We must study the word, trust the word and have faith in the word. FAITH, now if we see all things, why would we need God? Trust and believe this, without God we are nothing.

I encourage and remind you that God is our source. He is coming back! He sent his son Jesus to remind us of this. We don't have forever, but we have now. God is all we need, he is strong and mighty and deserves all of our praise.



Rev. Annette Love



Clean Me Up, Lord Matthew 23:26 (NIV) Psalm 51:7, 10 (NIV)

In this Advent season, I would like to share with you the thought, "clean me up." Usually, every holiday season there is a strong push to clean up the house, the yard, and decorate it to embrace the season. This is done with family and friends as a great invitation, for some, to share our love for God and the birth of His Son, Jesus. However, the location that our Lord and Savior was born was in a stable. Yes, an unsanitary stable where animals were kept, because there was no room for them in the inn. Thus, Mary and Joseph found the best suitable bed for our Lord and Savior and placed Him in a manger, the place that holds the food for the donkeys and the other animals to eat.

We must never forget that in our pursuit for cleaning things up on the outside, the first dwelling place Jesus came into was an unclean, dirty habitation that He made clean. In our Durham community, there are tons of brothers and sisters who are homeless. One Sunday as we were serving the community with food and a worship service in the street, one brother came up during the service and gave me something that I will never forget. He reached down in his bag and pulled out a 14 fl oz bottle of dish liquid. The blue dish liquid had the phrase written on it "24/7 life, tough on grease," with a small picture of clean dishes shining in the background. This was a holy act. He gave an offering. Yes, a Spirit-led offering to help make things clean. May we ever seek our Lord and Savior as He washes us and makes us clean 24/7 for life.



Rev. Dr. Louis Threatt



The Episcopal priest, preacher, and theologian Fleming Rutledge notes that, "Of all the seasons of the church year, Advent most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians and of the church, asks the most important ethical questions, presents the most accurate picture of the human condition, and above all, orients us to the future of the God who will come again." In Advent, we're keenly aware of the beauty of creation and redemption and the hope of Christ's second coming, all while surrounded by the realities of sin, evil, and death.

This Advent posture leads us to live in the way of Jesus, a way marked by compassion, vulnerability, the power to heal, and a willingness to suffer; the capacity to grieve, lament, and protest, all the while celebrating the goodness and beauty of creation and our experience of God's kingdom in Christ. We are sustained by the hope that, in the words that Julian of Norwich received from God in prayer, "It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

In Durham, we see the beauty of creation along the Eno River and in the Duke Forest. We celebrate the beautiful diversity of human culture, language, and creativity at the Farmer's Market. We worship, study, and pray, infused with joy and hope at our churches and with ecumenical, parachurch, and other organic opportunities for the body of Christ to come together.

At the same time, we also lament the continued consequences of racism, the suffering of the poor and the immigrant, the violence that so regularly erupts in our city, and the lonely, isolated lives led by so many. We give thanks for the individuals, congregations, and other ministries that work, in the power of the Spirit, to transform these tragic realities. We join with them in prayer, friendship, and action, as we pray the prayer of Advent, "Come, Lord Jesus."



Rev. Chris Schutte



Do You See What I See? John 1:9-14 ESV

The Zulu people have a greeting, "Sawubona," which translates, "I see you." One response is "Yebo Sawubona," meaning, "I see you seeing me." Reflecting on this salutation and Advent, I am reminded of my walks down a hallway or the sidewalk, when my eyes meet those of an oncoming person. We gaze, almost stare, until we are close enough to offer greetings and yet don't. For me, there is sometimes an anticipation—a hopefulness that the approaching stranger and I will say "hello." Instead, we simply pass by without acknowledgment.

The Gospel of John gives a glimpse of Jesus in the world and describes how the world missed him. In this passage in the first chapter, the scripture describes how the word became flesh and dwelled in the world and yet he was neither recognized nor received. I wonder how often we still miss Jesus. In our rush to reach around or over someone for that Black Friday sale item, do we miss the opportunity to recognize, receive, or acknowledge Jesus in the humanity of others? Seeing others and seeing Jesus made flesh in them is to know and receive God.

Therefore, I am encouraged and inspired by the concept of Sawubona— of seeing and being seen by others. Our Gospel lesson describes Jesus, the True Light, coming into the world. And as Jesus' light approaches us this Advent season, I pray we do not miss the opportunity to see the light of Christ in others. Sawubona!



Rev. Deborah Williams



Durham, O Durham. Many look at your brokenness rather than your potential. Many look at the times that lives have been taken insensibly or the innocent becomes a victim because of their ethnicity or politicians can't work together and have a shouting match right there in City Hall. Where kids are attacking one another's schools with knives and the lack of teachers make them feel unloved. All those things are true.

Yet I shed tears for our Savior to come marching down the streets and show justice and mercy to those that are causing harm, to show love to those that are marginalized. I cry unto you, Lord, to come and establish your kingdom with your love and compassion, so others can truly see that you care for those who are left behind in a city that many see as the last place to buy a home.

Savior, O Savior. Let all of us look unto you and your power. Let us look at the time that you defeated death. The time that you healed the sick and provided healing to a woman who touched your cloth. Come to the city that needs your presence in every corner, so that instead of bullets, we have hugs. Instead of death, we have life. Come and bring together white, black, and brown under the banner of peace, love, and mercy as it will be in heaven.

Jesus, te esperamos para que nuestra cuidad sea una cuidad de medicina de amor al vecino. En tu nombre Amén! (Jesus, we wait on you so that our city may be a neighborly city of love medicine. In your name Amen!)



Rev. Ricardo Correa



We initiated and welcomed our move to Durham during the Pandemic, though it was not a time to physically join a church, build community, or a new life in a new place, so we waited.

I've publicly confessed on numerous occasions that patience is not my best virtue. While it is not true that I lack all patience, it is true that when I consider the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, patience is needed to exercise them all. The practice of these virtues is where I sometimes fail.

Truth is most humans (certainly in United States) are horrible at waiting. We want what we want when we want it, which is often now. Yet our broken, tragic, trauma-filled lives remind us (perhaps too often) of our desperate needs, many of which do not have quick fixes, so we wait.

We wait with the rest of creation, not without hope but with promises that Jesus has come, Jesus is present and near, and Jesus will come again.

Rom. 8:18-25, Message

"That is why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next...Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs...We are enlarged in the waiting...But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy."



Dr. Natasha Robinson



Mark 13:24-26

"In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor."

Jesus—on the way out of the temple on that last visit—takes time to predict that in a short while the beloved, magnificent temple will be utterly destroyed (Mark 13:2). In Jesus's longest sermon in Mark's Gospel, Jesus rants that not one stone will be left on another. Imagine the shock among the faithful when they heard Jesus speak of the destruction of the building that was built to look eternal. The grand temple, meant to appear as if it had always been here and always would be, according to Jesus, would very soon cease to exist.

Advent begins with apocalyptic talk of the world's end. Our cherished religious institutions, beautiful creations, and time-honored traditions will "in those days," in "that time" be dismantled, the whole cosmos shaken. Stars and planets, so reassuring in their constant courses, will be dislodged, turned upside down, deconstructed, all shook up.

We claimed that we wanted Advent, said that we yearned for God to come to us. We prayed that God would descend from heaven to us.

But when God took us seriously and actually came down among us, God's Advent was so earthshaking that many ran for cover. Trouble is, we wanted God on our terms, not God's. We wanted God quietly and gently to slip in beside us, not kick in the door, blow the house down, tear up our temples, and shake us up. Be careful what you pray for.

Most of us have been conditioned to think that church is personal. Just Jesus and me. So much of our praise music is packed with first-person pronouns. I. Me. My. Mine. Religion is a private matter, something just between the two of us. Church is where we go, if we go, to have some personal time with a God who sometimes gives us assistance with our individual problems.



What does that have to do with me?" is the question that's put to every sermon. "What's in it for me?"

Therefore it's a jolt to be told, on the First Sunday of Advent, that when God at last turns toward us, God is about more than mere healing, moral renovation, or a helpful spiritual nudge for individuals. God's intentions are no less than cosmic: heaven and earth shaken, darkened sun and moon and stars falling from the sky.

Powerful, privileged people (like most of us North American mainline Christians) get nervous when the talk turns edgy apocalyptic. Such highly charged, poetic language sounds unsophisticated, primitive, even fundamentalist. What would my sophisticated friends, who already think this church stuff is whacko, think of me if they heard Jesus on the world's end? And after all, down through the ages, those Christians who took Jesus's predictions literally, thinking that they had come up with a date for the end of the world, have always been wrong. Right?

People on top, well-fed and happily ensconced, tend always to believe that this world is as good as it gets. Don't pray for change; work the world as it is to your advantage and privilege. Church is where we come to nail things down. The Christian faith is a primitive technique for holding on to what you've got. Stop whining about your troubles in the present; cease dreaming about the future. Adjust. This is as good as it gets. The best of times. Learn to be happy with things as they are. Steady, upward progress is easier on the psyche than abrupt death of the old and birth of the new.

Then comes Advent.... One reason why Patsy and I support Durham Cares is that, in so many ways, Durham Cares keeps reminding me that God didn't create Durham, we did. God didn't set up this economy; we did. And maybe one day, someday, even today, God is dismantling what we built so that God can get what God wants out of Durham.



Rev. Dr. Will Willimon



The Reason to Rejoice

Philippians 4:5-7 (NRSV)

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.

Waiting is not easy, but it is a necessary part of the believer's journey. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice..." are the words Paul writes to the Church at Philippi. But let's be honest, finding joy in a period of waiting is not easy. For Paul, the waiting occurs in a prison cell, and the outcome does not look promising. For the Philippians, the waiting occurs as they long for news of their beloved church leader, their pastor and friend, and their partner in mission. They have even been waiting for Epaphroditus, one of their own, whom they sent to minister to Paul and who came close to death, risking his life for the work of Christ. They have been eager to hear news and hope for a good outcome.

Paul is writing this letter from yet another jail cell. Like in Acts 16, he (Paul) again finds himself in prison for doing the right thing while agitating the wrong people. Paul is a living example to the Philippians of what it looks like to wait on God—even during the most adverse times.

Paul urges his readers to: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." But the critical phrase of this statement is "in the Lord." We can have fleeting moments of joy when we receive an unexpected blessing or hear about a loved one or close friend's promotion. We can experience temporary joy when we achieve a milestone or accomplish a goal in our lives.



To rejoice in the Lord is completely different. This rejoicing gives our attention solely to a joy that is not only enduring, but that sustains us even when we are worn down by life challenges. This joy is more than seasonal cheerfulness. It is a joy rooted in an ongoing relationship, built on trust, that can negotiate the moments of joylessness in ways that ultimately work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose!

Paul helps us to understand rejoicing and gentleness by following it with "the Lord is near." Beloved, "the Lord is near...!" Whatever we are suffering from now. Whatever grief we are experiencing. Whatever fears we have for our own futures—the apostle reminds us that the real King is near, and our wait can be filled with the joy of the Lord's coming!

Beloved, we may never get accustomed to waiting, but we have to accept it. Not everything we want can be instant. And some things are just better when you wait. During this Advent season, we are waiting. We are waiting for a miracle. We are waiting for a sign. We are waiting for the Lord to come. We do not know when, but we know the Lord is coming. The Advent season symbolizes both the waiting for the birth of Christ and his return.

The powers and principalities and wickedness in high places does not have the final say so in the matter. The suffering of the prison cell does not define or end this good news. The Lord is near. He is coming! While you are waiting, keep rejoicing! The Lord is near!



Rev. Sheritta Williams



Join me in prayer: God of mercy and justice, we come before you needing the grace you provided by sending your son, Jesus, to this earth. Please give us the eyes to see that your presence is with us even now. Allow us to be present with those around us in our lives and our community.

Matthew 1:23, NRSV

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

The Lord spoke these words to the prophet Isaiah to describe the coming of Jesus. In this Advent season, let us remember that God is with us. God's presence surrounds us here and now. God is in Durham. In difficult times, in times of grief, loss, and devastation, we must look to God's presence as the way to move forward. There is nothing on this earth that can compare with it. As Jesus came to this earth and the Holy Spirit was given, God's presence is active among us.

I wonder why we have such a hard time seeing God's presence sometimes. Is it because we're not looking? Or maybe it's because it's difficult to see God's presence when we see sin and evil in this world reigning over the powers of peace, love, joy, and hope.

In this Advent season, let us remember that God is present with us despite what we feel or our doubts. He is Immanuel, God with us! I pray that we all will "look" at what the Lord has done, not only in our own lives, but also in the city of Durham. Thanks be to God!



Suzanne McLendon



Embracing Hope in the Midst of Challenges

As we enter this season of Advent, we find ourselves reflecting on the profound message of hope that emanates from the story of Jesus' birth. This hope is not only a historical event but a living reality that calls us to action in the present.

We are no strangers to challenges in our city of Durham, North Carolina, filled with a rich history and diverse community. The issue of affordable housing looms large, leaving many of our residents struggling to find a place to call home. As we await the election of new leaders in our city, we recognize the crucial need for prayer, especially for our mayor and city council, that they may have wisdom and compassion as they make decisions that impact the lives of Durham residents.

Recently, I had the privilege of serving residents in the East Durham community during our annual back-to-school community day. Thanks to the ongoing support of several community partners and sponsors, such as DurhamCares, our church provided food, backpacks, and school supplies to nearly 300 children and families. This experience reminded me of our city's immense need and our people's resilience.

Durham has a rich legacy, including descendants of the enslaved persons at Stagville plantation, the economic breakthroughs of Durham's Black Wall Street, the devastation of the historic Hayti community, and the ongoing impact of urban renewal and gentrification. The effect of this legacy warrants the inclusion of its historic residents in the city's economic progress.

In the face of these challenges, we remember the words of Jesus in **Matthew 25:40**, where he says, "And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Jesus calls us to love and serve our neighbors, especially those who are marginalized and in need.



As we journey through Advent, may we be inspired by Jesus' message of love and compassion. Remember his commandment in Mark 12:31, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." This principle embodies the mission of DurhamCares, challenging us to see beyond our differences and divisions and work together as a unified city. DurhamCares provides excellent examples of this cooperative effort through its ongoing commitment to church mobilization, with programs such as the East Durham Vital Worship Movement, sponsored by the Calvin Institute Grant, and its "Church in the Streets" Sunday services.

In this season of Advent, may we hold onto hope, acknowledge the challenges we face, and recognize our people's resilience throughout history. Let us strive for a city where all residents have access to affordable housing, economic progress does not exclude anyone, and love and compassion guide our actions toward one another.

Let us pray for our city's leadership that they govern with justice and prioritize the needs of all residents, especially the marginalized. Let us unite across racial and socio-economic lines and work towards a future where love, justice, and hope shape Durham's narrative.

As we prepare for the birth of Christ, may we be instruments of God's love, bringing hope and transformation to our beloved city of Durham.

May God bless you abundantly this Advent season and always.



Rev. Demarcus Williams



Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of the Lord. Christmas preparations are rightly centered on the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, but the prophets and the nativity stories also call our attention to "the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Isaiah foretold the Messiah as the one on whom "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" shall rest (Is 11:2). Luke tells us that Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist were "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:15, 41, 67). It is by the same Spirit that the miracle of Mary conceiving Jesus was possible (Lk 1:35).

Advent is a season of the Spirit. Durham needs a merry, little Pentecost. The poems of Isaiah, the canticle of Zechariah, and the Magnificat of Mary can be flaming songs for wintry days. The sounds of carols and the scents of meals, the lighting of candles and hanging of greens can be occasions for fresh outpourings of the Spirit that bring healing and hope to our city. Advent is the time for the people of God in Durham to reclaim their anointing to "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (Is 61:1). Advent is time to announce that the God who "has filled the hungry with good things" is near (Lk 1:57). Come, Lord Jesus! Come, Holy Spirit!



Rev. Dr. Edgardo Colón-Emeric



Greetings, I am Deborah Boston. When I think of the blessedness of Advent, I think of how Jesus gave us the perfect roadmap to how we should live our lives as disciples of and ambassadors for Christ. Not only did he give us instruction through the written words and parables we find in the scriptures, but he modeled love, compassion, forgiveness and grace. Then he gave the ultimate sacrifice by his crucifixion to save each one of us from sin. As if that was not enough, he was resurrected to let us know the eternal power of God and the great love he has for us.

While it may not be a traditional Advent scripture, I am drawn to the words we find in **Matthew 22:36-39**, known as the Great Commandment, which reads: "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'

I believe Advent is a perfect time while we wait and prepare to see Jesus to consider and act upon what he clearly told us to do. This is what he desires, expects, and requires of all of us. I am so grateful to be affiliated with DurhamCares and the Mt. Level Community Partnership for Racial Justice as two organizations whose members demonstrate daily that they understand the assignment! May each of you experience the blessedness of Advent!



Dr. Deborah Boston



As we prepare to cross over into 2024, I cannot help but reflect on this year of ups and downs, joys and struggles, challenges and obstacles. However, we must remain grateful for being able to write a word of encouragement to the people of God. In this Advent season, we are calling for PEACE for our country, nation, and world. Unfortunately, there is a war at our back door, and we urge PEACE during such a time as this. God is not the author of confusion but the solution to every situation and circumstance.

PEACE begins with the heart of each of us, and it is incumbent that we share this PEACE by imparting the blessings of God on the underserved, less fortunate, overlooked, and every individual that has been created on this universe. Hatred is not welcome in this place, so we must erase the hatred and replace it with love for mankind. As we prepare to transition into a new chapter of life, let us recommit ourselves to sharing the peace that passeth all understanding and incorporate it into every segment of our lives. God is our ever-present help in the time of trouble. Therefore, we humbly give ourselves to his will and his way. God has called us to be agents of change and lets us begin changing the atmosphere one day at a time.



Rev. Dr. Michael Page



#BGE (Best Gift Ever)

Titus 2:11-14

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world. At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and savior Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us in order to rescue us from every kind of lawless behavior, and cleanse a special people for himself who are eager to do good actions.

There's nothing like a wrapped gift under the Christmas tree with your name on it to get the imagination going. We love to watch the flying flurry of wrapping paper as excited children tear open packages on Christmas morning. The question becomes "Is it something I want or something I need?"

IT IS EASY TO GET CAUGHT UP IN THE GIFTS, THE GIFT GIVING, AND LOOSE THE TRUE MEANING OF THE SEASON. CHRISTMAS REMINDS US EACH YEAR THERE'S ONE GIFT GREATER THAN ALL THE GIFTS—IT'S BIGGER, IT'S BETTER, IT'S PRICELESS! IN SENDING HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST INTO THE WORLD, GOD SENDS US "THE BEST GIFT EVER."

Paul says in his letter to Titus, "The grace of God has appeared" in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. The starting point of this passage and our faith is grace. Grace, God's unmerited favor, is a divine gift rather than an achievement. Grace is something we can never earn but can only be given. In the birth of the Christ child, we see grace in human form. Grace was born at Christmas!



But this is no ordinary gift like the one we give and receive at Christmas. **Paul understood that God gave the world a gift immeasurably precious and God did so in lavish measure to everyone, regardless of whether you are "naughty or nice."** Indeed no one is worthy of such a priceless gift since we all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We have no room to boast about our standing or accomplishments before God. We actually deserve the "worst gift," if a gift at all, yet God gives us only the best. God gives us Jesus--The Incarnation. It is God who became flesh and lived among us. The gift appears wrapped and ready in a manger on Christmas bringing "salvation to all" (v.11). **It is a gift offered to everyone who simply unwraps it and receives it!**

It's easy to think about the kind of gifts we want to receive on Christmas morning. Sure there will be some good gifts and some bad gifts. Most will be consigned to the junk drawer or find their way into the donation pile for the local thrift shop.

The gift of grace is different. It's the "best gift ever" because grace is exquisitely designed for each of us and sends the message that God loves us so much and deems us worthy to be saved. God's gift is a gift that begs for us to respond. How do we respond to this fabulous gift except by offering our lives in service? Moreover, because God's gift is the "best gift ever" it is a gift that we must share with others. It's the gift that "keeps on giving." God's gift always comes on its way to someone else! It's the gift that calls us to give ourselves to God and to others in return. When we consider the magnitude of God's saving gift to us in Jesus Christ, we respond with joy!



Rev. Donna Banks



CHRISTMAS, 2023

How can our city grow as a community of care, seeking the common good with tenderness in a world so entangled with logics of fear, division, and hyper-efficiency? And what does Christmas have to do with this vision of care?

My name is Ms. T, and I grew up in Durham with my grandma, Mary. She raised me, loved me, and cared about me. She loved purple, like me. Then I was on my own and lived in a lot of group homes. My disability made it hard for me. These places didn't have friends there for me. People call them homes, but not for me. On December 27, 2016, I moved into Corner House and now people care for me and are kind to me. I have my own room. I help cook and clean dishes. I couldn't do that in the group home. But now I can. I mess with people and can be a goofball. I can be sad or happy. It's OK if I cry here too. I have friends. I am at home.

We live in a world that is quick to celebrate cures and explanations, so often abstracted from the solidarity of relational care. A community of care is one in which being together is paramount. The origin of the word "care" comes from Germanic/Old English words for "grieve" and "lament." Something fundamental to a community of care involves crying out with one another, sharing a togetherness in suffering. Abiding with one another – especially in our pain – has a way of unearthing our common humanity. This is the kind of community to which Paul gestures: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2). This is the gift of both Ms. T's tears and her sitting with others in their tears.

This season we celebrate Emmanuel, the Word becoming flesh. The incarnation grounds us in the reality of a God who refuses to leave us alone, One who doesn't deal in abstraction or distanced fixes, but rather enters into humanity to offer free and full life from the inside. God makes home with us and invites us to make home, to abide in His love. May our celebration of Christmas this year open us to discover our shared humanity in Christ and kindle us to discover Christ's coming in our mutual care for one another.



Ms. T and Greg Little



Rev. Reynolds Chapman is Executive Director of DurhamCares and lives in Durham with his wife and three kids.





Rev. Miriam Phillips-Stephens serves as the Assistant to the Pastor and Minister of Christian Education at Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church.

Alexandra Valladares is a Honduran mother of two children, whose passion is to tend to the ecosystem of relationships that underpin the social realities of underserved communities and promote health, educational advancement, and other aspects of family wellbeing.





Rev. Stephen Poulson resides in Durham, NC with his wife, Yolanda and his two children, Hannah and Micah and he is the Executive Pastor of Nehemiah Church in Durham, NC.

The Rev. Breana van Velzen is an ordained Baptist minister and currently serves as the executive director of Durham Congregations in Action.





Rev. Mike Jones is journeying and discovering what it truly means to "follow Christ" and "to love God's people."





Rev. Dr. Alma Tinoc Ruiz is a mother, spouse, minister, and faculty director of the Hispanic House of Studies at Duke Divinity School.

Mr. Lafayette Perry is from Louisburg, NC, and has been in Durham for 41 years; he has one daughter, a son, and a granddaughter.





Rev. Angela Smith Taylor is an Associate Minister and Chair of the Board of Christian Education at Union Baptist Church, Prince R. Rivers, Sr. Pastor.

Rev. Heather Rodrigues, lead pastor at Duke Memorial United Methodist Church, is married to local artist Pete Rodrigues and has two children; Sarah, 10th grade, Durham School of the Arts, and Eli, Sophomore, NC State.





Rev. Annette Love is a woman who loves God and his people.





Pastor Louis Threatt, a husband, father, dedicated to providing essential spiritual, moral, justice and educational guidance to all those in need, especially to those pushed to the margins of life.

Rev. Chris Schutte is the rector of All Saints Church in Durham and has lived in Durham since 2018; he is married to Tracy, and is a parent to Owen, Anna, and Claire.





Rev. Deborah A. Williams, MBA, M. Div., MMDI, author of Peace Treaty With Myself: A Book of Poetic Meditations, Poet, and Project Coordinator, Office of Black Church Studies, Duke Divinity School.

Rev. Ricardo Correa is pastor of Ministerio Monte Sinai, a father of 4 children and a Durham resident for over 20 years.





Dr. Natasha Sistrunk Robinson is the author of Mentor for Life, A Sojourner's Truth, the Hope for Us Nicene Creed and Journey to Freedom Exodus Bible studies, and editor of Voices of Lament. She is the President & CEO of T3 Leadership Solutions, Inc. and Natasha Sistrunk Robinson Ministries, and serves as the Visionary Founder of Leadership LINKS, Inc.





Rev. Dr. Will Willimon is a United Methodist Bishop, retired and is Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry, Duke Divinity School.

Rev. Sheritta Michelle Williams is an passionate clergywoman, educator, lecturer, mentor, and community advocate who serves as the Minister for Young Adults & Performing Arts at Mt. Level Missionary Baptist Church here in Durham, NC.





Suzanne McLendon is a student at Duke Divinity School and has lived in Durham since 2019.

Elder Demarcus Williams serves as Associate Pastor and Director of Evangelism at Greater Emmanuel Temple of Grace in Durham, North Carolina.





Rev. Dr. Edgardo Colón-Emeric is dean of Duke Divinity School, Irene and William McCutchen Professor of Reconciliation and Theology, and director of the Center for Reconciliation.





Dr. Deborah Boston, a disciple of Christ loves the Lord, her family, neighbors and working with the Beloved Community!

Rev. Dr. Michael Page is the Pastor of Antioch Baptist Church and resides in Durham, NC.





Rev. Donna Banks currently serves as the Lead Pastor at Epworth United Methodist Church in Durham, North Carolina.

Ms T and Greg are friends and housemates at Reality Ministries' Corner House in the North Street Neighborhood.

