The Stories of Advent

Hope: Week One – Day One

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. – Isaiah 40:3 (NRSV)

Maybe you have heard this passage before. It is repeated in the Gospels and used to describe the ministry of John the Baptist. John was a prophet sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the way for Him. He lived in the wilderness near the Jordan River and people came from all around to hear him and be baptized. John called people to repent and get their hearts right because he knew that the Messiah of God was coming soon.

Advent is the season before Christmas in which we are supposed to prepare our hearts for Christ just like John did two thousand years ago. We are invited to take time for reflection and prayer. We are called to cultivate anticipation in our souls through worship and studying the Bible. We are encouraged to sit quietly and remember what Jesus means for our lives.

The thing is, while God is asking us to prepare our hearts for Jesus, the world is asking us to prepare our homes for Christmas. There are gifts to buy, halls to deck, presents to wrap, lights to string, cookies to bake, and carols to sing. There is so much to keep us busy and distracted that we might miss Jesus when He shows up.

So how should we prepare our hearts for Jesus this Advent? Here are a few ideas: participate in some charity work in your community, attend a special Christmas service with your family, or spend some extra time in prayer or reading your Bible alone or with some close friends. And of course, following this devotion series is something that will help too.

Believe me, Christmas morning is so much sweeter when we welcome the day having prepared for Jesus.

Hope: Week One – Day Two

Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. – Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV)

This verse is a passionate prayer that God would interrupt the whole world. The imagery is violent and startling. If God were to act like this, there would be no denying who was in charge. The speaker is asking God to storm onto the stage in the middle of the play. God is the director. God is in charge. If things are going awry then it is God who should jump in and make things right.

But, if any director were to jump on stage in the middle of the play, then the play would be over. The only time you see the director is at the curtain call. Instead, God chose to enter the play as an actor. He came to us as a little child. A helpless baby born in a barn to a poor family.

Why might God have chosen this particular method? Why would God hold off on the big flashy entrance and come to Earth as a humble child? Well, one reason might be that if God came with thunder and lightning, there would be no need for faith. Everyone would be forced to acknowledge God as King, and God would not be sure who really wanted an authentic relationship with Him.

God might also be trying to teach us something about who Jesus is and who we are supposed to be. We are not supposed to go through the world throwing our weight around and lording over people. As Jesus followers, we are to be humble like Jesus, treating everyone as our neighbors.

Now, this prayer from Isaiah is still really helpful. It is a hopeful cry for God to act. Whenever we see terrible things on the news or we've experienced some evil, we should pray asking God to intervene in a big way. The amazing thing about God is that He is planning on coming back in a big way to right all wrongs and save His people. God has promised to someday jump on stage and make things right. When we reach the curtain call of this life, God will make a big appearance and things will be made right.

Hope: Week One – Day Three

Make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! – Isaiah 64:2 (NRSV)

This has been a pretty crazy year with the pandemic, celebrity deaths, and a vicious presidential election. We've seen politicians on all sides behave badly and struggle to provide good leadership for our country. The way we do school and church has changed in ways we wouldn't have imagined beforehand. We missed big events and milestones all in the hope that we could keep each other safe and healthy. 2020 has been tough; if 2020 was a food, it would be toothpaste-covered orange slices. But this verse is one we need for today. It's about hoping for a better future.

In the second half of this verse, Isaiah asks that God might make the nations of the world tremble. He doesn't specify which nations; he probably means all nations. It's tough to say what is going on exactly, but it's a pretty good bet that it had not been a good year. If we think about the historical context, this was likely written during the exile when all of Israel was under the thumb of foreign enemies. For Israel, things were rough, and it felt like the whole world was turning against God. So, what does Isaiah want? He's not interested in maintaining the status quo. Isaiah wants God to shake things up!

Advent is the beginning of the church calendar, and this prayer seems to be a wish list for God to do new and exciting things with the new year. Remember that this week in Advent we are focusing on hope. As Christians, we are called to live with the hope and anticipation that God is still working in the world.

Imagine what the new year will be like for just a minute. How would you like for God to shake things up in our world? How would you like God to shake things up in your community or your school? Take some time today to ask God to shake things up. Tell Him what you might want this to look like. Allow the hope of Christ to shape your vision for the future during this Advent season. Rest in the hope that God wants to shake things up!

Hope: Week One – Day Four

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. – Isaiah 64:4 (NRSV)

What a mysterious passage! This verse sets up an interesting theological idea. The first half of the verse talks about how amazing and powerful God is. From generation to generation there has never been anyone more marvelous than our God. God is the creator of the world and Savior of all humankind.

This week in Advent, we are focusing on the spiritual discipline of hope. Being good at hope (and yes, you can be good at hope) means you must have two things: patience and Imagination. Consider what it means to be patient. Nobody hopes for things they already have, rather we have to wait for the things we are hoping for. Verse four says that God only works for those who wait on Him, not the people who rush to get things done their own way. But we shouldn't just sit around waiting for God to work without any idea of what we are looking for.

Think about it this way: there was once a little girl who was participating in a scavenger hunt. As she wandered through the yard she got more and more upset because she couldn't find any of the clues that her parents hid for her. Finally, she gave up and asked for help. When her brother came over, he easily found one of the clues and handed it to the little girl. She was shocked! The little girl had walked past the clue a dozen times, but she didn't realize that's what she was supposed to be looking for. She lacked the imagination to see what was right in front of her.

Today's passage calls us to practice hope with patience and imagination. We are not supposed to wait around doing nothing and expecting God to act. We must remember what our God is like and then live into the expectation of what God will do. Take time today to ask God for the right combination of patience and imagination.

Hope: Week One—Day Five

But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. – Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)

This year has felt like a marathon. There has been so much stress, anxiety, bitterness, and obstacles. Nothing has been normal. I feel like if I hear the phrase "uncertain times" one more time I am going to explode. We really need some *certain* times if you ask me. We need new energy. We need some encouragement.

In Hebrew, the word "wait" can also mean "hope." We talked about the connection between waiting and hoping in our last devotion. We discussed how God calls us to practice hope with patience and imagination. But this verse introduces another element to hope which God promised to provide: strength.

Waiting can take a lot of energy out of you. Without God's intervention we can become discouraged or exhausted by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. But God promised if you wait for Him, if you put your hope in Him, He will renew your strength. It is a message of endless endurance and profound support. Isaiah presents us with a heroic image of a runner who never gets tired, and paints us a picture of a majestic bird soaring above all troubles.

This verse reminds me of where we find hope in our Christmas hymns. There's a line in "O Holy Night" which goes: "A thrill of hope – the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!"

I love the idea that hope is thrilling. There's an energy and strength behind hope. It feels like electricity animating our very bones.

The hope of God is not a weak and fragile thing. God's hope is dynamic and strong. It energizes us in the midst of "uncertain times." It makes us agile enough to overcome the most challenging of obstacles. God's hope is thrilling and brings joy to all the world.

Maybe this seems unattainable to you. Maybe you are weary from a year of uncertainty. Engage God in conversation. Ask for the strength and thrill of hope this Advent.

Peace: Week Two – Day One

Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God. – Isaiah 40:1 (NRSV)

This passage is spoken over the people of Israel at the end of their exile. Is read in God's own voice, and He is calling out to Israel to give them comfort at the end of their trial. It's an important verse in the book of Isaiah because it presents a huge shift in the message of the book. In fact, some people call the following few chapters the "Book of Comfort" because the tone is one of support and encouragement.

When you think of the word "comfort," what images come into your mind? Maybe you think about a warm, safe blanket on a cold, rainy night. Maybe you imagine a good hug from a dear friend that you received just at the right moment.

There are lots of things we use to inspire comfort during this time of year. Hot cocoa in a good mug after a long day. Bright lights on our homes when the night lasts so long. Bells that spark music when we least expect it.

The Christmas season is definitely a time when we need comfort; comfort food, comforting friends, and comfortable clothes on those cold winter nights. You, or those close to you, might need a little extra comfort during this season, especially when we remember all the people who cannot celebrate this season with us.

Today, take time to reflect on the images of comfort which surround you. Candles, hugs, and Christmas cards are full of warm wishes and messages of comfort. Resist the urge to get caught up in the stress and materialism of our world. Embrace the Sabbath rest of God. Find your favorite image of comfort and put it in a prominent place. Put a candle on your desk at home or a Christmas card on your bathroom mirror. God wants you to enjoy His comfort this season, and if you get the chance, offer someone else a little comfort too!

Peace: Week Two – Day Two

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. – Isaiah 9:7 (NRSV)

Long ago, when kings and queens were being introduced, they would collect a bunch of titles or nicknames for themselves to sound impressive. You might be familiar with names like Catherine the Great or Ivan the Terrible of Russia. But rulers had more interesting names too. Edward I of England was known by the name The Hammer of the Scots, which sounds kind of cool.

Today, these kinds of nicknames are typically reserved for professional athletes like football players or basketball players. The best nicknames are found among pro wrestlers. Think "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, or "Macho Man" Randy Savage. These names are supposed to mesmerize fans and intimidate opponents. The nicknames given to our rulers in the past did the same thing. Names like "the Great" or "the Terrible" or "The Hammer of the Scots" were supposed to sound mighty and unapproachable. We are supposed to be captivated and frightened by them.

This verse from Isaiah lists a bunch of nicknames for Jesus, and they seem very different from the nicknames of our worldly rulers and wrestlers. The title "Wonderful Counselor" does not sound scary; it sounds inspiring and personal. What if we were to rewrite Jesus's name with the phrase 'Mighty God.' It might sound something like Jesus Christ the Mighty God. Now that does sound awe-inspiring. Perhaps the most confusing of these titles is 'Prince of Peace.' I cannot think of any worldly ruler or even modern athlete who wishes to be called 'Prince of Peace.' It tends to be against human instinct to advocate for peace, even when it is the thing we need most.

Jesus comes into this world sporting the title "Prince of Peace." Jesus turns the earthly model of leadership on its head. He does not rule by force and terror, but through faith and love. He preaches "Blessed are the peacemakers," and through His death and resurrection He brings peace between humanity and God. Take time today to reflect on the nicknames of Jesus. Which one means the most to you?

Peace: Week Two – Day Three

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. - Isaiah 11:1 (NRSV)

What a crazy verse to start out week two of Advent. If you haven't heard this verse before, it's commonly read in churches in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Though its meaning might be hidden from us, the Jewish people of Jesus' time considered this a prophecy about their future king.

The key to understanding this verse is to know who in the world this Jesse guy was! If you remember your Old Testament, Jesse was King David's father. David was the best king Israel ever had, and his family ruled Judah for hundreds of years before the kingdom was destroyed by Babylon. When the text talks about the "stump of Jesse," it's referring to David's family tree, the royal family of God's people.

Now, if you remember your New Testament, you'll know that Jesus comes from the house and line of David. He is born in David's hometown of Bethlehem and is called the King of the Jews. Jesus is Jesse's great-great-great-great-great grandson, or something like that. The people of Judea had waited for generations for God to regrow the royal family tree, and Jesus is that shoot growing up from Jesse's stump. In fact, there's a lot of kingly language in this passage. The Hebrew word for "shoot" can also mean "scepter." It's a play on words connecting the symbols of kingship with an image of new growth. Jesus is the shoot rising up to claim the throne of David, ready and eager to extend new life for us.

There's a tradition in some churches to take bare branches and cover them with ornaments representing Jesus. They call these decorations 'Jesse trees,' after this passage. Trees are a big part of the Christmas celebration. Maybe you have one in your home right now. We use evergreen trees to remind us of God's ever-present love for us, even in times of darkness and uncertainty.

Peace: Week Two – Day Four

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. - Isaiah 11:2 (NRSV)

This verse from Isaiah throws out a lot of words we don't typically associate with peace – words like "wisdom," "understanding," "counsel," and "knowledge." These are all words associated with thinking and decision-making. And, of course, Isaiah keeps repeating the same word over and over again: "spirit."

Isaiah did not just give us a general description of Jesus' character traits; he pointed to a very specific element of who He is. Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit of God.

In John Chapter 14, Jesus sat down with the twelve disciples and talked with them about the Holy Spirit. He said that the Holy Spirit would be given to them as a gift, and the Spirit would teach them, remind them, and guide them. He even called the Holy Spirit the Counselor. He went on to say that He would send this Spirit to them after He had gone away.

Remarkably, everyone who is in Christ has been promised the Spirit of the Lord as well. Though this verse points to Jesus, it could easily be rewritten to apply to you or me. It might sound something like: The Spirit of the LORD rested on Riley, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding. James received the Spirit of counsel and might. Marcus was covered in the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Although Jesus was originally filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, He has already offered His Spirit to you. If you accept God's Spirit, He promises to change the way you think. He will teach you and remind you of God's instruction. The Spirit will bring you an inner peace grounded in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. If you accept the Spirit of God, you will be transformed.

If you have already accepted the Holy Spirit, when was the last time you heard His voice? In the middle of this busy Advent season, you might take some time to listen for His counsel. Find a quiet space today to sit and listen to the Spirit of God.

Peace: Week Two – Day Five

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.
– Isaiah 11:3-4 (NRSV)

If someone asked you for a definition of "peace," what would you say? Perhaps you would talk about the inner calm you get from prayer. Maybe you would use words like "tranquility" or "harmony." You might talk about meditation or circles of hippies singing "Kumbayah" and everyone getting along. This verse from Isaiah does not talk about peace in that way.

Isaiah describes the ministry of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, as one of judgment. This passage throws around words like righteousness, equity, and "meek of the earth." This is the sort of turn-the-world-upside-down peace in which the winners become losers and the losers become winners. As Jesus put it in His own words, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." Moreover, Jesus isn't the sort of judge who hears testimony or can be corrupted. It says He doesn't need His ears or His eyes to know what's right. Jesus already knows how to righteously judge.

There certainly hasn't been a lot of peace this year. There have been protests and counterprotests, riots and prayer walks. More than wearing their emotions on their sleeves, people have started printing up t-shirts broadcasting their frustrations everywhere they go. Maybe you've even posted or protested too, possibly using some mantra like Back the Blue, Black Lives Matter, Pro-Life, or Love Wins. In our world, everyone has got a slogan, and no one is at peace.

We live in a broken, mixed-up world, and on the other side of Christmas that will still be true. We are all sinful people trying our best to do what we think is best. During Advent, we are awaiting the arrival of Jesus the Righteous King. When He sits down to judge the people of this world, He will do so with perfect justice. Until that day, we are called to seek justice and equity the best we can.

Today, take time to consider someone else's point of view. How can you lovingly pray for those who are not at peace?

Joy: Week Three – Day One

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. – Isaiah 35:5-6 (NRSV)

The ministry of Jesus Christ is full of the miraculous. He healed those who could not walk and gave sight to the blind. We know that He walked on water and calmed a raging storm. He fed thousands of people with a few pieces of bread, and once He made a coin appear from the mouth of a fish. John writes in his Gospel that Jesus did so many miracles that they couldn't begin to have written them all down. But I have to say, of all the miracles, the coin-in-the-fish thing seems the most like a magic trick.

Let me ask you this: just for fun, what would you say was Jesus' most extraordinary miracle? You might think it's one of the fancier miracles like walking on water or calming the storm. Or, you might jump straight to the resurrection as His most impressive feat. However, what if it's something else? What if it's something that literally every person alive today has done?

Every human being who is alive has gone through the process of birth. There are different ways of being born, of course, and we don't need to get into that here. Yet, every human alive was formed in the belly of a woman and brought into this world to undergo the human experience. Even though Adam and Eve weren't 'born' in the typical sense, they still lived the human experience. However, Jesus isn't *just* human.

Now, the idea of Jesus actually having a definitive "Most Extraordinary Miracle" is not real. This is just a thought experiment. However, since it is the season of Advent, maybe we should consider the birth of Jesus as fully human *and* fully divine as His most extraordinary miracle. We call this event the Incarnation, and without it none of the other miracles are possible. This is the moment that heaven touches Earth and they mix together. This is the moment that Love came down and took on human skin. What would it mean for us to think of Jesus' birth as His most extraordinary miracle?

Joy: Week Three – Day Two

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" – Isaiah 52:7 (NRSV)

This is the third week of Advent, and churches all over the world are talking about joy. You cannot read today's verse without hearing joy. We've all experienced the joy that comes from getting some long-awaited good news. Maybe you've anxiously refreshed a webpage looking for a grade, or you've waited outside while a team of judges decided if you passed the audition, or you got that thrilling text with those four joyous words: "You made the team."

Back before smartphones and fax machines, the only way to receive a message from a long way off was to send a hand-delivered letter. There was not a postal service or a Pony Express. Most of the time, these messages were carried by people on foot. Today's verse describes someone traveling on foot to deliver a message of peace and salvation. Picture a soldier dispatched from the front lines and told to run back to the city. The soldier is to announce that the war is over. Peace has come, and God has brought about salvation. The beautiful feet in this story are not just bringing good news, they are bringing a message of life in the face of death.

Though we have all received *good* news, we have not received many messages of life in the face of death. That kind of news sounds more like hearing "His cancer is finally in remission," or "She survived the accident," or "We will be together again someday."

However, we have all received the same good news in Jesus Christ. In fact, that's exactly what the word "gospel" means: good news! And How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the gospel, who proclaim peace with God, who announce our salvation and the Kingdom of God.

This season, we should remember that Jesus's birth is the ultimate good news. More than that, it is a message of life in the face of death. Take joy and give thanks for God's message of life in the face of death.

Joy: Week Three – Day Three

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. – Isaiah 9:2 (NRSV)

This time of year, the world is full of lights. There are twinkling lights on the Christmas tree and flickering flames in the Advent wreath. There are great big light extravaganzas down the street and dainty icicle lights on the house next door. There are candles in the windows and headlights on cars. As the song goes, "City street lights, even stop lights dressed in holiday style." We need light this time of year because the days are short, and the nights are long.

This year might have felt pretty dark to you. We have been engulfed by the uncertainty of COVID-19, and it has amplified our preexisting fears. Maybe you once feared not making the team, and now you're afraid there won't be a team. Maybe you once feared not being able to get into the right college. Now, you're not sure how well college and coronavirus mix. We have been walking in the dark for most of the year – never knowing what the next day would bring. For most of us, darkness is terrifying, but we're even more afraid that any light in our life will be destroyed by the darkness.

Author Brené Brown says this about the darkness: "The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It's our fear of the dark that casts our joy into the shadows." Think about it this way, there is no way a shadow can ever overcome the light. The smallest amount of light – the tiniest good thing – shines even brighter and becomes even more noticeable in the depths of the dark. If we spend time worrying about the dark, worrying about the bad things, we are letting go of our own joy.

For those of us who call themselves the people of God, our great light this Christmas is the boy child Jesus. He is the Light of the World, and if you are following Jesus you will never have to worry about the dark.

As you go about your day today, keep your eyes peeled for Christmas lights and candles. Maybe even find a bright spot around your house. Ask yourself, what does it mean for Jesus to be the Light of the World, and what does it mean for Jesus to be my light in the darkness?

Joy: Week Three – Day Four

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. – Isaiah 9:3 (NRSV)

What's your favorite Christmas food? Take a moment to really think about it. Close your eyes and picture the family table covered in casseroles and carbohydrates. There's got to be one you put on your plate first. Without its savory goodness, Christmas would be incomplete. Or maybe you have a sweet tooth ready to devour some cookies, cakes, or pies. They don't call it holiday weight for nothing.

This verse from Isaiah talks about the joy of Israel. He says that God's people are rejoicing like it is harvest time, and there's more food than they can imagine. They are gathered together as a community as they delight in the good things God has given them. As we celebrate in our homes and with our loved ones, it can be easy to let the focus of our joy be on the food or the presents. Our eyes will drift to the harvest on the table and under the tree, and we will forget the God who has made all our blessings possible.

This verse reminds me of the final scene in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas.* If you remember the story, all the Whos in Whoville were being quite obnoxious with their joyfulness, so the Grinch decided he would steal Christmas. On Christmas Eve, he went house to house and stole all the food and decorations and gifts, then waited until morning to hear them cry "boo-hoo." But of course, they didn't. They arose Christmas morning and gathered together to sing. Somehow or other Christmas came just the same.

James 1:17 reminds us that "…*every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*" (NRSV) Nothing we have comes from our own hand, but only through the grace of God. We must not find joy in the gifts without first finding joy in the Giver. And, during Advent, we are awaiting the most important gift of all in Jesus Christ, from whom we reap a harvest of salvation.

Joy: Week Three – Day Five

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. – Isaiah 12:5-6 (NRSV)

Let's think for a minute: how many Christmas songs talk about joy or being joyful? Well, there's "Joy to the World," that one is pretty obvious. There's also "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "O Holy Night," "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," "O Come All Ye Faithful," and "Angels We Have Heard on High" just to name a few.

Joy is pretty a churchy word, but we use it because we are talking about something more than happiness or pleasure. We are talking about a heavenly feeling which has somehow made its way deep into our souls. Often, in Scripture and in worship, we are so overwhelmed by its presence we cannot help but sing. That's why we have so many Christmas songs about joy.

This verse from Isaiah encourages the people of God to let loose with shouting and praise. There are hundreds of other passages in the Bible which encourage the same thing, yet we often find ourselves quiet and self-conscious when it comes to worship. When was the last time you found yourself singing? Maybe it was in the shower or in the car. Maybe at a friend's birthday or in the school choir. There is so much emotion bound up with the act of singing. When we sing we are forced to really feel the words deep within us.

Theologian St. Augustine used to say, "To sing is to pray twice." In a sense, anything we sing to God reflects the depths of our soul. Isaiah encourages the people of God to sing in celebration and joy at what the Lord has done for them. But he also told them to sing for another reason. He said that they should sing because "…in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." They should sing, not just because of what God has done, but also because God is present with them.

During the season of Advent, we are called to celebrate because the God of all creation has decided to make His home among us. God is not far off in heaven. The Holy One is found here in our midst in the person of Jesus Christ. This season, do not be afraid to celebrate boldly and with singing the arrival of our Lord.

Love: Week Four – Day One

O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. – Isaiah 64:8 (NRSV)

Pottery was such an indispensable part of life during the time of the Bible. Nearly everything you ate, sold, wore or enjoyed was stored in or served on pottery. Each piece of pottery was entirely unique and handmade. That's not the case today; but back then every plate, bowl, jug, and cup was formed by a skilled artisan working with clay.

If you have any experience working with clay, you'll know there are a few things you need to go from a lump of dirt to a lovely work of craftsmanship. The first thing you need is water to make the clay malleable. Dried out clay cannot be formed and will crumble into dust. A proud and difficult heart is like dry clay in the hands of God. It will break apart and never become the beautiful creation God has planned. If God is the potter of our lives, that means we must present ourselves to God as well watered clay. We must be willing to be lovingly molded by God, to let God lead us and shape us and make us something wonderful.

The other thing you need to make pottery is time. If God is shaping our lives it means we must be patient. God wants us to be perfect before the end, and perfection takes time. We are called to be humble and hopeful while God is working within us.

The final stage of making pottery is the kiln, where the clay is heated and hardens. What's interesting about pottery is that it can be both beautiful and useful. We use plates to serve bread and cups to drink water. When the master potter is finished with us, we will be beautiful and valuable. We will be equipped to love our neighbor who is hungry or thirsty through humble service. We can serve as tools for the kingdom of God.

Think about your own faith journey today. Have you offered yourself to God as a malleable piece of clay? Are you letting God shape and mold you with humility and love? If not, how can you soften your spirit to better accommodate God's work in your life? Where do you need to yield to God and stop trying to have your own way? And where can you serve as a faithful piece of God's handmade pottery?

Love: Week Four – Day Two

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. – Isaiah 7:14 (NRSV)

Have you ever been to a baby shower? Or maybe you have younger siblings and can remember the anticipation of the coming baby? It's such an exciting time waiting for a new addition to the family. Perhaps this season you will receive a Christmas card with a new face in the group. I guarantee wherever you see a new baby, everyone is smiling a bit bigger. There's a tad more joy when we add someone new.

This verse from Isaiah is a piece of prophecy pointing to Jesus. The young woman is, of course, Mary. But there's something peculiar about this verse. It says that the new baby will be named Immanuel. Now, Jesus' name isn't Immanuel; it's, well, Jesus. But we even have hymns that seem to refer to Jesus as "Immanuel." So, what's the deal?

The name Immanuel in Hebrew translates to "God with us." This verse should read something like: the child will be God-right-next-to-us. This means Immanuel is more of a title than a person's name. In Matthew 1:23, this verse from Isaiah is referenced when the angel announces Jesus' birth to Joseph.

God-with-us is exactly who Jesus is. He is the incarnation of the living God. He is heaven come to Earth. He has made his home among us mortals because of His love for us. He's not social distancing but right up in our business. The overarching message of the Bible is just that: Immanuel – God is with us. God says, "I will be with you," to Abraham when he is asked to leave home. God said, "I will be with you," to Jacob when he fled from his brother to the wilderness. God said, "I will be with you," to Moses when he brought the Israelites from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. And God said, "I will be with you," to Mary when she finds out she will have a baby.

So, if Immanuel is a title or more of a description, how have you seen God with you this Advent season? Does it feel like God has been with you lately? Maybe it has felt like God was so far away He was on another planet. Take some time today to reflect on what it means that God is with us no matter what happens.

Love: Week Four – Day Three

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name; you are mine. – Isaiah 43:1 (NRSV)

In 2012, an independent film called *Beast of the Southern Wild* was released. The movie was about a little girl named Hushpuppy trying to survive, in the bayou of Louisiana. The young actress who played Hushpuppy auditioned for the role at just five years old. In 2013, at age nine, she became the youngest nominee for Best Actress, the first African-American child actor

to earn an Oscar nomination, and the only person born in the 21st century to be nominated for an Academy Award. Her name is Quvenzhané [Kwa-Vin-Je-Nay] Wallis.

That's probably not a name you hear a lot. In the middle of her success, Hollywood was having a difficult time making sense of her, and especially, her name. TV Personalities decided to bypass the issue by giving her the nickname "Little Q," a nickname she did not request.

It may seem harmless, but the message was clear. Despite her enormous success and talent, her name was not worth knowing. She's not the only actor who's had a hard time because of their name. Actors James Rodriguez and Ramón Estévez changed their names to sound less Hispanic and be taken more seriously. You may know them by their stage names James Roday and Martin Sheen.

In Isaiah 43:1, God calls out to his people with words of tender love saying, "Don't be afraid because I have made everything alright. I am calling you by name, your real name. You are my child and you are worth knowing. The real you, not the mask you put on to make others feel comfortable. I love you as you are." To call someone by their name seems so ordinary. We do it all the time without thinking. However, when the God of creation stoops down to our level, He takes great care to refer to us by name. Jesus wants us to know that we matter and that we are loved for who we are.

As Christmas draws even closer, you might find your name written on the tags of gifts or in the address line of a greeting card. Whenever you see your name written this week take time to reflect on God's personal call on your life. You matter. You are loved. You are the recipient of the most wonderful gift, and it's addressed specifically to you – the gift of salvation wrapped in human skin.

Love: Week Four – Day Four

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. – Isaiah 43:2 (NRSV)

Lately, it seems as if everyone is obsessed with superheroes. There are new superhero movies out several times a year, and every streaming platform has their own show following the antics of a superhuman crusader. Maybe you follow *Agents of Shield, The Boys,* or *The Umbrella Academy.*

This verse from Isaiah reminds me of superheroes. It comes to us as a promise from God. It's written as a bit of poetry and says that God will be with us in times of trial to prevent us from getting hurt. The way it is written, it sounds like whenever we are confronted by a challenge, God will allow us to breeze right through it like Wonder Woman or Superman. This verse reminds me of the age-old saying that God won't give you more than you can handle. By the way, that saying isn't actually in the Bible, and I have to disagree.

The focus of today's passage is not God's protection from harm. Rather, we are supposed to pay attention to the five little words, "I will be with you." Here's the thing: there will definitely be times in life when you feel like you've got more than you can handle. In the Bible, God gave people more than they could handle all the time, and, this year, everyone feels like they've got way more than they can handle. Instead, God promises that He will be with us when challenges come our way. He promised to walk through raging rivers and fierce flames by our side. With God we will survive. More than that, with God we will have salvation.

Despite what we see in TV and movies, there has only ever been one super human to walk the earth. That Hero's origin story includes being born in a barn and sleeping in a manger. He was a lowly peasant who suffered just like us. But the whole world knows and celebrates His story more than any hero in history. Take time today and reflect on how Jesus has been a hero in your life.

Love: Week Four – Day Five

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? – Isaiah 43:18-19 (NRSV)

We are so close to Christmas Day! In just a few dozen hours we will all be gathered together ready to celebrate the birth of our Lord. What's more, we will finally be able to open all the gifts underneath the Christmas tree.

When theologian and Pastor Samuel Wells was a young man, his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Before she passed away, she managed to muster up enough energy to go out and buy him a special gift. She wrapped it in beautiful paper and tied it with a bow, but instead of giving him the gift she placed it in the closet for safekeeping. She told Samuel that his father would give him the gift on his eighteenth birthday, a birthday she would not live to see. For years, he dreamed of what might be in the box in the closet.

Sometime after her death, but before his birthday, their home was robbed. Someone broke in through a window and stole several items of value, but there was nothing more valuable than the beautifully wrapped box tucked away in the closet. Samuel never opened his mother's gift.

Samuel was never able to enjoy his mother's gift, but the gift of Christ is at our fingertips. We must not let it slip away. It is such a powerful gift that it transforms both our past and our future. As to our past, Jesus offers forgiveness and turns our grief into joy. As to our future, we receive the wonderful blessing of the Kingdom of God and eternal life.

The gift of Jesus is the most valuable gift of all. As we approach Christmas morning, I want to encourage you to be present for the present of Jesus. Do not allow this moment to pass you by. Isaiah reminds us to pay attention to the moment at hand and to notice the new gift God is offering us in Christ. Savor the celebration. Reflect on God's love for you. Let your eyes be opened to the glory of God. That God would give us such a gift is truly a reason to rejoice.