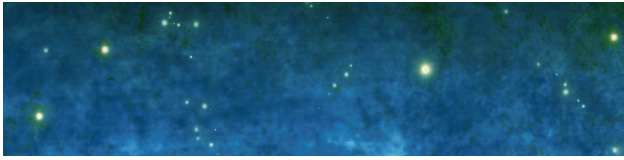




CREATOR

of the
Stars
of Night

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2015



Creator of the stars of night,
your people's everlasting light,
O Christ, redeemer of us all,
we pray you hear us when we call.

Sunday, Nov. 29

"Creator of the Stars of Night," Verse 1 (ELW 245)

I never looked forward to that night; in fact, I dreaded it. Growing up in north Florida, every summer I attended a week of church camp. One night each week, we'd sleep outside in the middle of Kelly Field. The mosquitoes were terrible. The horse flies were pretty bad, too. Sometimes it rained. For a city boy, it was just weird sleeping without a roof over my head. But those stars! Every year I was stunned again by their beauty.

During those nights, staring up at the stars, it was hard even to close my eyes. I hated to shut out the grandeur. My heart raced with the sight of them. Bugs and all, it was worth it.

O God, our maker, your creation shines in glory. Guide us this Advent as we seek your everlasting light. Amen.

Monday, Nov. 30

Malachi 3:1-4

As my wife and I have grown in our marriage, we've come to realize it's important to always know when our next vacation will take place. Life can get pretty hectic, but anticipating the time off helps us through our crazy schedules. Some studies have shown that the anticipation of vacations is even more important—and more enjoyable—than the vacation itself.

The prophet Malachi is anticipating a future unlike any vacation I've been on. The identity of "the messenger of the covenant" is a bit vague in the passage, but the outcome is clearer: a powerful refining that will please the Lord.

Prepare us, O God, for your coming reign. Refine us for peace, for joy and for love. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 1

Luke 1:68-79 (Canticle: "Benedictus")

Zechariah was in need of a timeout. In his earlier appearance in Luke, we find him questioning an angel. Gabriel didn't appreciate his attitude, and Zechariah was made to remain silent for nine months. When he spoke again, he sang this song of God's salvation, mercy and security.

Zechariah means, "God remembered." Sometimes, for us to remember God's gracious acts, we need times of silence and contemplation. But, even when we ourselves forget, God remembers us.

Holy God, you always remember your people with mercy, graciousness and love. This Advent, silence in us any voice but your own, and set our hearts on you. Amen.

Wednesday, Dec. 2

Philippians 1:3-11

Much of Advent is about waiting, preparing and anticipating the celebration of Christ's birth even while we wait, prepare and anticipate Christ's final glorious return. But how shall we wait? Paul might suggest we give thanks and pray.

In the first chapter of Philippians, Paul particularly addresses prayers of gratitude for his relationship with others who share the gospel. Today, I give thanks for Sunday school teachers and church choir directors; for those who visit prisoners and feed the homeless; and for those who proclaim Christ's death and resurrection in their daily acts of love.

As you wait, prepare and anticipate this Advent, for whom do you give thanks to God?

Ever-present God, as we wait this Advent, help us to be thankful. And in our gratitude, shape us to be mindful of your coming reign. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 3

Luke 3:1-16

Fairy tales often begin, “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a princess.” These stories are ageless. They depend on a lack of connection to any particular time and place. The gospel story is different.

To introduce John the Baptist, the writer of Luke explains the exact date and place by noting no less than seven historical figures. Our salvation history is grounded in actual events that took place in named places. God works in the midst of real people, in real places, to bring about real salvation.

Fairy tales are great, but we can put those stories down and ignore their implications. John the Baptist will not be ignored. He proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John does this because into actual history, and in actual flesh, Jesus is coming.

Center our hearts, O God, on your story of promise. Guide us to respond to its real claims on our lives. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 4

Luke 3:1-16

By this time of year, we’re already beset by Christmas decorations, carols piped over loudspeakers and candy canes aplenty. Nowadays, many banners in public read, “Seasons Greetings” rather than “Merry Christmas.” The reality for Christians is that the greetings of the season are far from mall Muzak. John the Baptist prepares us not with Frosty the Snowman figurines, but with preaching of wrath and repentance. Perhaps most troubling, rather than buying more stuff, he calls upon those with two coats to share one with a neighbor. That message doesn’t quite jive with the popular conception of the Christmas season. But that’s okay. After all, the season is Advent. And “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

God in whom we live, move and have our being. In this season of life make our ways smooth, our paths straight and open our eyes to salvation in you. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 5

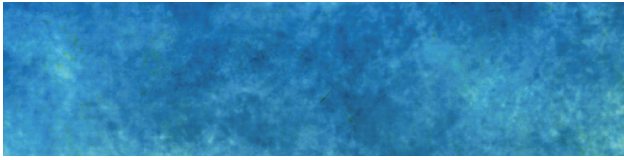
“Creator of the Stars of Night,” Verse 4 (ELW 245)

I once had a religion professor who was so soft spoken that the front of the classroom used to fill up first so students could actually hear him. This man also happened to be short and thin. His whole aura radiated not wanting to take up space.

So I was shocked when I saw my professor speaking at a large peace rally off campus. He shouted into the microphone with energy, volume and passion that I had no inkling he possessed. I came to understand that the change had to do with faith: in the classroom, he taught what other people thought about God. At that podium, he got to proclaim his own faith.

I remembered my professor when reading “holy might” in the fourth stanza of our hymn. We sing that God might come in “holy might” to redeem and defend us. Even as we sing, we can profess what we believe with holy passion now.

Gracious God, enlighten in us your might for justice, redemption and peace. Amen.



When this old world drew on
toward night,
you came; but not in splendor bright,
not as a monarch, but the child
of Mary, blessed mother mild.

Sunday, Dec. 6

“Creator of the Stars of Night,” Verse 1 (ELW 245)

In the Genesis 1 creation story, after God creates the heavens and the earth and all their creatures, God takes the seventh day to rest. Whenever we think of God as “Creator of the stars of night,” we should also remember that God advocates Sabbath, time to rest from our work. These days we often lament, and sometimes brag, about how busy we are. This can be especially true in Advent, when the demands of the holiday season meet end-of-year obligations at work, or exams at school. But remembering our Creator’s rest reminds us that a life of faith need not be a life of perpetual exhaustion. Whether it’s Sunday or another day for you, carve out time to rest, to worship, to pray and to delight in God’s goodness. Genesis 1:27 reminds us that we are all created in the image of God, and that same God calls us to lay down our busyness and rest.

Creator of the stars of night, your people’s everlasting light, O Christ, redeemer of us all, we pray you hear us when we call. Help us regularly rest from our work, taking time to praise you and delight in your creation. Amen.

Monday, Dec. 7

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The prophet Zephaniah has spent two-and-a-half chapters proclaiming God’s judgment and destruction against both Judah and foreign nations. To read here about the imminent restoration of Jerusalem can be a little disorienting. Yet this pattern is repeated over and over throughout the Old Testament, which testifies to God’s continuing fidelity to and love for Israel, even when God’s people seem to invite nothing but destruction.

The promise of Advent continues this pattern of God’s faithfulness: into a world full of brokenness and sin, God will send a savior. However, unlike the vision of Zephaniah, which sees God as a warrior-king, this coming savior will be born into poverty and scandal. Instead of repelling military enemies, this coming savior will die the shameful death of an enemy of the state. This is all very disorienting indeed. And yet this is exactly what Advent is about: the world will soon be turned upside-down.

God of surprises, thank you for continually upending our expectations. Keep us watchful this season for the coming wonders of your salvation. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 8

Isaiah 12:2-6

Today is Tuesday. The prophet Isaiah calls us to sing, shout and testify to the greatness of God with wild abandon, to throw off our fears and celebrate our salvation. But it can be hard to praise God on a Tuesday. Tuesdays can be such ordinary days, with school and work and committee meetings and crying babies and doctors’ visits. Even in the season of Advent, when we wait with joyful hope for the coming of Jesus, we can slip into some very ordinary melancholy.

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). This metaphor is perfect for a Tuesday, because it celebrates all that God has done for us by imagining praise as a routine, everyday survival activity, like drawing water from a well. As we move through our ordinary days, may we find ways to sing and shout and tell the world of God’s saving power.

God of our salvation, we praise you for all you have done for us. As we move through our ordinary days, help us rejoice in you always. Amen.

Wednesday, Dec. 9

Philippians 4:4-7

“Do not worry about anything,” writes Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi. Really, Paul? Not anything? But there is so much to worry about! Will I do well on this exam? Do I have enough money? Is my health OK? Can I keep my family safe?

Letting go of anxiety is easier said than done. This may be especially true in the pre-Christmas season, when the world ramps up its expectations for what our holidays should look like. Even churches can contribute to these high expectations, with Advent craft fairs and well-scripted candlelight services and nativity pageants. Of course, many of our worries reach far deeper than the stresses of the season. But Paul encourages us to give over even our most closely-held fears to God. Imprisoned and facing the possibility of death, Paul still exhorts the church at Philippi—and now us—to live with joy, gentleness, gratitude and peace, made possible only by handing over all our worries to God in prayer.

Merciful God, we long for your peace, that peculiar peace that passes all understanding. Help us hand over our worries to you. Free us from our anxieties so that we might share your joy with the world. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 10

Luke 3:7-18

The end of this Gospel lesson has always been a bit disconcerting to me. John emphasizes that the coming Messiah will be powerful, eager “to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17b).

Immediately after this description of separating the wheat from the chaff, Luke the Gospel writer explains, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people” (Luke 3:18). Good news?!?! What’s so good about unquenchable fire?

We know that Luke was a fierce advocate for the poor and oppressed. He is, after all, the Gospel writer who includes Mary’s Magnificat, which states that the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty. The promise that God will set things right for the poor, then, is good news in Luke’s book, and it should be good news in ours. The Messiah is coming to bring justice to an unjust world. We are called to participate in that justice.

God of mercy and compassion, help us rejoice in the coming of the Messiah, with all that his arrival entails. Make us advocates for the poor and instruments of your peace. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 11

Luke 3:7-18

How many coats are hanging in your closet? I count 16 in mine, which comes out to four coats for every member of my household. Part of that excess is a consequence of being equipped for Minnesota’s winters, with days that may be 30 degrees above zero or 30 degrees below it. But even now, just as in John the Baptist’s day, these multiple coats are a tell-tale sign of the abundance I experience, even as others have no coats at all.

“What then should we do?” the people ask John. How does the coming of the Messiah compel us to live? If we have more, we share with those who have less. If we are in positions of power, we do not exploit the powerless. Sharing our resources is not just a seasonal nicety; it is a gospel mandate. In Advent we do not await the Messiah passively, twiddling our thumbs, but actively, bearing fruits worthy of repentance.

God of every good gift, open our hearts and hands to share our abundance with those in need. Call us out of our complacency and into action, even as we await our coming Messiah. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 12

“Creator of the Stars of Night,” Verse 3 (ELW 245)

In late September I was delighted to be able to see the super moon lunar eclipse. While my son and husband went off to a local overlook for the best view, I stayed home and watched from my back porch, because I was nine months pregnant at the time. As I watched the moon overtaken by shadow, I felt the baby kick. I was deeply moved by the idea that the “creator of the stars of night” could also be the creator—and redeemer—of such a tiny thing as an unborn infant. Then again, how astonishing it is that the creator and redeemer comes down to earth as an infant! We talk about the dyad of “heavens and earth” all the time, but how often do we pause to wonder at God’s presence in them both: all things celestial and stellar, all things terrestrial and earth-bound, God made and cares for each and every one. Thanks be to God!

God of all things celestial and terrestrial, thank you for the care that you show to all of creation. Give us courage and fortitude to care for the heavens and the earth alike and to wonder always at your majesty. Amen.



At your great name, O Jesus, now
all knees must bend, all hearts
must bow:

all things on earth with one accord,
like those in heav’n, shall call
you Lord.

Sunday, Dec. 13

“Hark! A Thrilling New Voice” (ELW 246)

Christ is near! Right now and throughout the day I can boldly stand in God’s daylight. I have nothing to hide. I no longer need to feel trapped by the dysfunction within and around me. I no longer need to numb myself to the truth into which God is calling me. I’ve been forgiven and healed. I’ve been freed from all that would wrap me in fear and dread. I’ve been shielded by God’s mercy and words of love. I can cast off all thoughts and activities that would keep me from living in the spacious glory of God’s creative light and life. I now can embody genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God with others. Yes, right now and throughout the day my very body, with all its vulnerabilities, can be a place where Christ, my sun, dispels my sloth and shines upon the morning skies. Christ is near!

Come, Lord Jesus, into my life today. Give me the power to live in the spacious glory of your creative light and life. Amen.

Monday, Dec. 14

Isaiah 11:1-9

Come Lord Jesus and be my Messiah today. Baptized into your death and life, Jesus, I too have been given the Spirit of the Lord. Clothed with your identity, Lord Jesus, I too have been given the Spirit of wisdom and understanding: I too can live out of the fecundity of the new creation you are bringing about within and around me. Clothed with your identity, Lord Jesus, I too have been given the Spirit of counsel and might: the judgments and decisions I make today can be based not on human criteria but on God's righteousness—which always defends the poor—and God's equity—which always vindicates the meek. Clothed with your identity, Lord Jesus, I too have been given the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord: I too can, with boldness, wear God's righteousness and faithfulness in every moment of my life today.

Come Lord Jesus into my life. Clothe my mind and my body with God's righteousness and faithfulness wherever I find myself today. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 15

Psalms 80:1-7

God's salvation is all about God's face shining on us. When God's face shines on us, we actually sense and experience God's sheer goodness and delight in us. When God's face shines on us, we know in a very palpable way—throughout our entire bodies—that nothing can ultimately harm us or separate us from God's love. Yet Psalm 80 is brutally honest about the fact that we don't always experience such "salvation." Instead, we often feel that we've been given "the bread of tears." Yet in the midst of our anguish, the Holy Spirit is always there praying through us, bearing witness to our spirit that we are indeed God's children, the ones upon whom God's face shines. And through the Spirit, we can boldly cry out amidst whatever it is that we are facing: "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

Let your face shine on us, O God of hosts. Restore us, that we may be saved. Amen.

Wednesday, Dec. 16

Philippians 4:4-7

I don't know about you, but I'm a worrier. I worry about all sorts of things. And my worries do all sorts of things to me. They agitate me. They make me restless and anxious. They make me bitter and resentful. They sour my capacity to love the people in my life and they dampen the creative insight I could bring to my work. Yet in the midst of my annoying worries, the Lord Jesus is near. Through Jesus, my worries can become requests that make my needs known to God. And when that happens, the peace of God, which surpasses anything my thoughts and worries could conjure up, guards my heart and my mind in Christ Jesus. In the space that only God's peace can create, I find myself embodying the gentleness—and the love and the creativity—needed for whatever it is I am facing. God's grace is always sufficient.

Lord Jesus, help me turn my worries into prayers so that I can live in God's peace. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 17

Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist calls for repentance. He warns that trees that don't bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. If we have two coats, we are to share with those who have none. If we have more food than we need, we are to share our surplus with the hungry. We are not to exploit others or to abuse whatever privileges we've been given. God's demands for justice and righteousness are clear and unstinting. And yet, John the Baptist only baptizes for repentance and forgiveness. Jesus, who comes after him, baptizes with the Spirit and with fire. Baptized in the name of Jesus, we've been given the Spirit who not only burns away all injustice and evil within and around us, but also burns within us a flaming desire for God's justice and righteousness—not only within ourselves but throughout the world around us.

Lord Jesus, through your Spirit of fire burn away all injustice and evil within and around us. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 18

Luke 3:7-18

Jesus baptizes with the Spirit and with fire. What does this mean? If we have been baptized in Jesus' name, we've been given a burning fire that radically transforms all other identities we may have been given by our families or culture. This burning fire even transforms the identities we've carefully crafted for ourselves. The same Spirit that burned throughout Jesus' life, animating all that he did, now burns in our lives, animating all that we do. And this burning Spirit of fire not only burns away all injustice and evil we may perpetrate or suffer at the hands of others, but it also enflames our hearts with a passionate desire for God's justice and mercy—not just for ourselves but for the world around us. Whether we like it or not, the Spirit's burning fire lies at the heart of our identities. May this Spirit of Jesus burn within and around us!

Lord Jesus, through your Spirit of fire, enflame in us a passionate desire for your justice and mercy—not just for ourselves, but for the world around us. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 19

“Oh Wondrous Image, Vision Fair” (ELW 316)

Early Christians claimed that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah. They also claimed that Jesus was God's beloved son, God's wisdom in human form. In the face of Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead, we now can see God's glory just as Moses and Elijah did. Jesus reflects God's eternal light to us. Jesus is a spotless mirror of God's working within us and throughout the world. Jesus is an image of God's goodness. Although but one in number, our Lord Jesus, the Messiah and God's wisdom in human form, can do all things and renew all things. May we claim today the shining face and bright array Jesus manifests within and around us through the Spirit! May we claim throughout our lives the mystery of this great vision: that in the face of this crucified Messiah, we see God's glory face to face and have a share of God's joy and perfect love!

O Father, with the eternal Son, and Holy Spirit ever one, we pray you bring us by your grace to see your glory face to face. Amen.



Come in your holy might, we pray,
redeem us for eternal day;
defend us while we dwell below
from all assaults of our dread foe.

Sunday, Dec. 20

“Creator of the Stars of Night,” Verse 1 (ELW 245)

“Creator of the stars of night, your people's everlasting light,

O Christ redeemer of us all, we pray you hear us when we call.” (verse 1)

Have you noticed that most of God's creatures look downward? As do we, though we are best suited by our creator to look ahead and up. An architect in Cambridge, England, once told my wife that one should always look up when sightseeing, so as not to miss buildings' architectural beauty, which is usually above street level.

Our hymn reminds us that the stars we see above are evidence of God's creative work, and that we, of all God's creatures, are privileged to comprehend that glorious fact. Furthermore, our hymn announces that Jesus has redeemed us all and, finally, invites us to call upon him in prayer. Could one of those stars be the Christmas star that leads you to Christ?

God of the universe, may my contemplation of your creation lead me back to you. Amen.

Monday, Dec. 21

Isaiah 9:2-7

“His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.” (Isaiah 9:7a)

When you hear the word shalom, do you, along with many Bible translations, think of “peace?” Shalom means more than this. Shalom happens when everything is working together as God intended. It speaks of wholeness and integration, completeness and harmony. When your six-cylinder car is hitting on all six cylinders, it is in a state of shalom. When even one sparkplug misfires, it affects the smooth operation of the engine.

The church sees the fulfillment of this promise in the birth of Jesus. Think about Syria, Ukraine and the 33 other instances of conflict that currently beset our world. Think how wonderful peace—true peace—would be. And then, contemplate Isaiah’s promise of shalom, where peace is but a byproduct of everything working together for good, and marvel at the richness of God’s promise.

God of peace, help me to see that your love stretches beyond my horizons. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 22

Psalms 96

“O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.” (Psalm 96:1-3)

Our world is not the world of praise envisioned by the psalm. All nations do not acknowledge God or praise God’s name. The psalmist’s world was full of gods, each competing for allegiance. How can this psalm speak to us?

Maybe the difference is due to our refusal to do as the psalm suggests. As we sing the praises of God and proclaim God’s glory to the nations, recounting God’s marvelous works, our praises may join these other curious representatives of creation, the heavens, the sea, the fields and the trees in the proclamation that “The Lord is king!” Perhaps the psalmist’s new song is like Isaac Watts’ “Joy to the world the Savior reigns ... while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains ...”

With the trees of the field, with all earth and heaven, with all your creation, I rejoice in the coming of your son. Amen.

Wednesday, Dec. 23

Titus 2:11-14

“He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” (Titus 2:14)

Our reading begins, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,” and ends with a reference to God’s people being “zealous for good deeds.” In the age old discussion about the relationship between God’s grace and the place of our good deeds, we sometimes forget that Jesus was actively involved in equipping us for good deeds. Good deeds are not a problem—the purpose of our charitable acts is.

Our text gets it right. Christ’s death on the cross, his giving of himself, redeems and purifies us. Then our good deeds, performed as forgiven people, become our grateful response to Christ’s act of love. In other words, God doesn’t need our good deeds; God is perfectly capable of saving us apart from them. But our neighbor does!

As you have blessed me with your gifts, Lord, make me a blessing to those around me. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 24

Luke 2:1-14

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

The sign is—diapers? No, Jesus’ swaddling clothes have served the church for centuries as a sign of the whole life of Christ from nativity to resurrection. This is especially clear in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of depicting the newly born Christ child as born in a cave and wrapped tightly in cloth bands. The similarity between the cave and the tomb as well as the similarity of the swaddling clothes with the cloth in which Jesus is wrapped following the crucifixion serves as a connecting link running through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Christmas is about more than the birth of our Lord. It is but the first step in that which leads to our salvation.

On this holiest of nights, O Lord, keep me mindful of your passion and death. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 25

Luke 2:8-20

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’” (Luke 2:10-11)

In the Old Testament, worshipers brought their prayers, requests and petitions to the priest in the form of a lament. After hearing a worshiper’s lament, the priest consulted the Urim and Thummim. If a positive response were indicated, the priest would begin a salvation oracle with the words, “Do not be afraid. . .” When Luke depicts the announcement of the birth of Christ as beginning with these same words, we hear, along with those shepherds tending their flocks by night, the grandest salvation oracle of them all—the good news of the birth of a savior, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. This “good news” is truly the beginning of the gospel.

Gracious God, make me like the shepherds, glorifying and praising you for all that I have seen and heard. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 26

“Creator of the Stars of Night,” Verse 4 (ELW 245)

Why these sobering words in an Advent hymn? Our culture excels in taking Christmas songs and retooling them. Popular versions of “What Child is This?” are especially widespread. Many replace the somber refrain of stanza two, “Nail, spear shall pierce him through, The cross be borne for me, for you” with the ending of the first stanza, “This, this, is Christ, the king . . .”

But something is lost in this reworking, namely the connection between the wondrous birth of Jesus and the fact of his death. The biblical texts maintain this connection: Joseph was to name him “Jesus” because he would save his people from their sins; the angels announced the birth of a Savior; and the magi brought gifts of myrrh, an embalming resin. Christmas is all about Jesus, but Jesus is all about the cross.

Let me never forget your passion and death, O Lord. Amen.

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