

Keeping Watch Under Pandemic Skies

Pandemic Advent 2020

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Viral spread continues.

We turn our gaze above to wonder how this can be. We are losing hope. We have no peace but can wonder what in the world happened to love. We have lamented so much but the skies have not changed.

We keep watch over the things that do not change. We watch the sun and the moon keep their orbit just as much as our hearts rend over the things that seem to be constantly changing. This year has been different.

The ways that we celebrate the coming of Christ will be different too.

I was honored to be asked to write this outside meditation by the Rev. Anna Kriesle Humble, my friend and Co-Bridge Pastor for United Christian Church in Austin, Texas. This was her vision to provide a socially distanced practice toward embracing the hope and possibility of the Christ Child.

The following pages offer the complete resource we created together with multiple stops on the journey through Advent to Epiphany. As requested by Anna, there is a longer path and a shorter path. The longer path wanders through the garden behind the church using the landscape that includes a labyrinth, outdoor chapel and small playground. Those stops that are oriented toward a particular location are so designated. Others do not require a particular landscape. The shorter path will follow the edge of the church parking lot that will be more accessible than the uneven ground behind the church.

Each stop includes a scripture reflection, reflection, prayer, hymn and an action. Yard signs will be designed, printed and posted in the rear garden. New stops on the way will be introduced on

Wednesdays and Sundays for the longer path. The shorter path will offer new stops only on Sundays. At the United Christian Church, the full meditation will be recorded to an audio file that will be accessible both the church website and the particular QR code for that stop on the yard sign for that particular stop. You could, instead, opt to have the full text on a weather-proof sign that is posted in the designated location on your property.

Aside from Christmas Eve, there is no advance preparation beyond adding each yard sign on the designated day to the church property. It does not require clergy to be present but invites seekers and wanderers to keep watch for hope. I pray we all find it.

LONGER PATH

1. In the Midst of Chaos

Wednesday November 25

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Holy One, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Holy One, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Reflection:

Start here. Feel that catch in your throat as you recall both all that has torn the heavens in 2020 and that we are still all God's people. Remember what has made you tumble with fear and yearned for God to mold us and shape us into pure love. Consider your anger as much as you wonder what enrages God so much that she might tear the stars from the sky.

Hymn:

[Calling All My Children Home by Conspirare](#)

Prayer:

O North Star, orient us
beyond anger
and into your way.
Mold us into
the love you dare

to dream for this shattered world.

Amen.

Action:

Tradition holds that in one creation narrative God uses dirt to mold humanity into the divine image. Reach down into the earth and grab a handful of dirt. Contemplate the earthiness of your humanity with this earth massaging your palm. Consider if it's possible to feel if this is what love feels like in the palm of your hand. Later this week, when you find you feel that catch in your throat again, go outside and reach for another blessing of dirt.

2. Making a Way

Sunday November 29, Advent 1

Scripture: Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Reflection:

Sometimes it feels like there is no way. There is no way forward, nor even the glimmer of possibility. That was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. It felt exactly like that in the wilderness of impossibility, but it was there that John the Baptizer cried out for hope and peace. In the wildness of multiple pandemics, it is our holy task to listen for the messengers of love.

Prayer:

Wild God, begin
our hope in
the wildness of possibility.
Do not mollify
us with perfect peace
but dare us to dream
of the change
we hope for this world
for this church
and for ourselves.
Amen.

Hymn:

["Wildflowers" by Conspirare and Carrie Rodriguez](#)

Action: Feel the strength in your weary legs. Bend your knees enough that you can see the weeds under foot. Cast your gaze upon wild grasses insisting on life in dry ground. See how the cactus defends herself with spines and the prickly vines snake towards the light. Roots below dig deep to find Life-Giving Water. Limbs above stretch wide to find Light. And so it is with you; you have adapted to these rough and unforgiving times. Pull up a weed, and take it with you to remind yourself of this.

3. Waiting in Wonder

Wednesday December 2

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?

But, in accordance with this promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Reflection:

You're in a safe place here. This is the kind of place where we practice telling each other the truth so it's OK to admit that you have wished that it would all just end. You've wanted the new heavens and new earth without the wildfires and soaring temperatures. God is patient but God is also busy at work. The promise of love is coming. In the eternal mystery of our faith, it is here but not yet here. So, where do you see love right now?

Prayer:

Wait with us, O God,
in your infinite patience
for that which
we cannot quite
fathom. Be gentle
with our frustration, O God.
We are so tired. Amen.

Hymn:

["Beauty Will Rise" Conspirare](#)

Action:

Waiting is the hardest part. We have been waiting for so long for so much. Allow yourself to let go of those worries and simply gaze at the heavens above. Lie in the grass if you choose. Notice the cloud formations and the particular color of blue in the sky. Imagine what it was like in the beginning when the earth was a formless void until God said, "Let there be light." Imagine that first day and then go to make something beautiful yourself whether you pick up a pencil, a whisk or a wood plane. Create a bit of wonder today.

4. The Annunciation

Sunday December 6, Advent 2

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her, and said, Hail, you that are highly favored, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this might be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for you have found favor with God. And behold, you shall conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. And Mary said unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall be with you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you: wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God. And behold, Elisabeth your kinswoman, she also has conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her that was called barren. For no word from God shall be void of power. And Mary said, Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

Reflection:

You've heard this story so many times before. You've pondered it's strangeness in art galleries and every time you've heard Ave Maria sung, but it's different this year. Our world is greatly troubled. So troubled that we have to wonder what this familiar promise says to us now. Do we still believe God can do impossible things? Is that what God is doing right now?

Prayer:

Let it be with us,
Holy One,
so that we can
find our way
back into the
wonder and mystery
of your amazing love.
Let it be. Amen.

Hymn:

["Lo How a Rose/The Rose" Conspirare](#)

Action:

Mary answers quickly. Or at least, so it seems as the story has been told and retold but answers do not always come so quickly for us. While practicing social distancing and making room for other prayers, walk the labyrinth. Before you enter, ask God a question heavy on your heart. Walk that sacred path listening for God's answer. Return later this week — multiple times as your question needs — to ask God again for an answer.

5. Angels All Around

Wednesday December 9

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection:

There are angels all around, messengers of God appearing in dreams and visions to calm our fears. You might not remember your dreams or you may be struggling with the ninth month of pandemic insomnia so that the fears lurk in the shadows. You know God is with you. Of course you know. You just need to hear it again so you can rest. God is with you in the waiting and the wondering. God is with you.

Prayer:

Be here with me, O God.

Be here in my fears.

Be in my doubts

and in all the

things my heart waits

longs to name

aloud. Amen.

Hymn:

[Angel Be/Angels We Have Heard on High by Conspirare](#)

Action:

In Celtic traditions, it was known as a thin place. That wondrous sense that there was something special about this place. That feeling that God was nearby was what they called a thin place. There didn't have to be anything particular about that place. It may not have seemed like anything special at all, but they felt something there and they would let others know about this thin place by stacking rocks one on top of each other to let others know that this was a place that God could be felt. This is where God is near. See if you can find such a place here. Mark it with a small tower of rocks so that others can find it too. Keep stacking rocks in the days ahead when you feel God is with you.

6. Way of Justice

Sunday December 13, Advent 3

Scripture: Luke 1:46b-55

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Reflection:

This pandemic has wreaked havoc on minority communities. A disproportionate number of black and brown children and grandchildren have lost their matriarchs and patriarchs, never mind their neighbors, bus drivers and teachers. It has destroyed small businesses and ruined dreams. You've doom scrolled enough. You already know something about the tremendous loss this virus has left in its wake. Just as Mary sang of a different world order, you've hoped that another world is possible. Allow your soul to magnify that hope right now.

Prayer:

From generation to generation,
we need your blessing
and mercy to be
poured upon your people.
Mighty One, fill
the hungry and hurting

with good things.
We need your good things
so much. Amen.

Hymn:

[Gaudete by Conspirare](#)

Action:

As you imagine good things coming into the world, especially for those that have experienced such tremendous loss in the wake of this pandemic, commit to do one thing this week that will scatter the proud and send away the rich empty whether that might be making a donation to Black Lives Matter or writing your legislator about your concerns about climate change. Donate food or clothing to those that truly need good things.

7. Way of Comfort

Wednesday December 16

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Reflection:

Comfort comes with assurance. It comes with having a way forward and knowing what lies ahead even when there are voices crying out. A way is prepared. A way where valleys will rise and mountains will fall. Glory will be seen. Everyone will see it. All together. All at once, glory will be revealed. That is the certainty we are waiting for and while it feels like Advent has stretched beyond the usual four weeks. We have been waiting for glory. We are still waiting for glory.

Prayer:

Speak tenderly
to your people, O God.
Hear our cries
of frustration.
Wipe away
The bitterness
of our tears
for what we really
want to hear
and feel
is glory.
Help us to see
your glory. Amen.

Hymn:

["This is to Mother You" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Tradition holds that the Glory of God was hidden within the Temple. It was tucked behind a big heavy curtain where only the priests could see its wonder. The future feels like that sometimes. The way forward is hidden behind the knowledge of wise ones. Assume that knowledge for yourself by stepping into the pulpit of this outside chapel and dare to proclaim (aloud if you are brave and others are listening) the way through the wilderness of uncertainty.

8. To the House of Bread

Sunday December 20, Advent 4

Scripture: Luke 2:1-5

Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be registered. This was the first census made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to register themselves, every one to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David; to register himself with Mary, who was betrothed to him, being great with child.

Reflection:

We come wandering and curious. We aren't sure we are prepared for the journey ahead, though perhaps Mary and Joseph were not either. We can't quite believe that we already find ourselves here on our way to Bethlehem. This year has gone so quickly. And so very slowly. Time has been redefined over and over again.

We've done our best. We've done what we could with what we had without really allowing ourselves to stop and wonder how strange this is. Did Joseph wonder? Did Mary bother to question why they must make this trip when she was so close to giving birth? It is a question we should ask? Why was it important to be in that place at that time? Why is it important for us to be here now?

Prayer:

We have doubted
so much this year, O God.
We haven't been sure
that we could do
all that was needed
for our children
for our families
for our church
for the whole world.
O God, make it
be enough.
Make it all
be enough. Amen.

Hymn:

["O Little Town of Bethlehem" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

It is from the prophet Micah that we get the idea that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem. That ancient prophet imagined that a great ruler would emerge from the tiny town of Bethlehem.

That might be enough, but Bethlehem also means the "house of bread" because of the ample wheat and grain in that region. It was a place to be fed. It was a place where there was enough for everyone. Allow yourself to settle into this assurance: You are enough. Repeat this mantra to yourself until you believe it. Repeat it again and again. You are enough.

9. What We Will Be

Wednesday December 23

Scripture: Titus 3:4-7

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Reflection:

It will happen. Christ will be born. The angels will sing. The shepherds will come and see what good news looks like for all people. It will happen tomorrow. Who will you be then? What will you become with this good news? Titus challenges us to become part of that good news. It becomes part of our lineage, part of our identity. We are to become heirs of hope. Imagine that. Imagine hope is so woven into your family tree that it is all you can pass onto your children and your children's children. Imagine that the mercy and the grace that the world needs is in your DNA.

Hymn:

["Maybe It's Time to Let the Old Ways Die" by Conspirare](#)

Prayer:

Make us ready
for the goodness
and loving kindness
that will transform us
again, O God. Let
that newborn cry
and the angels' song
remind us who
you call us to be. Amen.

Response:

Standing beneath these mighty oaks, notice how far their branches reach. These sturdy, immovable trunks rooted in this spot on the earth reach beyond themselves for sun and oxygen. Loving kindness is like that too. It goes above and beyond. It twists and turns to

where it is most needed. It is so needed. Reach your arms far and wide and imagine what your loving kindness can do today. Before good news comes, do one thing to offer loving kindness to someone who really needs it.

10. Birth of Love

Christmas Eve

Scripture: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through God, and without God not one thing came into being. What has come into being in God was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a creator's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection:

It is a risk. That's what the poet Madeline L'Engle proclaims. It is a risk for God to become flesh and live among us. It is a risk to glimpse the glory of God. It is a risk when "honor & truth were trampled" upon and "the earth [is] betrayed by war & hate." It is no time for a child to be born, not in the middle of a pandemic. Not now. Yet, the poet proclaims, "love still takes the risk of birth."

Hymn:

[Love Came Down at Christmas by Conspirare](#)

Prayer:

Come, O Christ,
and be born to us
tonight. Reveal to
us the fullness
of your grace and truth.

Shine your love
upon us. Be our
light and our hope. Amen.

Action:

Love is patient. Love is kind, but not birth. Not the birth of hope and peace. Not the wonder of God taking on human flesh. Rub your hands together. Brush your cheek as your mother did when you were newborn babe. Think of all that your flesh has done this year. Even while you have socially distanced and quarantined, light has shined. Light will continue to shine because love is always being born.

Spark that hope again tonight by taking a candle from the table. You may light the candle, symbolizing Christ, the light who came into the world. Tip your candle to the others in your household, sharing the light coming into the world. If it is only your family present, you may sing Silent Night a cappella as we have done so many Christmas Eves before, and will do so together again. Risk the connection of human skin by sharing the peace of Christ. Embrace. Rejoice and take your candle with you to remember that love is born again.

Later this evening, a pastor will be present in the garden to greet you, pray with you, share in the wonder of music and bless you in the name of the newborn Christ.

11. A Hard Night's Work

Sunday December 27, Christmas 1

Scripture: Luke 2:8-15

And there were shepherds in the same country abiding in the field, and keeping watch by night over their flock. And an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were very afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this is the sign unto you: You shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among people." And it came to pass, when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us."

Reflection: They were working in those fields. They worked all night, every night. They must have been exhausted. No matter how normal their exhaustion had become, they must have rubbed their eyes in dismay and confusion. When you're working that hard, can you see glory? Are your senses that keen? Are you able to respond so quickly when you are that bone tired from a hard night's work? What would it take for you to go with haste?

Prayer:

We are stiff
and sore from Zoom
and too few embraces,
O God. We're weary
even after Christmas
has come that
there could
be good news.
Make it known
to us. Amen.

Hymn:

["Sing Joy" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Sometimes the release we need is just to be silly. To remember what joy feels like in our bodies. Step into that possibility of glee by building a sand castle, crawling into the playhouse or maybe just dance to the music on your heart.

12. Weeping and Wailing

Wednesday December 30

Scripture: Matthew 2:16-18

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Reflection:

This is part of the story too. After the baby is born and wrapped in swaddling clothes, life is extinguished. The lights of these lives are snuffed out and the grief is overwhelming. It is the kind of grief that will not give up. There is no moving on. There is no getting over. There is only this horrible pit of despair because they are no more. We have lost so many lives this year in our community, at the hands of those that are supposed to protect and serve, to natural disasters and to a virus that kills without logic or reason. We have so much to grieve.

Prayer:

O God, we weep
for so much death.
We weep
and wail
because there
are no words
for this lamentation.
There are no words
for so much death.
We grieve. We grieve
so much. Amen.

Hymn:

[“Do You See What I See?/I’ll Be Seeing You” by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Grief makes us feel powerless. We want to do something with our sadness. We want it to be more than this awful endless feeling but all too often it leaves us wrecked. As you remember many losses of this year, dare to believe that you could do one small thing to ease another's pain. Consider what that might be and do it.

Or instead, if you are the one that is feeling the intensity of new or old grief, allow yourself to share what is breaking your heart with the next person who asks.

13. In the Beginning

Sunday January 3, Christmas 2

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

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. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Reflection: Has your joy increased? Have you felt the world shift in this Christmas season? 2020 is over. It is finished, but does light shine into this new year? Or are we still lurking in the shadows of our own despair and grief? Perhaps it is both. Perhaps that is what it means to cling to the newness of birth right now. There is wonder and delight. There is comfort and peace, but all of that goodness is twisted around loss, destruction and hate. We want to believe there is more good but we are cautious. We are so cautious with our hope.

Prayer:

Wonderful Counselor,
lend to us your zeal
for the future.

Our heavens are still
torn and shattered.

We want to
believe. We want
that hope to be our own,
but we don't feel quite
so mighty. Not yet.

One day, we will.

We pray. Amen.

Hymn:

["Stables" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

We began right here five weeks ago. We felt the catch in our breath. We felt the weight of our hope and our need for Christ to be born again. Maybe it feels like nothing has changed. Or maybe it feels like everything has. Make a list -- with pen and paper if you have it -- of all the big and small things that has changed in these five weeks.

14. By Another Way

January 6, Epiphany Feast Day

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east, and are come to worship him." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ should be born. And they said unto him, "In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written through the prophet. And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, Art in no wise least among the princes of Judah: For out of you shall come forth a governor, Who shall be shepherd of my people Israel." Then Herod privately called the wise men, and learned of them exactly what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and search out exactly concerning the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word, that I also may come and worship him." And they, having heard the king, went their way; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and opening their treasures they offered unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Reflection:

They went home by another way. They were not who they once were. They had changed. In her children's book *Home By Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor imagines that departure where these wise souls grab their bags to go. They are lighter than they were before but they don't rush out. They stop to thank the baby for the gifts he had given them. Mary laughs at how ridiculous this sounds, but these gentle, old souls are quick to remind her of the wonder of that newborn smell, for the miracle of witnessing love and for the power of a really great story. These are the things that change us.

Prayer:

Transform us, O God,
from wanderers
to wise souls
Able to discern
the gifts you offer

to us each and every day.

Amen.

Hymn:

["This Little Light of Mine/Go Light Your World" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Tradition holds that we give gifts at Christmas time because of these wise souls. In some parts of the world, there are still children that leave their shoes outside the front door full of hay for the camels which the wise ones swap for candles, candies and treats. Others bake cakes. Find some way to continue the spirit of this gift-giving today whether it is the gift of a handwritten letter to an old friend or buy two copies of a meaningful book to read and discuss with a friend. Buy a bag of fair trade coffee to brew for backyard visits with your best friends or share the wonder of giving with your children with a simple journal that you use to write love notes back and forth. Use up that yeast you hoarded and bake a loaf of bread for a neighbor. Make a memory book of a recent adventure to share with your travel companions or give the gift of kindness by selfless service.

SHORTER PATH

1. Making a Way

Sunday November 29, Advent 1

Scripture: Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Reflection:

Sometimes it feels like there is no way. There is no way forward, nor even the glimmer of possibility. That was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. It felt exactly like that in the wilderness of impossibility, but it was there that John the Baptizer cried out for hope and peace. In the wildness of multiple pandemics, it is our holy task to listen for the messengers of love.

Prayer:

Wild God, begin
our hope in
the wildness of possibility.
Do not mollify
us with perfect peace
but dare us to dream
of the change
we hope for this world
for this church
and for ourselves.
Amen.

Hymn: ["Wildflowers" by Conspirare and Carrie Rodriguez](#)

Action:

Feel the strength in your weary legs. Bend your knees enough that you can see the weeds under foot. Cast your gaze upon wild grasses insisting on life in dry ground. See how the cactus defends herself with spines and the prickly vines snake towards the light. Roots below dig deep to find Life-Giving Water. Limbs above stretch wide to find Light. And so it is with you; you have adapted to these rough and unforgiving times. Pull up a weed, and take it with you to remind yourself of this.

2. Waiting in Wonder

Wednesday December 2

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?

But, in accordance with this promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Reflection:

You're in a safe place here. This is the kind of place where we practice telling each other the truth so it's OK to admit that you have wished that it would all just end. You've wanted the new heavens and new earth without the wildfires and soaring temperatures. God is patient but God is also busy at work. The promise of love is coming. In the eternal mystery of our faith, it is here but not yet here. So, where do you see love right now?

Prayer:

Wait with us, O God,
in your infinite patience
for that which
we cannot quite
fathom. Be gentle
with our frustration, O God.
We are so tired. Amen.

Hymn:

["Beauty Will Rise" Conspirare](#)

Action:

Waiting is the hardest part. We have been waiting for so long for so much. Allow yourself to let go of those worries and simply gaze at the heavens above. Lie in the grass if you choose. Notice the cloud formations and the particular color of blue in the sky. Imagine what it was like in the beginning when the earth was a formless void until God said, "Let there be light." Imagine that first day and then go to make something beautiful yourself whether you pick up a pencil, a whisk or a wood plane. Create a bit of wonder today.

3. To the House of Bread

Sunday December 13, Advent 3

Scripture: Luke 2:1-5

Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be registered. This was the first census made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to register themselves, every one to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David; to register himself with Mary, who was betrothed to him, being great with child.

Reflection:

We come wandering and curious. We aren't sure we are prepared for the journey ahead, though perhaps Mary and Joseph were not either. We can't quite believe that we already find ourselves here on our way to Bethlehem. This year has gone so quickly. And so very slowly. Time has been redefined over and over again.

We've done our best. We've done what we could with what we had without really allowing ourselves to stop and wonder how strange this is. Did Joseph wonder? Did Mary bother to question why they must make this trip when she was so close to giving birth? It is a question we should ask? Why was it important to be in that place at that time? Why is it important for us to be here now?

Prayer:

We have doubted
so much this year, O God.
We haven't been sure
that we could do
all that was needed
for our children
for our families
for our church
for the whole world.
O God, make it
be enough.
Make it all
be enough. Amen.

Hymn:

["O Little Town of Bethlehem" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

It is from the prophet Micah that we get the idea that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlhem. That ancient prophet imagined that a great ruler would emerge from the tiny town of Bethlehem.

That might be enough, but Bethlehem also means the "house of bread" because of the ample wheat and grain in that region. It was a place to be fed. It was a place where there was enough for everyone. Allow yourself to settle into this assurance: You are enough. Repeat this mantra to yourself until you believe it. Repeat it again and again. You are enough.

4. Who We Will Be

Sunday December 20, Advent 4

Scripture: Titus 3:4-7

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Reflection:

It will happen. Christ will be born. The angels will sing. The shepherds will come and see what good news looks like for all people. It will happen tomorrow. Who will you be then? What will you become with this good news? Titus challenges us to become part of that good news. It becomes part of our lineage, part of our identity. We are to become heirs of hope. Imagine that. Imagine hope is so woven into your family tree that it is all you can pass onto your children and your children's children. Imagine that the mercy and the grace that the world needs is in your DNA.

Prayer:

Make us ready
or the goodness
and loving kindness
that will transform us
again, O God. Let
that newborn cry
and the angels' song
remind us who
you call us to be. Amen.

Hymn:

["Maybe It's Time to Let the Old Ways Die" by Conspirare](#)

Response:

Standing beneath these mighty oaks, notice how far their branches reach. These sturdy, immovable trunks rooted in this spot on the earth reach beyond themselves for sun and oxygen. Loving kindness is like that too. It goes above and beyond. It twists and turns to where it is most needed. It is so needed. Reach your arms far and wide and imagine what your loving kindness can do today. Before good news comes, do one thing to offer loving kindness to someone who really needs it.

5. Birth of Love

Christmas Eve

Scripture: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through God, and without God not one thing came into being. What has come into being in God was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a creator's only son, full of grace and truth.

Reflection:

It is a risk. That's what the poet Madeline L'Engle proclaims. It is a risk for God to become flesh and live among us. It is a risk to glimpse the glory of God. It is a risk when "honor & truth were trampled" upon and "the earth [is] betrayed by war & hate." It is no time for a child to be born, not in the middle of a pandemic. Not now. Yet, the poet proclaims, "love still takes the risk of birth."

Prayer:

Come, O Christ,
and be born to us
tonight. Reveal to
us the fullness
of your grace and truth.
Shine your love
upon us. Be our
light and our hope. Amen.

Hymn:

[Love Came Down at Christmas by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Take a Christmas Eve candle from the table. You may light the candle, symbolizing Christ, the light who came into the world. Tip your candle to the others in your household, spreading the light from one to another. You may sing Silent Night a cappella as we have done so many Christmas Eves before, and will do so together again. You may take your candle with you. On Christmas Eve, a pastor will be there to greet you, pray with you, and bless you on your journey.

6. Weeping and Wailing

Sunday December 27, Christmas 1

Scripture: Matthew 2:16-18

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Reflection:

This is part of the story too. After the baby is born and wrapped in swaddling clothes, life is extinguished. The lights of these lives are snuffed out and the grief is overwhelming. It is the kind of grief that will not give up. There is no moving on. There is no getting over. There is only this horrible pit of despair because they are no more. We have lost so many lives this year in our congregation, at the hands of those that are supposed to protect and serve, to natural disasters and to a virus that kills without logic or reason. We have so much to grieve.

Prayer:

O God, we weep
for so much death.
We weep
and wail
because there
are no words
for this lamentation.
There are no words
for so much death.
We grieve. We grieve
so much. Amen.

Hymn:

["Do You See What I See?/I'll Be Seeing You" by Conspirare:](#)

Response:

Grief makes us feel powerless. We want to do something with our sadness. We want it to be more than this awful endless feeling but all too often it leaves us wrecked. As you remember many losses of this year, dare to believe that you could do one small thing to ease another's pain. Consider what that might be and do it.

Or instead, if you are the one that is feeling the intensity of new or old grief, allow yourself to share what is breaking your heart with the next person who asks.

7. In the Beginning

Sunday January 3, Christmas 2

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

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. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Reflection:

Has your joy increased? Have you felt the world shift in this Christmas season? 2020 is over. It is finished, but does light shine into this new year? Or are we still lurking in the shadows of our own despair and grief? Perhaps it is both. Perhaps that is what it means to cling to the newness of birth right now. There is wonder and delight. There is comfort and peace, but all of that goodness is twisted around loss, destruction and hate. We want to believe there is more good but we are cautious. We are so cautious with our hope.

Prayer:

Wonderful Counselor,
lend to us your zeal
for the future.

Our heavens are still
torn and shattered.

We want to
believe. We want
that hope to be our own,
but we don't feel quite
so mighty. Not yet.

One day, we will.

We pray. Amen.

Hymn:

["Stables" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Five weeks ago, we felt the catch in our breath. We felt the weight of our hope and our need for Christ to be born again. Maybe it feels like nothing has changed. Or maybe it feels like everything has. Make a list -- with pen and paper if you have it -- of all the big and small things that has changed in these five weeks.

8. By Another Way

January 6, Epiphany Feast Day

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east, and are come to worship him." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ should be born. And they said unto him, "In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written through the prophet. And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, Art in no wise least among the princes of Judah: For out of you shall come forth a governor, Who shall be shepherd of my people Israel." Then Herod privately called the wise men, and learned of them exactly what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and search out exactly concerning the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word, that I also may come and worship him." And they, having heard the king, went their way; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and opening their treasures they offered unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Reflection:

They went home by another way. They were not who they once were. They had changed. In her children's book *Home By Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor imagines that departure where these wise souls grab their bags to go. They are lighter than they were before but they don't rush out. They stop to thank the baby for the gifts he had given them. Mary laughs at how ridiculous this sounds, but these gentle, old souls are quick to remind her of the wonder of that newborn smell, for the miracle of witnessing love and for the power of a really great story. These are the things that change us.

Prayer:

Transform us, O God,
from wanderers
to wise souls
Able to discern

the gifts you offer
to us each and every day.
Amen.

Hymn:

["This Little Light of Mine/Go Light Your World" by Conspirare](#)

Action:

Tradition holds that we give gifts at Christmas time because of these wise souls. In some parts of the world, there are still children that leave their shoes outside the front door full of hay for the camels which the wise ones swap for candles, candies and treats. Others bake cakes. Find some way to continue the spirit of this gift-giving today whether it is the gift of a handwritten letter to an old friend or buy two copies of a meaningful book to read and discuss with a friend. Buy a bag of fair trade coffee to brew for backyard visits with your best friends or share the wonder of giving with your children with a simple journal that you use to write love notes back and forth. Use up that yeast you hoarded and bake a loaf of bread for a neighbor. Make a memory book of a recent adventure to share with your travel companions or give the gift of kindness by selfless service.