By the Light of the Star

Advent 2012
Devotional Booklet

The Union Church
in Waban

www.ucw.org

A Preface

In the Christian liturgical year, Advent is a time of preparation and waiting where we ready ourselves to receive again the gift of God's love made manifest in the person of Jesus.

This booklet is intended as a resource to you as, over the course of these four weeks in Advent, you make your way to Bethlehem, make your way in readiness to receive the gift of God's love again in your life.

The booklet is arranged in four sections corresponding to the four weeks in Advent. I encourage you to take your time and make your way slowly through the pages. You will find an opening prayer that corresponds with the prayer we say when we light the Advent candles in worship. This prayer is followed by Holy Scripture passages, one passage from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the New Testament. The section concludes with reflections by those in our congregation or others and a suggested meditational or devotional practice.

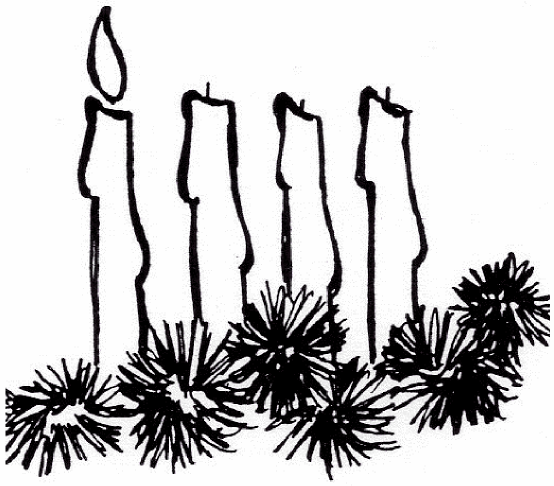
Go slowly through the readings each week. Read with your heart as well as your mind. Listen for an invitation that may be present to you this season.

May this booklet be a blessing in your time of preparation.

—- Rev. Stacy Swain

December 2nd
The First Sunday in Advent
HOPE

Light of hope, grant us hope.
We wait in hope for a world,
Where neighbors live in peace,
Where the rich share with the poor,
Where the strong protect the weak.
Hope heals our souls and brings
meaning to our lives.
We call on you O God, the source of hope
to dwell in our hearts,
and in the hearts of those who have lost hope.



Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 21: 25-36

[Jesus said:] "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. God makes us happy as only children can be happy. God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be — in our sin, in our suffering and death. We are no longer alone, God is with us. We are no longer homeless, a bit of the eternal home itself has moved into us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps much more than the children are able. We know that God's goodness will once again draw near. We think of all God's goodness that came our way last year and sense something of this marvelous home.

From *Watch for the Light*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2001).

Rev. Victoria Weinstein's Holiday Survival Guide

From her blog http://www.peacebang.com

1. **Keep your expectations *completely* realistic.**

Like, I don't bake. I'm a really good cook and a terrible baker. Guess who's not going to bake cookies for the holiday swap? ME. Guess who's going to not feel guilty about that? ME.

Don't try to do the stuff you're not into doing. My old college roommate Mary is a genius at tying bows so she has a lucrative side business at the holidays doing up wreaths. If I had to make even one professional-grade bow I would be in deep trouble. But I'm really awesome at helping people pick out gifts and at sneaking up on people and doing a special tiny Christmas miracle for them and I love doing that. Do what you can do, and what you're good at. If all you can do this year is change the sheets on your bed once a week and keep reasonably clean until the whole season is over, do THAT. Maybe you're not feeling good at anything right now. You don't have to be. Maybe you could just be good at extending compassion toward yourself. How about that?

2. **Consider making the holidays actually religious**.

Sixteen years ago I was a ministerial intern and my supervising minister informed me that I would be leading the Christmas Eve service. I was shocked and excited and full of liturgical anticipation for days until it hit me: I wouldn't be going home for Christmas.

I was devastated. But I had chosen ministry as a life path and I realized that I had to consider this part of my calling and part of my job. What I did then was to book myself into a monastery for Christmas Day, where I would have no vestige of my traditional Christmas and could break with the past in an intentional way. I drove to the Cistercian monastery late that night in the December rain where I was greeted by a friendly nun and showed to my room, which had a reindeer decoration and my name on it on the door (a reindeer! So secular!). It was very touching. I put down my bag. We didn't have cell phones then, so there was

no phone, no television, no computer, no connection to the outside world. That was where I spent my first Jesus' Birthday in silence, with only an illuminated star over the barn to mark the day.

No presents, no new pajamas, no family or friends, no music (except for the morning service in the chapel), no Rudolph on TV, no decorated tree. I ate my meals alone in silence. It was immensely peaceful and beautiful. I walked outside in the fields on the unseasonably warm day and asked Jesus a lot of questions, all of which he responded to with questions of his own. Christmas has ever after been about his birth for me. I love giving and getting presents, I love decorating my tree (with all animal ornaments), I love the cards and the music and watching "The Muppets Christmas Carol" most years. But Christmas is a religious holiday now, and that means that if I'm not able to observe any of my traditions, it's still a favorite and most special day of the year.

You could decide to make a silent, peaceful day for yourself, too. If you do it out of desire rather than a sense of anger, rejection or fleeing something painful, you are bound to experience real fun and joy. Of course your children may never forgive you but that just gives them rich fodder for the therapist's couch later in life. They'll survive.

3. **If life has changed drastically, drastically change your holidays**.

In the aftermath of a seismic life shift, we may cling to the hope that holiday traditions will anchor us with a sense of the unchanging nature of life. In my experience, this doesn't work. It's like taking out Grandma's linen tablecloth and trying to get it to fit over a new dining room table at Thanksgiving. The dimensions are new and different, so Grandma's tablecloth is going to have to be altered or added onto in order to set a beautiful table.

Please don't try to follow traditions when your heart isn't in it. In the aftermath of death, divorce, grave illness, tragedy or momentously joyful but disruptive occasion like winning the lottery, welcoming triplets, or moving to a new city, feel free to do something new with the holidays. Over time, you can re-incorporate some of the old traditions as they suit your new circumstances. For now, though, recognize that nothing you do

on Christmas can make things the way they were. Figure out together how you can best get through this one.

4. Make plans *now* to assure more well-being in the weeks ahead.

You might have tons of social obligations that make you sigh when you look at your calendar, or you might be looking at the weeks ahead and dreading loneliness and isolation. Honey, you've got to reach out. You've got to get some plans in place now so that (a) you have something to look forward to and (b) so you can start the new year feeling like you're cared for and well, not exhausted, depleted, depressed and cripplingly lonesome.

Make HAPPY plans that help you feel supported and sane. Maybe it makes you happy to go out with a friend to the mall on December 26th and hit the sales. I would rather stick pins in my eyes than do that, but this has to be about what feeds your soul. Pastors, plan to meet friends for dinner after a Sunday evening worship somewhere (you need to attend worship as well as lead it!). Ask pals to stop by with their dogs to hang out on December 28th when you know the kids will be out of town. Ask your favorite cousin to spend a few days with you over the new year to help you clean out the storage room in exchange for your going to her place in April to do her spring cleaning. Put something altruistic on the schedule for the time of the season you tend to get most Grinchy. Invite a child to see "The Nutcracker" with you and give her parents the night off. Promise a handy acquaintance a big pot of chili if he'll come over and assemble toys for you on Christmas Eve. Call your therapist and get an extra appointment for December. Call in the troops for addictions support. Make sure you have an abstinence plan for the season and get a good sponsor, and put them on speed dial.

5. **Pray.**

However you do it, this is your key to holiday survival. Maybe it's yoga. Maybe it's walks in the woods. Maybe it's sitting tucked in a comfy chair with your Bible and a candle burning. Maybe it's meditation, following your breath in and out.

This is from me to you, my friends, from a gal who has spent many Christmas mornings in frosty silence, listening to the world with a cat in my lap, a cup of coffee in my hand, and a beagle curled up next to me on the love seat in the parlor, in front of a roaring fire.

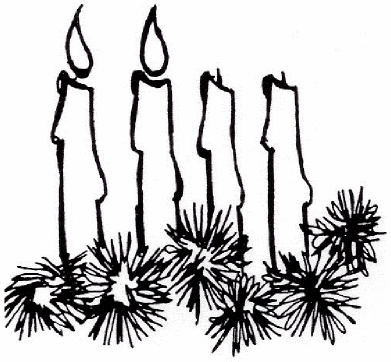
God really did so love the world, and really does still. Christmas really does have a special magic to it, a winter-begotten magic, an ancient, twinkly, hope-sprinkled thing that sounds like a very old man walking slowly across crunchy snow to die peacefully at the turning of the year, and that smells like a soft baby head after a nap on the warm hay. If you can just get away from the blaring mall music and dysfunction and sadness long enough to get to that magic, I promise it will come to you. It will come to you and it will give you the strength and the faith and the fuzzy lamb sweetness that you want to have filling you this season. Make as much space between yourself and the people and situations that interfere with you experiencing this magic, and make time and room for everything that hooks you up with it.

Putting it into Practice
Week of December 2
Kathryn Henderson

Create your own Advent calendar of acts of kindness for others, which works especially well as a family practice. Make a list of things to do, either together or as individuals, each day of Advent. For example, when making Christmas cookies, take a plate to a friend who isn't feeling well. Or offer to do some gift wrapping or run an errand for a busy mom. Write Christmas cards or letters that describe why you are grateful for that person, recalling something special that you share. The daily activities can be simple or elaborate -- what is important is taking a few minutes to be grateful for the gift of friendship, and expressing that. You could also read the story of the real St. Nicholas (www.stnicholascenter.org), and think about how your gifts can also touch people in unexpected ways.

December 9
The Second Sunday in Advent
Peace

Peace, peace they say, and yet there is not peace. We are called to be peace-makers. We are called not to return evil for evil. But rather end the cycle of violence with love and forgiveness. Therefore we pray, O Prince of Peace, come and grant us the courage to be peacemakers that your world may know peace.



Scripture

Baruch 5:1-9

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O
Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.
Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.
For God will give you evermore the name,
"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."
Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.
For God has ordered that every high mountain
and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.
The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.
For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness
that come from him.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in
the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill
shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

THE DAILY AND THE HOLY
By Priscilla Lasmarias Kelso

While having our morning prayers recently, Bart and I read from a book that mentioned "angels and archangels and the great company of heaven." In my mind's eye, I pictured the manger scene with the heavenly host hovering over the stable where the shepherds - common folk from the surrounding countryside - also showed up. Such a common sight as we picture the Holy Birth - this seemingly incongruous mix of characters - angels and shepherds - the heavenly presence with the mundane.

Might this hold some meaning for my life and for the Advent season?

Why this combination of the celestial and the homely? Why put together the heavenly and the earthbound? What do we make of a birth that welcomed all visitors from such diverse spheres?

Perhaps one answer leads me to the *veritas* of the Gospel - that there is splendor in the ordinary and that the sacred includes both the commonplace and the extraordinary. A few days ago, while looking for a box of Christmas decorations in the basement, I came across a packet of letters from my mother who died at the age of 95 over two years ago. It stopped me in my tracks - this sudden intersection of an ordinary task with the reminder of a mother's love. Had I not paid attention to this epiphany in a dusty basement, I would have just spent the time looking for wrapping paper, disregarding my spirit's need to respond to this holy nudging.

Or, as I cut an apple or a pear cross-wise, I see the pattern of a star inside - as if God, in the First Creation, saw the splendor of the Milky Way and, finding it satisfying, said, "Let's do it again," this time in a piece of fruit from a supermarket.

Because I am so immersed in the mundane – checking emails, answering phone calls, making lists - the holy surprises often take the shape of what's right in front of me - the obvious, the ordinary, the predictable. As Annie Dillard, the poet-theologian, says: "Beauty happens all the time. The trick is to pay attention."

Advent, too, is like this – paying attention to the daily when God's Spirit prompts us to notice the ordinary details of life – including the interruptions – because our sense of the divine is not always accompanied by celestial music or exquisite stage lighting. One of the most touching paintings I have seen of the Annunciation shows Mary in a humble dwelling, sweeping the floor, as the Angel Gabriel makes his appearance with the startling announcement of her supernatural role in the birth of Jesus.

Perhaps the presence of angels and shepherds may seem like an incongruous mix at first, yet they symbolize the weaving of both the heavenly and the earthly in that wondrous birth. Advent prepares us for that event. May we learn anew to pay attention to the commonplace which may bless our lives - and even surprise us - with deeper, more profound meanings.

"A prison cell in which one waits, hopes and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside – is not a bad picture of Advent." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I think what Bonhoeffer is saying is that as he was imprisoned in Germany, the only freedom for him was someone coming from the outside and unlocking the cell. In the same way we as a human race have all been in some sort of bondage (call it sin) and it took a major event from outside of us to come into the world...Jesus' birth... so that as we grow to know Him we can experience a life, no longer in "bondage" to just so-so existence but a life of freedom to be who God has created us to be.

—— Audrey Smith

Putting it into Practice
Week of December 9th
Kathryn Henderson

Write an alternate Christmas list with your hopes and wishes for your loved ones and yourself. This can be whatever you will find meaningful. So, for example, it can include qualities you'd like to develop, like trust or enthusiasm. It can reflect your deep longings, like release of an old resentment, or hope for the end of war. It can be concrete, like learning a new hobby or making a plan to travel or go back to school. Families can also write a list together, and create a ritual around adding a new item to the list every day.

December 19th
The Third Sunday in Advent
Joy

The angel said, "Do not be afraid for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." It was a joy not born of emotional exuberance, but a Holy Joy; the joy found in the culmination of justice and peace and healing. And yet not all people know or live in joy. Many in our world have been forced to leave their homes due to war, many face unemployment, economic difficulty, poverty, and broken relationships. Show us, O God, the way to healing and wholeness that joy may flow throughout the world for all people.

Scripture

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength
and my might;
he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells
of salvation.
And you will say on that day:
Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among
the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

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.

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?"“He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Noli Me Tangere
Sue Ellen Kuzma

How many Magdalens, Christ,
do you lure back,
Gardener of souls?

What do I want
of your world without touch,
I who wrapped your body with strips
of myrrhed linen, the tender art of shrouding?
I want your fingers smeared with mud, spit,
to make up my eyes all caked with grief.
And take those fingers across my mouth too,
stopping all my gibbering word-sins.
You don't have to stroke my hair,
raining over your feet,
pooled at the hem
of your robe.
For it has
already sucked
the power out of you,
it has so much faith in the healing
welt of your corporeal self.

Flower Power
Jaap van Reijendam

I guess everyone has their favorite Christmas hymn, and one of my favorite Christmas hymns growing up as a kid in the Netherlands was the German-based hymn "Er is een roos ontloken." Fortunately, it has been translated into English and is included in the NCH Hymnal as "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" (127).

I was thinking of this hymn and the power of a flower in hard times when, at my mother's encouragement, I was re-reading the autobiography / memories of Konstatin Paustovsky, "The Story of a Life." He lived in Russia, growing up during the final years of the czar, and spent several years as a journalist in Moscow during the revolution-years. Life was extremely harsh, with no supplies around. But sometimes there was a ray of hope. I offer this excerpt as my Advent thought for this year.

"Sometimes the gardener would pick some stock or a few double carnations for me. I was ashamed to carry them through the hungry anxious city; I always wrapped them carefully in paper that no one could guess I had flowers in the package.

Once the package came undone in the trolley. I did not notice it until an elderly woman in a white kerchief asked me: "And where did you get such beauty nowadays?"

Someone was breathing feverishly down my back and I heard a whisper so low that at first I couldn't even make out where it

came from. A pale girl about ten years old was standing behind me in a homemade pink dress and looking at me implor-ingly out of gray eyes that were like pewter saucers.

“Little uncle” she said huskily and mysteriously, “give me a flower. Please, please give me one.”

I gave her a carnation. The girl made for the back platform of the trolley at once, through the resentful and jealous com-ments of the other passengers, jumped off while it was mov-ing, and disappeared. “She is out of her mind,” the woman conductor said. “A crazy fool. Everybody would ask for a flower if his conscience let him.”

I took a second carnation out of the bouquet and gave it to the conductor. She blushed almost to the point of tears, staring at the flower with shining eyes.

At once several hands were quietly held out to me. I divided up the whole bouquet, and suddenly saw in the trolley around me more shining eyes, more friendly smiles, more excitement than I had every seen before, it seemed to me, in all my life. It was as if a blinding sun had risen in that dirty trolley car and brought youth to all those exhausted, anxious people.”

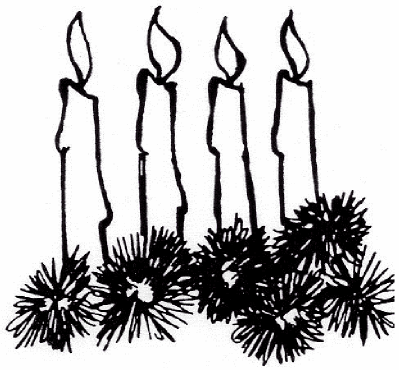
It is cold outside, and sometimes we can feel even colder on the inside. We can make fun or even resent the sentimental as-pects of Christmas. But in the season of Advent we need to keep our eyes open for these signs of loveliness. There is rose that will bloom and a baby will be born....

Putting it into Practice
Week of December 16th
Kathryn Henderson

Write your own prayers to use as part of a daily or weekly devotion. The prayers can be based on a text that you love, like a psalm or a poem, or simply reflect what you are thinking about or hoping for. The devotional time can include any elements that have meaning for you, such as a favorite hymn or carol, prayer, scripture, and lighting the Advent wreath. This is an especially nice practice as the sun is going down or before dinner. This is a great time to create a "family liturgy," with everyone contributing to a unison prayer or grace. It can also be meaningful to include a remembrance of a part of the world that needs Light.

December 23
The Forth Sunday in Advent
Love

Advent season speaks to us about God's love for all creation. When God created all things, God saw it was good and loved what was created. Because of that love, God sent prophets to teach of God's great love and to encourage us to love in the same way. We remember Jesus' birth has come because God so loved the world that God desired to save it. May love be lit as well in our hearts, in all people and in the this World.



Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

[And Mary said,] "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."

Burning Mouths, Touching Hems
By Sue Ellen Kuzma

"Woe is me. I am lost, a man of unclean lips."

The mouthy one, glib, caustic,
knew his speech then as impediment.

So the "Burning One" flew to him
-Seraph with six wings-
hot coal in tongs, to sear his very mouth.

Thus anointed, Isaiah, now prophet,
notices this:
the Lord's garment, His hem,
voluminous, fills the entire Temple.

He answers, "Here I am, Lord."

*

The woman in Mark says nothing.
Blood, like water, will find its own way.

The woman famous for bleeding twelve years.
No doctors of any help.
In the crowd—shy, desperate, bold-
she is moved to touch the rough linen
hem of the cloak of the Man.
Right then, electricity,
she feels the cauterizing.
As if He caught her, rising
from her knees to look in His eyes.
To stop her loss.
Hemmed in by the crowd,
feeling the power go out from Him, He asks
"Who touched me?"

Isaiah was purged, yet hers,
I can't help thinking
was the greater action.
Saving herself,
going to the bottom of it all.

From "Shipwrecked at the Stable"
Brennan Manning

One day Saint Francis and Brother Leo were walking down the road. Noticing that Leo was depressed, Francis turned and asked: "Leo, do you know what it means to be pure of heart?"

"Of course. It means to have no sins, faults or weaknesses to reproach myself for."

"Ah," said Francis, "now I understand why you're sad. We will always have something to reproach ourselves for."

"Right," said Leo. "That's why I despair of ever arriving at purity of heart."

"Leo, listen carefully to me. Don't be so preoccupied with the purity of your heart. Turn and look at Jesus. Admire him. Rejoice that he is what he is — your Brother, your Friend, your Lord and Savior. That, little brother, is what it means to be pure of heart. And once you've turned to Jesus, don't turn back and look at yourself. Don't wonder where you stand with him."

After a long pause, Leo said, "Still, Francis, the Lord demands our effort and fidelity."

"No doubt about that," replied Francis. "But holiness is not a personal achievement. It's an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew. To cry out, "You alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord." that is what it means to be pure of heart. And it doesn't come by your Herculean efforts and threadbare resolutions."

"Then how?" asked Leo.

"Simply hoard nothing of yourself; sweep the house clean. Sweep out even the attic, even the nagging painful consciousness of your past. Accept being shipwrecked. Renounce everything that is heavy, even the weight of your sins. See only the compassion, the infinite patience, and the tender love of Christ. Jesus is Lord. That suffices. Your guilt and reproach disappear into the nothingness of non attention. You are no longer aware of yourself, like the sparrow aloft and free in the azure sky. Even the desire for holiness is transformed into a pure and simple desire for Jesus."

From *Watch for the Light*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2001).

Christ and the Ladies
Sue Ellen Kuzma

The woman as yet unstoned
stood, loverless, tall.
He stooped, fingered the sand,
as if writing…

~

She stooped, the one who
bled for years, touched
the tassel of His cloak.
He stopped, stunned
at the power
gone out of Him.

~

They sat at the well like lovers,
equals, though not.
Asking for water,
He opened her life a gift.

Excerpts From "A Sky Full of Children"
Madeleine L'Engle

I walk out onto the deck of my cottage, looking up at the great river of the Milky Way flowing across the sky. A sliver of a moon hangs in the southwest, with the evening star gently in the curve.

Evening. Evening of this day. Evening of my own life.

A sky full of God's children! Each galaxy, each star, each living creature, every particle and subatomic particle of creation, we are all children of the Maker. From a subatomic particle with a life span of a few seconds, to a galaxy with a life span of billions of years, to us human creatures somewhere in the middle in size and age, we are made in God's image, male and female, and we are, as Christ promised us, God's children by adoption and grace.

Children of God, made in God's image. How? God's explanation is to send Jesus, the incarnate One, God enfleshed. Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me! It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshed that love in the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine.

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being went with all his love into the womb of a young girl, and the universe started to breath again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy?

Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ the Maker of the universe or perhaps many universes, willingly and lovingly leaving all that power and coming to this poor, sin-filled planet to live with us for a few years to show us what we ought to be and could be. Christ came to us as Jesus of Nazareth, wholly human and wholly divine, to show us what it means to be made in God's image.

From *Watch for the Light*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2001).

Journeying with the Magi

Mark Smith

Each time I read T.S. Eliot's poem *The Journey of the Magi*, I am struck by the profound discomfort and unease the Magi felt after visiting the newly born Christ. Somehow, their experience traveling to Palestine to bear witness to the Prince of Peace doesn't fit the Advent narrative I was raised on: a narrative of joyful angelic choruses singing in the sky, of shepherds humbly kneeling in homage at the manger's door, of even donkeys and cows transfixed by the miracle. And above all, "glad tidings of great joy..."

For the Magi, it's obvious the birth they witnessed was bitter, and more like a death. This manger birth changed and ruined everything, and its impact on the Magi revealed to them, in stark relief, the hollow and meaningless *dispensation* in which they were now foreigners:

"...All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death."

May we, like the Magi in Eliot's poem, feel the life-changing miracle of the manger birth and see, with new eyes, the altered reality in which we now live...

From *The Journey of the Magi*. A poem by T.S. Eliot

A Healing Touch of Grace

Even as we step into Advent and prepare to receive Jesus on Christmas Eve, we are mindful of all the ways that his healing touch and presence is already among us. In unexpected moments of beauty, grace, comfort and healing our Emmanuel draws near and through prayer and care we too participate in Jesus' ministry of healing.

Take for example, Jay O'Beirne's cousin this year who had come down with Eastern Equine Encephalitis this fall.

Jay writes "My Advent thought is of God's merciful healing grace. Today I received a long distance telephone call from my cousin Roger Egan. He is so grateful that he is alive and well this Thanksgiving after winning his recent battle with the EEE virus. He called to say thank you for our daily visits to see him at both the Brigham and Woman's Hospital and at Spaulding Rehab Hospital during the many weeks he fought to survive. Most of all for all the prayers that came from here in Houston as well as our UCW. Christmas will be special for us all for God's gift of life for Roger."

How can you be an instrument of God's ministry of healing in the year to come?

Are there places in your life where you need the touch of love and grace?

For life, for new life, we give God thanks.

Putting it into Practice:
Week of December 23rd
Kathryn Henderson

Choose a time and place every day where you can be alone to pray, meditate, reflect, or sit with your feelings about the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Choose a place that will become your dedicated space, like a particular chair. Being consistent is more helpful than length of time spent, so even five or ten minutes a day can help you feel like you are living the season of Advent instead of racing through a holiday to-do list. Advent was originally a time for reflection and penitence, more like Lent, and approaching these four weeks as an opportunity to prepare for the coming of God-with-Us can help you feel the beauty and mystery of Christmas more fully.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men."

Till, ringing singing, on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

May the love of God
The peace of Christ
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be, and go with us all,

And let the people say:

"AMEN!"