

*Show Me
Your Ways,
O Lord*

Devotions on
the Psalms of Advent

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INTRODUCTION

There's a reason why we have favorite songs. With just a few words, they jettison us back to a treasured memory: a lullaby from grandma, a carefree drive on a summer day with friends, a first dance with a partner. Songs are faithful companions, putting words to emotions—from joy and delight to grief and sorrow.

So it is with the psalms. These ancient Hebrew hymns express praise and thanksgiving as well as anger and lament. Through the grace of God, we have the gift of 150 psalms that meet us where we are, grappling with a range of emotions, and invite us to go where we should: into the embrace of a God who loves us in good times and bad.

This Advent, we turn to the psalms with a petition: “Show me your ways, O Lord.” Show me how to forgive when wounded. Show me how to love without

condition. Show me how to praise you, how to offer thanksgiving, and how to be faithful in times of uncertainty. Show me, O Lord, the ways to prepare my heart to welcome your son.

We asked four faithful women, noted leaders across the church, to guide us through the psalms during the season of Advent. They selected excerpts from the psalms appointed on the Sundays of each week, and they offer stories and wisdom—and a partner for the journey. Perhaps you'll discover a favorite psalm, just as you have a favorite song, one that will offer promise and solace each time you hear it. One that shows you the way to God's abiding love.

Richelle Thompson
Editor

Of note: *We included a full four weeks of meditations for Advent. But the number of days in the season of Advent depends on the calendar. Feel free to skip ahead to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (and, if you'd like, read the days you missed during the fourth week of Advent, too!). In the Appendix, you can find the full readings of the psalms cited in the meditations.*



*Show Me
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THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." Now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

PSALM 122:1-2

Think about the last time you went on a trip. Think about the preparations that you had to make before the trip began. They might have included organizing house or pet sitters, booking hotels or rental cars, and planning the itinerary for your time away. Unless it was a completely spontaneous trip, you likely needed some time to complete the necessary preparations. Think about the actual trip and the feelings you had as the journey to the destination began and the excitement began to build. Now think about the arrival at your destination. Whether you had travel

challenges or not, you probably experienced relief and excitement when you arrived. The adventure could begin!

If I were to put these psalm verses in a modern-day context, I imagine the psalmist saying something like, “It made me happy when my friends invited me on a trip. Now we’ve made it to our vacation spot, and I’m ready to have fun.”

I love reading this psalm as we begin Advent and our journey toward Jesus’s birth. The words set the context for this season. In this first week, we hear the invitation, “Let us go to the house of the LORD.” As I prepare my heart for the manger, I think about the first nativity story: the journey Mary and Joseph took, the preparations they had to make in anticipation of the birth, the challenges they had in finding a place to rest on their journey, and the celebration upon Jesus’s birth.

We don’t hear about whether Mary or Joseph made this journey alone, but I imagine many traveled together to fulfill the census demands of Emperor Augustus. I imagine the stories they shared over campfires at night or as they made the long trek on foot from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In my journeys, I

have found my time deeply enriched by friends and family—and by those I have met along the way.

This is just the first day of the first week of our preparations for Advent. As you begin your preparations, take time to be intentional about your actions. Think about what the preparations mean to you. Think about how they relate to the first Christmas. And don't take this journey alone. Join with your faith community in sharing the hopes, anticipation, and excitement of Advent and Christmas. In a season where it is easy to rush through things and check off the proverbial boxes, take the time to soak it all in and savor the memories you are making or helping to create for others during this season.

Going Deeper

What one way will you be intentional about preparing your heart during Advent? You might consider a commitment to reading from the psalms every day.

A full list of the Advent psalms can be found at the back of this book.



This Week's Author

Kathryn Nishibayashi is the fourth generation of her family to be a member at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, a church founded for Japanese immigrants but now home to a multicultural congregation. She received her master of divinity degree from Church Divinity School of the Pacific in 2023 and is in discernment for Holy Orders.

Monday

Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

PSALM 80:3,7,18

As a former elementary school teacher, I know that repetition is key to incorporating a phrase or action more fully into your body, mind, and spirit. Conventional wisdom says you must do something 21 times before it becomes a habit. Whether we need 21 times or not, the more often a phrase is heard, the more likely it is that we will remember it in the future.

Scattered throughout the Bible are verses that are repeated, sometimes verbatim, others repeated with slight differences. In Psalm 80, the phrase “Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved” is repeated three times. Perhaps the psalmist chose to repeat the phrase to grab the worshipper’s attention.

Meditation practitioners often repeat a mantra or phrase throughout their practice. As the phrase

repeats, it sinks into one's bones. While this can be powerful, there's also the possibility that it can backfire. Sometimes, when something is repeated so often, it can feel like it loses meaning. In our tradition, we follow a liturgical calendar, which means we visit the same liturgical seasons in the same order year after year. We have a schedule of readings that changes every two or three years, but the overarching themes remain. Further, our Sunday liturgies repeat the same words and prayers week after week. With such repetition, it can be easy to get complacent and forget to focus on the meaning of the words we pray. This has happened to me occasionally throughout the years.

But once I am aware that the prayers have become rote, I work to adopt a new intention and awareness so I can renew my focus on the words of the prayers, even the most familiar ones. While the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible begins this verse with the words, "Restore us," the King James version of the Bible says, "Turn us again." As we turn again to the season of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year. Much like January 1 serves as the beginning of the secular new year, Advent serves as a time to reflect and reset our hopes and expectations for the coming

season and the coming year. With each new year, we have the chance to begin again. We can look forward in hope to the possibilities and opportunities that lie ahead.

Going Deeper

Perhaps in this season of Advent, you might find a word to latch onto as a mantra for the season. This repetition might be a helpful anchor in a busy time or provide an opportunity for deeper reflection. What word might you take on as a mantra for Advent? What might you do to make the anticipation of this season a fresh experience or take on a new or different meaning for you?

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday

*Give the King your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the King's son;
That he may rule your people righteously
and the poor with justice;
That the mountains may bring prosperity
to the people,
and the little hills bring righteousness.
He shall defend the needy among the people;
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.*

PSALM 72:1-4

This beautiful prayer poem from the Book of Psalms shows us a pathway to God's hopes for us and how we are expected to navigate the world. God's way is to look at this world and then act through the machinery of justice—a complex system of heart, mind, and hand. While the psalm is a prayer for a new king, we all have the power and the possibility

to be God's partners here on earth. This psalm invites us to take up the divine leadership activity of treating people righteously and the poor with justice.

But what is justice anyway? We may think of charity or handouts and donations for the poor as the only means to achieve justice. While these acts are necessary, I came across a definition of justice that is a broader understanding and, I think, much more helpful. Saint Bonaventure, a thirteenth-century Italian theologian and bishop, describes justice as "the returning to its original beauty that which has been deformed." By this definition, we are asked to restore the world's original beauty by righting wrongs, restoring balance, and weeding out acts of oppression wherever we can. Justice, then, is seeing the beauty and divinity in others, no matter what. The pursuit of justice reveals the world's imbalances while maintaining human dignity. Justice sees the oppressed and the oppressor through a restorative lens. We have deformed God's beauty through our acts of selfishness, blindness, and desire for power. But all hope is not lost. We can still work toward recreating God's beauty through everyday acts of justice and righteousness. And when we do, we experience God's peace that passes all understanding.

One of the most striking memories I have of my mother is when I was a child riding in the back of her car, and she came to a complete stop on the side of the road. I did not know why we stopped. But then I saw my mother take off her shoes, get out of the car, and hand them to an elderly woman who was walking on bare feet on the side of the road. The woman thanked my mother and said, “God bless you.”

This was an extraordinary act but not a singular one for my mother. She taught my siblings and me to seek out and see not only the poor but also the injustices in the world and to act, to make a difference. We watched her commitment to restoring imbalances through her nursing, her work with organizations for the homeless, and even her elegant way of restoring dignity in interactions when someone felt wronged or was abusing their position of perceived power.

When we strive to return “to its original beauty that which has been deformed,” we move through life with our hearts bent toward justice, our minds creating opportunities for justice, and our hands enacting justice wherever we can. May we all have the courage, the presence, and the commitment to restore God’s beauty by acting with God’s justice.

Going Deeper

Do you pray to God to reveal a pathway forward in life? This Advent, pray to God to help you discover this pathway—God’s dream for our lives.



This Week’s Author

Beth-Sarah Wright works nationwide, encouraging individuals, communities, and institutions to develop the capacity for change and transformation. Originally from Jamaica, she has lived and studied worldwide, from Edinburgh, Scotland to San Juan, Puerto Rico. She is married to Robert C. Wright, the Episcopal Bishop of Atlanta, and they are parents to 5 adult children.

Monday

He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, from one generation to another.

He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, like showers that water the earth.

*In his time shall the righteous flourish;
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon
shall be no more.*

PSALM 72:5-8

I remember someone once told me that everything I needed to know about God was in my backyard. Undoubtedly, I have felt closest to God when observing the awesome wonder of God's natural creations and can see God's fingerprints in the majesty of the Grand Canyon, the profound peace in the glassy waters of Lake Geneva, the lush comfort in the canopy of plant life in Jamaica's Fern Gully, or simply the smell of rain on a summer's day.

It is no surprise, then, that the psalm uses nature to describe the divinely inspired acts of the King—that

his life and legacy shall endure as long as the sun and the moon. He may pour out his heart like rain showers upon the field, nurturing the earth so that righteousness shall sprout up and flourish and peace shall be abundant until the moon is no more. But all this flourishing and abundance needs a climate of justice and righteousness. As we saw in the first verses of Psalm 72, God's soil is amplified with the fertilizer of intentional acts of defending the needy, rescuing the poor, and crushing the oppressor.

These are the types of actions that should endure, strengthening and guiding each generation to come. Yet, we struggle as humans to carry out these acts and let ourselves become distracted by power, greed, and selfishness. We see who we want to see and help who we want to help. But there is no room for that thinking in the psalm's paradigm of abundance. Raindrops that shower the earth are filled with grace and mercy, falling everywhere with no exceptions. In God's ecosystem, all feel the freshness of the showers that water the earth, and peace shall be abundant.

Going Deeper

In this Advent season, how can we emulate God's provision for the most vulnerable among us? Let us begin by blessing and providing for others and seeing how God's ecosystem flourishes with a climate of justice and love.

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! whose hope is in the LORD their God; Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever;

PSALM 146:4-5

As Christmas nears, the world around us enters a frenzy. The anxiety is palpable as everyone rushes to buy the perfect Christmas gift. We mean to show our love through these gifts, but I often wonder: Can a beautifully wrapped gift underneath the Christmas tree truly show love? Can love be placed in a box, wrapped up, and put on hold until it's time for the gifts to be opened? When did love become so commercial and transactional? Have we lost the meaning of real love?

In scripture, we encounter four types of love: *philia*, a love of friendship and affection shared by equals; *storge*, a love within familial relationships; *eros*, a love of passion and attraction; and *agape*, a love that is unconditional, selfless, and sacrificial.

Agape is the love shown by God for God's people in the incarnation. It is the love represented in a little babe who is to be born not in a palace filled with riches and power but in a stable surrounded by humble field workers and visited by foreigners seeking a king who would transform the world. This love is almost indescribable. One could argue that we can know true joy because of that love, the love of God that dwells in and among us.

This love is impossible to wrap and place under the Christmas tree, for it is a love that must move and be lived. It is a love given freely by God, who has from the moment of creation kept God's promises. In Advent, we are invited to stop with the busyness of life and delight in God's love and in God's promises of liberation and salvation. Instead of rushing through the season, let us, like expectant mothers, rejoice in the expectation of new life! Let us commit to the joy of knowing we are loved by God who created us in

God's image and who, despite our brokenness, never abandons us, a God whose promises are forever.

Oh, what joy it is to know that type of love! Let us always anchor our hope in God's love, and may we, in this Advent season, prepare not the Christmas tree but instead prepare our minds, hearts, and spirits to receive the hope, love, and joy that only God can provide.

Going Deeper

Think about how you will give the gift of love this season—not wrapped in bows and paper—but through kindness, selflessness, and generosity.



This Week's Author

Nancy Frausto is the director of Latinx studies at the Seminary of the Southwest. She is the first and only DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) beneficiary priest in the

Episcopal Church and was a founding member of the Diocese of Los Angeles Sanctuary Task Force.

Monday

Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous; the LORD cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked

PSALM 146:6-8

During my time in seminary, I had the pleasure of serving my field education year at a historically African American church, where I learned of their call-and-response worship style. Some of my favorite memories serving this church were the moments of complete joy as the preacher would shout, “God is good!” and the whole congregation would respond with, “All the time. God is good!” Is that not the most beautiful expression of faith? One of the lessons I treasure the most from serving in that church is the congregation’s unwavering faith in God’s goodness,

for even amid oppression, God will show us God's love and mercy.

In reading today's psalm portion, I could picture my sweet congregation praising God and God's goodness, shouting in great joy to the heavens, "God is good! All the time. God is good!" Like that beautiful congregation, how could we not rejoice on this day and every day when our sacred text reminds us of God's love for those that the world rejects, for the unwanted, unnamed, and unappreciated?

In these words from the psalm, we find the faithfulness of God's care for those who hunger. God will bring liberation from all chains that enslave the beloved children of God. God's goodness will be for all people. God has promised to lift the downtrodden, love the righteous, care for the stranger, and sustain the forgotten. No wonder Mary, mother of our Savior, sings a song of resistance that echoes the psalmist's writing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Holy indeed is God's name.

Just as Mary proclaims and as my congregation shouts to the heavens, let us, too, on this day rejoice in the goodness of the Lord! This, my friends, is the good news that our neighbors need to hear. Good news is necessary for survival when the world groans in agony due to the pillaging of resources. Good news must be proclaimed so we might help transform this world filled with anger and fear toward the other, the stranger, and the foreigner into a place of belonging and love. Let us be bearers of the good news by proclaiming that God is good.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, let us experience true joy in the knowledge that our God is a God of goodness who celebrates the wholeness and flourishing of all people.

Going Deeper

In your prayers and in your worship this week, respond with the words, “God is good! All the time. God is good!” You can say them aloud, whisper them, or say them silently to yourself. How does the act of saying these words impact your prayers and worship?

THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Sunday

*The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,
the world and all who dwell therein.*

PSALM 24:1

In my Hebrew class in seminary, my professor pointed out that the phrase “have dominion over” is best translated as “serve and preserve.” I like this reframing, as it is a paradigm shift from oppressive power and control to loving, tending, and stewarding.

I am proud to belong to a denomination that considers climate change a scientific fact. I am proud to belong to a church that recognizes the need for confession and reconciliation and action, not just for sins (seeking our own will, not our Creator’s will) against God and other humans but also for our failure

to serve and preserve all of creation: land, water, and our non-human relatives.

In Native culture, there is the idea of considering the impact a decision has on seven generations—and if we act out of love, having been created in the image of our loving Creator, then we will remember that the earth is indeed the Lord's and all that is in it. We are called to care for the earth and treat its resources not as commodities but as gifts. Our daily choices either reflect our love for God's creation or not.

I serve in North Dakota, a land of stark and (in the winter) deadly beauty. It is also a land of oilfields, and on my way to work, I drive past flares of methane, an eerie sight, especially at night. I am aware that I live, as we all do, on stolen Native land that was cared for by Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years before colonization. In this context, I strive to live in harmony with other people, with myself, and with “this fragile earth, our island home,” as we say in one of our prayers.

As we observe Advent, many of us have wreaths at church and at home. My son always enjoyed helping gather greenery for our home Advent wreath. We would talk about the different trees, usually pine,

cedar, and holly, that we used. Cedar is a medicine tree in Cherokee tradition, in Arikara, the tribe I married into, and in other tribes as well. Plants traditionally are seen as helpers to humans. When we honor the earth and all that is in it, we honor our Creator.

Going Deeper

This Advent, reflect on how your actions, individually and collectively, can embody your love of Creator and creation.



This Week's Author

Kim Fox serves as the missionary for reconciliation, creation care, and congregational ministry development for the Diocese of North Dakota and priest-in-charge for three congregations, two Native and one Anglo. She has also served as a rector and as a hospice, ICU, and level 1 trauma chaplain.

Monday

*For it is he who founded it upon the seas
and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.*

PSALM 24:2

Our Creator, who made us in their (Trinitarian) image, also created the seas and the rivers of the deep. This water imagery invokes the water of baptism. Early Christians (and some Christians today) practiced full immersion baptism, sometimes outdoors.

I grew up in North Carolina and spent a good deal of time as a child playing in the creek outside my grandparents' farmhouse. The creek was from an underground spring. A short drive away was the New River. It wasn't a very deep river, but one time when my son was a child, our canoe tipped over (much to the amusement of other family members watching), and we were suddenly in a deep pocket of water. I had put a lifejacket on him but had neglected to wear one myself since it was known to be a shallow stretch of river. Not that day. The more my son clung to me,

the more I felt myself sinking—and yet I would have done anything to keep him above water. We were only in the water for a few minutes, but I'll never forget that feeling of panic as I knew that I had to keep him safe despite my fear. I imagine that is how our Creator feels about us: loving us so much and wanting to save us from whatever situation we've gotten ourselves into. Years later, when my son was in college, we returned to the same river on a day of severe flooding and decided against going on the water, as it ran too fast and under the surface were limbs and rocks. We stood safely on the bank and respected the river's raging.

Water is a sacred source. Seas and rivers are living entities, providers of sustenance, both physical and spiritual, yet water levels are rising to dangerous levels due to the human impact on our climate. We see more destructive flooding and other natural disasters and may be tempted to think this is a punishment from God, but we are experiencing the consequences of our failing to love and protect the world and its waters. Sin is when we seek our own will, not God's will. When we remember that our loving Creator made not only humans but also the seas and deep rivers, we might then do better at expressing our love for the waters that sustain us.

When I started studying the Cherokee language, I felt like I was drowning in new information. We were not allowed to speak English, even on lunch breaks, and it turns out I kept ordering a glass of salt instead of water until I was gently corrected by my teacher, who explained that it was the same word with a different tone. Sometimes we need someone to correct us in a loving, not shaming, manner. Fortunately, we have been given guidelines to live in harmony and balance when Jesus gave us the summary of the law, a guide for living lovingly, just as we are loved.

Going Deeper

Think of the different relationships you have with water: baptism, drinking, bathing, swimming, and so forth. How might we be better stewards of the gift of water?