



Come Now,
Breath of God

Advent Vespers

Devotional 2020

AUGSBURG
UNIVERSITY®

Advent 2020

Dear friends,

Advent blessings to you and yours from the Augsburg University community. We are pleased to share these Advent devotions with you - reflections from members of our community on the theme of this year's Advent Vespers, "Come Now, Breath of God."

As we commence our Advent journey - in the midst of these pandemic times - "Come Now, Breath of God" is our fervent prayer as we are experiencing a deadly virus, economic disruption, and racial reckoning that all literally take our breath away.

This Advent we come as God's faithful people called to stay awake, to keep vigil, to be patient as we watch for God breaking into human history, for love incarnate in the person of the baby Jesus, the Christ Child, and for all of the ways that our awesome God continues to work in our midst, calling us to the work of healing and justice and compassion and reconciliation. We pray that God's breath might restore, revive and renew us to the work we are called to do in the world.

In particular this year, we are paying attention to the ways God is in our midst here at Augsburg and in our neighborhood. We are mindful of the needs of our neighbors who are suffering in these pandemic times in ways that demand our action. This Advent, we are focused on the ways in which these pandemic times - more than two millennia after the birth of the baby Jesus in a Bethlehem stable - call us to watch for what God intends for us to be and do in the 21st century.

May your Advent journey be enriched by these devotions. Stay awake, my friends, for the breath of God is once again making all things new!

Peace,

Paul C. Pribbenow
President, Augsburg University

Come Now, Breath of God

41st Annual Augsburg University

Advent Vespers

Advent blessings be yours, as you wait and watch for the Breath of God.

2020 has seen unprecedented upheaval with a four-fold pandemic infecting our lives: COVID-19, systemic racism, climate change, and severe economic distress. With the murder-site of George Floyd just mere miles away from Augsburg's campus, the uprising for racial justice sparked by his tragic death this summer still reverberates in the Minneapolis' streets with a cry: "I can't breathe." While the deadly constrictive forces of racism hinder our capacity to breathe as individuals and together as beloved community, COVID-19 intensifies these hardships along with a choking climate and economy.

This simple devotional book – written in tandem with our 2020 virtual Advent Vespers video – offers words of promise in the midst of these pandemic days as we await the Word of God taking on breath and blood and bone to be among us. The devotions are written by faculty, staff, and alumni of Augsburg reflecting on scripture readings and hymn texts designed to fill our lungs with breath and our lips with song. May they kindle in you hope as together we plead, "O, Come, O, Come, Emmanuel! Come Now, O Breath of God!" Advent in us anew. Amen.

Rev. Babette Chatman & Rev. Justin Lind-Ayres
University Pastors

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4
ISAIAH 42: 1, 5-6

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen,
in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

Thus says God, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the peoples upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you.

I once fell asleep with a cough drop in my mouth. I woke up gasping for air, choking on the drop. I needed to catch my breath; I wanted to breathe. I wanted to live, to freely breathe again. It is one of the most frightful feelings I have ever experienced. Briefly, I was afraid to go back to sleep. Breath is life. Spirit is life.

Isaiah speaks about God's promise fulfilled in Jesus' coming, the embodiment of justice and righteousness. This promised One chooses and keeps God's people, giving breath anew and spirit-life to all. This promise is the light to the nations; light that shines through the cracks in a broken world.

God's Spirit is upon him; the chosen, the called; the bringer of Justice. Justice is the breath we desire. Justice is the breath we long for, the breath we hold on to once we catch it. We have a promise that the servant will bring justice to the nations.

God who promises is faithful! We look here toward the light of Christ, and in this holy light proclaim: Come, Emmanuel. Come now, Breathe of God, bring Justice for all God's creation. Oh, may it be so!

The Rev. Babette Chatman '06

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL - STANZA 1

O, come, O, come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel!

— Text: Psalterium Canticum Catholicarum, Köln, 1710; tr. John M. Neale, 1818-1866

I have sung this verse hundreds of times in Advent services over the years, but this is the first year that I am struck by the idea of “lonely exile.” It is a feeling that I have felt many times during these last several months of the pandemic—a feeling of being exiled from the way things used to be, from ability to easily physically connect with others. The song reminds us that although we may feel lonely, Emmanuel, “God with us” will appear. During our lonely exile of this Advent season, I must remind myself that God is already with us. I think of the words of the Indian poet Kabir, who writes, “God is the breath inside the breath.” God is not just with us, God is within us and all around us, just like our breath. And this breath is something we all share and gives us all life.

Matt Maruggi

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6

EXODUS 15:1-2, 20-21

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

To sing is to breathe. A song requires air: breath to escape from the throat and wind to carry the sound. Miriam can sing because she can breathe. She has what the Hebrews called “ruah” and the Greeks called “pneuma”: breath, air, wind. And spirit. They included that, too. All packed together in single word.

Miriam can sing because she has ruah. Ruah is also why she sings. God has removed the knee of oppression from the throat of her people. They all now can breathe. Spirit again fills their lungs and escapes in the air to be carried by the wind as song.

Come now, breath of God, to your people who struggle to breathe, whose spirits are oppressed, whose songs remain unsung. And also to your people who breathe freely yet complacently, content with the sound of their own song. May your spirit of justice fill the lungs of all your people and escape into the air as your song of salvation from every oppression, carried by the wind.

Russell Kleckley

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL - STANZA 3

O, come, blest Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to you, O Israel!

— Text: Psalteriolum Cantionum Catholicarum, Koln, 1710; tr. John M. Neale, 1818-1866

In waiting, we learn to become a source of strength. In the dim days of winter, we wait for the sun to return. We wait in times of worry and fear for our hope to return. Right now, we wait to gather with family; we wait to be close to our friends. In order to gain strength through this waiting, it's essential that we see and linger in the simple, tender and sometimes tiny moments of love that are around us each day. Perhaps we are inspired by someone helping to dig a stranger's car out of the snow or the couple down the street who regularly checks on an elderly neighbor. Maybe it's an extra burst of beautiful kindness from the person working at the grocery store or someone yielding a seat on the bus. Or you're lucky enough to overhear a senior college student say to a first year before their performance, "You got this." Glimpses of these exquisite moments help our dark days become lighter, our hope to swell, and transform our despair to gratitude.

Darcey Engen '88

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In Hebrew, Zechariah means, “YHWH remembers.” Through this prophecy, God reminds Zechariah of this remembrance, of the hope that God provides. God promised a holy covenant through Abraham that the people would “be rescued from the hands of our enemies and would serve God without fear”.

During times of isolation and division, this promise can feel impossible or so very far away. In the midst of continuing realities of racial injustice, a global pandemic, and division in our country and communities, how can we remember God’s promise? And yet, we are challenged to know and feel in our bones, that “YHWH remembers.” There is hope in remembering, just as God filled Zechariah with the Holy Spirit, we have hope for a future, a day, a moment where the tender mercy of God gives light to our darkness, unites neighbors for the common good and guides our feet into a way of peace. There is hope in a season of waiting, the possibility of what is to come.

Adrienne Kuchler Eldridge ‘02

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9
O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL - STANZA 3
WRITTEN BY KRISTINA BOERGER

O, Come, O Come, thou breath of God.
Sustain those who on Freedom's paths have trod.
Give health to ev'ry heaving breast
and strength to all on Liberation's quest.

— Kristina Boerger, Schwartz Professor in Choral Leadership

We have come to understand Emmanuel, God is with us, in a particular way, especially during Advent. Scripture gives us a more expansive expression. At creation, it was Divine breath that brought life to the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). It was Emmanuel, God not only with us, but in us. God flowing into our nostrils and through our lungs giving life to our bodies.

Millenia later, Black, Indigenous, and people of Color, and other marginalized people cry out, "I can't breathe." This cry is not only for human breath, but for the life-giving breath of God to once again fill our lungs, sustaining and strengthening those who seek Liberation and Freedom for ALL. Advent has been a season of waiting. This Advent, hear the cries that cannot wait any longer and pray "O, Come, O Come, thou breath of God. O, Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Jenn Luong, Pastoral Intern

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10
LUKE 1:46-55

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."

Let us remember that

Mary was a nobody,
a simple girl,
poor, meek, mild,
anonymous to the empire.

God chose what no power could have or would have chosen. God knew what was otherwise unknown: the simple and the human and the feminine could and would hold the divine.

While history is quick to forget the women, Mary has not been forgotten. She remains near the center of the story of God's redemption: the woman who contained and delivered the divine. In Mary, God turned the whole world upside down.

Or was it right-side up?

In the year when time turned the world over, God turned Mary's life inside out. Of course these events are related, bound together by cords and cells. The boy in her belly would change the direction of the world. Time would turn around him.

Her life would turn around him. Each kick, each punch, each hiccup, drummed the heartbeat of redemption. In her, the fullness of love was growing. In her, God was being born. In her, healing and hope were being knit together in the Christ child.

The Rev. Jeni Grangaard

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11

SAVIOR OF THE NATIONS, COME - STANZAS 1 & 2

Savior of the nations, come;
virgin's son, make here your home.
Marvel now, O heav'n and earth:
God has chosen such a birth.

Not by human flesh and blood,
but the mystic Breath of God,
was the Word of God made flesh,
fruit of woman, blossom fresh.

— Text: attr. Ambrose of Milan, 340-397; Martin Luther, 1483-1546

O Saving God, who makes a home with us...
Even though I know my body is enlivened through breath,
I just feel like I'm just inhaling too much that is life-denying.
My cloth mask is no protection from breathing in the brokenness
around me,
the troubled lives close to me or the crumbling society beyond.
It only muffles my responses.

Each week I try to bring that inhalation to you in worship,
laying before you with "kyrie eleisons" all that I have taken in
during the week.
I join with my community in handing over the burdens of the world
to the One who bears all things.

And now, I thank you for those times –
just every once in a while, really –
when I get a whiff of you,
that "mystic Breath of God"
filling me with awareness that you are here...
for me, for us, for the sake of the whole world.

Tom Witt

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12
ISAIAH 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

God's people have been displaced, endured suffering and enslavement, and have experienced death. They have been exiled. They are waiting for a return to Jerusalem, waiting for the messenger. The messenger comes proclaiming that God, who remains true to God's promises, reigns. God will redeem God's people. This is good news! The message includes words of peace, salvation, comfort, God's return to Zion, and redemption. This message of good news is proclaimed in a context of bad news, and yet it's still good news. In this Advent season, we find ourselves at a point in the narrative where we are waiting, waiting for the Good News to become incarnate and dwell among us. For us, in the here and now, it's also not difficult to find bad news. What's the good news in this time and place? What good news does our neighbor need us to proclaim? How might we join in the joyful song?

Amanda Vetsch

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13

SAVIOR OF THE NATIONS, COME - STANZAS 3 & 4

Wondrous birth—oh, wondrous child—
from his throne, a virgin mild!
Very God, and Mary's son,
eager now his race to run!

From God's heart the Savior speeds,
back to God his pathway leads;
out to vanquish death's command,
back to reign at God's right hand.

— Text: attr. Ambrose of Milan, 340-397; Martin Luther, 1483-1546

Jesus is the savior of the nations, who can vanquish death with the breath of God. And yet, Jesus' own life experiences the shortness of breath that we all feel. Jesus' first earthly breath was taken in a manger among animals and a poor young couple. His last breath was through torture and government brutality, surrounded by other condemned people.

Yet, we believe that Jesus' journey starts and ends well past his earthly breath. Jesus' journey starts in the heart of God. His earthly experience through betrayal, sickness, and sin leads us back to God, giving us eternal life.

It is hard to breathe right now, and in so many ways, our breath is cut short. But our journey with Christ also leads us through sin and sickness back into the heart of God, where we can freely breathe the breath of God.

Deacon Ross Murray '00, '09 MBA

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14
PSALM 98

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.
The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
 with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
 the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

The sea roars, the floods clap their hands, mountains tap their feet to the beat. The entire universe and all that is in it is filled with joyous noise. There is no such thing as too much singing. In bad times, songs of lament help us express our grief and sorrow. In good times, songs of praise burst from our mouths and fill the air. We are to sing a new song. Every day, every situation is a time for singing. We are to sing a new song which transcends time and space; and, in our singing, past present and future become one. God has done wonderful things! God's steadfast love is remembered. The Lord comes to judge the earth with justice and equity. Sing a new song!

Dana Nissen

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15

PSALM 103: 1-8

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is
renewed like the eagle's.

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.
The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love.

Lord I call your name. Lord I Bless your name. Lord I know your
name. Come Now, O Lord, and give me Breath.

In all human journeys, I know there is Darkness. But our Lord is
the otherside which is light. Lord is Light and Light is Lord.

So, Lord I call your name. Lord I Bless your name. Lord I know
your name. Come Now, O Lord, and give me Breath.

And because the Lord dwells within, the Kingdom of God is mine,
and all the good fortunes in his name: Good health is mine. For-
giveness is mine. Healing is mine. Love is mine. Order is mine.
Revelation is mine. And discernment is mine. Lord is with me and
is mine.

Lord I call your name. Lord I Bless your name. Lord I know your
name. Come Now, O Lord, and give me Breath.

My faith is strong, my wings spread wide, and my heart young
and innocent. The Lord works all, and is all; and All is just, righ-
teous, and right on time. Freeing the oppressed and restoring life,
love, kindness, and grace.

Lord I call your name. Lord I Bless your name. Lord I know your
name. Come Now, O Lord, and give me Breath. Amen!

Terrance Kwame-Ross

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16
ISAIAH 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

The great baseball philosopher Yogi Berra supposedly once said: "You can see a lot by looking." In other words, we are often caught up in seeing but without truly looking. By "looking" I mean taking the time to pause from our self-preoccupations and notice what is really going on. Maybe it's the child laughing across the street. Maybe it's the snow clinging to the cedar tree out your window. Maybe it's the line in front of the food pantry that you pass by on our way to work. Maybe it's the elderly neighbor isolated by the pandemic. There is a lot to see out there in God's world. How often do we really look?

We pray: God of the light and truth, open our eyes to look...to see your work in the beauty of your creation and in the needs of our neighbors, near and far. Amen.

The Rev. Mark Tranvik

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17
JOHN 1:1, 14 (ADAPTED)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was with God. And the Word became flesh – that is, the Word took breath – and lived among us. (John 1:1, 14, adapted)

James Weldon Johnson writes about a lonely but imaginative god in “Creation.” Alice Walker’s god is said to be deeply troubled when we don’t notice the color purple in a field. Here, John gives us a god who is The Word.

The Word was all that was needed to create the foundations of the earth. To spin it on its axis, firm up the firmament, separate the deep from the deeper still. And yet, God was not done after all that; God then created living things in the *imago dei*. Amen. And in that image, we inherit the power of our voices as well as the blessing of The Word.

For people like me, intersectional and oppressed – our Word is often all we have. We are written out of official stories. We do not appear, as we should, in the public record. We are purged from voter rolls as if we never existed. Our cries for our mothers do not produce empathy, even as we are running out of breath. We are erased from curriculum that talks about our ancestral lands which housed our ancient selves. We are erased from schools of knowledge that we originated when they are hellenized, made into marble statues that repudiate our features. Nevertheless, we persist.

The creative power of The Word stays our souls, and gives us strength. Our oral and shared histories, our names written in decades old ornamental bibles, our obituaries, become the record of our lives. We have become masters at turning a phrase, sparking a verse. We are word made flesh. And we too were at the beginning.

Genesia Williams '20

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18
JOY TO THE WORLD - STANZAS 1 & 2

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let ev'ry heart prepare Him room
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and heav'n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ,
while fields and floods,
rocks, hills, and plains,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

— Isaac Watts, 1674 – 1748

Heavenly Father, King of kings, and Lord of lords - we give you thanks. Thank you, God, for sending Jesus your son. Your son, who is the living word; the word who became flesh. A perfect man to die and pay the price for the evils and crimes of the world. Thank you, Jesus. Blot out our transgressions and wash us from our sins as we present our hearts to you as a living sacrifice – the very broken hearts of an oppressed people, mourning the state of the world. Indeed, we have been mourning, for the world is in a time of darkness and bloodshed; but, we know you have overcome the world. Therefore, let us sing our hearts out to you. You have formed us from clay and breathed life into us, so let us use that very gift to glorify your name. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord; and let every person confess now that Jesus is Lord. Amen.

Minister Miracle Adebajo '20

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19
LUKE 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

December 19, 2010...with a swollen belly, exhausted body and eager heart I pace the hallways of the hospital with my husband, encouraging our son to join the breathing world.

Breathe. Walk. Wait.

Breathe. Walk more. Wait more.

Breathe. Breathe. PUSH!

Push and breath. Breathe and push more until...

The waiting brakes. A cry, a first breath.

Filled and emptied all at once, I exhale deeply. The work is over, but it is also just beginning. This new human in my arms - a reminder of the fragility and responsibility of the gift of life. And of the God who accompanies it all from beginning to end, to new beginning.

I imagine Mary. Breathing. Walking. Waiting. Breathing and pushing. Until a cry breaks through. Jesus' first breath, like his last, a promise of God's fierce commitment to an exhausted creation.

May we never forget this promise.

May it fill us with the inexhaustible love of God.

May it push us towards a creation that longs for abundant life.

Amen.

Kristina Fruge

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20

SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT - STANZAS 1 & 2

Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight;
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing, Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!

— Joseph Mohr, 1792-1849; tr. John F. Young 1820-1885

Silent night, Holy night. These words begin one of the most well-known, well-loved Christmas carols. This hymn has a story and even legend of its own. An Austrian priest, Josef Mohr, brings his poem to musician friend Franz Gruber on Christmas Eve 1818 and by midnight Mass this carol is first sung accompanied by guitar.

The first stanza describes a mother and a child and a holy night marked by calm, silence and peace. Meanwhile back at the ranch, so to speak, the second stanza is more raucous. An angel describes the meaning of what's going on to shepherds who are quaking and shaking, with glories streaming light-show and a heavenly host singing. And then there is silence again.

Words say things, but words also do things. These words in this carol ironically speak and sing about silence. This carol creates a moment of holy silence even in the midst of sound. For some this carol evokes memories of times past and maybe brings a moist eye. Nothing wrong with that. The good news also is that experiencing this carol, singing these words brings us into a holy moment in the now. As one preacher described it, an eternal now. Amen.

The Rev. Phil Quanbeck II

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21

LUKE 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

“I long to hear some good news.” Words spoken and heard often in the midst of multiple pandemics. In such a time fear is understandable. Fear can motivate us to take responsible actions. Yet fear can also close us off to God’s promises and presence, to neighbors struggling, to the creation suffering. “Do not be afraid” the angel announced. Take a deep breath! God is about to do a new thing for the sake of God’s liberating, reconciling love for all. God becoming one of us in Jesus the Christ. God taking on our flesh, our anxieties, our breath, our death for the sake of life. Breathe that Good News into our lives, O God!

The Rev. Mark Hanson '68

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH, STANZAS 1&2

Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains,
And the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains.
Gloria in excelsis Deo; Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be which inspire your heav'nly song?
Gloria in excelsis Deo; Gloria in excelsis Deo.

— French Carol; tr. H.F. Henry, *The Crown of Jesus Music*, 1864

Egg. Shell. Seas.

Our Sunday School teachers would teach us to pronounce “excelsis” by singing “egg shell seas” each year as we rehearsed for the annual Christmas pageant. We always pronounced the word correctly but would ruin the song by snickering. Only we knew our secret. The audience thought we were angelic, but we were just singing about egg shell seas, whatever and wherever those were. And every year our teachers would ask, “Why are you laughing?” What a silly question!

The shepherds would have laughed with us. They knew our jubilee. They knew what made our joyous strains prolong and what inspired our heavenly song. It wasn't proper piety. It was sheer giddiness. They knew why we laughed. They too were used to being asked silly questions. I can hear them now, “Why this jubilee? Why our joyous strains? What are the gladsome tidings inspiring this song? What a silly question!”

And I can hear their answer, “We once were lost, but now we have been found. Your religious practices have refused us entry into the temple to worship our God, but now this God has come to us here in the fields. You might consider us too unclean for your pageants, but the God of egg shell seas has come to us. Gloria!”

Jeremy Myers

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23

LUKE 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

It is very difficult to make sense of this passage without looking at the verses that precede it, verses 8-14, in which an angel tells the shepherds that the Savior – for whom they have been waiting – has been born. This news is both what prompted the shepherds to say, “let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place” and what they “made known,” that is, what Mary treasured and pondered in her heart. A newborn baby, of humble means, is certainly not the Savior, the Messiah, the people of Israel were hoping or expecting to come. Yet, the shepherds returned to their flocks, praising God.

This year – 2020 – has been marked by the intersecting horrors of a global pandemic, rampant racial injustice, and the escalating climate crisis, a far cry from the good news of the second chapter of Luke. But this reality has forced us to pay attention. Over and over again, we have been called to “go now...and see this thing that has taken place,” to listen to unexpected voices, prophetic voices on the margins, and to hold their words in our hearts. George Floyd’s agonizing cry, “I can’t breathe,” simultaneously proclaims Black Lives Matter and evokes images of creation choking on the thick smoke of forest fires in the Pacific Northwest and loved ones dying alone, isolated in ICUs, of Covid-19. I will not praise or glorify God for these atrocities. I will not look for a ‘silver lining’ or a providential plan. But I will return from all that I have seen and heard, and amplify what has been told to me.

Lori Brandt Hale

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24

BEAUTIFUL STAR OF BETHLEHEM - STANZAS 1 & 2

Oh beautiful star of Bethlehem,
shining afar through shadows dim,
giving a light for those who long have gone (have gone)
and guiding the wise men on their way
unto the place where Jesus lay.
Oh beautiful star of Bethlehem, shine on (shine on).

Oh beautiful star (beautiful, beautiful star) of Bethlehem,
shine upon us until the glory dawns,
give us the light to light the way
unto the land of perfect day.
Oh beautiful star of Bethlehem, shine on (shine on).

— R. Fisher Boyce, 1938

We know too well that the dangers of the coronavirus have reformed our communal life. When breathing together puts people at risk, everything necessarily changes. This Christmas Eve family gatherings, communal celebrations, and church worship services will likely look and feel different – all for the sake of protecting our neighbors and the communities to which we belong.

“Oh Beautiful Star of Bethlehem” was the signature choral piece of our 2020 virtual Augsburg University Advent Vespers. Performed by the Augsburg Choir, Riverside Singers, the Global Harmony class, and community members under the steadfast direction of Dr. Kristina Boerger, this offering combined over eighty some voices through the aid of technology and virtual collaboration. This joint choir – connected online – found a way to join voices and harmoniously sing out the starlight promise of Christ Jesus.

I believe the heart of the Advent/Christmas season is the communal call to join the angelic chorus and sing of our Savior’s birth - to praise God together and proclaim God’s Spirit-breath taking flesh and being birthed among us! Somehow, we find a way to sing because our God finds a way to fill our lungs with hope. Even in these challenging times, the songs of incarnational love will be sung and the beautiful star announcing Christ’s birth will shine on (shine on)!

The Rev. Justin Lind-Ayres

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25
LUKE 2:27-32

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

On this most holy morning, we once again encounter the Christ Child in the manger and with Simeon we proclaim that our eyes have seen God’s salvation, a light for revelation, a source of glory. And now we look to what poet W.H. Auden calls the “time being,” the time when we are called to free the prisoners, heal the sick, feed the hungry, dismantle racism, fight for justice, help all of God’s creation to breathe again – Guided by the Spirit. May it be so for now and evermore.

Paul C. Pribbenow

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Olivia House '20, who earned a degree in graphic design at Augsburg, created the artwork for this year's theme, "Come Now, Breath of God." For more information on the artist, please read a [Q&A with Olivia House](#).

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Hymn Text Citations

Angels We Have Heard on High

Text: French carol; tr. H. F. Hemy, *The Crown of Jesus Music*, 1864. Music: French carol; arr. Edward S Barnes, 1887-1958 (Public Domain). 2019 Advent Vespers, video produced by Mark Kieffer, Central Lutheran Church. (© Augsburg University).

Beautiful Star of Bethlehem

by R. Fisher Boyce, 1887-1968 (One License Print/Streaming A-723242)

Joy to the World

Text: Isaac Watts, 1674-174. Music: English melody, 18th Cent.; arr. Lowell Mason, 1792-1872 (Public Domain).

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Text: Stanza 1, *Psalterium Cantionum Catholicarum*, Köln, 1710; tr. composite.

Stanza 2, Kristina Boerger, 2020. Music: French processional, 15th cent. (Public Domain)

Savior of the Nations, Come

Text: attr. Ambrose of Milan, 340-397; Martin Luther, 1483-1546, tr hymnal version. Copyrighted 2006 Augsburg Fortress. Music: J. Walter, *Geistliche Gesangbucklein*, 1524. 3) Savior of the Nations, Come - arr. Paul Manz, MorningStar. (1,2,3 - One License Print/Streaming A-723242).

Silent Night, Holy Night

Text: Joseph Mohr, 1792-1849; tr. John F Young, 1820-1885. Music: Franz Gruber, 1787-1863 (Public Domain).

