

Advent 2020

Slowly and without grandeur God took a *risk* and intertwined God's own being with an unknown girl, in an unknown place. Each beat of the young girl's heart, each breath that she took led her to finding her deeper inner self. There is a *revelation* that speaks of transformation, it comes without request. The transformation calls for a change that she did not invite, one that she was uncertain that she wanted to accept. The girl named Mary unfastens the door that held her *unease*, wondering if the Lord of all would show her the way. The God of all, the God that is came to give counsel, rised as her prince of peace and reminded her that **God is** and she has nothing to fear.

As we await the holy of holies, we invite you to step into this Advent at Home experience that is contained in this packet. Over the next 4 weeks we will experience the following together:

Risk and Vulnerability
Revelation and Incarnation
Unease
God is...

In this packet you will find the following contents

- Weekly Advent Devotional written by our Blakemore Family*** ***Page 3***
We join together throughout the week in scripture, reflection and prayer
- Carrying Jesus with Us*** ***Page 17***
Let us walk in Mary's steps carrying Jesus everywhere we go and into every task we must fulfill.
- We decorate our Chrismon Trees*** ***Page 18***
God's *heart* beats for us
A revelation *lights* {star} the way
An *angel* calms the unease
Each week we create a new Chrismon ornament to hang upon our tree
- Making Room in our Manger*** ***Page 19***
We spend time crafting a sacred and holy space for God to enter this world.
- Gathering around the advent wreath with light and liturgy*** ***Page 21***
Each week Sunday we gather to light a candle in our advent wreath
- We Sing Silent Night on Christmas Eve*** ***Page 25***
Gathering our candles and our Christ Candle Liturgy we come to celebrate Christmas Eve at 6:00pm.

*A word of thanksgiving and acknowledgment
Advent in a bag has been made possible through the faithfulness of so many.*

For those who so graciously stepped into the depths of their hearts and wrote reflections on the words assigned to them.

To Steffie for writing and developing the Chrismon reflections and so patiently teaching us how to build a manger from craft sticks, glue, and a paper bag.

For those who gave their Sunday afternoon to deliver our first ever Advent at Home experience.

To Jessica for the behind the scenes stuff that keeps us informed and for Matthew for creating a night of music, song, and holiness this advent season.

Without the faithfulness of so many of you this Advent season would not have been possible.

Events this Season:

Worship	Sundays at 9:30 Zoom and In-person
A Not-So-Silent Night of Christmas songs and Carols	Wednesday, December 9 th at 6:30 Zoom
Blue Christmas Service: Hope Revealed	Thursday, December 17 th at 6:00pm Zoom and In-person (please register for the event)
Christmas Eve	Thursday, December 24 th at 5:00pm Zoom

Monday, November 30th
First Week of Advent
Risk and Vulnerability

Read:

Mark 9: 36-41

God is... risk

Well, not exactly, but doing what God asks us to do sometimes means taking a risk. I'm not talking about becoming a martyr, and I don't mean that I've run into burning buildings or been the hero of a tale. I'm not especially brave, and I really, Really don't do well with conflict. But when I see someone in trouble, and know that I can help, I know I HAVE to act. Morris and I have fostered (officially and un-officially) many teens over the years. Some came and stayed, (4 of them) some used our house as a on again/off again place to be fed and to be safe. To be Safe – that is the driving force for most of our children. Our house is and was a safe zone, where there were words of advice, an open table, and most importantly, a place to lay down their burdens for a little while. It doesn't matter at all what they believe, who they love, or what they look like – they are welcomed and loved. It's always a risk - we've been burned a time or two by the teens who came or their friends. We've had things stolen, and things broken. We've lent money that we will never see again. We have been accused of all sorts of nasty allegations by some of the biological parents of our children, and that hurts. It's scary to be judged. But that has not stopped us from providing what we can. Jesus said to feed his sheep, to care for those who are lost, to count the least as the most important. Not just when it is convenient; not just when we have extra, but always and everywhere. I have tried to care for those God has placed in my path, even when it means taking a risk.

Prayer:

Dear Father and Mother of us all, give us courage this season to be open to take a risk, to feed the hungry who come in our path, to see where our actions do your work in the world. Give us the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the words to speak so that when someone encounters us, they encounter you.

Lisa Lewis

Tuesday, December 1st
First Week of Advent
Risk and Vulnerability

The Birth of Jesus: A Modern Retelling

Holy☀️Mobile™
G LTE

God: Hail, Mary. WYD? You blocked my angel.

Mary: New phone! who 'dis?

God: Srsly?...

God: C'mon. You can do this.

Mary: Nah, bruh.

God: Mary. Srsly. You R the 1.

Mary: Get someone else. LOL.

God: No can do.

Mary: Joseph is gonna lose it.

God: I'll send my guy to talk to him.

Mary: NVM, I think he'll be ok. I'm still not sure. LOL.

God: Trust me.

Mary: How will we care for a baby? They smell. Elizabeth's baby cries all the time.

God: Did she tell you it will be a boy? He will be called the Son of the Most High God?

Mary: OMG, chill. Joseph and I haven't even...you know.

God: IKR?! ROFL.

(Months later:)

Mary: Um, it's a census year. Wut? Headed to B'ham, I guess.

God: Meet you there. Look for the star.

Mary: Tell Clarence not to scare me again.

God: I told you to stop calling him that. His name is Gabriel.

Mary: I got Gabsmacked.

God: Stop.

Mary: TTYL

(Later)

Mary: Nowhere to stay in this place. My baby daddy is tired. He walked the whole way and let me ride that donkey.

God: He's 100%.

Mary: This innkeeper is letting us stay in the barn. #glamping

God: Lol. FaceTime me when it happens.

Mary: Like, I'm kind of still in the middle of the last favor you asked me to do.

God: You got this.

Mary: It's go time.

God: I'm right there with you. #Emmanuel

God: Did you see Facebook Live?

Mary: Yep. They are starting to arrive. Lots of shepherds.

God: How is he?

Mary: He's perfect.

God: Send a pic.

Mary: *selfie with Jesus*

God: Oh, he's beautiful. Sweet baby savior.

Mary: Strange way to save the world.

God: Blessed are you among women.

Mary: This baby, tho.

God: Truth.

A glossary of text abbreviations:

WYD—What are you doing?

Srsly—Seriously

Bruh—Brother, or bro

LOL—Laughing out loud

NVM—Nevermind

OMG—Oh my God

IKR—I know, right?

ROFL—Rolling on floor laughing

Wut—What?

TTYL—Talk to you later

Kristi Walker

Wednesday, December 2nd
First Week of Advent
Risk and Vulnerability

Read

Matthew 1:18 - 25; Luke 1: 19-20, 57-65

Societies whether ancient or current draw many conclusions about names, who we are named after, what is the meaning behind a name, and how we identify ourselves with a name, male, female, or non-binary . In the ancient Judaeen society, male names were especially expected to follow tradition. Yet, we read in the scriptures the responses of two men when God intervened in the naming of their children. Joseph, although, he wonders about the appropriateness of his marriage to Mary, is convinced only through a dream to call his son, Jesus. Zachariah, not so much. I wonder if it really was Gabriel's doing Zachariah remained silent during Martha's pregnancy or, if old Zach himself chose to remain silent out of fear and uncertainty? He has every right to fear this, even if Gabriel said, "Do Not Be Afraid"! According to the scripture, the town folks tried to step in and question John's given name. Only then, was the moment of truth for Zachariah and, after getting at least 9-7 months to think about it, he spoke up. He spoke up for his faith and spoke up to signal that God had new paths to make in his child, John.

Zachariah was acting in faith. He probably had no certainty when naming his child apart from tradition, he was already preparing the way for his son's ministry and for ...Jesus, the Emmanuel.

Risk and vulnerability lead to the notion of uncertainty. Who am I? Where do I stand? How can I speak up in the face of social expectations? How do I risk my identity as a peacemaker if I speak up for injustice? How do I ruffle feathers and risk criticism from even those closest to me?

I leave you with this:

Uncertainty to me
Is Hell itself,
As I am plunged
And detached
From all I know
and cannot control...
Uncertainty.
For certainly it
is without knowing,
What is next;
What is best;
What is sure;
What is true.
For uncertainty
has it's own control
on me and I
must
live
in
it.
To know,
being given to
Uncertainly,
I can be certain
Faith will
Not let me go

Thursday, December 3rd
First Week of Advent
Risk and Vulnerability

Scripture:

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me...

- Psalms 23:4

Why is Psalm 23 so comforting, humbling and strengthening. This Christmas, remember the times when you have taken risks in your life that strengthened your faith and presented a path to God's righteousness. Let me tell you my story

I was a young man in my early 20s and was living a life without much purpose and ambition. I was excelling at my job but at a level that I was comfortable with. I was searching for meaning and challenge even though I didn't know it at the time.

My pastor had seen this lack of direction of mine and reached out to me after church one autumn Sunday after service. He suggested that I consider traveling to Nicaragua and join a Methodist mission that Advent season that was helping to build schools in Managua in the midst of the internal Contra war. By this time, the conflict in Nicaragua had been halted through a ceasefire, but I was still thinking to myself - ***This is a big challenge...I wonder if the people hate Americans for funding and continuing the war...I don't know the language or the culture...***

I stopped my thoughts right there and immediately said "Yes"..I didn't mull it over or take 24 hours to for an excuse in saying no like I usually did. I needed to step into risk. Risk with purpose. Risk that feels right. The purpose was to help students and a community in Managua, Nicaragua get back on their feet and build a future after this awful war had destroyed their present. The risk was real but the purpose was so much greater.

As it turned out, the two week mission was a watershed moment for me. I made a documentary of the experience and as luck had it. The film was accepted at the Methodist School of Missions to document what Methodist missionaries were accomplishing in Central America. I received a promotion at work soon thereafter and my overall direction and drive became focused and strengthened. It was taking a risk while walking humbly in the hands of God.

Prayer

Dear Lord, we love you and want to live in your word every day. We are called to step out in faith and please help us realize the God is greater than any problem. Help us be still and walk in your path. Amen

Eric Will

Friday, December 4th
First Week of Advent
Risk and Vulnerability

Read:
Psalm 121

Whenever the Great Flood is being talked about, it has given me the understanding that Noah was safe in the Ark because he built it according to God's specifications. Perhaps it was the strength of the materials that they used, the way that it was constructed, the soundness of the plan that made sure that it will withstand the flood.

But in an article I read, I was presented with another view of this whole scenario: Gen 7:16 says, "And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the Lord shut him in". After Noah has built the ark, *it was God who shut him in, in order to shut the flood waters out. In other words, God sealed them inside.*

As I reflect on this, Noah took a big risk when he drastically changed his day to day routine, followed God, and started building the ark. In our present day – he and his sons would have left their jobs, their secure source of living, and would have suffered ridicule from their neighbors/community. They did this to follow God's bidding. But God did not fail: He shut them in inside His Ark of Protection.

Everyday, we present ourselves to risks, which makes us vulnerable to the world. We go out, do our daily chores, meet people and make life changing decisions. It is not being a skilled driver that keeps us safe on the road, our good lifestyle that keeps healthy, our being smart that makes us make sound decisions, nor it is not because we lock our homes that we can sleep safely at night. Rather, it is God's love sealing us in, embracing us with His protective arms.

In this season of Advent, may we feel secure in the knowledge that the God who shut Noah in in the Ark is still the same God that shuts us in each moment of our lives? Why fear, why doubt when the God who seal us in knows the number of hairs in our heads?

As a verse from "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" goes:

"Let not your heart be troubled," His tender word I hear,
And resting on his goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Tho' by the path He leadeth, But one step I may see:
His eye is on the sparrow, And I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow, And I know He watches me."

May God continue to seal us in as we continue to follow His will.

Prayer:

**Oh God of Noah, we are surrounded by unease, disunity, hatred, fear.
Continue to seal us in –
seal us in in your care, that we may truly care
seal us in in your compassion, that we may be compassionate
seal us in in your love, that we may love the way that Jesus taught us to. Amen.**

Anne Kabling

Monday, December 7th
Second Week of Advent
Revelation and Incarnation

I've always been fascinated by those pictures that you can see in different ways. For example, you could see a beautiful woman or an ugly hag just by changing what you focus on. Once you can see it both ways, you just can't go back. The truth in the picture is revealed, but not as you would expect.

In the season of Advent, I am always drawn to the story of Mary. She probably imagined her life going in a particular direction. She was young with a long future stretching out before her. But God gave her a different way to look at her own picture. God sent the angel to reveal to her a different truth. Once she was able to see the picture both ways, she could never go back. God does the same with us, though maybe not as monumentally as with Mary. We think we are viewing one picture but another is revealed, whether we want to see it or not. And once it is revealed, you can't see it any other way. For me, I saw my life one way, but God intervened and revealed to me another picture. Today I cannot imagine not being the strong independent woman that I have become. I cannot imagine not being a teacher. Honestly, I cannot imagine not having my Blakemore family. My life picture can be seen as two images, the second revealed at just the right time.

For Mary, her life did not end up the way she pictured it. But in my mind, I am certain she understood the power of the revelation by God. For all of us, I am hoping that God's revelation for us will be just as powerful. Make sure to look deeply at God's picture!

Cindy Kleinrock

Wednesday, December 9th
Second Week of Advent
Revelation and Incarnation

I was asked by our pastor to write an Advent devotional with an aspect on Revelation. For a split second I thought of what an eschatological comment about the last book of the Bible would have to do with Christmas. Well it's a different kind of revelation this coming of Jesus, or maybe not. At any rate it all ties together I'm sure.

At each Christmas season in my life, I have also asked myself "What is it that makes this season so special? Can somebody reveal the answer to me?" As a child the revelation of Christmas was Santa Claus. I believed that Jesus and Santa were the same. After all they were both a gift from God, you can't see them, they both were miraculous, doing things for children, etc. My folks insisted that the gift thing was just our extension of the Magi visit and Jesus was the true meaning of Christmas.

Then as an adolescent I figured out that no biblical exegesis ever said anything about celebrating Christmas, let alone snowmen, evergreens, Rudolf, sparkling lights, and fun parties. These were all people made concepts. I guess people just have to relate in more tangible ways. But maybe that's not so bad if you really kept the true meaning of Christmas in your heart. During my college years Christmas had lost a lot of its sparkle, not the lights as they were still there, but that certain magic that has no explanation. It was weaker or didn't come till later in the season or maybe just before Christmas or finally not at all. I thought it was just a matter of growing older, but it wasn't necessarily age related at all as my grandmother had only begun to lose that Christmas spirit about when I did. Maybe it was just a sign of the times.

Every Christmas from then on I made a ritual of going for a special event with my grandmother "Momma Abby" every Christmas Eve. No matter what was going on I would go and drive her for a while about town. We would just meander around and look for the best decorated house or yard, the most tactful being the standard. This ritual continued for many years until one Christmas when she just didn't feel up to going out. I knew she might not see many more Christmases on earth but that would be alright too. By then it had somehow been revealed to me that Momma Abby was that Christmas feeling that I sought. Many other such revelations have come with each new Christmas, and I look forward to this next one.

We all know now that Baby Jesus was God's Revelation to the world. This Revelation is God's Kingdom and Will for the world. God's Grace is that we get to experience it in our own way. For a Christmas devotional, I don't know that I have what it takes to write a very good one. Therefore I will rely on my favorite words of Longfellow written during the American Civil War:

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!

Well I'm sure he meant "women," too. And yes the times have changed some, but God's Revelation to us is still the same!

John Jackson

Monday, December 14th
Third Week of Advent
Unease

The closing of the year approaches, this year of so much unease. It closes with the hopefulness of Advent, the watch time that anticipates the birth of the Hope of the World.

It has been a year of political squabbles, pandemic anxiety, social isolation, and for many, losses of loved ones, health, jobs, and physical interactions with friends. We have learned to bump elbows instead of sharing hugs; we have acquired a wardrobe of facial masks. We have had to deal with confusion, anger, frustration, and grief; we have had to learn new ways of communication, shopping, and worshiping.

We may feel like we are caught up in an extraordinary and singular even, but according to The Preacher, there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Are we the only generation in the world's history to suffer? This question has led me to look back and to acknowledge that every generation has faced one crisis after another.

There have been wars, and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6). Many of us have parents or grandparents who lived through World Wars I and II, who wept for the young lives lost in Viet Nam. There have been plagues, famines and natural disasters around the world. There have been financial crises—recessions and depressions. Many of us have heard stories from elderly relatives about the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. It is easy to fall into despair, cynicism, or hopelessness (acedia).

In spite of our current adverse circumstances, Advent brings us a season of rejoicing, a reason to renew our hope. Whenever we look into the eyes of a newborn baby, we are filled with hopeful anticipation for the life and well-being of this little child. We are ourselves renewed. How much more are we renewed by the birth of Jesus!

We were not promised easy times because we follow Christ, but we were promised a place of refuge, a never-ending support in the boundless love of our Creator.

We may have to celebrate Christmas in a new way this year. Our customary parties may be curtailed, or celebrated via Zoom! Our family gatherings might be smaller than usual. But as we explore new means of observing the days of Advent, may we rekindle our joy and sense of wonder.

We will still hang wreaths, decorate our Christmas tree, bring out treasured family mementoes, and sing the carols. We will celebrate the promise of salvation that was begun with the birth of Jesus. May we put away sorrow, disappointment, and discontent and focus on the blessings that this year has brought. We have made new friends and deepened old friendships. We have learned empathy for those with whom we disagree. We have found joy in simple things—the blossoming of flowers, the comfort of pets, the support of loved ones, the dawn of a new day.

In summary, let us remember Paul's words in Romans 12:12: "Let hope keep you joyful; in trouble stand firm; persist in prayer."

Rosanne Awbrey

Tuesday, December 15th
Third Week of Advent
Unease

I remember the surprise I felt when I realized that they were going to let my husband and I take our daughter home with us from the hospital, assuming we were grown up enough to take care of this tiny, fragile person without adult supervision, and I spent most of my kids' infancy and toddler years looking for an adultier adult to tell me what to do. In talking to other parents, I have found this desire for adult supervision to be pretty universal. As a mother, I am uneasy all the time. My kids are constantly pushing boundaries and causing me to look at things in a new way.

Even though I was over 30 when my oldest was born, I have grown up with my kids. My daughter's quiet curiosity about the world and desire to make it better has pushed me to work that makes the world fairer and more accessible for everyone. My son's boundless sense of adventure has helped me become (slightly) more comfortable taking risks. They have pushed me beyond my comfort zone, and every time I step out into new territory, I can feel the discomfort in my body as my shoulders creep up towards my ears and my eyebrows move closer together. Sometimes this is overwhelming, and I can't or won't take the next step in that walk right then. Almost always, though, those places of unease show me the places where I can grow and make space for my children to grow.

One of those phrases that recurs in the New Testament is that Mary "considered [it] in her heart." In the story of Jesus's birth, and in the scenes we see of his boyhood, odd things keep happening, and Mary is uneasy. From the beginning, she knows who her son is going to become. She's told how special he will be from the moment the angel tells her she will become pregnant in an impossible way. Her cousin Elizabeth sees how special Jesus will be, that he will be the savior foretold in Isaiah. His birth is met with signs and portents and unusual visitors and gifts. And Mary accepts all of these things, but she considers them in her heart, which I have always understood as working her way through her discomfort.

She knows who he will become and that he is unlike any other child, but she is still uneasy when these unusual things happen; she loves her son and wants to protect him. Nonetheless, she follows him through his ministry because she trusts God enough to lean into her discomfort and see what happens; her discomfort is ultimately transformed into faith. I have always imagined Mary ministering to the disciples during Jesus' adult ministry—when Jesus has surprised them with something he has said or done, I imagine her saying to them "he's been making me uncomfortable his whole life, just relax and ease into it—you're going to be okay." Maybe this is the voice we all need to hear when God calls us to be more than we thought we could be or love someone we find hard to love.

So this advent, I pray:

Loving God, in whose presence I find rest, help me to lean into my unease and find my own growing edges. Be patient with me and help me be patient with myself when the discomfort becomes overwhelming. Help me not be afraid of this discomfort that comes with growth and continue to love those who are growing in different ways and at different speeds than I am. Amen.

Jessica Moore-Lucas

Wednesday, December 16th
Third Week of Advent
Unease

Scripture: “Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” – Matthew 2.12

Reality sucks. I mean really...it does. Look around us-a global pandemic, income inequality soaring, rural hospitals closing, rampant racial and economic injustice. Reality is uneasy. But, for me, it's not just the world out there; I'm also uneasy in interpersonal relationships. “She really doesn't like me...she's just pretending to be my friend”, “If he really knew me...all of me...he wouldn't like me”, “I wish I was a man like him”, “If I had that job or that amount of income everything would be perfect”. And the truth, for me is that when I'm faced with that unease I just check out – I pick up my phone and play or game or check social media or watch TV or shop or drink or _____. Whatever it is I do I want to disassociate from the unease of life around. So, I hate reality...I zone out and have to work hard to stay grounded in the present moment.

I want the easy life.

However, the truth is that life is messy and uneasy. M. Scott Peck said that recovery is commitment to reality at all costs. Easy street doesn't exist; I have to travel uneasy street. In other words, I have to learn to live with the discomfort that is real life...I can't escape it or numb it out or shop it out or do any other activity to escape it. I have to learn to live with the unease.

The good news of Advent is that it is in the very midst of our uneasy lives that Emmanuel comes. In Matthew chapter two everyone is uneasy:

- Herod was uneasy.
- Mary was uneasy.
- Joseph was uneasy.
- The Magi were uneasy.
- All of Jerusalem was uneasy.

Jesus' birth upended everything. Did Jesus' birth cause the unease or was it already there and his birth simply brought it to the light? Who knows. What is true, though, is that in the midst of the unease God is at work. God warns the Magi. God warns Joseph. God doesn't remove us from the uneasy situations in life...God shows up with us. God is present in the pandemic and the social unrest of our nation and the economic injustices and my personal relationships with others. Like Joseph and the Magi, we need to stay open to God's direction and lead so that hope and peace and justice can be enfleshed in our world just as it was enfleshed in the baby in the manger.

Prayer:

God, give me the courage to stay present in every moment of my life. Give me the grace to witness the unease of the world around me and to be a vessel for Your love, peace, and justice just as Jesus was. Amen

Kevin Walker

Friday, December 18th
Third Week of Advent
Unease

Have you ever felt prompted by God to act? Have you ever felt that invisible pull to move out of your comfort zone? There is a sudden palpitation of the heart, knotting of the stomach, and frizzing of the nerves that you know with all your being is God calling you to do something. Perhaps you have welcomed these moments wholeheartedly and met the moment without hesitation. If you are like me, the things God often calls you to do are not things that will make you popular and may even put you at odds with people you love and care about. You may have felt uncomfortable and uneasy about stepping out and speaking up because of this. Perhaps in that unease you waited too long and missed the moment. This inevitably brings further unease thinking of what might have been.

To be a follower of Jesus is to not always take the easy path. It means you keep walking forward with the uneasiness of knowing there will be forces resisting you along the way. It means speaking truth and opposition to power like the prophets of old that could have consequences for you and your well being. It can mean giving up a life of comfort and familiarity for a future of living in the margins and even possible martyrdom like the Disciples did. To follow Jesus is to place trust and faith in Jesus to lead you through the moments of unease and stand with you when you choose the side of justice, righteousness, and love.

May we remember, in the moments when God calls us and we feel the twinge of unease, to call out “O Come, o come, Immanuel!” God be with us.

Steffie Misner-Wampler

Monday, December 21st
Fourth Week of Advent
God is.....

God is the connection between people and the beauty in our world. When one person shows compassion toward another, there is God. When one expresses love to another, there is God. When we use empathy or sympathy to understand one another, there is God. Even when we admire the beauty of a sunset or a Fall day, that is God to me.

However, that does not mean I think God is not present when we fail to be kind and considerate to each other. God is always in the space between us, trying to connect us, waiting to shine brightly in our hearts and minds when we need it most.

As such, God is all around us all of the time. Just as our bodies take in oxygen to keep us alive, our souls take in God around us to make us live.

Mike Friddell

Tuesday, December 22nd
Fourth Week of Advent
God is....

I John 4:9

“For God is love; and his love was disclosed to us in this, that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life.”

Yes, I believe that God created our world and everything in it. He did not create us as puppets on strings that he controls. He gave us the ability to make our own choices. Many times unloving choices are made and our lives are filled with the consequences of those choices. I believe that God sent us his son, Jesus, to teach us how to make better choices- how to love unconditionally.

Christmas can be filled with preparations, gift buying, parties and other activities that we almost forget to thank God for his precious gift. We probably need to slow down and reflect on Jesus every day of this advent season. Take up a new way of studying the Bible, increase your time spent praying, start a new family tradition like volunteering at a soup kitchen, write notes to friends you've not been able to visit during the pandemic, make a list of resolutions for 2021. Have an ADVENTURE!

Prayer:

“Dear God, in my heart I know it is more blessed to give than to receive, not just monetary gifts but also gifts of compassion, forgiveness, friendship, tolerance, respect, and most of all love. Help me to give all these gifts every day of my life. Amen” (Prayer written by Helen Keller)

Pat Pile

Wednesday, December 23rd
Fourth Week of Advent
God is....

God is steadying.

One of my favorite prior bosses used to describe it as The Squirrels. The Squirrels are the random, half-formed thoughts and the incomplete sentences that fill my brain when things are stressful, when there is too much work and when there are too many emotions. My old boss used to call these thoughts The Squirrels because they were frenetic, characterized by hurky-jerky motions and indecision; they were little and jumpy, and never lent themselves to productivity. These are the kinds of thoughts that run out into the street in front of the car and then get paralyzed when they see the tires.

The Squirrels often race at night, in the early hours just before the alarm goes off. They sometimes come on the drive home from work when the day has been too long and too full. And this year, to add to the list of things that are new and different, the Squirrels have started coming when there has been too much news in the 24-hour cycle or too much face on Facebook. In other words, this year, The Squirrels came a lot.

And while The Squirrels have definitely increased their presence in my head in 2020, God has been there too. I've been working to remind myself that God can steady me against The Squirrels. I tell myself that God doesn't require fully articulated concerns and clearly delineated next steps. And while I'm sure God loves my carefully thought through project plans and task lists, God doesn't require them as a starting point for my reaching out. God doesn't even need me to put my thoughts, worries, and stresses into complete sentences. God can handle my simple request of, "Be with me; there is too much." Or as the prayer often forms in my head especially in the middle of the night, "Thy will be done."

When I remember that God is there, when I remember to reach out even from my place of incomplete thoughts, when I allow myself to see the Grace that does not require well- reasoned or fully articulated requests in order to grant me peace, I know that God is steadying me. God roots my feet underneath me, quieting The Squirrels in my mind. I'm grateful, because the things that feed those Squirrels aren't lessening in the world around us. But with God's help, I can stand more steadfast in the face of them.

Ellen Zinkiewicz

Carrying Jesus with us

Reflection:

We love to sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. It reminds us that God is with us in all circumstances and seasons of life. God comes to set us free from that which holds us captive, reminds us that are small victories that envelope us each day, and in the shadows of our fears that there is a dawning of a new day.

Activity:

Beginning on ***Sunday, November 30th through January 6th*** we challenge you to take your “baby Jesus” figure with you wherever you go.

- Running your errands, carry Jesus in your pocket or inside your purse. When you go to work carry Jesus into your office and place him beside your computer. As you attend school carry Jesus into your ‘classroom’ and place him in a prominent place that you can be reminded that God is with you. Talking over the phone or participating in a video conference carry Jesus into that space.
- Spend time reflecting on who God is to you in every space you occupy. What does it mean to carry Jesus with you wherever you go?
- Keep a journal of the ways that physically carrying Jesus with you enhanced your advent season.
- Write a short poem or draw a picture of how Jesus was with you in this season.

We decorate our Chrismon Trees

We celebrate Advent by decorating trees with symbols of Christ. This tree is called a Chrismon tree. The symbols represent who Christ is and how Christ makes himself known to us in the journey of life. Each week we invite you to decorate a specific symbol to be placed on your tree at home to remind you that while we might be worshipping from home Christ is present with us.

Feel free to decorate your ornaments using markers, paint, glitter, fabric, ribbon, or stickers. Be creative and enjoy the process!

We decorate between November 22nd through November 29th

Ornament Needed: The heart

Reflection: The heart symbolizes God's risk and vulnerability coming to us in the form of a child. In the depths of a womb God shared God's most vulnerable self with us. In this season we are reminded that sharing the deepest part of our hearts with others puts us in a vulnerable position and takes great risk. As Christians we often talk about Jesus being in our hearts, what might it mean to have Jesus in our hearts when we take the risk of becoming vulnerable?

Decorate: As you decorate your ornament, play "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

We decorate between November 30th through December 6th

Ornament Needed: The Star

Reflection: The star is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Advent and Christmas Season. It was the revelation of God's presence among the people. What has God revealed to you this year? Has your idea of who God been formed into something new? Where has God given you a revelation in your relationships to others, with God, about yourself and your calling/purpose?

Decorate: As you decorate your ornament, play "Do you hear what I hear?"

We decorate between December 7th through December 13th

Ornament Needed: The angel

Reflection: In this Advent season, the angel signifies the tension of unease and excitement. As Mary stood on the cusp of the revelation of what God was asking her to do her fears, unease and questions rose to the surface. Just as God had done numerous times before, his angels brought forth the words "do not be afraid." Reflecting back to how God has revealed Godself to you this year, dig deeper to explore how the revelation made you uneasy. What questions, fears and unease rose to the surface as God came to you? Where has God led you through moments of unease this year?

Decorate: As you decorate your ornament, play "In the Bleak Midwinter"

We build between December 14th through December 20th

Instructions begin on page 19

Reflection: During this last week in Advent we make room for Jesus in our lives by constructing a manger. The manger reminds us God ask us to make room for the unknown and the unexpected. He reminds us that when we make room for the unexpected, that God shows God's self in ways that we could dare to dream. God reminds us that God is the creator of all, the sacred one that transforms our lives, offers us a gift that we are then asked to pour upon others. While constructing the manger in preparation for Christ's coming, reflect on

where God is asking you to make room for God in your life? What does it mean for you to make room for the unexpected?

Construct: As you construct your manger, play “Away, in a Manger”

Making Room in our Manger

Manger Building Instructions

Included in the Advent Bag:

- 16 Craft Sticks (2 are extra in case of mess ups or for extra reinforcement)
- Baby Jesus
- Bag Handles to tear up and make hay

Items Needed:

- Glue – A hot glue gun works the best but you can also use Elmer’s, Wood Glue, or other types of quick drying glue.
- Manger filler- if you want something that looks more authentic than paper bag strips.
- Coloring utensils, fabric, imagination, and other items you might like to use to decorate your Baby Jesus.



Step 1 – Glue 5 crafts sticks together side-by-side on the
Step 1.5 – Repeat with another 5 sticks

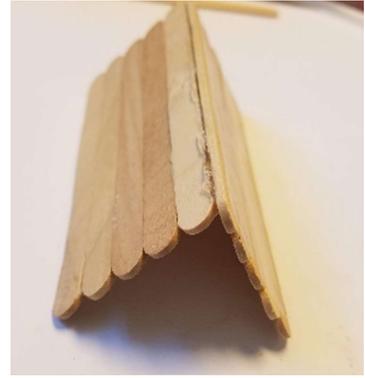


long side.

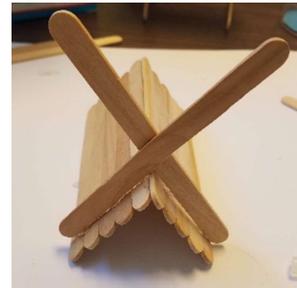
Step 2 – Keep one palate of sticks laying on a flat surface. Take the second palate, apply glue to one of the long ends and attach to the first palate at a right angle. Hold the pieces together until the glue dries.



Step 2.5 – If your glue is dried you should be able to flip your attached palates together to create a tent.



Step 3 – Take 1 craft stick and apply glue along the thin long side. Line it up about a half-inch in from one end of the tent. Attach the stick to one side of the tent, starting from the bottom and poking up past the angle in the middle.



Step 3.5 – repeat this step on the other side of the tent so that the two sticks form an X above the angle. NOTE: Be sure the ends of your X line up as evenly as possible so your manger stands up right when flipped over.

Step 4 – Repeat steps 3 and 3.5 on the other end of the tent. You have now completed the legs of your manger. Once the legs are secure you should be able to flip the manger over and it will stand on its own.



Step 5 – Use one of the handles of the paper grocery bag your kit came in and cut it up into small, thin strips to make your hay and lay in the middle of your manger.

Step 6 – Add your decorated Baby Jesus and you are done!



Gathering Around the Advent Wreath with Light and Liturgy

November 29th

First Week in Advent

“Risk and Vulnerability”

Reader:

Risk:

A dream

A hope

A breath being held

Vulnerability:

A forming

A weaving

A breath being released

{If there is a 2nd reader in your home:}

Today we step into the season of Advent that reminds us that there is both a waiting and a coming. In the waiting we hold our breath that our lives will be renewed. We hold our breath daring to dream the dream that God has formed us in God’s own image in the hope that the world would see we are willing to risk all that we have on a God we cannot see.

In this season there is a forming and a weaving in which new life is promised. The risk of entering this world leads to vulnerability for which God releases his breath into the life of child. A child that will become a man who will call us by name, ask us to open ourselves to being created new over and over again and who stands with us in all that is to come.

As we light this candle of risk and vulnerability we breathe deeply for the coming of Jesus . We proclaim the risk God took for us as our Emmanuel entered this world.

{back to first reader if using more than one reader}

Join with me, together lighting our first candle of the advent season.

Let us pray together:

Creator of all things, thank you for taking the risk of being formed in the womb of a woman. We come to you today afraid to take risk, afraid to open ourselves up to the world around us, we ask that you remind us that we are not alone and that through you the risk is worth the taking. Let us be your people who are willing to create, willing to risk becoming vulnerable in order for the world to see you. We come in thanksgiving that you are a God of risk and vulnerability. Amen

December 6th

Second Sunday in Advent

“Revelation and Incarnation”

Reader:

Revelation:

A surprise

A transformation

A giving and receiving

The heart-beat of our story

Incarnation:

Embodiment

Flesh of God’s flesh

Becoming

The heart-beat of our story

{If there is a 2nd reader in your home:}

From risk to revelation there is a both a giving and a receiving. We long to be transformed, to have the scales of pessimism removed from our eyes and the shadows of brokenness released from our souls. In this season we are reminded that God is a God of revelation. Our Yahweh is one who arrives in the unexpected and unexplained seasons of our lives, and offers us a life of receiving the embodiment of holiness while being asked to give it away.

In this second week of Advent we are reminded that God stepped into the flesh of a human-being. As God embodied the shaky, unpredictable, dynamic presence of a human, the heart-beat of a change rang forth. The seen and unseen became one, offering us a portal to experience a deeper, fuller self-realization of who we are and reminding us that we are at the very heart-beat of God’s story of redemption.

As we light this candle of revelation and incarnation we receive the gift of hearing God’s voice ring within the core of our souls. Let us become bearers of the ways in which God surprises the world and stands among us today.

{back to first reader if using more than one reader}

Join with me, together lighting two candles on our advent wreath.

Let us pray together:

Flesh of God's flesh, we come to you on this day to remembering that you surprise us with your presence in our lives each day. Your revelation transforms the very beat of our heart, challenges us to accept that we are not in charge of the world around us and leads us into a life of receiving and giving. Help us to become people who embody your spirit of revelation bearing witness to the world that you love never ceases to surprise and transform us. Amen

December 13th

Third Week in Advent

“Unease”

Reader:

Unease:

A discomfort

A wondering

A restlessness

A question

A rising up

{If there is a 2nd reader in your home:}

In this year for which we have experienced discomfort, restlessness deep within our bones, and wondered silently if we would make it through this global pandemic, financial instability, and the loneliness of being isolated we are reminded that Jesus' coming moves us ever so slightly out of our discomfort. In the dread that resides in the pit out our stomachs we are reminded that God rises to meet us and offers us a life of renewal and acceptance.

On this third Sunday of Advent we are being asked to bear witness to the mystery of faith that announces God is here among us. In the midst of our uncertainty and unease, there is a voice whispering to us, beckoning each of us to lean into the inconceivable that helps us to move from the bleak mid-winter into the dawning of a new beginning. This season summons us to let our questions rise like incense to make way for the depth of God's arrival.

As we light this candle of unease let us inhale the promise that God does not leave us alone. We rest in the comfort of God's voice proclaim “do not fear, for I am with you.”

{back to first reader if using more than one reader}

Join with me, together lighting the pink candle and two other candles on our advent wreath.

Let us pray together:

Holy One who sees our unease and discomfort, we call upon your name asking that you help us to be more like Mary who claimed her fears yet had the courage to hold fast to your promise that you would never leave her alone. In our restlessness let us pause to breathe in your assurance, and in our anxiousness envelope us in your peace. We come as your children proclaiming, "let it be with me just as you have said." Amen

December 20th

Fourth Sunday in Advent

"God is..."

Reader:

God is:

I am

Alpha and Omega

Mighty Counselor

Prince of Peace

Light of the World

{If there is a 2nd reader in your home:}

Today we are reminded that our God is the beginning of all things, the creator of life and the breath of substance. The God who comes to us in the form of a child is the one who embraces us when our world is upside down and the path is unclear. In this space we are reminded that "Jesus became human so we would know He nothing to hide. He live in a complicated world so He would relate to the complexity of being in our world. His name is God-with-us so we would know we are prized" (Scott Erickson).

On this fourth Sunday in Advent let us remember that God comes to us in the form of a child, who grows into a man that redeems us from ourselves. God proclaims "I am who I am" and reminds us that we are made in God's image to "bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, to comfort all who mourn, and bestow on them a crown of beauty, the oil of joy and a garment of praise" (Isaiah 61).

As we complete our circle of light, we are recognize that God is.

God is all that we need.

God is all that we could ever hope for.

{back to first reader if using more than one reader}

Join with me, together lighting all four of our advent candles.

Let us pray:

God of many names, we praise your holy name today. We lift our voices in thanksgiving that you are our everlasting prince of peace, our mighty healer, and our great comforter. Thank you for standing at the door with open arms, making room for each and every one of us within the depths of your being. As a gathered community we proclaim you are our God. Amen.

We Sing Silent Night on Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve
December 24th

Reader:

God is:
A risk taker
Vulnerable
A revealer
Word made Flesh
Assurance in unease
Emmanuel
Our Silent night and Joy to the world

{If there is a 2nd reader in your home:}

Tonight is the night we have yearned for. The night reminds us that our God is the God that took a risk on our behalf. Through vulnerability God bridged the gap between the humanity and divinity, creating a relationship like no other. Through the exhale of an angel, God revealed a pathway to transformation, a journey that required growth. The revolution deep within our beings would bring questions and an assurance that in our unease a peace would come.

In the shadows of this evening we are reminded that the trimmers of the season are not merely about a sanctuary filled with collective voices singing Emmanuel The First Noel or even Silent Night, but is found in the dimly lit presence of a sacred space that welcomed a baby boy into the world.

As we light this Christ candle let us make room for the one who makes room for us over and over. Let hold the silence of the night in the crevices of our hearts and make room for Jesus to enter our lives new once again.

Light a candle

Let us pray together:

Little Child of Bethlehem, gathered in our homes tonight, we ask that you make our spaces the sacred places where your child is free to enter. May our voices join the angles that sung on high. Help us to come like the shepherds with curiosity. Let us have the courage to go out of our way like the Wise Men offering you the very best of who we are. We ask that the stillness and awe wash over us it did for all gathered in the space so long ago. Come, holy child, come. Amen