

NORTHMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

ARISE

Your Light Has Come

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2020



*Advent Reflections*  
***Arise, Your Light Has Come!***

“Advent” literally means “the coming” or “the arrival.” In the Christian tradition it is also a time of preparation. The celebration of the Nativity was not a tradition until hundreds of years after Christ’s life on earth. As Easter people, we know that the birth of this child—this child who is both fully human and Emmanuel, God with us—sets in motion a life and ministry that will change the world. Just as we prepare for Holy Week in Lent, we are invited to prepare for the Nativity during Advent.

Our theme for Advent and for this Advent devotional is “Arise, Your Light Has Come” based on Isaiah 60:1:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
And the glory of the Lord rises upon you!*

This has been a shadow-filled year—the COVID pandemic, the resulting economic turmoil, the chaos of a deeply divided election season, and so many things not going as anyone had planned. And yet, we have seen moments of hope, of grace, of compassion, of bravery, of reconciliation and or resilience throughout this year. As we rehearse yet again the light of Christ breaking into the world in the person of the little child of Mary, we remember moments of light and give thanks. Let these reflections draw us closer to the light of this Season, Members of Northminster are sharing their reflections on this theme. *We thank them all so much for their sharing their thoughts and talents with us!*

On each of the days of Advent, you are invited to read the scriptures that you will find here. Some of these passages don’t seem to have much to do with Christmas or the Nativity, but they are ways Scripture speaks to us of light.

We encounter them cautiously, knowing that in the past, these passages have been used to demonize or belittle races with darker skin or to elevate those with lighter complexions as more Godly or superior. We utterly reject that false interpretation, understanding that light in scripture is about revealing truth, and illuminating the way forward. Christ’s light gives us the vision to see clearly how God’s image is present in everyone, thanks be to God!

After you have read the passages for each day, read the reflection or devotion and join with your fellow Northminster folks in the prayer of the day.

May we at Northminster be filled with Christ’s light in this Holy time!

*Pastor Michael*

*Pastor Jessica*



*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold[ of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? **Psalm 27:1***

I spend a lot of time with the sky. Since we downsized several years ago from our big house to a small condo on the 11th floor of a downtown Evanston high-rise, I spend a lot more time with the sky. I have a view to the east – I can see Lake Michigan in between the other buildings – and I have a view to the south. This means that depending on where we are in the earth’s movements through space, I see the sun come up, the sun go down, the moon come up, and the various planets (and a few stars) in their places.

This year though, I have longed for the ground. I take walks with my new dog and make a point to venture off the sidewalk to the grass and dirt just to feel the ground under my feet. I have become very aware of the trees and the birds. In the early, quiet days of the pandemic, I watched as spring took hold – and then we moved into summer – and then into fall. Now we are almost in winter with the last of those spring leaves fallen to the ground.

The passage of time through these pandemic months has been swift and so very slow too. It strikes me that what I’m noticing in the sky and the trees, is that the natural world is both timeless and timely. While we humans are trying to get through each moment of each day, we are deeply in the midst of something much bigger, more eternal.

*Heavenly Father - help us to experience the natural world around us with the eternal in mind, letting the light of the sun and the ground under our feet remind us of you and the eternal light that broke through the darkness at Christmas. Amen.*

*Daniel said: "Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are [the LORD's]...Who reveals deep and hidden things; who knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with [the LORD.] Daniel 2:20a, 22*

## PERKINS WOODS 2020

### Early Spring

My outdoor sanctuary is Perkins Woods.  
Seven sacred acres criss-crossed by footpaths,  
where wood ducks and warblers pass each Spring.  
Golden-crowned Kinglets,  
tiny monarchs of the aviary world,  
feast on hazelnut catkins as I stop and stare.  
My heart stands still at last  
and I hear their songs of praise.

This year I wonder,  
will woodlands heal if we decrease?  
If our footprint shrinks, will the Wild increase?  
When will we remove our knee from nature's neck,  
learn to listen for her Words?

I see dead leaves rise from the forest floor, falling upward.  
Then, leaves revealed as wings beat toward sky  
as a dark Mourning Cloak butterfly  
ascends to the heavens.

### Late Fall

Exposed to the virus, I shun the backyard gathering,  
heading to woods once again.  
The weakened sun sets through bare branched trees.  
Color drains from the sky to gather at horizon.  
And earth spins, tilts toward solstice.

Dry leaves cover the forest floor,  
a blanket of brown, drab and dry.  
Gone is June's soft green,  
October's orange has fled.  
And yet, there it is!



**To be continued on the next page...**



Among the leaves stands a single scarlet seedling.  
Blood red leaves ring its slender stalk.  
Red as the blood of the covenant,  
Red as the blood of babe bursting from womb,  
Blazing like the bush to tell me God is nigh.  
And that Christmas will come this year  
with all its Scarlet Splendor.

*God of majesty and power  
Who spoke and this world was  
Who breathed and this world lived  
Who counts the hairs upon our head  
Who loves us more than we deserve  
How can we not bring today  
Our sacrifice of praise?  
Cast your light so that we see  
the beauty of your creation and our place in it.  
Amen.*

**Elizabeth Hopp-Peters**



*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. **James 1: 17***

The posting at Reddit.com was innocuous—simply a statement: “Someone remembers a little something you did years ago that you’ve probably forgotten about.” The responses blew up, as they say at Reddit. Within hours, there were thousands of replies.

Some posters remembered little kindnesses they had received, others recounted surprise at learning that a little something they had done had had an impact on someone else. One person recounted having a flat tire along the side of a highway during rush hour and a stranger nearby, who always waited at that spot for traffic to ease before heading home, drove the stranded driver to a repair shop. A high school football player remembered sitting with a lone person in the lunchroom for a semester. Several years later, the recipient of the kindness was killed in a car crash. Although the two had never developed a friendship, the football player attended the funeral. The mother told him his presence at the lunch table had meant much to her son. “He talked about you all the time.”

Reading the stories made me feel better during these dark days. And they reminded me of similar experiences of my own.

On the receiving end, I recalled when I was a young man driving solo from Vermont to home in Wilmette. I took a break at a rest area along the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Nearby were an older foursome. One of the women invited me to join them for a cup of coffee. “If my grandson were traveling by himself, I’d like someone to show him a kindness,” she told me. I remember that small act of generosity nearly 50 years later.

And it made me think of times when I learned I had had an impact. A few days before Christmas many years ago, I saw on the train a former Northminster member who had recently gone through a difficult divorce. I sat with him and we talked until the train pulled into the Central Street station. Months later, I ran into him and he said, “You have no idea what it meant when you sat with me on the train, especially with the first Christmas since the divorce coming up. That was a period when people were avoiding me because of the awful things my ex-wife was saying.”

Especially during Advent, as we await the Light, in this dark time of physical separation due to COVID and emotional separation due to political divisiveness, small kindnesses are important. “The bright light of salvation shines in dark and empty skies.” It doesn’t have to be a big light. A little ray will do.

## **PRAYER**

*Light of the World, open our hearts and minds to performing small acts of unremembered kindness. Help us to see your image in all humans, no matter what circumstances they are in at the moment. Help us remember no kind act is too small to be insignificant.*



*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in [the gloom], but will have the light of life." John 8:12*

In the Before Times, we met early every day, co-workers sitting side by side facing an outdoor sculpture, meditating for ten minutes before going our separate ways. During the summer, we ventured outside to a courtyard. When a building renovation project began, we found a quieter place opposite the construction.

In March this year, after working from home for a week due to the pandemic, we reconvened online, having learned how to videoconference on Slack, a tool that had previously been used only for text communication. We quickly established a routine, which, like so many other things in our lives, was familiar and yet completely different.

At 8:59 a.m. on most days, I hear the bells chime across the street at St. Nicholas Church, and know it is time to start the call. One by one, faces pop up on the screen, sipping from coffee mugs and sitting in rooms I've come to recognize. At one home, Arlo the dog is lounging in the background. We chat a little, sharing updates on creative projects we pursue during non-work hours, as well as losses, sadness, and struggles. After a few minutes, someone asks, "Shall we?" prompting a co-worker to connect her phone to a speaker and set the timer. The meditation app gong invites us to breathe for the next ten minutes.

I tend to keep my eyes open and gaze out the window. Over the past eight months, I've watched bare branches of the trees fill out with green, then turn golden, and return to lines that split and split and split again. Sun shines on the garage roof. A cloud changes shape as it moves across the sky. In the next room, Terry taught remotely for most of the fall. If I paid attention, I might have learned a little math. Each day, my mind wanders repeatedly to worries and tasks for the day. If I'm lucky, the sound of a co-worker's cat Sammy interrupts my incessant list-making, reminding me to take a breath.

Sometimes, I experience glimpses of deep gratitude, joy, and peace. I suppose it is the potential of those moments that keeps me coming back. On most days, the second gong breaks through whatever unbidden thoughts are going through my mind, giving me one more chance to take a deep breath and to remind myself that it is a practice.

*Dear God, you are the Breath of Life. You are the Creative Spirit that brings peace and joy. Interrupt our thoughts with a glimmer of the light of Jesus Christ, so that we may be filled with love and gratitude each day. Amen.*



*No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. **Matthew 5:15-16***

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On September 24, 2020, world renowned English composer and conductor John Rutter celebrated his 75th birthday. Choirs and choruses across the globe had been practicing his sacred choral compositions to honor him in concert venues around the world, when the novel coronavirus dubbed COVID-19 brought efforts everywhere to an abrupt halt. As group singing was cited as a super-spreader event for this air-borne virus, singers could not sing together without risking infection, a huge loss for those who love to sing. Some choirs eschewed medical advice and continued to meet together, with generally dire consequences. Persistent singers came up with unvalidated “singers’ masks,” met in small groups with social distancing that met talking guidelines (not singing/shouting), and even came up with technically complicated options like singing in a parking lot in cars using individual microphones. Finding a good option to sing together safely seemed like an insurmountable task.

This led choir directors to turn to creative use of digital technology and Zoom gatherings. Unfortunately, only one voice can be heard at a time with Zoom and sound lag time was problematic for combining voices. Zoom works great for individual vocal warm-ups, teaching vocal technique and music theory, but not for experiencing the joy of making music together. Inspired by this dilemma, two young, innovative London conductors, Tori Longdon and Jamie Wright, determined to organize a global “Stay at Home Choir.” They enlisted thousands of singers from around the world to practice and record their parts on multiple projects at a nominal cost to each participant.

They organized part practices, vocal technique sessions, games and social events and guest lecturers. In addition to the global singers, their performance partners included acapella ensembles, acclaimed orchestras and esteemed conductors, including John Rutter. Tori, Jamie and their team work their technical magic to incorporate each singer’s video and sound recording to create a massive mosaic of singers in one recording. What a wonderful gift to sing John Rutter’s Star Carol to the beat of the composer’s baton in this holiday season! Yes, these are trying times, but innovation often arises in trying times, propelling us to places we never dreamed.

(The carol is the prayer for today)

**Mindy Pierce**

#### STAR CAROL

*Words/Music by John Rutter © 1972 Oxford University Press, all rights reserved.*

*Sing this night, for a boy is born in Bethlehem,  
Christ our Lord in a lowly manger lies;  
Bring your gifts, come and worship at his cradle,  
Hurry to Bethlehem and see the son of Mary.*

***See his star shining bright  
In the sky this Christmas Night!  
Follow me joyfully;  
Hurry to Bethlehem to see the son of Mary!***

*Angels fright, come from heaven’s highest glory,  
Bear the news with its message of good cheer:  
‘Sing, rejoice, for a King is come to save us,  
Hurry to Bethlehem and see the son of Mary.*

*See, he lies in his mother’s tender keeping;  
Jesus Christ in her loving arms asleep.  
Shepherds poor, come to worship and adore him,  
Offer their humble gifts before the son of Mary.*

*Let us all pay our homage at the manger,  
Sing his praise on this joyful Christmas Night;  
Christ is come, bringing promise of salvation;  
Hurry to Bethlehem and see the son of Mary!*



*Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.  
The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.*

**Psalm 119: 129-30**

All my life I've been an amateur astronomer. My imagination, sparked by books I was reading, got fuel from science articles and speculations on what was "out there." Then the detail and intense color of published pictures caught my young boy heart.

So when I got a telescope for Christmas in middle school, I was elated – I knew, just knew, that it would open up the universe to me.

Viewing through a telescope in Chicago is an exercise in frustration. We all know the weather here, but to a boy with a telescope, there were only three kinds of days: mild or warm days when the sky is overcast, bitter cold days when the sky is crystal-clear but your hands stick to the controls, and days when you have to do something stupid inside. So most of my viewing was done quickly, before my hands could freeze.

My early viewing was made even more frustrating by what I could see during those short minutes when everything came together: Fuzzy white blobs. That is what I could see. Want to see a galaxy? There it is, that oval fuzzy white blob. Want to see a globular cluster? Yeah, that's it, sort of a fuzzy white cloud. And that comet? Uh-huh, longer, sort of a tail on a fuzzy white blob. Fuzzy. White. Blobs. Everywhere.

But I stayed with it. And I came to realize that this is what amateur astronomy is: fuzzy white blobs and a ton of imagination. That fuzzy white blob galaxy? You're looking at something that is 1.5 trillion miles away – you're looking 2.5 million years back in time. Globular clusters are hundreds of thousands of suns, and probably planets, crammed close together. The view from planets there must be astonishing.

This year the universe continues to astonish me. And those early experiences, of seeing dim fuzzy blobs of light, remind me that sometimes I need to use my imagination to illuminate them. The magic is always there, it just sometimes needs a mind that is willing to work a little, to add another spark, to make them come alive with potential.

*God of Love, Jesus, is your greatest gift to us, the living sign of your love. Help us walk in the light of that love during the weeks of Advent, as we wait and prepare for his coming. We pray in the name of our Savior and friend, Amen.*



*There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!  
Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!" Psalm 4:6*

At a gathering of our Confirmands and their Mentors, teams were asked to consider where they have experienced "light" during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are including the reflections of some of these teams throughout the month.

Our confirmation group discovered some similarities about "light" in this time:

- Having space to be creative, to pray every day, time to write poetry, to rest, time to walk around the neighborhood. It's cracked some things open and opened up space for us to explore more fully who we are and who God is calling us to be.
- Finding interesting connections we might not have made without COVID: spending more time with new neighbors, shopping for others and discovering new foods, walking and borrowing a bottle of mineral oil from a church member for the communion cups instead of buying one's own.
- Benefiting from fewer distractions, both little and big, to have the chance to be alone and with God; to rest, nap, and also think about God.
- To realize what we really miss, such as sports, as the opportunity to participate was taken away. The light is we will try not to take those experiences for granted.

*God of hope, who brought love into this world, be the love that dwells between us.  
God of hope, who brought peace into this world, be the peace that dwells between us.  
God of hope, who brought joy into this world, be the joy that dwells between us.  
God of hope, the rock we stand upon, be the light, the center of our lives always, and  
particularly this Advent time. Amen.*

The collective reflections of:

**Katelyn Brownlee, Ashlyn Rogowski, Kimberly Gartner, and Elizabeth Hopp-Peters**