

## 2023 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Featuring excerpts from:  
["Expecting Emmanuel:  
Eight Women Who Prepared the Way,"](#)  
[from Joanna Harader](#)

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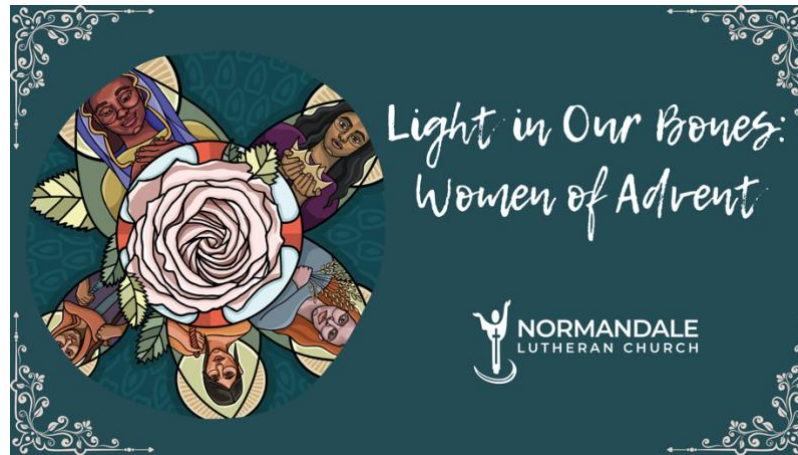
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## A NOTE FROM PASTOR REBECCA

*"If the Word truly became flesh... then attending to human emotions, human bodies (of every kind), and complex human stories can help us understand the strangely present power of God in our all-too-human lives. This Advent we pause to consider the variety of women in Jesus' lineage and young life - at least the very few we know of who actually receive names. We ponder how their true and messy humanity connects with our own, including through tales of beauty, courage, creation, longing, and trauma. We wonder at the gift of knowing God is present with us all! And stunned, we consider what it means to claim that the divine One became human at all... the Light of the World, **embodied**... and **still** being borne... in us, to us, and through one another.*

*The following reflections on the women of Advent, questions for thought about our own embodiment, and accompanying blessings were written by Joanna Harader and come from her book:*

['Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way.'](#)

*I highly recommend the purchase of her full Advent devotional, which provides daily reflections for November 27 through January 6 each Advent season."*

# ***Prelude***

## WOMEN PREPARE THE WAY

### **READ:**

Matthew 1:1-17

### **REFLECT:**

Perhaps you-or people you know (and possibly try to avoid) – are a little obsessed with your family tree. I'm not overly invested in mine, but I can tell you that somewhere down the line I had ancestors named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego Harader. And also a Dorothy Gale (yes, from Kansas). In reading through a list of family names, there are moments when the anonymous syllables take on a bit of flesh and call forth questions: Who was this person? Why did their parents choose that name? How badly were they teased because of it?

Besides our curious wonderings, there are also deeper truths revealed in our genealogies. Where did "our people" come from? Where were they displaced to? Did they displace others? Where is the trauma – and the resilience – lurking in these lists of names? For all the answers we find in our family trees, there are even more questions. A compassionate and critical tending to these questions raised by our own family histories can be an important piece of our personal growth and our work toward justice.

Genealogies can be somewhat complicated in many families that, like mine, involve adoption. We don't know much about the biological ancestors of my two oldest children, and sometimes that feels like a loss. But it's significant that Jesus' genealogy lists *Joseph's* ancestors, not Mary's. This is the family tree that Jesus was adopted into. The Bible acknowledges and honors many forms of family.

Today's scripture passage is one we generally skim over. It's a text no scripture reader wants to see in the bulletin. Still, I find this list of Jesus' ancestors to be one of the most beautiful and compelling passages in Scripture. Here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the author insists that Jesus has parents, and grandparents, and great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. Before the awe-inspiring story of Jesus' miraculous healings and wise words, before the declarations that he is the Messiah, before the crucifixion and resurrection, we have the genealogy.

The story of Jesus' birth is grounded in human history. It is not just the story of one young woman's awkward pregnancy, but the story of generation after generation of people living in this world, muddling through relationships, trying to find their way to God. This genealogy is an insistence on the incarnation. It is a declaration that when the Word became flesh, it became flesh in just the same glorious and mundane way that we all become flesh.

This genealogy is also an invitation into the rich history that is merely hinted at as we skim through the generations from Abraham to Jesus, "who is called the Messiah." Every name is a story. Every one of Jesus' ancestors had their own lives, their own loves, their own struggles and accomplishments. Every generation faced trauma – maybe also caused trauma – and tried to figure out how to follow God in the midst of it all.

Some of the names listed, like Jechoniah, Salathiel, and Eliud, we encounter only in these brief verses. We know nothing of their stories beyond how they fit into Jesus' family line. Others, of course, are well-known biblical figures: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; David and Solomon. And then there are the women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary.

It is odd for the author of Matthew to include any women in this genealogy at all; Luke's list includes only men. But with these few female names, Matthew's gospel gives us a great gift. The women he names have rich stories that can speak deeply to us in these days of Advent. As we spend time with these women in the coming weeks, we will see how their stories connect to the Jesus story and to our own stories.

**CONNECT:**

Contact a woman who is part of your family tree (mother, aunt, grandmother, niece, daughter, etc.) and ask her to share a story from her life.

**CONSIDER:**

How have your ancestors – even the ones who died long before you were born – helped form who you are today? How do you think Jesus' ancestors influenced him? Why might the author of Matthew begin his gospel with a genealogy?

**November 29**

## MARY VISITS ELIZABETH

### **READ:**

Luke 1:39-45

### **REFLECT:**

I think we need to take a moment here to acknowledge that the journey Mary takes from Nazareth to the Judean hill country was no quick, simple matter. We don't know exactly where Elizabeth lived, but it was probably at least an eighty-mile trip. Likely on foot. During the first trimester of Mary's pregnancy.

When I was pregnant, I had about a thirty-mile trip to work each day. By car. And I could show you the parking lot between my house and my job where I pulled over every morning to throw up. Traveling while pregnant is no picnic.

There's a lot we don't know about the journey Mary took. Did she go by herself? It seems strange that a young woman would take a three- to four-day journey alone, but nobody else is mentioned. (Maybe Mary figured she would be safe since she was carrying "the Son of the Most High.") Was Mary feeling sick? Were her ankles swollen? Did she have to stop and take a nap every afternoon?

Maybe more interesting than the *how* of the trip is the *why*. Why is visiting Elizabeth the first thing Mary wants to do after receiving news of her own pregnancy? Is it to congratulate Elizabeth? Is it to share her own news – and all the excitement and fear that go with it? Is it to get some practical advice and moral support for the physical difficulties of pregnancy? Or to ask Elizabeth's advice about what to tell Joseph? Whatever Mary expects to gain from this visit to Elizabeth, it is important enough for Mary to undertake an exhausting – and possibly dangerous – journey.

Maybe what Mary most needs from this trip is the blessing that Elizabeth offers: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). Elizabeth serves a prophetic role here, recognizing the activity of God where others miss it. Mary might not yet be showing, but we can be sure that when others can tell she is pregnant, she will hear many words that are the opposite of blessing. As a pregnant, unwed teenager, Mary would have been shamed and shunned by many in her community. But Elizabeth, seemingly the first to know of the pregnancy, offers these words of blessing as a foundation for Mary's experience of motherhood.

And Elizabeth offers words of joy – so much joy – in a situation that will bring much difficulty and grief. We are told that Elizabeth's baby, John the Baptist, "leap[s] for joy" (v. 44) in her womb when Mary greets Elizabeth. And notice that Elizabeth blesses Mary twice. The second time, Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (v. 45). This second "blessed" is a different Greek word than the first. This is the same word Jesus uses in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). This second word for "blessed" is sometimes translated as "happy."

Despite the long journey, despite the physical discomfort and pain that comes with pregnancy and childbirth, despite the difficult conversations Mary will need to have in the coming months, despite the confusion and sheer weight of it all, despite what looks, from a worldly perspective, to be a terrible mess – there is deep joy.

Elizabeth does not create this joy, but in naming it she opens Mary up to it in a new way. Elizabeth does not, herself, bless Mary, but in reminding her of her blessed status, she allows Mary to more fully live into the life God offers.

I find this relationship between Elizabeth and Mary to be quite beautiful. I know there are times when I feel overwhelmed and want to run "with haste" to someone who will welcome me, understand me, and bless me. I hope there are times when [ am that person whom others want to come to, and that I can offer deep compassion and blessing, just as Elizabeth does.

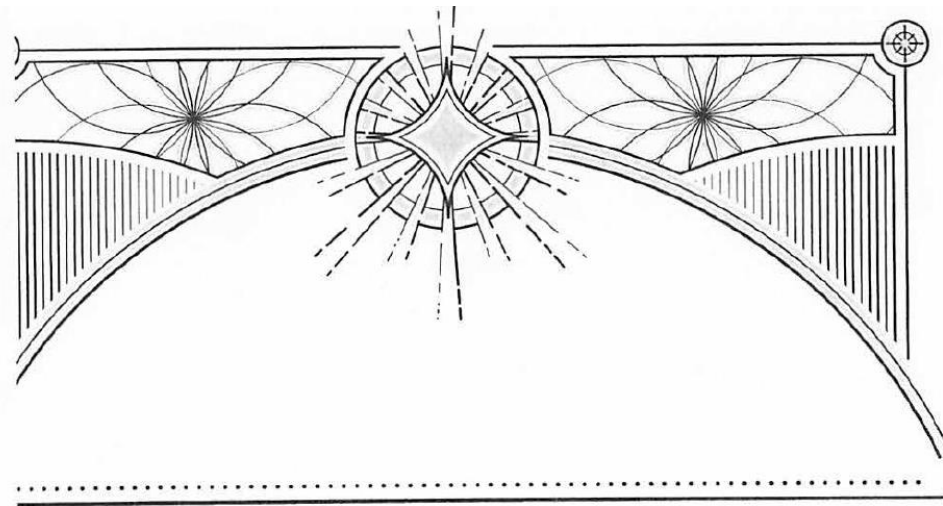
### **CONNECT:**

If you are feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed right now, reach out to someone you trust who can offer a listening ear and a blessing. If you know of someone who is struggling, reach out to them and see if they would like a chance to visit.

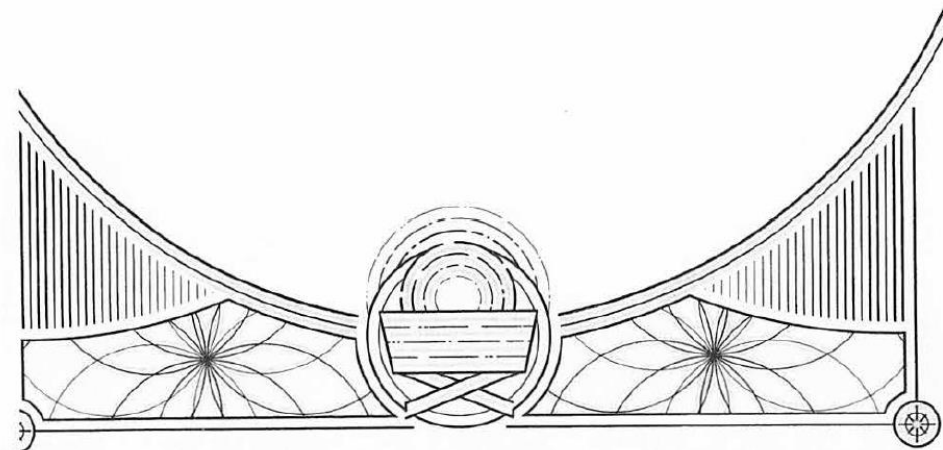
### **CONSIDER:**

What does it mean to speak words of blessing to others? What does it mean to receive words of blessing? When do you have an opportunity to give and receive blessings? What words of blessing do you think God wants you to hear right now?





TAMAR





## ***December 3***

### TAMAR GRIEVES

#### **READ:**

Genesis 38:1-11

#### **REFLECT:**

Tamar is the first woman listed in Jesus' genealogy, linked to the divine family lineage through marriage and deception. Yet before we really get to Tamar's story, we encounter the unnamed shadow figure of Judah's wife. No attention is given to the grieving mother, but she is there, in the background, joining ranks with Rachel and Mary, with my grandmother, my aunt, my friend. Tamar's mother-in-law is there bearing witness to the destabilizing grief of losing a child.

Judah's concern seems to be not with the loss of his son, but with the fact that he does not have an heir. Rather than words of lament from Judah, we hear words of problem-solving; he commands his second oldest son: "Go in to your brother's wife; ... raise up offspring for your brother" (Genesis 38:8). If Judah grieves his son's death, we know nothing of it.

We also know nothing of Tamar's grief. In this first part of her story, Tamar is treated as an object. Judah "takes" her as a wife for his oldest son, Er. And when Er dies, Judah tells his next oldest son, Onan, to "go in to" her, which he apparently does several times – and then he also dies. And after what must have been a fairly traumatic few years in Judah's household, Tamar is dismissed – told to go back to her father's house and wait for Er's youngest brother to come of age.

We don't know whether Tamar was taken as a wife against her will or whether she loved Er. The writer of this narrative says that Er was "wicked." Is that what Tamar thought? What were the consequences of his wickedness for her? Was he kind or abusive? Was she relieved or heartbroken – or a little of both – when he died? And what about Onan? Does she want her husband's brother to do this particular duty? Does she resent his refusal to impregnate her? Is she sad or angry or just confused by the whole mess? How does she feel when *he* also dies? And how does she feel about returning to her father's house? Is this a burden or a relief?

As we enter into "the holiday season," a kind of relentless cheerfulness is imposed on us from many sides: the jaunty music on the radio, the persistent holiday lights, the bright colors in the store displays. And I hope that you do find some happiness, even some joy, in the bright festivities of the season. But Advent is a time when we attend to the humanity of Jesus, which should allow us to attend to our own humanity as well. Our emotions, like Tamar's, may be quite complicated and messy.

The holiday season is often a time of increased tension within families, elevated stress as we try to fulfill too many roles, and deepening grief in the face of unrelenting cheer. The reality is that there is no right way to experience the relationships we have; no proper emotion to feel about any particular event or during any given time of year. Things that look terrible from the outside might actually bring positive feelings; things that seem wonderful to those looking in can make us feel awful. Grief is a shape-shifter that shows up in a thousand different ways. In this season of Advent, we can remember that through Jesus, God has experienced grief, and God is faithfully present with us in all our complicated emotions.

**CONNECT:**

Settle into a quiet and comfortable space. Hold on to a stone (or other solid object), take a deep breath, and name aloud who and what you are grieving in this season. Sit in silence for a few minutes, inviting the Holy Spirit to offer comfort and speak to your grief. Then place the stone in a place that will remind you of God's care and love (maybe outside in the sunshine or wrapped in a warm sweater in a drawer).

**CONSIDER:**

What emotions do you carry into this Advent season? What complicated grief do you bear? What joy do you hold? Do you have a sense that you *should* feel a particular way? What will help you accept your feelings as they are?

## ***December 6***

### TAMAR WAITS

#### **READ:**

Genesis 38:12-23

#### **REFLECT:**

"In course of time." That brief phrase indicates Tamar's restless season of waiting. She is living in an in-between time: in her father's household, but belonging to Judah's household; a widow who is not free to marry; a woman obligated to have children with no legitimate way to conceive them.

"In course of time." We don't know how long it has been since Judah sent Tamar away, but we know it has been too long. Shelah, the youngest brother who is supposed to be her husband, has grown up, but Judah has not sent for her. She is still wearing her widow's garments, carrying her grief with no way to move forward. In a world where women are identified primarily by their relationships to men ("the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter"), Tamar's connection to men – and therefore her identity – is uncertain. She is a daughter still in her father's household, but not really. She is a wife married to nobody, but connected in marriage to three brothers. She is a should-be mother with no children.

Tamar has very little power in her situation. She is stuck – until someone tells her that Judah is going to Timnah to shear his sheep. I find myself wondering who that someone was. Did a family member assume that Tamar wanted to keep up on the family news and casually mention in passing where Judah was headed? Did Tamar have a friend, a co-conspirator who helped her keep track of Judah and plot her action? However Tamar receives this news, she uses her knowledge of Judah's travel as a means to get herself unstuck. She has waited around long enough. She has played the role she was supposed to play for a "course of time." Now she is ready to stop waiting for Judah to do the right thing and take action to make Judah do the right thing.

Everything about Tamar's actions here is deliberate and wise. She puts on appropriate clothing. She wraps herself in a veil so that Judah will not recognize her. She places herself at the entrance to one of the towns that Judah will be traveling through – a location that might, and in fact does, lead Judah to believe she is a prostitute. Did Tamar know that Judah was in the habit of "going in to" prostitutes? Did she imagine he would be sexually needy since his wife had died? Did she calculate that Enaim was far enough from his home that he would feel free to approach her? With the knowledge she has, Tamar sets the scene perfectly.

Once Judah makes his sexual interest known, Tamar asks what he will pay, and she negotiates this deal skillfully. She doesn't actually want the sheep that Judah promises; she wants the pledge – the signet and cord and staff. It seems a lot for him to give, but she presents it as a reasonable request, as nothing to be concerned about. And so he hands over these personal items to someone he believes to be a stranger. And he "goes in to" her. With this one act of intercourse, Tamar gains her ultimate goal: she becomes pregnant. Which makes me think that she likely thought through the timing of this encounter in terms of her own fertility cycle as well.

It is a masterful plan. A plan that indicates Tamar's deep understanding of human nature in general and Judah's nature in

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particular. In carrying out this plan, Tamar ends her own time of waiting; she gets herself unstuck.

We talk about waiting a lot during Advent. And there are certainly times to wait patiently for what is to come. We wait for babies to be born. We wait for seasons (literal and metaphorical) to change. We wait to learn and grow and be ready for new experiences. We wait on our God, who will renew our strength (Isaiah 40:31).

Waiting on God, on the natural cycles God has established, is good and holy. But waiting on other people, as Tamar has waited on Judah, is sometimes harmful. We can get stuck when we set aside our own autonomy and power to wait for another person to make things right for us. I admire Tamar for using the resources at her disposal to get herself unstuck, for deciding that the time had, in fact, run its course.

This Advent season of waiting does not mean a season of passivity. It does not mean a season of powerlessness. Our waiting on God renews our strength and can help us take the actions we need to get unstuck.

**CONNECT:**

Write the first part of Isaiah 40:31 ("Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength") on a piece of paper or card stock. Place the paper somewhere that you will see it each day and be reminded that you are called to wait for God *and* to use your strength.

**CONSIDER:**

What has been the hardest season of waiting in your life? What are you waiting for right now? *Whom* are you waiting for right now? Is your waiting part of a natural, healthy rhythm, or is it a time of being stuck? If you are stuck, what steps could you take to get unstuck?



# TAMAR'S BLESSING

It is not your fault, but it is your grief –  
the deaths of those you have loved,  
the betrayals of those who should be trustworthy,  
the ways you have been neglected,  
and the shame they have invoked to kindle the fires.

It is your grief,  
but it is not your fault.

No matter what they say,  
you are free,  
in God:

Free to cry into the night, to wail and weep  
and to wear your widow garments for exactly as long as you like;  
free to name those who betray you –  
in private and in public – with truthful words, proper or not.

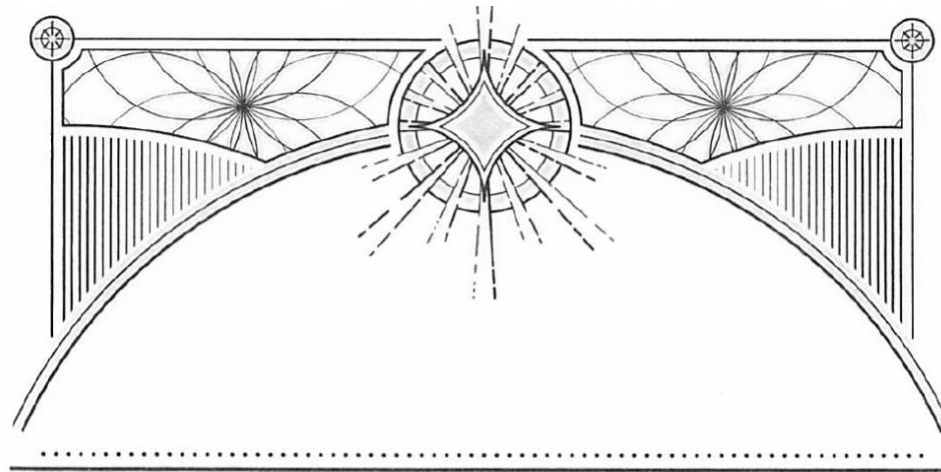
Free to insist on your own existence and importance,  
to take up whatever space your body and soul need to inhabit.

Free to turn the shame back on those who deserve it,  
to light the fires that warm and enlighten  
rather than those that destroy.

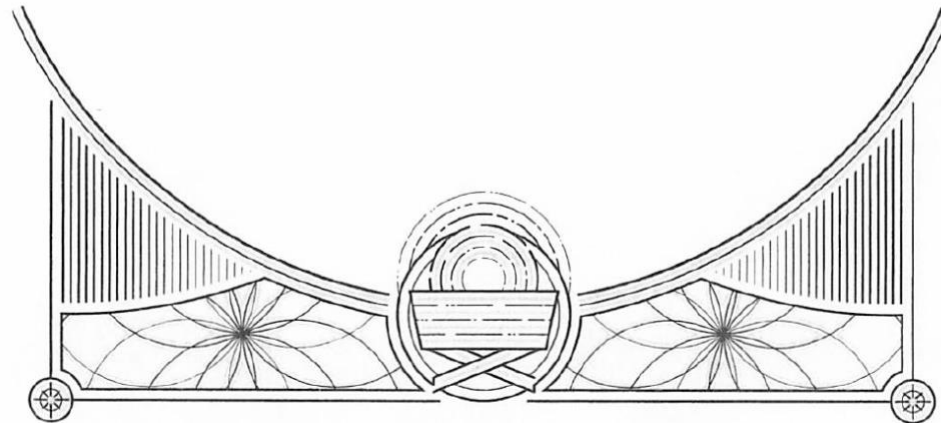
Wear this blessing as a signet,  
tie it around your waist as a cord,  
carry it as a staff, to support and protect:

May the God of cloud and fire  
lead you in the wilderness,  
providing room for your grief,  
support for your anger,  
comfort for your pain,  
attention to each part of you.

May the God of cloud and fire burn away your shame  
to reveal your shining wisdom,  
your unmistakable power.



# RUTH





## ***December 10***

### RUTH SUPPORTS NAOMI

#### **READ:**

Ruth 1:19-2:7

#### **REFLECT:**

The narrator makes it clear that Ruth returns with Naomi to Bethlehem, but you wouldn't know it by listening to Naomi. She speaks only of herself and the bitter way God has dealt with her. There is not even a mention of Ruth – no introductions, no sign of gratitude for her daughter-in-law who has made the long journey with her.

Naomi's entire speech is full of negativity and self-pity. She insists her name be changed from "pleasant" to "bitter." She idealizes the past in Bethlehem, saying she went away full, when in actuality she left because of a famine. She claims she is returning empty, when in fact Ruth is with her and the two women seem to be in good health. She insists that Goel has brought calamity to her, even though she has just returned home safely.

This is clearly a woman in grief, with the deaths of her husband and sons looming so large in her life that she cannot recognize or acknowledge any positive realities. It's not surprising that "the women" who greet Naomi upon her return to Bethlehem disappear after this speech. Who would want to listen to this constant negativity? We don't hear from the women again until the birth of Obed at the very end of the book.

Is it possible that Ruth insisted on accompanying Naomi because she realized what a fragile state Naomi was in? It is difficult to imagine what would have become of Naomi if she had arrived in Bethlehem alone. She doesn't seem to be able to relate well to people or figure out a way to support herself. Naomi doesn't even mention her husband's rich relative or seek out his support.

It is Ruth who takes action by going to the fields to glean. And whether through her own investigation or by luck, Ruth ends up in the field of Boaz, the prominent rich kinsman that Naomi neglected to mention. Ruth works hard enough in the fields to impress the servant, who tells Boaz about her.

Yet apparently, even though the servant is impressed, he can't be bothered with Ruth's name; she is "the Moabite who came back with Naomi." In this story about Ruth in a book named after her, only the narrator calls her by name. The people surrounding Ruth identify her by her nationality and relationship to Naomi.

Ruth, however, seems unconcerned about how others perceive her. She does not seem resentful of Naomi's neglect, but rather finds a way to help provide for her mother-in-law. She does not seek any special treatment in the fields. Ruth does what she thinks is best to do – what she believes needs to be done – regardless of how other people perceive her.

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Of all Ruth's virtues, perhaps this is the most impressive. We all long for acknowledgment, recognition, gratitude. For people to call us by name and introduce us to their friends. And too often, perhaps, we let people's dismissiveness, their lack of gratitude, affect our actions. The holidays can be an especially sensitive time, when we may be doing a lot for others with little recognition, when we may interact more intensely with friends and family who do not give us proper respect or appreciation. Ruth's example encourages us to make choices based on our best sense of what is good and right, regardless of how others treat us in the process.

In addition to Ruth's positive example here, we should also pay attention to the negative examples of Naomi, "the women," the servant, and all those in Bethlehem who fail to properly acknowledge this foreigner in their midst. The busyness and stress of the holidays can cause us to neglect people around us. So Naomi and the others can encourage us to offer the acknowledgment, recognition, and gratitude that those around us deserve. As you go through your day, perhaps you want to make an effort to call people by name, engage them in meaningful conversation, and say thank you at every opportunity.

**CONNECT:**

Write a thank you note to someone whose presence you feel you have taken for granted recently.

**CONSIDER:**

When have you felt that your presence and efforts were not appreciated? Did people's lack of appreciation affect your actions? When have you felt dismissed? How did you respond? What helps you let go of the need for recognition and acknowledgment?

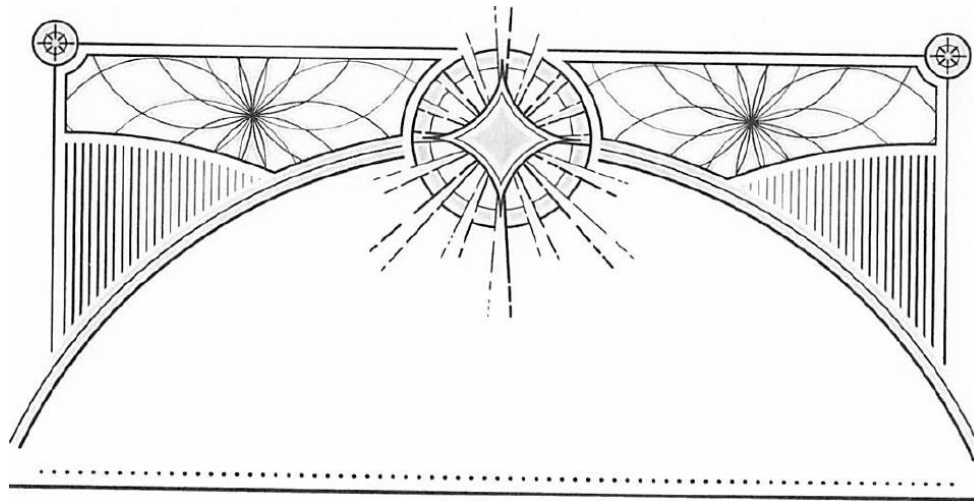


# RUTH'S BLESSING

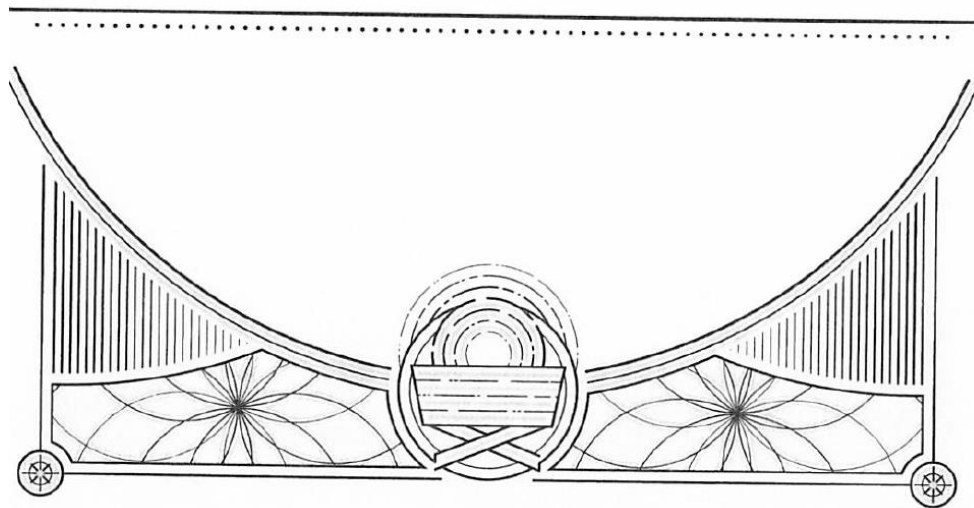
Dear friend,  
    we will face deep disappointment  
    and unbearable grief.  
Emptiness will taunt us.  
Hunger will gnaw.  
It will seem impossible to travel to the unknown land,  
    and more impossible to go back to the fatally familiar.

But oh, dear friend,  
    we will also be startled by beauty  
    and catch glimpses of joy.  
Contentment will sneak up on us.  
Abundance will delight.  
We will realize that  
    while the entire journey is impossible,  
    the next step is not.  
Nor is the next.

So for each step you take toward that foreign land of home,  
I offer this blessing to kiss and to cling to:  
May you have courage  
    to leave where you've been,  
    to travel to where you're going,  
    and to do what needs to be done when you get there.  
May you have indifference  
    about how much credit you get,  
    how many times they say thank you,  
    and whether or not they call you by name.  
May you have wisdom  
    in the work you choose,  
    the roles you fill,  
    and the generosity you exhibit.  
And through it all-  
    in and around and under and above it all –  
    may you be guided by love.



RAHAB



***December 13***

## RAHAB SHELTERS SPIES

**READ:**

Joshua 2:1-7

**REFLECT:**

"Two men" went into "the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab," and someone told the "king of Jericho" about the visit.

That's odd, don't you think? That Israel's top spies are just "men " and the ruler of the entire nation is "the king," while the prostitute alone gets a name? This isn't usually how the biblical text works. Scripture is littered with unnamed women, but this particular woman, Rahab, is named – here in this narrative, in two of the New Testament epistles, and in the genealogy of Jesus.

Rahab is named, and her occupation is highlighted. While on the one hand her status as a prostitute diminishes, and possibly shames, her, it is also true that this status is the reason "the men" are able to talk with her at all. "Respectable" women would be in the home of their father or husband and would not be able to speak openly with unrelated men. As two strange men in a foreign town, where else could the spies go but a brothel? What other women could they approach?

Rahab lives – literally and figuratively – on the border. Her house is built into the wall of the city. Her occupation places her outside mainstream culture. Her willingness to help foreign spies suggests that she does not feel a deep connection or loyalty to the people in her community. Inhabiting this type of marginal space is often uncomfortable. It can be inconvenient to live on the outskirts of town. It can be difficult to function outside the realm of respectable society. It can feel lonely to be disconnected from your community.

Yet Rahab's place on the edge gives her many advantages. As we will see in tomorrow's reflection, the location of her home in the city wall proves quite convenient for a woman harboring spies. And while her occupation as a prostitute places her outside the boundaries of respectability, it also affords her a freedom not granted to other women in her culture – the freedom to have a house of her own and to talk freely to men outside her household. Furthermore, her disconnect from her community means she feels no obligation to obey the king's orders. Because of Rahab's marginal status, she risks less than most of her neighbors would in aiding the foreign spies. This entire story depends on Rahab's position on the literal and metaphorical edges of her community.

Those of us trying to follow Jesus in the world today likely find ourselves on the edge of a lot of things, not quite understanding many of the people around us, not really fitting into the dominant culture, not fully able to commit our loyalty to the rulers and powers who expect, even demand, it. Existing in the margins is often inconvenient, difficult, even lonely. But Rahab's story reminds us that there are also advantages to dwelling on the edge.

It is from the edge that we get a more complete and clear perspective of the situation. With her home embedded in the wall of the city, Rahab is positioned to see both those within and those outside her community. From the edge, we may have more opportunities to encounter people who are different from us – and who might have something valuable to offer. Ironically, Rahab's socially marginalized position allows her to speak with people – both the foreigners and the king's men – whom she would not have contact with if she were a "respectable" woman. Being on the edge means that we have little to lose and, therefore, will likely be willing to take more risks and confront those in power.

As we journey through Advent, it is worth noting that many of Jesus' ancestors existed on the edge in some significant way. And it is worth remembering that Jesus himself was far removed from the center of political and religious power. Sometimes being on the edge is the exact thing that puts us right in the middle of God's story.

### **CONNECT:**

Find a physical space that is, somehow, on an edge. Maybe sit in a doorway or travel to a city or state line; maybe place yourself at the boundary of a piece of property or find a place where one terrain type transitions into another. Situate yourself in this marginal space; feel what it is to be on the edge of something. Talk to God about all the places in your life where you feel like you are on the margins. Ask God how you can be faithful in these marginal spaces.

### **CONSIDER:**

Who is on the edge of a community or system in which you dwell closer to the center? Seek out their perspective by having a conversation, reading an article, listening to a podcast, or watching a video. What can you learn from them? Is God calling you to learn more, or maybe to take action on their behalf?



***December 17***

## RAHAB SURVIVES

**READ:**

Joshua 6:22-25

**REFLECT:**

After Rahab helps the spies escape, they go back to their camp and fill Joshua in on the situation. Then the Israelites launch their odd yet successful attack on the city of Jericho. The city walls fall, the valuable are looted, and everything else is burned.

Is this what Rahab had in mind when he hid the spies? As she observes the destruction around her, does she regret helping the Israelites, or is she glad to have chosen the winning side?

Amid all the morally problematic elements in this story, this concluding scene reveals a certain integrity on the part of Rahab and the Israelites – they all keep their promises. They stick to the agreement. After the spies left, Rahab could have gone to the king of Jericho and warned him about the impending attack. The Israelites certainly could have ignored the crimson cord and killed Rahab and her family along with everyone else. It's really somewhat surprising that they keep their word to someone society held in such low esteem.

I'm not sure Joshua is too happy about this agreement, actually. While the narrator uses Rahab's name, to Joshua she is "the prostitute" and "the woman." Still, he instructs the two spies to keep their promise – bring Rahab outside the city before the Israelite burn it. A small kindness in the midst of destruction.

That kindness extends not just to Rahab, but also to other members of her family. She insists that the spies promise to save "[her] father and mother, [her] brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them" (Joshua 2:13). And then, later, the spies bring out Rahab along with "her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her" (6:23).

It is notable that neither of these lists include children or a husband. It seems that Rahab is unmarried and childless – which might be expected of a prostitute, but is definitely unusual in the scope of named women in the Bible.

In Tamar's story, her desire to be a mother propel the action of the narrative, and the birth of her twins provides the climax of the story. Likewise, the birth of Obed to Ruth serves as the satisfying conclusion to her story. The stories of Mary and Bathsheba center on their pregnancies and then on their roles as mothers. Of all the women in Jesus' genealogy, it is only Rahab who has a story in her own right with no mention of husband or child.

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On the basis of Matthew's genealogy, we assume that Rahab eventually gave up her job as a prostitute and married an Israelite named Salmon (see Matthew 1:5), but we don't really know – because Rahab's marital status is not what is important to her story.

In white North American culture, the family unit of spouses and children is often prioritized over other forms of family; the role of parent (especially mother) takes on an all-important status. As we celebrate Advent and Christmas in the church, we talk a lot about pregnancy and motherhood and babies. We set up nativities of the holy family: Mary, Joseph, Jesus. But Rahab remind us that families consist of far more than a partner and children. Our families include "[our] father and mother, [our] brothers and sisters, and all who belong to [us]" (Joshua 2:13). Sometimes our families consist of people who would not even show up in our genealogy.

Some people long to be spouses or parents, yet are not able to be for a variety of reasons. Other people choose not to marry or not to have children, again for a wide range of reasons. And for many people who do have children, their role as parent is not the defining narrative of their life. The connections we have to those we love – biologically related or not – are certainly important in our lives, but they are not our whole lives. Above and beyond our roles and relationships, we are, most importantly, children of God.

### **CONNECT:**

Spend some time in prayer for the people with whom you have significant relationships. You might want to try praying with colored pencils, pens, or markers. Draw lines on a piece of paper (curvy or straight) to divide it into several sections and then write a name in each section, using colors and embellishments as you wish and praying for the people as you write and color. Carry this list of names with you or display it somewhere prominent as a reminder to give thanks for and pray for these people.

### **CONSIDER:**

What roles do you have in relation to the other people in your life? Which roles feel like they are at the center of your story? Which roles do you feel most called to by God? Do any of these roles seem to keep you from living out God's call more fully? How could you find a balance between your relationship roles and your role as a child of God?



# RAHAB'S BLESSING

Perhaps you have been there, too,  
on the edge,  
a mere windowsill away  
from being cast out completely.

Maybe you have been there, too,  
in the midst of uncertainty,  
having to choose the form  
of your own potential devastation.

It's possible you have been there, too,  
stuck with a label  
that is true and fine  
and used to diminish.

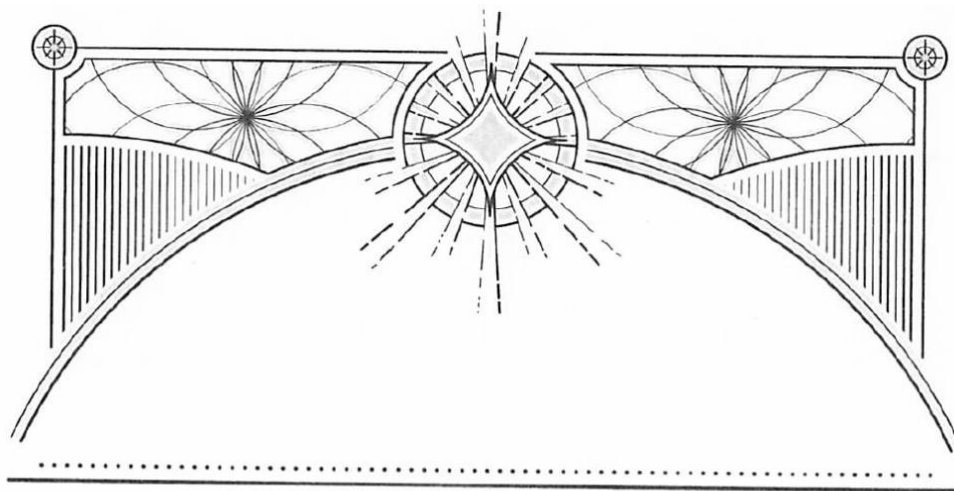
For all who have been there  
(or for wherever you have been),  
I offer this blessing  
as a bright crimson cord  
to disrupt destruction:

When you are pushed to edges,  
may you insist on your own story with such grit and grace  
that they have no choice but to tell it.

When you are far from center,  
may you know the power and freedom  
that God grants to those on the margins.

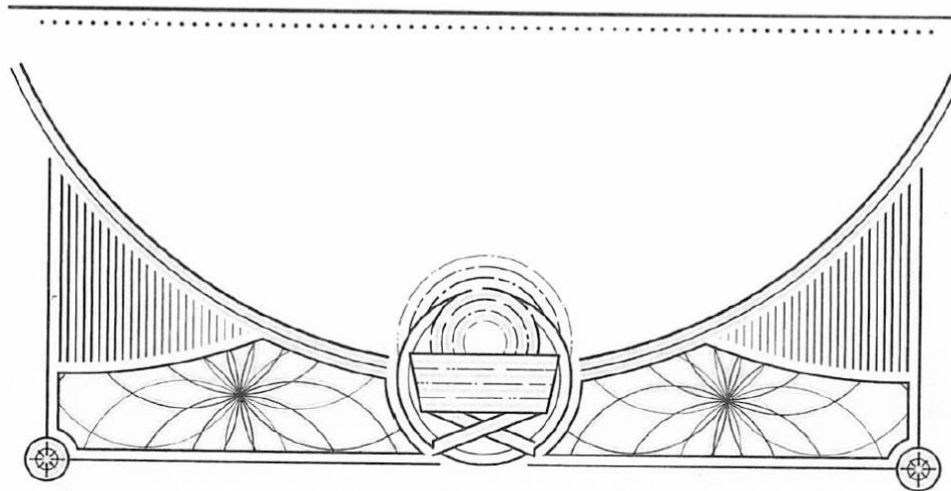
When you face impossible choices,  
may you act with integrity and courage,  
resting in the shield of God's grace.

When others dismiss you with a label,  
may you claim your deep identity  
as a beloved child of the Creator.



# BATHSHEBA

*"The Wife of Uriah"*



**December 20**

## BATHSHEBA APPROACHES KING DAVID

**READ:**

1 Kings 1:11-31

**REFLECT:**

Many years have passed since our last reading. Bathsheba's second baby, Solomon, is now a grown man; the powerful king, David, is now an old and ailing man; and the once silent, passive Bathsheba is now a bold, powerful woman.

She is, apparently, a confidant of the prophet Nathan, who has been a close, trusted advisor of David. Following Nathan's advice, but of her own volition, she goes to David to advocate for her son Solomon and his right to the throne. She reminds David of the promise he made to her: that Solomon would succeed David as king. The interesting thing is, there is no record in Scripture of David making such a promise to Bathsheba. (First Chronicles 29 does indicate that David intends Solomon to be his successor, but Bathsheba is not present and the text relates quite a different story of how Solomon comes to power.)

Perhaps David *has* promised Bathsheba that her son will take the throne. (Given David's previous actions, we can imagine he might have promised *all kinds* of things to all kinds of people.) Or perhaps David never made any such promise and Bathsheba is trying to convince him that he did. Either way, Bathsheba is bold to go before the king and ask him to tell the people that Solomon should succeed him. For the most part, David seems to listen to the prophet Nathan, but for some reason Nathan thinks it best for Bathsheba to go to David first. As a court insider, Nathan perceives that Bathsheba holds some degree of influence over the king.

Bathsheba goes to David as a mother and makes a request for her beloved child – this second son she bore, the one who lived. It would be expected that she would go to the king on behalf of her son, not herself. Yet it is clear that Solomon's fate and her own are closely linked. If Adonijah's kingship is allowed to stand, she insists that both "Solomon and I will be counted offenders" (1 Kings 1:21). She clearly understands that in promoting her son's position and power, she is also promoting her own.

In this passage, Bathsheba exercises power, but within acceptable confines. She goes to the king only because of the counsel of Nathan. She speaks primarily (whether truthful or not) of what the king himself has said, not of her own desires. And she is there on behalf of her son, not herself. Bathsheba is bold. She is also wise. She knows the rules, and she follows them.

This story of Bathsheba, along with the Christmas story, can help us think about how we confront power. In the birth of Jesus, God enters the world as a human infant – a move that is both bold and vulnerable, much like Bathsheba approaching the throne of David. Such boldness is commendable. Like Bathsheba, we must be willing to take a risk in approaching those with power over us.

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But along with the boldness, we must also be wise. It is good to get counsel from someone with insight, someone who is on the inside and knows the system. And in our boldness and wisdom, we must also recognize our vulnerability. Confronting power always comes with risks, risks we may be called to take on behalf of those we love and on behalf of those who are even more vulnerable than we are.

**CONNECT:**

Call or write to someone who holds a position of power regarding an issue you care about. You might contact an elected official, your boss, or even your pastor.

**CONSIDER:**

When have you made a request to someone in power? What wisdom did you seek before making your request? What risks did you take? How did it work out? Is there anything you would like to do differently next time?





# BATHSHEBA'S BLESSING

Nobody knows what to make of me.  
Temptress or victim.  
Bride or widow.  
Queen or concubine.  
Calculating or naive.

Siblings, listen:

People will write their own stories over your life –  
fill in their own motives,  
project their own fears,  
reach for their own dreams.

Your life – as it turns out –  
has very little to do with you.

At least how they tell it.

Which is why their story cannot be your guide;  
why you must bathe in your rooftop garden without guilt;  
why you must mourn your beloveds however you can;  
why you cannot believe the lie  
that their abuse was actually a favor  
to grant you a palace and a prince.

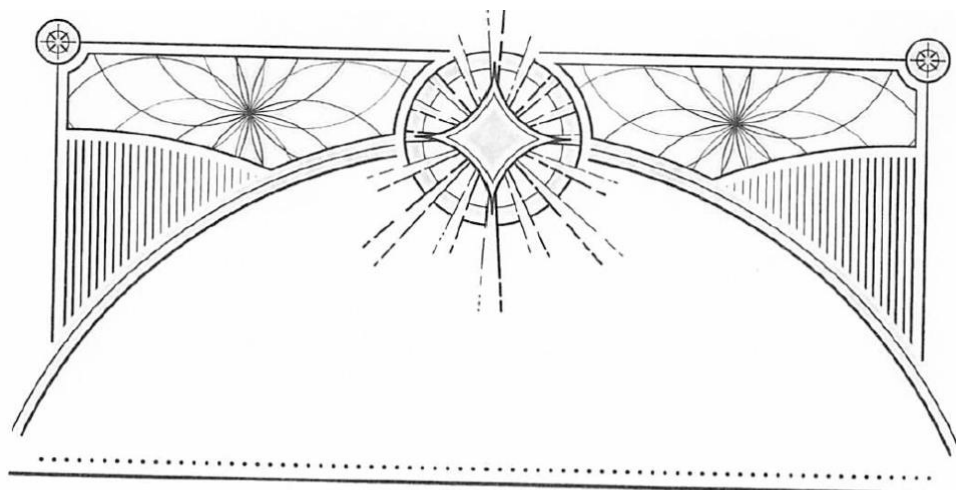
Even though my story is not well told,  
you know, at least, that I finally found a throne.  
So from my royal seat,  
with whatever power it offers,

I bestow on you this blessing:

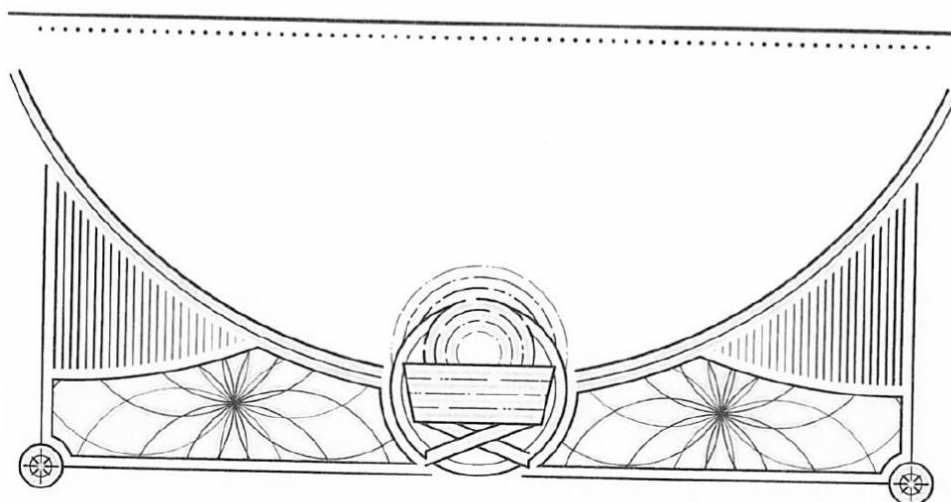
for companions with integrity;  
for moments of delightful abandon;  
for love deep enough to cause grief;  
for consolation.

May you have the power that is your due  
and use that power on behalf of the vulnerable –  
even if the vulnerable one is you.

May you write your own story,  
and may it be told by compassionate voices  
in all generations to come.



MARY



**December 24**

## MARY TREASURES AND PONDERERS

**READ:**

Luke 2:8-20

**REFLECT:**

This story of Jesus' birth has a warm glow around it as we remember Christmas Eve services filled with candlelight and familiar hymns. When we hear these words, we envision the nativity scene: a loyal father and loving mother gazing down contentedly at their blissfully peaceful newborn son. By all means, we should hold that warmth in our hearts and enjoy the joyful memories. And we should also acknowledge that the holy family was quite possibly not in such a serene state at this point in the story.

After a long and difficult journey, Mary gives birth in a strange town, in a strange room, with an animal feeding trough for her son's bed. None of this was in her birth plan. There is, for some new mothers, a surge of joy at holding their child for the first time, looking into the face of the one who has been hidden within their body for the past months. And mixed with the joy they may feel, there is also exhaustion, deep weariness, and fear – a terrifying realization of how vulnerable this human is that they love so deeply.

Amid all this, Mary receives unexpected visitors: the shepherds. They have come straight from the fields "with haste," so they are likely dirty, smelly, out of breath. Imagine Mary's surprise when this crew bursts in to gape at the child in the manger, when they start telling anyone who will listen about the angel, the good news, the multitude of heavenly host. It must have been disconcerting, to say the least. But Mary does not kick them out; she does not ask what they are doing there. She does not start yelling or break down in tears. She "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

This is the second time we are told that Mary *pondered*. It is a lovely word. *Pondering* suggests a calm center, a certain interior spaciousness, an ability to step back to a place of perspective and contemplation – which is not the state I imagine I would be in if the angel Gabriel visited me (Luke 1:29), or if a group of rough strangers crashed into my space right after I gave birth and started telling stories of more angel visitations.

I can imagine myself doing many things if I were in a situation similar to Mary's. I might run or hide, cry or yell, start nervously fidgeting or be completely unable to move at all. What I struggle to imagine is that I would be able to ponder this angel presence, the unbelievable message from the excitable shepherds – to take the significance of these holy moments into my being and hold them tenderly, with curiosity, gratitude, and wonder.

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As hard as birthing Jesus was, mothering him surely proved much more difficult. And isn't that the way it always is? Whether we are bringing life to a new human, to a new community, to an artistic work, to a project, or to an idea, the initial creation is often difficult but it is also exciting. Creative work is carried forward by longing, anticipation, and holy energy. Then comes the equally important but less recognized work of nurturing and sustaining our creations.

Mary does not just give birth to Jesus; she raises him. She cares for him, nurtures him, teaches him, walks with him all through his life. And I wonder whether all this pondering at the beginning of her journey is part of what helped her with the ongoing challenges of motherhood. She maintained the energy of creation; she noticed the presence and work of God; she sat at the still center of the miracle that was her life and held it as a treasure.

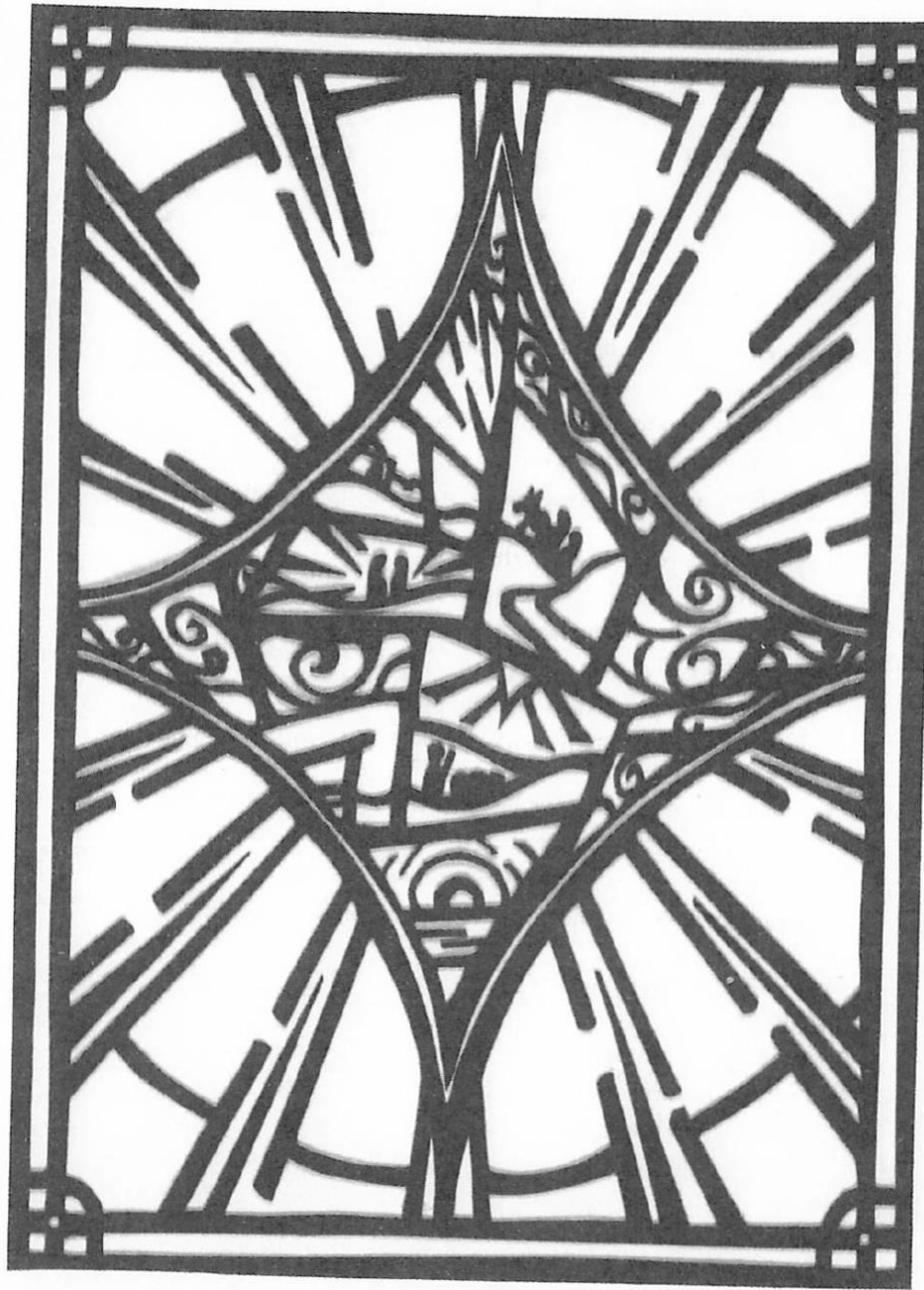
May we do the same in these holy days of Christmas.

**CONNECT:**

Center yourself in God's presence. With God, walk through what you expect of your day tomorrow and choose a time – even just ten minutes – when you will step away from the holiday activities to read the Christmas blessing in this book, meditate on the artwork, and *ponder* God's immeasurable love for you. Put this time on your calendar or write it on a paper you will see.

**CONSIDER:**

What have you created? How would you compare the difficulty of creating to the difficulty of nurturing what you created? Where did you get energy for the creative part of your work? Where did you find energy to sustain your creation? Where is God present for you in the process of creation and the task of sustaining?



## ***December 25***

### CHRISTMAS BLESSING FROM MARY

Dear one, I wish you had been there:  
to see the startling light, to hear Gabriel's brazen promise;  
to journey into the hill country, to receive Elizabeth's bold blessing;  
to look with the Spirit's eye,  
to sing of joy and justice that echoes through the ages.

Oh how I wish you had been there:  
with sore feet, aching back, Joseph's encouraging words,  
and Bethlehem on the horizon;  
with, finally, a place to rest,  
then the pain (the pain!) and the pushing,  
and the baby – my baby – bloody and perfect in the manger.

I would love for you to have been there,  
gathered with the shepherds  
who had somehow found their odd sign  
in this scene of me and Joseph and my swaddled child.

But you were not there, then.  
You are here, now.  
I cannot offer you the baby to hold and rock and smell.  
So I offer you these words to wrap tenderly in cloth,  
and to lay in the manger of your heart:

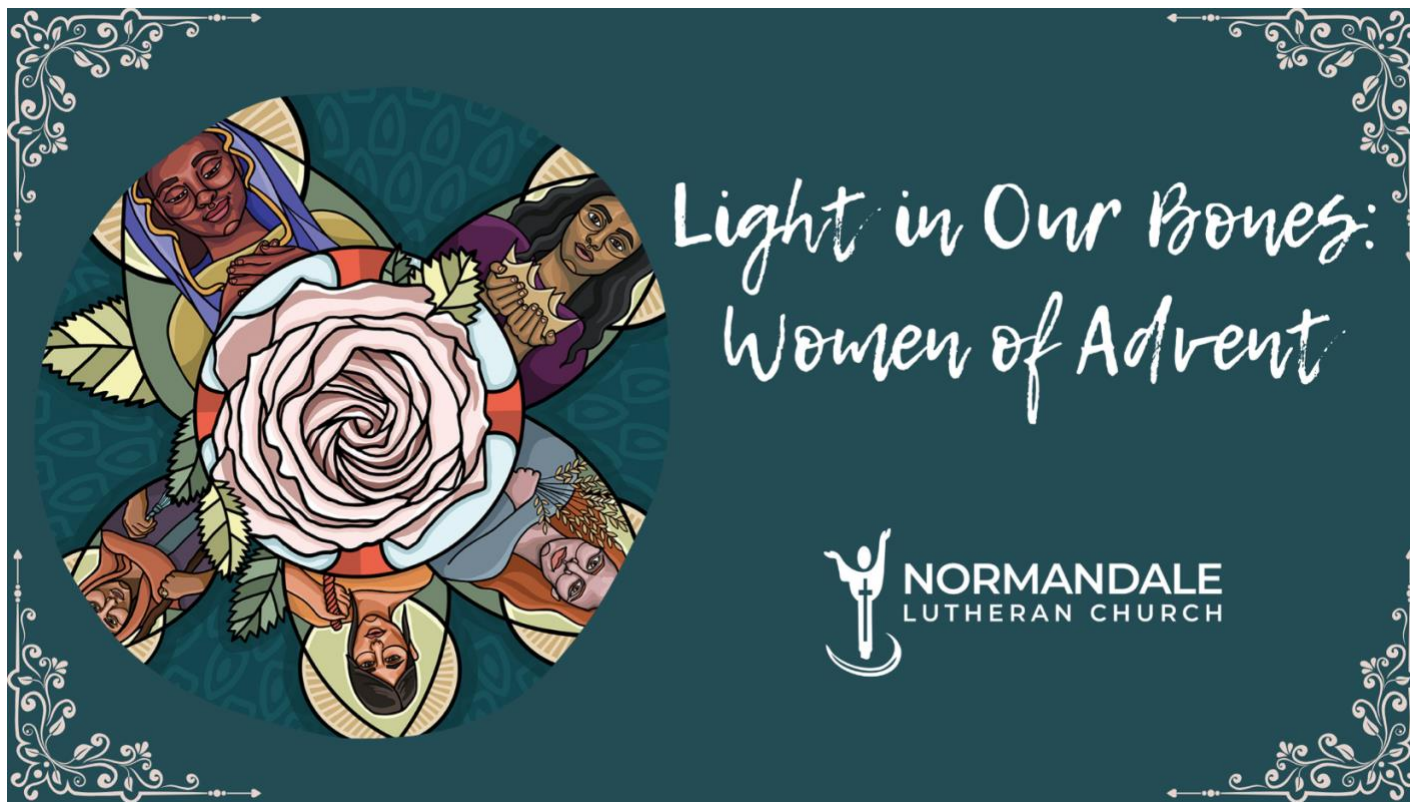
In all that God calls you to do and to be  
may you have courage  
to say yes to the mystery.

In times of excitement, grief, joy, and fear,  
may you have loved ones  
to offer companionship and blessing.



In the labor of creation,  
may you be strong,  
may you be flexible,  
may you know joy.

May you, beloved child,  
ponder deeply each divine message you hear,  
whether from angel or shepherd.  
May you ponder and treasure  
every gift you receive  
from the holy hand of God.



## Light in Our Bones: Women of Advent

