

Darkness & Light

Advent Devotional 2018



Cover art: Carl Gutherz

American (b. Switzerland), 1844-1907

Light of the Incarnation (Lux Incarnationis), 1888

Oil on canvas

Darkness & Light Advent 2018 is our gift to you this season. We have written this devotional in the hope that you may see the truths of God and His accomplishments in a new light. Each devotional has a reading and a reflection to prompt journaling or a discussion. We envision this devotional as an accompaniment to your Advent traditions.

Darkness and light is a profound metaphor used to symbolize many parts of life. Leading up to the winter solstice, the sun sets earlier and the nights lengthen, signaling the coming of cold weather. The layers of meaning are everywhere in creation. Darkness and light meter out our lives into meaningful increments of time. At first, creation began with God's declaration, "Let there be light." Now, the Advent season is a reminder to us of the spiritual darkness in the world and the anticipation of light's infiltration. Even as one small spark of light illuminates a whole room, in the same way, the coming of Christ signifies a momentous entrance of light. The heavenly Light, God's Son, came down and lived among us. God shared His Light with us, and those who draw near begin to share in His brilliance and glory. We await the promise of a second Advent when all shall be revealed, Light will triumph, and darkness will be no more. Like the star over Bethlehem, may God's light guide you and illuminate your path!

Contributors:
Amy Atkinson
Nathan Bingaman
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Bethany Stallings

NIGHTFALL



Discretion will watch over you,
understanding will guard you,
delivering you from the way of evil,
from men of perverted speech,
who forsake the paths of uprightness
to walk in the ways of darkness

Proverbs 2:11-13 English Standard Version [ESV]

December 2

A Tent in the Desert

by Bethany Stallings

The light slowly fades and darkness descends. Night begins.

The language of darkness is often how we express our experiences of despair, of grief, of loss. We have different reactions to times of darkness that can prevent us from encountering the Light. It could be that in experiences of darkness God will arrive.

In the internal tension between life and death, experiences of darkness can create a hardening or a distancing. We may find ourselves in nights when it's too painful to live, when death calls to us. But Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen wisely states "the way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life."

The initial reaction to run or escape painful experiences may actually prevent us from holy lessons, from gaining life and strength. In *Till We Have Faces*, C.S. Lewis writes that "Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood."

The famous Sufi mystic and Persian poet, Rumi, states: "The wound is where the light enters you." And even more explicitly, Rumi's own father, Bahauddin says:

"Grief is better than happiness, because in grief a person draws closer to the Friend. Your wings open. A tent is set up in the desert where the Friend can visit you. Wealth that arrives in grief is what we spend in joy. The soul is greater than anything you ever lost."

Reflection: Recall a loss, multiple losses, or even the anticipation of loss that you have or are experiencing. How can the quotes above apply to your situation? How might you set up a tent "in the desert where the Friend can visit you[?]"

December 3

Darkness Overcome

by Meridith Matson

Both darkness and light are themes throughout Scripture. Beginning with the opening of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2, we watch expectantly as God calls order in an environment of chaos and speaks: “Let there be light” into complete and utter darkness.

Darkness can be chilling, isolating, depressing, and hopeless. Light brings warmth, hope, and causes the unseen to become seen. John says: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). God himself is light, so where God is, there is light, and where God is not, there is darkness.

The prophet Isaiah says this: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” This, of course, foretold the birth of Christ, and that this event would bring light to people walking in deep darkness. Did the people know they were walking in darkness at the time of the prophecy? Did the first-century Jews know they were walking in darkness and realize when the light of Christ’s presence on earth finally dawned?

John also writes:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through Him, and apart from Him not one thing was created that has been created. Life was in Him, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it.”
(John 1:1-5. HCSB)

The darkness did not overcome the light, yet darkness had to exist to be overcome. Darkness was not created: in Genesis 1, the earth simply was dark and God spoke into the darkness to create light. John, bringing to mind the language of Genesis 1, also begins with creation, darkness, and light but also puts Christ, the Word, with God in the beginning. Once again, God continues to bring light into darkness, proving the light is more powerful than the darkness.

Reflection: How have you struggled with darkness during different seasons of your life and how did you work through those seasons? Consider how seasons of darkness make seasons of light brighter.

December 4

Promise of stars

by Nathan Bingaman

Darkness set the stage for second thoughts. Abraham thought of his father: venturing out from Ur, taking his son and grandson Lot with him. Abraham thought also of His God: calling him to go out, just as his father had, and all the blessings to follow. He knew the blessings he possessed of wealth and power. Abraham thought again about an heir: who would inherit his blessing? Lot had bravely followed him out of Haran--his familiar land. As a reward, Abraham had given him first pick of the grazing lands. He had even conquered the four kings to rescue and re-establish Lot. Yet it was another, not of his line, who stood to gain Abraham's inheritance.

Nevertheless the Lord had sealed His promise to Abraham with a covenant in blood, smoke, and fire, as a terror and great darkness had fallen upon Abraham, putting him in mind of his earthly estate. In deepest darkness, the Lord ensured blessing to Abraham unconditionally. But what Abraham remembered best was another quiet moment in the darkness with His God. He had taken Abraham outside, under the stars of the night sky, saying: "so shall your descendants be." So shall my descendants be.

Reflection: Has God given you His word on something? What promise of His does your situation seem to contradict? What does it look like in your life to take God at His word?

December 5

Blessing and Cursing

by Scott Matson

“Since Balak son of Zippor was Moab’s king at that time, he sent messengers to Balaam...Balak said to him: “Look, a people has come out of Egypt...please come and put a curse on these people for me because they are more powerful than I am. I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that those you bless are blessed and those you curse are cursed.” (Numbers 22:4b-6a CSB)

Blessing and cursing: the words of divine promise given generations ago. Words which had proven true time and time again. But what’s this? One who would usurp the promise sought their harm. The king of that land threatened to curse God’s people. Hadn’t they seen enough trouble? They wandered through the desert, a people alone. No allies, no friends. Night and day, hot and cold, light and darkness all around them.

But they were sustained by the provision of the One who told their great forefather to leave his home and go.

They had left their home as well. That same One had told Moses to lead them out of Egypt. Now they were wanderers with nothing but the promise of divine protection and provision. But somehow that was enough. It had to be enough.

“We should ask God to increase our hope when it is small, awaken it when it is dormant, confirm it when it is wavering, strengthen it when it is weak, and raise it up when it is overthrown.”

- John Calvin

Reflection: Listen to the song “God of My Everything” by Bebo Norman and reflect upon God’s faithfulness to sustain you in difficult times.

December 6

Darkness Prods

by Bethany Stallings

“The question is, / what will it be like / after the last day? / Will I float / into the sky / or will I fray / within the earth or a river— / remembering nothing? / How desperate I would be / if I couldn’t **remember** / the sun rising, if I couldn’t / remember trees, rivers; if I couldn’t / even **remember**, beloved, / your beloved name.

I know, you never intended to be in this world. / But you’re in it all the same. / So why not get started immediately. / I mean, belonging to it. / There is so much to admire, to weep over. / And to write music or poems about. / Bless the feet that take you to and fro. / Bless the eyes and the listening ears. / Bless the tongue, the marvel of taste. / Bless touching. / You could live a hundred years, it’s happened. / Or not. / I am speaking from the fortunate platform / of many years, / none of which, I think, I ever wasted. / Do you need a prod? / **Do you need a little darkness to get you going?** / Let me be as urgent as a knife, then, / and remind you of Keats, / so single of purpose and thinking, for a while, / he had a lifetime.”

Excerpts from *The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac* by Mary Oliver
(emphasis added)

When reading this, I think of the way darkness can be a reminder.

Like a knife pierces

Like the voice of John the Baptist and the prophets before him, crying out

Do not waste time

Hasten

Make way

Prepare

“prepare ye the way of the Lord”

Reflection: What darkness or dark thoughts seem to visit you? Do these prod you toward or away from the light? If death awaits even Christians, the exhortation is to live in a way that prepares our own souls and saves others from a hopeless death.

December 7

A Poem of Longing

by Scott Matson

“In a dream, a vision in the night, when deep sleep comes over people as they slumber on their beds, he uncovers their ears and terrifies them with warnings, in order to turn a person from his actions and suppress the pride of a person.” (Job 33:15-17 CSB)

Nightfall surrounds me,
Fearful terrors steal away
My hope and my joy.

God, don't forget me,
The one whom You have redeemed.
Keep me in Your thoughts.

When comes our hope, God,
The promise which came from You?
We are still waiting.

Messiah's advent
Means its joyous fulfillment.
The promise has come.

Reflection: Read Isaiah 9:2-7 and Revelation 21:1-4 and reflect upon God's great promises to His people. Focus on how Israel awaited Christ's first advent and how we now await His second advent.

December 8

Darkness breaths Chaos

by Amy Atkinson

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day’ and the darkness ‘night.’” Genesis 1:1-5 (NLT)

Before God creates, the world that we know was “tohu wa-bohu” [Hebrew: תהו ובוהו]: emptiness...futility...vanity.

In Isaiah 34:11, the words tohu and bohu appear again together, communicating confusion and emptiness. This confusion and emptiness is first mentioned at the very beginning of God’s Word, showing that before his presence was made known, the earth was empty, dark, chaotic. And yet, even after His presence was made known to the world, the nations of the earth continued to walk in darkness, emptiness, vanity, and chaos. God’s light was hovering over the surface of the waters, ready to bring light into a dark world. Creation accepted the gift of God’s presence. However, God gives us each a free choice: he desires relationship, which is never coerced. Will we invite his presence, his light, into the darkness of our hearts? If God’s light is not filling the darkness of our hearts, then the vanity and emptiness of idols - which promise a cheap and fleeting light - will strike like a match, temporarily illuminating and satisfying, until they burn out. We are left to wander in the darkness again. All while his presence is hovering over the surface of our hearts.

Reflection: What idols are causing “tohu” and “bohu” in your heart right now? Are you willing to expose such things to the light? Take a moment to write them down.

MIDNIGHT



When I was with you day after day in the temple,
you did not lay hands on me.
But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.

Luke 22:53 English Standard Version [ESV]

December 9

Atop the oily earth

by Nathan Bingaman

Atop the oily earth and a little thought
What is man that You care for him
Never mind becoming one I dare not
Light of Light, Lamp now lit

The last man
A living bridge
To span infinities

I am not the flame

Within man You glimpse what is dark
The Image shines back the secret
A pilot light to melt the wax heart
With fire thrown by the Wind

Otherwise charred
If not tarred
By Divine Oil

I am not the flame, nor the wax

Between a woman and her God
It is best to keep a candle lit
Somewhere in there between
her and Him put a link to fit

It was clear
Living mirror
In which I found myself smouldering

I am not the flame, nor the wax
I am the wick

Reflection: How do you reconcile the light and the darkness in yourself? What metaphor would you use to describe your relationship with God?

December 10

Midnight Light, part 1

by Meridith Matson

The Jewish holocaust during World War 2 is perhaps one of the darkest times in most recent history. The mass murder of over 6 million Jews and other persecuted demographics left a haunting mark over human history. Humans killing and dehumanizing other humans is truly the darkest darkness that exists. The images and films of those beaten in the streets, taken captive, and forced into concentration camps, and the bare, skeletal ghosts of those who were still alive in these camps at the end of the war are etched on our minds.

This chapter of history leaves a stain of darkness. A time of “midnight” when it seemed the sun may not ever shine again.

Yet, darkness is where the light shines through. In the darkest darkness, sparks of hope still existed. Etched on the wall of a cellar in a concentration camp, these words of an unknown prisoner were found:

“I believe in the sun
even when it is not shining.
And I believe in love,
even when there’s no one there.
And I believe in God,
even when he is silent.”

Reflection: In what ways have you had to wrestle with belief versus reality in your own times of darkness?

December 11

Midnight Light, part 2

by Meridith Matson

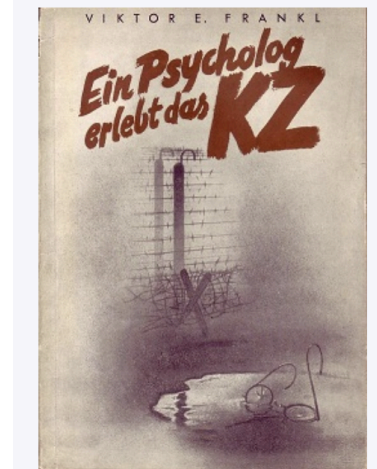
Holocaust survivor and Jew Viktor Frankl survived Auschwitz, one of the most brutal concentration camps during World War 2. He was also a neurologist and psychiatrist and took his experience in the camp as a chance to understand human behavior. Frankl is most known for his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, originally titled in German: *trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*. That is, "...Nevertheless Say 'Yes' to Life: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp."

Frankl observed three stages of most prisoners: shock, apathy, and lastly reactions to dehumanization. Ultimately, the prisoner's ability to survive depended entirely on their outlook and inner world. If the prisoners had a hope for the future and a reason to hold on in their spirit, they would survive. If all hope was lost, they were destined to die in the camp one way or another.

Frankl writes about one memory in particular:

"We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk[...]
That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love."



Reflection: How has love been an instrument of light and salvation for you in times of darkness?

December 12

The Dark Before Light Dawns

by Scott Matson

“Then Balaam went with Balak to Kiriath Huzoth. Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep...the next morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-Baal, and from there he could see the outskirts of the Israelite camp.” (Numbers 22:39-41 CSB)

The usurper had convinced the false prophet to go with him. He hoped this would be his hour of victory over the people of God. There they were, encamped in a valley, helpless and defenseless! Surely victory was right around the corner.

Or was it?

This was the moment of truth. Would God again prove faithful to His covenant-promises to Israel as He had so many times before? Would the usurper's plans be thwarted?

It has been said that night is at its darkest just before dawn. At this point in the story, the pagan king expects his hired sorcerer to pronounce a curse on God's people. But it was not to be. God had made these people His own, and He would never be unfaithful to His covenant with them. And while we know the final outcome, the author wanted his readers to feel the tension and suspense.

“God has to work in the soul in secret and in darkness because if we fully knew what was happening, and what Mystery, Transformation, God, and Grace will eventually ask of us, we would either try to take charge or stop the whole process.”

- St. John of the Cross

Reflection: Look up and read the lyrics to the hymn *Stand by Me* written by Charles Albert Tindley and William Farley Smith. As you read each stanza, praise and thank God for His sustaining power in your life.

December 13

Vision of stars

by Nathan Bingaman

The darkness made it easier to remember. Joseph was awake but images floated before him still. Rubbing the dust from his eyes, he looked hard to descry any impending events. Today was the eve of Pharaoh's birthday. Joseph had hoped to be released, to be remembered, last year at this time. Instead, Joseph had been left to plow into his work, always one step ahead of the executioner. Joseph shivered. That cistern had been a death, like souls in prison. In the cistern, all you can see are the stars. They had shimmered down disdain through even deep blue sky, mocking his destiny. It was a wonder all these stars had not yet pierced his mind.

With a practiced turn inward, he called up the vision. He is on a high and dark path, arriving in the sky. As he looks over his shoulder, the sun, moon, and stars--just as bright as him--swirl into dancing orbit around him. Their motion sends a pulsing cheer of gratitude singing through the air--and then it ends. His crime had been to brag. In this dark dungeon, he nurtured himself with this destiny from His God. Maybe He would come through today.

Reflection: What has God shown you in the light that you tend to doubt in the dark? When has God shown up for you or made something good happen for you that you did not expect?

December 14

Crushed, but not Destroyed

by Scott Matson

“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience would be neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I can do no other.”

- Martin Luther

Martin Luther was on trial for his life. Standing before Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, he was pressed to recant his writings which the Church had deemed “heretical.” He believed his reforms would bring the Church back in line with God’s Word.

Knowing full well that he would likely face death by burning if he chose not to recant, he faltered. On the day before his bold “Here I stand” proclamation, he had faced the tribunal and asked for time to consider his response. He spent the night in anguish, feeling abandoned and forsaken by God.

He was in a “[midnight] of the soul,” but even there, God met him. And the rest is history.

Reflection: Listen to Matt Maher’s song, “Empty and Beautiful,” and think about times you’ve felt abandoned by God. Then, think about how He revealed His presence to you and reminded you that He never left you.

December 15

Under the cover of darkness

by Bethany Stallings

“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.
Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you
have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.” (Luke 12:2-3
ESV)

Hiddenness is related to dark and to what occurs in the dark. Darkness often feels comforting, like a cocoon, a time when no one will see or judge us.

But the promise here is that one day total revelation will come. Light will bring disclosure. People will see. People will hear. People will know. Everything will be revealed.

Nothing is covered or hidden that will not one day be revealed.

All the mysteries of God

All the evils and sins of my life

All the sins of humanity

Reflection: What have I done or said, thinking it was hidden? Have a time of confession before God.

SMALL HOURS



My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

Psalm 130:6-7 English Standard Version [ESV]

December 16

When the Earth was Made

by Meridith Matson

Chaotic blobs of darkness
Seething. Spilling. Oozing
messes and madness
Colliding

Crying out in anguish
neverending. chaos.
No sanity
No stillness
No light

But then. A voice.
A calm, powerful voice.
Stops the madness
stills the anguish.
Bringing order to chaos.

The Spirit hovers
OVER the waters.

The voice
of God
Spilling out from the heavens
He speaks
He SAYS:
“Let there be light”

Reflection: Read Genesis 1:1-5 and imagine how drastic the change would have been when God called order into the chaotic world. Imagine how the earth that was “without shape and empty,” took form. Imagine how the darkness over the surface of the watery deep would have changed with the Spirit hovering over the waters, and God speaking the words: “let there be light.”

December 17

Portent of stars

by Nathan Bingaman

The light overwhelmed him, and he had found himself undone. Daniel, Israel's interpreter, pious dream-descrier, councilor to kings and accompanied by angels, with whom lions may not demur. Daniel, abandoned to His God in a fast, had fallen to the ground sapped of strength. Privileged with a portent of the devastating end of all things, Daniel suffered this vision of the last battle supported by the hands of an archangel. How he felt his frailty, always aware of the dust out of which he had come, this protean planet he was made from: the creatures and kingdoms and horns, arriving, growing, morphing blasphemously.

But there! He saw it down in a forgotten area of the wild tableau, the key which unlocked the puzzle--the echo of Enoch. He strained his eyes to see it, this dark drama, this sweet succour, unfolding out of a cataclysmic cosmos. He recounts: "many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake: these to everlasting life, but others to disgrace--everlasting contempt. Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever!" Amen!

Reflection: Sometimes, the things God reveals makes our heads spin. Contemplate the destiny of the saved.

December 18

Post Tenebras, Lux

by Scott Matson

“Then he spoke his message:
‘The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor,
the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly,
the prophecy of one who hears the words of God,
who has knowledge from the Most High,
who sees a vision from the Almighty,
who falls prostrate,
and whose eyes are opened:
I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.’” (Numbers 24:15-17a CSB)

After darkness, light . . .

The morning awakens with the promise of new life, new hope, and new glory. The sorcerer, the usurper, hired to curse the people of God, was only able to pronounce blessing upon them. God willed it to be so.

And in the blessing pronounced came a prophecy of the One who was to come. This One would finally and fully put an end to the oppression and tyranny which God’s people have always faced. The Moabites, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Romans...even sin itself. The usurper will not have the final word. The Promised One will.

The narrative of Numbers 22-24 reminds us during this Advent season that God will always be faithful to His covenant promises. No one can curse the ones He has chosen to bless. And because of Jesus, we are the blessed ones. Sin’s curse is destroyed. Death is not the end. Messiah reigns!

Reflection: Watch the Bible Project’s YouTube video entitled “Messiah” and thank God for sending His only Son to save us from our sins.

December 19

Joy and Grief Intermingled

by Bethany Stallings

Advent

by Donald Hall

When I see the cradle rocking
What is it that I see?
I see a rood¹ on the hilltop
Of Calvary.

When I hear the cattle lowing
What is it that they say?
They say that shadows feasted
At Tenebrae.²

When I know that the grave is empty,
Absence eviscerates me,
And I dwell in a cavernous, constant
Horror vacui.³

(Source: Poetry magazine, January 2010)

For modern-day Christians, the advent season not only carries anticipation of Christ's birth but the knowledge of what awaits. At the advent of our Lord, we also know and connect Jesus' coming to the Passion: crucifixion, death, and resurrection. The joy of advent and the lament of easter intermingle for modern-day Christians.

Reflection: Recognize that many significant moments have both joy and grief. (For example, the birth of a child brings excitement and possibilities, yet simultaneous doubt and fears of loss.)

¹ Rood: a crucifix or cross

² Tenebrae: (Latin for *shadows*) matins and lauds for the last three days of Holy Week, at which candles are successively extinguished.

³ Horror vacui: a concept in art that is approximately translated from Latin to *fear of empty spaces*.

December 20

The return of stars

by Nathan Bingaman

The last light streamed to him. Enoch, kneeling at nightfall, felt the cool of evening darken on his eyelids. His heart pumped faster as he finished his vigil. His God would arrive at any moment. Enoch liked to take God up on His offer, and walked with Him. As they walked, God spoke to Enoch about the world. The more God said, the more there was to understand, so Enoch did not ask many questions. Sometimes God was silent, until He gestured at something for Enoch to observe. His time apart became moments of waiting and preparing for the joy of meeting. Yet there were also times when the Lord came to convict Enoch. And Enoch still considered the violence and bloodshed on the earth. Suddenly there was a supernatural wind whipping about Enoch.

“Do not fear,” God said to Enoch, “the light will return in the same way it left.”

Enoch smiled.

“Walk with Me as the stars are arriving.”

He later related what he heard that evening to his people, who would safeguard the word, the promise through all the ages: “Behold, the Lord will arrive with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all . . .”

Reflection: What does it feel like to walk with God? What does it mean to be like God?

December 21

A Prayer for Strength

by Scott Matson

“O God, Almighty God everlasting! How dreadful is the world! Behold how its mouth opens to swallow me up, and how small is my faith in Thee! . . . Oh! The weakness of the flesh, and the power of Satan! If I am to depend upon any strength of this world – all is over . . . The knell is struck . . . Sentence is gone forth . . . O God! O God! O thou, my God! help me against the wisdom of this world. Do this, I beseech thee; thou shouldst do this . . . by thy own mighty power . . . The work is not mine, but Thine. I have no business here . . . I have nothing to contend for with these great men of the world! I would gladly pass my days in happiness and peace. But the cause is Thine . . . And it is righteous and everlasting! O Lord! Help me! O faithful and unchangeable God! I lean not upon man. It were vain! Whatever is of man is tottering, whatever proceeds from him must fail. My God! My God! Dost thou not hear? My God! Art thou no longer living? Nay, thou canst not die. Thou dost but hide Thyself. Thou hast chosen me for this work. I know it! . . . Therefore, O God, accomplish thine own will! Forsake me not, for the sake of thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, my defense, my buckler, and my stronghold.

Lord – where art thou? . . . My God, where art thou? . . . Come! I pray thee, I am ready . . . Behold me prepared to lay down my life for thy truth . . . suffering like a lamb. For the cause is holy. It is thine own! . . . I will not let thee go! No, nor yet for all eternity! And though the world should be thronged with devils – and this body, which is the work of thine hands, should be cast forth, trodden under foot, cut in pieces, . . . consumed to ashes, my soul is thine. Yes, I have thine own word to assure me of it. My soul belongs to thee, and will abide with thee forever! Amen! O God send help! . . . Amen.”

- Martin Luther

Reflection: As Advent comes to its culmination and you celebrate Christmas, reflect upon Martin Luther’s prayer and praise God that He sent His Son, and that because of Christ’s sacrifice we are never forsaken. Then, listen to Audrey Assad’s song, “Immanuel’s Land.”

December 22

Dry bones reborn

by Amy Atkinson

“Therefore, give the people of Israel this message from the Sovereign Lord: I am bringing you back, but not because you deserve it. I am doing it to protect my holy name, on which you brought shame while you were scattered among the nations. I will show how holy my great name is—the name on which you brought shame among the nations. And when I reveal my holiness through you before their very eyes, says the Sovereign Lord, then the nations will know that I am the Lord. For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” (Ezekiel 36:22-27 NLT)

“The Lord took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with bones. He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. Then he asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones become living people again?’

‘O Sovereign Lord,’ I replied, ‘you alone know the answer to that.’

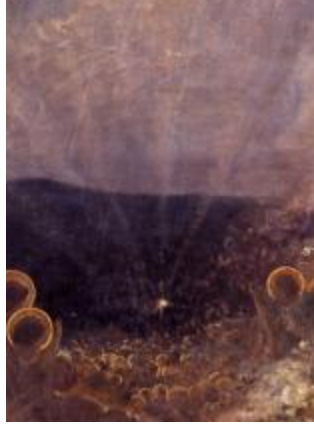
“Then he said to me, ‘Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, “Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”’” (Ezekiel 37:1-6 NLT)

The Hebrew *ruach* [רוח] means “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit.” This is the same word used in Genesis when the spirit is hovering over the waters and in the passages above. But the dry bones are first commanded to listen to the word of God before being promised the breath of God. There is a beautiful relationship between God, the word of God, and the breath of God.

In John 1, we discover that the Word of God flashes back to Genesis 1 and the light in the darkness. God wants to bring life to our dry bones, just as he desired to do so for Israel. This is not because we deserve it, but because he desires relationship; bringing Him glory and us great joy. The promise of a new, clean, light, heart is ours. God will put a new spirit in us that can overflow. Do we understand the important relationship between his light-revealing word and the breath that will fill us with new life when we listen, seek, and obey?

Reflection: Take time to praise the one who wants to bring us out of darkness into light; who wants to give us a new heart; a new spirit. Ask God to reveal His Word to you so that your dry bones can be revived. Ask God to fill you with his “ruach” so that you can overflow.

LIGHT IS BORN



The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:5 English Standard Version [ESV]

December 23

We will continue to fight

by Bethany Stallings

Sojourner Truth was a woman born into slavery and sold to four different owners. At many points in her life, she experienced physical abuse, heartbreak, and loss. One of her owners promised to grant her freedom, but later went back on his promise. She worked long enough to satisfy her sense of obligation to him, then walked away with only one of her children. She, and her baby, were taken in by the Van Wagenens. While staying with them, she became a Christian. She later learned that her five-year-old son had been sold to a man in Alabama. Sojourner Truth decided to take this issue to court.

She could have just given up, but instead she decided to pursue justice for her son. In doing so, she became one of the first African-american women to win a court case against a white male.⁴

After that, Sojourner Truth became a traveling speaker and an active fighter for women's rights and the abolition of slavery.

She once said:

"I will not allow the light of my life to be determined by the darkness around me."

Sojourner Truth acknowledged darkness all around. But would not allow it to overcome her spirit. Instead, she fought for her own light and she lit the way for others as well. She raised her voice, speaking out against injustice.

This is not an imagined fight, or only an internal or psychological one. The struggle against darkness and sin is real. Darkness in our lives and in our world is real. John, the apostle, wrote "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (1 John 1:5). The light is not only shining, and unchanged by the darkness. It will overcome the darkness.

Like Sojourner Truth, we can be light shining, fighting against the darkness.

Reflection: What am I fighting for and against? Do I allow darkness to overcome the light in my life? In what ways can I spread the light of God's love and redemption?

⁴ Biographical information summarized from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sojourner_Truth

December 24

These moments of over-mastery

by Nathan Bingaman

“When I was young, there was a notion among the believers I knew--and I didn’t know anyone who wasn’t a believer--that to feel the presence of God required that one seek God constantly, that one’s spiritual instincts demanded the same sort of regular exercise as the muscles of one’s body. The great fear was not that God would withdraw, but that one’s capacity to perceive him would atrophy. I think of this when I hear people say that they have no religious impulse whatsoever, or when I hear believers, or would-be believers, express a sadness and frustration that they have never been absolutely overpowered by God. I always respond: Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond your self, some wordless mystery straining through words to reach you? Never? Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can’t even acknowledge their existence afterward. Religion is what you do with these moments of over-mastery in your life, these rare times in which you are utterly innocent. It is a means of preserving and honoring something that, ultimately, transcends the elements of whatever specific religion you practice.”

Christian Wiman in the chapter “O Thou Mastering Light,” from his book *My Bright Abyss* [2013]

Reflection: It is always a confronting moment when the light shines on something. Think about how you can prepare for and respond when God meets you next.

December 25

The Light Came Down

from Josh Garrels

“The light came down
Cast the darkness away
He appeared
A helpless child
The light of God came to save us
To the world that He made us
O' Lord and savior
Alleluia”

- Josh Garrels

Reflection: Listen to “The Light Came Down” by Josh Garrels <https://youtu.be/skUUMWb2uvw>