

PRESBYTERIANS TODAY

*Come to Bethlehem
and Be Nourished*



INTRODUCTION

Come to Bethlehem and Be Nourished Advent's Hunger Gives Way to Christmas' Fulfillment

By Donna Frischknecht Jackson, Editor of *Presbyterians Today*



I was hopeful at the start of 2021. Vaccines for a global pandemic were available. Businesses and churches began reopening. Weddings that were put on hold resumed. As the months passed, though, hope began to wane. Coronavirus variants emerged. Debates on mask wearing escalated. Those tirelessly working for justice grew weary. I found myself searching for certainty in a still uncertain world. And now, as the year ends and the Advent season begins, I find myself, like my biblical forebears, walking in darkness. Perhaps you are walking with me, too.

Now more than ever, we need to hold on to the Advent truth Isaiah proclaimed that “those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined.” And we hold on to that promise together — in a community rooted in prayer and marked with compassion and forgiveness. We cannot walk alone. Nor should we.

We need to find our strength in the Good News of that holy night when a Savior for all humankind came to save us. We need to help one another bolster an all too precarious faith, especially in a world that seems to be emerging from a global crisis no better than it was before. Tempers are rising, patience is shorter, and self-preservation seems to be the star guiding businesses, governments and churches.

During this Advent, what if we seek to be the builders of that peaceable kingdom foretold,

boldly committing to build a community that cares for the unloved, the unseen and the unheard? What if we discover once again that all we hunger for is in that ancient feeding trough that cradled a precious gift — a babe who would one day say, “I am the Bread of Life.”



Hearth, home and a loaf of bread

Bread is a key theme for this year's online devotional, which will continue beyond the four weeks of Advent through the 12 Days of Christmas and end on Epiphany, Jan. 6.

The inspiration for this devotional came from an experience I had just before the pandemic uprooted our lives. For three days, I lived in a community without running water and electricity, mastering the skills of 18th-century open-hearth cooking. I slept on a rope bed with a straw mattress. I washed my face with a bucket of cold creek water. And I baked to feed not

only myself, but the many others who were on the same colonial campus participating in other primitive life skills classes.

I didn't just learn how to make bread in a variety of ways: in a Dutch oven over glowing coals, in an outdoor clay beehive oven and in a bread oven in an old stone fireplace. I was struck with a profound awareness that I should never take for granted my daily bread.

This experience revealed how I needed the help of others to make one loaf of bread even possible. It took many hands to cut wood for the fires, to stoke the embers, to mill the grain for flour, to knead the dough, to wash the pots, to set the table and to offer grace. (Perhaps you can guess which task I gladly took on.)

When I returned to running water and electricity, I didn't leave behind what I learned during those three days. I carried the experience with me, especially throughout the pandemic, as I found myself wondering what community building lessons from the past can strengthen our weakened communities of the present.

Howard Thurman joins us

Like *Presbyterians Today's* 2020 Advent and Christmas devotional based on Howard Thurman's "I Will Light Candles This Christmas," we will once again be warmed by the wisdom of Howard Thurman. Each week we will reflect on a verse of his lesser known reflection, "The Sacrament of Christmas."

Thurman — an African American theologian, preacher and activist known for his deep spirituality — viewed the seasons of Advent and Christmas not only sacramentally, but as a time for taking stock of and adjusting our lives. I believe the 2021 Advent and Christmas seasons are asking us to do exactly what Thurman observed: It is time to take stock of and make adjustments in our lives so that we, the body of Christ, can be loving and relevant in the world.

Daily morsels of hope

As Thurman's wisdom feeds us, we will also break open God's Word, with daily Scripture verses to ponder, followed by a reflection and prayer. We will journey to Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means "House of Bread" and in Aramaic means "House of Meat." We will also make bread and share those loaves with others. We will discover how the placing of our newborn Savior in an animal's feeding trough, because there was no bed available for him, was symbolic of how — in him — all our Advent hungers would indeed turn into Christmas joys.

If you are entering this holy time weary and worried, you are not alone. I am there with you. Let us go to the House of Bread. Let us read, listen and share. Let us light the candles around the Advent wreath. Let us bake bread. Let us share those loaves with others.

Let us find hope again — together.



An interactive Advent and Christmas devotional

Bread making as a spiritual practice

This year's devotional invites you to be part of building a tighter-knit community right where you are. Share the devotional with friends and family. Read and reflect together as a small group meeting over Zoom or in person. You are also encouraged to bake bread and share the loaves as gifts with others.

Each Friday in Advent, a bread recipe will be offered. Make more than one loaf so that you can share one and keep the other to be part of your Sunday Advent practice of having a simple meal as you light the candles around the Advent wreath.

You can enjoy the bread as you light the Advent candles as part of your breakfast or later in the day for supper. For either meal, keep it simple: bread, butter and jam for breakfast; bread and soup for dinner. Advent was originally

embraced as a winter Lent, so having simple meals during a season of holiday feasting will make a wonderful spiritual practice.

And for those whose baking skills are not the best — or if there is a week where there is no time to mix, knead and bake — seek out artisan bread in your neighborhood bakeries or specialty shops. Buy a loaf for yourself and a loaf to give away. The local shops will appreciate the business.

Social media participation

Presbyterians Today wants to share your loaves of bread or your lighted Advent candles (or both together) with others. Submit pictures to Donna Frischknecht Jackson at editor@pcusa.org. Please include your name, church and a brief description of and/or reflection about the picture.



An Act of Faith

The Sacrament of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

*I make an act of faith toward all humankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions
brood.*

I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.

I make an act of strength toward feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.

I make an act of trust toward all life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.

I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.

I make a deed to God of all my days –
And look out on life with quiet eyes.

Reflect

As Advent begins, consider the acts of faith God is asking you to show the world. How can your act of faith dispel doubts and put an end to divisiveness that seems to be abundant these days?

Pray

Gracious God, just as the disciples asked for their faith to increase, we too come to you at the start of this holy season asking for more faith. You know where our faith wavers. Come to us, now, so that we can be bold in our witness and ease the unrest of a distrustful world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Amish Friendship Bread

We begin the Advent “House of Bread” journey with a recipe for Amish Friendship Bread. It is called “friendship” bread and it has been described as the “chain letter” of bread making because it uses a sourdough starter that is made in advance and shared with friends to make their own bread.

You can begin this bread at the start of Advent, allowing the time needed for the sourdough starter. When the starter mix is ready, share it with others and make loaves for gift giving. To get started, go to: friendshipbreadkitchen.com/amish-friendship-bread

So that you have a loaf of bread ready for the first Sunday of Advent, either make your favorite quick loaf recipe, buy a loaf at the store or get a boxed mix to whip up. (No judgment here.) As the weeks of Advent continue, remember: A new recipe will be posted each Friday, allowing you time to bake on Saturday and have bread for a Sunday meal around the Advent wreath.

Day 1 | First Sunday of Advent, Nov. 28 The four-candle room charge

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.” — Jeremiah 33:14–16

I began settling into what would be my home for the next three days — a clapboard-sided and wood-shingled roof structure from the 1700s that once served as a tavern for hungry and tired travelers. After putting my quilt on top of the straw mattress in one of the tiny bedrooms on the second floor, I took from my bag four candles. The candles were my payment for choosing to sleep in the tavern rather than a nearby motel during the open-hearth cooking class I signed up for.

Down the narrow stairs and into the kitchen I went. A fire was already blazing in the massive hearth. The cooking instructor was kneeling in

front of a skillet that was placed over hot coals. I peeked over his shoulder and noticed golden biscuits that made my mouth water. “Biscuits made in a skillet?” I asked. “I had no idea you could do that.” He chuckled and looked up. Noticing the candles in my hand, he nodded to a wooden box in the corner. “You can put them there,” he said. I made my way to the box and opened the lid. Inside were hundreds of candles: some with wicks untouched and some burned down to an inch. I placed my candles as if placing money in an offering plate — with reverence and a sense that they would now be part of something bigger.

I sat by the fire, took a biscuit and asked about the curious four-candle room charge. Legend has it that a woman found her retreat into a world without modern-day conveniences so healing that she wanted to thank the founder of this living-history campus. What could she give to show what her stay meant to her? That’s when she thought of four candles. She sent the candles with a note that explained they represented the ones she would light during Advent: hope, peace, joy and love.

“She experienced the real meaning of Advent here in this old tavern,” the instructor said, not taking his eyes off the second batch of biscuits that he had begun. “Watching the fire to make sure it never went out, waiting for bread to be done, lighting candles to chase away the

darkness and gathering with others around the hearth. She said it was Advent being lived out.”

I turned to the box of candles. Have I really “lived” Advent? I broke my biscuit like it was some holy communion wafer and ate silently, pondering.

Truly the days are coming when God’s promises will be fulfilled. Till then, we live Advent: lighting candles of hope, speaking words of peace, sharing the bread of joy and feasting on the abundance of love we will find in that lowly manger bed.

Pray

God of Advent waiting, we empty ourselves of all that keeps us from experiencing the hope, the peace, the joy and love you have for us. We offer you our complete attention. And so, come Emmanuel, come and help us to live in the Advent moment. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Challenge yourself to create a space where there is no humming of electricity, ding of social media notifications or the glow of computer screens. Dare to say no to Zoom meetings or decline signing up for another webinar. Find the divine quiet that can heal. Light the first candle of Advent — the candle of hope — and take some bread, break it, hold it in your hands and think of ways you can offer hope to this crazy, noisy world.



Day 2 | Monday, Nov. 29

Sleeping with bread

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. — Isaiah 40:1, 11

I looked at the straggly Advent wreath that was failing to cheer up my tiny Manhattan apartment and sighed. It wasn’t like the lush evergreen wreaths I remembered my dad making when I was a child. While not pretty to look at, the wreath was perfect as it mirrored how I felt: straggly and sad. I found it ironic lighting the wreath’s first candle, which symbolized “hope.” Could I find hope amid all this quiet and lonely gloom? Every time I had dared to hope in something or someone, those hopes were dashed.

As the lone candle flickered, a gentle knock came to my door. I found no one on the other side. All that was there was a loaf of bread tied

with a ribbon sitting on my welcome mat. A note from the elderly neighbor who had left it read: “Something to fill your stomach. Something to fill your heart.”

I went back inside, sliced a piece of the bread and sat back down in front of my Advent wreath. As I chewed on the bread’s yeasty goodness, I remembered a book I had read called “Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life.” It is the story about how orphans, rescued from concentration camps at the end of World War II, were taken to England to be placed with families. The workers caring for the children noticed how many couldn’t sleep. They were afraid and anxious. So, each night the children were given a slice of bread to hold as they were tucked into bed. The workers discovered that the children slept better with bread in their hands. It eased their fears.

I took another slice of bread and held as if I was entering into a sacred moment. In a way, I was. For as I held the bread, I allowed myself



to enter the despair those children must have felt, and ultimately, the hope that was renewed. I understood how in the holding of the bread, they were comforted. They finally felt safe, seen and loved.

Howard Thurman wrote that if we listen in the stillness of the quiet, “we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear and hope to despair.”

In seasons of straggly, sad Advent wreaths, listen carefully to the whispers of the heart. Hear them tell you that you are safe, you are seen and you are loved. Advent has begun. Hope can never be dashed. Hold tightly to the babe of Bethlehem who is coming into this world — again.



Day 3 | Tuesday, Nov. 30 One who comes with bread

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps. — Psalm 85:10–13

I had one thing to remember and one thing only: Pick up the basket of tea breads in the home economics room before meeting the rest of the members of my high school’s cooking club on the bus. I was a freshman in a club of mainly cool juniors and excited about our trip to a nursing home where we were going to put on a short holiday skit, sing a few Christmas carols and then give out the treats we baked.

It wasn’t until we walked into the facility’s activity room that I realized I had forgotten the basket of tea breads was back at school. I felt horrible. The cool juniors rolled their eyes. Our home economics teacher tried to make me feel better and reassured me: “Everything will turn out wonderfully. Don’t fret.”

I did fret, though, and as we finished singing the last fa-la-las of “Deck the Halls,” I was anything but jolly. This was the part of the program where we were going to hand out the tea breads. Now we had nothing to give. All we could do was wish each resident a Merry Christmas. As I made my way to talk with the residents, I watched as my club members gathered in a safe group of their own off to the side of the room.

Pray

Caring God, you know the fears and the hurts that keep us awake at night. Help us to remember that you do see, hear and love us. We know this to be true because you sent your Son, Jesus, to the world as an answer to our aches and longings. May we grab hold of your hand this day and be comforted by your presence. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Before going to bed tonight, reach for a slice of bread to sleep with. I’m not suggesting a real slice — unless you feel so moved to do that. Rather let this “slice” be a list of what you are grateful for. Naming all the “God goodness” that is still in the world will comfort you — and help you sleep more soundly.

Without something in their hands to give to the residents, many of the cool juniors were suddenly shy, not really knowing how to engage with the senior citizens.

I knelt beside one resident — a frail woman in a wheelchair. Her arthritic hands tremored slightly as she took mine that trembled slightly, too, not really knowing what to say. But something did come to me: a confession. Yes, before I knew it, I was confessing to her how it was my fault that she was not getting a tea bread. I expressed how sorry I was that I had nothing to give. That’s when her hand squeezed mine with surprising strength and told me the real gift was me being there by her side. “Bread is always nice to get,” she said, “but the real blessing is companionship.”

The psalmist tells us that “faithfulness shall spring up from the ground.” It sprang up that day, and I will never forget how the act of simply being there for someone is perhaps one of the greatest things we can ever do in this life. We all need a companion. The word “companion” is derived from two Latin words: “com”, which means “with,” and “panis,” which means “bread.” The word was originally used to describe someone you would share a meal with.

Howard Thurman said that we must all ask ourselves two questions. The first is “Where am I going?” and the second is “Who will go with me?” Whether we come with or without bread, there are many people who need a companion. They are the ones often forgotten during the holidays, hungering for company. Go to them — now — and after the holidays are over.

Pray

Faithful God, in our loneliest moments, we only need to turn to your beautiful words that you will never forget or forsake us. You walk with us. You guide us. You even carry us when we have no strength to go on. Thank you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Is there a friend you keep saying you will call? Has a loved one been reaching out to you, but

you find you have no time to see them or talk to them? We say we will make time for others, but that time slips away. This Advent, put an end to slipping time. Take a loaf of bread, a tin of cookies or just the gift of yourself and visit someone. But remember to be mindful of COVID-19 precautions that are still needed to prevent spreading the virus. And if you feel inspired, try making this recipe for Cranberry Apricot Quick Bread: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/cranberry-apricot-quick-bread-recipe

Day 4 | Wednesday, Dec. 1

The bread song

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. — John 6:5–11

There's an old German proverb that goes, "Whose bread I eat, his song I sing." The saying basically means whoever will feed your hungers in the world is the one whom you will follow. All throughout history, we have seen how true this is. We have seen people give up their beliefs and morals to fall in line with the one who is promising "bread" for the day.

Yet when I hear the miracle of how five barley loaves fed a crowd of 5,000, I can't help thinking of that German proverb in a more positive light. I can't help thinking of the beautiful song that others began singing about a generous, young boy because of his selfless act of giving what little he had. It's a song that we all need to sing. It's a song of no more hoarding. It's a song that says belief in the common good still exists.

Last summer, "The Atlantic" magazine had an article that questioned whether people still believe in the common good. The reporter talked

about how in a world of a deadly, ongoing and wearisome pandemic, divisions were growing stronger between the vaxxers and anti-vaxxers and between the masked and nonmasked. How did society get to the place of only caring for oneself without any thought of others? What happened to the common good?

We are in a season of Advent, which invites us to prayerfully make our way to the Christ child, reaching out to others along the way as we journey. Yet, too often, the focus on helping others gets overlooked because we find ourselves fearfully safeguarding what we own and what we think we are entitled to. The song we tend to sing is that of a broken world — "What's in It for Me?" is the name of that song, I think — rather than the song of generosity that can bring hope and healing to many. We will never know how God will turn our smallest acts of generosity into big miracles unless we are willing to participate in the miracle like that young boy with five measly barley loaves did. What would be your bread song that others will sing?

Pray

God of many miracles and abundant grace, create in us a selfless heart, seeking to live in a way where everything we do and say, is done with forethought of how it will either hurt or help the world you have created. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take a good look at what is happening in your community. Where are there discrepancies between the haves and the have-nots? Investigate what is happening in terms of policies in the schools, in local government and town councils. This Advent, how can you do something for the greater good of where you live?





Day 5 | Thursday, Dec. 2

Alertly resting

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. — Psalm 62:5–8

The sun had set on the first day of my open-hearth cooking class. It was a long and tiring day. I didn't realize how much time and energy it took just to have one's daily bread. As the last dish was washed in a tin bucket filled with the ever boiling cauldron of water hanging from an iron rod in the hearth, I could hear footsteps above me as others were getting ready to turn in for the night.

I wasn't ready to go to bed, so after I threw the dishwater out the back door, I sat down for a moment on the ragged stone step. All I could hear were the beautiful sounds of God's Creation: wind rustling in trees, the creek gurgling, the occasional hoot of an owl and the eerie, lonesome howl of a coyote.

There was also another beautiful sound that is often not heard anymore. Voices of people talking to one another around a table. It was then I made a promise to myself that when I reentered modern life I was going to do my best to have stillness be part of my nightly routine rather than the chaos of checking emails and social media. I would end my day talking more to my husband and talking more to God.

For some people, the world came to a crashing end back in October — OK, I am being dramatic. But on Oct. 4, the day Facebook and Instagram didn't work for many hours, friends who depended on the constant connection freaked out. How will people know what I am doing? How will I know what my friends are doing? And those relying on digital technology for time-zapping webinars were left without an



Day 6 | Friday, Dec. 3

Beauty out of ashes

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to

audience.

I admit, I wasn't happy at first when Facebook wasn't working. But that unhappiness reminded me that I had made a vow, which I had broken, to step away from the social media craziness. That night, without the ability to post and scroll, I found myself once again enveloped by the stillness that spoke to my soul. I found that I was calmer. I was happier. I didn't have the negativity of the rumors and rants that consume social media affecting my mood.

Advent is a time when we need to willingly enter the holy silences so that we can hear more clearly God's voice speaking to us.

In his book, "Deep is the Hunger," Howard Thurman writes about the power of silence. He says: "I abandon all that I think I am, all that I hope to be, all that I believe I possess. I let go of the past, I withdraw my grasping hand from the future. In the great silence of this moment, I alertly rest my soul."

"Alertly rest." It seems like an oxymoron, but I can't think of a more appropriate way to describe Advent. It is a time where we all must alertly rest. And we should not wait to do that until Facebook fails us again.

Pray

God, our souls are waiting for you this season. We want your holy stillness to surround us. But it is so hard to find the silence we need to be renewed. Help us to turn off the chatter in this world. Help us to find the strength to step away from negative news and conversations. Let us be able to hear the beauty of you talking to us in the sounds of your Creation. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Create a daily practice, either in the morning or evening, to turn off all devices (phones, tablets, computers, radios and TVs) and sit in stillness. If complete stillness is hard to find, then buy meditative music that echoes the sounds of nature to play in the background.

comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion — to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. — Isaiah 61:1–3

Something struck me as I skimmed over the recipes the instructor handed to the participants

of the open-hearth cooking class: There was no yeast, baking soda or baking powder in any of the recipes. I raised my hand and asked, “How will the bread we make be light and fluffy?” I soon learned that 18th-century cooking didn’t have many of the leavening agents used in the modern kitchen. Rather there was something they called “potash.” And as you can guess where this is going, yes, there is “ash” in that word.

Ashes from burned elms, beech and maple trees were gathered and mixed with water to use as a leavening agent. The potash was then burned at a high temperature, resulting in a white ash sometimes called “pearl ash.” When mixed with milk, honey or molasses, the pearl ash would bubble and cause quick breads to rise. It was a technique Native Americans used to leaven their breads, and they shared their knowledge with the white immigrants to their lands.

So, there I was that afternoon doing something I never thought I would ever do — make gingerbread with the ash of burnt wood. I was skeptical and kept asking the question, “Would the gingerbread taste like burnt wood?” Turns out, the pearl ash didn’t leave a sooty aftertaste, and the gingerbread we took out of the bread oven and enjoyed that night was light and moist.

Who would have thought something sweet could come from ash? God can. God can take messes left behind from all the metaphorical fires we have set — those arguments, rumors, assumptions and hurtful words — and redeem them. God can take the ash in our lives and turn it into something beautiful because God is a God of new beginnings and redemption.

During Advent, the prophet Isaiah prophetically speaks of the One who will come to save us — the Messiah — and all he will do: bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, comfort all who mourn and give garlands in place of ashes.

In my kitchen cupboard, I now have a jar of pearl ash that I found at a company specializing in 18th-century cooking utensils and supplies. I will use it to make my holiday gingerbread, and as I measure and mix, I will think of all the times God has made something beautiful from the ashes in my life.

Pray

Redeeming God, our hearts thank you for the many times you have brought us out of trials, through suffering and restored our brokenness. You do make beautiful things out of our messes. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Gingerbread

Let us get ready for the second Sunday of Advent, by making some delicious gingerbread. The bread is perfect for this time of year with the warm fragrance of holiday spices. Don’t worry, you won’t have to use ash from a fireplace in this recipe. Traditional baking soda will do. And remember to make extra to give to someone who is alone, grieving or struggling with depression. Go to: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/gingerbread-recipe



Day 7 | Saturday, Dec. 4 Needing one another

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” — Genesis 2:18

There she was kneeling in front of the huge hearth puffing on a little spark that refused to be coaxed into a burning flame. She fanned her hands to encourage the spark. Nothing. She rearranged the kindling and twigs in hopes that would do the trick and get the fire going. Nothing. The spark was gone.

I watched her from the doorway of the “buttery” — a tiny pantry-like room that would have housed dishes, pots, bottles of ale and sometimes, not always, crocks of butter. I was on my way to get out the mugs for the coffee that

I soon realized would not be coming anytime soon. We needed the fire that our cooking companion was trying to start to roast the beans, which would have to cool and then be ground before steeping them in a kettle of boiling water.

Before I could ask if there was anyone willing to make a coffee run to the nearest Dunkin’ Donuts, an elderly man hobbled into the room with an armful of wood. He stopped suddenly at the scene in front of him, realizing the logs were not needed now. What was needed was another pair of hands to help get the fire going. His old knees creaked as he knelt down next to the woman who was beyond frustrated. He took the flint rock and steel from her hands. We didn’t have matches as this was a true adventure of living in a different time.

Before he began striking the metal against the



flint, another participant joined to help, telling him to wait as he took the time to rearrange the jute and twigs so that there would be more air flowing to feed the precarious spark. I remained standing in the buttery observing the trio. I had quickly learned that fire making was not one of my skills. I was good at hauling buckets of water from the creek and doing the dishes.

Finally, a spark turned into a flame, which turned into a blaze. There were cheers and smiles. Hands from other cooking participants reached out to help those fire makers up from the floor. I came out with the mugs and placed them on the table. Coffee beans were poured into a shallow pan to roast. It took a few hours, but finally we had our morning coffee at noon. And it never tasted so good.

I learned that day that I cannot do all things, nor am I expected to. Yet all too often we don't admit when we can't do something. All too often we hesitate to ask for help as if asking for help is a sign of weakness. Advent, though, is the perfect time to remember we were not meant to toil alone. We were created for community. God saw that at the very beginning in the Garden of

Eden. God saw it later as well when Love came down to dwell — and help us in our weaknesses — at Christmas.

Howard Thurman concluded that living is itself an act of interdependence: “However strong we may be or think we are, we are constantly leaning on others. However self-sufficient we are, our strength is always being supplied by others unknown to us.”

Pray

Holy God, from the very beginning you knew that we could not walk this walk of faith alone. We need others to lean on. Forgive us when we become so self-reliant that we shut others out. Forgive us when we are afraid to admit when we need help. Turn our eyes to see the helpers in our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take an honest assessment of yourself, identifying your weaknesses and then be bold and reach out for help. After you have identified where you are weak, take stock of the strengths you have that could help others in your community.

An Act of Joy

The Sacrament of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

I make an act of faith toward all humankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions
brood.

*I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.*

I make an act of strength toward feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.

I make an act of trust toward all life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.

I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.

I make a deed to God of all my days –
And look out on life with quiet eyes.

Reflect

As we enter the second week of Advent, take time to reflect on the second stanza of Howard Thurman’s “The Sacrament of Christmas.” How will God use you to “make an act of joy toward all sad hearts?”

Pray

Advent God, while the world around us is making merry and singing choruses of “Joy to the World,” we know that for many, such joy is only on the surface. Many hearts are sad, many hearts are breaking, and tears abound. This week, open our eyes to those who are hurting. May we be the hands of Christ to catch their tears. Use us to bring more acts of joy into your world. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Day 8 | 2nd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 5 The heel of the bread

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. — Micah 5:2

The “heels” of the bread — that’s what I grew up calling those end pieces of a loaf that no one wanted to eat. At least, I didn’t want to eat them. Every time I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich after a Saturday morning of watching cartoons, my little fingers would rummage through the plastic bag of Wonder Bread, reaching past the coarse heel to get to the soft and spongy slices. I can’t tell you how many bread bags, with heels in them, have been tossed into the garbage throughout my life.

Bethlehem, the House of Bread, was the heel of the clans of Judah: an insignificant village where nothing much happened nor would anything great come from it. When it came to

putting the plan for salvation into place, God though, didn’t bypass Bethlehem for a much greater clan. Rather, God looked upon the lowly heel of clans as the ideal place for Jesus to be born. In doing so, God sent an important message to us: Stop discarding the “heels of bread” in the world — those people and places we deem unfit or unworthy.

I would like to say I no longer toss bread heels into the garbage, but that would be a lie. My fingers still rummage through the plastic bag, bypassing the heel to get to the “real” bread. But there is someone who doesn’t mind the end pieces: my dad.

I remember many mornings where he would happily take the piece of bread no one wanted. He would toast and butter it and drizzle honey on top. He would then sit at the table and smile at me as I looked on in disgust at him eating that part of the loaf.

There’s something else I remember. As my dad held the bread’s heel in his hand, he would look over at my special-needs brother. His disabil-



ity was not an easy thing to deal with in our household. I will always carry memories of tension and sadness that permeated the air. There just weren't many resources back in the 70s for parents of children with special needs.

Perhaps my dad knew there was more to his son than society was seeing, that his son could do more than what the school system judged him capable of doing. Just like the heel of bread, my brother was not something to be discarded. Something great lies within each one of us, no matter what our abilities may be. Everyone is worthy. Everything has value. Just ask God, who chose the unwanted heel of clans — Bethlehem — to be the birthplace of our salvation.

Pray

Loving God, who sees such potential in each one of us, we ask that in this season of Advent we may



Day 9 | Monday, Dec. 6 A platter of forgotten joy

You shall take choice flour, and bake twelve loaves of it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. You shall place them in two rows, six in a row, on the table of pure gold. You shall put pure frankincense with each row, to be a token offering for the bread, as an offering by fire to the Lord. Every sabbath day Aaron shall set them in order before the Lord regularly as a commitment of the people of Israel, as a covenant forever. They shall be for Aaron and his descendants, who shall eat them in a holy place, for they are most holy portions for him from the offerings by fire to the Lord, a perpetual due. — Leviticus 24:5–6

My open-hearth cooking classmates gathered around to look at the bread I had taken out of the clay outdoor oven. The oohs and aahs I had hoped for were nil. I did, though, get a lot of sympathy for my charred and unrisen blob for our dinner. “Better luck next time” and “It was just your first attempt” were some of the things said as we made our way back into the old tavern that served as our classroom.

As the meat pies and baked beans were set out, the cooking instructor noticed I had placed my bread off to the side, hoping it would be forgotten. But it wasn't. Rather, he vanished into the pantry where the dishes and plates were stored. He soon emerged with a platter in his hand. While it was chipped in a few places, the white porcelain platter with its delft blue flowers and birds was elegant and beautiful. “Put the

begin seeing the world with your eyes. Help us to stop overlooking the “heels of bread” in our lives. Help us to see the value, the potential, the goodness and the worth in all that we are too quick to judge and discard. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

On the second Sunday of Advent, pause and light a candle: either the one on your Advent wreath or any candle you may have in your home. Take your bread, bless it, break it and think more deeply about the “heels of bread” in your life. Who has been discarded, ignored or overlooked? And if you still throw away actual heels of bread, stop. Collect them during this season of Advent and use them to make a delicious bread pudding. Here's a tasty recipe: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/maple-walnut-bread-pudding-recipe

bread on this and set it on the table,” he said, insisting that what I called a “blob” of bread was worthy of such an honor.

As we dined, we talked about what we learned that day. We talked about the recipes that could have been improved with another dash of salt or more freshly grated nutmeg. When we got to the topic of my dismal bread, it was remarked that while it was not pretty to look at, it was deceptively tasty. It was also noted that the presentation of a less than perfect loaf on such a beautiful platter was profound. The conversation became philosophical as we talked about beauty mingling with ugliness. What is true beauty? Who gets to define what is ugly?

The candles in the room grew brighter as the meal continued and dusk gave way to the pitch black of night. The conversation lulled as we ate, but was soon broken by an older woman who was staring at the bread on the platter.

“My grandmother always made a special presentation of our daily bread — always! No matter how small the loaf or how stale it was, she would always find a pretty plate for it. She said it reminded her to always be grateful for having not just bread on the table, but others to share it with,” she said.

Howard Thurman once wrote, “Whatever may be the stresses of a particular day, there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy.” Leviticus talks about presenting loaves of bread on a table made of gold. There was no golden table that night to put my loaf on, but that century-old, chipped platter with

beautiful blue swirls of flowers and birds was just as precious. What if every day, we took the time to make a special presentation of the daily bread we eat? Could such a simple act be for us “the trailing beauty of forgotten joy?”

Pray

Adoring God, with you by our side, every day becomes a day to celebrate. Help us to see the divine in the mundane. Help us to remember what is ordinary can become extraordinary. Every moment is a moment in which joy can be rekindled in our

Day 10 | Tuesday, Dec. 7 Bright hope for tomorrow

“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.” Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’” She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah. — 1 Kings 17:12–16 (NIV)

History remembers Mary Tilden Dewey as the feisty housewife who made 80 loaves of bread to feed the colonial soldiers on the eve of the Battle of Bennington in 1777. The trough used to mix the dough now sits in a museum in Bennington, Vermont. Every time I have seen it behind the display case, I have found myself wondering what was going through her mind as she toiled over the hot fires making sure all those loaves didn’t burn. Did making the bread help ease her fears and worries? Did it give her hope for an uncertain tomorrow?

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a surge in bread making. Perhaps people were seeking to ease their fears through the primal act of kneading. Whatever the reason, all this bread making ultimately led to a shortage of flour — which didn’t help in the easing of fears category. If anything, it added to a growing sense of despair. What would tomor-

row bring? *In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

Go deeper

During the season of Advent, consider making special bread plates for yourself or to give as gifts. Buy solid color dinner plates and nontoxic, permanent markers and decorate the plates. Perhaps include your favorite Bible verse in the center of the plate. Bake the decorated plates in an oven set at 350 degrees for about 30 minutes. When cooled, wash the plates. They are now ready for loaves of bread to be placed on them.

row bring?

The widow of Zarephath, whom the prophet Elijah visits in 1 Kings, knew what tomorrow would bring: death for her and her son. There was a famine in the region, and she had just enough flour and oil for one more loaf. So, when Elijah comes knocking at her door and requests bread to eat, of course, she laughs bitterly. Elijah, though, tells her to make the bread and she will see there will be enough for her tomorrows.

We are not free of the global pandemic yet. There are still communities experiencing surges in virus cases. There are still too many deaths. And, yes, there are still empty shelves in grocery stores — something I never thought I would see in my lifetime. There are times I worry about having enough for my tomorrows, and I must fight through the tendency to hoard.

I need to remember that if I am ever without enough flour for my bread, I can reach out to a friend or neighbor and ask, “May I borrow some flour?”

When was the last time we ever knocked on someone’s door and asked to borrow something we didn’t have enough of? In an earlier time, the knocks on our door were expected and answered. Flour, sugar, butter and eggs were always willingly given. It was part of the unspoken, sacred pact of being in a community. I was hoping that our time of pandemic living would have helped us renew that sacred pact of being here for one another. I’m not so sure it has.

I went through my pantry the other day. I needed brown sugar to make my molasses crinkles for the church’s Christmas cookie exchange. As I scanned the shelves, I discovered four bags of flour behind the oats and rice. I remember the day I put them into the shopping cart. My husband looked perplexed. “There’s a flour shortage. We need bread,” I replied. He then pointed out



that the store's bread aisle was fully stocked.

I really didn't need all those bags of flour, did I? Many tomorrows have come, and God has provided. But there is someone who does need that flour. As hunger in the U.S. and around the world grows, there are many more "widows of Zarephath" among us. I looked at the flour and asked myself, "What else have I hoarded that could have helped someone in need?"

Pray

Provider God, forgive us for the many times we have hoarded in fear of not having enough. Help us this



Day 11 | Wednesday, Dec. 8 Hungering for God's word

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. — Amos 8:11–12

The old wooden windmill stood on a mound of green: a silent witness to a time when its weathered blades once turned with the wind, producing flour to feed others. But that day in East Hampton, New York, no one seemed to take note of the relic that was built in the early 1800s. Cars whizzed by, never stopping to learn more about its history, never pausing for even a second to hear how vital the mill was to the survival of those who came to this part of Long Island so long ago.

I stopped, though. I was intrigued with Old Hook Mill, one of the 11 historic wooden windmills that still stand on Long Island. I was in the Hamptons to fill in the pulpit for a friend who was on vacation. I think I might have been the only person to come to the playground of the rich, with no desire to sit on the beach, shop the tony retailers or dine in one of the many upscale eateries. I preferred to explore the Hamptons of yesteryear — to hear the whispers of wisdom from the past rather than the empty promises of the present.

So, there I was fighting traffic to find a parking space close to the windmill with no such luck. I parked where I could and walked on the crowded sidewalk, past the packed outdoor cafes. When I got to the windmill, I was delighted to see it was open for tours. I paid my \$5 and went in. A young woman looked just as delighted to

day to trust that our "flour and oil" will never run out and, in that trusting, may our hearts become ever more generous. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Throughout this season of Advent, you are encouraged to bake bread and share it with others in your community. As you do, take time to explore ways to eradicate hunger for good. Bread for the World, a Christian advocacy group, has many ways you can work toward that goal of everyone having food on their table. Visit bread.org to learn more.

see me. She looked out the entryway of the mill, nodded to the traffic going by and said, "I don't get many visitors. No one seems to be very interested in hearing how this mill once fed thousands." She continued her history lesson, telling me that an 1860 "Census of Industry" recorded that Old Hook turned 5,000 bushels of grain into flour that year. "No one went hungry. And today? If there was a need to have to make our own bread, this mill could once again be operational," she said, "But no one seems to recognize what this mill has done and still can do."

The prophet Amos comes to us this Advent speaking about a famine the Lord will send. And when he mentions the famine will be one of hearing God's word, I can't help but think about the Old Hook Mill and its message of provision that was not being heard. God stands among us this day, wanting us to listen to where our hungers will be met. But we whiz by God during our busy days with so many things to do. This Advent, may the Spirit's wind start turning the spiritual blades in our lives so that we truly hear God's life-giving words.

Pray

Steadfast God, you are always amid our lives, but so often we run right by you, failing to see, failing to hear, failing to pause and recognize how you nurture and care for us. We pause right now and acknowledge you. We need you. We want you. O come, O come, Emmanuel and revive us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Delve into the history of where you live. Scour the archives of a library. Talk to a local historian. Hear again the stories of provision: a time of coming together and a time of revival in your community. What are the "windmills" that have gone unnoticed?

Day 12 | Thursday, Dec. 9

I want to be Amish

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. — Acts 2:46

Red brake lights flashing on and off were a strange sight to see on this strip of rural road. It was strange because there was hardly ever another car to be seen for miles. Even stranger was the reason for all these cars. There was an Amish barn raising taking place on the property of a local farmer, and many people came to watch. There had never been Amish before in this part of upstate New York, which bordered Vermont. But here they were. And I was excited.

One of things I knew I would miss when leaving the church I had served in Maryland was the clip-clop of horses that pulled the Amish buggies. I lived close to the border of Pennsylvania, which many Amish and Mennonites called home; so slowing down for buggy traffic was expected.

I would miss seeing the Amish because I have always secretly admired their way of life: their conviction to live in a way that goes against the grain of modernity, their courage to say no to technology and their commitment to live in a tight-knit community with others.

During my Manhattan days, where I was a young editor covering the fashion industry's influence on fine jewelry designs and the newest creations, I would often say on my stressed-out, drop-dead, deadline days: "I want to be Amish." My colleagues would look at me in disbelief that I, standing in designer shoes and wearing a fashionable dress, was saying such a thing. As much as I loved the life I had, deep down I knew it was not where my ultimate fulfillment would come.

"I want a simple pegboard to hang my one dress on. I want to live off the land, make my bread and be thankful for the little things in life," I would say.

The Amish are known for simple living, but their life is anything but simple. When I drive by the Amish weeding their huge gardens by hand in the heat of summer, I start to feel weary.

When I see them plowing the hard, stone-filled soil in this part of the country with just their horse and plow, I can't imagine how challenging it must be. It is backbreaking work for me to break just a small patch of new ground for a garden bed with a high-powered tiller.

I no longer see Amish living as simple. Rather I see it as sacred. And perhaps that is the life I have wanted: the sacredness of breaking bread together not just once a month in church, but everyday around a table filled with friends who I know are there for me and I for them. I want the sacredness of community that the Amish represent as they help one another build a barn, sew a quilt and pickle beets. I want the sacred life modeled by the first Christians who Acts tells us came together, sharing bread, sharing possessions, sharing joys and sharing grief.

The Amish have come to upstate New York. I once again get to hear the clip-clop of horse hoofs on payment. I get to slow down on my rural roads to let a buggy pass by. And each time I stop at their roadside bake stands and buy a shoofly pie or a loaf of Amish Friendship Bread, I hear my younger self gently remind me of my desire I have still not fully realized: "I want to be Amish." I want the sacredness of a life together where we build up, rather than tear down, and where fractures are healed in the act of sharing our daily bread.

Pray

Companion God, at the very beginning, you envisioned us not to live isolated lives, but to be in a community. You gave Adam a helper in the garden. Jesus paired disciples to go out together to share the love of God. And the early Christians came together regularly to break bread and share stories of your goodness. Help us to widen our circles of community. Help us to redefine what community is. Help us to honor the sacredness of living together in peace and with joy. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

How sacred is the community you are living in? What are the new communities God is asking to be created where you live? Challenge yourself this day to really see who is missing in your community that you call your church.





Day 13 | Friday, Dec. 10
Bread, the universal language of love

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. — 1 Corinthians 10:17

Bread has been “the staff of life” in all cultures for thousands of years. In China there is “mantou,” which is dough that is either fried or steamed. In India, there is “naan,” which is unleavened bread baked in a clay oven. Corn tortillas are the staple in Mexico; while in the Philippines, “pandesal,” which means “bread of salt,” is a bread usually eaten for breakfast. In South Africa, there is a bread that is more like a firm pudding and called green mealie bread. Green mealies are a type of sweet corn; thus, the bread is more like a dessert. I know because I had the privilege of tasting it. It was a slice of heaven on earth.

In my former life, I travelled the world for a fine jewelry magazine, reporting on trends and the market prices of diamonds (thus, the trip to South Africa and its many diamond mines). I had the opportunity to taste the bread of life in all its delicious incarnations. But the memories that have been my most treasured ones are not of all the breads I got to taste. They have been of the times where I, a stranger in a strange land, found myself welcomed — even cared for — by angels bearing bread.

“Flight 202 has been delayed. Please check with the gate attendant for more information.”



Chapati

Bread is the universal language of love and of welcome. As the second of week of Advent winds down and we prepare to enter the third week of this holy season — lighting the third candle on the Advent wreath this Sunday, our recipe will be from another part of the world — “chapati,” which is an unleavened flatbread common in many South Asian countries. Made with white whole wheat or sprouted wheat, this bread is easy to roll out. It has a mild, slightly sweet flavor and is a quick accompaniment to serve alongside most any meal. This recipe is one that doubles nicely — making it easy to share. Go to kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/whole-grain-flatbread-chapati-recipe

I sighed with all the others gathered at the gate. I was eager to get back home to New York City. My week in Bangkok had been long and grueling. It had been one of those trips where everything that could go wrong did. On top of all the glitches, I hadn’t packed appropriately. I had loaded my suitcase with wintry sweaters that were just wrong for Thailand’s high humidity. I sweltered, not wanting to wear for seven days straight the one and only appropriate cotton shirt I had packed.

If that wasn’t enough, I was also nursing a broken heart. Where I really wanted to be was not in an exotic part of the world, but in my apartment, crying into a pint of ice cream. I sat in the hard chair staring into space, thinking about the losses in my life. The more I thought, the more my eyes began filling with tears.

At first, I didn’t notice the three Thai women nearby who, even though there were plenty of chairs to sit in, were seated on the floor. But their colorful chattering got my attention. I watched as they reached into their bags for food, taking out stacks of roti, a pan-fried flat bread, and what looked to me to be the curry rolls I had fallen in love with all week. They sat cross-legged in a circle making this makeshift airport meal into a ceremonial banquet.

Suddenly, their chattering stopped. All eyes were on me. I gave a feeble smile and tried to look away. They would not have that. They patted the empty space in their circle, inviting me to join them. I shook my head no, but they insisted. A hand holding a curry roll was extended to me, insisting that I take it. I nodded a thank you.

While Christmas is a Christian celebration, Howard Thurman always felt its message has something for people of all faiths and even no faith, writing, “For the Christmas season, we affirm our solidarity with the whole human race in its long struggle to become humane, and to reveal divinity with which all humankind shares.”

I eventually made my way onto the floor, joining their circle. They didn’t speak English. I didn’t speak Thai. Yet they could see I was hurting as one woman pointed to my tears and then placed her hand over her heart. Her two friends gave a knowing smile. They too had known heartache. More bread was passed. My heart was lifting. Bread is not the only thing that

is universal. Heartache is as well. And so is the ability to be humane to one another.

Pray

Universal God, help us this day to remember that in all our differences — from the way we look, to

the language we speak, to the bread we break — our hearts can still beat in sync with one another. May we remember more the many things we have in common with others rather than focus on what keeps us apart. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Day 14 | Saturday, Dec. 11
Angel biscuits

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. — Psalm 30:5

There is nothing more comforting than walking into a home with bread that is baking in the oven. The scent is like a warm embrace. It's comforting. It's nostalgic. This time of year, especially, when I smell bread baking, I find myself remembering Ella and the gift she gave her family of faith.

Ella was a farm girl through and through. Or so I heard. Sadly, I didn't get to know her as she was already in hospice when I came to the community as pastor. But I heard the stories of how she would tend to the goats and cows, mow the lawn with a push mower well into her 80s, and how she was always dreaming up one more mission project for the church. What Ella was most famous for, though, was her light and fluffy biscuits. She made them for every church dinner. She made them as gifts for those who were sick or grieving. She made batches and batches of them for families with young children that she knew were hungry.

A few days before she died, I went to her. As usual, there was a steady stream of visitors. The first thing that greeted me when I walked through the door was the scent of biscuits baking. Ella's daughters were busy in the kitchen baking them. Ella was in a bed set up in the living room with a view of the kitchen, her eyes opening every now and then to check in on the bakers. There was also a tree set up on the other side of her bed. The only decoration, aside from the white lights, was an angel on top. With her soft wings unfurled, her head tilting in Ella's direction, it looked to me like the angel was keeping a close watch over Ella. Before I left, Ella's daughters told me how much their mother

wanted to make one more batch of biscuits for her church family.

Ella died two days before Christmas. As I sat with the family making funeral arrangements, the daughters had an idea: Would it be possible to make Ella's biscuits and hand them out to the congregation as a gift at her funeral service? I had a better idea.

Christmas Eve came and as was the tradition in the church to celebrate the Lord's Supper on that night, I made sure to have the biscuits Ella's daughters had made. And inside the worship bulletin, was a copy of Ella's recipe. As worshipers opened their bulletins and saw the recipe, eyes filled with tears. Visitors who didn't even know Ella were touched as well. And as I prepared to invite the children of God to come to the table to share the bread and cup, I announced that the bread would be the biscuits that Ella was so famous for: biscuits made from her worn, torn recipe card that read: "Angel Biscuits."

"Truly he taught us to love one another" was heard from the choir singing "O Holy Night" as the communion elements were shared. It was a lesson Ella mastered in her life, showing her love for others one "angel" biscuit at a time.

Pray

God, in this season of joy, we find ourselves wiping a tear, remembering those who are no longer with us. We take comfort in knowing, though, that someday we will sit at the heavenly table together again with those we miss. Till then, we thank you for the many ways their memories live on, be it a treasured recipe or a funny story that we share at the holiday table. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

What are the treasured recipes in your family? Collect them and compile them into a book to pass along the memories to others.



An Act of Strength

The Sacrament of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

I make an act of faith toward all humankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions
brood.

I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.

*I make an act of strength toward feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.*

I make an act of trust toward all life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.

I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.

I make a deed to God of all my days –
And look out on life with quiet eyes.

Reflect

We are halfway to Bethlehem, the House of Bread, and it's time to pause and reflect on the journey so far. What acts of faith have you shown others that have chased away doubts? What acts of joy have brought laughter to heavy hearts? This week, as we light the Advent candles and bake, share and eat our bread, let us meditate on the strength of God's Son, a gift to humankind, which gives to us when life grows dim.

Pray

God of light and hope, life has a way of beating us down: so many people hurting, so many children hungry, and so many dying. But in you we find our strength. In you, we see that in the deepening darkness, your light shines brighter. We are never alone. We turn to you and ask boldly, O God, to restore us this day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Day 15 | 3rd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 12 The pie maker

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. — Isaiah 12:2–4

Over the course of our time together, I and my open-hearth cooking companions found a rhythm to our days. The awkwardness of being strangers eased as we shared stories while chopping, measuring and mixing at the well-worn wooden table that had many stories to tell if its aged slabs could talk. We fell into roles we were good at: wood collector, fire maker, dough kneader, dishwasher, etc. The instructor, though, noticed we were getting too comfortable and decided to challenge us.

You can guess where this is going. Challeng-

ing those who are comfortable rarely goes well, especially if you have the job title of “premier piecrust maker.” Yes, one of our cooking companions — who boasted how she had spent an entire summer at a historic site showcasing 18th-century kitchen skills — had to relinquish making the crusts for our savory meat pies that day. Instead, she would tend to the smoky fires. The piecrusts would be made by an older man who had failed several times already in making a buttery, light crust.

So, there he was at the old table clumsily working the butter and flour, with the piecrust queen looking over his shoulder remarking: “Don’t work it too much.” “Don’t add more flour.” “Is the water cold? It has to be cold.”

The man’s already drooping shoulders sunk a bit more with each critique. When his finished pastry wasn’t enough to fill the pan — and before any comment could be made — I swooped in with a smaller pan in hand and exclaimed, “Awesome! I’ve wanted to use this pan, and now you made the perfect crust to fit it!” His

shoulders straightened with a newfound sense of worth, and he smiled back at me. That meat pie with a crust like lead was the worst I had ever tasted. But that night, gathered around a lone candle burning on the old table, no one admitted it. We washed down big mouthfuls with cider and applauded the effort of this man who was eager to get back to the job he was good at: tending the fires.

Living in community is not easy. We fall into roles that we think only we can do, never daring to branch out and try something new. Not only do we have our own special roles, but we get territorial if anyone dares to encroach on our area of expertise. We protect what is ours rather than inviting another into our space. When we live like this, we miss the opportunities to learn from others and grow. Worst yet, we miss those magical moments of God's grace that can only happen in community.

What would happen this Advent if we learned to smile at others more, praise others more and share with others more? What would happen if we spoke words that didn't make another person's shoulders droop? What would happen if we gladly accepted that substandard pie and ate it with joy?

Howard Thurman once said, "When I've lost

harmony with another, my whole life is thrown out of tune. I cannot be truly aware of God if I am not at peace with my fellows."

This Advent, may we begin living more in harmony with one another, and by doing so, find ourselves ever more aware of Emmanuel, God with us.

Pray

Loving God, how your heart must break every time you hear from our mouths a hurtful insult or derogatory comment made to one of your children. Forgive us for those times when we look down on others. Help us to see the potential in everyone we meet. But most of all, God, bring the harmony back into our lives that can only begin by us truly loving one another. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

It is time to light the third candle of Advent. As you do, get your bread out to eat. Thank God for all you have. Now, take time to do a self-inventory, listing all the things you are good at. As you make the list, lift your praises to God. After you are done, think about how you might be able to share your gifts with others. Are you good at making piecrusts? Teach someone. Are you good at woodworking? Mentor someone. How can you enrich your community this Advent?

Day 16 | Monday, Dec. 13

The song of the bread

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" — Luke 2:10–14

The cooking instructor ceremoniously pulled the bread out of the fireplace's beehive oven. It was a proud moment as we looked upon the perfectly shaped loaf with steam rising from its crusty top. He set it on the table and placed his finger in front of his lips. "Hush. Listen. Do you hear it? Do you hear the song the bread sings?" he asked.

If I hadn't heard the sounds for myself, I would have thought the instructor had gotten into the "sack" — a sherry-like liquor that was popular for cooking in 18th-century kitchens — that we were going to use to flavor our steamed

puddings. But I did hear the soft crackling filling the air as the cooling crust of the bread contracted.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? Not many people take time to listen to their bread serenading them," he said.

Later that day, as I took a walk in the crisp air — a wonderful respite from the dark, smoky room where we cooked — I thought about the song of the bread. I had made bread before, but I had never heard it sing. I began wondering what other soft songs God was gracing me with in my life that I had been deaf to.

In a world where there is constant noise — the nonstop humming of appliances plugged into their outlets, the email notifications dinging or buzzing, the message alerts on cellphones, cars driving by — what are the divine sounds trying to soothe our rattled souls?

That day, I not only heard the bread sing. I was also treated to a duet as the cider, fermenting in the tavern's cellar, fizzed and bubbled. "The singing of the cider was music to the ears of many New Englanders," the instructor said, explaining that making cider was the only way



to keep apples all winter long. Yes, he shared more than his cooking expertise with us; he shared many a quip and lore from the past.

In a quieter time, people would be comforted by these songs, as the cracking and bubbling of bread and cider reassured them that they would neither thirst nor hunger.

I find thirsting this Advent. I find myself hungering — not for something to drink or to eat, but for something to satiate an emptiness in my soul. And so this Advent, I will be listening to the songs around me. I will especially be listening for the song of the angels who bring the Good News of great joy as they proclaim, “Glory to God in the highest!” Yes, indeed. Glory to God forevermore.



Day 17 | Tuesday, Dec. 14

The pink tulle Christmas tree

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. — Matthew 24:36–44

It was a relic from the 1960s that my mom was going to throw away, but to my little girl’s eyes, the pink tulle Christmas tree, glistening with red glass ornaments, was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I placed the salvaged small tree on my bedside table where, every night, I would hop into bed and gaze at it before turning off the light. It brought me joy as I eagerly counted the days till Dec. 25.

One night, though, as my mom walked by my room, she didn’t see joy in my eyes. Rather she saw tears streaming down my face. She came

Pray

Ever-singing God, may we listen this Advent to the divine melodies that are all around us. May our ears tune into the holy rather than the hectic. May we hear the song of the bread, the cider, the birds, the wind and, most of all, the angels. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Stop everything you are doing at this moment. Sit with your feet planted firmly on the floor. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes and listen to the sounds around you. What do you hear? What needs to have the volume lowered or turned off: email notifications, phone alerts, etc.? What is a sound you never noticed before? Now commit for the rest of Advent to spend each day listening more carefully to the heavenly songs that are always playing.

in quietly and sat by my side. I was staring at the tree and, in the silence of that moment, she looked at it, too, and joked, “I know. The tree is ugly, isn’t it?” Perhaps it is from my mother where I get my poorly placed timing for cracking jokes.

I began crying harder. No, the tears weren’t for the tree. I was anxious about the long division test that we would have to take in school the next day. I wasn’t very good at math, and I was dreading all the problems I would have to solve. I had thought about it so much that I had worked myself into a frenzy, and nothing could calm me — not even staring at the pink tulle Christmas tree.

It was then my mother reminded me of my elderly great-aunt, Frieda was her name, who had lived a long and not always easy life. Widowed for many years and never having any children of her own, she continued to greet each day with faith in God. She refused to let fears overtake her. She insisted on looking for the good even amid the bad. And she would always be thanking God for the littlest things that we just never think to thank God for: the way the butter melted into her bread, “Thank you, God;” the tea she was steeping in a pot, “Thank you, God;” the stray cat that had decided to make a home with her, “Thank you, God.” And on it went throughout Aunt Frieda’s day — counting her blessings, surrendering her worries, always looking up towards the night sky in search of that proverbial bright star what would lead her to her Savior.

“Remember to be like Aunt Frieda, never worrying about what tomorrow will bring. Just lift it up to God in prayer.” With that, my mother kissed my forehead and turned the bedroom light off. My tears stopped falling, and I suddenly noticed something on that pink tulle Christmas tree. Amid all the red ornaments was a golden star that had fallen from the top of the tree and was caught in a lower tulle branch. I reached for the star to put it back in its rightful position.

Howard Thurman once wrote, “We do not know how to deal with that which awaits us tomorrow, and in our desperation and panic we find ourselves unable to center our spirits.”

Aunt Frieda knew how to center her spirit. And after that, I did, too. I placed the star on top of the — now I will admit — gaudy tree. May we all look to the star in the sky that will

guide us to our Hope, our Joy, our Strength, our Peace — our Redeemer.

Pray

God of comfort and strength, you tell us to not be afraid of what tomorrow might bring, yet we continue to worry and fret. Our minds race to all the “what ifs” and to all the things that might happen. Ease our fears as we recognize the time we waste thinking of things that might not happen. Bring peace to our fainting hearts. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Think about how you handle life’s worries and problems. Do you meet them with a calm assurance that all will be well? Challenge yourself this Advent to meet every worry with this simple affirmation: “God is with me — now and forever.”

Day 18 | Wednesday, Dec. 15

Green bananas

Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. — Psalm 147:1–6

My neighbor, Borg, a Swede whose woodworking skills helped secure him a lucrative living over the years, was moving out of Vermont to South Carolina. It was time to go, he said. The cold winters were no longer treating his old joints favorably.

A few days before he moved, I saw him on the trail that runs behind my house and many farms throughout the little village that I call home. He was standing in front of a pond, watching his beaver friends busily swimming about and building a new home. “I will miss them. I’ve always come down here to watch them,” he said. “But it is time for me to live life again.”

I could understand what he was saying. The COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted many lives, not only putting plans on hold, but also altering plans completely, especially for those who now had to forge new lives without a loved one by their sides. The year had been tiring, frustrating and depressing. For Borg, though, his desire to live again went deeper than the painful

waiting of hopes delayed. Borg spoke quietly as he admitted his struggle with “long COVID” — the lingering effects of the coronavirus that some people experience, which can include a loss of taste, brain fog, headaches and extreme tiredness.

Borg’s long COVID was so long that it led to a deep depression, which led to that fateful day last December where he kissed his wife goodbye before setting out into the woods for a walk in the falling snow. “What my wife didn’t realize is I had no intention of coming back home,” he said, now shaking his head in disbelief that he was even thinking about ending his life. Friends eventually searched and found him. He was sitting on a rock by the edge of the beaver pond, sobbing. They brought him home.

“But I now buy green bananas,” he said wistfully, explaining that when COVID-19 started, he had stopped buying them. He didn’t have hope that tomorrow would come. “So why bother buying bananas if they might not get a chance to ripen?” he shrugged. I nodded to show I understood all too well.

Ever since that conversation with Borg, I find myself stopping in front of the green bananas in the grocery store. I stop and wonder, “How strong is my faith that tomorrow will not only come, but come bearing the hope we need?”

“All around us worlds are dying, and new worlds are being born,” wrote Howard Thurman, observing that hope in the moments of despair can be found in “the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life



when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.”

Borg is emerging from his long COVID. He is even buying green bananas again. I know this to be true because before he left for South Carolina, he placed on my front step a loaf of banana bread made with all the fruit he had purchased that he had indeed lived to see ripen.

Pray

God of our days, renew our fainting spirits, for we are tired of living in a pandemic world. Whenever there does seem to be a glimmer of hope, it dims all too quickly. But you, O God, are bringing



Day 19 | Thursday, Dec. 16 Candles in the window

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. — John 1:1–5

Dusk was descending quickly, but I put my sneakers on anyway, thinking I had enough time to get a run in before supper. I was wrong. The path before me was getting harder to see. I picked up the pace trying to get back home before complete darkness enveloped the woods. There wasn't anything to really be afraid of. I wasn't out in the middle of nowhere, and I knew this trail by heart. Still, it was a bit unsettling.

I finally turned off the trail and felt my feet touch the muddy ground of the well-worn cow path that leads back to my house. By now all was dark. The only light guiding me was that of an electric candle that I had placed in my kitchen window, which faces the open field. I never knew how comforting it was to see a flickering light beckoning to me. Imagine how beautiful the sight of a candle in a window was so many years ago for lost and weary travelers when darkness was much harder to chase away without battery-operated flashlights or fully charged cellphones.

The sun had set on our last night of the open-hearth cooking class. We had our candles lit as we broke bread together at the table. In addition to the dripping beeswax tapers on the table, there were also a few in the wall sconces and on the fireplace mantle. But that night we were going to have guests for dinner: the participants

light back into the world, and it is a light that you promised will never dim. We hold on to that promise. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Buy the greenest bananas you can find and display them prominently in your home. May the sight of them make you pause and ponder just how strong your faith is in the beautiful tomorrow God will bring — and then be prepared to turn them into loaves of banana bread to share with others.

of the tinsmithing class that had been running concurrently with ours. To greet them, we set to work placing candles in all the tavern's windows so that they would cast a long stream of light on the path leading up to the tavern.

Candles have long been placed in windows as a sign of welcome. Some folklore has it that the tradition began when priests were outlawed from practicing their faith in parts of the United Kingdom. The priests would have to secretly meet with their flock, and so the faithful began lighting candles in their windows as a sign it was safe to enter in and visit. Of course, putting a lighted candle in the window was also a way to guide loved ones home safely or to serve as a beacon of welcome to a stranger in need of a place to stay. Sometimes, too, candles would be lit and placed in a window when someone died, or when a baby was born.

In his book, “The Mood of Christmas,” Howard Thurman tells the story of a “desert dweller” who always placed a lighted lantern alongside the road to “cheer the weary traveler.” The desert dweller wasn't just offering light on the journey, but a note next to the lantern provided detailed directions to his cottage, “just in case” a person needed shelter, company or bread to eat.

Are there candles in your windows to welcome a lost and weary world? Better yet, is there a lantern with a note that needs to be set out this Advent season — a light and an invite to someone who might need you “just in case”?

Pray

Illuminating God, you are always beckoning us to come ever closer to you. Forgive us when we grope along life's paths. Overwhelmed by the darkness of our own despair and doubt, we fail to see your divine light shining bright and shining always. Open our eyes. Help us to see that you are there for all our “just in case” moments. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

If candles in windows aren't part of your holiday décor, consider placing some to brighten the winter evenings. Better yet, seek to create a "prayer window." Choose a window in your

Day 20 | Friday, Dec. 17

One cup, many handles

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. — 1 Corinthians 12:12–14

I removed the silver chalice from the communion table and placed my strange looking mug — the one with many handles — in the center next to the bread that we would break for the sacrament. The mug was going to serve as the common cup, and there could not have been a more fitting illustration for the "one body, many members" message I was going to preach.

I first encountered this uniquely designed mug with many handles while putting the dishes away in the old pantry of the tavern I was staying in during the open-hearth cooking class. I fell into the role of dishwasher during my time there and didn't mind the task at all. I found it meditative, swishing my hands in the warm water that filled the wash tin.

One night, as I reached to place a bowl on the top shelf, I spotted the mug. It was bizarre looking, and my curiosity led me to ask about it. Of course, my cooking instructor, knowledgeable in all things from the past, knew all about the mug.

It was a "tyg" or sometimes spelled "tig." The large pottery cup was a popular design from the 15th to the 17th centuries. Often, they were fashioned with three handles, but some had up to nine all around the body of the mug. The many handles were made so that hot drinks could be passed easily to all of those seated around a table without burning one's hands. I found the concept of the tyg powerfully moving. That is, after I moved past the reality that such a cup would be the perfect germ spreader in times of plagues — back then, bubonic; and today, coronavirus variants.

I held the tyg in my hand and thought of the many times I had lifted the cup of salvation during the celebration of the Lord's Supper,

home and place a candle on its sill year-round, lighting it nightly with a prayer for God's light to shine upon those who are walking in darkness.

the sharing of one cup and one loaf for all. Yet throughout history, how many times have that one loaf and one cup been withheld from someone? When seated at the table with strangers, how easily shared is our cup of love, of hope, of hospitality and of understanding?

I thought of my cooking companions and how each one of us, while so very different, were brought together by our common love for cooking over open fires. We came as strangers, learned to love (or put up with) each of our idiosyncrasies, and left as friends.

I now have a tyg of my own. Last Christmas, my husband found a reproduction of one online and surprised me with it under our tree. It now sits on my desk where I write, reminding me how we really do need one another. And on occasion, it graces the communion table, serving as the perfect illustration of being one in Christ.

Howard Thurman once wrote, "It is a great and blessed fortune that our lives are never left to themselves alone."

"We are visited in ways that we can understand and in ways we cannot understand, by



Cheddar Cheese Pull-Apart Bread

We will prepare our bread for the fourth Sunday of Advent with "Emmanuel, God with us," in mind, pondering how we are never alone. And what better way to capture the idea of community in bread than with a "pull-apart" loaf, which is sometimes called "monkey bread" or "bubble bread." Often these recipes are sweet, but today we will whip up a savory loaf. And if you don't have time to bake, no worries. An easy way to create a pull-apart bread is to take ready-made biscuits and nestle them side by side in a round pan. Sprinkle cinnamon, sugar and butter on top for a sweet treat; or layer with shredded cheese. Remember, to make an extra loaf to share with someone who might need to be reminded that they are not alone in this world. Christ is coming. Hope is being born. Neighbors and friends still care. Go to: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/cheddar-cheese-pull-apart-bread-recipe



great moments of inspiration and quiet reassurances of grace. These quiet things enrich the common life and give to the ordinary experiences of our daily grind a significance and a strength that steady and inspire,” he said.

I am looking forward to the day when I can once again pass my tyg around in a post-COVID-19 world. Till then, there are many other ways I can seek to be one with God and with the community God calls me into.



Day 21 | Saturday, Dec. 18 *The real blessing in a box*

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” — Matthew 25:34–36

It took two years to get a “blessing box” on the property of the little rural church I serve. Why did it take so long to get an idea that seemed easy and straightforward off the ground? There were many conversations as to where this 24/7 food pantry should be placed. Some in the congregation felt that such a box, filled with nonperishable food items and toiletries for people who might need them, should not be outside in the harsh elements of rain, wind and snow. Rather, place the box inside and make it available on Sunday mornings so that folks could come and see how pretty the sanctuary is.

I gently remarked that putting a blessing box inside the church would defeat the purpose of this ministry. “We want to reach out, not draw in,” I said.

Finally, it was agreed to have the box outside, but not on the side of the rural road. The box now sits on the church’s front porch, which one gets to by driving up a long hill. Is it any surprise that it is not being used?

Many times, when we seek to feed others, our good intentions wind up putting more obstacles in the way of the hungry. Our hearts might be filled with love and concern for God’s hurting world, but even the most woke and generous heart still has a bit of self-preservation beating

Pray

Community-shaping God, you ask for us to live peaceably with one another, sharing our bread, our wine and our resources freely with our siblings. Forgive us when we are hesitant to pass the cup of grace to others. Forgive us when we keep that common cup away from others. May our hearts open to the message of the season, that we are not meant to go through life alone. Emmanuel, God with us, is indeed with us — asking that we make room in our lives for strangers to become friends. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

inside. Whether we want to admit it or not, many times the things we do come with an expectation of what we will get back in return. “Will this blessing box encourage people to come and be part of our congregation?” is the silent question floating among the congregation of 23 people.

Will we ever be truly selfless in our care for others? Perhaps not. Perhaps that is something we will always have to work on. Perhaps that is the tension we will need to accept as we constantly challenge ourselves to be Christ to others?

Howard Thurman recognized this tendency to give with strings attached to the gift, writing, “When I ask myself why I try to help others, what reply do I get? Is it merely an effort on my part to build up my own sense of significance?”

Thurman remembers a trip to Myanmar years ago when, while walking on a road, he noticed water and fruit left at intervals along the way. He later learned the water and fruit were left by Buddhist priests to bless anyone who passed by. The priests weren’t looking for new converts. They weren’t looking to be thanked. They just wanted to bless a stranger on a journey, not caring about who they were, what their religion was or even if they had a great need.

“Giving is no longer an offering merely of money or time or services, viewed as a sacrifice or a cause for merit, recognition or glory,” said Thurman. “It is a simple sacrament, involving all of a person as their spirit moves through the swinging door of need into the very citadel of another’s spirit.”

During Advent, may the obstacles we place before serving others be removed, and may our blessing boxes, whatever they might be, move from the safety of our sacred sanctuaries and be placed out into the world.

Pray

Provider God, we are getting closer to Bethlehem, the House of Bread, where we will fall on our knees and pay homage to the Christ Child who sleeps in a feeding trough. As we continue our journey, may our hearts grow more generous, seeing clearly and then removing the many stumbling blocks we create when seeking to reach out to those who need a blessing. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Before writing a check to the church or dropping off canned goods to a food pantry, ask yourself: "What are some other ways I can engage with a hurting world? How can I enter the lives of those who are hungry, really taking time to hear their stories?"

An Act of Trust

The Sacrament of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

I make an act of faith toward all humankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions
brood.

I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.

I make an act of strength toward feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.

*I make an act of trust toward all life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.*

I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.

I make a deed to God of all my days –
And look out on life with quiet eyes.

Reflect

The Christmas season is almost here, but as the world sprints toward Dec. 25, let us commit to staying fully present in Advent. Where joyful carols are ringing, let us continue seeking God's silences. Where friends and family are gathering safely with virus precautions in place, let us be watching for God's angels among strangers. Where gifts are being placed under trees, let us remember the greatest gift cannot be found in a box, but in our hearts. Let us join Howard Thurman in making the sacred act of trusting that in little Bethlehem, "our hopes and fears of all the years" will once again be met in Christ. How will you commit to a slower, more prayerful last week of Advent?

Pray

Compassionate God, despite all that is wrong in the world, you have not given up on us. You, who loved the world so much that you gave us your Son, continue to shower us with redemptive love. As we make our way to Bethlehem, the House of Bread, strengthen us for the work that is still to be done. Help us to see the opportunities this week to share the Good News of a Savior born for all humankind. And may our arms be filled with loaves of love to share as we speak of your greatness. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Day 22 | 4th Sunday of Advent, Dec. 19 *It can be a wonderful life*

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. — Zephaniah 3:14–18

It just wouldn't be the holidays without watching the 1946 classic, "It's a Wonderful Life." It's the story of a banker, George Bailey, who after

sacrificing his dreams to help those in his hometown of Bedford Falls, questions if it had been worth it. Perhaps he should never have been born, he wonders. Clarence, the loveable, bumbling angel — seeking to get his wings — sets out on his mission to show George how wrong he is. The life he has lived is blessed. But he just doesn't see it. The movie is timeless because of its haunting "What if?" question, which resonates in us all.

There's one scene particularly that strikes a chord with me. George and his wife, Mary, are standing on the steps of a home welcoming its new owners. They're surrounded by their community, which is happy that this family now has a place to call home. George and Mary present three housewarming gifts: bread, "that this house may never know hunger"; salt, "that

life may always have flavor”; and wine, “that joy and prosperity may reign forever.”

It’s been 75 years since the film hit the big screen, and I wonder: What if there were more George Baileys among us? When was the last time I stood in the doorway of a home with bread, salt and wine, offering a true welcome to someone who was rejected or dejected?

Like the rest of the country, homelessness in my little state of Vermont is a growing problem, with the state legislature just signing an extension for housing the homeless in local motels till the end of the year. But what will happen in January when the temperatures really dip and the snow piles high? Who will welcome them into a home with bread, salt and wine?

And what about a loving community welcome for new refugee families?

A few years ago, a Vermont town made a big flak about not wanting to welcome refugees into their neighborhood. Today, that same town is reconsidering its anti-refugee stance. The town needs revitalization. Becoming a more welcoming and diverse community is what the town needs — at least that was the sentiment of the newspaper article I read the other day.

Homelessness and an influx of refugees coupled with all the vacant churches I see as I drive along my rural roads — five, by the way, five churches in my little area with “For Sale” signs on them — got me thinking. What if a nonprofit was started to turn those empty houses of worship into affordable housing? What if those churches that failed as “organized religion” showed people turned-off by church what God

really had in mind when creating the body of Christ to provide a true refuge?

What if this Advent we do not let our hands grow weak, as the prophet Zephaniah tells us, and we become the George and Mary Baileys who welcome others into homes with gifts of bread, salt and wine? What if we really looked around and found a place for that down-on-their-luck couple who is about to have a child? The world might insist that there is “no room in the inn” for them — or for the homeless or the refugee. But we know better, don’t we?

Pray

God of refuge and respite, there are so many this day who are without a roof over their heads. Even in our own communities, there are those who are on the verge of homelessness, barely making ends meet. Fill us with your creative Spirit, revealing to us all the ways in which we can ease the struggles and worries of others. And as you open our eyes to the “inns” that are vacant, open our hearts as well so that we become more loving and more generous. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Spend time exploring your community, driving through streets to see where there might be a need. Ask agencies that help others what trends are emerging. Reach out to local schools to inquire what families might need. As you light the fourth candle of Advent and break a piece of your bread, think of who needs a loaf this week. Homelessness is a nationwide crisis. Learn more at endhomelessness.org

Day 23 | Monday, Dec. 20

Our daily bread

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. — Matthew 6:11–13

Like many children of the 1970s, I went through a “Little House on the Prairie” phase, reading and rereading all of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books. From her earliest adventures living in the “big woods” of Wisconsin to her first years of married life on the unforgiving plains of South Dakota, I took it all in. I also tried to recreate her life, making rag dolls with buttons eyes and unsuccessfully churning cream into butter.

There was also one December day that I tried making maple candy that Laura mentioned in

one of her books. Home from school due to a snowstorm, I busied myself boiling fake pancake syrup — a childhood staple — to pour into the snow of my New Jersey home. Rather than hardening, like it did for Laura, my father was greeted to a slushy pile of pancake syrup when he got home from work.

I continued to live vicariously through Laura’s tales of life in the mid-19th century. So, when I received for Christmas one year a bread platter with sheaves of wheat and the words “Give us this day our daily bread” engraved in the tin, I squealed with delight. It was just like the platter Laura had as a young farm wife.

Bread was an important staple in Laura’s life as it was in biblical times. Bread, in fact, is mentioned 492 times in the Bible. And each week, the faithful are reminded of bread’s importance



as they pray the “Lord’s Prayer,” asking for daily bread to be given. Often, when this line is spoken, we think of food for our tables. Recently, though, my “daily bread” prayers have not been for warm, yeasty loaves. They have been for more of Jesus, the Bread of Life, who desires to be an integral part of my daily living.

It still amazes me how God’s plan for salvation was so perfectly planned: selecting Bethlehem, an insignificant village whose name means “House of Bread,” as Jesus’ birthplace, and placing the babe in a feeding trough that would have held food for animals. All of this illustrates powerfully that our hungers will be met in Christ.

Yet we are still starving spiritually, aren’t we? Perhaps we need to pray instead, “Give us this day, more of Jesus.” More Jesus and less of self would bring peace into this world where there is conflict. More Jesus and less of self would bring love where there is hate. More of the Bread of Life and less of self would bring contentment with who we are, where we are, and with what we have.

I no longer use that platter I received so many years ago for bread. Instead, I use it as my prayer platter, writing my prayers for more Jesus in my

life: more Christlike actions to come from my hands, my Christ light to shine from heart, and more Christ inspired words to come from my lips.

Howard Thurman observed that “the lords of business and religion will never bring peace to the world.” Rather, it is from the “common” person — you and I — in which Christ’s peace will be known to this weary world. And so, we pray for our daily bread: more Jesus and less of self.

Pray

Provider God, you know our needs even before we utter them out loud. Help us in this time of Advent waiting to pray for more of your light and your love in our lives. Give us this day not just a yeasty loaf to ease our grumbling stomachs. Give us daily the Bread of Life — Jesus. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Get a special platter or basket that you often use to serve bread and — for the rest of Advent and continuing throughout the Christmas season, which ends on Jan. 6 — use it as your prayer platter or basket, replacing actual bread with prayers to know the Bread of Heaven in a deeper, more meaningful way.



Day 24 | Tuesday, Dec. 21

The communal bread oven

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. — Luke 1:39–49

The seemingly innocent request for the keys to my husband’s pickup truck garnered a raised eyebrow from him. “Why?” he asked with great trepidation. What he really wanted to ask was,

“What could his wife be up to now?” I glossed over the things that I needed to get, like bags of clay mix and firebricks from the home supply store and stones from a friend’s nearby field.

Since coming back from my 18th-century, open-hearth cooking class, I had been on a mission to create an outdoor oven with a stone base and a clay, beehive shaped dome to cook in. I was enthralled with this cooking method, sharing with him my desire to cook our Christmas meal in such an oven. What really interested me, though, was the chance to somehow cook with that “great cloud of witnesses” Paul speaks of in the Bible — to spend time on some realm with ancestors of long ago.

Connection and community — they are really what these ovens were all about. Since the dawn of time, in every culture and in every part of the world, evidence of outdoor clay ovens can be found. There are relics of such ovens in Syria, dating some 9,000 years ago. Many of these ovens were communal, built in the center of villages. Families would prepare their dough at home and then bring it to the communal ovens to be baked. To distinguish whose loaves belonged to whom, a wooden stamp of a design

or initials would be pressed on top of the dough.

I sometimes think of how it was at a communal oven where joys and concerns were shared: where a new mother received encouragement, a lonely widow found companionship, and a teen was imparted morsels of wisdom from her elders.

Who knows? Perhaps during Mary's visit to Elizabeth, young and old not only rejoiced as to what the Lord was doing in their wombs, but after embracing, the women gathered around a clay oven, baking loaves together as encouragement, companionship and wisdom were shared.

My husband gave me the keys to his truck, but I didn't make my run to the home store that day for clay, and the stones are still in my friend's field, untouched. I decided to hold off on building an outdoor bread oven on my property. I found a more perfect location instead: the church in which I serve.

After all, what better way to build community than inviting people to gather around an oven and bake the bread that will be blessed and broken? And as we bake, I can only imagine the stories that will be shared and the laughs that

will fill the air. It will take some planning, some heavy lifting and some money. There are grants, though, to see such a project through. In 2017, in Johnson, Vermont, a community bake oven was built in the middle of town with grant money. Jen Burton, the visionary behind the oven, said she had hoped the oven, "would rekindle community around food." It has done just that.

Pray

Communal God, it is too easy these days to shut ourselves off from others. We protect what we have. We hesitate to reach out to others either for help or to help. We fail to hear the wisdom of those who have walked before us can share. May we find in our community that space where we can gather and, in the sharing with one another, be nourished. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Explore your community for where coming together around food can begin to strengthen relationships. And if you are curious about making an outdoor clay oven, here's a fun video to watch. Go to: [youtube.com/watch?v=i0foHjPVbP4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0foHjPVbP4)

Day 25 | Wednesday, Dec 22

Glad surprises

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on — since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." — Genesis 18:1–6

Glad surprises: Howard Thurman describes them as moments in life that go beyond a clean bill of health from a doctor or when a meeting to address a conflict turns out better than one had anticipated. Glad surprises, Thurman said, are ones that carry the "element of elation, of life, of something beyond the surprise itself."

The Bible is filled with stories of these glad surprises — those moments when God's divine presence breaks into the ordinary lives of ordi-

nary people with news that is deeper and more transformative than one could ever imagine.

Abraham was just minding his own business that day when he was visited by three strangers — angels of the Lord who would tell the surprising news that his wife, Sarah, beyond childbearing years, would have a baby. But before getting to that news, Abraham invites the strangers to sit, rest and eat with him. He instructs Sarah to make some bread. As they sit and dine, the news is shared. Of course, Sarah, listening from within the tent, laughs.

God's glad surprises can do that. They can make you laugh in disbelief. They can turn our lives upside down. Think back to Mary and Joseph and how their lives changed the day when an angel told Mary the news that she would be the Christ bearer.

We are heading quickly toward the Christmas season where the world received the greatest surprise of all: Jesus. But before we enter this holy time, we need to remember that we have to be open to receiving these "surprises" from God. We must take time to listen to the angels that come to us disguised as strangers and invite them to sit and break bread with us.

I will never forget the day a stranger carrying a package in his hand — gruff in appearance and



with an even gruffer Russian accent — came to my church office door when no one was around and asked to sit with me. I was a little wary but pulled up a chair for him. I was struggling with many possible life-changing decisions, none of which gave me the peace I was seeking as the green light to act. Now here was this stranger speaking to me about the twists and turns in life and how he had learned that sometimes peace in the heart is not needed to step out in faith. Sometimes, he said, you just need to move forward into the uncertainty, holding on to the one thing that is certain: God's love.

When he got up to leave, he took the package in his hand and gave it to me. It was his wife's "krendel," a Russian Christmas bread filled with dried fruit. I learned that day, as I sipped my tea and enjoyed the bread, that glad surprises do happen if we keep our hearts open to all the ways God makes the impossible possible.

I will admit, though, that sometimes I long for the days when glad surprises were simply the

gifts I asked Santa for as child: the surprises that waited for me wrapped in festive holiday paper under the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. But Christmas is so much more than the gifts we give or receive. Christmas is all about God's glad surprises, those moments when the Divine enters our days, changes our plans and moves us forward.

Pray

God, you who know the plans you have for us, for futures full of hope, may we, in our time of waiting and watching for the Christ Child, trust your perfect plans. May we not be hesitant or fearful to accept the life-changing, glad surprises you gift us with. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Think of a time when a glad surprise presented itself to you. How did you feel initially about it? How did it change your life? What did it reveal to you about God's care and grace?



Day 26 | Thursday, Dec. 23

Teaching our children

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. — Deuteronomy 11:18–21

The children gathered after school in the church's kitchen. After diligently washing their hands, they listened to the guest who was joining them that day: a local bread maker who was going to teach them how to make their own loaves of bread. The loaves, though, were not just for them to slather butter and jam on. The children were also making extra to give away to others.

As the loaves cooled, filling the fellowship hall with a heavenly scent, the children were asked to think who might be blessed by receiving a loaf. The answers were many and varied, ranging from the school nurse to the post office worker, to the crossing guard who stood on the corner of the village's one traffic light every day when school was dismissed. There was one little boy, though, who surprised everyone when he quietly whispered,

"I'm giving my loaf to my neighbor. She doesn't have much, and mom says she isn't feeling well."

The children then took construction paper and cut out angel wings that would serve as note cards attached to the packages of bread. The cooking class was part of a free outreach program for children called "Bake for Good." It was created years ago by the King Arthur Baking Company, a flour company founded in Boston in 1790. The business eventually moved to Norwich, Vermont, where it has expanded way beyond flour distribution. It has become an educational center, and part of that teaching includes instructing the next generation how to not only bake, but the importance of sharing what they make.

In a world where what can be purchased for children in a store seems to define a "Merry Christmas" and where COVID-19 disruptions in the supply chain have led to crowded malls all Advent long, as people grab "Christmas" from the shelves, it has never been more important than now to heed the words of Moses in Deuteronomy. We are reminded once again to teach our children what it means to live for God. We are to model for them in words and actions the love of God. We are to instill in their young hearts, the truth that "joy to the world" is not seen in how many toys you have. Joy to the world happens when they give of themselves to another — one loaf, baked and shared.

Pray

God, no matter our age, we are all your “little children” in need of being reminded every day to keep your commands, especially the one in which you ask us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. May we show the world that love today by the healing words we speak and the helpful actions we take. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Christmas Eve | Friday, Dec. 24 Searching for angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” — Luke 2:8–12

Christmas Eve has always been a night when I strain my eyes looking toward heaven for the unfurling of angels’ wings. It has always been a night when, after the world has finally quieted in slumber, I step outside in the frigid night air, hoping beyond hope to hear the angels’ song telling the lowly shepherds that hope has broken into their hard lives.

So, it should come as no surprise that one of my favorite hymns is “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” And every time I sing with pride out of tune, I pause at the line, “risen with healing in his wings.” Now Jesus doesn’t have wings; nor is he an angel. That is correct. But when Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, penned the lyrics to this beloved Christmas song in the early 1700s, he could have been thinking of the Hebrew word “kanaph,” which refers not only to angelic wings, but to “the hem of a garment.” Risen with healing, thus, echoes the story of the woman who found healing from her many years of hemorrhaging by just touching Jesus’ hem.

For as long as I can remember, the cry for healing was always on my lips — that is, healing for my brother who is “special.” Every Christmas Eve, I would search for the angels to announce that healing and hope had arrived for my brother.

My brother is in his 60s now and still lives with my aging parents. There have been no plans

Go deeper

Is there an opportunity in your church to offer a children’s bread making class, using the opportunity to teach them about Jesus as their “Bread of Life” and how to share loaves with others? Or perhaps there is a young neighbor, grandchild, niece or nephew that you can invite to make bread with over the Christmas season?

put into place for how to care for him when the day comes that they can no longer do it. That day is drawing closer. And I worry. I cry. I reach out to God, but my hands seem to grab nothing but empty air.

There’s a fountain in New York’s Central Park known as the Bethesda Fountain, or it is sometimes called “Angel of the Waters.” Designed by Emma Stebbins in 1868, making her the first woman to receive a commission for a major work, the fountain measures 26 feet high by 96 feet wide. At the fountain’s center is an 8-foot bronze angel who stands above four cherubim that represent health, purity, temperance and peace. The fountain gets its name from the Scripture story of how those who came to the waters that had been stirred by an angel would find healing.

When I lived in Manhattan, I would visit the angel often. I guess that I was looking for healing with one particularly painful memory. We were children visiting Central Park with my parents. After stopping by the zoo and the rowboats, we came upon the angel. My brother and I began to run to the edge of the fountain to get a closer look at her. My brother’s coordination, though, was not the best. He stumbled and fell.

The crowds looked on as he cried. I, being just a child, was embarrassed that my special brother made a scene out in public yet again. My parents looked sad as they rushed over to him. Before they reached him, though, a woman seemed to come out of nowhere and hunched over my brother, calming him with a smile while wiping his tears. He never reached the fountain’s



A Cinnamon Christmas Star Bread

What better way to usher in the Christmas season than with a pull-apart cinnamon bread shaped like a star. As you enjoy it with your family — or give as a gift — reflect on the star that shone the night Jesus was born.

Go to: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/cinnamon-star-bread-recipe



waters, but healing of the heart took place that day: his heart, mine and my parents' hearts. We were not alone. Angels were among us.

Perhaps this year I need to stop searching the Christmas Eve skies for angels. Perhaps I need to stop straining my ear for their heavenly song. Perhaps I need to realize my brother does not need healing from Jesus' "wings." He is perfect just as he is. More importantly, the angels I have been seeking are already here, swooping in when help is needed the most. And they look a lot like you.

Pray

God of salvation, on this holy night when angels sing of the arrival of our Savior, may we listen for the songs of the angels that are already among us.

May we hear the words of hope, love, peace and grace that come from friends, loved ones and even strangers. May we rejoice knowing that healing mercies abound. Yes, glory forever to our newborn King! In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Whatever plans you have for Christmas Eve, take time to quietly light the middle candle in the Advent wreath, which is the Christ candle. If you don't have an Advent wreath, then light one candle to represent the light of Christ that is now in the world. As you watch the flame flicker, think of that babe in the manger. Give thanks for how, through him, you have been nourished and healed.

THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Embracing Christmastide

December 25 is here, and our devotional continues as we enter the joyous season of Christmas. These 12 days, which bring us to Epiphany on Jan. 6, seem to go unnoticed by the rest of the world, as festive decorations are taken down all too quickly.

I encourage you, though, to observe Christmastide. Keep the decorations up. Take the middle candle in the Advent wreath, the Christ candle, and put it in a prominent place in your home and light it on each of these 12 days as a reminder of the Christ light shining in the world. And, of course, we will continue to bake our bread to share with others. But most of all, use this time to ponder what God's gift of Jesus, the Christ, has meant — and will mean — in your life.

Howard Thurman viewed the Christmas season as a time for taking stock and making adjustments in our lives — and that is what we will do. We will take stock and make the necessary adjustments so that our lives will more clearly reflect the wondrous gift we have received.

Each day in Christmastide will feature a reflection followed by the same questions, inviting you to examine what needs to be done to truly “adjust” your life. The questions are short, but they are not simple: How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

Blessings,
Donna Frischknecht Jackson



The Sacrament of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

I make an act of faith toward all humankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions
brood.

I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.

I make an act of strength toward feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.

I make an act of trust toward all life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.

***I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.***

I make a deed to God of all my days –
And look out on life with quiet eyes.

Reflect

For Howard Thurman, Christmas was a time for the “forgiveness for injuries past,” for the “remembrances of graces forgotten,” and for the “sense of renewal restoring the soul.” Where do you need to extend forgiveness? What graces are worth remembering? In what ways will you renew and restore your soul?

Pray

God of grace, help us to fully enter this season of Christmas rather than rushing to pack it away. May we slow our steps and linger at the manger, lifting always our praises to you for the life-giving gift of Jesus. In his name, we pray. Amen.



Day 1 | Saturday, Christmas Day, Dec. 25 A longing for home

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. — Titus 2:11–14

I once attended a Christmas tea at the local library where, gathered around tables sipping fragrant teas and sampling homemade holiday goodies, we were asked to share memories of Christmases past. Some memories were funny;

some were sad. After everyone had shared, a moment of silence descended upon the room. It wasn't planned. It just happened while we either chuckled to ourselves or wiped away a tear as we each longed for a home that was no more.

There is an old Welsh word for that longing of home. It's called "hiraeth." While it can be loosely translated as "nostalgia," it is more than that. It's a deep longing — an ache almost — in one's heart not for a specific place, but more for the love that resided there. As I get older, I understand better the concept of hiraeth.

I find myself up before the sun rises on Christmas Day, quietly plugging in the tree lights and making coffee. I then take out the German stollen — a dried fruit and marzipan Christmas bread that was my family's tradition every Christmas morning — and I cut into it. As I do, the longing in my heart grows as I remember my brother and sister running down the stairs to get to the presents under the tree; the bayberry candle that my mother lit by the manger scene, shining light on the baby Jesus figurine; and the crackling of the yule logs that looped continuously on the TV screen. I remember mom and dad, their younger versions, smiling from the couch as their children squealed with joy at the gifts Santa had left them. I remember, and I ache for that to which I cannot return.

We all long for home, whatever that vision of home might be. Yet the Christ Child reminds us that while we cannot go back, there is still more joy to come. The love we ache for is right there in the face of Jesus.

I wipe away a tear over what once was and sip my coffee. The lights on the tree shine brilliantly. I bite into the stollen. Today the weary world has been given the most perfect gift: Jesus. And he is all I need.

"Christmas is the brooding presence of the eternal Spirit making tired hearts refreshed and dead hopes stir with newness of life," said Howard Thurman. "Christmas is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day."

Pray

God, on this Christmas Day, may you take the longings and aches of our hearts and transform them into something beautiful. May peace and joy fill our homes. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?



Grandma Allen's Cardamom Coffee Bread

This recipe was submitted by Anne Turek, a Presbyterian in upstate New York, who says every Christmas this bread brings back memories of "home." The recipe makes two loaves — so think about who to gift the second loaf to.

1. Mix 2 teaspoons of yeast and 1 teaspoon of sugar in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of warm water. The yeast should bubble and foam up.
2. Melt 1 stick of butter in 2 cups of milk. Don't let it boil.
3. Put the melted butter and milk in a bowl with 1 egg, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of maple syrup and one teaspoon of salt. Let it cool to touch, and then add the yeast mixture.
4. Add 6–7 cups of white bread or all-purpose flour. Add 1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon of cardamom to the dough. Let it rise for 1 to 2 hours.
5. Roll out the dough into a rectangle approximately 9 inches wide and 12 to 14 inches long. Butter the top. Spread the sugar/spice mixture — $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of brown sugar, 2 to 3 teaspoons of cardamom and 1 to 2 teaspoons of cinnamon — over the dough.
6. Roll the dough into a 9-inch log and place it in a well buttered bread pan. Snip across the loaf and "weave"
7. Let the log rise again, and then bake it in a 350 degree oven till nicely browned.

Day 2 | Sunday, Dec. 26

Bowls of warm porridge

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ... There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. — Luke 2:25–32; 36–38

Raising chickens in Vermont is not idyllic when winter snow piles up. The deep drifts make it a workout getting to the coop. On the coop itself hangs a lantern, often lit with a real candle that beckons me in the dusky dawn.

I keep my feathered friends snug with a thick layer of straw beneath their feet. I also treat them to warm porridge. Before making my first mug of steaming coffee, I tend to them, getting the water warmed as I trudge to the shed to scoop out their mash. I then stir the water and mash together and place the mixture in two bowls so that the chickens have enough room to leisurely enjoy their meal without nudging each other away. (It has happened.) My husband watches my morning routine, teasing me that “they are just chickens.”

I know they are more than that. They are little angels who pulled me up from a COVID-19

gloom that was descending upon me. They gave me a reason to get up early in the morning and spend my time doing something constructive, rather than mindlessly scrolling through social media at the breakfast table, ultimately being dragged down by all the negative news and comments.

It is said that the best way to feel better if you're in a funk is to do something for someone else. Call a lonely neighbor. Visit a friend who has just lost a spouse. Make an extra loaf of bread for a relative you haven't seen in a while. Show up for someone else. Put someone's needs first, over yours. Iris Murdoch, a philosopher and novelist, called this “unselfing” — the process of stepping outside of self.

Christmastide is the perfect time to master unselfing. It's also the time in the Christmas narrative that we hear from Simeon and Anna: two elderly people who held on to the promise that they would see salvation in the eyes of a baby. They waited in faith, knowing God would answer them. But as they waited, I wonder: Who was there caring for them? Who was being a friend to them? Who took time to listen to the wisdom they had? There are many in our lives right now we could be caring for, befriending and reaching out to, if only we learned to “unself.”

Winter can be a challenging time, not just for raising chickens. But when the days are dreary, I remember that there are bowls of warm porridge to make.

Pray

God who hears our cries and always answers us, we draw close to you today. You are always so good in providing for us, and we thank you for that provision. Help us this day to share that gift of care with others who might be blessed by the warmth of being seen, heard and loved. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

my mini-messages I would give at the Baptist church where I was working as the director of Christian education. I had just left my career as a trade magazine editor and was discerning the strange and wondrous call into ministry. I had no experience with children. I didn't have any of my own, and I think I might have been the



Day 3 | Monday, Dec. 27

Giving our best to God

Do everything for the glory of God.

— 1 Corinthians 10:31b

For years, I was the queen of children's sermons. Or so my mother would tell you. She loved

only teenager never to babysit. God, though, has a sense of humor, for there I was surrounded weekly by children.

My first Christmas at the church, I remember talking to the children about the gifts they wanted Santa to leave them. I talked about the real reason we have Christmas: that God loved them so much, God gave them the gift of Jesus. I then asked what we could give to God to show our thanks.

The answers were many — and funny. One little boy wanted to give God his new baby sister that he really didn't want, but "mom brought her home anyway." There were a few older children who talked about the Magi's "really cool" and "expensive" gifts. I had an oversized stuffed lamb by my side, which I cradled in my arms as I shared with the children that the best gift wasn't "cool" or "expensive." It wasn't something that could be bought. And it certainly wasn't one's baby sister! The best gift we could give God was one that came from the heart. "The little shepherd loved his lamb, but he was willing to give it to Jesus," I said. The children were wide-eyed as they thought about what they might be able to give from their hearts.

While it was one of my mother's favorite children's sermons, I think it resonated with others over the age of five as well. I think back

on it often, whenever I wonder if I am giving God my best.

Perhaps this Christmastide is our time to take stock of our lives and decide how to live differently, that is, to live in way in which our gifts are used to glorify God. Can we really give away that which is the most precious: our talents, our time and our treasures?

In every Buddhist monastery, there is a "tenzo," the monk who oversees feeding the group. And the tenzo does it with great care, making sure each ingredient is the best, even if it is just a sprig of parsley for a humble soup or common flour for a batch of plain biscuits. What if we did everything with such care and love, thinking always of each act as a way to glorify God?

Pray

Loving God, in the gift of Jesus, you gave all of humanity a second chance to change: to be kinder, more generous and more loving. May all the tasks we do today, reflect that second chance to change. May all that we do and say be done in ways that glorify your holy name. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?



Day 4 | Tuesday, Dec. 28

I shall not live in vain

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord! — Psalm 146:5–10

I discovered the tattered book of Emily Dickinson's poetry on a shelf of old cookbooks in the 18th-century tavern I was staying in as I learned how to cook over an open hearth. I have always enjoyed her poetry, so I took it gently in my hands and, by the light of the candle, began reading.

The prologue from the editor revealed some interesting facts about the poet that I never

knew. Emily Dickinson was not just a word-smith, she was an accomplished baker as well, tackling a new skill in the kitchen with grace and humor. In 1845 she wrote to a friend that she was going "to learn to make bread tomorrow."

"So, you may imagine me with my sleeves rolled up, mixing flour, milk, saleratus [a leavening agent], with a great deal of grace," she wrote, adding, "I advise you if you don't know how to make the staff of life to learn with dispatch."

Sound advice that a nonprofit in the United Kingdom has embraced. Called the "Real Bread Campaign," the group advocates for healthy, sustainable living where the making of bread is the central focus. One of the many programs it has created is called "Together We Rise" where baking bread is brought into prisons and group homes to teach employable skills.

A few years ago, the Real Bread Campaign launched another program to help those struggling emotionally. Called "Bethlehem Baking Buddies," the six, two-hour baking sessions were held for residents in a mental health care facility

at Bethlem Royal Hospital in Kent. The bread making was to help show how people could benefit therapeutically and socially from coming together to knead and bake bread.

I have always found baking bread to be therapeutic. There is something about the feel of the dough between your fingers and the work it takes to knead it. There is also a powerful lesson in having patience as you wait for the dough to rise, or in my case, wait to see “if” the dough will rise. I have always thought, too, about writing a cookbook for those with learning disabilities like my brother, one that would consider various motor skills and present instructions in an easy-to-follow format. How can we build a community where all abilities are represented?

The light from the candle was sputtering as it came to the end of its wick, but there was just enough for me to savor one last line in the book: “If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall

not live in vain.” The candle died out. I closed the book and sat in the now darkened room, wondering if Emily Dickinson had composed that beautiful line while kneading her bread.

In this season of Christmastide, what ways can you stop one heart from breaking?

Pray

God, you call us to live peaceably with one another, yet there are so many who do not feel the warmth of being welcomed. There are many in our own communities who are looked down upon or thought to be “less than.” Help our hearts awaken to the beauty in all your children. Lead us into ways we can heal this hurting world. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

Day 5 | Wednesday, Dec. 29

Dare to live authentically

Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. — Galatians 1:10

Her name was Tasha Tudor. By the dress she wore in the black-and-white photograph of her amid flowers with a Corgi by her side, one would think that the picture was taken in the early 1800s. Except there were no cameras then. Rather, the picture was taken in the 1990s. Tasha, though, was dressed for another century. Tasha, in fact, lived her life in another century.

The prolific children’s book illustrator, who published more than 100 books, followed her passions, creating a world where she embraced the fashions and lifestyles of the 1830s. Her children grew up with their mother’s unique view of life, remembering days full of candlelight and turkeys cooking on a spit over a fire. As Tasha got older, her eldest son built a small home on his Vermont property where she continued to garden and cook, in period clothing, until her death in 2008.

Tasha had a dream, and rather than letting the world tell her dream was impossible, she showed the doubters that all things are possible.

When I returned from my 18th-century, open-hearth cooking adventure, I not only unpacked notes and recipes from my bag. I also unpacked a dormant dream: to live in a time

long since forgotten. I shared with my husband my desire to be off the grid. I then asked sweetly, “Can we add a keeping room, without electricity and with an open hearth, to our already old home?”

We have yet to add that primitive living addition to our house, and when it is discussed my husband jokes that I am the only person who wants to spend money “downgrading” our home rather than upgrading it. But I have a dream. I have a passion. And deep in my soul, this is what connects me to the divine. It is where I feel myself come alive to who God created me to be. It is at a rustic old table with a candle lit that I do all this writing.

I wonder, though, how many of us spend our lives pushing aside what will make our souls sing? How many, as they draw their last breath, have regrets that they never dared to lived authentically? Certainly not Tasha Tudor.

In this season of Christmas, when we remember the greatest dream God had for humanity was its salvation in Jesus, could we allow ourselves to be saved, that is, from ourselves, from our negativity, and from all the times we have said or heard, “It can’t be done”?

I have noticed during this time of COVID-19 that more people are waking up from their societal slumbering. They are daring to risk and live a different life, reaching for dreams that are not out of reach if they will only stretch their arms out a bit more in faith.

For years there was a brick factory on the edge



of a rural village in upstate New York. It once employed hundreds of workers who produced shirts, but it had been empty for more than 20 years. I was once the pastor in that village, and every time I passed the building, I had a vision of it coming back to life. Just recently, a young couple in Colorado who design furniture has bought it and are now restoring it, creating spaces for their design gallery and residence.

Howard Thurman once said that our dreams are the living water welling up from the very springs of Being, nourishing and sustaining all life. He also said that a “dream is the quiet persistence in the heart that enables a man to ride out the storms of his churning experiences.”

Imagine what the world would be like with-

out the Tasha Tudors in it? Imagine what the world would be like if God wasn't the biggest dreamer of all?

Pray

Encourage God, you know the dreams we hold in our hearts because you are the one who has placed them there. Forgive us for being afraid of them. Forgive us for thinking the life you want for us is impossible. Give us courage this day to live as the child you created us to be. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?



Day 6 | Thursday, Dec. 30

The day-old bread bin

“I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

— Matthew 25:36–40

I made a quick trip to the grocery store this week, wanting to get a few items for a quiet, yet festive New Year's Eve dinner for my husband and myself. We are not “noisemakers and champagne people.” Rather, we tend to greet the new year at 5 a.m. on Jan. 1, when our alarm goes off.

As I was whizzing up and down the store aisles, knowing exactly what I wanted and where to find it, I suddenly stopped. I found myself in front of a big bin of day-old bread. The many different loaves, from cinnamon

swirl to sourdough, were tossed together. Their plastic bags now marked with a neon sticker that read: “50% off.” I went to rummage through the loaves but stopped midair. For a moment, I was transported back to a time when the day-old bread bin was the first and only stop I would make at the grocery store.

I was in my 20s, renting a Manhattan studio apartment that took a huge bite out of my assistant editor's paycheck each month. I was good at budgeting and able to make ends meet, but I didn't leave too much money in the line item marked “groceries.” There were weekends when I would cross the Hudson River back to my parent's New Jersey home to visit them — and swipe a roll of toilet tissue, some paper towels and a big bag of apples. And when I entered the city supermarket, I knew better than to linger around all the delicious, expensive premade meals — containers filled with steaming brisket or baked chicken — with their scents wafting through the air making my mouth water. No. I would make a beeline to the day-old bread bin and find what looked the most appealing and the freshest.

I lived like that for a while, even after many small raises boosted my budget for groceries. I just couldn't get out of the habit of only placing in my shopping cart items that were marked down in price.

I no longer live like that. I now have the comfort of being able to buy fresh, artisan bread. I even have the means to splurge on pricier items. But occasionally, when my husband asks if I want to grill a steak, I can't help but cringe when I see the prices of the slabs of meat he puts into the cart. I have also pointed



No-Knead Crusty White Bread

Here's an easy, no-knead bread recipe that yields three to four loaves, depending on size, that are perfect for wrapping up and sharing with others to ring in the New Year. Go to: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/no-knead-crusty-white-bread-recipe

out to him the cheaper cuts that he could have chosen.

Occasionally, I find myself stopping in front of the bin of day-old bread with my husband and asking, “What are you doing?” I am remembering a time when this bin was my saving grace. I am remembering the days where I had to watch every penny I had. I am remembering both the days of want and the days of plenty.

But mostly now, when my hand does reach into the day-old bread bin, it is more of a priestly act — a blessing of sorts. For when I gingerly touch the bags, I remember that there are still those who enter grocery stores across the country and make a beeline for the day-old bread bins. I think back to when I was one of them.

“There is a unity that binds all living things into a single whole,” said Howard Thurman. May the unity that binds us this Christmastide

be a compassion for those whose hands reach for day-old bread. May the unity that binds us in the new year be one in which we work together toward the day when day-old bread bins are no longer needed.

Pray

Gracious God, in this season full of holiday foods, help us to remember that not everyone has a feast to enjoy. Help us to become more aware of the growing number of families in our communities who are struggling to put food on the table. Open our eyes to see who might be reaching into the day-old bread bin, and then lead us to ways we can feed your children. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

Day 7 | Friday, Dec. 31

Making a path

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

— Proverbs 3:5–6

With all the snow that had fallen, I just had to go sliding down the hill behind my house in Vermont. So, in the bitter cold, I put on my boots, hat and gloves and dug out the snow saucer from the cellar. I didn't know what I was in for. It sounded like a lot of fun at first.

I began my trek up the hill. The snow-covered mountains provided a sharp contrast to the deep blue sky. Once I was at the top, I noticed there was nothing but silence all around. I placed the saucer on the ground, sat on it and pushed myself forward. It didn't budge. I pushed again. Still no movement. I found myself sitting on this saucer slowly inching my way down the hill as to cut a path into the deep snow. I never had to cut a path in the snow before. As a child, the hills were always sled ready.

After a grueling trip down the hill, I decided to try my path out. Up the hill I went again. I sat down on the saucer and pushed forward. Slowly I went down, getting stuck every few feet. I got to the bottom and looked up the hill, hearing a voice inside whisper, “Come on, one more time.” My legs were frozen numb. My arms were sore. But up the hill I went. I sat down on the saucer for a third time, not

expecting much and pushed forward. That's when it happened. I was flying down the hill! The snow was packed enough to provide a slick path for me.

After that great run, I called it a day. With a cup of cocoa in my hand and some leftover Christmas stollen, I couldn't help but think how it takes perseverance to achieve the things we want to achieve, and yet how quickly we often give up when things don't go smoothly. I see this with our children when doing crafts at the church: how often little fingers will give up and hand the project over to an adult to finish for them. I look over at the bread dough, remembering a time when I gave up on making bread all because I kept failing at getting the yeast to rise. And what about our relationship with God?

Soon the warmth of the nativity story will cool. Life will be filled with the mundane. Life's busyness will edge out this time of daily devotions. How quickly will we give up trying to clear a smooth path toward a deeper relationship with God? 2021 is quickly ticking away and a new year will be upon us. It's a time of making resolutions that we probably won't keep. But I pray that today, you don't make a resolution.

Rather, I pray that you will recommit to making time for God. Climb whatever snowy hill you must climb to get to the divine. Work on clearing a path to God's word. And don't give up if it seems arduous. Keep at it because anything worthwhile takes work. And God is worth your while. Here's to a blessed 2022!





Pray

God, you who make all things new, as the calendar turns a page and ushers in a new year, help us to continue making you a priority in our lives. May we find those blessed moments in our day to just sit quietly with you. May we find ourselves praying more, trusting more and calling upon your holy

Day 8 | Sat., Jan. 1 (New Year's Day) Have a blessed day

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
— Isaiah 43:18–19

There was a man at a church in New Jersey where I once worked who would never say goodbye to me. Instead, he would say, “Have a blessed day!” Admittedly, I was a bit surprised the first time I heard it. No one says that when they are leaving — especially in church. So the first time it happened, I thanked him and said, “You too!”

What really surprised me was the power those words had on me. “Have a blessed day” says so much more than “goodbye” can ever say. In just a few seconds, “Have a blessed day” reminds you that the time you have is indeed blessed and to take time as you go about your day to realize how blessed each moment is and can be. “Have a blessed day” makes you feel that someone really noticed you and took time to see the child of God that you are.

“Have a blessed day” rather than “goodbye” wakes you up to the fact that God’s divine grace and beauty are embedded in all of life, and it is our responsibility to open our eyes to the divine that is there in the mundane. We go through the motions of making small talk with others, but rarely do we invest our time in seeing the light of Christ in another. Rarely do we dare to enter more deeply into another person’s life.

Howard Thurman believed that the new year is our opportunity to look at one’s life objectively, to even “select one thing beyond the needs of you and your family with which to be concerned with.”

Many churches within the Presbyterian

name more today and in the days to come. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

Church (U.S.A.) are committing to becoming Matthew 25 congregations — communities of faith that take to heart Jesus’ words to help “the least of these.” While the three areas churches are invited to focus on include addressing hunger issues, dismantling racism and seeking to become more vital within their communities, I can’t help but pose the following question: What if the work of Matthew 25 really began from within each of our hearts and began with the words we choose to use?

Words are powerful, and they can make a difference. I remember reading last summer a newspaper article about all the phrases that are used among theater folks, many of which are sexist and racist. What if we chose to begin this new year more mindful of only speaking words of grace, words of healing and words of love? What if we tried not to say anything negative and complied with the adage that if you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything at all? What if it were possible that saying, “Have a blessed day!” could do more in the world than a simple “goodbye”? What if?

Pray

God, let the mediation of my heart and the words of my mouth, be pleasing to you and to all who bear me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

A quick reminder

January is here, but we are still in the season of Christmastide. Are you still taking time each day to light the Christ candle that was part of your Advent wreath? This focus on light will become even more important as we make our way to Epiphany and remember the bright star that led the Magi to the Babe of Bethlehem.

Day 9 | Sunday, Jan. 2

A twig whisk

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:8–11

“You want me to use WHAT to mix the batter?” I didn’t mean for my question to sound so incredulous, but the cooking instructor stood there with what looked like a bunch of twigs tied together in his hand, insisting that this was indeed a real kitchen utensil. I had wanted to master primitive cooking skills, but using twigs — for a whisk?

Turns out, the birch twig whisk, as it is officially called, was better than any metal whisk I have ever used. The wispy ends of the twigs reached more of the batter along the sides of the bowl and got deep into the little corners of flour that always form when trying to mix dry ingredients with wet. And so there I and my cooking classmates were, taking turns whisking the batter with a strange little utensil. We whisked away till our arms grew tired and then passed the bowl of batter along to the next person to take over.

For the cake we were making to be light and fluffy, the batter had to have a lot of air in it. There was no other means of leavening except for the manual whipping, whipping and whipping of the batter. As we took turns passing the

bowl and the twig whisk around, our instructor insured us that this cake would be worth our sore arms. He also warned that this was a recipe not to be made alone: “You need a community gathered around you to step in and continue the mixing when you grow tired.”

I looked down at the twigs in my hand as I continued to stir and thought, “Life is sweeter when you have a community there to help you.” Each twig on its own wouldn’t be able to mix the batter. But twigs tied together are much stronger for the task.

Howard Thurman echoed the wisdom of John Donne, who wrote, “No man is an island,” when he said, “It is of crucial importance for each person to consider how he relates to himself, to the society in which he is a part. We are not an island; we do not live alone.”

The instructor was right. The cake was worth our sore arms, but I think it was the many hands passing the bowl and twig whisk around that made it so delicious. And I am proud to say, I now have a twig whisk in my kitchen drawer.

Pray

God, help us this day to value the importance of community in our lives. We are not meant to journey alone. There is strength in working together, especially as we work for justice for those who are suffering and neglected. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?



Day 10 | Monday, Jan. 3

Stirring up our faith

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

— 2 Timothy 1:6–7 (New King James Version)

On my bookshelf sits an Anglican “Book of Common Prayer.” I inherited it during my days, ever so short, that I was serving as a Christian education director in an Episcopal church. For a time, I thought about pursuing an Anglican ordination, but in the end, the Presbyterians wooed me over.

I still enjoy, though, reading from the “Book of Common Prayer.” I am especially fond of the

liturgy for the Sunday before the start of Advent, which is known as “Stir Up Sunday.” It gets its name from the prayer of the day that reads, “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

It is a day that has traditionally become the day to literally stir things up, with the faithful getting to work at making holiday fruitcakes. A friend of mine, who is an Episcopalian priest, considers Stir Up Sunday an important day on the calendar. He observes it with the same reverence of celebrating the Eucharist. He clears his schedule and sets to work in the kitchen, “stirring up” all the dried fruits and nuts into a



batter that will cook until golden. Once cooled, the cakes are stored in a tin throughout Advent and Christmastide, soaking up the brandy drizzled on then daily. Come the eve of Epiphany, also known as “Twelfth Night,” my friend makes the rounds delivering the cakes. I am lucky to be on his fruitcake list. (That sentence can be read many ways!)

As the season of Christmastide draws to a close, I find myself making my own fruited



Everyone’s Favorite Fruitcake

Not everyone likes fruitcake. In fact, fruitcake has been the brunt of many a holiday joke. But this recipe lives up to its name. I invite you to join me in “stirring up” the faith for the new year to come. Make a few loaves and give them as gifts later in the month. It might be a great way to remind people that the light of Christ is indeed shining brightly in the world. Go to: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/everyones-favorite-fruitcake-recipe

cake. I had become interested in several recipes after learning that these cakes were in fact the original wedding cakes of old. There were no white fondant cakes with sugar flowers for the bride and groom to cut into. What they sliced and shared was a heavy, boozy and fruit-laden creation.

Some staunch Stir Up Sunday observers like my friend might tell me that I am too late in the season to be baking, but I don’t care. I like being reminded, as the holidays come to an end, that the faithful need to have their wills for serving God “stirred up” a bit every day.

Pray

God, stir up our faith today. Stir up our desire to speak boldly for those who have been wronged. Stir us up to work for justice. “Stir us up” is our prayer, so that our lives become beautiful gifts to the world. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?



Day 11 | Tuesday, Jan. 4

Bringing good tidings

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. — Isaiah 52:7–10

I still have Christmas music playing in my home. Among the selections filling my office is “How Beautiful are the Feet” from Handel’s “Messiah,” which lifts the verse from Isaiah that proclaims, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

On New Year’s Day, my husband and I put on our snowshoes and went out among the hills that are beyond our property. We couldn’t think of a better way to begin a new year than together out in God’s creation. As we made our way up and down the many slopes and around

pine trees, we turned a bend and there we stood before the most amazing view of Vermont’s Green Mountains. The mountains looked as if a pastry chef had dusted them with confectioner’s sugar. I wondered then how anyone could not trust God’s goodness in their life.

I thought of Isaiah’s words. The mountains were majestic, but they were made even more so by the beauty of those who walked upon them — those bringing good news to the created world around. I thought about how it is that beauty begets more beauty. When one seeks to bring good tidings into every place they enter, doesn’t the beauty of God, which is there all along, finally become apparent? Whereas the one who thrives on bad news or relishes in negativity often darkens the mood of a room. How beautiful are the feet that dare to tread where the ugliness of hate resides? How beautiful would this world be, if your feet carried you into places this year that needed to hear good tidings?

Pray

Merciful God, the angels’ song of good tidings is getting softer as we step into the new year, but that is OK. We know the words. We have been lifted by the tune. We know the Good News that needs to be shared by us. And so, God, guide our feet this day to where you want us to be and who needs to hear

tidings of peace, joy and love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Day 12 | Wednesday, Jan. 5
Hope never dies

Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."
— John 6:32–35

It's a Twelfth Night tradition for me to go to the Scottish specialty store a few towns over from where I live to buy a "Scotch bun" — a type of fruitcake that is wrapped completely in flaky pastry crust. While for centuries the Scotch bun was served on this day that marks the end of the Christmas season, it has become more popular to serve it on New Year's Eve. It is true, not many people I know celebrate Twelfth Night, let alone realize that it is an actual holiday and not just a Shakespearean play.

As I pulled up to the store, I was relieved to see it was still open for business. Prior to COVID-19, the owners shared with me that business had been slow. I could only imagine the financial stress that the pandemic added to non-essential retailers like the little Scottish shop. I walked in and saw that while the shelves weren't as full as the once were, there was still a small offering of Scotch buns available. As I caught up with the owners, I shared how happy I was to see they were still in business. They admitted it was tough, but they were able to reinvent themselves quickly, focusing on baked goods and groceries, which meant they were now "essential" retailers. "What really saved us was the bread I began baking," said the wife with the Scottish brogue I had missed hearing. The bread business had become so popular that it is now part of the day-to-day offerings of the shop.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?

When Jesus said to those who were worried about their tomorrows that he was the "bread of life," who would have thought that statement would carry so much truth. This couple's business was able to survive a global pandemic thanks to the baking of bread for others.

Currently, there are many farms in my area that are also being given hope for tomorrow as local artisan bread makers. They are popping up throughout the state and partnering with farmers to supply them with grain. One such upstart bread company has expanded its operations, building a mill to grind the grain from local farms.

In a year of so many losses due to a virus that still has a tight grip on us, I find joy in these stories of how new life is emerging from death. I take these seemingly little wins — a couple able to keep their retail shop afloat thanks to the baking of bread, and bread makers finding a way to support local farms by using their grain — and thank God, not just because I really wanted a Scotch bun for my Twelfth Night table, but because Jesus' words — "I am the bread of life" — have never been more powerful or tangible to me than now.

Pray

Redeemer and Sustainer, on this Epiphany eve, we lift our hands in praise to you for all that you have done this past year and all that you continue doing in our lives. For those times when you rescued us and gave us new hope, we thank you. For those times that you walked with us through the shadowy valley of death, we thank you. For those times you have breathed new life into our weak and fainting bodies, we thank you. May we remember that with you, O God, all is not lost. May we remember with you, O God, all will indeed be well. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Taking stock

How can my life better reflect the light of Christ? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to do more of?



THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Epiphany Is Here

The Sacrament of Christmas

BY HOWARD THURMAN

I make an act of faith toward all humankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions
brood.

I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.

I make an act of strength toward feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.

I make an act of trust toward all life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.

I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.

*I make a deed to God of all my days –
And look out on life with quiet eyes.*

Reflect

Our time together has come to an end, but the work of being the hands and feet of Christ in the world continues. As we reflect on the last couplet of Howard Thurman's "The Sacrament of Christmas," think about what new things you learned during Advent and Christmastide. What excited

you? What made you pause? What troubled you? And how will you look out on life with quiet, expectant eyes? May you challenge yourself in the days and weeks to come, to see Christ in all things. As the "Prayer of St. Patrick" says, may you see, "Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising, light of my life."

Thursday, Epiphany, Jan. 6 Our Epiphany moments

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.

— Ephesians 5:8



Three Kings' Bread

While living in Manhattan, a Spanish friend of mine invited me to a Three Kings' Day celebration at her church. It was day of gift-giving and remembering how the Magi presented their gifts to Jesus. The centerpiece of the celebration, though, was found on the buffet table — what she called "Three Kings' Bread" (or cake). Inside the bread, a figurine of a baby representing Baby Jesus was hidden. The custom is that whoever gets the doll must give a party on Candlemas (Feb. 2). Three Kings' Day celebrations, while a tradition in Latin communities, is growing in many non-Hispanic Presbyterian churches. Why not start a new tradition in your family this year and host a Three Kings' Day party? Here's a recipe for Three Kings' Bread. Go to: kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/three-kings-cake-rosca-de-reyes-recipe

I look around my seemingly bare living room this morning and let out a long sigh. "I know. It doesn't look the same, now that the Christmas lights are gone," I say to my cat, Reverend, who doesn't even try to fain interest.

The Christmas season is over, and Epiphany — a Greek word which means "manifestation" — has come. It's on this day that we celebrate the visit of the Magi to Jesus and are reminded that those who truly recognized Jesus as the King of Kings were outsiders, thus, emphasizing once again the mission statement of Jesus, who said himself, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." That means all who are lost, not just a select few.

We are asked to see the Light of the world that no darkness shall overcome, even when all our artificial "lights of the world" are gone. But when all the Christmas decorations are packed away, we tend to stow with them the promises of Christmas: the promise of a Savior who hears our cries, the promise of a Friend always by our

side, the promise of a tear catcher, secret keeper, dream sharer, nightmare chaser and hug giver, always close by in our lives.

If the promise and hope of Christmas had the ability to light up our lives, leading us to be kinder to one another for just a few short weeks, then the realization of the Word made flesh should continue leading us onward to be kinder, gentler and more giving to one another.

If Advent has been our time to watch and wait for God's gift, and Christmas our season to go and adore that gift, then Epiphany is our time to come and see Christ in our lives now. There are still more loaves to be baked and shared. There is still more bread to be broken with friend and foe.

The Magi might have had the advantage of following a bright star, but we don't need a light in the sky to reveal Christ to us. We don't need to search high and low for our epiphany moments. All we need to do is commit to being fully present to God each day. For when we are, we will begin seeing as God sees. We will finally see the radiance of the Christ light that has never stopped shining.

Pray

God of wonder, God of light, keep shining upon us as we seek to serve the lost, the lonely, the broken and the misunderstood. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Presbyterians Today
2021 Advent and Christmas Devotional

Come to Bethlehem and Be Nourished
Advent's Hunger Gives Way to Christmas' Fulfillment

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