



Hapl





Written by Larry Tuell



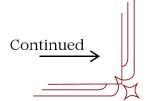
Read: Romans 13:11-14

Ponder:

Aren't you glad we serve a Holy, and loving God? It is God's holiness and love combined together that make Him so worthy of worship! We know that God exists in the form of the Trinity: the Heavenly Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are completely holy, and all three are fully all loving. In Roman's 13 Paul reminds of living in God's great love starting in verse 6: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Again in verse 10: "Love does no harm to a neighbor." God is love, and asks us to live in love towards one another.

Yet in our passage today Paul seems as if he's writing for the 21st century world, instead of the 1st century world of his time. Writing to the Roman church, he is all too aware of the world's pull on our hearts, and our struggle with our sinful natures, or flesh. He mentions three areas that pull us away from God's holiness and love. First he warns us to not live in carousing and drunkenness. Drinking and or drugs is an obvious ill for many in today's world. Carousing includes revelry in any idol you may have. For some it's TV, following movies or movie stars, or hobbies that become obsessive, or sporting teams or events. Anything that becomes more important in your heart than Jesus can become an idol. Second, Paul warns us not to have sexual immorality and debauchery. There are obvious sexual sins, and then the secret sexual sins, including the 21st century struggle with pornography on the internet. Debauchery is defined as "excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures." This could include things of a sexual nature, eating, or once again excessively binging on TV, sports or anything of the senses. If you passed the test on the first two items, the third area may be tougher. Paul finally warns not to live in dissension and jealousy. How many of us have struggled with dissension in our families with parents, brothers or sisters. Or maybe your work is filled with dissension or difficult relationships. Our entire media, news and political world is fueled on a model pushing dissension on all of us. Or maybe you are jealous of your friend's personality, life, or way of being. Do you covet your neighbor's lifestyle, home, car or friends. Paul knows all too well our struggles with our sinful natures, and calls us to wake up from our slumber. Jesus calls us to a higher standard, reminding us in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The good news is that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit have provided a way forward to victory over our sinful natures and the pull of the world on our lives. Paul, in these very verses, shows us how to overcome the world in two steps:

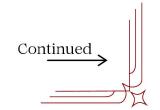


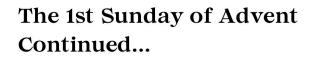
The 1st Sunday of Advent Continued...



Ponder Continued:

- 1. In verse 12 Paul says, "So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. The first step of victory over any area of struggle in your life is to bring it into God's light. The best way to bring anything into the light is to share it with another brother or sister in Christ. Christian friends, why do we hide so often our sins and struggles from others? In the Light of Christ is freedom! Satan wants us to hide our sins because he knows it will doom us. John 3:20-21 says, "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." Then I will remind you of another verse written by John in 1 John 1:8-9, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Confessing our sin and bringing any areas of struggle or sin to the Light is the first step to freedom and victory in Christ.
- 2. In verse 14 Paul tells us to, "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." The second step is to clothe ourselves with Jesus, by reading his word, literally dress and cover yourselves in Christ on a daily basis. Ask Jesus to be number 1 in your heart and life. The 2nd part here is much tougher, and a cannot be done on your own strength. Paul says here to "do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." A lot folks try this on their own strength, determining in their minds to think their way to holy living. I used to try this myself, often still struggling or falling back into areas of sin. Then a good friend of mine reminded me of the secret of Galatians 5:16, where Paul says "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." I truly cannot think my way into holy living, but Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would be our helper. We ask the Spirit to live and work in us to change our hearts and minds. If we walk in the Spirit, Galatians promises we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. You see, the Holy Spirit brings and promises us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. What an amazing, loving God we have that he sent Jesus to pay the price for our sins, then the Holy Spirit to help us not only overcome the world, but produce a crop of fruit and love in us!







- 1. What areas of your life do you struggle with sin and need to confess to another brother or sister in Christ?
- 2. You will never achieve holy or right living on your own. Have you invited the Holy Spirit to fill your heart and lead you in victory towards a more fruitful life?
- 3. For further study on holiness and God's call on our life, read: 1 Peter 1:13-16, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, Hebrews 12:14, and Proverbs 4;23-27.

Spiritual Practice: Practicing the Examen Prayer

St Ignatius taught his followers this five step prayer to be done once a day, preferably at the end of the day. Find a quiet, peaceful spot in your favorite chair near a fire or where you are most comfortable, or some even practice these steps in bed before you go to sleep.

- 1. Sit in in a quiet place and become aware of God's presence
- 2. Review the day with gratitude, thanking God for whatever comes to mind, both big and small things
- 3. Review your day, seeing where God was in it or not in it. Pay attention to your emotions. Review your thoughts, words and actions. Were you walking in God's Spirit, or did you find yourself living from your own strength or not feel God during particular parts of your day?
- 4. Choose one part of your day and pray for it. Ask for forgiveness or pardon if it was a part you felt you were not living for Christ. Thank God if it was part of your day where you were living in or felt God's great grace and love
- 5. We end the Examen prayer looking towards tomorrow and resolve to make changes in action or attitude that God has revealed to us through the first 4 steps. We are not resolving to be perfect, but instead ask for God's grace to live tomorrow with more of God in our lives.

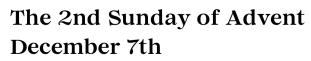
Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you God that you are a holy and loving God! We also thank you that you have not left us on our own, but have sent Jesus and the Holy Spirit out of your deep love for us. Thank you that through Christ we can be forgiven for all our sins. Thank you that through the Holy Spirit, you promise to help us live victorious and abundant lives. Help us walk in your Spirit daily, so that we produce your fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. May we feel your love with us throughout our day as we clothe ourselves with Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Listen:

Find a version of the hymn "Holy, Holy," and spend time worshipping God!





Written by Pastor Aubrey Larsen



Read: Isaiah 11:1-10, 2 Samuel 7

Ponder:

When I read this passage, I was reminded of my visit to the Redwood National Forest. The towering trees stretched toward the sky, but the ones that truly caught my attention were the nurse logs—fallen trees that, though dead, became the foundation for new life. Out of what was once lifeless, new trees began to grow, nourished by what came before them.

Isaiah 11 begins in a similar way: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse." God could have started over completely, yet He chose to rebuild from what was promised. From what looked lifeless, He brought new life. His kingdom would be rebuilt—not from human strength or might—but from His continued promise first spoken in 2 Samuel 7.

The people of Israel longed for a kingdom like a mighty redwood—strong, tall, and unshakable. But their trust had shifted from God to their own power. We come to this passage recognizing God's trustworthiness amid Israel making a mess and thus the disaster on the nation of Judah. This tree they hoped would be towering is now a nation cut down due to their own lack of trust in the God who has always provided for them. And yet, God holds true to his promise that He will rise up one to reign but it won't be in the way Israel thought it would look like.

Instead of military strength or political dominance, God sent One filled with His Spirit. When the people sought answers and timelines, God revealed something greater: His character.

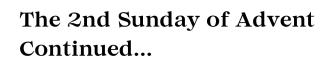
The One who will come will showcase God's heart and character. He will have Gods Spirit in the ways of:

- The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
- The spirit of counsel and might,
- The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

God meets Israel on a much grander scale than what they asked for. What they hoped for was the God would answer their questions and tell them how this would come to be and instead God met them with something so much bigger. Something they didn't know they needed. When they hoped for a clear-cut answer and solution, God gave them something bigger. They wanted a king to come and reign. They wanted a kingdom. And God gave them the real king and a new kingdom one that could never be overcome.

We often are looking for solutions and answers. We want to know what God is going to do. How is He going to show up in this situation. We too want to see God move in our lives in a specific way and yet He gives us so much more.

Continued .





Ponder Continued:

The NIV Application commentary says,

"The Hebrew language does not recognize any distinction between knowledge that is an accumulation of information and knowledge that is personal acquaintance. For the Hebrews, all true knowledge is based on experience. Therefore, when the prophet speaks here about "knowledge of the Lord," he is not speaking primarily of knowledge about the Lord but of insight into reality born of a close and intimate relationship with him. The Messiah will make it possible for all people to know God intimately." (p.189, Oswalt.)

This is the heart of Isaiah 11. God is not simply offering more information about Himself—He is inviting us into relationship with Himself. He takes what is broken and lifeless and makes it beautiful again.

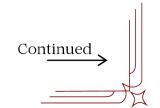
Through Jesus—the shoot from the stump of Jesse—God fulfills His promise and reveals His heart. He is taking the brokenness and the mess that we created and weaving it into His larger story of redemption for the good of many. He is bringing the King and the Kingdom of God to the earth. He is rebuilding what is broken- not just the systems, kingdoms and structures but Creation back to its created order as God intended it- to be in intimate relationship with Him.

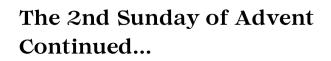
All of this is done through God revealing His heart to His people. That the One to come will showcase His heart that He is faithful and righteous. He is righteous in all His ways and faithful even when His people are not. He fulfills every promise, and His goodness is revealed through His Son. Jesus came in righteousness, judging not by appearance but with justice for the poor and the needy.

The passage both begins and ends with the root of Jesse:

"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to Him, and His resting place will be glorious."

That Root is Jesus—the One who made God's faithfulness visible and His love tangible. The One who came as an infant to showcase God's character to the world so that we could live in intimate relationship with Him. And we today are part of that same story. We belong to the King and live as citizens of His Kingdom—one built not on power, but on intimate relationship with the One true God.







How does it change your understanding of faith to know that "knowledge of God" is based on relationship rather than information?

What are you currently asking God to "fix" or "explain"? How might He be inviting you instead to trust His presence?

The people of Israel wanted a visible, powerful kingdom—but God gave them something greater: His presence. What expectations might you need to release so you can receive what God truly wants to give you?

Spiritual Practice: Examen

The examen is a practice that helps you go through your day in the light of God's presence. In this practice, you can either take a 12/24 hour period or considering todays passage take time to reflect on God's faithfulness throughout your life. Where are the times where you have seen His presence most evident in your life?

The examen is a time where we can hold your day or life out to God and ask Him to reveal where He was. It's a time where you can reflect on the ways in which you felt God's light and presence or maybe when you didn't and you are wondering where He was. Hold all these things out to God and know that He is holding you.

Prayer:

Faithful God,

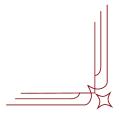
Thank You for being the One who brings new life out of what seems lifeless. When I look for clear answers, remind me that what I truly need is Your presence. Help me to trust Your righteousness and Your faithfulness even when I cannot see the full picture. May I know You not just through information, but through relationship—through daily walking with You.

Let my life be rooted in Your love, and may Your Kingdom on this earth be evident in my life.

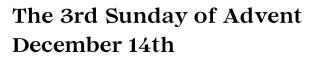
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Listen:

Give Me Jesus by UPPERROOM, Abbie Gamboa







Written by Tammy Bhang



Read: Luke 1: 46b-55

Ponder:

Has there ever been a time in life when you encountered God in a startling way? Perhaps it was assurance of something you have longed for or an answer to prayer? Maybe the word or presence of God came through a song, art, a scripture passage or a random conversation. You were comforted, reassured, confident of something to come. And then.....you began to wait. And as the days passed you began to wonder if you heard correctly or if you even heard the Lord at all?

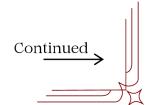
Long ago in Israel, God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary with a special message. She had found favor with God. He told her that she would conceive and bear the long-awaited Messiah. He patiently answered her questions about how that could be possible since she was a virgin. At the time she was overwhelmed and yet believed the messenger, believed the message.

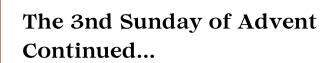
But now, weeks later she found herself having to explain what felt unexplainable, to those she loved. Her loving, kind parents sat quietly. And Joseph, her sweet betrothed, such a good young man. Ah, Joseph, his dark misty eyes full of deep pain and uncertainty looked away.

Mary might have lowered her head and closed her eyes for a moment to once again, picture the angel. Maybe she again experienced the initial fear and wafting of her troubled and confused spirit, remembered each word of the message. She might have recalled the questions she asked, the explanation received, recalling her words of submission, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Perhaps she thought about the walk home later, her profound wonder, a bursting fullness in her heart, confident she had heard from the Living God.

But now, sitting with her parents and Joseph, saying the words, "I am with child. A few weeks ago the angel of the Lord told me..." and seeing the questions in each of their eyes made the recounting seem thin, implausible even to her own ears.

Maybe her mother looked worried with questioning eyes underscoring deep concern, "Mary, what are you saying? We are poor people. Why would God choose you, choose our family when He could pick from all the rich and well-heeled young women of Israel? It doesn't make any sense."







Ponder Continued:

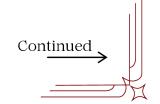
Maybe there was an uneasy stillness in the room. Maybe it was at that point her parents suggested she go to see her cousin, Elizabeth. Get out of town for a bit. It would give all of them time to process things, time to think. Mary might have gone away worried about what Joseph would do, if he would walk away from her, find someone else. Divorce would bring shame to her and her family. She might, even briefly, have wondered if she got it right from the Lord, or if it had all been some strange dream. And yet, Mary held fast in what God had promised her.

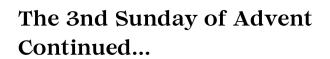
When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house baby John, six-months in utero, leapt in Elizabeth's womb. And Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophetically called Mary "the mother of my Lord", blessed among women, blessed because she had believed that God would fulfil his promise to her." And that prophetic word was so reassuring, so confirmatory to Mary that JOY burst from her mouth in a glad song, recorded for all eternity.

She glorifies and rejoices in God. He is the Savior! She contemplates how God has been mindful of her humble state. Now, her name would be remembered for all time. Not because of her. She was not proud. She knew that it had nothing to do with her, her ability, her appearance, her keen mind or ability to figure things out, make things happen. Things had happened to her and in her. She did not have control and she knew it. God in her, growing in her, humbling himself to live inside flesh swirling in amniotic fluid inside the flesh of a human. Who ever heard of such a thing? Those around her might look askance at her, talk about her, make comments about her all they wanted. She was blessed by God!

God is omniscient, even knowing our thoughts. Mary sings, "His mercy extends to those who fear Him....He scatters those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, bringing down rulers, lifting up the humble, filling the hungry and helping Israel. Maybe most importantly, she rejoices that God keeps His promises. He promised through the angel Gabriel, confirmed that promise through Elizabeth and in the process reassured Mary.

God has made promises to us as well. We may have to wait a long time. We may wonder if we have heard Him correctly or forget that He promised at all. In the darkness we may be tempted to forget what He promised in the light. We may feel desolate. The good news is that a promise is a promise. God keeps His promises no matter how long it takes. That is a consolation. And if that isn't a cause for JOY, I don't know what is.







What promises of God are you holding onto right now? Have you been waiting and getting discouraged, wondering if you really heard correctly? How have you felt the Lord encouraging you to continue in trust? Do you sense an invitation from God today?

Spiritual Practice: Ignatius: Desolation/Consolation

Consolation and Desolation: Noticing Our Movement Toward or Away from God

Consolation is the state of moving toward God's active presence.

We experience consolation when we sense growth in love, faith, mercy, hope, or any of the fruits of the Spirit. Even when life feels difficult, if we sense alignment with God's call—peace beneath the struggle, excitement for goodness, compassion for others—we are in consolation.

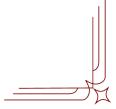
Desolation is the state of moving away from God's presence.

It's marked by feelings or attitudes such as resentment, fear, selfishness, or despair. In desolation, we often turn inward, lose perspective, and become disconnected from others or from what gives life. We may seek false comforts—work, distraction, indulgence—that mask but don't heal our distance from God.

Take time to notice consolation or desolation as you go about your day. Do you find there are times where you noticed God's presence or an absence of His presence? Take some time to bring this to God.

Listen:

In the Meantime (Jess Ray)



Faith





Written by Andrew Kruse



Read: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Ponder:

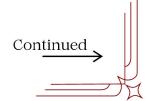
"Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave his only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life."

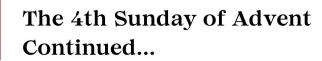
This quote is attributed to Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian who was arrested alongside other family members for hiding Jewish people from the Nazis in Holland. She was the lone survivor of her family from the Nazi concentration camps. She spent the rest of her life writing, advocating for human rights and sharing the Gospel and the power of forgiveness.

When we say we believe in something, we mean that we trust the particular being or object to be up to the task of fulfilling its mission or purpose. For example, if I sit in a chair then I expect it to hold my weight and not buckle. When I make a deposit in the bank I trust that my money will be held securely. Even more importantly when I say I have faith in God, I am saying that I trust that he can hold the complexity of my whole being, redeem me by his righteousness and secure my eternal future. With that same faith I am also confessing my inability to successfully do life on my own terms to reduce the burdens I feel brought on by my own sinful nature.

Asaph, the psalmist, was addressing the people of Israel who were worn down, oppressed and crying desperately to reach the ears of God. The image he depicts is of God being a Shepherd-King who the people would experience healing, redemption and freedom through. In addition to the Shepherd-King, God is addressed as the "LORD God of hosts", literally the Lord of Heaven's Armies. Our God is available to us intimately, like a shepherd who cares and knows his sheep. Our God is also sovereign and powerful enough to fight our battles and be victorious.

3 times in this passage the psalmist asks God to restore Israel and repeats, "Let your face shine, that we may be saved!" The anticipation in God's saving power calls us as believers to have faith and remain full of faith even in dark times. Faith in what? Faith in Christ as we remember his first coming this Advent season and anticipate his Second coming. We can have faith that Jesus' promises of forgiveness, rescue and resurrection are a sure thing because of his own life, death and resurrection. May your face shine as God's light shines on you!







- 1. How do I attempt to take control of my life instead of surrendering to God?
- 2. How has God shown up faithfully as a Shepherd-King in my life?
- 3. When have I called on God's name and believed he will help me in my circumstances (temporary and eternal)?

Spiritual Practice: Testimony

A spiritual practice that you can do this week is to write down your testimony. You can journal briefly about what your life before Christ was like, how you came to faith in Christ and 2-3 lessons in faith you've learned along the way. You could write a few sentences or a whole page. It's up to you. Writing down your testimony can remind you of what God has done in your life and prepares you for when people ask you about your own faith. Nobody can tell your story about what God has done in your life like you can!

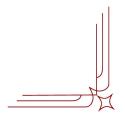
Prayer:

This Advent, Lord, come to the manger of my heart. Fill me with Your presence from the very start. As I prepare for the holidays and gifts to be given, Remind me of the gift You gave when You sent Your Son from Heaven. The first Christmas gift, it was the greatest gift ever. You came as a baby born in a manger. Wrapped like the gifts I find under my tree, Waiting to be opened, to reveal Your love to me. Restore to me the wonder that came with Jesus' birth, When He left the riches of Heaven and wrapped Himself in rags of earth. Immanuel, God with us, Your presence came that night. And angels announced, "Into your darkness, God brings His Light." "Do not be afraid," they said, to shepherds in the field. Speak to my heart today, Lord, and help me to yield. Make me like those shepherd boys, obedient to Your call. Setting distractions and worries aside, to You I surrender them all. Surround me with Your presence, Lord, I long to hear Your voice. Clear my mind of countless concerns and all the holiday noise. Slow me down this Christmas, let me not be in a rush. In the midst of parties and planning, I want to feel Your hush. This Christmas, Jesus, come to the manger of my heart. Invade my soul like Bethlehem, bringing peace to every part. Dwell within and around me, as I unwrap Your presence each day. Keep me close to You, Lord. It's in Your wonderful Name I pray.

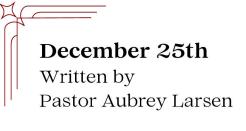
~Renee Swope, "The Manger of My Heart" from Proverbs 31 Ministries

Listen:

Jesus Christ is Born by Mac Powell









Read: John 1: 1-18

Ponder:

These verses are power-packed, the essence of the gospel in just a handful of lines. The Word, the One who was there from the very beginning — the Creator of all became flesh and dwelt among us. He became one of us. He left His glory and power to take on our humanity — with real hurts, real pain, and real emotions. He scraped His knee and bled red blood. He was probably mocked and misunderstood. He was rejected by many. And yet, He came; leaving the glory of heaven to dwell with us so that we might see and know God. The Word became flesh. In doing so, He revealed the grace and truth of God to the world even in the face of rejection.

As The NIV Application commentary puts it so well:

"The prologue to John is not about a message that offers hope, but about The Message that is the only hope. It is not about an idea, but a person. The Word became flesh tells us that God is intent on communicating with us — not about mere concepts but about Himself. The Word became flesh tells us that The Message is accessible, not hidden away for mystics or scholars, but lived in the world, touched and heard by many.

The Word became flesh tells us that Jesus was no mere mortal — not simply an inspired carpenter or model human — but God Himself, taking on the clothing of humanity, embracing it fully and eternally, walking in it, speaking through it, and delivering the reality of God to the world as had never been done before." (p. 64-65, Burge).

The hope we have is not an idea, it is the person of Jesus. In Him is our life, and through Him, we are witnesses to His light. Yet the world did not recognize Him. Still, we have seen His glory, and through Jesus, God has made Himself known. Jesus became the tangible image of God and yet many did not recognize Him, and still don't. We often move through our days consumed with tasks and routines: doing dishes, commuting, visiting family, or watching television. In the busyness, we forget that God is with us. Right there. Always near.

A few summers ago, I set aside time to spend with God on a walk. I expected to hear His voice - maybe a revelation, a word of encouragement, or a sense of peace. But none of that happened. The next day, I felt disappointed, wondering if I'd wasted that time when I could have been reading Scripture, listening to a Christian podcast, or worship music. Then an image came to mind- of my daughter coming downstairs simply to be with me. She didn't have an agenda; she just wanted to be near me. Sometimes she got distracted, playing with a toy while I sat nearby. But my heart was full of joy that she chose to be in the room with me.

Continued





Read: John 1: 1-18

Ponder Continued:

In that moment, I sensed God whispering that this is how He feels about us. He delights when we simply desire to be with Him even if we get distracted or don't "feel" anything spiritual is happening. He isn't looking for perfect focus or performance; He's looking for our presence.

We are God's children. He knows how easily we drift and how distracted we can be. Yet He longs for relationship with us — not the version of us we think we should be, but the real, present us. He meets us where we are, not where we think we should be. Today, let's remember: we are God's beloved children — the ones with whom He dwells, and the ones He delights to simply be with. Today we celebrate that Jesus became human to be with us and show us the love of God incarnate.

Go deeper:

What stands out to you most about the phrase "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"?

How does knowing that Jesus experienced real human pain and emotion affect the way you relate to Him?

What is one small, intentional way you can be more aware of God's nearness this week?

Spiritual Practice:

Light a candle and sit in silence as you contemplate that the light of the world has come.

Prayer:

Father, You are worthy of our praise. When we consider Your faithfulness through the works of Your hands, through the gift of Your Son, and through the ways You care for us day by day, we're humbled and we remember once again: You are God and we are not. Lord, forgive us for the ways we try to steal Your glory and trust in ourselves. You draw near to us each day and put on display the ways You are still sovereign and good. May we give You the adoration and praise You deserve—not just this Christmas season, but each and every day. Amen. (Ruth Chou Simons)

Listen: O Come All Ye Faithful

