

December 20, 2020

Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26

***I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all
generations.***

***I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens (Psalm 89:1–2 NRSV).***

This is my first Advent season without at least one of my parents alive. My parents taught my siblings and me their faith that was taught to them. We share that faith, grounded in service, with our children who have started to teach their children about steadfast love established forever.

Together this fall as the COVID surge built toward its winter crest of heartbreaking illness and death while a bizarre nationwide election spotlighted our sadly divided nation, our Nassau Church family did a deep dive into the Psalms.

Our Psalms education-for-all-ages leader, Professor Brent Strawn, poignantly urged us to stay in the void of bad memory as expressed by lamenting Psalms because that is where we encounter God. Professor Strawn credits Patrick Miller, author of *The Lord of the Psalms*, as a strong teacher and career mentor who influenced him. Miller, who passed away in May, provided insight through his own notes on the faithful trail markers found in Psalms that he had discovered through his childhood learning that continued for a lifetime. It also occurs to me that his sons are experiencing their first Christmas without a parent.

In his beautiful book about the Psalms, Miller proclaims the Lord's steadfast love clearly. Writes Miller, "The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the Yea and Amen to all that the Psalms tell us of the person of God in and with us, seen and seeing, named and naming, speaking and listening, here and there, now and forever."

Gracious God, we give thanks for your steadfast love in our lives and the lives of our families who have lived before us and will follow us to proclaim your love that lasts forever and ever. We praise you as we entrust our anger with you and give thanks for transforming our lives and for teaching us to love kindness as we walk humbly with you. Amen.

Marshall McKnight

Marshall celebrates the Lord's steadfast love as he is honored to serve Nassau Presbyterian Church as a deacon, a member of the Adult Education Committee and a member of the Mass Incarceration Task Force. He works for the State of New Jersey.

December 21, 2020

Luke 1:46b–55

*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 1:46–48 NRSV).*

Mary’s Magnificat reminds me of when I learned about psalms, specifically psalms of thanks. Mary says, “*my spirit rejoices in God my savior.*” So, I see this prayer kind of like a psalm. The prayer Mary writes was right after she found out that she was going to have a child, the Messiah, Jesus. This passage shows me how mighty and great God is. Mary describes God as “*the Mighty One*”.

I can tell Mary is so joyful as she writes this prayer in song. If you write something in song you must be very happy—especially since Mary is 12 at the time, and, trust me, I know a lot of 12-year-olds and none of them write songs. I can see that God is just because he feeds the hungry and leaves the rich empty. Mary went from being scared of the angel to the most joyful person. Mary rejoices in happiness and thanks, not fear and worry. Mary knows that God is on her side. The prayer magnifies all synonyms of thanks and happiness. This prayer makes me happy and trust in God. Overall, this prayer is beautiful and brings joy to the world.

Dear Lord, let us see the Magnificat as a symbol of your greatness and your good deeds. Let the disbelievers read Mary’s prayer and believe in you, Christ. Show the weak how they can be strong and let the world live in peace. In your Son’s name. Amen.

Hosford Roberts

Hosford is a seventh grader at Grover Middle School. He enjoys playing baseball, riding bikes, playing with his siblings and friends, and drinking hot chocolate. Hosford is a huge Atlanta Braves fan and loves his dog Hank too.

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December 22, 2020

Luke 1:46b–55

***...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 1:48–49 NRSV).***

The Magnificat text, in its entirety, is one of my favorite passages. I realized long ago that my favorites have musical connections. When I read this, I hear Bach. No one ever wrote more joyous music than Bach, particularly in D major with trumpets.

When I read the text, I see that the first four verses express personal gratitude and joy, and the remainder are a general song of praise. I will meditate on the personal part, in which Mary expressed her joy at bearing a child.

I have had some difficulty with the personal part, as a childless woman, but the Mighty One has surely done great things for me. I had a troubled childhood with a wonderful father whose addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs created a painful wall between us. Through God's grace, our relationship was healed and became something I will always treasure. Then, I had my own struggles with alcoholism. Through God's grace, I have experienced the joys of recovery for almost forty years. My husband killed himself in depression following a stroke, and I felt abandoned by him and by God. Through God's grace, I have survived, grown, and found love again. "...the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

Dear God, help me to live each day in gratitude. Let me sing your praise upon waking and upon sleeping. Help me to be of service so that my life may reflect your mercy and glory. May my soul magnify your name. Amen.

Frances Slade

A native of Atlanta, Georgia, Frances has lived in New Jersey since 1977. She is the founder and Artistic Director emeritus of Princeton Pro Musica. She is an enthusiastic participant in contra dancing and English country dancing. In recent years, she has channeled her music-making into playing the piano. She joined Nassau Church in 2007.

December 23, 2020

1 Samuel 2:1–10

***Hannah prayed and said,
“My heart exults in the LORD;
My strength is exalted in my God.”
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.***

***Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed (1 Samuel 2:1, 3 NRSV).***

Hannah had reason to rejoice. She was previously unable to bear a child. In an era when a man could take multiple wives, her husband’s other spouse produced offspring and then taunted the infertile Hannah who wept bitterly, praying to God for a son. Witnessing her fervor, an uncomprehending priest thought her drunk. Nevertheless, she persisted. God answered her fierce appeal, and her son Samuel was born. Dedicating Samuel to God’s service, Hannah pours forth gratitude: “*My heart exults in my God.*” But rejoicing also includes a sense of getting even or at least of satisfaction in seeing opponents brought low. “*My mouth derides my enemies,*” she declares. Throughout her song, she names surprising reversals by which God’s purpose is worked out: the weapons of the mighty broken, the feeble becoming strong, the poor raised from the dust, and the rich brought low. Hannah’s God is the Lord who comes especially to those who are barren, poor, and dispossessed. To be sure, God’s promise of liberation is for all people, but it is good news first for those regarded as weak or marginal or oppressed. Perhaps we who enjoy privilege—whether bestowed by gender, income, education, ancestry, or race—will understand God’s promise to the extent that we learn humility, to the degree that we “*talk no more so very proudly, ... [nor] let arrogance come from ... [our] mouths.*” Perhaps we best observe Advent when we wait in silent awe for the One whom we could never have imagined.

O Lord of all our days, we thank you for the promise of Advent which perpetually renews us with joy, comfort, and challenge beyond our dreams. In the name of the Child born in Bethlehem. Amen.

Jim Moorhead

Jim is an ordained Presbyterian minister who taught at Princeton Seminary for several decades before retiring in 2017. His area of expertise is the history of American Christianity, and he currently serves as senior editor of the *Journal of Presbyterian History*. He and his family have been part of the Nassau Church family since 1984.

December 24, 2020

Isaiah 9:2–7

***The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.***

***For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders.***

***His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace (Isaiah:9:2, 6, 7 NRSV).***

In the chapters of Isaiah preceding this text, the context of *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light* is given. King Rezin and King Pekah of Israel were set to attack Jerusalem, but Isaiah advised King Ahaz that the Lord would protect Jerusalem. Ahaz refused the advice and sought the help of Tiglath-pileser of Syria to protect Jerusalem. This king did defeat Israel, but Jerusalem became a vassal of Assyria because of the commitment Ahaz had made to Tiglath instead of to the promise of Yahweh. It was a dark time for Jerusalem, but finally, *The people who walked in darkness will see a great light*. A son has been given to them. *His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace*. They were accorded this promise, *The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this*.

In the news today, the reactions against policies that mandate control of the corona virus are reported. Leaders who would try to question the deadliness of the virus call on their supporters to ignore the precautions advised by scientists. They initiate war against reason and mangle with delay. It is a dark time for America, but finally, we people who walk in darkness will see a *great light*. A son has been given to us, *and there shall be endless peace*. *The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this*. Let us trust in this zeal to guide us to conquer this scourge so we can walk in the light.

Dear God, we thank you for your endless blessings, even in these troubled times. We beseech you for your help to conquer not only disease, but also perilous policies. We pledge to continue compassion for all. We look forward to walking in the light. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We magnify your name. Amen.

Cecelia Hodges

Cecelia is a transplanted New Yorker whose West Indian parents raised her in the faith. She has been a member of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church since the 70s, serving as elder, as founding director of the Witherspoon Verse Speaking Choir, and on many committees. She is a retired professor from Rutgers and Princeton Universities and, as an avocation, has presented a one-woman show of poetry and prose abroad and throughout the states. These presentations are

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founded on her Ph.D. research. She has served on many community committees and she attempts to continue support of them.

December 25, 2020

John 1:1–14

***The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.***

***The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.
We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth (John 1:5, 14 CEB).***

Again a darkness, every hundred years:
we are coronavirus-masked, breathless
and in quarantine. God's people pixelated
and disembodied, muted by circumstance.
We have lost more than two of our senses.
What did poets of other centuries do
amid chasms of darkness and sorrow?
Shakespeare, the bard of Avon,
lost his only son, Hamnet—twin brother
of Judith— to bubonic plague. Tragicomedy
excavates the ache of absence and longing.
In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* a sister,
mourning her dead twin brother, finds
him alive on the twelfth night of Christmas.
Like Shakespeare, many have hearts
bruised by absence—those we once loved
faded into a country of shadowed memory.
All that is left is an urn with ashes.

In this and every century God's Advent promise
is cosmic light, as if all constellations were
a single beam: the star we know each
Christmas arrived to dissipate the darkness.
Heaven's luminosity streams with a fierce
purity to banish disease and decay.
Our star leads to the cradle and the Child,
who holds God's poetry, the Word in Flesh.
The Child's hands, folded, tiny,
peaceful, like delicate cowrie shells.
Come all, huddle around the cradle, protect
the Child; let the luster of his Love crowd
out every inch of darkness and gloom.

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Dearest Lord, thank you on this Christmas Day for sending your only Son as a babe to be the Light of the World. The Christ Child gives us hope that we will conquer the pandemic, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and soothe the broken-hearted. Hallelujah, Amen!

Roz Anderson Flood

Roz sings in the Adult Choir and serves on the Worship and Arts Committee. She loves poetry, reads, writes and teaches it. She was recently elected to the board of Copper Canyon Press.

December 26, 2020

Jeremiah 26:1–9, 12–15

The priests, the prophets, and all the people heard Jeremiah declare these words in the LORD’s temple. And when Jeremiah finished saying everything the LORD told him to say, the priests and the prophets and all the people seized him and said, “You must die!” (Jeremiah 26:7–8 CEB).

Christmas is perhaps our most treasured holiday. Radio stations switched to all holiday music and stores were glittering with decorations by mid-November. Millions gathered online and in church buildings for Christmas Eve worship services. Yet, what are the priests and the prophets and all the people saying today?

Jeremiah, one of the major prophets, dedicated his life to turning the people back to God during a period of great social and political conflict. Sound familiar? Now look around...radio stations immediately resumed their regular programming and businesses are back to usual today. What about you? Did you already unplug your lights and haul your tree to the curb, or will on the weekend?

What if I told you that the Twelve Days of Christmas are just beginning? More than the familiar carol, this period runs from December 25th until January 6th, Epiphany when Christians mark the Magi’s visit to Jesus.

When possible, my spouse and I love to spend New Year’s with my in-laws in Mexico. Although I’ve always known about Epiphany, the idea of celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas became more real for me the first time that we walked past airport employees eagerly removing garland in the USA to boulevards filled with poinsettias, bustling plazas still adorned with lights, and even mall photo booths with the Three Kings in Mexico. Families gather to enjoy “Rosca de Reyes” (Three Kings bread, which somewhat resembles Mardi Gras King Cake), and schools resume after children wake up to find gifts delivered by the Three Kings on Epiphany.

What if all Christians lingered in the Twelve Days of Christmas? Like new parents, I suggest that we need a transitional period to adjust to all of the physical and emotional changes brought on by Jesus’ arrival into our lives and our world. Exhausted and overwhelmed, yet bursting with a love you didn’t even know was possible, and forming a critical bond that will sustain you through life’s challenges.

O, precious newborn Jesus, how greatly we anticipated you and how much we celebrated your arrival on Christmas Day! Now, please stay in our hearts. Give us the strength and the courage to heed your powerful cry. Help us to resist our tendencies to so quickly criticize, ridicule, and even abandon your love and the prophetic voices in our world. Amen.

Brandy Alexander

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Brandy is a member of the Adult Education Committee and a licensed social worker privileged to serve the Latinx immigrant community in New Brunswick. She and her husband Francisco Pelaez-Diaz began attending Nassau Church in 2012. Together with their young children Oliver and Max, they continue to worship regularly and build the beloved community with our faith partners at Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church in Trenton, and Princeton Theological Seminary.