



Cultivating Care for Creation

This advent season, the Council decided our theme would be focused on Climate Change. As people of faith, we proclaim our belief that our world is God's creation, that God sees it as good, and that it is ours to protect and maintain. We also recognize that the quality of life for all of us depends upon the earth's health and well-being. We are charged by our Creator with caring for creation, and are called to be faithful stewards of that which is entrusted to us.

We hope this guide will provide an opportunity for prayerful reflection within your faith community, your family, and on your own.

An Advent Guide for Lectionary Year A
from the North Carolina Council of Churches



First Sunday of Advent – Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together.

To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.”

For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.”

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Rational, intelligent folks are no longer debating climate change. Some are debating its causes—natural warming and cooling cycles, warming and cooling cycles driven by human behavior, or a combination of the two. But no one disputes it is changing and most agree it’s not changing for the better. We’ve all heard it: swifter floods, harsher droughts, stronger storms, fiercer fires. For my part, I no longer joke about the beach house I plan to buy after I write my first best-seller. I still plan to write a best-seller, but I won’t use the money “to build a house on sand” (Matthew 7:26).

Such a scenario necessarily involves resources and choice. With the resources from my best-seller I’ll have the choice to build on rock or sand. Not everyone has resources or choice. Many live on sand because it is their only choice. Many live near water for the resources it provides, but with those resources come the risks water presents—risks that are becoming routine even here in North Carolina where we managed two one-hundred year floods in three years.

With these real live scenarios playing out in our world, the ones with resources and choices should heed the advice from Psalm 122, “For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.” We should swiftly be about seeking the good of those in harm’s way and not merely rushing to build our own houses on higher ground.

Those of us who subscribe to the real possibility that this particular climate change cycle has been hastened by humans, and who generally leave larger carbon footprints than our two feet allow (my own is 4.5 and I try hard to repair, renew, and recycle), have some responsibility to seek some good for others. Human decency suggests our moral compass should point us toward the welfare of those endangered by our big feet, but for people of faith, there is another imperative.

Our imperative is bound up in the DNA of creation. All of creation is God’s gift to us (Genesis 1:26). All of humanity is “precious in the sight of the Lord (Psalm 116:15).” David sings it beautifully for us on this first Sunday of Advent. As we gather in our places of worship to begin

the journey through a new Christian year, may we start this journey in the memory that we are all bound up together.

*For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, "peace be within you."
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.*

Seeking implies we are looking for ways to make things better. There are some readily available things we can do every day—turn up the thermostat a few degrees in the summer and down a few degrees in the winter—and there are some bigger challenges we must work together to meet. Of course, the bigger challenges will make the biggest difference and require collective will. If we are honestly “**seeking** good” and not merely “**saying** peace” we must be willing to join forces for change at the economic and political level. Keeping my thermostat at 62 degrees in the winter is not going to stop the polar cap ice melt unless every home, business, school, and government building also makes this adjustment AND if our businesses and governments mandate new energy regulations.

As people of faith mandated by our scriptures to seek good for all creation, this is the place to focus our energy. We can vote with our pocketbooks by choosing to do business with and buy goods from environmentally friendly places. We can vote with our feet by leaving those places that do not respect creation. We can vote—vote for individuals at the local, state, and national level who share our values, who will “seek the good.”

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

Second Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 11:1-10

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

*His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Through deeply ecological imagery, Isaiah tells us what peace and the peaceable kingdom will look like when it arrives.

We learn that peace will mean the gentle cohabitation of predator and prey as wolves “shall live with lambs.” We learn peace will mean nursing children playing and laughing among snakes’ dens. We learn peace will mean life without destruction as even our eating patterns will no longer require death. “The bear shall graze” while “the lion shall eat straw like an ox.”

Biblical scholars regularly point out that in God's ordering of creation, humans exist *within* the ecosystem. This vision of peace described by Isaiah is a vision for all of God's Creation—both human and non-human. The whole world is held in this imagining. We are a part of this vision.

What does that mean for *us*, the humans?

Clearly, we are not living at peace with our world today. Some say peace is unattainable and this kind of flourishing is beyond our ability. After all, in order to live our lives today, entire forests are being cleared to make room for livestock. Entire mountain ranges are blown to bits to find coal. Waterways are degraded with the toxicities of industry, poisoning people and aquatic species alike.

We are quick to point out there are no alternatives, that this way of death is *the only way*. In some cases it is the only thing we know. But the Christ child, the Messiah, offers us another way—the way of peace, the way of justice, the way of life.

May the promise of the Messiah in this passage remind us of God's ability, always, to do a new thing. In the Christ child, through the incarnation, God becomes a part of our world with all its death dealing ways in order to show us the way to life. In God's vulnerability we are given the Holy Child, and with this child the promise of justice and peace awakens.

Friends, the promise of peace and justice is a promise for the created order in its entirety. We must live into the realization of that promise. We must advocate for our world as a whole, trusting that God is doing a new thing in us—that the way of death is not the only way.

“And a little child shall lead them.”

Sarah Ogletree
Program Coordinator – NC Interfaith Power & Light

Third Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

I was once lost—literally—some miles south of Nowhere. In this case, Nowhere, Wyoming. (Yes, it’s a real place.) This was before the days of cell phones, let alone GPS. As you might imagine, south of Nowhere was a vast stretch of not much at all, a landscape devoid of visible habitants or visible life. It was the “high lonesome” of deepest wilderness.

But—there *was* a highway. And highways might lead us to nowhere—but they also must lead us to somewhere, if we keep our wits about us, if we keep our faith.

In Isaiah 35, the prophet describes, in beautifully vibrant language, the journey of the people of God out from a place of wilderness and emptiness into a profoundly altered landscape—a landscape now bursting with profuse life and abundance when before there had been nothing, and they were nowhere. Even more, those who had simply been wandering about, lost in the “high lonesome,” have now been given a raised road, a path on which to place their feet, turn around, and come home. They will do so, we’re told, wearing a crown of everlasting joy—which describes perfectly my own sense of euphoria and release at finding that the same highway that had led me into lost-ness could take me back toward habitation, toward life, toward home.

Our faith can at times feel like a two-way street (or road). Sometimes, it seems to lead us into a high lonesome place, where we fail to see any signs of life, of hope, of assurance that we’re heading in the right direction. But just as in any piece of desert geography, life is always there, perhaps invisible to our eye, but pushing silently upward through the surface, moving soundlessly across the seemingly empty landscape. Life is *always* there. And eventually, while we’re wandering around lost and confused in this place of wilderness, we will realize that this road of faith that has brought us *here* will surely lead us back out again—toward life more abundant, toward home.

There, in the place that once was wilderness, once a place of wandering, will be a raised road. There will be no more wandering (35:8) and no more danger (35:9). The people God has redeemed and ransomed will walk on it, and they will turn, and they will come home (35:8-9). As they walk homeward, upon their head, like a canopy, a garland, or a crown, will be a joy not bound by time. Rejoicing and gladness will meet them on the road. Sorrow and sighing will flee (35:10).

Isaiah 35 invites us to reflect on this Advent season not only as God's coming in Christ, but also as our coming home. God comes. God is here. We leap and shout and sing. And together we walk home.

Prayer: Divine Creator – take us where we need to go, be with us on the journey, and lead us back out again, always toward home. Toward you.

Karen Richardson Dunn
Regional Coordinator – Partners in Health and Wholeness

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80 is a prayerful lament by the people of Israel who have strayed from their Shepherd and desire to be restored by the one from whom they have strayed. The people of Israel realize the consequences of drifting from the path of the Lord. In this Psalm we read their confession, not of sin, but of faith. They trust in the Lord to restore them, shine his face upon them, and save them from their own undoing.

The larger context of Psalm 80, not entirely presented in this reading for today, describes Israel as a vine that had been planted. It took root in the land and stretched from “sea” to “river.” Today’s passage tells us this vine had been cut down, burned, and is near its end. It is a metaphor not only for the nation of Israel and its people, but also for the land itself. God, creator of all things, is the original sower of seeds and we are again victims of our own undoing. The prophet Jeremiah describes how God “*brought you into a land of plenty, to enjoy its gifts and goodness, but you ruined my land; you disgraced my heritage*” (2:7). Humans have been defiling the land for generations.

Humans were given dominion and stewardship of God's good creation, but we have turned *care* into *carelessness* and *dominion* into *domination and exploitation*. We must lament our own undoing and once again turn to the God of all life to save us from ourselves. Our compulsive desires leave us in a different kind of exile; one that has ripped us away from the original good gifts of creation we were meant to enjoy, protect, and preserve.

The Advent season is a time of both anticipation and remembering. If we all take the opportunity during Advent to confess how we have defiled the lands, to acknowledge our impact on God’s creation, and to commit to following scripture, we could begin to anticipate the new way of being and living that God intends for us. We must begin again and live in ways that care for God’s creation and all who share creation with us.

Let us join the Psalmist in honest confession of our brokenness as we seek to repent in how we treat others, how we treat the world, and how we treat the good gifts of creation. Let us once again turn to God to save us, knowing that once our faces and hearts have turned, our hands and feet will quickly follow.

Prayer: With the Psalmist, we pray:

*Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
 have regard for this vine ...
 Then we will never turn back from you;
 give us life and we will call on your name.
Restore us, God of heavenly forces!
 Make your face shine so that we can be saved!"*

Rachel Baker
Immigration Advocacy Program Coordinator

Christmas Eve/Day – John 1:1-14a

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. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us...

And the word became flesh and lived among us...

In the incarnation we see God's ultimate affirmation of the physical earth. That God would assume physical existence—that God would be wrapped in flesh and bone, tendon and cartilage—was an insurmountable obstacle for many early Christians. In fact, the early Church's most formidable heresy was Christian Gnosticism, a system of dualism that separated evil bodily existence from the spiritual realm of purity and truth. Christian Gnostics simply could not circle the paradoxical square of a perfect God assuming fallen flesh. It's a stumbling block that has continued to dog the church and lives on in various forms today.

But the incarnation should come as no surprise to those who pay close attention to God's actions in the world. The gospel writer has been paying attention, and signals as much in that favorite Advent verse: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Matter has always mattered to God. God creates the world—sun, rocks, birds, bacteria—and rejoices in its goodness. God creates humans, both male and female, and calls us to be caretakers of God's beloved world. God shows us power in water, delivers healing in leaves, promises grace through rainbows, sustains life through soil. God is praised by the trees, and worship breaks forth in the mountains. God lavishly displays God's love in the world around us and is always using the stuff of the world—be it flesh, water, bread, or wine—to reveal God's self. Nowhere is this more powerfully on display than in the incarnation, when the Word that created matter assumes it in order to redeem it.

God is so concerned with the created world that God freely chose to enter into it. But do we share that concern? Do our lives display a similar love and appreciation for the created world? Do we allow the power and magnitude of the incarnation to transform our relationship with the creation? Or do we cast aside the physical and earthly paradoxical God-human and reduce God to a spiritualized religious dogma?

If God views the stuff of earth as worthy of participating in the work of redemption, what keeps us from celebrating creation and engaging in the sacred work of serving and protecting it?

Prayer: God of Love and Light, with all of creation, we give thanks for the gift of the Christ child. Show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth. Help us to protect all life and prepare for a better future. Amen.

Sean O. Allen
Director of Finance and Administration

First Sunday after Christmas – Psalm 148

*Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.
 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
 Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
 Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!
 Young men and women alike, old and young together!
 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and
 heaven.
 He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are
 close to him. Praise the LORD!*

There is nothing more beautiful than the love for all of Creation illustrated in Psalm 148. Today is a day to savor these images, connecting perhaps to moments in our own lives when our praise of God’s Creation has elevated us, inspired us, nurtured and strengthened us. We feel it when we walk in the woods, or sit in the sun on a park bench; when our hands are in the garden, or we put our feet in the sand. This sense—this feeling of wholeness, connectedness—isn’t limited only to the natural elements of the world. It’s there, too, when we are in our homes and our houses of worship, and during the ceremonies and celebrations that draw us together.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, we are offered a great opportunity to reflect and share memories of these moments, to delight in one another’s delight. Psalm 148 is a song of praise!

And yet, where are we practicing praise of the Creator? Consider the environmental chaos we are experiencing as a result of a changing ecological climate. People of faith can step up and become the leading protectors of God’s glorious creation.

Scripture instructs us, not only to praise the Lord, but to praise all of creation. And all of creation, from the heavens above to the earth below, are called to praise God.

The Council’s Creation Care Program, NC Interfaith Power & Light (NCIPL) tells and lives a new story of partnership with the natural world that overturns the destructive story of dominion. We believe this new story is essential to creating the will to address the climate crisis. This belief is at the core of our theory of change; change happens when we connect our own gifts and strengths to the world’s places of need. When we do so in community with others, we are empowered and connected to work that is life giving and in alignment with God’s will.

NCIPL works with faith communities to identify and implement positive, hope-filled responses to climate change as a moral imperative. We believe it is through NCIPL's values-based messaging that people of faith will awaken and respond to the realities of a changing climate. Through community engagement, hearts and minds will be educated, inspired, and mobilized to protect the natural environment and the health and well-being of all North Carolinians.

PRAISE BE TO GOD!

Prayer: Holy God, today we give thanks for the gift of your son Jesus. And we know that you will guide us as we move beyond celebrating the birth of the child in the manger towards the epiphany of praising you for all the grandeur of the Earth and Heavens above. We pray that we will know best how to love and worship you by caring for all your Creation.

We Praise you, Creator God, and therefore we call all people of faith to come together. We must come together because our love for and care of Creation inspires it; our concern for justice, freedom and peace demands it; and what we can learn from each other requires it.

We must truly awaken to the realization that might is not right; that human power is not self-sufficient or absolute, and that our trust is in something greater than ourselves.

Dear Lord, grant us a sense of obligation to stand on the side of the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed, and to serve the cause of Eco-justice for All. As we praise you in this way, and through the teachings of Jesus, we are blessed with a profound hope that good choices for All of Life will finally prevail.

We praise you again and again, Creator God, and we offer you our hearts and our hands for the protection of your Creation.

Amen.

Susannah Tuttle
Director – NC Interfaith Power & Light

Epiphany of the Lord – Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“. . . for we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage,” the travelers from the East said to King Herod.

A star at its rising led them to travel from far away—it beckoned them, and they remained transfixed on this star, until they arrived where they hoped they would find the Messiah, “the child who has been born king of the Jews.” The travelers were beckoned by a star, pulled by the hopes deep within their hearts of long-awaited Good News. These travelers saw the star and knew its meaning immediately because they had been waiting for it, depending on it, and wondering about it. To “pay him homage” emphasizes the respect these travelers already had for this child. These travelers, knowing what is holy, knew the child was from God. His birth drew them to come and worship.

They noticed the star because they were looking for it. The awareness and mindfulness when we are looking for something is far different than when we are not. Our posture in the world reflects what we are open to seeing and what we are trying not to notice.

Often we travel through the day in a slumped-posture, with our faces pointed down—often at our phones, computers, but sometimes to avoid eye-contact and connection with another person. We often live trying to avoid life. In this avoidance, we do not notice much, let alone Good News.

The travelers continued their trek until they found themselves where the star was directly over the child. Life for them would never be the same. The story goes, they were “overwhelmed with

joy.” We would expect that after a long journey of anticipation; however, the Magi teach us one more thing about awareness and mindfulness. They teach us to be aware of our surroundings and also to be aware of what is happening with our own emotions and reactions. Identifying how we feel is an enormous insight into life. The travelers were so aware of what God is doing in the world that they noticed a star, found it, and felt within themselves immeasurable joy.

The beauty of Advent is that it teaches us each year that God is coming. In our longing we will be met with hope, peace, joy, and love. In our normal ways of thinking, often tired, maybe stressed, and sometimes afraid to look up—we may only see pain and worry. We may tell ourselves things about this world that further separate us from it. Undoubtedly, there is much pain in this world that could use a star in the night, but if we look for the sacred among us and tune our hearts to that, we can become people of hope who lift our eyes to the heavens.

This oft told tale is a crucial reminder to watch for the sacredness in this world. To be aware and mindful of what God is doing around us—to pursue it—and then join it. Our awareness might lead us on journeys that end in overwhelming joy.

Prayer: God of Love, thank you for giving us reminders—signs all around us—that you are present in our world. Thank you for stars in the night. Thank you for beckoning us, inviting us to join you. Help us in our journeys so that we are looking for you. And help us focus our awareness on what is of you. Amen.

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