

Candles of courage for fears ever present

Reflect. What does courage look like? Who are those in your life who have exemplified courage? What can you learn from them?



Day 15 | 3rd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 13 Courage to admit you need help

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized — John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. Now a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.” — John 3:22–30

Lighting the candles on the Advent wreath was a tradition in my family. The wreath, which my father made larger and larger each year, would be placed on the dining room table come Sunday evening. I knew this was a special moment because we only ate at that table for birthdays or holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Once gathered for our meal, my parents allowed my brother or sister or me to light a candle. While this is a fond childhood memory, it is also a memory that taught me the meaning of courage. My brother is disabled, and his coordination is not the best. His hands aren’t steady, so there

was tension rising in the room when he held a match over the evergreen that could quickly become a pile of kindling. My brother’s first attempt failed. A second match was lit and burned out before it reached the candle. When the third match did drop onto the wreath, there was chaos that involved a glass of eggnog dousing the smoldering needles. I don’t remember the smell of burning evergreen, though. What I remember is how deflated my brother looked. I can still hear his voice choking through tears, asking, “Can someone help me?” I learned that night that our inabilities aren’t something to be ashamed of. In our struggles, God’s grace shines, showing us, with help, that all things are possible. I learned that true courage is being able to admit you need help, and there’s no shame in that. Howard Thurman once said that what every person wants is to know they are not journeying alone. We all want to know that we are cared for. Eventually the Advent candles around our family wreath were lit. The fire department was never called. We all smiled, including my brother.

Pray

Great God, who sees the shaking hands and the trembling hearts, come to me in my moments of doubt. Help me remember that with you by my side, I can do all things. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

As uncomfortable as it might be, take time to sit with something you are struggling with. Find the courage to face it, to name it and to ask for help.

Day 16 | Monday, Dec. 14

A brave little state

Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. See, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?" surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness. — Isaiah 8:16–22

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined. — Isaiah 9:1–2

Prior to the November election, I noticed signs appearing on the side of my rural roads that read: "This brave little state says 'no' to hate." I live in Vermont and "brave little state" is the nickname President Calvin Coolidge, a Vermonter himself, gave the state after it showed bravery and resolve to work together in the aftermath of a flood that hit one of the counties in the early 1920s. Now in 2020, an advocacy group has created a campaign around the nickname, raising awareness of the racial justice work that needs to be done in a mostly white state. It's

important work because Bernie Sanders and Ben & Jerry's ice cream aside, Vermont isn't as liberal as my friends think it is.

I realized that a year ago when the children of a neighboring school voted to fly a Black Lives Matter flag on the flagpole. The news story unleashed a torrent of hate messages that flooded the station's social media feed. As I scrolled through the comments that slammed the school's education board for allowing this, and the many more comments about how "all" lives matter, the scales from my eyes began to fall. I was shocked and realized that I had been living in a bubble. It was time to shed light on what was really happening. The prophet Isaiah talks about people walking in darkness, but eventually they will have a light shine upon them. Redemption will be theirs. This light, though, is not a given. We need to do our part in order to have it shine upon us. We need to stop living in bubbles. We need to recognize the ways we perpetuate hate — no matter what hate it might be. We need to open our hearts, repent and invite that light in. It is not going to be easy because sometimes we get used to being in the dark and a sudden stream of light can be jarring. But we need to be brave little states that say "no" to hate. For how can we enter into the season of Christmas, where love came down from heaven, and still harbor hate?

Pray

God, remove the scales from my eyes that keep me from seeing the hate that is in me. Break open my heart so that this Christmas I will sing with a new conviction, "Truly he taught us to love one another." Amen.

Go deeper

What is your community doing to say "no" to hate? Is there a group to get involved in? If not, is there a need for such a group, and could it be something that God is asking you to start?



Day 17 | Tuesday, Dec. 15

The courage to stick close to Jesus

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said,

"This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The



Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. — Luke 22:54–62

One of my favorite Christmas songs is "Away in the Manger." Perhaps it was the illustrated book I had as a child depicting the cutest barn animals cuddling baby Jesus as they sang to him, "Away in the manger, no crib for his bed," that captured my fancy. The line, though, that I held onto as child, and as an adult navigating career and relationship moves in New York City, was: Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me forever and love me, I pray.

"Don't ever leave my side" has come from my lips many times in my life as a problem or a challenge led to me to crawl into bed and pull the covers over my head. And through my tears I would sing, "Be near me, Lord Jesus."

When in physical or emotional anguish, we often find ourselves crying out to Jesus, praying for God's son to love us, unconditionally and forever. Yet our Advent Scripture reminds us that while we expect Jesus to remain by our sides, many times we keep a distance. Many times, we will deny knowing the Holy Child because admitting we are friends with him just might jeopardize our current relationships or jobs or even put our lives at risk. But do we want to be Peters?

I was at the fine jewelry trade magazine for a few years and had some seniority. There was a Sunday morning breakfast at a trade show that weekend at New York City's Javits Center. I had

assigned a junior reporter to cover the event. When my boss asked why I wasn't attending the breakfast, I said, "I have church." He wasn't expecting that answer. I wasn't expecting that answer, either. I often kept my newfound churchgoing activities quiet. "I guess you don't care about career advancement?" was his reply. I huffed out of his office. Sunday came and I went to church as planned. I wasn't going to turn my back on what was important to me. My career wasn't hurt. I eventually became editor-in-chief of the publication, only to leave that post after two years to pursue ministry.

Peter kept a distance. That is a heartbreaking and troubling sentence to me, because I know how easy it can be for us to do just as Peter did. But when the world tempts me to be quiet, to play the game, to not ruffle feathers, I begin humming, "Be near me, Lord Jesus." I then reach my hand to the skies to let him know I am here by his side as well.

Pray

God, your love for me boggles my mind. It is sometimes too much to comprehend that you never let go of me. You are always by my side and for that I lift my thanks to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take a look at your schedule, your activities, the time you spend working and the time you spend with family and friends. How much time is carved out for God? What can you do this day to follow your Savior, Jesus, the Holy Child, more closely?

Day 18 | Wednesday, Dec. 16

The courage to look through a magic mirror

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,

and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." — Mark 1:1–8

"Romper Room" was a television show for preschoolers that ran from 1953 to 1994, and I loved it! My mother couldn't drag me away from the black-and-white TV with the rabbit ears that had to be fiddled with to get a clearer image on the screen. I enjoyed the singing, the dancing and the time of show and tell. What I looked forward to the most, though, was when the host would end our time together by holding up a magic mirror so that she could "see" us. And so, with the mirror in her hand, she would begin



naming the children: “I see Tommy and Maria and Robert and Jamel. I see Frances and Jose.” I waited with bated breath in front of the TV to hear my name. Most times my name wasn’t mentioned, and I would turn off the TV feeling sad and lonely. But, boy, do I remember the time when I heard, “I see Donna.” Even now, when I transport myself back to 5-year-old Donna, I feel the excitement of being “seen.” We all want that, don’t we? Not only to be seen, but as Howard Thurman points out, to be understood. Many didn’t see John the Baptist for who he really was — the one sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus. Many didn’t see John for who he was because of how he presented himself in wearing strange clothing and eating weird food. Yet he was the one sent by God to pave our way. I wonder how many people — ordinary angels — God had sent to me that I have not seen at all because they weren’t what I was expecting. I wish we had a magic mirror in our lives, one that would allow our cynical, judgmental eyes to really see God’s children for who they are — beautiful — and what they offer the world. Imagine a magic mirror in which you see and call by name the homeless person discarded by society. Imagine calling by name the person who

you were brought up to hate. Imagine the smile you would receive when seeing — and calling by name — the person whose body is twisted in a wheelchair. Imagine the joy on the face of a woman with a speech impediment who you have called by name and asked to read Scripture on Christmas Eve. Imagine what the world would be like if we walked around with such a mirror that allowed us to see and name one another.

Pray

God, years ago your Son stood on the lakeshore and, smiling, he called out the names of those fishing, inviting them to follow him. There is such power in hearing you speak my name, to know that I am known by you, seen by you, gives me courage to do the same — to call by name the stranger, the outcast, the hurting, the wounded. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

While shopping in stores this holiday season might be curtailed by the COVID-19 virus, when you are in store, make it a point to thank the cashier by name. Or when helping someone who is a stranger, remember to always start by asking their name. Sounds simple, but it is something we often forget to do.

Day 19 | Thursday, Dec. 17

Finding the courage to give what little we have

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down

and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” — Matthew 3:1–12

There was a cartoon making the social media rounds of John the Baptist, arms flailing in anger, pointing to some religious bigwigs. In the picture were also snakes slithering away. The text read, “Happy Advent! You brood of vipers.” This passage makes me chuckle and cringe at the same time. Chuckle because I think about that cartoon, and cringe because John is calling out the corruption that is often lurking behind good deeds. John is angry with the hypocrisy of the religious elite of his day. They claim to be righteous, but they are really just a brood of vipers — snakes that slither away so as not to get consumed by fire. Any farmer will tell you how snakes slither to safety when the stubble in the fields is burned to prepare for a new planting. Those in John’s day would have had this image



in mind when hearing “brood of vipers.” Many today are turned off by organized religion because words and actions don’t seem to match one another. During the holidays, especially, you hear stories of scams claiming to help others when really the money donated lines a pocket that doesn’t need lining. Vipers are out there, but so are obedient sheep, like my neighbor. He’s a logger. The trail I run on borders his property, which has a huge pile of logs to be cut into firewood. Firewood isn’t cheap, but for those in my rural community it is a bit more affordable than oil or propane. There is many a household I have come to hear about that relies solely on firewood. These are families, too, that often run out of wood to burn just as winter’s deep freeze descends. I know that pile of logs is my neighbor’s bread and butter. So, imagine my surprise when one December I learned that he wasn’t selling the wood, but rather giving it away to families in need. Now this neighbor isn’t a churchgoer, but when he heard of a severe shortfall in the village’s community fuel fund, he took it upon himself to give what little he had to help others. How many times do our words of loving others that we toss around in the church match our actions outside of a cloistered building? It’s a question we need to always ask,

because the temptation for self-preservation is always great, especially in the church. This past summer, I smiled when I heard of a Presbyterian church whose working-class members took their COVID-19 stimulus checks and gave that money to help others. I also remember one Christmas when a parishioner who struggled to buy gifts for loved ones told me he was going to challenge himself to match the amount of money that he spent on gifts and give it to a local homeless shelter. There will always be a brood of vipers in this world. But there are many more who are finding the courage to give what little they have.

Pray

God, giver of my daily bread, may I not fear scarcity, nor may I seek abundance. Help me instead to see that with you I have just enough, and just enough is enough to share with others. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

In preparing for Christmas, challenge yourself to match the amount that is spent on family gifts and give to an organization in need. Especially keep in mind organizations that help eradicate the hunger that is rising due to the global pandemic.



Day 20 | Friday, Dec. 18 The courage to allow others to speak

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. — Ephesians 6:10–20

I woke up Sunday morning rattled by a dream I had. It wasn’t the usual “I forgot my sermon notes” or “no one is in the sanctuary” dream that pastors sometimes have. In this dream, I was really excited to share the Good News and I couldn’t because I had no voice. Nothing came out of my mouth when I spoke. It was frustrating and scary. I woke up vowing that no matter, I would always find a way for God’s Word to be proclaimed. With the dream still on my mind I got to church. Today was the launch of a new service — a twist on the traditional “Lessons and Carols.” This was “Lessons, Carols and Witnessing to the Light.” I had arranged for a child to read the Scripture passage and then for a new church member — we had several people join the congregation that year — to share what that passage meant to them in their walk of faith. I just thought this new service would be a

refreshing way of presenting the familiar nativity passages. What I didn't expect was how powerful it would be to hear Scripture read by children and then hear the stories from people from all different walks of life. By the end of the service, there wasn't a dry eye in the sanctuary. Not only were the adults touched, but the children were in quiet awe, having listened to so many people share about the power of God working in their lives. Later that day, I thought back to my dream. This time it didn't rattle me. Rather it gave me an "aha" moment. For what I witnessed was the beauty of God's Word being shared among the generations and shared so honestly. And, the space for those stories to be heard was made when I, as pastor, kept quiet. Sunday worship wasn't about me nor my ability to eloquently proclaim the Good News. The new Advent service of "Lessons and Carols and Witnessing to the Light" gave the space for voices not heard to be heard. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul

asks for prayers so that he may speak boldly. That Sunday, though, I learned that prayers for others to speak boldly and to share their stories of faith need to be said. We need more people finding the courage to speak. We need even more people to find the courage to be silent for a moment and listen.

Pray

God, who spoke Creation into existence, give me the courage to speak when I need to speak and listen when I need to listen. Help me to hear the stories of others and in my listening come to understand more of who you are. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

When was the last time you had a family story night? Winter is the perfect time to gather around a virtual fireplace and have a night of witnessing to the light of Christ.

Day 21 | Saturday, Dec. 19 Courage to trust all will be well

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp

of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. — Revelation 20:1–10

My New Testament class was going to discuss Revelation. I was looking forward to it as it was one book in the Bible rarely expounded on in the church of my childhood. I was disappointed, though, when an important church meeting called me away from class. When I arrived at the church, the pastor, seeing my disappointment, joked that as a Presbyterian I wasn't going to miss much. "We don't spend too much time in Revelation," he said. We Presbyterians haven't spent much time in Revelation and after reading this entry in the daily lectionary schedule, I can see why. I am more comfortable talking about people walking in Advent darkness than about the battle between good and evil. Yet here we are, and here is Advent good news. Really.

First, I have to ask for you to not take literally the thousand years mentioned in the Scripture. Both Augustine and John Calvin viewed this cosmic event as something happening now. OK, I know that doesn't sound like good news, but stay with me. What John is sharing with us is a picture of triumph and the people who have battled in life now being blessed, resurrected, safe, secure — whole. This passage is an Advent



one for it underscores once again that the birth of Jesus wasn't just so we have a sentimental holiday to celebrate. Jesus was born to save. Jesus also came to equip us with how to battle evil in this life — how to stand up and speak up, learn to love more deeply and forgive more freely. Sure, the battle is a fierce one, but in the end we will persevere. All those bearing battle scars will be made whole. It seems these days there is a battle raging in our world. This year has been a rough one. Too many deaths from too many viruses named COVID-19, racial injustice and poverty. Yet we are called to find the courage to fight the good fight and be part of making the world a better place. There is nothing to fear for Revelation is telling us we are on the winning team — and team is the key word. We are called to work together in making the world a fair and just one for all. Howard Thurman knew this when he wrote, “There are areas of the common life in which we must do our part in order that

the very fabric of society may be maintained against collapse and disintegration.” And in case you find your courage waning, remember this: “Do not fear” is the Advent message spoken by God’s angels back then to a frightened Mary, a confused Joseph and rejected shepherds. “Do not fear” is being whispered to all of us now.

Pray

God, battle between good and evil seems to be escalating as each day there is news of a yet another injustice, another health threat, another natural disaster, another innocent death. I pray boldly for courage to face the day. I pray for courage to calm my shaking hand so that I can keep on lighting candles that will chase away the darkness. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Remember to share your pictures of the candles of courage you are lighting this season. Send them to editor@pcusa.org.