

Candles of courage for fears ever present

Think about a time when — amid a storm in life — you found a sense of peace. Where did it come from? Was there an “angel” perhaps who brought it to you?

Day 22 | 4th Sunday of Advent, Dec. 20
Keep the dream alive

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”
— Luke 1:13–20

Howard Thurman wrote, “As long as man has a dream in his heart, he cannot lose the significance of living.” But what happens when the dream in our hearts — that earnest prayer — is delayed? How do you keep hope alive when days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months and months turn into years?

Zechariah knew all too well what it was like to wait. He had long hoped for a child, and it was only in his old age that God answered by sending Gabriel — the angel of Advent conception announcements — with the good news: You will have a son, and his name will be John. Zechariah was shocked and perhaps a bit skeptical. But we know how the story goes. Elizabeth delivers John, who would later emerge

from the wilderness with a message to prepare the way of the Lord.

Many years ago, I held on to a dream of having a child. I held on even after my boyfriend, whom I thought would become my husband, was killed in a jeep accident in Africa. I was in my early 30s — still time to find and meet someone to start a family with. I held on to the dream, and I prayed. Each birthday, though, gifted me a sense of growing hopelessness. There were many dark nights of my soul as I cried to God, wondering why this was not to be for me.

God, though, was answering in the most amazing way. When I finally married in my 40s, I saw just how God answered my desire for children. My bridal party had 17 flower girls: children from the rural community I was serving as a pastor. In addition to the flower girls, there were the boys who served as ushers. There were many more children who came together to form a choir that sang during the ceremony. They might not have been my biological children, but they were indeed mine, given to me by God to be part of their lives and tell them the story of a God who hears our cries, no matter how long it seems we are waiting.

Thurman urged all to “keep the dream alive.” Yes, keep it alive because we are never too old for dreams to be answered.

Pray

Ever-listening God, I surrender the dreams I hold in my heart, dreams that are new and dreams that have been way overdue in coming true. Grant me a sense of peace as I wait to see how you will answer me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Name a dream that was answered in an unexpected way. What was it? Who was involved? How did you feel? And, more importantly, how can you see God’s hand in it now?





Day 23 | Monday, Dec. 21

Catching a new vision

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoptase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. — Revelation 21:9–21

Years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to the Greek island of Patmos, where John, exiled there by the Romans, received the visions that are recorded in Revelation. I was excited to enter into the dark, dank cave where the apostle resided. I was eager to “feel” something; perhaps to receive my own vision from God.

What I didn’t expect, though, was hundreds of tourists buzzing about, making it hard for me to be in a contemplative mood. In fact,

there wasn’t much time to pray and ponder as guides quickly shuffled camera-snapping tourists through the cave. I was given a moment to sit on one of the chairs lining the walls. I tried to sit still, quiet my thoughts and sense God’s presence. Disappointed that I didn’t get a divine tour of my future, I made my way to the exit, only to stop suddenly. Something nudged me to go back and sit some more, and so I did, sitting through three more tour groups. I sat with my eyes closed and expectations low. Then I left.

When my husband, who was by my side throughout this experience, asked later what I thought about our visit to the cave, I was hesitant to share. How could I tell him that I felt a warm sensation in my hands and heard a clear message to write and keep on writing? How could I tell him that I felt this peace in seeing clearly who I am: a writer first, a pastor second? And what would this “vision” mean when it came to my call as a traditional pastor of a parish? I began to speak: “It might sound weird, but I felt ...” That’s when my husband finished my sentence: “I felt something too.”

God is always trying to get our attention, always willing to show us a new Jerusalem. This Advent especially, God is showing us a new vision of “doing the holidays” that has been forced upon us by COVID-19. It’s a vision we might not welcome as it means letting go of beloved traditions and not holding large family gatherings. But God is always recreating our lives and always presenting us with a vision of what can be. And that vision, if we see with eyes of faith, is indeed beautiful.

Pray

God of new beginnings, in this season of Advent, open my eyes so that I can see a future full of hope and catch a vision for a brighter tomorrow that is overflowing with peace and beauty. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take a virtual tour of John’s cave in Patmos, Greece, via this link: [youtube.com/watch?v=EEX1m53o1AY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEX1m53o1AY)

Day 24 | Tuesday, Dec. 22

Safe and secure

Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord! Yet he too is wise and brings disaster; he does not call back his words, but will rise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall, and they will all perish together. For thus the Lord said to me, as a lion or a young lion growls over its prey, and—when a band of shepherds is called out against it—is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill. Like birds hovering overhead, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it. Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. For on that day all of you shall throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you. “Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals; and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him; he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labor. His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic,” says the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem. — Isaiah 31:1–9

My husband went to get his pickup treated with an anti-rust undercoating — a necessity in Vermont where road salt is damaging to trucks. He went to a mom-and-pop auto store that just happened to be a gun retailer, too. (Yes, only in Vermont.)

When he came home, he told me about a conversation he overheard as he was paying his bill. The cashier was having a side conversation with a few friends and mentioned how great gun sales were. In fact, the other day, she had sold four guns in less than a half hour.

I felt uneasy when I heard this. I felt a twinge of fear as I remembered hearing the recent sta-

tistic that Americans have purchased almost 17 million guns so far in 2020, more than in any other single year on record, according to Small Arms Analytics & Forecasting, a research firm that tracks firearms.

People are afraid of the social and political unrest in our country. They want to feel safe and secure. They want to protect whatever peace there is. Yet the season of Advent reminds us that peace will not be obtained with a firearm.

Isaiah tells us that trusting in horsemen because they are strong and relying on chariots because there are many of them are not where our security lies. Real peace comes when we look to the Holy One of Israel. Security is found when we consult the Lord.

Living in a rural area, where I learned that the opening weekend of hunting season meant low attendance in church that Sunday, I can understand why there are those who bristle over gun-control laws. Having guns is a rite of passage for many rural teens. But I can't shake how troubling it is that the rise in gun sales coincides with a recent FBI report that hate crimes in the United States have risen to the highest level in more than a decade.

It seems what Howard Thurman wrote decades ago, is true today, that “the panic of fear, the torture of insecurity, the ache of hunger” have “rekindled ancient hatreds.” These ancient hatreds, though, are not kindling. They are a raging fire.

Do you want to feel safe and secure? Then let us lean into the everlasting arms of the Savior — the One who was born for a world such as we live in now. Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice ... Jesus Christ was born for this!

Pray

God, may a peace that passes all understanding enter into my life this Advent season. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

The work for peace is great, and it begins with education. Every year the Southern Poverty Law Center updates a national map of hate group activity. See the hate groups in your state at splcenter.org/hate-map





Day 25 | Wednesday, Dec. 23 Singing a new song

Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre. He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. — Psalm 147:1–11

“Brokenhearted” and “downtrodden” are words that sum up how many people are feeling as Christmas Eve approaches. Broken hearts abound as loved ones taken by COVID-19, unjust shootings, accidents and illnesses have left empty chairs around many holiday tables this year. And there are hearts broken by vacant chairs because friends and family can’t gather together this year out of safety concerns for a virus still infecting the young and the old.

There will also be many downtrodden Christians making their way to the manger with heads hung low and steps that are faltering due to the tiredness that comes in trying to fight injustices. Let us not ignore the drooping shoulders of many who are burdened with trying to put food on the table. The world is in pain, and to not be able to even gather in person on Christmas Eve to light candles and sing “Silent Night” is just

too much for some to handle. This year’s “Silent Night” will indeed be silent, but maybe not.

Just because we won’t be singing an old, familiar song in an old, familiar way — in a church sanctuary — doesn’t mean that there isn’t a song to sing. Could it be that our broken hearts are creating space for a new song this Christmas Eve? Could it be that “the old song of my spirit has wearied itself out,” as Howard Thurman discovered years ago?

Thurman added that “the words belong to old experiences. I know that the work of the old song, perfect in its place, is not for the new demand. I must learn the new song that is capable of meeting the new need. I must fashion new words born of all the new growth in my life, my mind and my spirit.”

Perhaps not being able to sing “Silent Night” — as we have always done in church — is not a bad thing at all. Yes, this tradition will be grieved. But can we look beyond the loss to see what new thing can be found? “We need the untried melody to meet the need of the untried tomorrow,” said Thurman. May this Christmas bring us the gift of an untried melody.

Pray

Gracious and loving God, as Christmas Eve approaches, I can’t help but feel some sadness this year. Nothing feels right. The holiday cheer is missing. The traditions I have looked forward to are just not happening. Help me to find a new song to sing: a song of praise to you. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Take time to mourn the losses in your life. Don’t push them aside. Let the tears fall. Then wipe your eyes and ask God for a new song to sing this Christmas, a new tradition to begin, a new friend to make and a new understanding of Emmanuel: God with us.