



# 2018 Advent Meditations

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# Advent I, 2018

## Preparing the Way: The Minister as Gardener

An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Brent A. Newberry

Growing up in the South, the notion of four seasons was a bit like stories of Babe Ruth: we knew he existed, but we'd never actually seen him in person ourselves. Moving to New England then, I discovered Autumn to be the most beautiful time of the year, and I learned more than I ever could've imagined about trees and flowers and gardening and even which apples you can eat off the ground (hint: not crab apples).

In soliciting gardening tips, I heard the best advice from a congregant with magnificent gardens that consume her front and back yards. She said, "When you move some place new, you don't plant anything new in the garden for an entire year. You want to wait and see what pops up first."

I'm not sure there isn't a better reminder for ministers to hear.

We tend and nurture vocationally, be it relationships with congregants, patients, clients, family, friends. All too often we are quick to give advice, to plant some new seed in someone's mind or heart. We would be wise to slow down, back up, back off, listen, and wait to see, hear and learn what is already growing within our friends' lives. Fruit, flowers, weeds, wisdom, whatever.

The Hebrew Scriptures text for Advent 1 is from Jeremiah 33:14-16, and it is quite obvious on the surface. From the Christian perspective, we have traditionally interpreted this as a reference to the Christ—Branch of David who goes by the name "The Lord is our right way." I'm not suggesting this isn't the case. But for clergy—ministers, pastors, chaplains, directors, artists, musicians—perhaps another angle might offer some inspiration this Advent.

Being as it falls on the first Sunday of the season, any churches who participate in Advent wreaths will be lighting the Hope candle this Sunday. How might hope intersect with this text about a branch of right living? Perhaps the metaphor of gardening will prove helpful again.

Trees, like bushes and vines and even those potted plants, need to be pruned, to be trimmed back during the Fall. In part, this is to protect more of the plant from exposure during Winter, but also, it activates and promotes regrowth in the Spring. You cut back the dead or diseased leaves and branches first, so that the healthy ones can *spring* up in their season.

How might pastors and ministers of all types view their vocations as gardening?

How might we tend hope in others' lives?

In our own?

What are those diseased or dead branches we need to prune from our consciousness, heart, mind, practices?

As people of hope, people who believe in this Branch who is the Tree of Life, we must ensure that we are embodying this hope in our own lives, too. It's easy to preach hope (well, not really), but harder to live it.

But like Winter is to gardening, Advent is to our spiritual lives. Dormancy in plants isn't a time of death; it's a time of waiting, of resting, of regrouping. Advent is an opportunity to hunker down and take a deep breath (or a long nap), and to wait. Not anxiously, but with anticipation of what is yet to come—in this life and the life to come, in the world as it is and the world as it should and one day will be.

So, what is weighing down the branches of hope in your life, in your ministry? Is it busyness? Cynicism? Depression? Numbness? Grief? Fear? How might you trim back these branches?

And how might you tend the hope that is rooted deep in the heart of your calling? If we are to prepare the way for our congregants and patients and clients and colleagues, we need to start by preparing a way for hope to flourish in our own lives.

Advent might just be the perfect time to do it.

After all, Spring is coming.

Lord, allow us to be gardens where hope could germinate in the spring of our lives. Our ministries need to be renewed and the branches that numb us need to be cut. Prepare

the way for the Spring to come and sprout leaves, branches, trees, fruits and hope bloom in the hearts of those we serve. Amen.



*The Rev. Brent A. Newberry is the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Worcester, Massachusetts*



# Advent II, 2018

## Prepare the Way

### An Advent Meditation from Ms. Leta Williams

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar . . . the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'”

*Luke 3:1-6*

Unfortunately, I fit the stereotype that is often flung upon tech-dependent millennials: I am absolutely terrible with directions. There's the old saying that says, “Give them an inch, and they'll take a mile” - I'll take several and will probably end up in a different state. You can imagine how frantic I am when I am driving in a new place. No time was worse than navigating my first-ever post-driveway journey through the local Christmas light show upon receiving my permit.

My mother handed me the steering wheel thinking that I had scooted up and down the driveway enough times to endure this haunting ten mile an hour path of colorfully lit doom. I had cousins in the back, and at the ages of twelve and thirteen, they were probably preparing their wills. Nevertheless, I put into drive, and eased my foot off of the brake...Now here's the real shocker: Despite my sheer panic, I drove through what seemed to be a hundred miles of twists and turns through Christmas lights without hitting anything (except the brakes really hard a few times)!

My mother knew some things at the time that I did not. She knew that there was one way in, and one way out. Once we entered the ornately lit path, we couldn't possibly drive on the wrong side or turn the wrong way down a one way street! On the other side

of the coin, my mother knew that I was indeed prepared to make this journey. Little as I had mastered, she knew that she equipped me with all of the tools to make this journey safely. I indeed could put the car in drive, press the gas, switch to the brakes, and even turn up the Christmas music that played on the radio.

Isn't it wild how many distractions there are to divert our focus? Even when we're not caught up in the lights, sounds, and mayhem of the holiday season, we find ourselves instead frantic about the things that happen within our own head and heart – our “vehicles,” if you will! Even if I had the confidence to have gone through that journey by myself, I couldn't imagine what chaos would ensue with the little experience and the enormous panic I had. My mother gave me a blessed assurance that, while abundantly gracious, pales in comparison to the comfort and guidance that Christ gives us. He not only knows the way – He prepared it for us!

I love what John does with this prophetic scripture. Not only is he reminding us of a completely smooth ride – no twists and turns, no ups and downs – but he is calling us to pave the way through our repentance and forgiveness of sins. Much as we know it pains us, we remember that sins come at a great cost as they bulldoze our comfortable towers down. When we remove the obstacles from our life, getting to Jesus is like a straight shot through the Kansas state plains: One way. No turns. Full steam ahead.

Who or what is guiding you through this advent season? Perhaps the buzz and bulbs of the holiday season distract you. Or maybe you are worried about the people that ride in the back seat with you. Maybe it's feeling ill equipped to take on this particular season, or maybe you just don't feel the Spirit riding along with you. Despite being in ministry, we often find ourselves caught in the same traps of the holiday rush, but we somehow justify it because we know advent to be such an important season. In fact, it may lead us to drive ourselves further into a bewildered state of exhaustion – and that's a tough one to get directions out of!

Remember that you are fully equipped to take the journey of patient, yet ecstatic anticipation of the birth of Christ. Don't get so caught up in the mechanics of the drive that you miss celebrating the true Light of the World. Your leadership has allowed the people in the back of your vehicle to leave behind fear and be filled with the arrival of their Savior. Continue on your journey – one way, straight ahead.

*Lord, I give you my twists, turns, hills, and valleys.*

*Make the path from me to you straight.*

*Allow me to bring others safely along on this journey.*

*And Lord, no matter what, I will not turn back.*



*Ms. Leta Williams is the Director of Christian Education at the United Church of Pittsford, New York.*



# Advent III, 2018

## Preparing the Way

### An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Dr. Charlotte W. Myers

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

When we've been Christians a long time it is easy to forget what it is to live without the hope and possibilities found in Christ. We may even take for granted the advent of holy joy and peace that worldly pleasures cannot give. This complacency is why we must not fail to celebrate the season of Advent. While observing Advent we literally and metaphorically reflect the will of God as manifested through His presence within our congregations.

The meaning of Advent was made very real to me. When before my sister, Myrna, died she wanted to make peace with a number of strained relationships broken by misplaced words of anger. Although she was very ill, she sat before her computer sending emails of reconciliation and apology. She made phone calls to reach out to those she may have wronged. Swallowing her pride and offering the hope of forgiveness with each blink of the moving cursor and ring of her cell phone. At the end, Myrna was glad to receive messages of thanksgiving and humility responding to her outreach. She was grateful to no longer feel she was sin's slave, but the benefactor and beneficiary of friendships healed by forgiveness and love. She thanked God to finish her life at peace, because she wanted to face her personal advent of return to Christ with a clear conscience.

In this Thessalonians text the writer instructs his readers about life's potential options found in Christ as seen through the light of the Spirit. He wants them to be prepared to meet Christ knowing they have “held fast to what is good.” Telling them how much better it is to live “sound and blameless” lives in the hope of Christ's return. Than to live as

common (i.e., meaning: often done or mainstream) hostages manipulated by trends, fashions and deceptions of the world. Not to stand above anyone in judgment, but to stand apart from indulging “the appearance of evil.”

In the fast pace of our lives it is often the path of least resistance to forget we are called to be Christ’s advocates willing to “test all things and hold fast to what is good.” What about you or me . . . Do we face disappointments and challenges with strength found through faith in things hoped for and evidence of what is not seen? Or do we rely on “just the facts”, proofs of science and bank balances to face fearful situations? These things in themselves may be good, but surely are not all there is to be relied on. As advocates for Christ, we know the Spirit is reliable, steadfast and ever-present. We know that the Lord is with us and guides those who seek him with never failing love. So that we can move forward in faith.

Today we might consider if our preaching holds up to the “test” of gospel truths. When what we may really want is to shout out and rile against public deceptions and the moral decline of our times. In this season of watchful waiting, can we permit the Holy Spirit to send us gentle reminders of Christ’s Advent? Perhaps revealed through the passion of an exuberant testimony or the proclamation that we are free to strive to be holy in spirit. Let us sincerely enjoy this season of speaking to the advent of possibilities and eternal life found in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Let us remember the gift of prayer:

Gracious Lord, the time for Christ’s Advent is present and we stand at the gateway to your eternal presence. Let us claim the peace you have purchased and place our faith in you. You have given us days of sorrow and hours of joy. Now it is time to seek the hope that passes all understanding and enter into a renewal of our covenant with you, unrestricted by the troubles of this world. You call out each of our names with tender fondness and draw us near to you, please grant us the understanding to remain steady and willingness to be of service. In Christ we pray, Amen.



*The Rev. Dr. Charlotte W. Myers is the Emeritus Minister of Christian Formation at Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church , Oakland, California.*



# Advent IV, 2018

## Preparing the Way

### An Advent Meditation from the Rev. José Flores

“I have seen him, but not now; I beheld it, but it was not close; The star of Jacob will shine, and a prince of Israel is to emerge.”

*Peshitta Bible in Spanish, translation of ancient Aramaic writings, Numbers 24:17a*

How much I like to watch the sky at night. Have you stopped to watch the stars, that mantle of pearls that unfolds muttering to our senses the greatness of our God? I have had the opportunity to see clear nights in which you can distinguish the Milky Way with its multitude of luminous points. The text chosen in Scripture has been interpreted by many as a prophecy of the coming of the Christ to whom Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the magicians, and others saw with deep emotion. The Star of Jacob is shining. The Star, yes, the Star will shine. In this fourth Sunday of Advent we need more than ever that Star to shine bright in our lives and ministries. The world and its wickedness invite us to seek that radiance for our ministries to have relevance to the vileness, foolishness and disrespect of the lives of human beings. The Star, yes, the Star of Jacob. That Star that gave its radiance in a difficult society, full of religiosity and poverty both physical and spiritual. That Star told the people, "I am the light of the world." That Star offered hope to the helpless, to the poor, to the humble, to the sinner. That shining Star called men to follow him and invited them, he called them to be the light of the world and to shine as he did.

By ministering to our congregations and communities we prepare the way for that day when the Star of Jacob will appear again with power to fully establish his kingdom which he said was already among us. The Star of Jacob seeks to shine. As we get closer to the celebration of Christmas, receiving the most resplendent star of the universe and eternity, we are called to shine and prepare the way for a world of greater fairness. A world in which the poor will not be mistreated for that, just for being poor. A world in which unity among men would be the powerful testimony of the shining Star. We cannot keep our light under the table of daily worries, under the table of the ministerial concerns

that dominate our thoughts. Let the Star to shine in us, men and women called to give the world the best of our lives.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent we prepare the way to allow the Star to shine with splendid light. We prepare the way for our churches to be able to see with joy how the Star shines in us. We prepare the way for our congregations to feel invited to show how the star shines in their families, in their workplaces, in the communities where they live, in the cities they are a part of. Beloved, we prepare the way for a vital reconciliation with the Star of Jacob, Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords. We prepare the way for reconciliation between human beings and God who sent him exactly for that. The shining Christ in us invites us to pave the way for reconciliation in our families, in our churches, among ourselves. The Star of Jacob shines refulgent, visible, paving the way for the Kingdom of God to be victorious and for those times of peace and refreshment to come as the prophets of old announced. How about praying with me to prepare the way for Christ, the Star of Jacob?

Heavenly Father, you sent Christ, the refulgent Star of the universe, to proclaim times of righteousness. Help us to follow him and to produce ministries that are bright before a society that eagerly seeks better ways in the present and towards the future. Give us wisdom to prepare children, men and women to shine like the Star of Jacob. May your Spirit guide us to celebrate Christmas with joy, but at the same time with the desire of a world where the Star of Jacob will shine forever. Amen.



*The Reverend José Flores is a retired minister of the Baptist Churches of Puerto Rico and lives in Marion, Indiana.*



# Christmas, 2018

## Immanuel for the Journey

### **An Advent Meditation from the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Salinas**

I enjoy doing my income taxes. Weird, right? Why would anyone

enjoy that? Well, I enjoy it because it is a project that I can start, work on, and finish.

There is a point in doing my income taxes that I can say my work is complete. I may or may not like the result, but it is done. I feel like I truly accomplished something. The rest of my life in ministry is seldom like that.

Life in ministry seldom feels completed. We are always evolving, growing, fading. Ministry today is in a profound period of shift. We can set goals but we may not reach them, and not reaching them doesn't mean we've failed. God continually takes us on a journey, and the end of that journey is never in sight. We can vision and plan and project and budget, and indeed those things are important to our work. However no one can know or plan what God will do. I would not want to know the future, honestly. I couldn't handle it. None of us could. But God in God's grace shows us just enough that we can function in today, without the burden of trying to control tomorrow. When we allow ourselves to live in today's growth, we are ultimately more at peace.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I'm sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil 1:6, *CEB*) I like these words from Paul because he reminds me that this life-in-transition is a good thing, not the frustration I can sometimes feel. Life-in-transition means I'm never done, I'm always being used by God, I'm always in connection with God. Life-in-transition means I am being molded by God day by day, even on my busy days. Life-in-transition means the people to whom and with whom I minister are also being molded. No one is being abandoned or thrown out. God is working with us. God is Immanuel, God With Us, which is the promise of Advent after all.

Advent is an important part of life-in-transition. Unfortunately, we can so easily miss that. We need to prepare extra meetings, budgets, end of year work, services, projects, holiday events. At home we try to get the tree up, buy the presents, host the parties, whatever brings us that odd combination of joy and fulfillment and obligation.

Completion of all this can consume us and the people we love. When it's all over, we drop in exhausted relief or regret. Ministers can feel like all we want to do is survive December.

However, there is another way. When we live life focused on the journey and not the destination, we realize that the process is always an opportunity to grow, to see God, to express justice, to share love. God's call is for us to find a way to be less project-focused and more process-focused, less focused on getting things done right and more focused on living each moment in grace. To borrow from the 12-Step community, God created us to be human beings, not humans doing. God calls us not to look on our work as an opportunity to fail or succeed, but to live as servants of the God of mercy. That work is never done, which means our interaction with God is never done, and our growth as people is never complete. This is a wonderful gift.

In his book *The Naked Now* ([Rohr, Richard. 2009. \*The naked now: learning to see as the mystics see\*. New York: Crossroad Pub. Co.](#)) Richard Rohr reminds us that when we live aware of God's presence in our everyday journey, we can experience everything more deeply. We will feel both joy and sadness more, and we will know that the experience of such emotions is, indeed, a gift. The coming of the Christ child reminds us that God knows and lives all those emotions with us, and that indeed we need not be afraid, ever. Fear not. Immanuel is here. Now. Amen.



*Stephanie Salinas is the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Westwood, Massachusetts.*