

# *Patterns of Divine Possibility*

An Advent Search

Written by Teri McDowell Ott



**THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK**

"Dance for Joy" by Hannah Garrity | A Sanctified Art, LLC | [sanctifiedart.org](http://sanctifiedart.org)

# Introduction

In Abraham Verghese's 2023 novel *The Covenant of Water*, the main character, 12-year-old Mariamma, is preparing to meet her husband by an arranged marriage in India. She prepares to leave her childhood home and all its familiar comforts by recalling the words of her deceased father: "Faith is to know the pattern is there, even when none is visible."

Faith is to trust a pattern exists, to search for God's handiwork in the myriad designs of life. Too often we limit God's range, boxing our Creator into designs of our culture's making, denying the more of divinity. In his 2020 book *Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm*, Kazu Haga writes:

If we look back to any of our Indigenous worldviews, we understand that things are rarely, if ever, black and white. Our world is nuanced, and most things exist on a spectrum. Yet in a society that is oftentimes dominated by an Abrahamic worldview that pits "good" against "evil," we are unable to see nuance.

Haga's reference to the Abrahamic worldview, which includes our Christian tradition, piqued my curiosity and inspired this devotion. The seasons of Advent and Christmas highlight the binary pattern of light vs. dark. On Christmas Eve we read, "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 9:2). This beautiful passage gives us hope as Christ, our light, illumines our lives and helps us to see in the dark.

But such binaries have also been used (and abused) to substantiate sin, with darkness representing evil, and light representing pure good. People have interpreted this light/dark binary to substantiate false claims of the White race as superior over darker-skinned and Black people. But race is a social construct, and the shades of our skin beautifully diverse. When I select foundation to match my complexion, my color choices include warm ivory, cool sand and golden almond. Rhianna's Fenty line goes beyond "tan" and "deep" to specify foundations with pink, olive, bronze and golden undertones. If the beauty industry can evolve to embrace the full spectrum of skin color, certainly we can.

This devotion explores a full spectrum of patterns: narrative patterns of Scripture, fractals (repeated patterns) with the natural world, and the myriad ways life can be organized and ordered beyond either/or binaries. Readers will be led to consider the perspectives of people who live on society's margins, people who have wisdom to share because their very existence counters mainstream patterns, as well as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people. Like a quizzical dog, we will perk our ears and cock our heads to engage God's world and our faith anew.

For each Sunday in this devotion, I explore the narrative patterns that emerge from and thread through the four *Revised Common Lectionary* texts. Each Saturday invites you to discern the patterns in a piece of art through the spiritual practice of *visio divina*. The remaining days are a swirling scattershot of reflections on observed patterns of God's world.

In writing this devotion series, I have found myself increasingly open and attentive to the existence of patterns I hadn't recognized before. I concluded this series curious and eager to discover more. As we walk together this Advent, I pray this devotion gifts you with the same openness and curiosity to discover the more of our Creator, the patterns of divine possibility. Happy Advent and thanks for reading!

- Teri McDowell Ott

# *First Sunday of Advent*

## *December 1*

### **The In-Between Time of Advent**

*Reflection: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36*

Before civil rights protestors marched, they gathered in churches to sing hymns and spirituals about the future God desired for them. This clear vision of promise strengthened them to non-violently endure water hoses, attack dogs and the beatings of police batons. Of these marches, Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1968, “We just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we’d go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we’d just go on singing ‘Over my head I see freedom in the air.’”

The lectionary texts for the first Sunday of Advent lift our eyes to the horizon, to the promised future of and for God’s world, each text a piece of a larger, unseen tessellation.

“The days are surely coming,” declares Jeremiah, for God to fulfill the promise to redeem and restore the houses of Israel and Judah. This promise will manifest through a branch of David’s lineage, someone whose reign will be characterized by “justice and righteousness” and lead God’s people to “live in safety.”

Until this manifestation, the psalmist says, we must wait, trusting in God as teacher and leader in the way of steadfast love and faithfulness. Waiting is difficult, though — the psalmist prays for God’s help in this in between, not yet time.

Waiting doesn’t mean doing nothing, though. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul celebrates the joy of their relationship and encourages them to build upon that love with one another. Paul prays that the church will increase its love to prepare for Christ’s coming.

“The kingdom of God is near,” Jesus tells us through the Gospel of Luke. Near in time — he’s coming soon! Be on guard! Be alert! But also near in location — God is among us, within our lives, our hearts, our communities. Pay attention to the signs of God at work among and within us, so we will recognize Christ when he appears on the horizon.

The goal of Advent is clear: Christ is coming, and we need to prepare ourselves for his disruptive, world-changing arrival. A better understanding and clearer picture of what Christ is bringing, the kind of world he will create among us, will help us prepare and strengthen us for the present work.

Prayer: Soon and very soon we are going to see our King! Christ is coming! Savior God, help us to prepare our hearts, our homes, our communities and world. Help us keep our eyes on the hoped-for horizon so we can be strengthened for the work today. Amen.

# *Monday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 2*

### **The Linear Journey**

In his 2013 book *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, Verlyn Klinkenborg writes:

Much of what's taught under the name of expository writing could be called "The Anxiety of Sequence." Its premise is this: To get where you're going, you have to begin in just the right place and take the proper path, which depends on knowing where you plan to conclude. Why not begin where you already are? Is there only one way to get where you're going?

Must we be beholden to a linear path, with a beginning, middle and clear end? Couldn't we meander for a while? Spiral off in a new direction? Explore the edges? Color outside the lines? The life of faith is not clear cut. God's love is expansive and available — unbound by our human need for structure and certainty.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a well-known medieval spiritual text on contemplative prayer, the anonymous author suggests that the way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's particular activities and attributes: to let go of the linear path, of our assumptions of faith, and surrender to our "unknowing." Within this humble stance, welcoming mystery and mysticism, we might glimpse the nature, patterns or workings of God.

Prayer: God, make us less certain, more humble. Encourage us in our doubting and questioning and unknowing. Help us approach Christ's coming with a beginner's mind, open to all that is new and yet to be discovered about you and your ways. Amen.

# *Tuesday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 3*

### **Organization Reflects Values**

We organize our day, our to-do list, our calendar, our bookshelves and our budgets. If anyone pauses to study us, our chosen patterns reveal what we value, how we prioritize time and resources, through what we experience beauty and pleasure, where we find meaning and purpose.

My home office is filled with books about writing, religion and spirituality. I keep track of all the books I read in a bullet journal, where I also track the work I need to get done this day, this week, this month, this year. My digital calendar is full of meetings and work-related travel, but my mornings are blocked out for prayer, meditation and writing time. Each Friday, I make a plan for the next week, including the weekend. Having a plan, even if it gets disrupted, helps me relax. That's how God designed me.

If a stranger were to observe the way you organize your home, your bookshelves, your calendar,

what would they learn about you? If we consider how God has organized our world through the Creation stories in Genesis, what would we learn about the Divine? What can we learn about God's values and priorities over the course of six days of Creation that conclude in a seventh day of rest? What can we learn about our God, who takes a formless void and gives it a form, a structure, a pattern? God is working toward something . . . with us and with our world. What is God's grand design? How can we better discern God's patterns and priorities this Advent?

Prayer: God, you are more than we can imagine, more than we can organize on shelves or in calendars or bullet journals. Guide us this Advent in seeking your grand design and discerning your priorities. Amen.

## *Wednesday of the First Week of Advent* *December 4*

### **Fractals**

Examine the head of a cauliflower, the leaves of a fern, the community within the fluff of a dandelion, the print on the tip of each of your fingers, or a snowflake. A fractal is a shape, design or pattern that repeats, over and over. Each small section reflects the pattern of the whole.

In her 2017 book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown writes about the way fractals ground her work as an activist and community organizer: "The patterns of the universe repeat at scale. There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale."

Many of our destructive patterns start small and then reverberate with large consequences. Our patterns of plenty lead to overconsumption and abuse of natural resources. Our patterns of productivity bring overwork and burnout. Our pattern of self-protection devalues the path of nonviolence and overvalues investment in weapons and warfare.

But small patterns can also initiate large, influential, positive change. Consider Jesus' life and ministry. He walked this earth as a single individual and lived a short life. But he patterned his life on love, compassion and justice. He countered cultural practices by spending time with tax collectors, foreigners, lepers, women. He modeled an alternative way of living – personally, communally and politically – to great impact.

What small patterns of your life make a large impact? What destructive pattern can you begin (start small) to replace with constructive or Christ-like action?

Prayer: The designs of your Creation are wondrous, O God. Microscopic repeating patterns dazzle us with your intention and artistry. Help us attend to the small ways in which we pattern our lives as we intentionally seek to follow Christ's big, consequential love. Amen.

# *Thursday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 5*

### **Fractals of Conflict**

In *Healing Resistance*, Haga relates the patterns of fractals to the patterns of conflict.

*I believe that the laws that govern conflict and harm are fractal in nature. Whether we are talking about intrapersonal conflict within our own hearts; interpersonal conflict between two people; or large-scale global conflicts between nations; the principles, practices, and strategies that guide the transformation of conflict are the same at every scale.*

According to Haga, the work of healing ultimately transforms conflict. Practitioners of nonviolence are often heard saying, “Hurt people hurt people.” But as Haga writes, “Healed people heal people.” This is true of personal relationships as well as large-scale global conflicts.

In a recent disagreement with an acquaintance on social media, I reacted with anger — at the person, the words they’d chosen and the way they treated me. It wasn’t until I sat and meditated on the heat of my still-boiling anger that I recognized the hurt and woundedness as its core. Anger was the arrow I shot. But pain was my loaded bow.

Consider a conflict in your life. Meditate on this conflict, honestly considering what might be the underlying pain or wounds at its root. Scale up this conflict pattern to your community. What community wounds have manifested in conflict? Scale up to a global conflict, such as the war in Israel and Palestine. What human pain, if transformed into healing, could possibly pave a path to peace?

Prayer: Prince of Peace, we are a wounded and wounding people. We hurt and we hurt others. Help us to recognize and acknowledge pain so we can work toward healing.  
Amen.

# *Friday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 6*

### **Watershed Land Patterns**

In the 2016 essay collection *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, contributor Ched Myers writes about the importance of watersheds to ecological survival. Water’s journey can be traced through the land’s topography. From its original source, draining from peaks and ridges along a waterway or stream, to its end point in a pond, lake or ocean, water shapes and maps our land. “A watershed,” writes Myers, “is the area covered in water’s journey . . . a unique mix of habitats that influence each other, including forests, wetlands, fields and meadows, rivers and lakes, farms and towns. All human life is watershed-placed.”

Wherever humans reside – urban, suburban, rural – our lives and our communities are patterned by

watersheds.

Myers laments the growth of urban and industrial areas designed to accommodate traffic patterns, housing tracts and political borders. These patterns render nature and nature's design secondary or altogether invisible, stressing and stretching our relationship to land and water, bringing us to the brink of ecological and social collapse. Myers, a Christian activist and educator, advocates for a return to the "art, science, and theology of 'biomimicry.' We have lost our way as creatures of God's biosphere, and only the map that is woven into Creation can lead us home. And that map is defined by watersheds."

Myers implores us to consider new questions that take seriously the patterns of Creation. How might our politics change if boundaries were determined by nature rather than legislature? How might our city's development change if we honored our relationship with nature and nature's patterns? How might our international relations change if we understood ourselves as patterned and bound together by water and land?

Prayer: Holy God, Creator of land, water and nature's bounty, open our hearts and minds to the ecological patterns you prepared for us. Help us follow your waterways to the new and abundant life you desire for us and all Creation. Amen.

## *Notes*

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# *Saturday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 7*

### **Visio Divina**

Visio divina (sacred seeing) is an ancient form of Christian prayer where we dwell on an image in contemplative silence, listening for what God may reveal. This holy week, as we contemplate the life, death, humanity and divinity of Christ, we invite you to reflect on this work from Hannah Garrity that engages the Incarnation.

#### Prompts:

- Prepare yourself for prayer — perhaps by reading Scripture or through deep, centering breaths.
- Dwell on the image: what are your eyes first drawn to? Linger there. Then take in the whole image.
- What does this image evoke in you?
- What patterns emerge?
- What thoughts or messages arise?
- Respond to your visio divina experience with the following prayer or your own.

Prayer: Divine Artist, you pattern our lives with meaning and purpose. Thank you for art that points the way to new vision and new understanding. May this sacred practice inform our living and guide us closer to you. Amen.





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*Hannah Garrity*

# *Second Sunday of Advent*

## *December 8*

### **Seeking and Welcoming Feedback**

Reflection: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

In his 2014 book *Creativity, Inc.: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, Pixar Animation's co-founder Ed Catmull describes implementing a review process to give lower-level employees the chance to assess and share feedback with their managers. The goal was to help leaders identify their blind spots. What surfaced surprised Catmull. Employees noted the studio's lack of gender equity and diversity and criticized a culture of "domination and interruption."

Chagrined by this feedback, Catmull wrote, "I'd thought I had a clearer view than I had; I should have known better."

The RCL texts for this second Sunday of Advent reveal our need for feedback: from accountability partners, reviews and prophets who can help us see what we cannot see for ourselves.

Addressing the Israelites post-exile, Malachi grieves the corruption he sees among the Temple priests and calls them to account. They are in need of a messenger, one whom God will send to confront them with the truth. This truth will serve as a "refiner's fire" and "washers' soap" to cleanse and purify them from the sins they currently cannot see and address themselves.

In the first chapter from Luke's Gospel, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sings of his prophetic child who will "go before the Lord." John will give "knowledge of salvation" to the people, so they will know how they have gone wrong and what they need to do to get right with God.

From a prison cell, Paul writes to his beloved Philippians, encouraging their growth in knowledge and insight so they can "determine what really matters" and be "pure and blameless" when Christ comes.

In Chapter 3 of the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah by crying out in the wilderness, preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins, making the path of the coming Lord straight, smooth and without obstacles.

After receiving the feedback about inequities at Pixar Studios, Catmull and other executives took steps to better support female employees and increase diversity awareness throughout the company. They brought in an expert to talk about the neuroscience behind gender inequity. From this talk, Catmull learned, "Some of the most damaging causes of inequality involve no conscious intent. Most educated people believe that they are free of bias, and that they make decisions solely on merit. Research, however, proves otherwise."

We all need help seeing what we cannot see, recognizing the ways we have strayed from God's path. God sends us messengers, prophetic truth tellers, to prepare us for Christ. Our job is to take these messengers – and their messages – seriously.

Prayer: God of prophets and truth tellers, open us to hear what is hard to admit; open us to the mistakes we have made and the sins we have yet to confess. Guide us in your path of peace. Amen.

## *Monday of the Second Week of Advent* *December 9*

### **Starlings**

“Murmuration.” A gorgeous word, and an extraordinary pattern of God’s design.

Starlings – fist-sized birds with glossy feathers shining purple and green – gather in huge flocks during their breeding and nesting seasons. There is safety in numbers — and in motion. It’s hard for a predator to single out a bird in motion within a huge community. A flock of starlings “murmur,” twisting, turning and pivoting in the sky, like the inhale and exhale of a black storm cloud, completely coordinated, seemingly random.

Each starling is both participant and leader in its community. In an ever-evolving system, the flock follows first one bird’s flight pattern, only to quickly pivot and follow another bird. This murmuration adapts to whatever threat the environment holds, shifting the destination of the whole. Each pivot constitutes a complete commitment to a new leader, an immediate and unquestioning yielding of power from the leader before.

Humans live in patterned communities with hierarchical power structures and set leaders. Order is often achieved through control, and safety is ensured by the threat of punishment for those who get out of line. I wonder, What might we learn from the starlings? What might be different if humans could murmur, pivot, forsake power as strongly as we take it? What would such shared leadership look like for us? What new social patterns might we discover if we valued movement, growth and evolution as gifts to be nurtured?

Prayer: God, we get so stuck in our ways. We don’t question old systems and old patterns. We live with entrenched patterns, even when we know they are unhealthy. Open us to the murmuring of your Spirit, the blessing of new possibilities and the yielding of power. Enable our movement. Help us twist and pivot, grow and change for our survival and for all Creation’s flourishing. Amen.

## *Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent* *December 10*

### **Indigenous Patterns of Civilization**

Like fish who cannot know the water in which they swim, we humans need someone with a different perspective to shed light on who we are and what we’re all about.

Before Europeans colonized North America, Indigenous peoples organized and patterned their lives into advanced civilizations. In his 2022 book *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine*, Randy S. Woodley writes about their unparalleled techniques in agriculture, agronomy, botany, forestry, self-sustaining fertilized gardens, solar heating and mass water-transport systems. Early Indigenous communities shared their own philosophy, religion, arts and ethics; they patterned their lives with sciences of math and medicine; they organized themselves with systems of government, education, trade and complex peacemaking strategies. Christopher Columbus, as well as other European explorers, wrote about the generosity and hospitality with which the Indigenous tribes received their White visitors – a hospitality taken advantage of by Europeans who colonized these Indigenous communities, imposing a White culture of dominance and hierarchical patterns and pitting “us” against “them.”

We tend to assume dominant patterns are superior because they dominate. But this is the assumption of a fish who cannot see beyond the water in which it swims. How can you develop a new perspective on the pattern of your life, your culture, your community? What other culture can you study and come to know? What assumptions of dominance or superiority do you harbor that keep you from discovering new patterns and new truths?

Prayer: Creator God, help us to see the ways we have patterned our lives while helping us be open to new possibilities. Help us live into your radical welcome, shun forms of domination, colonization and superiority, and collaborate with new people and perspectives. Amen.

## *Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent* *December 11*

### **Water Walkers**

Indigenous Water Walkers trace a lake's perimeter on foot, over many days, to honor this natural boundary and our relationship to the water as a sacred relative, one to whom we are obligated. In an essay in *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, Denise M. Nadeau writes about a group of Anishinabe women living around the Great Lakes who in 2003 began the annual Mother Earth Water Walk. The first walk circled Lake Superior; each day began with a water ceremony before the women headed out, one carrying a copper vessel of water, another an eagle staff.

The goal of the Water Walkers is to change our perception: water is not merely an object, a resource to be used. Water is a living ecological partner, deserving our care and protection.

I walk around a small lake in my community with my daughter and our Australian cattle herder mutt, Max. At a few spots where the trail meets the water's edge, we unleash Max for a swim. Free, he barges and leaps in the lake's water, laps some with his tongue, and then crashes back to shore to shake off and shower us with his joy.

A golf course rests along one side of this small lake; homes line another. The path is for the public to enjoy, to walk the perimeter of the lake and notice how life has been built around this body of water's

natural pattern, a living ecological partner.

What water has your community, your life been built around? How might you recognize and honor your relationship to this water?

Prayer: God of oceans, lakes, rivers and tributaries, the earth is patterned by our partnership with water. Help us be good stewards of these natural relationships, so future generations can share in the showering of a dog's joy. Amen.

## *Thursday of the Second Week of Advent* *December 12*

### **Practiced Patterns**

Simone Biles, widely respected as the greatest gymnast of all time, has 41 Olympic and world championship medals. She is perfection on the mat, the vault, the balance beam. But her skills don't come naturally. Her body moves beautifully and powerfully because of practiced patterns, hours spent in the gym drilling each element she performs. In the 2024 Netflix documentary *Simone Biles Rising*, we see her humanity: her doubts, her pain, her past trauma, her fear. Her skills are not only difficult but dangerous. A wrong move, or a bad day, could leave her paralyzed or dead. But by the time she walks onto the mat for a competition, her routines are a part of her, patterned in her body. She is so prepared, she says, "I could do my routines in my sleep."

Sometimes, while I am washing dishes, folding laundry or transporting my kids across town to their next activity, I unconsciously hum a favorite hymn. If I am startled or stressed, a prayer instinctively rises from my heart and falls from my lips. After years of purposeful faith, these practices are part of my muscle memory, available to me whenever I have need.

Deliberate practice ups our game, and the season of Advent is a chance to practice our faith anew and prepare for the coming of Christ. This season is an invitation to increase our hours in prayer, worship and Bible study — an opportunity to build our faith's muscle memory. With Christ on the horizon, what can you do to be better prepared? What pattern do you need to practice to embody your faith?

Prayer: Savior God, you promise to come, to be born anew among us. Help us in our Advent practice and preparation so our faith is ready to receive your glory and your grace. Amen.

## *Friday of the Second Week of Advent* *December 13*

### **Patterns of Abilities**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, NASA recruited 11 men to participate in a study of how the hu-

man body would react to space travel. In one test, the men were sent on a boat into the rough seas off the coast of Nova Scotia. The test subjects enjoyed a game of cards — while the NASA researchers got so seasick they had to cancel the study and return to shore. Another test sent the 11 up in an aircraft nicknamed the “Vomit Comet,” which briefly creates zero-gravity conditions. Far from feeling sick, the men reported this “free floating” experiment as the one they found most enjoyable.

Who were these superhumans who so easily endured challenges to their equilibrium? The Gallaudet Eleven had all been recruited from Gallaudet College, a school for the deaf.

In her 2019 Wired article “It’s Time to Rethink Who’s Best Suited for Space Travel,” Rose Eveleth argues that while NASA runs on the assumption that only the strongest, most able-bodied can be astronauts, people with disabilities are actually the ones with the “right stuff.” “Strength comes in many forms,” she writes. The Gallaudet Eleven could endure the rough waves and zero gravity without nausea because their inner ears couldn’t detect up from down. They were truly differently able.

In Mark 7:31-37, a deaf man is brought to Jesus. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears, looks up to heaven and, in Aramaic, says, “Be opened.” Immediately the man is healed, and the reader is left feeling that to be opened is a blessed miracle.

We are constantly sorting people into categories: who belongs, who does not, who is strong and capable, who is weak and incapable. These human assumptions close us off from discovering new patterns and new people whose diverse gifts can help us reach for the stars.

Prayer: God, open us to learning from one another, from the many gifts and diverse abilities you give to each of us. Amen.

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# *Saturday of the Second Week of Advent*

## *December 14*

### **Visio Divina**

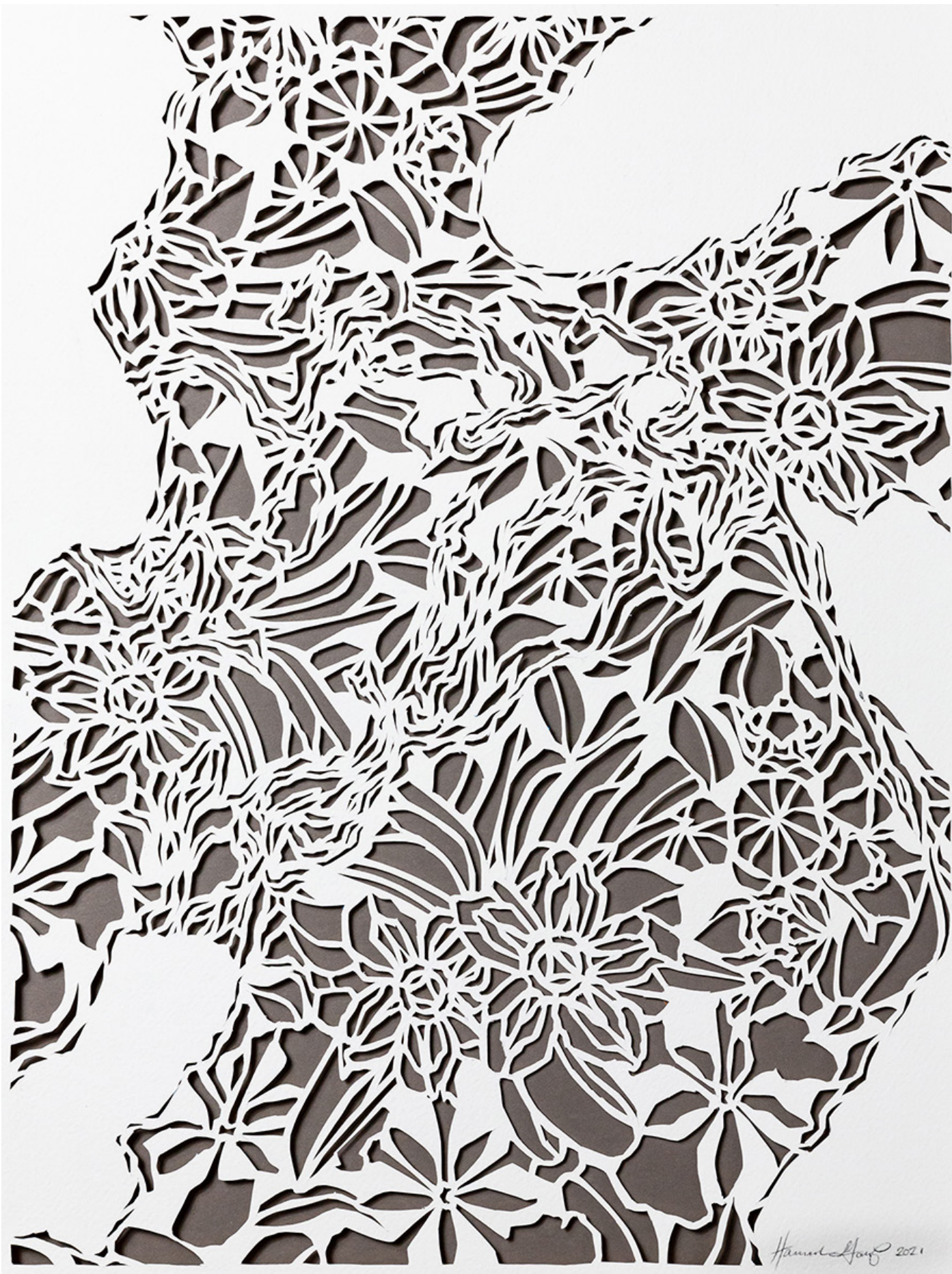
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"Four Rivers of Eden," by Hannah Garrity | A Sanctified Art, LLC | [sanctifiedart.org](http://sanctifiedart.org)

# Third Sunday of Advent

## December 15

### Called to Rejoice

Reflection: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12: 2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Traditionally, the third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete Sunday, using the Latin word for “rejoice.” All the lectionary passages for this day call us to joy. This call stands in stark contrast to our lived experience in December, the days dark and darkening, our conflicts intensifying, our planet warming, God’s people struggling and suffering. Still, the prophets call us to joy.

The passage from Zephaniah offers an abrupt shift following a long, judgmental tirade about the idolatrous, complacent, corrupt ways of God’s people. Still, there is good news, reason for joy. God is in the midst of Jerusalem – a phrase repeated for emphasis.

Then Isaiah is triumphant, announcing the coming of the Messiah, exalting in the salvation that God’s people can draw like water from a well. The reason for our joy is, as we read in Zephaniah, that the Holy One is “in your midst.”

The call to “rejoice in the Lord always” in Philippians arises in two contexts: the community is in conflict, and Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. Still they are to orient their lives and their faith around the joy that God is near, that God provides, and to be comforted that they are not alone in their struggle.

John the Baptist doesn’t waste time with niceties in Luke. John’s a straight shooter and he’s got a job to do: to confront the sin, name the sinner and call God’s people to repent. His message may not feel good, but John insists that this is in fact good news. He’s preparing us for the Messiah, whose arrival we will greet with joy.

As a pastor, I often counseled people to intentionally seek joy even in the midst of despair. Pause to observe the sunset. Listen to children’s laughter. Lean into a loved one’s embrace. Bear witness to a random act of kindness. Seek joy, I’d advise them — not to demean or downplay their struggles, but rather to help them find their way through. Joy can be a buoy when life’s storms overwhelm. Moments of joy can serve as stepping stones through our despair. In his 2017 anthology *Joy: 100 Poems*, Christian Wiman writes, “Joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone, the only antidote to the nihilism that wafts through our intellectual atmosphere like sarin gas.”

We need joy not only as an “inoculation against despair,” but as a way to resist it.

In his poem “A Brief for the Defense,” Jack Gilbert writes:

... we must have  
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless  
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only  
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.

Joy resists injustice; joy resists despair and hopelessness; joy resists evil by refusing to acquiesce or accept that evil's darkness is the more powerful reality.

This third Sunday of Advent calls us to joy, not only for our sake, but for the world's.

Prayer: Coming Savior, help us to resist giving all our attention to evil, inoculate us against despair, guide us through our struggles with stepping stones of life-giving joy. Amen.

## *Monday of the Third Week of Advent* *December 16*

### **Patterns of Teaching and Learning**

Master educator bell hooks is known for her democratic teaching style that fosters a learning community based on an ethic of love: grounded in care, respect and a commitment to everyone's learning. The transformative pattern of a bell hooks-style classroom is found in the teacher's stance not as one who dominates and controls, nor as one who dispenses information like a transaction into passive students, but as the facilitator of a learning community. The pattern of this community is shaped by curiosity, openness to others' experiences and ideas, and the search for points of connection.

Educational moments arise constantly in life, not just in the classroom. According to hooks, these are not moments to impose our beliefs or our interpretation of information on another. That's the authoritative, hierarchical pattern of the dominator and of our culture of domination: the way we are socialized to think that there must always be a superior and an inferior party. Arguments and analysis don't really matter in such a culture because we're not really listening; we're just fighting to dominate or win. But teaching and learning is not about winners and losers. It should be a joyful, liberating practice in which each engages because each has something valuable to contribute.

Consider the patterns of teaching and learning in your classrooms. Where do you recognize these patterns outside the classroom? We are all students of Christ. What pattern of teaching and learning would shape the classroom of our Master Teacher?

Prayer: God of wisdom, we are grateful for the gift of learning and for the liberation we can know through the growth and maturity of our thought. Guide us, Great Teacher, toward patterns that honor you and reflect your love. Amen.

## *Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent* *December 17*

### **Patterns of Relationship**

"Empathy, mutuality, and connection are dangerous to injustice. They can unravel what is otherwise a fragile, imposed order."

In their 2024 book *What It Takes To Heal: How Transforming Ourselves Can Change the World*, Prentis Hemphill writes about our need to remap relationships patterned by a forced, unnatural and inequitable social order. Hemphill, who identifies as Black and queer, is trained as a somatic embodiment therapist. Acknowledging how we have trained our bodies to relate to one another is a significant step in the healing process, Hemphill writes. Making way for a White person on the sidewalk and averting their eyes were among the tricks her Black ancestors learned and practiced to stay safe. These embodied deferences, Hemphill recalls, were passed on to ensure her people's survival.

We inherit beliefs and patterns of relationship by watching how the people around us move. Who is listened to and seen, who is adored. Who is invisible. Who is lifted up. Who is hunted down. We learn in this way who we are, and who we have been, in relationship to the world's other inhabitants.

Reading Hemphill, I pause to consider the way my body relates to others as a woman, as a White person, as a citizen of the United States, as a Christian. Woven into the ways I interact are inherited, unjust patterns of patriarchy, nationalism, xenophobia. Who might I be and how might I move through the world differently if I, and others, were freed from such patterns? How might my life be shaped if it were free of sexism? What wisdom have I missed because of the patterns of racism? Who might I have met and come to know differently without this embodied social ordering?

Consider your own patterns. With which others are you in relationship? How have these relationships patterned your life?

Prayer: Emmanuel, God-with-Us, you embodied grace through Jesus Christ. Let us heal from the unhealthy ways we relate to one another. Help us examine and pattern our relationships in light Christ's life and love. Amen.

## *Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent* *December 18*

### **Patterns of Gender**

Galatians 3:28 says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"

Discovering this passage from Galatians was transformative for Austen Hartke, a transgender Christian. He'd grown up struggling with what he believed were two opposing realities: his knowledge that he didn't fit within a heterosexual, cisgender binary, while also his feeling of being called to the study of Scripture and the Christian life. Because of this struggle, he'd avoided his desire to be baptized.

Coming across Galatians 3:28 in college, though, he "felt something click into place." Hartke writes. "The connection to baptism, negating gender as a barrier to acceptance, the metaphor of adoption into a faith family: this all spoke directly to my heart." In his 2018 book *Transforming: the Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, Hartke explains how this "neither X nor Y" formula shows up throughout Paul's letters. "It was apparently pretty important to early Christians," he writes, "that things like gender, ethnicity, and social status not be recognized as barriers to inclusion or to a relationship with God."

Since Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, research has led us to understand patterns of gender emerging from biological, psychological and social elements. We also recognize gender diversity among other cultures, such as the two-spirit people in some Native American cultures, the hijra of India, and the waria of Indonesia. Discoveries of plants and animals that switch between male and female over their lifetimes have also led science to a more nuanced, less binary and more diverse understanding of gender.

Do you (or does someone you know) not fit into the binary pattern of male and female? Can you imagine what life is like for someone who identifies as transgender, two-spirit or hijra? What barriers of mind, heart, religious belief, culture might we reconsider and repattern with new understanding?

Prayer: God, just as you spoke to the Christians of Paul's day, so you speak to us. Help us live faithfully with the new knowledge with which you bless us, opening our minds and hearts to new patterns. Amen.

## *Thursday of the Third Week of Advent* *December 19*

### **Patterns of Nourishment**

I keep adding new plants to my home office. Because I am a full-time remote worker, these living beings bring me comfort and company. But I also enjoy contemplating the magic of photosynthesis and appreciating how these plants filter the toxins in my environment and nourish me with clean oxygen. I move them regularly, from a sunny spot by a window to a background arrangement behind my Zoom screen to the corner of my desk. Wherever they find themselves, though, the plants turn toward the sunlight, leaning into the energy they need.

Every living being is patterned with needs and means of nourishing. Advent gives us the time to consider what spiritual nourishment we need to prepare for Christ. What toxins need to be filtered from your environment? Maybe toxic thoughts live rent-free in your mind, messages that make you doubt your worth and your abilities, even your belovedness. Maybe toxic people drag you down, turning you toward destructive, demeaning behavior. Maybe you have toxic beliefs that you have yet to question, but should – such as a theology of exclusion or narratives that do more to harm than heal.

What practices turn your soul toward the sunlight? Can you position yourself by a window overlooking a beautiful landscape to contemplate your wild Creator? How about standing shoulder to shoulder with others singing hymns of praise and praying prayers of both joy and lament? Would it serve you to sit alone in a dark room, lit by a single candle, where it is quiet enough to hear God's whisper?

God provides the nourishment we need. Take the time this Advent to lean into the light.

Prayer: Life-giving God, you provide all that we need and more. Guide us in turning toward you, your light, your spiritual energy, so we can be nourished this Advent and in turn nourish others. Amen.

# *Friday of the Third Week of Advent*

## *December 20*

### **Chaotic Beauty**

In *Emergent Strategy*, brown writes about her work as a doula and the messy, chaotic beauty of transformation as a baby is born.

“I ask myself if I am needed,” brown writes, “support only as needed, do absolutely everything that is needed (change the diaper, sweep the floor, rub mama’s feet, take out the trash — no task is menial), and make space for the natural order to emerge.”

This “making space for order to emerge” also guides brown’s activist work.

“Uprising and resistance and mass movement require a tolerance of messiness,” she writes, “a tolerance of many, many paths being walked at once.”

All too often we are quick to impose order, to pattern a life or lives in community, to segregate ourselves and others into binaries – Black or White, rich or poor, male or female – before we give God’s design enough space to emerge.

I don’t tolerate chaos very well. If my work desk is messy, my brain also feels cluttered. But if I can resist the urge to put everything in its “proper” place, to organize my creative work in predictable patterns, to outline and diagram and make my own plans, then I might discover a new insight, a new narrative thread for the devotion I’m writing, a new path through a forest I didn’t even know existed. Can we make and hold space for something new? Can we give the chaos a chance to transform us and our lives?

Prayer: God, it’s hard to be patient with ourselves, with others and with you. Chaos isn’t comfortable. We like to know where we are going and the best, easiest path to get there. Guide us with your wisdom and your grace so we can make the space for your holy order to emerge. Amen.

## *Notes*

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# *Saturday of the Third Week of Advent*

## *December 21*

### **Visio Divina**

Visio divina (sacred seeing) is an ancient form of Christian prayer where we dwell on an image in contemplative silence, listening for that which God may reveal. This holy week, as we contemplate the life, death, humanity and divinity of Christ, we invite you to reflect on this work from Hannah Garrity that engages the Incarnation.

#### Prompts:

- Prepare yourself for prayer — perhaps by reading Scripture or through deep, centering breaths.
- Dwell on the image: what are your eyes first drawn to? Linger there. Then take in the whole image.
- What does this image evoke in you?
- What patterns emerge?
- What thoughts or messages arise?
- Respond to your visio divina experience with the following prayer or your own.

Prayer: Divine Artist, you pattern our lives with meaning and purpose. Thank you for art that points the way to new vision and new understanding. May this sacred practice inform our living and guide us closer to you. Amen.





"Vessel," by Hannah Garrity | A Sanctified Art, LLC | [sanctifiedart.org](http://sanctifiedart.org)

# *Fourth Sunday of Advent*

## *December 22*

### **Turning Toward Hope**

Reflection: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-55

In an interview shortly after his release from prison, Václav Havel, a playwright turned communist dissident in 1970s Czechoslovakia, referred to hope as an “orientation of the heart; it transcends the world as it is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.” Havel’s hope sustained him, though he was imprisoned and his work banned, and eventually led him to become president of a more tolerant and open Czechoslovakia.

The lectionary passages for this fourth Sunday of Advent turn us toward the narrative pattern of hope. Hope is essential to our humanity, a fundamental ingredient to surviving hardship. Each passage for this Sunday turns us beyond what is immediately experienced, anchoring Christians in the hope of our coming Christ.

Micah, the eighth-century BCE prophet, pens today’s messianic poem against a backdrop of the Assyrian destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah and the deportation of God’s people from their homes. Their hope resides in a ruler, a savior, coming from Bethlehem and the Judean clan of Ephrathah, linking such a ruler to the ancestral line of King David.

Like the pastoral prayer led in our worship services, the passage from Psalm 80 raises the concerns of God’s people. The people need restoration. The people need God’s promised salvation. The people need God’s presence. “Let your face shine,” writes the psalmist. Presenting our needs to God in prayer reflects our hope that God hears and God acts.

The passage from Hebrews follows a lengthy section citing Jeremiah’s prophecy that God will make a new covenant with Israel, a covenant of belonging and grace: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Hebrews 8:10). This new covenant, as we read in this Sunday’s passage from Hebrews, is realized in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Christ is the embodiment of our hope, the fulfillment of God’s promise.

The scenes painted by the Evangelist Luke reveal that hope is not only something to ponder in our minds, but to be felt and experienced within our bodies. The baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps when it hears Mary’s greeting. Elizabeth responds to her hope-filled baby with an embodied cry of joy. Mary’s body cannot contain her own feelings – to speak is not enough, she must sing – her soul “magnifies” and celebrates the hope thrumming in her heart and from her throat.

With only a few days left until Christmas, we might pause here to consider how hope breaks into our present experience. How is your own hope embodied? Does it feel like the warm embrace of your spouse, the body God bound you to in the covenant of marriage? Does it sound like the tolling steeple bell, or the pealing laughter of children at play? Does it smell like the smoke of the match you just snuffed after lighting your prayer candle? Does it look like the dancing flame of a single candle, or the hundreds of candles lit on Christmas Eve? Hope

breaks into our present experience in the same way Christ is born into our lives at Christmas: real, embodied, humming with heart. Hope is God's gift to us, fresh from the womb, wrapped in swaddling clothes, cooing with love for us all.

Prayer: We praise you, God, for the gift of hope. We celebrate the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, whose birth anchors us beyond the horizon. For all the ways you break into our present struggles and orient our hearts with hope, we thank you, God of the good news. Amen.

## *Monday of the Fourth Week of Advent* *December 23*

### **Patterns of Healing**

When you cut your finger, hemostasis begins. Platelets rush in, sticking to the damaged tissue, forming a temporary clot like a cork in a barrel of beer. This plug isn't stable enough to stay in place without help, though. Molecules arrive on the scene, coagulating into a substance called fibrin. According to the Cleveland Clinic's web article on hemostasis, "The platelet plug acts like the bricks and the fibrin acts like mortar. Together, they form a solid, stable clot."

The pattern of healing is neither linear nor quick. Wounds are tended through multiple, simultaneous processes. God sends a variety of first responders: people who rush in when the wound is fresh, the clot unformed. Friends, family, church members bearing casseroles, the pastor sitting in the waiting room, the beloved at your bedside — these agents help determine the shape of our need, which will determine the pattern of our healing.

Did you slice your finger while chopping onions? Are you distracted because your daughter's grades are falling, and you have no idea why? Is your heart sore from shame because you spoke out of turn, hurting in a way you didn't intend? Or is your pain existential, a soul wound leading you to ask what earthly purpose God could have for you?

The pattern of our healing could be physical, emotional, spiritual — or all three. Agents of healing coagulate from all directions. The mortaring of our wounds takes time and the courage to understand what lies below the surface. God's work is not always obvious, nor quick. But our healing networks reveal our Creator's desire to see us whole. Look around: who are your agents of healing? Can you show your wound and seek help?

Prayer: Balm of the wounded, Healer of pain, Comfort of the afflicted, help us acknowledge the shape of our need so we can recognize the pattern of your healing. Amen.

# *Christmas Eve*

## *December 24*

### **Patterns of Light**

One year in early December, right before final exams, I led a Christmas service for the college I served as chaplain. Many of our students were unchurched, part of the growing category of nones (those who claim no religious affiliation). For some, this was the first traditional Christmas service they'd ever experienced.

"I loved it," said one such student, Emma, after the service. "When we handed out the candles and passed the flame from one to another, and it illuminated the entire room —" Emma moved her hand back and forth, seeking the words to articulate the aura of that moment. "I saw everybody's faces brightened by the candlelight and I thought about how we're all here thinking something different, but we're here together. It's like we're all different, but also all the same."

The pattern of light we witness on Christmas Eve, where each single candle joins a room full of candles to illuminate a large sanctuary, is a powerful testament to the ways in which Christ is present and at work among us. Christ not only illuminates our common bonds as humans but shows what we can accomplish when we work together toward the good. We can powerfully share and spread the good news of God's great love.

Personally, I can't get through the end of any candlelight Christmas Eve service without emotion catching in my throat, choking my final notes of "Silent Night." The light, spreading so easily, growing and expanding, fills me with hope . . . for me . . . for us . . . for our world. We aren't alone in a dark room or a darkening world. God has not abandoned us. Christ has not left us without beloved community. Love breaks through, like light shining in the dark. We have the power to share this love — tipping one flickering candle into another, until the whole world is aglow.

Prayer: Source of light and life, God of the sun and moon and stars, we praise you for the pattern of love you reveal to us on this holy night. Help us share your love with the world, one candle at a time. Amen.

# *Christmas Day*

## *December 25*

### **Patterns of Story**

Story quilts are a form of textile art that go beyond traditional geometric patterns. Scraps of fabric, discarded clothes, old blankets, ribbons, even metallic textiles are stitched together to tell a family's ancestral story — or send a coded message. Enslaved African Americans relied on story quilts to warn others of danger or to direct escapees to freedom. Symbols such as a bow tie (dress in disguise) or a bear paw (follow the animal trail) or a log cabin (seek shelter) were worked into quilts and then hung outside houses along the Underground Railroad.

On this Christmas Day, we might pause to consider how our human story is stitched together with God's. Christmas marks the beginning of God's story through Jesus Christ, the Messiah for whom generations before us waited with great expectation and hope. We are all a part of this lineage: people of different colors, cultures, languages, geographical and body shapes, faces turned toward the coming light. The pattern of each of our lives is a part of God's whole, a story that arcs toward hope and redemption, a story of amazing grace and wondrous love. It's as if God has hung a story quilt outside of each of our houses of worship this day, saying "Come, All Ye Faithful." This house is for you. This house is safe. In this house you are loved and welcome.

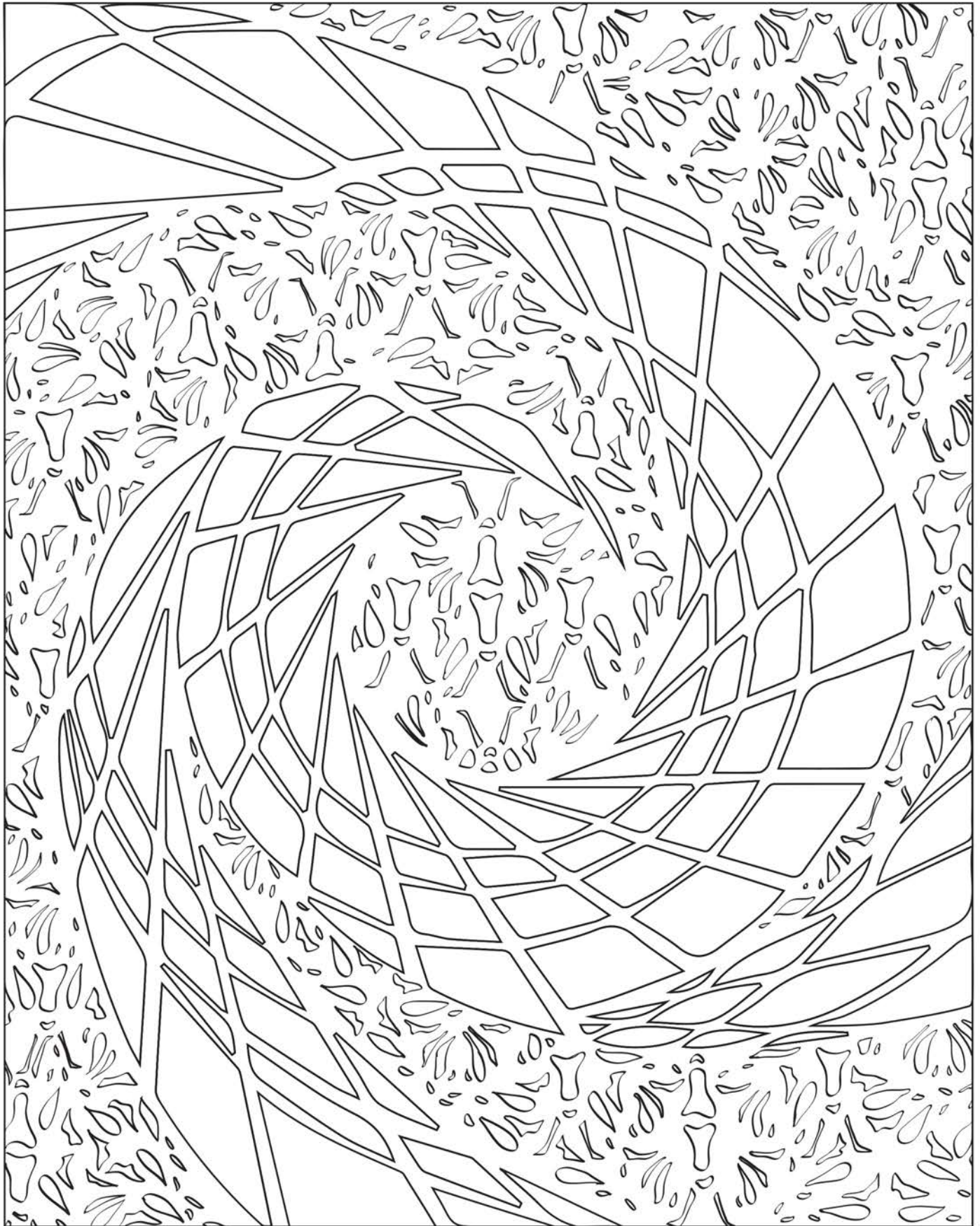
Thanks be to God for this day's good news. Thanks be to God for the patterns and patterning of our story.

Prayer: Amazing God, Master Quilter, on this Christmas Day we give thanks for the birth of Christ, for this new beginning and all the joy the birth of our Savior brings. Attune us to the patterns of our story, woven into yours and one another's, so we can bear witness to your good news and be guided to the glory of our salvation. Amen.



# *Coloring Page*

Take some time to enjoy this coloring page.



"Sleep Unborn," by Hannah Garrity | A Sanctified Art, LLC | sanctifiedart.org