



ADVENT CALENDAR

We encourage you to place this poster on your refrigerator. Each day, move a magnet to the next place on the calendar and complete the daily prompt together as a family.

2 Set up a stable for your nativity scene.

7 Describe a hope you have for the future.

14 Make placemats for your family.

3 Call or write to someone you love who lives far away.

10 Pray for people experiencing homelessness.

20 Build a fort. How many people can you fit?

9 Add animals to your nativity scene.

17 Gather canned goods to take to the food pantry.

13 Look for a chance to share today.

15 Sort through your belongings for things to donate.

4 Help your family do the laundry.

22 Hug someone who makes you feel safe.

16 Add shepherds to your nativity scene.

18 Help your family clean or decorate for Christmas.

8 Draw a map of your home.

23

Add Mary and Joseph to your nativity scene.

6 Build a home for your favorite toy.

12

Go stargazing tonight. What do you wish for?

24

Christmas Eve! Invite a friend to come to church with you.

25

Christmas Day! Celebrate Christmas! Add baby Jesus to your nativity scene.

11 Help your family cook dinner or set the table.

21 Take a walk to look at the Christmas lights.

5 Make a Christmas to-do list—include fun things!

1 Name five things you miss about home when you're away.

19 Visit an animal shelter and ask how you can help.

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshiping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God.

Learn more about their work at
sanctifiedart.org.



CLOSE TO HOME

Advent Devotional

Art, Poetry, Songs, &
Reflections for the
Season of Advent



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When something hits close to home, it affects us deeply. The stories and scriptures of Advent are tender, heavy with emotion, and vulnerable. We hold the memories and truths of this season close to our hearts. *Close to Home* acknowledges that Emmanuel is with us, and yet, God's promised day—our everlasting home—is not fully realized. We long for God to come close.

The Advent and Christmas scriptures are rich with home metaphors and imagery. John the Baptist prophesies about the One who is to come, but reminds us that we are still wandering far from God's promised day; his message hits close to home, especially for those experiencing inequity and oppression. After receiving the angel's news, Mary retreats to Elizabeth's home, seeking refuge and safety. Christ is born in the midst of a journey home, in a crowded dwelling space amidst livestock and shepherds alike. The Magi travel far from home to pay homage to Christ, and, having been warned in a dream, they avoid Herod by traveling home another way. In these scriptures, home is both physical and metaphorical, something we seek and something we are called to build. Ultimately, God is our home and resting place. God draws near and makes a home on earth—sacred ground is all around us.

This Advent, may we be comforted by the One who dwells intimately with us. May we expand safety and sanctuary for everyone wandering far from home. May we come home—wherever home is found—to live fully with joy, hope, and courage.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Hannah Garrity

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Rev. Anna Strickland



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About the creators



Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (*she/her*) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist), retreat leader, and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. She founded A Sanctified Art with the conviction that, in order to thrive, the church needs more creative expression and art-filled freedom.

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren (*she/her*) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, and Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. She also helps faith communities share their vibrant stories through branding & design services.

Hannah Garrity Founding Creative Partner of SA

Hannah (*she/her*) is an artist and an athlete, a daughter and a mother, a facilitator and a producer, a leader and a teammate. She is an art teacher at a middle school in Richmond, VA, a Sunday school visual choir facilitator at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA, an art in worship workshop leader wherever she is called, and a liturgical installation artist at the Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC.

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed Founding Creative Partner of SA

Sarah (Are) Speed (*she/her*) is the new Associate Pastor for Young Adults and Membership at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Sarah feels called to live her life welcoming people into the church by using her energy and passion for beautifully scripted words, raw and relevant liturgy, and hands-on worship experiences to engage our longing for God and the need for justice in this messy world.

Rev. Anna Strickland

Operations Support | Content Creator

Anna Strickland (*she/her*) looks for the Divine in the everyday like treasure in clay jars and first encountered God in the integration of her spiritual self and artistic self. She is a native Austinite and graduated from the University of Texas where she now works as a college minister, especially serving LGBTQ students.

About our GUEST CONTRIBUTORS



Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

Vilmarie (*she/her*) is an educator and a ruling elder. Ordained for 26 years, she has served in the Presbyterian Church (USA) at the Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly levels. Vilmarie holds a B.A. in Education (ESL) and an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Teaching. She has taught English and English as a Second

Language to teenage and adult students from all over the world. Vilmarie and her husband, Rev. José Manuel Capella-Pratts, live in Miami, FL. Along with the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann, she served as Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the first Hispanic Latina and first Puerto Rican person to be elected to this office. Among her loves is the love of art in its many forms. These days she feels closer to God through color, shapes, and movement, exploring watercolor painting as a form of prayer and engaging in one of her preferred spiritual practices, "Praying in Color."



Rev. T. Denise Anderson

Denise (*she/her*) is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the acting Director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency's Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries. A graduate of Howard University School of Divinity, she is the former Co-Moderator of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (USA). A nationally-

recognized writer and blogger, Denise's work has appeared in *The Christian Century*, *The Huffington Post*, *These Days*, and on her own blog, *SOULa Scriptura: To Be Young, Gifted, and Reformed*: soulascriptura.com. Denise writes, preaches, and engages on issues of social justice, diversity, and reconciliation. As a gifted visual artist, she creates art that explores themes of spirituality, history, religion, and race: tdandersonart.com.



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Homesick | Luke 21:25-36

How do you describe homesickness to a child?
 You don't.
 They know.
 Children know the feeling of being away from home.
 It's fear, dipped in loneliness,
 that "What if I've been forgotten?" sonnet,
 or the "What if I can't go back?" refrain.
 Even a healthy, scrubbed-clean,
 showered-with-love child
 knows the longing of home.

But if I *had* to.
 If I had to describe
 that aching feeling, I would say:
 "Homesickness is when longing and grief
 wrap themselves around you like a blanket.
 It's the door to comfort thrown open.
 It's an eye on the horizon for what could be
 and the only way out is to keep walking,
 to keep dreaming,
 to keep looking
 for signs that will point you back home."

And if you tell that to a child,
 you just may realize
 that a part of your spirit
 has shoes on
 and has always been walking,
 always been dreaming,
 always been looking
 for the home that could be.

The door to comfort has been blown open.
 Tell God I'm homesick.
 I'm on my way.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Read Luke 21:25-36
 Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

"...*Mi corazón se quedó frente al mar en mi Viejo San Juan...*"

The famous Puerto Rican song, "*En mi Viejo San Juan*"¹ has described the sentiments of many in the Puerto Rican diaspora. The song, written in 1943 by Noel Estrada for his brother stationed in Panamá, recounts memories of life in San Juan and the long-awaited return: "My heart remained at the seafront in Old San Juan." Listening to this song sometimes makes me a little **homesick**, but, most of the time, it evokes warm, nostalgic feelings and brings forth memories of the cobblestone streets and blue seas of my hometown.

When hurricane María hit Puerto Rico in 2017, the news footage of the massive category 4 storm contrasted with the lovely memories of the island. The words of the song resonated; my heart was, indeed, at the seafront in Old San Juan. The storm passed, and we anxiously awaited news from our families on the island. Homesickness crept in as we were far away from loved ones and wished to be close to them in the moment of need. Days later, *el silencio de la espera*² was finally broken by the buzz of a text message: "*Estamos bien*" ("We're OK"). Those two words were hope in the midst of chaos. Those words were **home**.

Images of distress, confusion, and fear emerge in Luke 21. In many ways, the feelings that these words evoke mirror the past almost two years of pandemic crisis—a world in turmoil suffering from disasters, both natural and human-made—speaking to the realities and injustices of a chaotic world. Thankfully, Jesus enters this world offering words, not of foreboding, but of **hope** to a homesick people that felt far away from God and longed to be close to kin in the middle of the crisis. "Stand up and raise your heads," Jesus said, "because your redemption is near . . . So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near" (v. 28-31). Even in *el silencio de la espera*, we are reassured that God's kin-dom is near. Kin-dom, in Ada María Isasi-Díaz's definition, is "interconnected community, seeing God's movement emerge from *la familia*, the family God makes."³ God is close. These are words of hope for a homesick world. These words are **home**.

1 Listen to "*En mi Viejo San Juan*" sung by composer Noel Estrada here: [youtube.com/watch?v=VFF7Oz80Xx4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFF7Oz80Xx4).
 2 "The silence of the wait."
 3 Ada María Isasi-Díaz quoted in "The Kin-dom of Christ" by Melissa Florer-Bixler. *Sojourners*. Nov. 20, 2018. sojo.net/articles/kin-dom-christ.



Awake to Wonder | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Read Luke 21:25-36

From the Artist Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

It is peculiar that we begin Advent with adult Jesus offering us a prophecy and parable filled with fear and mystery. This particular scripture is within a longer section of Jesus describing the coming destruction of the temple, a public statement that no doubt added to the conspiracies and plots stirring against him. The fate he speaks of is filled with terrifying details: the temple demolished, false prophets, wars and uprisings, food shortages, natural disasters, persecution, and epidemics (Luke 21:5-24). As we read these words now, this litany of fear and foreboding feels far too familiar—a bit too close to home.

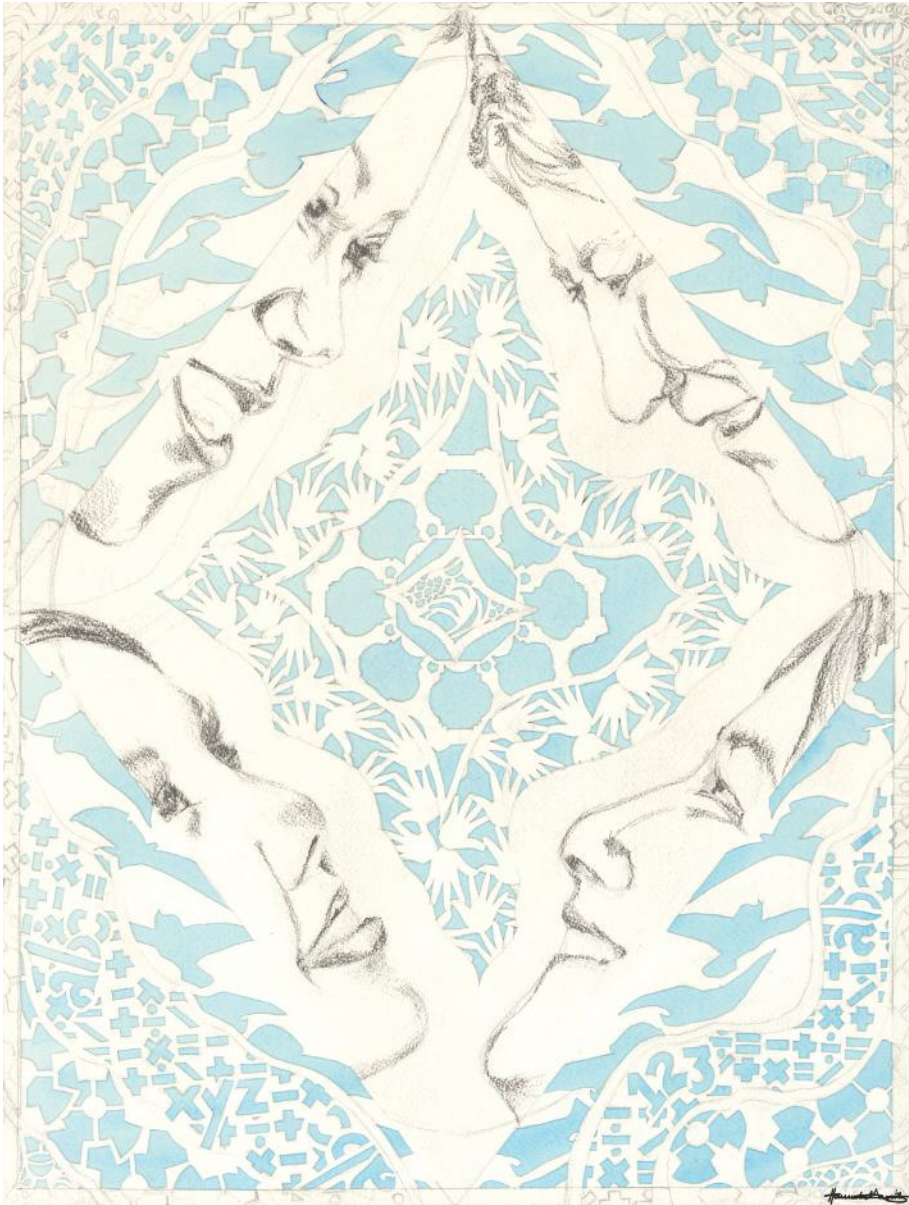
When I began this series of visuals, I printed an architectural blueprint on a large piece of cardstock. Using acrylic paint, I added fluid strokes of blue, obscuring the white lines in the blueprint so that the plans for building a home would appear present but also blurred and concealed. I added hints of gold leaf, trying to emulate the texture of paint peeling from the exterior of a building. I then shifted to digital media, photographing the painting from a number of angles and then drawing figures and details into my compositions with my stylus and iPad.

As I began this particular image, I imagined a scene of chaos and apocalypse. However, as I drew a woman lifting her head and reaching for the fig tree, I began to see a vision of beauty and hope, a glimpse of one's whole being awake to wonder.

I think we all share a collective homesickness. It feels like nostalgia. It looks like the trauma hiding in our past. It can turn into foreboding fear that robs us of real joy. But in this image and in Jesus' words, I see a call to resilience despite the difficult realities that confront us. I see a longing so deep that it keeps us reaching—for a home restored, for comfort renewed, for the fruit that is sure to come.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Yearning | Hannah Garrity

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

From the Artist Hannah Garrity

Silhouette profiles of faces with diamond repetition. . . Inside the diamonds weave paper lace representations of love, restoration, and Christ's forgiveness—God's grace that alone provides the state of holiness among people. Hands, architecture, doves, food, clothing, and education—these portray some of the gifts we give to one another in faith when we meet face to face.

In this 3rd chapter of Thessalonians, Paul spends time on the ideals of faith, of restoring each other's faith over time. We circle back to one another to connect, share, and build faith in God. From all over the world, four faces smile into the middle of the frame. Our longing to meet face to face creates a ripple effect for community building. Inside the ripples are hands, architecture, doves, food, clothing, and education symbols to represent faith in action. The faces yearn for and inspire one another from afar, like Paul in this letter of love and faith to the people of Thessalonica.

As Paul yearns for the people and the faith of the Thessalonians, he faces persecution in his own city. The news from Timothy gives Paul hope in the face of oppression and persecution. In our current global climate, whom do we yearn for? Whose good news do we rejoice in? Whose faith inspires the continued work of our own faith? For me, it is you.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



*Draw or journal a memory of feeling homesick. How did you feel?
What did you yearn for? Close with a prayer for those who are displaced
or far from home.*

Scan to hear
the tune!



See Fig Leaves Now Sprouting

Lo, How a Rose

Text: Anna Strickland (2021)

Music: Geisliche Kirchengasäng (1599)

See fig tree leaves now sprout - ing Soon
Sun, moon, and stars a - bove us Speak

sum-mer comes a - gain Cre - a - tion
of God's pro - mised day To make space

groans in la - bor For God's reign to
for our new home This world must pass

be-gin We wait with ba - ted breath
a-way When we are filled with dread

Home-sick for God's true kin - dom Age
The words of Christ up-hold us: "A -

with-out hate or death
- rise and raise your head"

Take sabbath

Nourish and sustain yourself with rest. Commit to a Sabbath activity today, perhaps one of those listed below:

- Go for a walk outside.
- Sit quietly and meditate.
- Plant something indoors or outside.
- Spend time with a friend or loved one.
- Explore a new area of your town or city.
- Cook or bake something using a favorite or new recipe.
- Do yoga or exercise in a way that feels good for your body.
- Write and mail a letter to someone you haven't talked to in a while.
- Organize or redesign an area in your home.
- Draw or create something.
- Dance or play music.
- Write a poem or a song.
- Watch a movie.
- Take a nap.
- Read a book.

WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

Luke 1:57-80

If I could give you words
for the very beginning—
for the stretches
and the yawns,
and the opening of eyes,
for the first hiccups,
and the first smiles,
and the first purse of your lips,
I would say,
“Oh, dear child,
how you are loved.”

But the thing about love
is you can't stop there,
so I would go on to say,
“You are strong,
stronger than you think.
And you are not alone—
look at these parents
who adore you
and these doctors and
nurses fighting for you.
And you are enough,
already enough.

You haven't done anything yet.
You've just been here,
breathing,
sleeping,
and already, you are enough.
And then I might say,
“This world is a mess,
but it is your home,
and you can make it better,
so always try to make it better.

And maybe most important
of all:
there is a love
that is bigger than
my understanding,
that moves through
this world,
and I call that love God.
And that love is here,
here in this room,
and that love knows
your name by heart.”

Those are the words
I would say to you
as you stretch and yawn
and open your eyes
on the very first morning
of your very first day.
Let that be your foundation,
like Zechariah did for John.
Let love be your beginning.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Mon. | Laying the Foundation
(peace)

Read Luke 1:57-80

Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

“I will trust the promise. You will carry me safe to shore...”

Of the songs at the 2019 Presbyterian Youth Triennium,⁴ Rend Collective's “My Lighthouse”⁵ was a favorite. As soon as those first bars of the song were played, the auditorium roared and came alive energized by, I believe, the Holy Spirit. The crowd of mostly young, high school age people burst into song, their hands raised high, the choreography performed harmoniously, their voices proclaiming, “I will trust the promise. You will carry me safe to shore...” I was moved to tears more than once, blessed by the message their young voices sang with conviction and gusto.

Zechariah's canticle in Luke 1 had such conviction. Having lost his voice for his initial disbelief, Zechariah regains it just in time to praise God for God's mercy and to pronounce a blessing, a prophecy, to his son that would set the tone for John's life and ministry. While the neighbors and relatives gossiped about the miraculous circumstances of John's birth—circumstances that amazed as much as frightened them—they also worried, wondering, “What then will this child become?” (v. 66). Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit and knowing his son would become the “prophet of the Most High,” (v. 76) spoke words of vision to a newborn that grew strong in spirit and helped lay the foundation into the way of peace. In building God's kin-dom, let us remember there is power in the words that we speak, to anyone, but especially to our young ones as we lay the foundation for their spiritual homes.

*“Your great love will lead me through. You are the peace in my troubled sea...”*⁶ thousands of young Presbyterians sang these words that summer at the Elliot Music Hall.⁷ Claiming those words for their lives, their song also blessed all who heard and joined them. May we cast this vision of kin-dom and bless others with words and acts of love, hope, and mercy. May these words and acts strengthen our collective spirits and guide us all into the way of peace—guide us all **home**.

4 The Presbyterian Youth Triennium is a triennial gathering for high schoolers, youth leaders, and young adults sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Churches.

5 “My Lighthouse” © Rend Collective/ Integrity Music. youtube.com/watch?v=reAUkV7ptU.

6 “My Lighthouse” by Rend Collective.

7 The Elliot Hall of Music is on the campus of Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.



Berakah | Hannah Garrity

Read Luke 1:57-80

From the Artist Hannah Garrity

In this image, Zechariah holds his baby boy. He speaks a blessing, a *berakah*.⁸ For his neighbors, he answers the question, “What then will this child become?” (v. 66). The intimate love of a father with his newborn son is captured in this pose. Patterns of water pour over John’s little shirt. Zechariah sees what his son will become and begins to speak his future into being from the start. As dawn breaks over Zechariah’s shoulder, his prophecy foretells God coming into the world—of light dawning in weary spaces.

Zechariah relents. God has made Her statement. He could not speak until he de-centered himself from the story. He gives the name that Elizabeth has been called to give. Zechariah’s willingness to hear the call is the action in this moment. Traditionally, he would give his first born son his own name. His neighbors are shocked by the name he chooses to give, by the prophecy, by his being able to speak again. By removing his own personal and family legacy from the picture, he is truly able to give way to the greater narrative that God is calling him to participate in.

This is an incredible moment of humility. As I created this image, I asked God’s help in identifying where I can step out of the way to forward Her vision for this weary world. She knows. Her work is greater than my legacy.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁸ The Jewish prayer of blessing expressing gratitude and praise to God.

Read Philippians 1:3-11

From the Artist Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Paul's letter is filled to the brim with affection, and models perfectly his prayer for the reader to live and move in the world from a foundation of overflowing love.

When I began creating this image, the reaching, mirrored hands of the *Close to Home* logo emerged for me as a way to reference Paul's outstretched, compassionate posture toward the Philippians as well as Paul's hope for the reader to mirror that Christ-like embodiment. How do we determine what is best? We constantly strive, extending our hands and stretching our fingertips to get a grasp of the person of Jesus, having our lives transformed in love along the way.

When I considered the metaphor of harvest that Paul provides, I knew I wanted to use botanical and fruit imagery. All of the flowers symbolize different kinds of love: Coltsfoot flowers representing maternal love and care, Forget-Me-Nots imaging faithful love and undying memory, and Heliotrope meaning eternal love and devoted attachment. At the center of the piece, the object of the hand's reaching is a pomegranate, bursting open with seeds. Throughout history, pomegranates have been used as a symbol for royalty because of their richness of color and flavor, and for the crown-like shape on the end of the fruit. At times, this fruit was used as a symbol for Christ and resurrection as well. The split-open fruit with seeds spilling out represents Christ breaking out of the tomb.⁹ The hands are ready to receive the knowledge and full insight of Christ and to be nourished by the harvest of righteousness.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁹ Appleton, LeRoy H., and Stephen Bridges. *Symbolism in Liturgical Art*. New York: Scribner, 1969.



Harvest of Righteousness | Lauren Wright Pittman

「Thurs day」

Close to Home Journaling
Laying the Foundation

What is the foundation of your faith? Who has helped lay the foundation for you? How are you helping to lay the foundation for others? Journal or draw any thoughts or memories.

Scan to hear
the tune!



Zechariah's Lullaby

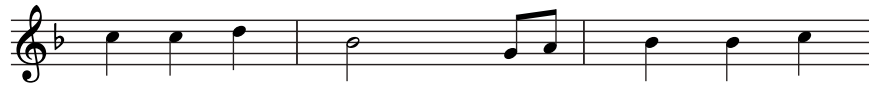
Away in a Manger

Text: Anna Strickland (2021)

Music: Willi patrick (1)



When old Zech - a - ri - ah held
"And you child will be called a
We lay a foun - da - tion for



his ba - by son He blessed him and
pro-phet of Christ To bring hope to
what is to be Not know - ing yet



dream of what he would be - come As
hearts and to sha-dows the light For
pray - ing for what we can't see We

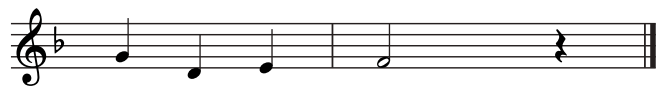


ba - by John rocked in the tem - ple that
God has sent vis - ions of what you will
trust in God's i - mag - in - a - tion to



morn This song Zech - a - ri - ah sang
do A dream to pro - claim and a
build From blue-prints and hope for a

2



for his ne - born
world to re - new"
dream yet ful - filled

Take Sabbath

Nourish and sustain yourself with rest. Commit to a Sabbath activity today, perhaps one of those listed below:

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- Sit quietly and meditate.
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- Do yoga or exercise in a way that feels good for your body.
- Write and mail a letter to someone you haven't talked to in a while.
- Organize or redesign an area in your home.
- Draw or create something.
- Dance or play music.
- Write a poem or a song.
- Watch a movie.
- Take a nap.
- Read a book.

ADVOCATING FOR HOME | Luke 3:1-18

Written with love for all who identify as transgender and/or non-binary.

I know you don't feel at home in your body.
 Your clothes don't feel right.
 Your bones don't feel right.
 Your name, just a word that people have labeled you with.

I see the way you try on pronouns like I try on clothes,
 looking for something—*anything*—that feels right.

And what I would *give* to build you a shelter—
 a safe space where you could be,
 a home where you were safe and free.

What I would give to carve out some room
 for you to process and grieve
 and dance and sing your way
 into your true self.

But I know
 it's not that easy.

My hands cannot build you safety.
 My words cannot give you time.
 My heart cannot be home enough.
 So until the day when you are truly at home,
 I will keep marching for you.
 I will keep advocating for the home you deserve—
 the home in your own skin.
 I will keep praying.
 I will give you my second coat,
 and the shirt off my back, and the food from my table.
 I won't give up on preparing the way.

A voice is calling out in the wilderness.
 Do you hear it?

There's more for us here than has been before.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Read Luke 3:1-18

Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

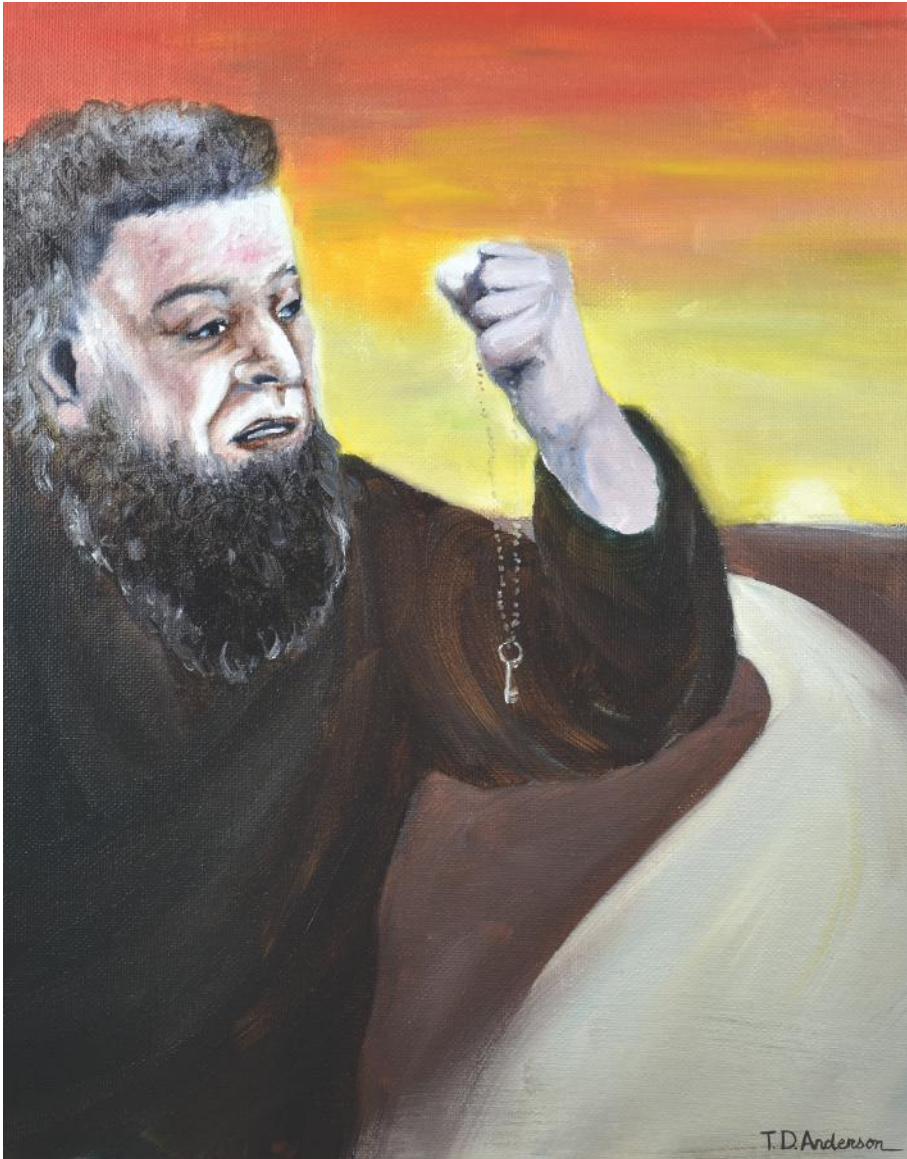
"No te duermas en los laureles."

The scripture for this week focuses on John's prophetic message. Though his words might sound harsh ("You brood of vipers!" (v. 7)), it is a message of good news—of change, forgiveness, and justice—to a suffering people. God called John for a specific place and time (v. 1-4), and his cry from the wilderness, as written in Isaiah, proclaimed leveled valleys and righted wrongs. This was, and is, a message of **joy**, especially for those who had lost hope, hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious authorities aligned with it. The world as they knew it was about to change.

Crowds came to John to be baptized, and he charged them with "bearing fruit worthy of repentance" (v. 8), not relying on past glories, heritage, or lineage, but producing their own fruit, living and acting in ways that demonstrated true change. Resting on their laurels for far too long, the crowd wasn't quite sure how to do that, and John offers words of wisdom. Instead of accumulating, share with others what you have. Instead of being indifferent or selfish, show consideration and compassion. Instead of taking advantage and preying on the vulnerable, be satisfied with what you have and treat others fairly and with dignity... even if you work for the empire (v. 12-14).

What implications does John's message have for us kin-dom builders today? If "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6), we all have a part to play in the salvation story, in leveling valleys and righting wrongs. Like John, we are also called for a specific place and time: Here and now. Be at the ready, *no te duermas en los laureles*,⁹ and bear fruit worthy of repentance, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving voice to the silenced and oppressed, speaking truth to power, and protecting and empowering the vulnerable. Let our collective voice cry out in the wilderness—and everywhere—with exhortations and good news. And, as the message is heard, more and more people will join us in building the kin-dom of God, making it truly a **home** for all.

⁹ "Don't rest on your laurels."



A Closer Walk | T. Denise Anderson

Read Luke 3:1-18

From the Artist Rev. T. Denise Anderson

As I meditated on the theme, *Close to Home*, I decided that what makes a place “home” for me is people. That realization informed my decision to explore this theme through portraiture—the depiction of people. The references for each of the depictions I’ve painted are actual Palestinians and Israelis. It’s important to me to bring this ancient story truly close to home as we consider the current geopolitical realities in the land of the Advent story. I encourage you to read more about the stories of those who inspired these depictions.

My depiction of John the Baptist is inspired by Abuna (meaning “Father”) Elias Chacour, who was the Archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church (2006-2014). A Palestinian Arab-Israeli, Abuna Chacour is a well-respected activist and educator who established the Mar Elias Educational Institutions in Ibillin, which educate students of multiple religious backgrounds—Arab and Israeli—from kindergarten through high school. His life’s work embodies the courageous and prophetic pointing to a better way that I also see in John the Baptist.

John’s words in the text are so full of imagery that it’s impossible to fit it all in one image. The shape of his tunic recalls the base of the tree referenced in verse 9. In the background is an obvious path, recalling John’s clear instruction to his listeners. *Share your belongings! Do not extort people!* His counsel is so simple, yet apparently so hard to follow. The path leads to the sunrise on a new day, the colors of which allude to the fire of Jesus’ baptism. In his hand is a key, which is a symbol that you’ll see in my other works. For Palestinians, the key represents a longing and determination to return home from displacement.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20

From the Artist Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

King Josiah, Zephaniah's cousin, has ascended to the throne of Judah. He steps into the aftermath of a half century of ruin incited by the former King, Mannaseh, who ruled with evil actions and led the people astray (see 2 Kings 22–23).

Much of Zephaniah's prophecy is an exacerbated lament. He believes the only way forward is for Yahweh to destroy everything. Too much has been corrupted, too much has fallen apart. But then, in chapter three, his message takes an unexpected turn—he turns toward restoration and unabated joy. This joy comes from God, who renews and calms us with love, rejoicing over us with singing. It comes from those who are vulnerable and shamed being gathered back in, restoring the whole community.

In this image, the blueprint background reminds me of a deconstructed building; it's as if the roofline has fallen and the infrastructure crumbled. Yet, the collapsed roof provides an opening that becomes a doorway of invitation. God's hand reaches down from the heavens, gently nudging us inward. Fig trees adorn the opening as signs of promise. A music bar (showing the first line of the familiar hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing") lures us toward the doorway, becoming a pathway for our journey home.

Perhaps the path toward creating a home for all requires some deconstruction. Some of our structures are rotting. Some of our institutions are compromised. Some of our rituals need repair. And yet, nothing is beyond redemption. Collective belonging gives way for collective joy—joy that is free and full. God's love will find a way to renew us and gather us in.

*Here I find my greatest treasure;
hither by thy help I've come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.¹⁰*

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Gather Us In | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

¹⁰ The second verse of "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," written by Robert Robinson (1758), altered by Martin Madan (1760). Public domain.

「Thurs day」

Close to Home Journaling A HOME FOR ALL

In the space below, draw an image or blueprint of a home for all. What details, structures, or aspects of your drawing symbolize hospitality and radical welcome?



Scan to hear the tune!

A Home for All

Hark, the Herald Angels Sing

Text: Anna Strickland (2021)

Music: Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1840)



Light the can - dles, deck the halls We are mak - ing
Stack the gifts be - neath the tree Hang the lights where
Set the ta - ble for a feast Crys-tal, chi - na,



room for all Prac-tice hos - pi - tal - i - ty
all can see Send cards full of Christ-mas cheer
sil - ver gleam Once the ban - quet has been blessed



Give in Chris - tian char - i - ty But to cre - ate
To the fam - ily far and near But the great-est
Ga-ther 'round in Christ-mas best But Christ's ta - ble



las - ting change A trans - ac - tion - al ex - change
gift we share Is a world that's just and fair
has been set With the sim - plest meal of bread



Won't make straight our crook-ed ways Or lift val - leys
Though it feels so far a - way We work for God's
Of - fer - ing a - bun-dant grace Here all peo - ple



in - to plains Pro-phets of the ag - es call: "We must build a
promised day have a place



home for all!"

Take sabbath

Nourish and sustain yourself with rest. Commit to a Sabbath activity today, perhaps one of those listed below:

- Go for a walk outside.
- Sit quietly and meditate.
- Plant something indoors or outside.
- Spend time with a friend or loved one.
- Explore a new area of your town or city.
- Cook or bake something using a favorite or new recipe.
- Do yoga or exercise in a way that feels good for your body.
- Write and mail a letter to someone you haven't talked to in a while.
- Organize or redesign an area in your home.
- Draw or create something.
- Dance or play music.
- Write a poem or a song.
- Watch a movie.
- Take a nap.
- Read a book.

come on home | Luke 1:39-55

We all know the feeling—
the shaky ground,
sinking sand,
water-is-rising,
sun-is-fading feeling
that makes steady breathing
an entire miracle,
and holding back tears
a marvel in and of itself.

And when those days come,
I call my parents.
And I call my church,
and I call my friends,
and they say in unison
what God has said
from the very beginning,
which is, “Come on home.”

Is there anything more healing
than an open door?
If you’re seeking sanctuary,
if the waters are rising—
listen.
It may be hard to hear,
but God is always saying,
“Come on home.”

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Read Luke 1:39-55

Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

When thinking about “sanctuary,” the lyrics of a Carrie Newcomer song hit close to home...

*“Will you be my refuge, my haven in the storm,
Will you keep the embers warm when my fire’s all but gone?
Will you remember, and bring me sprigs of rosemary,
Be my sanctuary ‘til I can carry on, carry on, carry on...”¹¹*

In the song, Newcomer lists places, experiences, and metaphors to define sanctuary: “rest here in Brown Chapel... with a circle of friends... a quiet grove of trees... between two bookends.” We can imagine these as safe spaces, uplifting and welcoming. My own list would include grandma’s kitchen, watercolor paints, and the arms of a loved one. What would your list include? If you close your eyes, can you picture yourself there? Wherever it is, a place where God’s love dwells freely and abundantly is **sanctuary**.

Hearing the news of her pregnancy, Mary sought such a place. As a pregnant teenager, poor and unwed, dangers and uncertainty—both physical and societal—surrounded her. With haste, she journeys to Elizabeth’s house. Elizabeth—and the child in her womb—welcome and affirm her. Mary then bursts into a song of praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (v. 46-7).

For three months, that home and the arms that received Mary became her safe haven. Elizabeth’s welcome, blessing, and care were safe space, just what she needed as she prepared for the important call ahead. Mary would give birth to Jesus and would educate him in his formative years. The world saw the imprint of this young woman in the life and teachings of her son, Jesus. Mary herself was sanctuary and Jesus’ first home.

Sanctuary is not only a place. It is also the people who say, “Here I am,” striving to create and to become a safe place for others. Will we be a refuge, someone’s haven in the storm, sanctuary? In the spirit of these two holy women, Mary and Elizabeth, may we offer ourselves as sanctuary for anyone in need of one—glorifying, with our actions, the One whose love, freely given, is our sanctuary, our **home**.

¹¹ “Sanctuary.” Words & music by Carrie Newcomer. From the album, “The Beautiful Not Yet.” ©2016 Carrie Newcomer Music (BMI), Administered by BMG Chrysalis. [youtube.com/watch?v=HjOioWTVAl4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjOioWTVAl4)



Dances for Joy | Hannah Garrity

Read Luke 1:39-45

From the Artist Hannah Garrity

As I worked through the creative process for this image, I was talking to my mother and showing her my inspiration board: images of babies in the womb, spinning or cuddling. She said that John dancing for joy in his mother's womb is one of her favorite biblical images.

I thought back to my study abroad in Glasgow, Scotland, at the Glasgow School of Art. I was interested in childbirth that year. As a woman in my early twenties, I had no plans of having children anytime soon. Truly, I was intrigued by the way we hide the earthy, natural, bloody parts of the process. All semester I painted fetuses, newborns crowning, mothers birthing alone. They were dancing in the womb. They were emerging from the womb. They were patterns in a collage of orphaned children due to the AIDS epidemic. They were an American flag interwoven with articles of the strain of American military action on children overseas. They were newborns, still bloody, painted on patterned fabric with the stories of Peter Rabbit and the cow jumping over the moon. I even made a paint by number children's book explaining the stages of childbirth. The clash of a facade of perfection and the tangible reality was and is ever-present in my every day.

Here the globe is drawn as the background flow of the image. This long view of the world acknowledges the earthy, bloody, tangible, pouring-out reality that Mary and Elizabeth will soon embody to bear their sons. There is so much liquid everywhere. The central story of the text emerges as John dances with joy in his mother's womb of this world. Around him the patterns of his baptisms flow outward into the miracles of Jesus, woven into the flow of landforms and waters on the map.

Where in my daily routines can I remove the facade of perfection, or break through it, and embrace the tangible reality of a beautiful and wonderful, earthy joy?

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Redemption Song | T. Denise Anderson

Read Luke 1:46b-55

From the Artist Rev. T. Denise Anderson

I've read the Magnificat many times, but only recently have I started reading it for what it is: a protest song. Listen to the tone: "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." It's a song of vindication against oppressive powers.

Some ancient manuscripts attribute this song to Elizabeth, not Mary. Of course, an older woman would be able to exegete the times from both communal history and lived experience. But it's also true that the gift of prophecy is no respecter of age. They each have different proximities to the Messiah: one's offspring will prepare the way, and another's will *be* the way. Both are able to sing the song because both are oppressed, which brings me to the inspiration for this portrait: Ahed Tamimi.

An activist from childhood, Tamimi became a symbol of Palestinian resistance. Because of her recognizability, her family sent her to live with relatives in Ramallah, where she'd not have to face the threat of checkpoints. At the age of sixteen, she was arrested for slapping a police officer to protect her disabled cousin. The reference for this painting¹² was a photo taken of her as she was being detained by Israeli forces for trying to intervene in her mother's arrest.

This visual expresses the mood of the Magnificat in a new way for me: a young girl under occupation, sent away for her own safety, responding to not only her own oppression, but to that of her community. She believes that righteousness is on her side, but she's still in anguish. The *Gaudete* (joy) colors of Advent surround her, but with that joy is remarkable pain. As for the key, it's there, but very tenuous. Can you even see it? Freedom is both here and not yet.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹² Painting inspired by a photo by Abbas Momani/AFP/Getty.

INVITATIONS | Luke 2:1-20

I've been thinking about a universal truth—the way we all want to be invited in. We want the door to be opened with cheers of, “You're here!” We want the clerk at the store to ask how we're doing, and the waiter to wink at us and whisper, “Good choice.” We want the barista to learn our names, which people call being “a regular,” but it feels more like being known. We want the stranger to help us pick up our sodas when the case breaks, and the woman to put her bag in her lap on the subway, which is to mean, “Come, you can sit by me.” We cherish every open palm wave from the child in the grocery store and every city church with open doors when the organist plays.

At the end of the day we are all just a collection of heart and bones walking through this world, exchanging invitations, saying to one another in a million little ways—come matter here. Come make a difference here. Come be you, here.

Jesus didn't receive much of an invitation.

No one moved their bag to their lap, or opened the door to the inn and said, “You're here!” Still, he came.

What a gift it is
to have a God
who does not wait on my invitation.
What a gift it is
to have a God
who can't imagine
being anywhere but here.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Christmas Eve | INVITED HOME

Read Luke 2:1-20

Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

“Donde comen dos, comen tres...”

Parrandas are a time-honored tradition in Puerto Rico that take place during the Advent and Christmas seasons. The *parranderos*, our version of “carolers,” would unexpectedly visit friends and family at night, serenading the home-dwellers with Christmas music and *aguinaldos*.¹³ *¡Parranda!* It was a surprise to be awoken by the lively serenade, and the family would invite the carolers into their home for more singing and refreshments. One never knew when a *parranda* would arrive nor how many people would show up. Families prepared as best they could in the event of a visit, putting into practice the old Spanish adage, “*Donde comen dos, comen tres*” (“Where two people eat, three can eat, too”). Families made room for extra visitors who arrived, pouring more water into the *asopao*¹⁴ pot or borrowing chairs from the neighbor's house. The visitors were invited in to sing, eat, and enjoy the blessings of family and the season.

Joseph and Mary journey to Bethlehem to fulfill their civic duty, and the time came for Mary to give birth. Although the town was full of people, and there was no room for them at the inn, someone offered an unexpected space, making holy room for Jesus's birth. Before the night was over, the place would receive even more unexpected guests. Shepherds arrived and found the child lying in the manger. “When they saw this, they made known what had been told to them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed” (v. 17). What a gathering! *¡Parranda!* Where two were invited in, room was made for more, welcomed in to share in the blessing, the good news of great joy for **all** people.

With a spark of creativity and an act of goodwill, someone made room for the holy family and welcomed others, too. Let us do the same. As we celebrate this *Nochebuena*, may we, in our own lives, make holy room for unexpected blessings and guests, inviting them in and welcoming them **home**.

¹³ The Spanish word for this Puerto Rican ritual of offering music as a gift during the Christmas season.

¹⁴ *Asopao* is a stew and a Puerto Rican cuisine staple. Usually made with chicken, pigeon peas, rice, and vegetables, recipes vary from family to family.

Read Luke 2:1-20

From the Artist Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

In this familiar narrative, what stuck out for me in this reading was the juxtaposition of human and divine, the mundane and extraordinary, the humbleness of a manger and the glory of a multitude of heavenly hosts. I wanted to image this dichotomy with the everyday, intimate, tender scene of new parents and their yawning baby, enveloped by the glittering, awe-striking magnificence of God.

The holy family is framed by an almond shape called a mandorla. Mandorlas have been used in Christian art to signify the glory of God, and can also represent the intersection and fullness of two things, like heaven and earth or spirit and body. Likely, the most familiar instance of this concept is the shape made between the overlapping circles in a Venn diagram. I wanted to use this shape because this is the moment when human and divine intersect in the person of Jesus, and when the glory of God is birthed into the world. The golden field surrounding the mandorla is filled with my interpretation of the six-winged seraphim from early Christian art, representing the heavenly hosts filling the air with tidings of peace (imaged by olive branches). A seven pointed star hangs over the heads of the family, surrounded by seven other stars, a number that represents completeness.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Ordinary Glory | Lauren Wright Pittman

CHOSEN HOME | Luke 2:41-52

There are a million ways to choose a home.

We choose to make it work.

- We hang a wreath on the door of our shoebox apartment.
- We invite company over.
- We ask, "Would you like coffee with that?"

We choose to make the most of it.

- We take up watercoloring or kickboxing and show up to class.
- We mostly embarrass ourselves, but we were there.

We choose to not go it alone.

- We sign up to volunteer and make ourselves a nametag.
- We slide weary bones into weary church pews.
- We shake hands and say hello.
- We let the music cover us, like a blanket, or a prayer.

We choose to love what we have.

- We look in the mirror and speak kindly to our body.
- We buy flowers at the market and arrange them in jelly jars.

There are a million ways to choose a home.

So like Jesus in the temple
 who chose to stay,
 who chose to speak,
 who took up space because he knew he was home,
 I invite you to do the same.

Put your body
 where your soul feels alive.
 Give yourself permission
 to take up space there.
 Stay, as long as it takes.
 Return, as often as you need.

There are a million ways to choose a home.
 Choose wisely. We need you here.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Read Luke 2:41-52

Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

We usually think of Jesus as an adult—healing, preaching, and teaching, going from town to town as the Spirit leads him. The scripture in Luke 2 gives us a rare opportunity to see a twelve-year-old Jesus at an important juncture in life, a story with much to teach us about the spaces we create and embody for others to belong and dwell.

After the festival of the Passover, Jesus stayed behind at the temple and sat “among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (v. 46). Jesus felt at home among them, so much so that he paid no attention to going home or even informing his parents of his whereabouts. When Mary and Joseph finally found him, they questioned and reprimanded him for causing them to worry. Somewhat surprised, probably feeling he was exactly where he was supposed to be, Jesus says, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (v. 49).

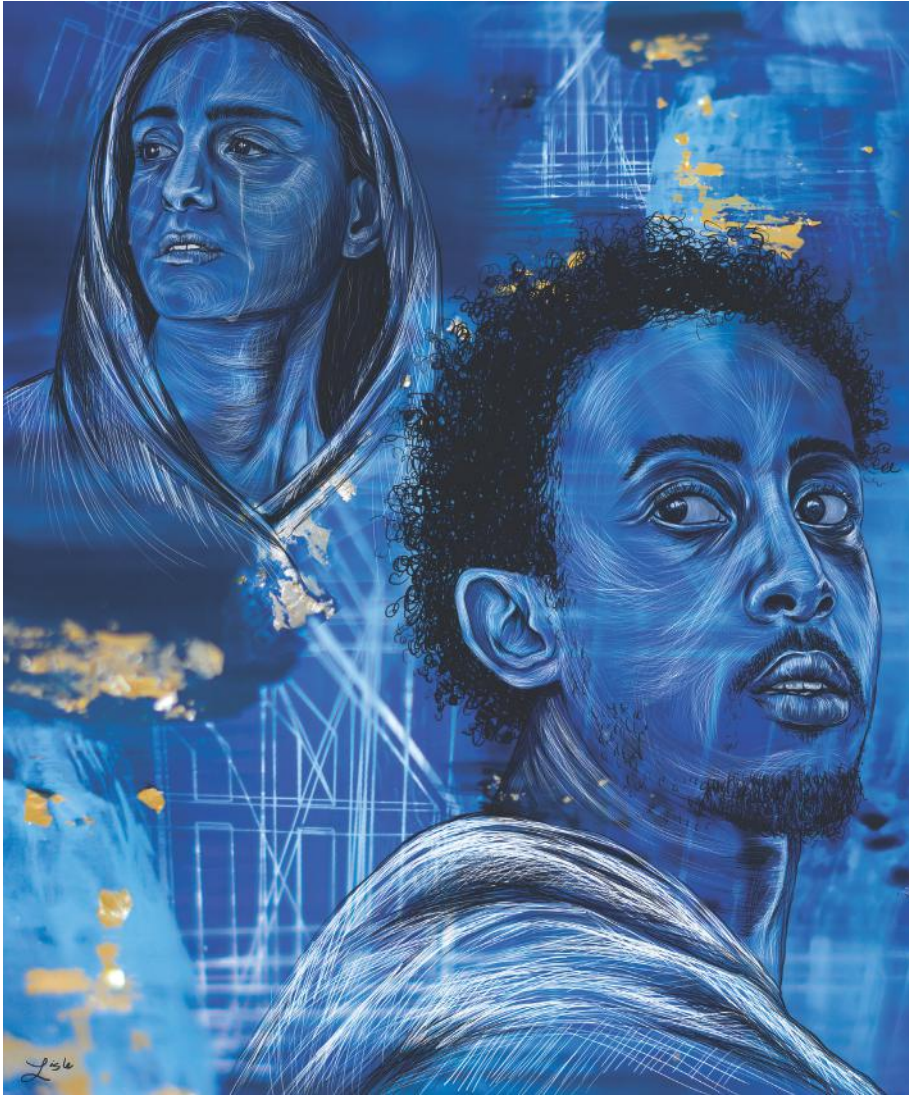
I can imagine a young Jesus annoyed at being found, soon to be taken away from a place he had claimed as his own, his Father’s house. For all the worry a lost Jesus caused his parents, those precious moments at the temple with other generations of teachers were time well spent.

I wonder if, as the Church, we are cognizant of the impact we have on young lives during their formative years? Are we providing space for authentic relationships to develop, intergenerational or otherwise?

As we focus today on a young Jesus, the parents, the teachers, the experiences, and the community that contributed to his growth in wisdom, in years, and in favor, may we as kin-dom builders strive to create and embody spaces for our young ones to feel that the faith community is exactly where they belong. As we do this, may we also strive to create a community where everyone—regardless of their age, language, culture, orientation, race, gender identity, and background—knows they belong, a place of welcome and a chosen **home**.

Read Luke 2:41-52

From the Artist Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity



Chosen Home | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

We don't know why Luke is the only gospel writer to tell us this story of Jesus as an adolescent. Luke offers us short vignettes of Jesus' life after his birth: he's circumcised and dedicated to God, he's blessed by both Simeon and Anna in the temple, and each year he and his parents return to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. His family follows the law according to Moses. This Messiah is not an outsider to the tradition; he's born from within it. But he will grow to question, challenge, reform, and revolutionize it.

We see Jesus' first challenge to that system in this story when, as a twelve-year-old boy, he stays behind without his parents' permission. He dives so deeply into the teachings that he shocks his elders, amazing them with his autonomy, knowledge, and earnestness. His actions threaten the status quo and also create a divide between him and his family of origin. To fulfill his ministry, he'll need to leave his home, his parents, and many of his faith traditions behind.

As I created this image, I felt the grief and tension shared by Jesus and his mother. The distance between them is poignant and heavy. Young Jesus looks over his shoulder at what he must leave behind as he moves forward in the other direction. His mother grieves what she can't fully understand, but she holds all of these things in her heart, keeping them forever. A dividing line made of gold separates them—but this boundary is also sacred and needed for Jesus to live into the fullness of his calling.

No matter the boundaries we choose or are forced to put into place, no matter the separations we endure, we must trust that we deserve true belonging. We must seek our chosen homes and families. When necessary, we must question and challenge the traditions we've inherited. Ultimately, we must trust that our true home belongs with God.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Ties that Bind | T. Denise Anderson

Read Colossians 3:12-17

From the Artist Rev. T. Denise Anderson

Sindyanna of Galilee is an all-woman non-profit of Arab and Jewish Israeli women that supports educational opportunities for Arab women “by selling Arab producers’ olive oil and other premium products in the international marketplace according to Fair Trade principles.”¹⁵ A visit to their facility gives you an opportunity to shop from their award-winning olive oils and myriad products made in-house. They also offer classes in basket weaving and *za’atar* making. When I visited them, I was struck by the palpable love and unshakable commitment to peace and cooperation between the women who work, teach, and learn there. It’s a vision of Israel and Palestine that people rarely get to see.

If you can’t visit the co-op in person, you can browse the extensive photo gallery on their website. I was stopped in my tracks by one photo of a Palestinian Arab woman and a Jewish Israeli woman weaving something together.¹⁶ The reeds are unruly and going in every direction, but the women hold them masterfully in their hands—together. It’s almost difficult to decipher which hands belong to which woman. It’s as if they all belong to them both. I wanted to capture this literal act of love binding “everything together in perfect harmony” (v. 14).

As with my previous pieces, I’m opting for a depiction that’s not a replica of the reference photo, but still captures its spirit. Each woman is dressed in colors that call back to the flags of their respective people. Can you find the key? If you look closely, it can be found among the reeds they will fashion into something useful and beautiful. In this way, the women of Sindyanna of Galilee show us all how to find home with others and reclaim what was lost.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹⁵ Learn more about the organization here: sindyanna.com.

¹⁶ A photo by Oren Shalev inspired this painting: sindyanna.com/gallery

「Thurs day」
Close to Home Journaling
CHOSEN HOME

*Who are the people and where are the places that feel like home for you?
Where do you feel safe and can be authentically who you are?
Journal or draw your chosen home and chosen family.*

Scan to hear
the tune!



Chosen Home

O Come All Ye Faithful

Text: Anna Strickland (2021)

Music: John Francis Wade (1743)



As Je - sus' fam - ily tra - veled back to
In la - ter years he called his cho - sen
We may not find home where it is ex -
May this - be a brave space for all



Naz - areth He stayed and claimed a space in -
fam - ily, Fish - ers and tax col - lec - tors,
- pec - ted Some - times we have to leave to
peo - ple Where all are seen and loved a -



- side tem - ple walls Seek - ing a place where
wo - men and men Leav - ing his home to
be who we are: Whol - ly cre - at - ed
- mong fam - i - ly Space to grow and



he could show his true self
eat with saints and sin - ners A place that tru - ly
in God's ho - ly im - age
fol - low in our call - ings



sees us, a place that loves and frees us, like



ta-bles set by Je - sus is our cho-sen home

Take sabbath

Nourish and sustain yourself with rest. Commit to a Sabbath activity today, perhaps one of those listed below:

- Go for a walk outside.
- Sit quietly and meditate.
- Plant something indoors or outside.
- Spend time with a friend or loved one.
- Explore a new area of your town or city.
- Cook or bake something using a favorite or new recipe.
- Do yoga or exercise in a way that feels good for your body.
- Write and mail a letter to someone you haven't talked to in a while.
- Organize or redesign an area in your home.
- Draw or create something.
- Dance or play music.
- Write a poem or a song.
- Watch a movie.
- Take a nap.
- Read a book.

MUSCLE MEMORY | Matthew 2:1-12

Going home is a form of muscle memory.
 Start the car.
 Turn on the lights.
 Turn left,
 turn right.
 Pass the big oak tree
 and the empty school yard.
 Look for the house with
 the light on.
 Look for the house with
 the open door.
 Look for the house that
 says, "Welcome home."
 You'll know when
 you've arrived—
 that's the thing about
 muscle memory.

But I am learning things
 of love,
 and home is not home
 unless all are welcomed,
 and muscle memory is not
 justice unless all are safe.
 So I'm asking—
 can we start the car
 and get totally lost
 chasing what is right
 far off on the horizon?

Can we drive off the road
 and get a flat tire
 if it means paving the way
 for justice and truth?

Can we circle the trees
 and miss the school yard
 completely
 if this new way home
 includes space for grace?

Can we waste our time
 driving in circles
 if it gives us time
 to add people to the car?

I am learning,
 muscle memory and faith
 are not one and the same.

So I am asking,
 Will you start the car?
 Will you turn on the lights?
 Will you take a deep breath?

It might be time to get lost.
 It might be time to find a
 new way home.

Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



Read Matthew 2:1-12

Commentary Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

"This is the way."

For those of us who are *Star Wars* fans, the premiere of *The Mandalorian* was a long-awaited event. Little did we know (spoiler alert!) that the first season would be less about the Mandalorian bounty hunter and more about a child—originally his bounty—and the parental relationship that developed between them. The child, a being of great Jedi-like abilities, is threatened by those who wished to exploit their powers. Together they face challenges and dangers that bring them closer throughout the season. Choosing the child's safety and well-being over his own, the Mandalorian knows the decisions made on behalf of the child (ignoring the bounty-hunter job and taking the child to safety) will cost him greatly. It is the right thing to do. "This is the way."

This last week of reflections, we encounter the Magi, astrologers whose hearts were moved by the sighting of a magnificent star. Following it, they left the safety of their homes and embarked on a journey to pay homage to the king the star announced. After a brief visit to Herod, the Magi found Jesus in Bethlehem at a humble home, not in the palace. They found him in a small village, not in the city center of political and ruling powers. They found Jesus among the poor and vulnerable, not the wealthy and powerful. Though the realities surrounding Jesus didn't conform to social constructs of "royalty," there is no mention that the Magi questioned the legitimacy of Jesus as king. The star had stopped over the place where the child was, and they were overjoyed. The birth of Jesus announced God's kin-dom, and he was worthy of their gifts, their honor, and their loyalty. Having been warned in dreams not to go back to the palace, the Magi defied Herod's order and returned home by another way.

We have traveled together and now the star has stopped. As our life journeys continue, looking at the example of the Magi and at the stories of the past weeks, consider what will be your way, the next step along the journey. Wherever the Spirit is leading, know you are loved, and that God is with you, always **close to home**.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

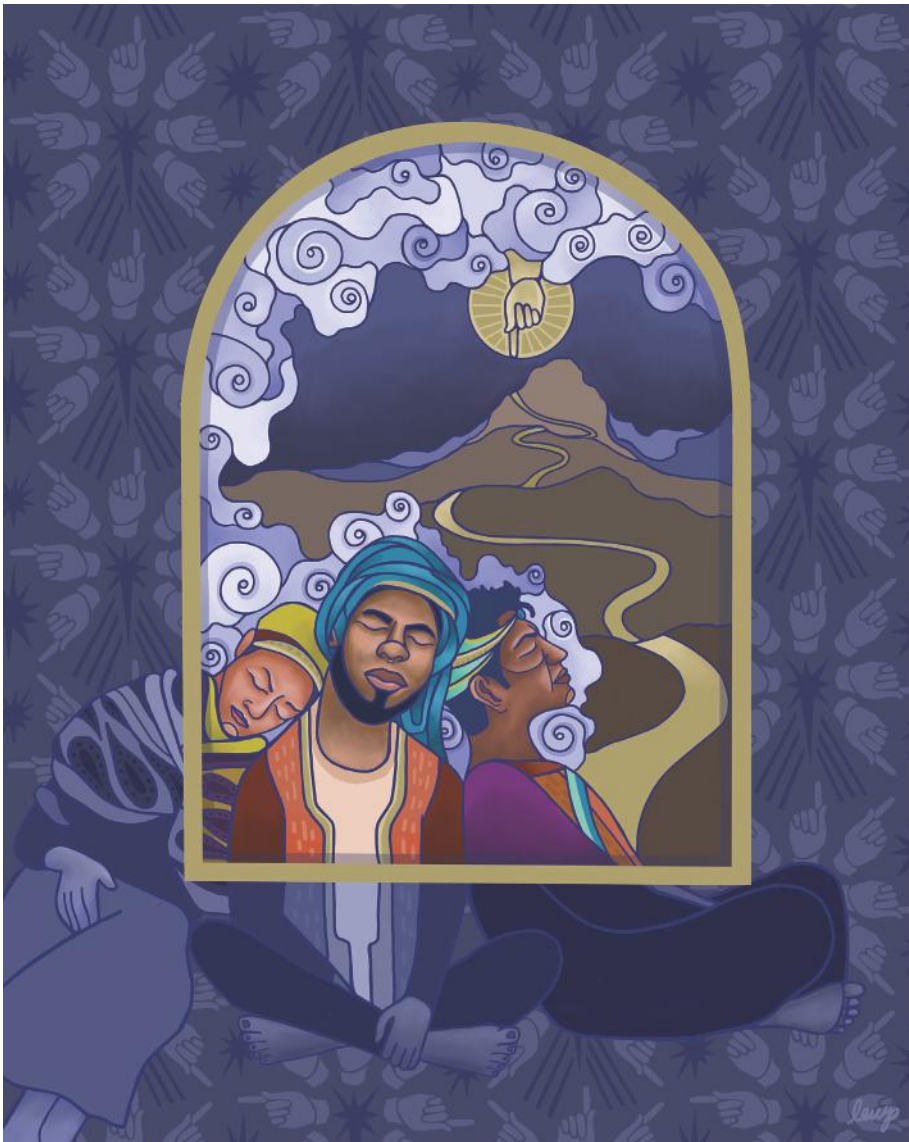
From the Artist Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

The Wise Men follow the direction of the shimmering, dotted lights of the night sky, and receive instruction in the subconscious world of sleep. They are ready and willing to discern God's will in the outward, tangible signs of Creation, as well as the inner contours of their own minds. God is in it all, and they are paying attention. Is this what it means to be wise?

In this image, the Wise Men are sleeping, and the viewer has a window into their vibrant dream. Surrounding the dream is the deep blue patterning of stars and hands pointing in every direction except for the direction of God's leading. These hands represent King Herod's desperate search and desire to take out this threatening, newborn King of the Jews. The Wise Men have a choice. They could succumb to the pressure of the King, which is thick in the air and pressing in all around them, or they could choose to listen to the mysterious guiding of their sleeping vision. They decide to change up the narrative and resist the domineering, violent powers of this world, trusting their dream, and taking the long, likely dangerous, journey home by another way.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Wise Men's Dream | Lauren Wright Pittman



Collapse | Hannah Garrity

Read Ephesians 3:1-12

From the Artist Hannah Garrity

As I worked on this paper lace, I saw the news of the Surfside building collapse in Florida.¹⁷ There was a building full of condominiums. Hundreds of residents were trapped or killed in the collapse.

The building had been deemed too expensive to fix. Inspections were skipped. People were lost to this tragedy; profit over people. Where else are we focusing on profit over people? We know what to do. We are a team, God's team. Listen to the Gospel call here in Ephesians. The capitalist priority of profit over people must end. People are being hurt, killed, and exploited. We have tried to fix this before; God calls to us again and again. The children of God are everywhere—let us protect them, care for them, love them.

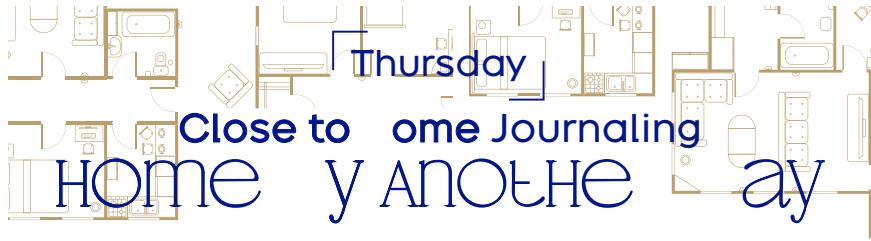
Embedded within the structures of the neighboring skyline are the lines of broken parts of the Surfside condominium. As I write this, 86 people have been found within the rubble so far. Many are still missing. As I drew these lines, I thought of the strength of design, the power of the weather, the need to reorder our societal structures so that people benefit financially from doing the right thing. It would have been right to renovate earlier. Trust would have allowed people to listen to one another. The background lines are figures sitting in vigil outside of the collapsed building. Leaning on one another, their limbs create an embrace in the energy of the image. Are we aware that God and love are the structures we can depend on?

As you look at this image, contemplate words that represent the places where you see our society valuing profit over people. Then, contemplate actions you can take in your daily life to combat this tendency.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹⁷ On June 24, 2021, Champlain Towers South, a 12-story condominium in Surfside, Florida, partially collapsed.



As you begin this new year, in what ways will you choose a new path or travel "home by another way"? Close with a prayer to God for the journey.

Scan to hear the tune!



We Three Kings

Text: Anna Strickland (2021)

Music: John Henry Hopkins (1857)



Ma - gi from a far - a - way place
Threat - ened by the good news they bring
Plans that change and storms that de - lay



Ra - diant star - light set - ting their pace
Her - od plots to kill the new king
Dreams and hopes left in dis - ar - ray



Ford - ing wa - di, risk - ing bo - dy
An - gels warn - ing in the mor - ning:
Make us trem - ble, but re - mem - ber



Seek - ing the king's birth - place
"A - void Je - ru - sa - lem"
There is a - noth - er way



We have trav - eled night and day Meet - ing God where -



- e'er we stay Paths are chan - ging, re - ar - ran - ging



As we find a - noth - er way

Take Sabbath

Nourish and sustain yourself with rest. Commit to a Sabbath activity today, perhaps one of those listed below:

- Go for a walk outside.
- Sit quietly and meditate.
- Plant something indoors or outside.
- Spend time with a friend or loved one.
- Explore a new area of your town or city.
- Cook or bake something using a favorite or new recipe.
- Do yoga or exercise in a way that feels good for your body.
- Write and mail a letter to someone you haven't talked to in a while.
- Organize or redesign an area in your home.
- Draw or create something.
- Dance or play music.
- Write a poem or a song.
- Watch a movie.
- Take a nap.
- Read a book.