

“Raise your voice... do not be afraid.” — The Messenger



I Believe Even When by Mark A. Miller

I believe in the sun, I believe in the sun,
even when, even when it's not shining.

I believe in love, I believe in love,
even when, even when I don't feel it.

I believe in God, I believe in God,
even when, even when God is silent.

I believe in the light, I believe in the light
That has come, that has come, and is coming.

Even when the sun is hidden from sight
Even when love feels so remote
Even when God is silent
Even then... We believe

1st Week of Advent, November 29, 2020

"I Believe in the Sun: Hope for Tomorrow"

This Advent, we are looking to hear words of comfort, of challenge and of good news. The prophet Isaiah and the four Gospel authors were writing in a time when people needed desperately to hear all of these as well. This first week, Isaiah, the prophet, and Mark—the Gospel writer who published first—reassure the people that good news is beginning and yet they both say, “Make yourself ready! Raise your voices, change your hearts, get ready to be transformed, because now is the time.” Let us embrace hope that we can do what needs to be done to bring more light into the world.

Prayer

Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of untiring hope.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when our view is obscured
by clouds of doubt,
ignite the flame of hope within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out.
Help us face this bleak night of the soul
and embrace it as a womb of rebirth.
Amen.

You are invited to light your Advent 1 candle of Hope.

Isaiah 40: 1-11 (CEB)

Comfort, comfort my people!
says your God.

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has
ended,
that her penalty has been paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins!

A voice is crying out:

"Clear the Lord's way in the desert!
Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

Every valley will be raised up,
and every mountain and hill will be flattened.
Uneven ground will become level,
and rough terrain a valley plain.

The Lord's glory will appear,
and all humanity will see it together;
the Lord's mouth has commanded it."

A voice was saying:

"Call out!"

And another said,

"What should I call out?"

All flesh is grass;

all its loyalty is like the flowers of the field.

The grass dries up

and the flower withers

when the Lord's breath blows on it.

Surely the people are grass.

The grass dries up;
the flower withers,
but our God's word will exist forever.

Go up on a high mountain,
messenger Zion!
Raise your voice and shout,
messenger Jerusalem!
Raise it; don't be afraid;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

Here is the Lord God,
coming with strength,
with a triumphant arm,
bringing his reward with him
and his payment before him.

Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;
he will gather lambs in his arms
and lift them onto his lap.
He will gently guide the nursing ewes.

Mark 1: 1-15 (CEB)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

*Look, I am sending my messenger before you.
He will prepare your way,
a voice shouting in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

2nd Week of Advent, December 6, 2020

“I Believe in Love: Daring Right Relationship”

In both the Gospel of Matthew and Isaiah, a messenger appears as a sign from God, heralding a new era. In each passage, the words “do not be afraid” appear... offering a clue that the messenger—whether prophet or angel—was referencing something that induced fear in the recipient. A new way of being together, of relating and loving takes courage—eschewing the present order of things so that a new and better day can be born.

Prayer

Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of daring love.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when we cannot yet see a better day
when we will act like the human family we are,
ignite the flame of love within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out.
Help us face this fear of difference
and dare to see what love can do.
Amen.

You are invited to light your Advent 2 candle of Love.

Isaiah 7: 1-14 (CEB)

In the days of Ahaz (Jotham's son and grandson of Judah's King Uzziah), Aram's King Rezin and Israel's King Pekah (Remaliah's son) came up to attack Jerusalem, but they couldn't overpower it.

When the house of David was told that Aram had become allies with Ephraim, their hearts and the hearts of their people shook as the trees of a forest shake when there is a wind. But the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the channel of the Upper Pool, by the road to the field where laundry is washed, and say to him, 'Be careful and stay calm. Don't fear, and don't lose heart over these two pieces of smoking torches, over the burning anger of Rezin, Aram, and Remaliah's son. Aram has planned evil against you with Ephraim and Remaliah's son, saying, "Let's march up against Judah, tear it apart, capture it for ourselves, and install Tabeel's son as its king." But the Lord God says: It won't happen; it won't take place. The chief of Aram is Damascus; the chief of Damascus is Rezin (in sixty-five more years Ephraim will be shattered as a nation); the chief of Ephraim is Samaria; and the chief of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you don't believe this, you can't be trusted.'"

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: "Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I won't ask; I won't test the Lord." Then Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel.

Matthew 1: 1-25 (CEB)

A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Aram.

Aram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.

Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of David the king.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.

Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.

Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.

Abijah was the father of Asaph.

Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram.

Joram was the father of Uzziah.

Uzziah was the father of Jotham.

Jotham was the father of Ahaz.

Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.

Manasseh was the father of Amos.

Amos was the father of Josiah.

Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers.

This was at the time of the exile to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.
Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.
Abiud was the father of Eliakim.
Eliakim was the father of Azor.
Azor was the father of Zadok.
Zadok was the father of Achim.
Achim was the father of Eliud.
Eliud was the father of Eleazar.
Eleazar was the father of Matthan.
Matthan was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ. So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

*Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,
And they will call him, Emmanuel.
(Emmanuel means "God with us.")*

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

3rd Week of Advent, December 13, 2020

"I Believe in God: Ode to Joy"

This week, we turn to Luke's writing, which is an account in two acts: the Gospel biography of Jesus and then the story of the early church—the "Jesus community." Whether you were a Jew or Gentile in those days, deciding to become a part of this illegal early Christian movement could bring punishment for your allegiance. Surely the message in both Luke and Isaiah that the downcast, lowly, and oppressed would rise up is a welcome and inspirational account. Like the Jewish exiled people of Isaiah's time and like the early Christians, we also sometimes wonder where God is in our suffering. We long to hear the promise that a reason for joyful praise is the good news on the way!

Prayer

Holy One,

we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of the depths of joy.

Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—

even when we are not sure of your presence,

ignite the flame of joy within us,

that we might glow with its brilliance

from the inside out.

Help us face the silence of unknowing

and embrace it as the pregnant pause before joyful new
beginnings.

Amen.

You are invited to light your Advent 3 candle of Joy.

Isaiah 57: 14-19 (CEB)

It will be said: “Survey, survey; build a road!
Remove barriers from my people’s road!”
The one who is high and lifted up,
who lives forever, whose name is holy, says:
I live on high, in holiness,
and also with the crushed and the lowly,
reviving the spirit of the lowly,
reviving the heart of those who have been crushed.

I won’t always accuse,
nor will I be enraged forever.
It is my own doing that their spirit is exhausted—
I gave them breath!
I was enraged about their illegal profits;
I struck them; in rage I withdrew from them.
Yet they went on wandering wherever they wanted.
I have seen their ways, but I will heal them.
I will guide them,
and reward them with comfort.

And for those who mourn,
I will create reason for praise:
utter prosperity to those far and near,
and I will heal them, says the Lord.

Luke 1: 1-4; 26-56 (CEB)

Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us. Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, I have also decided to write a carefully ordered account for you,

most honorable Theophilus. I want you to have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received...

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God."

Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all

women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

Mary said,

“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored

because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,

from one generation to the next,

who honors him as God.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,

just as he promised to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants forever.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

4th Week of Advent, December 20, 2020

"I Believe in the Light: Illuminating Peace"

The "great light" prophesied by Isaiah in today's text is echoed in the first strains of John's Gospel good news: the light that brings peace—that saves the people from all that would extinguish it—has been there from the beginning. The Word is made flesh and dwells among us. This reign is now... will we believe it? Will we continue to put flesh on it, embodying the peace meant for all humanity?

Prayer

Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of peace on earth.

Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when we aren't sure that
goodwill among us can be found,
ignite the flame of peace within us,
that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out.

Help us face the pain of life
and embrace the assurance that light is already here, and
always coming.

Amen.

You are invited to light your Advent 4 candle of Peace.

Isaiah 9: 2-7 (CEB)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.

You have made the nation great;
you have increased its joy.

They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest,
as those who divide plunder rejoice.

As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that
burdened them,

the staff on their shoulders,
and the rod of their oppressor.

Because every boot of the thundering warriors,
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for the fire.

A child is born to us, a son is given to us,
and authority will be on his shoulders.

He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

There will be vast authority and endless peace
for David's throne and for his kingdom,
establishing and sustaining it
with justice and righteousness
now and forever.

John 1: 1-18 (CEB)

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.

What came into being
through the Word was life,

and the life was the light for all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness
to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone
would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his
mission was to testify concerning the light.

The true light that shines on all people
was coming into the world.

The light was in the world,
and the world came into being through the light,
but the world didn't recognize the light.

The light came to his own people,
and his own people didn't welcome him.

But those who did welcome him,
those who believed in his name,
he authorized to become God's children,
born not from blood
nor from human desire or passion,
but born from God.

The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.

We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.

John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I
said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he
existed before me.'"

From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace;
as the Law was given through Moses,
so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God.

God the only Son, who is at the Father's side,
has made God known.

Christmas Eve

“We Believe, Even Now”

In this season leading up to this night, we have been hearing the Good News from all the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because we have *needed* good news and that’s what “Gospel” actually means. We have heard stories of courage all along our journey—of people who have sung out songs of hope, love, joy, and peace. Our luminaries have been a witness to the light we believe has come, and is coming.

Tonight we return to the story of Jesus’ birth as it is told in the Gospel of Luke. This account is the narrative we read again and again on this holy night, for this author gives us the most beloved detail. We yearn to see the scene play out, to hear the music of the angels, to feel the rush to the manger to see what this star that pierces the night sky has come to proclaim. We so desire to believe the Good News of the messengers that is the culmination of humanity’s pain of birth: “don’t be afraid” for unto us a sign has come that will be to all people... “on earth, peace.”

Prayer

Holy One,

we thank you for the glimpse of heaven on earth

In the faces and the light of those around us.

Even in the midst of fear, of challenge, of struggle—
even when our view is obscured by clouds of doubt,

You have ignited the flame of hope, love, joy,
and peace within us.

Let us glow with its brilliance from the inside out. Amen.

You are invited to light your Christ Candle.

Isaiah 52: 7-10 (CEB)

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of a messenger
who proclaims peace,
who brings good news,
who proclaims salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God rules!”

Listen! Your lookouts lift their voice;
they sing out together!
Right before their eyes they see the Lord returning to
Zion.

Break into song together, you ruins of Jerusalem!
The Lord has comforted his people and has redeemed
Jerusalem.

The Lord has bared his holy arm in view of all the nations;
all the ends of the earth have seen our God’s victory.

Luke 2: 1-20 (CEB)

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David’s house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David’s city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.



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