

ON
OUR
WAY...
HOME

2003 Advent Meditation Guide
for College Students

Higher Education Ministries Arena

The Higher Education Ministries Arena is a program function of the American Baptist Churches (USA), Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2003 Advent Meditation Guide from Higher Education Ministries Arena. This year's theme is ON OUR WAY... HOME. Life is filled with journeys, and home always seems to be at one end of them, from that first trip from the hospital to the family vacations to the trips from college now. Our lives are measured in going, going, gone—and nowadays we go faster, farther and more frequently than ever before. Our meditations are built on the idea of “the journey as home.” Advent is a journey, but not toward a destination we call “home.” The journey itself is our home. While we are on the way, we are home.

All of us writing are active in Campus Ministries—an ecumenical effort of students, faculty, and staff—at Eckerd College, a liberal arts college related by covenant to the Presbyterian Church (USA) in St. Petersburg, Florida. Max Cooper-Dowda is a creative writing/religion major on the newspaper staff; Ashley Jackson studies literature and is a DJ for the Eckerd College radio station's first Christian music program; Mike Dirks majors in Marine Biology and Chemistry and sailed from Tahiti to Hawai'i last semester; Andrew Black is the Campus Ministries Intern, returning to his alma mater after a year in law school at UNC-Chapel Hill; Mona Bagasao is Chaplain and Director of Campus Ministries.

We hope you will take time each day to allow us to share some thoughts with you. We'd be happy to hear from you! Comments may be sent to any of us at bagasam@eckerd.edu.

Thanks for taking time to reflect on the way. And welcome home!

— Ashley D, Max, Mike, Andrew and Mona
Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, Florida

WEEK ONE:

UNPACKING FOR THE JOURNEY

◆ ◆ Sunday, November 30 ◆ ◆

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you may enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as testimony against them.” They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

Luke 9:1-6

Imagine being told to take a trip with only the clothes you are wearing. Take no food, money or backpack. No laptop, cell phone, palm pilot, dvd/cd player, or digital camera either. If you are like me, you are filled with questions: Where am I going? Where will I stay? How long will this journey take? From the most basic traveler to those who make lists including reminders to pack dental floss, this venture seems foolish if not dangerous.

Imagine what the disciples were experiencing knowing that their journeys would be through terrain that might be as unfriendly as some of the people living there. Yet the scripture makes it clear that they did not question Jesus’ travel instructions. Rather they departed on their journey possessing only what they needed to succeed: trust and faith in Jesus himself.

Prayer:

As I journey through the twists and turns of life, remind me to seek your will. Give me the trust I need to step out against what seems at times to be impossible odds. Remind me that I need nothing on this journey as long as I have you. Amen.

❖ ❖ Monday, December 1 ❖ ❖

“Go home to your friends,” he told him, “and tell them what wonderful things God has done for you; and how merciful God has been.”

Mark 5:19

Most of us pack our things when we go on journeys, and unpack them when we reach our destination. “Okay,” you may say, “But that’s common knowledge.” It is indeed. What happens when the journey is the destination?

Life is a journey. My home is here on this journey, in this adventure. I should probably unpack. That’s a good metaphor, but what does it mean to ‘unpack’? Might it involve opening some of the “emotional baggage” we all carry around?

I do not suggest that you should completely discard all of the things that bother you, if that were even possible. I merely suggest that you open that suitcase to see if that old shirt in there still fits. See if you still have that grudge against that one person. See if you can forgive those who have wronged you. See if you can, well, SEE with a new perspective. If you can’t yet, that’s okay, but now is the time to start trying. Make this the goal: to start. Then, just open the suitcase—for starters.

Prayer:

O God, give me the courage to open the suitcase and get started. And help me to see your mercies that I may find there. Amen.

❖ ❖ Tuesday, December 2 ❖ ❖

For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 55:12

After college still in my twenties, I held about 36 jobs in 6 states. From waitressing in Arizona to ministering as a ski chaplain in North Carolina to cooking for a household in the Bahamas, I was set to go anywhere that beckoned. I thought it was great (it was!), but when the time came to get a “real job,” my colorful résumé seemed to have ‘UNSTABLE’ written on every line in “invisible” ink that only employers could see. Why would anyone think that experiencing more in more places was a problem? The way I saw it, I wanted to know the world better so I could love it more. “God calls some people to be flexible,” I thought. Maybe like Jesus, for a few years at least.

When I encourage students not to rush when figuring out careers, going to graduate school or getting married, I’m not always met with affirmation from parents, or from the students themselves. Is it inadvisable to take time to enjoy the journey, the very spot where you are now? Why can’t we go forth in joy, and go forth and go forth, with trees clapping and mountains singing, then still be led back in peace as God calls? We can be flexible because God is unshakable. The journey is our home.

Prayer:

Help me to be open to the unexpected, even if it means being inconvenienced or departing from what I assume about myself. And may I be attentive to trees clapping their hands as I go my way. Amen.

◆ ◆ Wednesday, December 3 ◆ ◆

“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.”

1 Corinthians 9:24-25

If you have ever worked hard to get in shape in order to excel as an athlete, you know what Paul is talking about here. (Even if you haven't, you can imagine what it might be like as you feel the pain in your gut after climbing several flights of stairs!) “No pain, no gain” as the saying goes. And if your athletic prowess and dedication are good enough, you can get a full-ride scholarship for your college education, and if you are better still, a lucrative contract to play a professional sport even before you complete a degree. By following the steps of this kind of journey, you can “receive the prize” of “a perishable wreath.”

But Paul exhorts us to win a different kind of prize. Being “imperishable,” this prize cannot be bought with money. Paul seems to suggest that as athletes “exercise self control in all things” that we should also even as we look for a different kind of prize. Reflecting on your own life, what kind of prize do you expect at the end of the race you are running?

Prayer:

Teach us, O God, to distinguish between the “perishable” and “imperishable” things in our lives. And may we cultivate enough attentiveness to our experiences that we may discern what is “imperishable,” holding it fast until our race is over. Amen.

◆ ◆ Thursday, December 4 ◆ ◆

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.

Matthew 2:1

The magnificent art of Europe's Renaissance has taught us to think of the wise men who came to search for the king of the Jews as regal and richly appointed. They are often depicted with retinues of camels and servants, bowing stiffly to the infant king. But I can't help but think what they might have been like after a long trek across open country—a little stinky from days on the back of a camel, hair peppered with sand that could never quite be combed out, eyes rimmed in red from staring out over the shadeless desert, and tired from spending too many nights trying to sleep on the sand in makeshift tents (and upwind from those camels!). But the difficulties of their journey did not stop them—they were on the road for a reason. The siren song of a star called them, a star that told them a King was born.

Look into the sky tonight. Is there a star singing its call to you? Listen, then follow. The King is waiting.

Prayer:

May I look for the star that might be calling to me. Once I see it, may I follow. Amen.

❖ ❖ Friday, December 5 ❖ ❖

When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:11

Never too late to start on the journey
Never too late to begin the ride
Never too late with the Lord on our side.

Ready right now to move in new directions.
Peace and justice are our traveling clothes.
This is a venture that will last a lifetime.
Where we're headed—thank God, God knows!

"I'll be ready in just a minute." Yeah, sure. We've heard—and said—that often enough to know what it means. We're going to be late to the meeting, or party, or service, or whatever. Usually, though, we do eventually get started—rarely are we so late that we just don't go.

How often does God have to hear us say, "I'll be ready in just a minute"? Does God pace and sigh while waiting for us to get to what we think is 'ready'? Are we really any more ready than we would have been if we'd come when called in the first place? Probably not. But, thank God, God waits for us. It's never too late, but we may miss out on some exciting things if we keep putting it off.

After Simon Peter saw the great thing that Jesus did by filling their boats with fish, he implored Jesus: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" But Jesus did not go away; instead, he invited Peter and his business partners to follow him. And they did. Will you? Now?

Prayer:

Living Christ, may I not put you off when you call me—today, tomorrow, or anytime. Amen.

❖ ❖ Saturday, December 6 ❖ ❖

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Psalm 119:105

What's the first thing you look for when you enter a dark building or room? The light switch? When I'm in a strange place at night, especially outside, I head for the closest light I can see. Traveling in the dark just isn't easy. While God may have us "on the road," God doesn't leave us without the basic tool for getting from one place to another: light. This verse from Psalm 119 tells us that God's word lights our path so we can see where we are going. And God's word is the Logos (Greek for 'word') of John 1:1—Jesus himself! By looking to Jesus as the example of how to live we can negotiate the often rough paths of our life, even when it seems awfully dark around us. The Light of the World is light enough!

Prayer:

May I see your light more clearly and follow your direction more closely each day. Amen.

WEEK TWO:

REST STOPS AND SIDE TRIPS

❖ ❖ Sunday, December 7 ❖ ❖

Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30

My friend Mike took the trip of his life (so far!) when he sailed with a Woodshole program from Fiji to Hawai'i. One of his dreams was to sail the world. But this was no vacation. He worked hard, and the work was made harder by the relentless blue sea and empty horizon constantly around him. As a diversion every now and then, Mike thought, "How great it would be to see a sidewalk!"

How we imagine 'rest' depends on who we are. For some of us, 'rest' is going home and cleaning. For others, it's going to the beach, period. Still others 'rest' at a local nightspot.

Taking a yoke upon us would probably not be the first thing we would do to rest! The 'rest' Jesus has in mind here is one that isn't apparent. It needs to be learned. But the payoff is great; by learning from him we will find rest from our deepest weariness.

Prayer:

Teach me how to take your yoke upon me that I might find rest for my soul. Amen.

❖ ❖ Monday, December 8 ❖ ❖

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.

Luke 2:41-42

Remember those rest stops you used to go to on those long family car trips? The ones where you had to get out of the car fast, get some space, or else you would slug your brother? Do we have those rest stops in our lives?

Sure we do. Our lives move so fast sometimes it's hard to keep up with the hustle and bustle. The road may be our home, but that doesn't mean it is always just the way we like it.

Look around your daily life. Is there a certain place where you can really relax? Perhaps your bedroom or a quiet place in the woods—anyplace where you can feel closer to God. Find your own "fast-food place/bathroom/gas station." We all need time to be recharged spiritually. Think of it: If we had taken that time when we were younger, then maybe we would have realized that slugging our brother wasn't such a good idea.

Prayer:

O God, help me to find a "rest stop" for my busy life. And may I meet you there. Amen.

Again Jesus spoke to them saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

A few nights ago, I was walking home in the rain from a study group. The road I needed to cross was completely flooded with water. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, stared at the small lake before me, and contemplated what to do. As many would have done, I chose to back up and walk around in search of an easier way home. We do this a lot—look for an easier way—and in doing so miss out on possible positive change in our lives.

Whether we like to believe it or not, God is constantly pursuing each of us, trying to get our attention. Sometimes God does it in really dramatic ways, other times not so much. No matter how it happens, it still takes a leap of faith to begin the journey with God. We can never be sure what will happen next, what new adventure we'll stumble into. But God promises to be there no matter what. In truth, God is always there in our lives though we often don't notice or refuse to acknowledge it. The risk in following lies in surrendering—giving our burdens to Him when we feel the most broken. He promises that if we follow, He will never leave us—and the peace that God gives can never be matched by any other worldly pleasure. Take comfort in that, and dive on in!

Applicable music: “Diving In” by Steven Curtis Chapman

Prayer:

Where are you in my life, O God? Help me to know your presence. Amen.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:11-12

The closer that Advent gets to Christmas, the more likely one is to see children acting out this very scene in a church pageant. A few of the children play the role of The Wise Men who come bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the baby Jesus. This mini-drama makes it very easy for us to visualize the Wise Men in their role as worshipers of the new-born king.

Yet, how many of us acknowledge how great a role the Wise Men play beyond their paying homage? Ask yourself: What would have happened had the Wise Men not paid attention to the sign of warning in their dream and returned to Herod? The story would likely have been very different from the one we have before us today.

Perhaps if we noticed more keenly the hidden wisdom found by paying closer attention to life's signs, our life stories would be quite different as well. We might better appreciate how truly wise those Wise Men were.

Prayer:

Help us to be attuned to the signs and directions you give us every day, and wise enough to heed your warnings hidden amongst the briars of everyday life that we might live more closely allied to your will. Amen.

◆ ◆ Thursday, December 11 ◆ ◆

... And there ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.
Matthew 2:9b

My sister has a really awesome red sports car. We love to just hit the road in it with no destination, just loving the very act of moving. As her friend says, it looks like she's going 65 when she's standing still. So, of course, when we're going just a little over the limit—well, let's just say that we could buy a slower car with what we've paid in speeding tickets.

Her friend's comment—what a perfect description of my life sometimes: speeding along, not seeing or hearing or understanding things as I pass them, and yet standing still, not really accomplishing anything. I'm headed everywhere, certainly not really present where I am. If I don't take the time to stop and get my bearings, I forget where I am, and why I'm there. Does this sound like a description of your life at times?

During this season of Advent, when so many things are urging us to hurry along even more, why don't we stop and reorient ourselves? Take a look at our guiding star, the one that lay under the star that came to rest over the stable. It's there, just beyond the glare of headlights, waiting to be rediscovered.

Prayer:

Gracious God, don't let us wait till the end of Advent to offer you our homage and our love. Amen.

◆ ◆ Friday, December 12 ◆ ◆

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.
Exodus 15:13

One of the hardest parts of being a creature of God is to acknowledge that we cannot always have control over everything in our lives. Yet, constantly we struggle for more power over those things that we cannot possibly manage anyway. What we need to realize is that God has that power even though we do not, and that God has greater plans for us than we could even imagine for ourselves. Our job is to surrender to God and give God complete reign in our lives. This is easier said than done.

There will be times when we are tempted to keep our eyes on the ground and take careful steps in the direction we see fit—but God asks us to look up at God, to take our eyes off our feet and trust Him enough to simply follow regardless of what we have to walk through. We can be very closed off, very protective of ourselves; it is one of the many flaws that makes us human, that separates us from God. Still, we should always be striving to get closer to God—and the only way to do that is to let down our defenses and take God's hand, surrendering to God in all aspects of our lives. Allow God's love to surround you, washing away the fear and apprehension.

Applicable Music: "All That I Need"

Prayer:

O God, help me to let you be God. Amen.

◆ ◆ Saturday, December 13 ◆ ◆

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me. But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.”

Jonah 1:1-3

Everyone knows the story of Jonah running from God which only put him on a collision course with a whale. Has God ever asked you to make a difficult journey? Was this journey physical: God asking you to leave a place you felt was your home? Social: God asking you to speak or act in a way that you knew was unpopular and against the grain? Or spiritual: God asking you to do something that seemed spiritually awkward or even scary? Perhaps your journey had all three elements.

Throughout our lives we are being asked to make difficult journeys. Perhaps we can recall stepping out in courage and following God's will. But, if we did, we can recall being filled with fear and desiring nothing more than to flee to our own personal Tarshish. It is in journeys both of courage and of fear that we must gauge our relationship and personal faith in God. It was during a time of self reflection that Jonah cried from the belly of the whale: “You brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you.” *Jonah 2:6-7.*

Prayer:

Help us walk the physical, social and spiritual paths you desire us to walk with courage and reverence. Amen.

WEEK THREE: ARE WE THERE YET?

◆ ◆ Sunday, December 14 ◆ ◆

“Surely the LORD your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.”

Deuteronomy 2:7

The Hebrews who left Egypt with Moses spent forty years wandering—the ultimate destination of the Promised Land always ahead—with a lot of stops along the way. I remember a group of us planned to attend a Sunday evening worship service that was cancelled with very little notice. We quickly made plans to go to the beach to have a sharing service and watch one of the amazing St. Pete sunsets. But when we all gathered to get in the van, someone heard a nearby frozen custard place calling loudly. The group was almost unanimous in agreement to respond positively to that call. Three destinations in less than an hour.

What I remember most about the experience was that we were together—laughing and eating, cajoling each other, and caring for one another. The significance wasn't where we went, it was that we went together. And God went with us.

Prayer:

Holy God, help us to see you in the journey as we look toward one another and to you. Help us to be your image more each day. Amen.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break through and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Matthew 6:19-21

Are we there yet? Are we there yet? We've all heard it (maybe even said it to an unlucky parent or two). Humans always want to get to that place “just over the next hill.” We are a people always with a destination. If the journey is the destination, then we've already arrived. What do we do now?

I don't know why we always want to be somewhere else. I don't think I have an answer though I do have some ideas.

First, I think that we have a tendency to make things greater in our mind's eye. That new car is always greater in our heads than in actuality. Ambition is good, but taken to extremes it can diminish our ability to be happy. We need to stop and evaluate our lives. Are we happy? What really makes us happy? Can we cherish what we have rather than what we don't have? I don't mean finite things like cars or stereos.

Second, think about the love you give to others, and the love they give to you. Think of your family, your friends, even your pets. Cherish that love. It's here, we're here. If we work on anything during these weeks of Advent, let's work on being happy with what God has given us. We're here!

Prayer:

O God, grant us the courage to stop and reflect on our lives. May we find and affirm the love which comes from you and from others. Amen.

Read Psalm 23

. . . he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Psalm 23:2a-3

Give me eyes to see and ears to hear,
And courage to step out without any fear.
Give me wisdom to know the way to go.
God be with me on this journey of faith.

The road is long, the choices many
And I don't always know the way.
Yet I'm willing to try not knowing just why,
And I can't let that stand in my way.
We are called to be God's servants
In a world that seems unfair.

And the way isn't clear on the journey from here,
So God give an ear to my prayer.
We follow one who died to save us.
We're deciding everyday.
And sometimes we fall, we stumble and fall.
So God hear us all as we pray!

By Rich Roberts (used by permission)

The simple words of Rich Roberts' song “Journey Prayer” are packed with meaning. Read these lyrics several times over the next twenty-four hours. Think about those choices, about not knowing the way, about that stumble and near-fall you just took. Then remember that God is faithful. God *will* be with us on our journeys of faith!

Prayer:

Help us to have the courage to find our way along the journey. And to trust that you are leading us in right paths for your sake. Amen.

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep.

Luke 8:22-23a

A person's skill at sailing in Christ's time did not warrant bragging rights, but the craft in many ways was a birth right. Since several of the disciples were fishermen and familiar with Mediterranean maritime culture, they would not have flinched at Jesus' command to obtain a boat in order to set sail across the lake. From the language of verse 22, we can surmise that Jesus assumed the role of the boat's captain. Further, since Jesus knew of his crew's competence at sea, he could take advantage of the peaceful rolling motion of the boat and take a nap.

What a great idea that Jesus can rest because he knows the crew is competent! Can Jesus rest when I'm at the helm, knowing that I've learned my lessons well from Him, the captain?

Prayer:

May we sail onto any sea with the assurance of those who have been trained by the Master. Amen.

A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?"

Luke 8:23b-25

The leisurely sail across the lake was quickly disrupted by an unforeseen wind leaving the well-seasoned crew in a state of hysteria. With panic in their hearts and minds, the disciples decided to arouse the sleeping captain to warn him of imminent doom. (In Mark's version of the story (Mk. 4:35-41), the disciples castigate Jesus for sleeping when they needed him to save them.) But they probably did not expect him to do what he did. Stop the wind itself to calm the waves?

The command from Jesus' mouth was not replete with maritime jargon, nor an assurance that the physical strength of the vessel would withstand the storm. Rather, Jesus was concerned with something greater than this in his asking "Where is your faith?" Let's take a lesson from this. When the intentions of our lives are buffeted by the severest of weather unforeseen, take heed of the most important question we may ever ask ourselves: "Where is our faith?"

Prayer:

Help us to trust our faith to transcend the trials and havoc that at times seem so overwhelming. Help our faith transcend fear so that we may continue our spiritual journey with you. Amen.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
Matthew 28:20b

Morning after morning we have new opportunity .

Day after day, we get another chance.
Evening after evening we face the light together
Singing, "God, we love you!
God's earth, we treasure you.
God's people, we will serve you.
We are one."

Rejoicing in surprises that surround us,
Awe'd by grand mountains and just out-of-reach skies.
Sensing God's laughter in the tallest of trees,
In the smallest of blossoms
In the faces all around us,
We ask, "Where are we going? What are we doing?"
We ask, "Why?"

Ready to accept the consequence of choices,
Learning our places in the pattern of the stars.
Trusting God for courage in the hardest of decisions,
In the challenge of changing,
In the fear of being wrong.
We'll decide where we are going.
Won't compromise what we are doing.
Love is Why.

We know God is going with us.
We know we're doing it together.
We know why.

Rich Roberts & Mona Bagasao (used by permission)

Prayer:

Holy God, thank you for being our Why! Thank you for being Love! Thank you for being with us always. May our being reflect all that you are. Amen.

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

Exodus 15:13

One of the hardest parts of being one of God's creatures is acknowledging that we cannot have control over everything in our lives. Yet, we struggle for more power over those things that we could not possibly manage anyway. We need to realize that God has the power we crave. As a result, God has greater plans for us than we could even imagine for ourselves. Our job is to surrender to God and give God complete reign in our lives. This is easier said than done.

When we are tempted to keep our eyes on the ground and take careful steps in the direction we see fit, God asks us to look at God, to take our eyes off our feet and trust God enough to simply follow God regardless of what we have to walk through. We can be very closed off, very protective of ourselves, ways that separate us from God. Still, we should always be striving to get closer to God—and the only way to do that is to let down our defenses and take God's hand, surrendering to God in all aspects of our lives. Allow God's love to surround you, washing away the fear and apprehension. God can do it if you let God be God!

Applicable Music: "All That I Need" by Point of Grace

Prayer:

Grant to us, O God, the wisdom to follow your way, lowering our defenses to allow you into our lives, completely and fully. Amen.

WEEK FOUR:

NOW THAT WE ARE HOME...

❖ ❖ Sunday, December 21 ❖ ❖

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23

On his way to China to teach English after college, a friend of mine looked out the window of his plane as it descended into Tokyo's Narita Airport. Strangely, he felt as if he were home. He got off the plane, within three days found a job, and ended up staying there for three years. Even today, he spends several months each year in Japan.

Shortly after he arrived, he had trouble reconciling his sense of belonging in Japan—as if he had been there before in another life—with his understanding as a Christian that we live only one life on this earth. Discussing this one day, we speculated that each of us carry certain tendencies or inclinations toward particular appearances, smells, tastes, climates, feelings, mannerisms, and so on. When we experience these elsewhere, they feel familiar, as if we have been there before. We feel like we belong, like we are “home.”

Paul identifies some of the “tendencies and inclinations” on our faith journey as “the fruit of the Spirit.” When we are in a place where we are experiencing all or even most of them, we are indeed home. Read the list of these fruits again. How do they describe your life these days? Let's pray that God's Spirit will continue to nurture them all in us.

Prayer:

O Great Spirit, who brings forth a sense of belonging for all who dwell in you, nurture in us your presence that we may bear the fruit of your Spirit. Amen.

❖ ❖ Monday, December 22 ❖ ❖

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

1 John 4:16b

Home is where the heart is. This may be a cliché, but I think there's a bit more than a grain of truth in the phrase. Home is where the heart is, where our hearts are. In us. We are already home. Welcome!

What is the House of God? Is it a church, or is it something more, something intangible? I believe wherever there is love, there is God. If we love each other, then we are practicing spirituality. What is love but the highest form of spirituality?

When people love each other they are transformed. Their home is where their heart is, their hearts love, and that love becomes the House of God.

In this time of Advent, let's bring love to the forefront of all that we do. It's not always easy. Was it easy for God to love us enough to become one of us? Perhaps. Was it easy for Jesus to love us enough to die for us? Probably not. But, following the divine example, take a chance and let love rule.

Prayer:

God of love, rule in our hearts. Don't let us get away with only doing the easy part. Be our teacher. Thanks for loving us. Amen.

❖ ❖ Tuesday, December 23 ❖ ❖

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Luke 9:57-58

When she was mayor of San Francisco, Diane Feinstein gave holiday gifts to the city’s homeless. In one of the great public-relations fiascos of her career, one of her assistants purchased house plants and gave them out. The media circus that resulted yielded some interesting perspectives on homelessness. Most people were horrified at the insensitivity.

But one man who received a plant expressed his gratitude and the opinion that he was not homeless. His home was the streets. Not that that was a good thing, necessarily. His “roof” leaked, his “air conditioning” was very sporadic, and his “neighbors” weren’t always the best. Yet, he encouraged people saying, “Please don’t think of me as homeless. Think of me as someone who needs help improving my home.”

Acceptance and hope, both are necessary for life on the road. Let’s pray that God will give us both in the great abundance of God’s mercy.

Prayer:

Help us to move beyond the common perceptions of those around us so that we may reach out to each other in ways that nurture justice and faith. Amen.

❖ ❖ Wednesday, December 24 ❖ ❖

And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:6-7

One night in the history of humankind. A night when the eyes of the universe were fixed on a stable, the ears of heaven listening for the wail of a newborn.

The beginning of a great journey for a mother and father, a small but significant piece of the journey for the Son of God. The starting point for a whole new way of journeying for every man and woman. God made Godself in human’s image to model this new way, just as the human had been made in God’s image at the creation of the world. When that image had tarnished, God made a promise. And on this night, Promise was sent to a barnyard in a little town. The Promise lives on in each of us who claim him and allow him to guide and power us. On this night, celebrating that night, let us re-claim the Promise with boldness!

Prayer:

May the wonder and power of “God with us” as a vulnerable baby be born in our vulnerabilities today. Amen.

CHRISTMAS DAY

❖ ❖ Thursday, December 25 ❖ ❖

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone round them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Luke 2:8-11

The good news of Jesus' birth comes to a bunch of shepherds out in the fields as they watch their flocks. Shepherds—those transient, untrustworthy types of the ancient Middle East (They used “crooks” after all!)—are scared out of their minds at the prospect that they are to be entrusted with such earth-shattering news. A baby born in a barn with shepherds invited to witness the marvel of the event. Not exactly the way one would choose to inaugurate the life of the savior of the world! Yet, the shepherds responded to the angel's words, came to the stable, and dutifully reported what they had seen and heard. And the world has never been the same.

And we—who may or may not be as untrustworthy as shepherds—are asked to do the same. As we continue on our journeys through the twelve days of Christmastide, then into Epiphany and beyond, an angel might come to us, scare us half to death, and then ask us to “go and see” what God has done. Are we up to it?

Prayer:

May the power of your coming be made real in my life today, and every day through the coming year. Amen.