

Attending to Advent: poetry, prose and prayer

THE PRESBYTERIAN
OUTLOOK



INTRODUCTION:

My idea to center the *Outlook's* 2022 Advent Devotional on poetry came while reading an essay in Jon Mooallem's recent book, *Serious Face*, recounting a time when the author felt decidedly lost. He was 22 and working his first job at a small literary magazine in New York City. Jon's father had died a year earlier, and the grief he had tamped down began to bubble upward. In the evenings, Jon wrote. He'd walk 58 blocks home from the office "excessively serious-faced, wrenching my mind around like a Rubik's Cube, struggling to make it show a brighter color."

Desperate to lighten his emotional load, Mooallem joined a couple of friends on a wilderness adventure in Alaska's remote Glacier Bay National Park, despite being comfortable with the wilderness only in the abstract. Mooallem is an excellent writer, and the story climaxes in a tragic accident where their expert guide – also named



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Jon – got trapped beneath a tree that fell on top of him. While their friend went for help, Mooallem was left with the job of keeping Jon conscious, keeping him tethered to the world with his voice so the guide wouldn't slip into death. Through a long and terrifying night, after Mooallem had exhausted retelling the memories he and Jon shared of friendship and family, he began reciting the poetry he knew by heart: a lyric poem by Elizabeth Bishop about the enormity of time, W.H. Auden's poetry that had been easiest to memorize due to its rhyme and meter, and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Road Not Taken."

"For the most part," Mooallem wrote, "I trafficked in hits," feeling like a late-night radio DJ playing records to which he was unsure anyone was listening.

In the end, help arrived and Mooallem's friend survived. But as a reader, it is this nighttime poetry-reciting scene that stayed with me. Poetry, for me, also serves as a lifeline to this world. The carefully chosen words of poetry – the brevity and precision, the break in the lines – slow my typical amped-up, anxious pace. Poetry forces me to attend to life and the world in ways I don't normally privilege with my attention. And this is what I hope this Advent devotional does for you, our reader.

Many of you, I imagine, can relate to Jon Mooallem's "serious face." We remain in an unprecedented time of change — grieving what has been lost, unsure of our futures, struggling to find steady footholds.

Advent leads us into a time of expectant waiting, a time when our faith can find its foothold despite our unsteady world. As we make our way to Christmas, reading the stories of Mary, Joseph, Herod and the Christ child reflected through poetry and prose, I pray these devotions tether you to our world and lighten your load with a hope-filled, tenacious faith. May God bless your reading and your living in this Advent season.

— TERI MCDOWELL OTT



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Advent Devotions: WEEK 1

— Theme of Mary —

“When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).

These poems and prose reflections focus on Mary’s story: her experience as God-bearer, her song, her prayers and ponderings, her faith. Readers will also explore themes of motherhood, the beauty and pain of childbirth, and a mother’s longing to provide and protect her children.

As you attend to these daily reflections, I invite you to call Mary to mind — to meditate on her story and locate yourself within it. Who are you in relationship to Mary? How do you relate to her faith? Or how do you not? Enjoy Mary’s company this week and be blessed.

Sunday, November 27

POEM

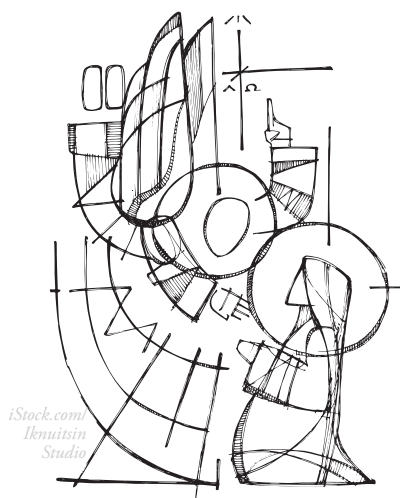
According to Thy Word

Or thy love.

Or thy life.

Or thy humanity.

Be it unto me
according to Thee.



BARBARA WOOD GRAY lives in a senior living community in Louisville, Colorado. Her most recent book, *Sharing the Song*, can be found at lulu.com.

PRAYER

Savior God, we start simply — a poem and a prayer evoking your word and our desire to follow you faithfully. We begin this Advent journey inspired by Mary’s response to your angel’s news. Her words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” read simple and steadfast, but lead us to wonder about this young, new mother. How could she bear this astounding call? What doubts and fears rose within her as the angel named her God’s favored one? But maybe we’re overthinking this story, this journey. Maybe we’re burdening Mary with what we carry, rather than seeing her for who she really is. Mary said, “Yes,” and stepped forward in faith. God our guide, hear our “Yes.” May this Advent journey be according to your word. Amen.

Monday, November 28

POEM



Virgin of Hope by artist Matilde Olivera (matildeolivera.com/en/product/virgen-de-la-esperanza/)

Calm: The Sculptor Contemplates Mary after Virgin of Hope by Matilde Olivera

In stone cold relief, the mother
sits, closes her eyes
to fear. All she knows is
here: the calm release of
Be still and know,
her small one kicking —
rosary of breath and belly.
Though she is tired
and her chiseled garments wrinkled,
she feels only Him,
majesty of miracle now turning
slightly inside her.
Like this, her humble hands
daily reenact the Magnificat,
embrace the ancient prophecy of pain
and salvation. But first,
in sculpted contemplation,
mother and unborn son
pray to the Creator together,
that same *I AM*
who also molded the artist's fingers
now faithfully shaping
this maternal and eternal
moment of hope and calm.

MARJORIE MADDOX is professor of English and creative writing at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, and author of 11 collections of poetry. Find more of her poetry at marjoriemaddox.com.



PRAYER

God, bless the tired, those worn weary from the day's labor and burdens carried. Bless those heavy of heart and body with the calm release that comes from knowing you are near — as near as a baby's kick within mother's womb. Amen.

Tuesday, November 29

Who is ever ready to give birth to a child? In today's world we diligently prepare for this transformational moment with tests, ultrasounds, a new vitamin regimen and the difficult switch to decaf. The home is reorganized — a room painted a new pastel shade, a crib assembled, a mobile hung. Dangers are foreseen, with every outlet plugged for safety, every corner padded and every dangerous cupboard door locked. The parents-to-be are showered with gifts — diapers, wipes, tiny nail clippers and strange tools like a rubber bulb to suck snot out of infant nostrils. Birthing classes are taken and parenting books read. Car seats are bought and installed. Yet, even after all this preparation, parents are not ready. They'll never be ready for the wild wonder and extravagant chaos a new baby brings. When the swaddled bundle of baby is placed in a mother's arms, she can't help but wonder, "Is this real?"

Mary may have been 13 years old, or 16. It's impossible to imagine her being ready for the birth of her son, our Savior. No doctors, no tests, no vitamins to swallow with breakfast. She was betrothed, but not yet married when the good news first broke. And yet she was bold enough and brave enough to say yes to God. "Let it be with me according to your word."

Nothing can prepare us for the birth of the One who comes to turn our world and our lives upside down. This Advent, let us simply prepare to be unprepared, to be bold enough and brave enough to say yes to God, trusting that when the new baby cries — wonder of wonders — God is with us.

PRAYER

Holy of holies, you break into our lives in unexpected and unplanned ways. We'd prefer to know your plans. We'd prefer to make our lists and check off each task, confident we will be prepared for all you have in store for us. Yet you are the God who makes all things new. Help us rejoice in your holy surprises. May we trust in your plans, like Mary. Amen.

Wednesday, November 30

POEM

The Season of Waiting



She spent Advent wondering
how she would tell her children
that Santa knew they were good
even if he didn't bring them
dolls and bicycles.

Her season of waiting
was measured not by candles
lit in an evergreen wreath,
but weekly Lay-Away payments
for toys she could ill afford.

Her Advent meant
teaching her children
that the faith of the Magi
was more precious than their
gifts of frankincense and myrrh.

GLORIA HEFFERNAN'S writing has appeared in over 100 journals including a number of publications that focus on faith and spirituality including *Presence*, *Dappled Things*, *The Windhover*, *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Amethyst Review*, *Chautauqua*, and the upcoming anthology *Without a Doubt: Poems Illuminating Faith* from New York Quarterly Books.

PRAYER

God of abundance, hear our prayers for those of scarce resources: parents who cannot lavish their children with Christmas toys, mothers measuring the season in layaway payments, children doubting they've been good enough for Santa. God bless them, and those of us with enough gifts to share. May the generosity you inspire, Great God, bring joy to all your children. Amen.

Thursday, December 1

I saw Mary today at the airport. She stepped in front of me as I was breezing through the automatic doors, rushing to check in for my flight. Her halting pace slowed mine to a crawl, as she shuffled inside to escape the chill of the wind, holding a half-drunk disposable cup of coffee, the sole of one shoe flap-flapping on the slick cement.

Mary was outside Costco last week with a grocery cart stuffed with garbage bags and a toddler on her hip. She held the side of a cardboard box inscribed with black marker, “Will work for food and diapers.”

The week before last, Mary was at my daughter’s school, sitting alone by the bike rack watching other teens getting picked up by their parents. The defiant streak of purple running through her hair contradicted her despairing eyes. No one stopped to speak to her.

Then there was the time I saw Mary in the mirror, weary and defeated, disappointed in herself for snapping at her child, wondering what was wrong with her, wondering why she wasn’t a better mother, feeling the big feelings — shame, regret, despair.

Mary’s showing up everywhere this Advent. I hear her singing a familiar, magnificent tune about a God who lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, and scatters the proud. “All generations will call me blessed,” she sings to herself, to me, to us.

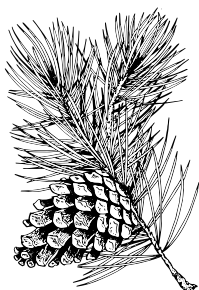
PRAYER

Magnificent God, in whom our spirit rejoices, may we recognize Mary in the lowly, the dispossessed, the marginalized, the poor — and in ourselves. May we hear her song of witness, reminding us of your care for all your children. Lord, forgive us when we fail to acknowledge the humanity of others. May our souls magnify your mercy and your love. Amen.

Friday, December 2

POEM

Humility the Final Frontier



Mother Mary adorned the tree
at Christmas in the country church
which called me, a newly
minted grad from seminary, to serve.
And I, head full of lofty ideas,
without bothering to learn why She
had come to grace the evergreen
cut from the surrounding hillside,
insisted on something more Protestant.
Thankfully, no one listened,
but continued their tradition as before,
and now, after a decade or more,
I still think of the God-Bearer
whenever there's a scent of pine in the air.

ANDREW TAYLOR-TROUTMAN is the author of *Gently Between the Words: Essays and Poems*. He is the pastor of Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He and his wife, also an ordained minister, parent three children and a dog named Ramona.

PRAYER

Steadfast God, we are humbled in your presence. We often think so much of ourselves — even belittling those who worship differently. But our ways are not necessarily yours, and Mother Mary inspires us to adorn our faith with grace. We worship and adore you, Great Mystery of mysteries, and we press on in humility. Amen.

Saturday, December 3

POEM

*Lynn Arrives for our
“Advent Prayer Service for the Unhoused.”*

“No. That’s okay,” she says, moving
past my hand. She points
to my expanded belly.
“You have a baby inside.”

She yanks her roller bag
across the threshold into
the sanctuary. “I’ll just take this
over there.” She walks down the aisle,
her heavy-laden bag trailing behind, swaddled
in duct tape, announcing its presence to all
it passes with one angry wheel, sparing me
the inconvenience of shepherding
her most precious things
packed so tight
those final steps
to safety.

KATHRYN LESTER-BACON is the director of religious
life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North
Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual
reflection on Instagram ([@pastor_poetry_practice](#)).

PRAYER

Holy One, each of us bears precious things. May those of us who
do not lack for shelter see those clustering in the corners of every
community. May those of us with convenient and comfortable
lives, see the poor, the unhoused, the rejected, those deemed
“unclean.” Shepherd us all to your sanctuary of grace. Amen.

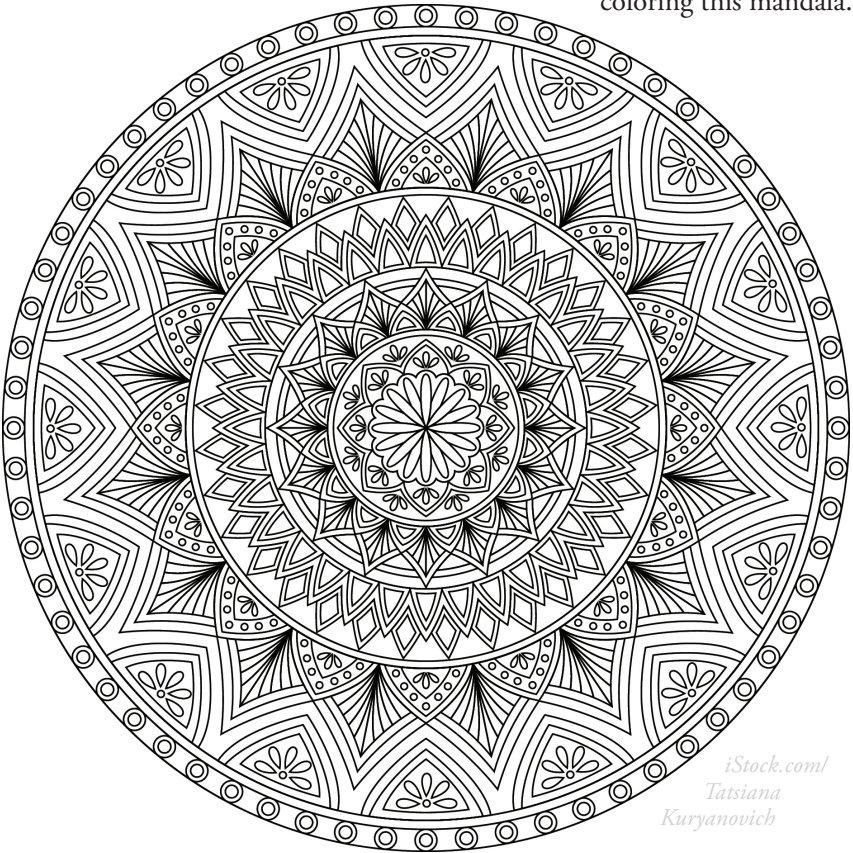


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MEDITATION

Created for color. Meditate on this week's devotion series while coloring this mandala.



*iStock.com/
Tatsiana
Kuryanovich*

Next week: Joseph