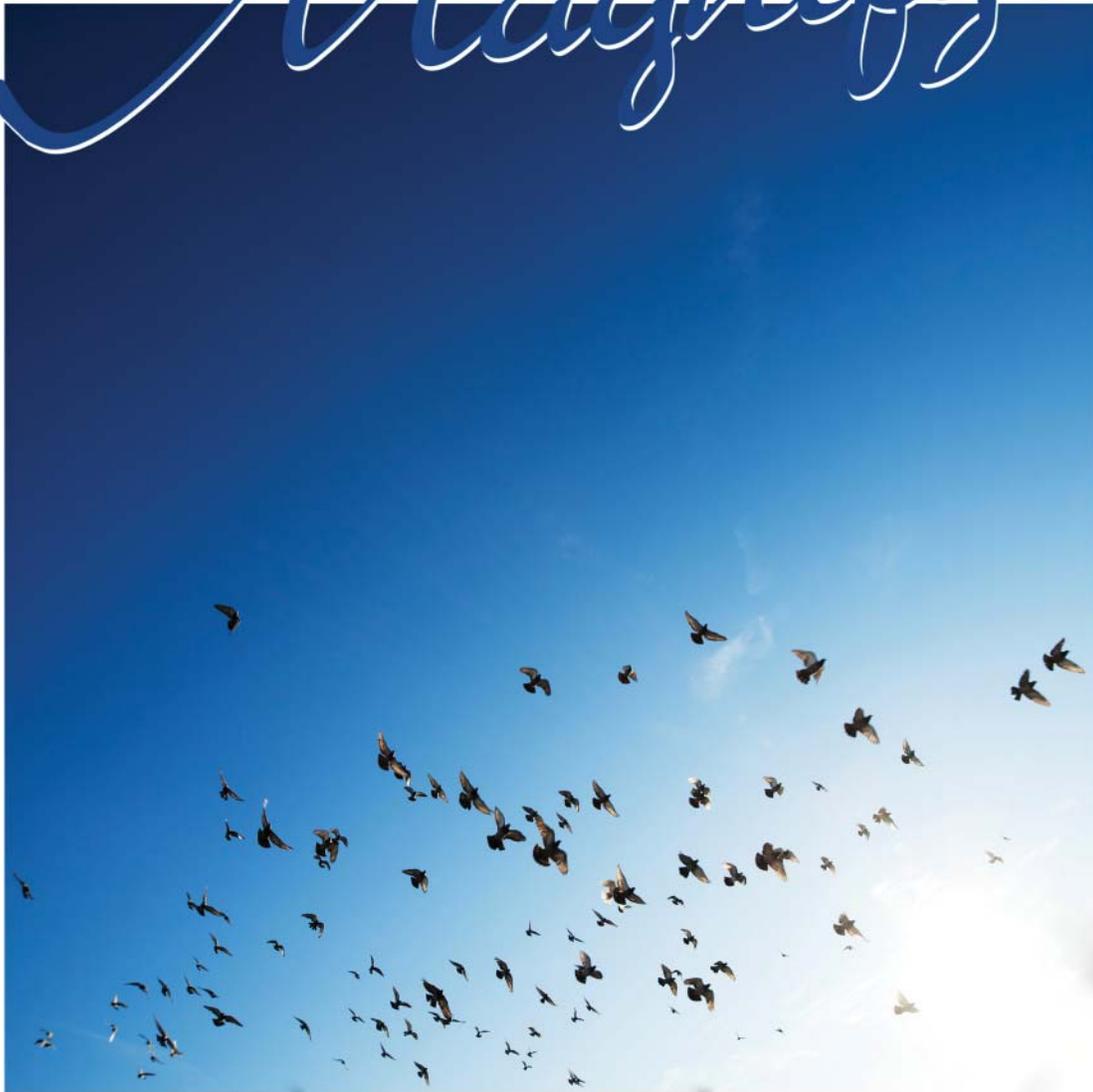


Magnify!



Advent Devotional 2017 ♦ Our Savior's Lutheran Church

Magnify!

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of
his servant.”*

Luke 1:46–48

MARY SINGS HER SONG OF PRAISE to God, remembering the good God has done and looking forward with confident hope to what God will do. When we tell the stories of what God has done for us, we magnify God in our world. Perhaps you treasure a memory of a moment you knew God was close because of a miracle, a coincidence, a beautiful moment, or a feeling you couldn't explain.

Magnify!, OSL's 2017 Advent Devotional, is the result of members of the Our Savior's community sharing reflections of what God has done in their lives. May these brief devotional pieces help you to focus on your own Advent journey and the many ways in which God walks it with you.

ADVENT DAY 1
SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 26

WHENEVER ADVENT ROLLS AROUND, I feel a sense of sadness. Not all the time, and definitely not because of the message of Advent, but because it stirs memories. And I know I'm not alone.

This season, which leads to the magnificent story of Christmas and the birth of our Savior, also magnifies memories of loved ones lost during this time of year.

One December the mid-1980s, Karen and I got a phone call that shook us to the core. My brother's wife, Carol, had been Christmas shopping the day before in their south-central Washington state town. The next day, totally out of the blue, she had died of a brain aneurysm. Carol was only in her early 50s.

We had the task of breaking this awful news to my parents, who lived in Wagner. This was something that had to be done in person, and I will never forget the shock on their faces. You don't expect a healthy, fun-loving woman to be here one day and gone the next with no warning.

We flew west for the funeral, and it was one of the saddest I've ever attended. It was right before Christmas, and ever since, the time leading up to the holiday makes me miss Carol.

Other family members have passed on late in the year since that time, and, combined, their memories and the circumstances are magnified in my mind.

How can we cope? The lyrics of the contemporary Christian song "Magnify" by We Are Messengers hit home. It really helps to focus more on Jesus and magnify his holy name!

I've been trying to make sense of the sorrow that I feel
Holding on for life to the only thing that's real
I've only scratched the surface, I've barely had a taste
But just a glimpse draws my heart to change
And one sight of you lays my sin to waste
I don't need to see everything, just more of you

Oh God, be greater, than the worries in my life
Be stronger, than the weakness in my mind
Be louder, let your Glory come alive
Be magnified

Take it all, take it all away
Magnify no other name
Open up, open up my eyes
To you, to you

Denny Gale

*"Magnify," Darren Mulligan, Casey Brown, and Jonathan Smith;
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ADVENT DAY 2
MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 27

"I AM NOT GOING TO CHURCH!" I was defiant and determined that I was not going to be a hypocrite and say I believed when I wasn't sure I did. I did not even go to my own confirmation ceremony!

Five years after getting married, my husband died, leaving me with a special child who, the doctor said, would probably never walk, talk, or feed himself. During those years I did pray, just in case God was for real.

The next 20 years I dealt with addiction, cancer, loss of my eyesight, and my second marriage on the verge of crashing. The marriage problems drove us to a 12-step program. The third step stopped me: "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him." My mind darted back to the confirmation ceremony I didn't go to.

I decided I would check out this God of the Bible. Even though I did not completely believe in this God, with all the challenges I'd had, I did pray to him. However, even with friends, if you do all the talking you don't get to know the other person! So, obviously I didn't know this God because I'd been doing all the talking. So, I needed to "check God out" to see if I could first, really believe he was God, and second, to trust him enough to turn my life and will over to him.

Two days later, my sister-in-law called saying she couldn't stop thinking about me when she was

studying the Bible. She wondered if God wanted her to invite me to her Bible study. What a coincidence! Just when I decide to “check God out” to see if he is real, I get invited to a Bible study!

After only one month in the Minor Prophets with the Women’s Bible Study Fellowship, I was convinced. God reeled me in! No one but God could have written a book like this, prophesying events that came to pass 1,000 to 2,000 years later! Mere man could not have done this! Finally, God opened my mind to his truths. Now, I could say I believed in this great God of the Old and New Testament. Now, I was ready to turn my life and will over to him.

Jeanette Stadtfeld

ADVENT DAY 3
TUESDAY,
NOVEMBER 28

OUR SON HAD JUST BEEN BORN at a large research hospital in California and my wife was recovering in the hospital room when we realized that our son should have been returned by now. It had been a whirlwind labor which started in the car on the way to the hospital. The doctor didn’t even

have time to take off his Mickey Mouse wristwatch before delivering our child. After catching our breath, we finally confronted the nurse to ask the status of our child. That’s when we learned of the problem with his heart and his transfer to the pediatric intensive care unit.

The doctors told us that there was a problem with the electrical system of his heart and he would require surgery within the next few days to install a pacemaker, a high-risk procedure for a child so young. Because my wife has an autoimmune disease we had known the pregnancy was high-risk. In fact, the doctors had been monitoring the pregnancy twice a week and all signs had pointed to a healthy delivery. Suffice it to say, we weren’t prepared for the reality of our less-than-week-old infant needing surgery. We were distraught, in shock, and feeling all alone.

We called our California pastor and our families in Idaho and South Dakota to tell them of the situation. My wife and I have always been part of a church family wherever we have lived, but I don’t think we were prepared for the wonderful outpouring of love and support that we received. I still tear up a bit when thinking about it; there was such a comfort in knowing entire

networks of family, friends, and church prayer chains in multiple states were praying for us and our son. Even though we were far away from our families and much of our support network, my wife and I felt an incredible comfort in knowing that so many people were praying for us.

Our doctors used the word “miracle” to describe that our son’s heart did not continue to deteriorate as they expected—despite the faulty wiring, his heart continued to function just well enough that he did not need a pacemaker until he was two years of age, making the procedure much less risky. But for me the true miracle that occurred then was in the love, support, and prayers from so many people that gave us the strength to face whatever steps were needed for our baby.

Steven Matzner

ADVENT DAY 4
WEDNESDAY,
NOVEMBER 29

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I had a very special experience I wish to share with the congregation in this Advent Devotional, *Magnify!*

In September 2005, my mother-in-law, Alice Jahr, had become ill and was in the hospital for a short stay. On one of my daily visits to see her, she told me that she had seen such a bright light; the brightest light she had ever seen. Here I was in her room, checking all of the lights and lamps looking for this bright light, but I couldn’t find it. She then told me that he had spoken to her and that he was coming for her on a Monday, but she was fuzzy as to which Monday.

A few days later, it was a Monday and she was having a really bad day. I thought for sure this was the end of her life, but it wasn’t. (After her hospital stay, Mom moved into a nursing home. She went on to live until November 7, 2005, exactly 12 years ago as I write this.)

On that day Mom asked me if it was a Monday, and it was. After her wonderful husband, Lowell, left for home after being with Mom all day, as he always did during her nursing home stay, Mom asked me to stay. She wanted me to lay her on the cold floor.

I said, "Let's sit on your bed." I put my arm around her and held her hand. She whispered in my ear, "I am going now. Bye-bye, bye." She died right in my arms. I held her for a time, then had a nurse come in to check on her. She confirmed that Mom had passed.

Mom knew where she was going, and she had no hesitation on leaving. She was ready with open arms, she was at peace, and she was running into heaven. She truly lived a life of faith.

It feels just like yesterday that I experienced this amazing testimony of faith. I am so honored and humbled to have known and loved this beautiful woman. As I was born in England, she taught me so many things as I became a member of the Jahr family in this great country of the United States of America.

Madeleine Jahr

ADVENT DAY 5
THURSDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

GOD HAS HELPED many different people in many different ways for a ton of different things. One time when I found God helped me was when my grandpa died. I felt like God was giving me huge hugs along the way, I felt like he was lying by me at night, and I felt like he was telling me that it's okay to be sad and cry but Grandpa is all better and very safe in heaven.

Every now and then, when I go to my room and lie there, I feel like God is giving me a huge cuddle. But ever since Grandpa died I feel like God has been telling me to be bigger and stronger in everything I do and say and live compassion all the days of my life because he still loves me, and God reminds me of that every day.

So just remember God will be and always has been there for you, and he loves you more than anything else in the world.

Hannah Nesdaahl

ADVENT DAY 6
FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 1

“Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all Faith, whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe: be there at our labors, and give us, we pray, your strength in our hearts Lord, at the noon of the day.”

“Lord of All Hopefulness,” ELW, No. 765

EVERY TIME I GO OUT TO MY WOODSHOP, I can't help but think of the words to this beautiful hymn of faith. You see, I love to collect woodworking planes, especially the old ones. Some of the planes I have are over 250 years old. Those who first used them are long since gone, and now they live on in my shop, where I will use them and take care of them for a time. Each time I pick one of them up and use them to create something new out of wood, I think of the people that used them before me, and I feel a bond between them and me.

The same feeling is true every time I sing the old hymns of faith. Those who wrote and sang many of them are long since gone now, but every time I sing them again, I feel that same tie that binds us all together, in “faith.” For a “time” these hymns are mine to sing and share together with you.

During this season of Advent, let us remember those who have gone on before us, and let us remember also that we are part of the “never-ending” story of God's love and grace. “For unto us a child is born, a Son is given.” Lord of all hopefulness, be there for us...always! Amen.

Pr. Timothy Lemme

ADVENT DAY 7
SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 2

AS CO-CHAIR OF THE QUILTING MINISTRY for the last several years, sometimes I have to just stop and wonder: Is this coincidence? Maybe not.

There are times when I need just one more block to finish off a quilt and when I look through what I have available to me, there it is. Makes me wonder where in this world that person is who will be kept dry and comfortable under this quilt.

Or I need just one piece of cute children's fabric to go with something that I have had for quite some time to finish off a warm quilt for some small child, and when I open the next box of donated fabric, there it is. Makes me wonder what child will be kept warm under this cute quilt.

Or when we wanted to purchase a few pin boxes to make laying out the quilts easier, and the next week in the paper I see they are free if we make a small purchase at a local store.

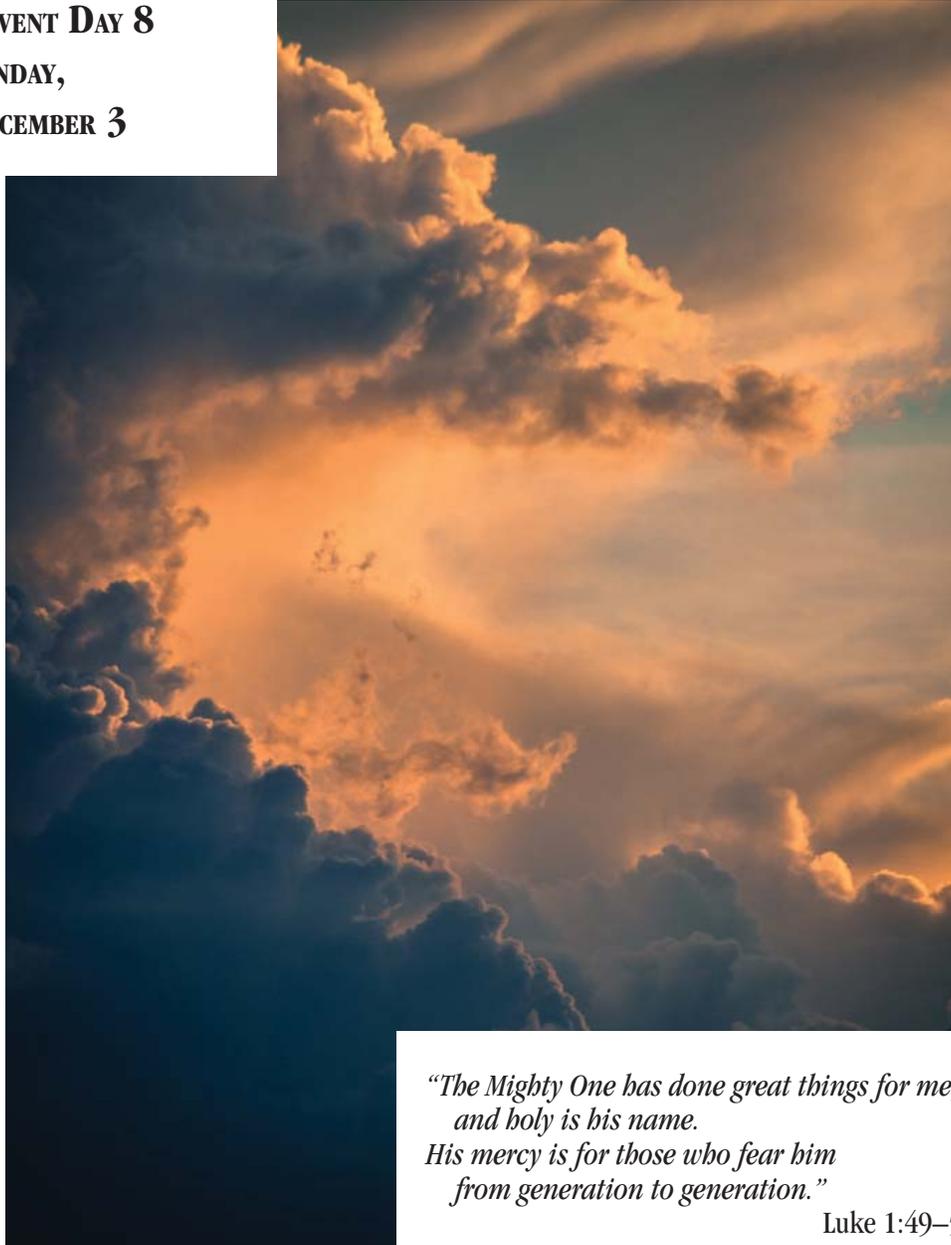
Or when I was making pocket prayer shawls and thought I didn't have enough yarn left for another one, but when I was done I did have just enough for one more. Makes me wonder just who needed the prayers that are attached to that one last shawl!

I have to believe that God is working right alongside us each time we gather, guiding and helping us to create that special item for that one special person in need.

What do you think? Are these coincidences, or small silent communications from God?

Marilyn Quam

ADVENT DAY 8
SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 3



*“The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.”*

Luke 1:49–50

ADVENT DAY 9
MONDAY,
DECEMBER 4

WHEN I THINK OF *MAGNIFY* in relationship to God, I think of Bible verses—

“But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you, may those who love your salvation always say, let God be magnified.” Psalm 70:4

“O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.” Psalm 34:3

“I will praise the name of God with song, and will magnify him with Thanksgiving.” Psalm 69:30

I think of song verses—

“O Magnify the Lord for he is worthy to be praised.” (“O Magnify the Lord.”)

“For who you are and what you’ve done, we magnify the name of Jesus Christ the Lamb upon the throne.” (“Magnify.”)

“Hallelujah, praise the Lord. You are worthy to be praised. I love Jesus and I magnify your name.” (“Magnify Your Name.”)

I get goose bumps every time I hear these verses or sing these songs. But, as I grow older, I have come to appreciate God’s mightiness not in relation to the enormity of his presence but in the small things he has created. He wants us to know praising him can be simple—

Being kind to your neighbor – Holding the hand of a child – Hugging a friend
Thanking someone – Calling or texting just to say hi – Petting your dog or cat
Saying a prayer – Forgiving someone – Smiling at a stranger on the street.
Making a meal for someone “just because”

He is so powerful . . . so impactful . . . so magnificent. Praise God, praise God in all that we do. Thanks be to God! Amen!

Anonymous

ADVENT DAY 10
TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Hi. Right now I am going to share a story with you that was so special to me.

A CRAZY DAY WAS FINALLY OVER at school. While I was in directed studies, through the intercom I heard the lady talking. The problem was my class is so noisy that I could only catch little parts of what she was saying. "Outside of school. . . you may take one if you want." That's all I heard. Not really caring, I rushed to my locker. I took my backpack and binder, and again rushed to the bus. I wanted a good seat.

After I was outside, I saw maybe five men. They were all wearing suits, and they were giving something out to everyone. I started walking in the direction of my bus, then realized they were giving out New Testament Bibles. Immediately I stood in front of one of the tall men, and he gave me a Bible. I smiled, said thank you, then got onto the bus. I did get a good seat. ;)

I thought that this was exactly what God wants. To spread the word about him, and share love with others. It was just like what we talked about in confirmation, advertising God. This was the way that I saw God's presence.

Grace Nesdahl

ADVENT DAY 11
WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 6

OUR FAMILY WAS LIVING IN RIDGECREST, California, and I was working as a mechanical engineer for the United States Naval Weapons Center. We were very active in our church where my wife, Marlys, served as the choir director.

For years I wrestled with feeling the call to ministry but hadn't acted on it. One day while painting our son's bedroom, I received a phone call that my father had had a serious heart attack. I was considering making an emergency trip back to North Dakota when I felt a strange assurance that my dad would live and see me ordained as a pastor. Three years later, in the fall of 1981, I enrolled in Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, by God's grace.

I graduated with a Master of Divinity degree, three years later, but at that time there was a surplus of clergy. After two years, I received a call to East Freeborn Lutheran Church, a rural congregation northeast of Albert Lea, Minnesota. I was ordained as their pastor with my brother-in-law, Melvin Blobaum, as the ordinator. Both my parents and all my aunts and uncles traveled from North Dakota to be present at the ordination service.

The experience of having my dad there for my ordination was a source of encouragement for me throughout my 25 years of service as a pastor and minister of Word and Sacrament at both East Freeborn and St. Paul's Lutheran in Lakota, Iowa. In retrospect, I know that I was led and sustained by the Holy Spirit throughout my entire time of service, but that did not mean that there were not some difficult times. I was able to fulfill my calling of service to God's people in both congregations in a way that helped build them up.

I share these experiences in the hope that you will become more aware of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in your own life and by God's grace follow where the Holy Spirit is leading you. I thank God for the presence, guidance, and leading of the Holy Spirit in the life of me and my late wife, Maryls. Without Marlys's support I wouldn't have gone into the ministry. I pray that the same Spirit would be abundantly present in the lives of our pastors, staff, and members here at Our Savior's during this Advent season and throughout the coming years.

Marino S. Melsted

ADVENT DAY 12
THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 7

I've wondered about the practice of writing a letter to one's younger self. Here's some of what I'd say to my younger self. It's a message I want to remember in these Advent days: God with us.

Dear Younger Me,

I SEE YOU SO CLEARLY at our home church as a kid. You are so at home, so involved in youth ministry and at worship. I remember you walking to church alone one summer Sunday, and relishing how grown-up you felt.

I also remember how you'd listen to the voices of your parents and your sister during the Lord's Prayer. Even as a bratty teenager that was one practice you consistently came back to: hearing each of their voices in that prayer, and sealing the memory away. Years later, grown up with a husband and family of your own, you still listened for each voice praying in worship, and each voice singing, too. You couldn't have known back then that you would continue to treasure the voices of those you love the most, and that those memories would be like God's voice in your ears over a lifetime. You wouldn't have believed that one day you'd be a grandma, and those new small voices would ring so clear and true, praying with you, and a row full of family.

God's voice has been in your ear, and heart, for many years, little Andrea, and I'm writing to let you know it never goes away. God's voice sounds like all those you love, and who love you. It sounds like the voices you've heard in other parts of the world, praying in different languages, yet united in one faith. It sounds like the many communities of faith you've worshipped in throughout your lifetime, singing praises and offering up their prayers. The common thread, the clear voice, always there, has been God's voice, in, with, and under all those voices you've heard and treasured. The Good Shepherd who has called you throughout your life, still calling and comforting, encouraging and loving you all the days of your life. God with us.

John 10:3-4 says, "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

Remember that especially in Advent, little Andrea.

I love you,

Me

P.S.: Don't worry so much about your hair. In the end, it just turns white. Let it go.

Rev. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl

ADVENT DAY 13
FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 8

AT BIRTH, WE ENTER THIS EARTH with our first inhale as we awaken to the world given to us.

I was blessed to be born to parents who loved each other deeply and loved my siblings and me unconditionally. My father was a gentle man. Gentle in disposition and speech and a gentle father who quietly lead us in forming our family values.

As Alzheimer's started to claim Dad's memory, we went on a journey with him, as he transformed from caregiver to the one needing constant care. The path was very long, somethings tiring and often sad, but also a time of our family holding together and leaning on our faith of having the promise of salvation. We often needed to remind ourselves to just breathe.

In death, there is one last exhale. At that moment with my dad, God's promise became an overwhelming living thing. The peace that filled the room and our hearts was intense and heaven felt just a breath away. In prayer and reflection, I can take myself back to that last exhale and feel immersed in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Someday we will all experience heaven, until then we breathe.

Brenda Bernard

ADVENT DAY 14
SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 9

AFTER A RECENT SURGERY, I went to stay in a rehab center for my recovery, since there was no one at home to care for me. At first I felt very uncomfortable there, since everyone seemed to know one another and I was the newcomer.

Strange as it may seem, there are certain groups who sit at certain tables, and newcomers have to be careful to choose an appropriate place to sit. I was fortunate that everyone introduced themselves to me at the first dinner, and they didn't ask too many questions about my reasons for being there. There seemed to be a code of privacy.

I have no complaints about the care I received there, although the weekends got long. Fami-

lies streamed in and out of the several corridors, and I was very happy when my family came for a while. On Sunday morning I watched Our Savior's worship service on television and that brought a new appreciation of how wide the ministry of our church is. Afterward I wondered how I would spend the rest of the day. There was a knock on my door, and one of my new table-mates, Sandra, quietly asked if I would like to come to a hymn sing. I hesitated for just a minute and then, shuffling along behind my walker, I followed her to the activity room.

The chaplain was very busy inviting other residents to come, but only one other woman joined us. The third person wasn't willing to share her name, but she did announce clearly that she attended First Lutheran Church.

We all were given hymnals, and the first song was "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Sandra knew all the words and the other two of us followed along in the hymnal. The chaplain chose a few other hymns, some of which were unfamiliar to me as they were part of what might be called "Praise Ministry," but as I was impressed that Sandra knew them all. She chose a few of her favorites, and all in all, it was quite a pleasant hymn sing even with just three of us.

On the way back to our room I thanked Sandra for inviting me to come. She told me that she had been at the facility for over five months, recovering from brain surgery that was supposed to stop the progression of her muscular disease. Her hair was just beginning to grow back, and she was thrilled about that. I asked her how she was able to maintain her positive outlook, and she announced boldly, "God isn't finished with me yet."

I thought about those words long after I left the rehab center. Is God finished with me yet? Am I called to do something directed by God in the remaining years of my life? I know Sandra is spreading God's love throughout the corridors of the rehab center. Everyone loves Sandra, and through her they may come to know the love of God.

Anonymous

ADVENT DAY 15
SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 10



*“He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of
their hearts.”*

Luke 1:51

ADVENT DAY 16
MONDAY,
DECEMBER 11

GOD SPEAKS TO US in many different ways and at many different times.

One example of a time where I felt him with me was a random moment recently where I felt called to reach out to a friend of mine who had lost her father in the last few months. This is a good friend of mine, but we hadn't talked in a while. That day her dad's name came across a social media feed of mine and it inspired me to reach out to her to let her know I was thinking of her, and if she ever needed to talk I would be there for her. She responded that she was going through a rough few days and she really appreciated my reaching out to her.

I believe God had his fingerprints all over that one, by giving me the inspiration—from a social media feed, of all things. I love the verse from Jeremiah where he talks about the plans he has for us, that we are to be loved and not hurt. God knows us, he knows what we need and he knows how we will get it done. His power never ceases to amaze me.

Charlie Nesdaahl

ADVENT DAY 17
TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 12

“[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”
Luke 1:52–53

Our world worships power. Those who get attention tend to be those who exert some degree of power over others. Often, though, power becomes a corrupting force that destroys relationships and community.

Mary's song sings of a reversal of the whole power dynamic present in our world. Her words signal a change in the status quo. The powerful are brought low and the lowly are lifted up. The hungry are filled and those who are over-full are empty. And all of this is because of the baby she was carrying within her. God had acted in a way that changed everything, and this was Good News.

How is a shake-up to the order of society good news? Change of such magnitude can often become chaotic. Is chaos good news?

It is when it restores justice. It is when oppression is eliminated. It is when abuse of power is overrun by a force for good.

In this day and age of great abuses of power by governments, law enforcement, corporate executives, and the like, how might we live as Advent people whose lives magnify the goodness and the justice of our God who comes to us not as a powerful ruler but as a baby born in the backwater town of Bethlehem? What changes in your life is God calling you to make so that your life's pursuit is not that of power and prestige but rather being a person who helps usher in the divine reversals of which Mary sang?

God of reversals, I praise you for your justice, your mercy, and your passion for those at the bottom, those on the fringe. Give me that same passion, that I may be an agent of your divine reversal and a force for good. In Jesus' name I pray; Amen.

Pr. Randy Gehring

ADVENT DAY 18
WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 13

THOUGHTS RACED THROUGH MY GROGGY MIND as soon as I woke up. It was an April morning in 1997 and I had an appointment with Sister DelRey Thieman, my spiritual director. But a feeling of angst stirred in me, causing me to have second thoughts about going. In fact, I decided that I did not want to go. My oldest sister had stage four ovarian cancer and would die two months later. Since DelRey was a nun, I did not want to hear about Purgatory or Limbo.

Now granted, in all the deaths over the years that she helped me grieve DelRay never once mentioned Purgatory or Limbo! Not once. But I was convinced that morning that I did not want to go. So I called her with high hopes of getting her answering machine. No such luck.

I quickly said, "Sister DelRey, I won't be able to come for my appointment this morning," I

thought we'd reschedule and I'd be off the hook. But no, that didn't happen.

"What's wrong?" she kindly asked.

"I, uh... I don't feel good," I stammered.

Yikes! There was the lie! But then she really threw me when she said, "Oh honey, I feel bad for you. I'll come to your house."

"Oh, oh...no, no. I'll just reschedule," I said as I rushed to hang up the instrument of deception.

I walked heavily into our kitchen where my husband stood, and groaned, "Owen, I just lied to a nun!" I felt mortified by my behavior while he just laughed and asked, "Well, how does that feel?"

Certainly not good. Awful. I felt horrible.

So I plodded back to the scene of the crime and picked up the heavy phone and dialed, this time hoping she would answer. "Sister DelRey, I lied. Can I still keep my appointment?" After a miraculous "healing," I drove to her office.

We had a good laugh and then came God's lesson as she said, "I'm glad that you told the truth, but don't be too proud of your actions; thank God for his Holy Spirit who nudged the truth out of you."

Dear God, thank you for the wise Counselor you have given to live inside of me.

Delaine Shay

ADVENT DAY 19
THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 14

ON MY MIDDLE-SCHOOL MISSION TRIP to Kenosha this year, I saw God in a lot of places.

One of those places was a nursing home I served at. I have been in a nursing home before, on a past mission trip to Duluth. The nursing home that I worked at there was a lot different than the one in Kenosha. What we would do was go to the residence rooms and ask them if they wanted to talk to someone. So they did not come out of their rooms that often, except for food or small things that the nursing home put on.

But in Kenosha, the residents were out of their room almost all of the time. The people that work there were very nice and made it so much more of an enjoyable place to be. It did not feel like a hospital or someplace unpleasant. It felt like a fun place. They had games that they played every hour, like bowling, Ping-Pong, chess, and puzzles.

I saw God in the residents because you got to know them by name and they all had something that they were known for—like the woman who made it her job (in a sense) to learn all of our names and know as much about us as she could. God was there all the time. You could feel it in the way that the staff walked around and how the residents smiled. They had church services so that they could feel closer to God.

My trip to Kenosha was very eye-opening—to see how much a smile, a wave, or a high-five can mean to somebody. I can't wait to go to Minnesota next year and help other people who are not as fortunate as we are.

Ethan Boyens

ADVENT DAY 20
FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 15

AT TIMES OF THE UNEXPECTED, I am at first always taken back by the fear that often comes with the announcement of such an unanticipated event. Mary seemed to take the news of her pregnancy without a great deal of fear, as described by Luke. Yet when my 16-year-old daughter, a soon-to-be senior in high school, shared that she was pregnant, I was gripped by fear, not knowing what to do or say at the time.

I left the living room at that moment knowing I needed to be alone with God, so I jumped in the truck and drove to Our Savior's. Luckily the doors were open and I could make my way to the chapel, where I knelt at the altar and wept tears of fear for a future I had not envisioned. "What am I supposed to do, oh Lord?" was my plea as I knelt there in silence.

Soon I heard God tell me, "You need to go love her, just as I have loved you."

And so I did with a great peace in my heart. A few months later we rejoiced in the birth of a baby girl who, now 19 years later, recently just began her first year of college.

Today I live in greater confidence, knowing how the Lord works in our lives—perhaps the kind of confidence that Mary felt when the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30).

While the path in life may be unconventional, we can greet each day with the assurance of God's love and know that we are favored in God's eyes. As God has first loved us, let us go about the business of loving and caring for our neighbor and share the good news of hope because of the resurrection. Praise be to God.

Fred Aderhold

ADVENT DAY 21
SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 16

GOD TRULY DOES MAKE HIS PRESENCE KNOWN and deeply felt in the midst of our most difficult pain.

This past summer was a very emotionally charged one for our family; we were expecting our second child in mid-July and my grandma's health had been declining as she was attempting to begin therapy yet again for her broken leg. Being an occupational therapist, I know the limits people must push their bodies to in order to achieve a level of independence in caring for themselves. My grandma, even though she was 98 years old, was a fighter and she certainly fought until the very end. I was very close to her, and I had such a special bond with her. Little did I know that God would work so profoundly on the Fourth of July.

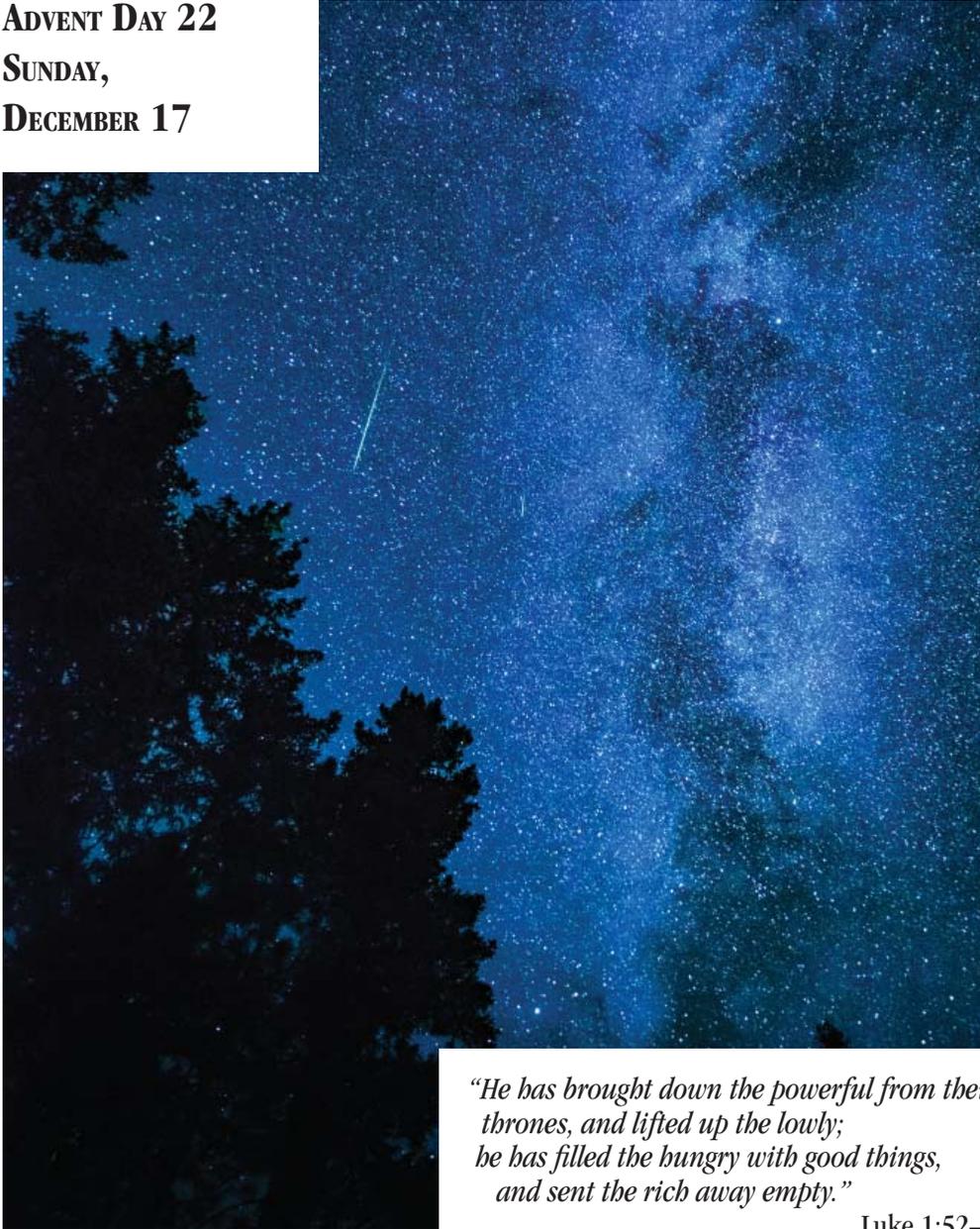
I wear my emotions on my sleeve and my big heart can sometimes be one of my biggest obstacles to overcome. God, of course, knows this personal struggle of mine and he certainly knew how to best comfort my hurting heart that longed for just a little more time with my grandma. As I sat with her at the nursing home on her final days, I experienced such divine intervention taking place that was so difficult to describe. As my grandma was letting go of her dwelling place here on earth, she was about to be welcomed into God's heavenly kingdom. Words didn't have to be spoken—I could feel God's presence in my heart as I accepted his will, despite how badly I wanted her to meet our little baby. But God's timing is perfect, as challenging as this is to accept.

God made it clear to me that it was my turn to “let go” and go take care of myself (38 weeks pregnant). My grandma passed away within an hour of my leaving the nursing home, and she entered her eternal home. I felt a sense of peace that she was no longer suffering.

Brooklyn Grace was born later that same day. The Fourth of July took on a whole new meaning for our family this year: “Life to Life.” Even though my grandma didn't meet our little girl physically, I am confident she kissed our precious baby in passing from this life to the next. My grandma truly does live on through our little miracle, Brooklyn Grace.

Laura Wong and Family

ADVENT DAY 22
SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 17



*“He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.”*

Luke 1:52–53

ADVENT DAY 23
MONDAY,
DECEMBER 18

I HAVE OFTEN STOPPED TO GIVE THANKS and praise to God for what he has done.

I grew up on a farm in north central South Dakota with my parents and two younger brothers. Mom and Dad were married in 1930 and rural life was challenging, as a severe drought and dust storms prevailed. Hard work and persistent prayer helped our family during this time.

World War II and rains arrived in the late 1930s and early 1940s. A new hope dawned for my parents and many others trying to make a living on the farm. With sufficient rains, crops were now able to grow and mature. Cattle had ample pasture for food, and cows gave milk. Gardens were producing vegetables for eating. Life was good.

The elder of my two brothers had juvenile diabetes and was on a strict diet. He required fruits and vegetables, some of which had to be purchased in the grocery store. Daily insulin injections were necessary to sustain his life. It was necessary for all of us to make sacrifices so his medical and dietary needs could be met. Many days were tense in our family because of the lack of money for anything extra. I had two dresses for school and one dress for Sunday. One pair of bib overalls and a shirt served as my work clothes for outdoor chores. One closet in our three-room farm home held clothes for our family of five. We felt secure as we gave daily thanks to God.

With this meager lifestyle and simple surroundings, my days were often spent outdoors where I could experience the wonder of God's creation and hear the music of the prairie provided by songs of the wind and rain and birds.

Mother became ill and died of breast cancer in 1952. Now what? I was trying to go to college 40 miles from home and also provide help for Dad and my brothers on the farm. Less than five years later Dad became ill and died of adrenal cancer. God prevailed and adequately supplied our needs. My brothers and I magnified God's love in prayer as he guided and protected us.

Let us give unending praise and thanks as we continue to magnify God in our uncertain world.

Margaret Novak

ADVENT DAY 24
TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 19

THE ALARM WENT OFF, beckoning me toward a day I preferred not face. Coffee silently cheered me on as I tried to ready for the world on the outside even if I didn't feel it on the inside. Life sometimes does this: Circumstance knocks you off-balance and leaves you struggling for footing.

Leaning into pain and being real through it has never come easy to me. Somehow it feels safer to have a one-on-one with God before I let anyone see me weak, vulnerable, broken, down. But my Tuesday held unique purpose that would make this day matter and, with it, a perfectly placed hope.

Rapidly moving little fingers worked their way down fleece's edge with visions of it soon blanketing others in warmth. Smiles and laughter and chatter of helping others have better days filled my ears.

It is an awkward world this side of Heaven. The one that jars us yet still inspires us. The one that breaks us, yet in those very moments shows us undeniable beauty.

I knew the woman standing next to me, though not well. As the organizer of the event, I wanted her to know why it meant what it did. I also needed to know that I could release the words running through my mind into open air and survive. And the story fell out. Broken.

Advent is a messy time. Even as faith-filled people, we tend to focus on the glorious ending rather than stay in step with The Story, which brims with dilemma, fear, restlessness, confusion—days looking different than Mary and Joseph expected.

But this God that we love finds way to make the uncomfortable beautiful once again.

"I get that," she replied. "I've been there, too."

And the walls around my heart fell to the freedom of community and compassion. And in releasing my fear I got to see God in the face of another.

Twelve hours later, there were still dishes that needed to be done. I mindlessly began moving my washcloth over the crockpots when a second set of hands appeared in the soapy water.

I turned to see my new friend grabbing another dish in silent solidarity. Presence that transformed my experience.

Thank you, God, for showing up to remind us you are not alone. I am right here. May we have courage to say yes in our mess that we might see you.

Melissa Nesdahl

ADVENT DAY 25
WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 20

ON THE FACE OF IT, the idea of “magnifying” God seems ridiculous. After all, to magnify something is to make it appear larger than it is, “to cause to appear greater, more important, or more extreme than is in fact the case,” according to my cracked and shelf-worn copy of the American Heritage Dictionary, a college-graduation present from my grandfather.

So let me get this straight: You’re suggesting that I—little ol’ me—should undertake the business of making God “appear greater, more important, or more extreme than is in fact the case”? God—the creator of the universe, the ground of being, the great I Am...that one? That’s whom I should be magnifying, making appear more important, and so on?

Good one.

Oh, but look—further down on the impossibly thin page (online dictionaries may be faster, but they are nowhere near as satisfying in a tactile sense), here’s a reference to the Middle English *magnifien*, “to extol, from Old French *magnifier*, from Latin *magnificāre*, from *magnificus*, magnificent.”

Now we’re getting somewhere.

The idea, I think, is not that my “magnifying” God will somehow help God appear greater or more important, but rather that magnifying God—exalting God, extolling God’s greatness, pointing to and focusing on God’s magnificence—might help *me* go deeper into that greatness,

to develop a greater appreciation of the goodness that surrounds us, to hone the skill of seeing God even in times when and places where God seems to be hiding.

This is not something that comes naturally to me. Generally, I am more inclined to take a “stuff happens” view of things. But when I pause and give myself a mental nudge to look at things more closely, I am invariably pleased and surprised at the result.

An example: Four months ago today, my mother-in-law reached the end of her life. She was a treasure, and while I miss her and plan to continue to miss her deeply, I am grateful for having known her for almost four decades. Hers was a remarkable life: As a child, she fled her home in Latvia with her mother and siblings during World War II. Eventually, improbably, she found herself employed in Moody County, South Dakota, where she met and married an eligible young farmer, with whom she raised four children and left a positive impression on every life she touched in nearly 70 years on her beloved farm.

If I choose to think in such terms—if I give myself that mental nudge to *make* myself think in such terms—I can only marvel at the sequence of events that shaped her life, my wife’s life, my life, our kids’ lives, and so on. A sequence that ultimately belongs to a God who pulls everything together and pushes everything around, directly and indirectly, purposely and unintentionally (I think God likes to stay open to surprises), and makes stuff happen. All stuff. All the time.

And for that, good God, I thank you, I praise you, I magnify you.

Bill Reynolds

ADVENT DAY 26
THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 21

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”
Matthew 3:3

THE WORD *PREPARE*, in Isaiah 40:3 and Matthew 1:3, is probably the most recognizable use of the word in the Bible. After all, we are now preparing for the second coming of Jesus Christ and so “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” is very applicable to us today. *Prepare* is in the Bible over

200 times and is often the Advent theme for many churches.

One year when the Advent theme at our church was “Prepare!” God provided an opportunity for Megan, my youngest daughter, and I to experience a dramatic lesson in being prepared. We were visiting family in Nebraska City, Nebraska, right after Thanksgiving, and I decided to go for a walk. Megan wanted to come along and we went to the shore of the Missouri River, about a mile away. It was unseasonably cold, large chunks of ice had already formed on the river and were moving quickly downstream. We heard a dog crying out and saw a German Shepherd coming toward us, in the freezing water, and unable to get out on the icy banks. I found a large branch and gave it to Megan, took off my boots and coat and found a large sheet of ice on the bank that the dog was approaching. The dog was exhausted. I lay down on the ice and got a grip on him and pulled him to safety. I put my boots on and dried off and wrapped the dog in my coat. He had a collar with tags that indicated he lived close by. After 20 minutes the dog seemed to fully recovered, so we all walked toward his home. When he could see his house he ran straight to the door and it all ended with very happy dog owners.

Megan was pretty excited by this experience and had lots of questions. I grew up in Minnesota, by many lakes and rivers, and had first-hand experience with people getting in trouble ice skating, fishing, and snowmobiling on ice. (It was difficult as a child to wait for the lake to freeze so we could play hockey!) I also spent a lot of time on lakes and rivers as a lifeguard. So I knew what to do around water. I told Megan the branch was to help me if I fell through the ice, and I’d taken off my boots and coat so I could get out of the water easier and have dry boots and coat to warm up.

When she shared the story back home, Megan used the word *prepared*. This sparked a conversation about the Advent theme “Prepare!” and we had a deeper appreciation of the season of Advent because of it.

I pray that I will never stop preparing myself and others for an eternity with God. Our theme this year at OS� is “Magnify!” How do we magnify? I’m going to do these three things:

1. *Pay Attention!* Slow down in the frantic pace of this world and look for God in everyday life.
2. *Participate!* Get a closer look at God, dig deeper into the scriptures, songs, and sermons.
3. *Be Still and Know!* Spend more time with God in prayer, being sure to take time to listen.

God bless you and your family as you “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Gene LeVasseur

ADVENT DAY 27
FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 22

SOMETIMES DURING MY DEVOTIONS, I see myself as a small grain of sand among the 108.2 billion other human grains of sand born throughout human history. I visualize my small sandy self in a woodland streambed, on a sunny beach, or in a desert sand dune. Once situated in one of those sandy

places, I meditate on the characteristics of God: Immortal, Almighty, Creator, Eternal, Omnipotent, Holy, the I AM. I marvel how God (like a high-resolution satellite imaging system that, when fed my street address, shows me pulling weeds in my backyard) chooses to “zoom in” on the small grain of sand that is me. Scripture says that God knows me inside and out (Psalm 139), even to the number of hairs on my head (Matthew 10:30). I cannot comprehend why or how a God-so-big would notice me-so-small among the billions of other smalls around me. In his book *Spectrums: Our Mind-Boggling Universe from Infinitesimal to Infinity*, David Blatner claims our human perspective is so limited that we “can’t handle the biggitude” of our physical universe. Well, my mind is completely boggled by the “biggitude” of God and the “smallitude” of me!

Dr. Gary Greenberg, a visual artist and scientist, added new dimensions to my sandy/big/small meditation. In his TED Talk “The Beautiful Nano Details of Our World,” he explains the “magical world behind reality” uncovered through 3D microscopy. He developed photographs of magnified grains of ordinary sand, beach sands from the Great Lakes to Maui, and out-of-this-world moon sand. His photographs revealed “big beauty in tiny things.” Every grain of sand is different; no two are alike, Greenberg explained. “Every grain is coming from somewhere and going somewhere—a snapshot in time.” The take-away lesson from these tiny magnified jewels? “Things even as ordinary as a grain of sand can be truly extraordinary if you look closely and if you look from a different and new point of view.”

Thanks to Greenberg, my sand grain meditation changed. No more blah, uniform sand grains. Now I see a kaleidoscope of tiny shapes, patterns, and colors that is a metaphor for humanity. Each human grain of sand is different; no two are alike. Each of us, in our brief flash of life, is “coming from somewhere and going somewhere—a snapshot in time.” God, The-One-Who-Looks-Closely, zooms in, seeing right through our sinful graininess to “the magical world behind reality” revealing “big beauty in tiny things.” And in an amazing burst of love, God became small like us—small enough to be conceived in a young woman’s womb and born in a manger so we can be “truly extraordinary.” Praised be the Biggitude of our God!

Joan Bacon

ADVENT DAY 28
SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 23

believe it was happening to us.

I HAVE TWO YOUNGER SISTERS and our families were always very close, even vacationing together for a week each summer. After our parents died we had a disagreement on what to do with the farmland. I'd always heard about families who had been torn apart because of an inheritance. I couldn't

After a legal battle the farmland was settled, but the separation of families went on for several years with only brief, strained communications. I really wanted to forgive my sisters, but the hurt went very deep and forgiveness is difficult.

Then the call came from my niece that my sister had aggressive stage four cancer and was dying. I called immediately to tell her that I was praying for her and wanted to come and see her. As time has gone on we have continued to work at repairing our relationship. My prayers were answered and we were given another chance.

Shortly after the horrific diagnosis my sister had some genetic tests. She started taking a special drug that specifically targets her cancer. In a few months her cancer was in total remission and she was feeling great with no drug side effects. We were given yet another chance, a miracle. We are separated by hundreds of miles but we now see each other more frequently and communicate regularly.

The Bible has many passages that tell how God cares for us, forgives us and gives us another chance. Just as my sisters and I were given another chance and a fresh start. My prayers were answered.

Dear Lord, thank you for giving us second and third chances to begin again.

Judy Winter

ADVENT DAY 29
SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 24

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Luke 1:46-47

I LOVE SPORTS. I love the competition. I love to see what the human body can do when pushed to the limit. And I love the emotional ride you take either as a player or as a devoted fan when the championship is on the line.

In this day and age of televised sports and athletes serving as role models, those of us who pay attention to sports will see or hear fairly regularly an athlete thanking God at the end of a winning performance. To most of us, it seems a little out of place; the cynics among us wonder if the same thing would be said if the camera wasn't recording the moment, and the theologians among us are quick to remind us that it's fairly likely that God could care less about who won the game.

Even though I may fall into both of those camps at one time or another, I am open to another interpretation, a Magnificat interpretation. When Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, when both of them were pregnant and the enormity of what God was up to through both of them began to sink in, she burst into spontaneous praise to God. Overrun with emotion, she simply couldn't keep it bottled up any longer, so she gave thanks. She praised God for being so awesome. She pointed not to herself but to the God who was up to something much bigger than herself.

In my mind, that's not a bad move on her part, and maybe, if I paint the athlete's witness in the best possible light, maybe that's the move they're making too.

Could that be our move when we simply can't contain our excitement and joy over life's really good moments? Could we find a way to authentically praise God when everything seems to be going really well?

If we do, maybe we'll be more inclined to turn to God when the going gets tough.

Awesome God, you are amazing and worthy of my praise. Today, I praise you for your faithfulness and grace, and I lean on you for strength and courage. You are my God, and I praise you. Amen.

Pr. Randy Gehring

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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

Luke 2:10–14



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