Your People Long to Greet You
O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?
Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart’s delight!
O kindle, Lord most holy, a lamp within my breast,
to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.

Sunday, Nov. 30
Exodus 19:1-6

A couple says “I do” and pledges to journey together in sickness and health. A judge signs the adoption papers and a new family is formed. A firm handshake seals the deal that launches a budding business venture. No matter the means, entering into a relationship implies commitment, trust and hope for a shared future.

The Israelites are three months into their wilderness journey. God has been present along the way, leading them by pillars of cloud and fire, sending manna and quail for nourishment. Now God instructs Moses to explicitly tell the people, “You shall be my treasured possession ... a holy nation.” God clearly desires a more personal connection, complete with commitment, trust and hope for a shared future. God’s words are an invitation into a deeper relationship.

This season, God invites us to come closer—closer to the Word, closer to God’s heart. “O Lord, how shall we meet you?” asks the Advent hymn. We might start by accepting the invitation.

O God, you call us into a relationship with you that will transform us from the inside out. Prepare our hearts to receive you, so that we might be surprised, comforted and changed by your presence. Amen.

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Monday, Dec. 1
Hosea 11:1-4

Yesterday’s Exodus passage affirmed that God chose Israel. In today’s passage we’re reminded that, sadly, Israel didn’t always choose God. At times the relationship was woefully one-sided. More often than not—especially during times of trouble—distractions, temptations and even despair led the people astray. Perhaps the same has been true for your own relationship with God.

Yet God’s love never falters, reassures the prophet. How can this be? If you’re a parent you might understand. When your child is disappointing, or even willfully disobedient, the underlying commitment remains. Whether a parent or not, a broken heart is the price we sometimes pay for unconditional love.

In our relationship with God, we see God’s unconditional love poured out most clearly through the cross. Yet God does not stop there. Like the Israelites, God feeds us at the communion table. God shares our burdens. God reaches out with arms of love to welcome us home.

When we stray, merciful God, draw us back to you. Thank you for choosing to love us and for never letting us go. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 2
Micah 4:1-5

Do you have a truth-teller in your life? Someone who you know has your back but also isn’t afraid to say that you’re headed in the wrong direction? Truth-tellers can be hard to listen to, but hopefully they can be trusted—because they deliver that truth in love.

Micah was such a truth-teller. Israel was facing certain defeat at the hands of the mighty Assyrian army. Their only chance for survival was to put their trust in God. Yet their worship had become hollow, their sense of justice distorted. Micah’s words both call the people to account for their failings, and cast a vision for what life could be like if they change their ways.

Advent can be a truth-telling time—a time of reflection and repentance, a chance to focus on how your priorities and values align with those of Jesus. What might Micah’s call to “return to God” say to you this season?

Help me take a good look at myself, Lord, and see those places that reflect your will—and those that draw me away from you. Amen.
Wednesday, Dec. 3
Micah 5:2-5a

Where are you from? How you answer that question gives people an insight into your past. It might explain your accent, or hint at your cultural heritage or point to your favorite sports teams. But it might also evoke stereotypes or preconceived notions about you—notions that often can only be overcome through a personal relationship.

When the prophet names Bethlehem as the place from which salvation will come, our Christian ears hear “birthplace of Jesus.” But if we were in the prophet’s day, we’d likely hear “home of King David.” That’s what Micah’s listeners would have held on to—that out of this tiny village came Israel’s greatest king. And that king himself was a surprise: The youngest and smallest of Jesse’s boys seemed more fit to tend sheep than lead a nation. It’s a reminder that with God the least can become the greatest, and that we should expect the unexpected. Perhaps where we are from is not nearly as important as whom God is creating us to be.

Wherever we are from, O Lord, and wherever we may be going, may we find our home and our future in you this day. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 4
Micah 6:6-8

A favorite premarital counseling exercise of mine is to have each person write up a list of 15-20 things they expect of their partner. Those expectations can be big (like contributing to household income) or small (like not leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor). Couples report that it usually takes a while to get started, but then the list grows quickly. My hope is that as they share their lists, they will understand one another a little more deeply, and maybe even avert a future conflict. As a wise person once said, “Unspoken expectations are disappointments waiting to happen.”

In Micah 6:8, God is perfectly clear about what is expected of God’s people: that we will do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Are these things always easy to do? Of course not. Nor are they one-time accomplishments to be completed and checked off a list. But they can help us understand God’s heart, and shape our own hearts as we put them into practice.

Lord, help me live up to your expectations today as I encounter those in need of your mercy and love. Amen.
Friday, Dec. 5
Psalm 85:1-7
The anguish of a broken relationship is particularly gut-wrenching. Whether it’s the disappointment of unmet expectations, the hurt of betrayal or an unexpected break-up, our hearts take a beating.

Amidst the pain, though, there is often an underlying wish that forgiveness and reconciliation will take place. Sometimes—with a lot of hard work and trust—those things do happen. Sometimes, when one person wants to work it out, but the other doesn’t, they don’t. And sometimes—as in situations of abuse and violence—maybe they shouldn’t even be attempted, at least not without professional help. Whatever the situation, one thing seems certain: We have to face the hurt before we can begin to heal.

The psalmist speaks of this sad reality with longing. The love God once showed has seemingly disappeared. The close bond the people felt has slipped away. The psalmist’s cries are our cries: “How long?” “Will you be angry forever?” “Will you not come back?” The words are plaintive: “Please, can I have another chance?”

Lord, I ask forgiveness for the times when I have hurt another. Guide me with your mercy and compassion when I strive to make things right. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 6
Psalm 85:8-13
Anytime problems arise it’s easy to question the nature of a relationship. Is the pain worth it? Can we really work things out? What if I get hurt again? And yet, when your heart is invested and the love you feel is real and deep, all you can do is make yourself vulnerable, reach out in humility and pray for healing to come along.

The analogy doesn’t fit perfectly, but much of the same can be said of our relationship with God. God first reaches out to us. Yet we have an important role to play in ensuring that our relationship with the Lord is healthy and life-giving. We need to seek forgiveness for the times we have neglected or turned away from God. We need to recommit our hearts to Jesus.

We never know for sure what reconciliation will look like—with the Lord or with others. But the psalmist’s words describe one possible result: “Love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss.” And slowly, slowly, healing begins.

Protect my relationships, Lord, and help me treat the people I love with care and respect. Amen.
I lay in fetters, groaning; you came to set me free.
I stood, my shame bemoaning; you came to honor me.
A glorious crown you give me, a treasure safe on high
That will not fail or leave me as earthly riches fly.

Sunday, Dec. 7
Mark 1:1-8

The second stanza of our hymn is a story of unexpected salvation. “I lay in fetters, groaning; you came to set me free.” In the midst of life’s struggles, when we feel the most lost, broken or alone, Jesus comes to bring hope and second chances. The news is almost more than we dare to believe: Is it true? Is it true for me?

The Gospel of Mark begins not with a trip to the manger, but with the story of John the Baptist. John is calling the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The people have been waiting for God to come and help them. And now, John says, the long-anticipated Messiah is here. The news is almost more than the weary people dare to believe. But John’s call will lead to salvation for them—and for us: Repent, for the one is coming who will forgive your sins.

Lord, we wait for you to come and set us free from despair, shame, emptiness and suffering. Come quickly. Amen.
Monday, Dec. 8
Isaiah 40:1-2

My colleague has a delightful 3-year-old son. He’s cute as a button. Twice a week, he comes to work with his dad before going to preschool. When I hear those little feet scampering down the hall, my heart perks up. There’s no better way to start the day than by holding out my arms and having him run into them to give me a hug. No matter how long my to-do list or how stressful my morning, spending a few minutes with my little buddy always sends me back to my desk with a smile on my face.

Do you have times of anticipation that lift your spirits? Daily devotions can be those moments. They center our hearts in the word and attune us to God’s voice. We need to encounter God in Scripture because we can forget God’s life-giving power. The Bible’s words can breathe peace and hope: “Comfort, comfort.” “Do not be afraid.” “Lo, I will be with you always.” They can give our days much-needed perspective.

Thank you, Lord, for lifting our spirits with your reassuring word. Draw us close and refresh us today. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 9
Isaiah 40:3-5

Last year’s Oscar-nominated movie “Nebraska” told the plaintive story of Woody, a man who journeyed home to claim what he was sure was a winning sweepstakes prize. Who among us hasn’t been enticed with words like, “You may already be a winner!” Like Woody, at times we desperately want to believe that there’s something better for us out there—a life that’s more satisfying, more comfortable, more fulfilling than the one we have now. And sometimes that belief leads us on a long—if not entirely productive or pleasant—journey.

The prophet Isaiah isn’t telling the people they’ve won the lottery. He’s bearing an even more enticing message: “Your exile is over! The traveling road home will be smooth and easy. You will see the glory of the Lord.” These words send their desperate hearers on a journey. They need to believe that something better is out there, and that God will deliver them.

What messages have you been listening to lately, and where have they been leading you?

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Guide my steps today, that I might walk in your path. Amen.
Your People Long to Greet You

Wednesday, Dec. 10
Isaiah 40:9-11

Waiting. It doesn’t matter if it’s for a baby to come, or the check to arrive, or the doctor to call or simply for the light to change. Waiting can be one of the most challenging things we do.

Isaiah’s people were waiting, too. Their misery was justified: Jerusalem and the temple in ruins, the people exiled from their homeland, prayers seemingly unheard. They were waiting for some sign that God had not abandoned them, for something to give them hope. The prophet paints for them this picture: The Lord is coming. He is strong, able to defeat every enemy. He is gentle, ready to gather the people into his arms. Imagine what the future will be like! Take heart. It will come.

During times of waiting, we need words that give us something in which to believe. The next time you find yourself waiting, try breathing deeply. Imagine the Holy Spirit filling you with patience and peace. And trust that God’s goodness will come.

For all people waiting for a sign of your presence, O Lord, we pray that you would send your Spirit and give them hope. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 11
Psalm 27:1, 4-5

In the midst of the holiday hustle and bustle, could you be satisfied with just one thing? This season seems to celebrate more, more, more. But what if there was just one thing on your Christmas list; just one wish your heart could make? What would it be? Good health? Enough money? A life companion? World peace?

The psalmist wishes for just one thing: to be fully immersed in God’s beauty and truth. “One thing I asked of the Lord: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life” (Psalm 27:4). Perhaps he imagines that doing so would lead his every action to reflect God’s heart of love and mercy; that his every thought would center on the good and upright, every night’s sleep be free from fear and worry. Perhaps if we pursued God like we wish for so many other things, we would be less consumed with the thought of more, more, more and instead find peace in the one who truly satisfies our deepest need.

Give me a laser-like focus on you, O Lord, so that my life might revolve around and be guided by your love. Amen.

Friday, Dec. 12
Philippians 1:3-6

Imagine that today is bread-making day. It starts with a little yeast and warm water dissolved in a bowl. Cups of flour and spoonfuls of salt are gently mixed in. It’s a mess on the counter until the kneading process blends everything together. Finally, a lump of dough is carefully turned into a bowl and set aside to rise. It doesn’t look like much ... but with time and patience, that lump of dough will expand until it becomes a loaf of tasty goodness.

The promise that something beautiful will come from an unfinished “mess” isn’t limited to bread dough. Paul writes that God “who began a good work in you will be faithful to bring it to completeness.”

The truth is, God isn’t finished with any of us ... thank goodness. But it takes patience, faith and confidence to trust that wherever you find yourself—even if it feels like a mess—is not your finished destination.

Thank you for working in my life, Lord, and promising to bring forth something good from my messes. Amen.

Saturday, Dec. 13
Philippians 4:4-6

The Lord is near: This is the message of Advent. No matter where you are, no matter what doubts and worries and fears keep you up at night or fill you with anxiety during the day, the Savior is close at hand. Do not worry. Do not be afraid. You are not alone. The Lord is near.

Nestled in the middle of this wonderful, familiar passage of Philippians are these words of unbelievable promise and comfort. They are for the single person dreading facing the holidays alone. They are for low-income workers who don’t have enough to buy presents for their children. They are for the grieving, who can’t imagine a family dinner with an empty chair at the table. They are for anyone who finds their hearts filled with longing. The Lord is near. And He will give you peace.

Fill us with your peace, O Lord, and draw near to us today. Amen.
Love caused your incarnation; love brought you down to me.  
Your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty.  
Oh, love beyond all telling, that led you to embrace  
In love, all love excelling, our lost and fallen race.

Sunday, Dec. 14  
Malachi 3:17-18

Stanza 3 of our hymn makes a bold claim: “Love caused your incarnation; love brought you down to me.” These words catch our attention. We are promised that God’s primary activity is love. People in Malachi’s day, in the hard years of rebuilding following the exile, questioned whether God really loved them. The prophet assured them of God’s care and affection: “I have loved you.” But still the people wondered: “How have you loved us?” Show us (Malachi 1:2)! 

Aren’t there times when we ask the same thing? Prayers seem to go nowhere, troubles linger, we long for God to come and make the world right. God’s word through Malachi is meant to lift our sagging spirits: “On the day when I act, I will spare them as parents spare their children ...” (Malachi 3:17). In the midst of questions and doubts, we put our trust in God’s enduring love.

God our parent, thank you for promising to love us always. Help us to trust in your promise to come to us. Amen.
Monday, Dec. 15
Psalm 42:1-8

Some scholars think Psalm 42 comes from the time of the Babylonian exile. Enemies cruelly taunt the exiles: “Where is your God?” In the face of overwhelming sorrow, the psalmist remembers how they went in joyful procession to the temple. There is yearning for those times to return: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” Memory seems to be one of the keys to waiting, memories especially of God’s never-ending love. The psalmist speaks confidently: “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me ...” Is this a claim that you are able to make? Maybe at some times more than others? We have our share of sorrow and tears. If anyone asks, “Where is your God?”—or even if you ask it yourself—try remembering some of the ways that God’s love has been present for you over the years. And as you name these things, ask God to fill your heart with longing.

God of steadfast love, help me remember those times when you have come to me. Fill my heart with a longing for your presence. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 16
Psalm 86:11-13

In Psalm 86 the psalmist asks for something quite remarkable: an undivided heart. We’re in the midst of a season that pulls our hearts in every direction: buy this product, consume that food and drink, find happiness in all this merrymaking. More often than not, it seems, we find ourselves chasing after the very happiness that’s being promised. So ... does it help? Maybe for a while. But after an hour or two, or a day or two, the feelings come back—and so does that sense of being pulled in too many directions. How about praying for an undivided heart? An answer to that prayer will mean different things to different people—perhaps a few moments of quiet in a busy season, an act of intentional generosity, a focus on God’s larger claim upon your life—but you may end up with a sense of peace that you did not have before. You may even end up with a heart that feels whole.

Give me an undivided heart, O God. Help me walk in your way for me. Amen.
Wednesday, Dec. 17  
Lamentations 3:22-26

How did you start your day? With a quick push of the snooze button? A desperate search for a cup of coffee? A rushed commute to work? By any chance, did your day start with this reminder? “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” What makes these words particularly poignant is that they were part of a lament bemoaning the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. If ever there was a time to doubt God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, that was it. Still, the poet held out hope for the future. This hope was based not on a pie-in-the-sky optimism that their troubles would soon be over, but rather in the abiding sense of who God is and how God will act on behalf of God’s people. We need that hope too. How about waking up tomorrow with a prayer on your lips: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.”

Lord, give me eyes to see the wonders of your love for me and for our world. Amen.

Thursday, Dec. 18  
Isaiah 43:1-7

There’s tremendous power when we say the words, “I love you.” God speaks powerful words of love over and over in Scripture, but perhaps never so powerfully—and tenderly—as in Isaiah 43: “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” The exiles in Babylon are reminded that they belong to God. They desperately need this reminder. They’ve been waiting a long time for God to come and bring them home. The prophet goes further. In an allusion to the exodus, Isaiah proclaims that God will be with them as they pass through the waters, that their offspring will be gathered from east and west, from north and south. If they listen closely, they can hear the words: “I love you. I have called you by name. You are mine.” There is power in these words—for Israel, and for us. As we hear them, we are reminded that we matter supremely to God. And we begin to imagine a future that we did not have before.

Loving God, give me ears to hear your powerful words of love for me. And give me eyes to see a future that is grounded in the new thing you are doing. Amen.
Friday, Dec. 19  
Luke 1:26-38

If you were to imagine God’s favor being extended to you, what would it look like? An unexpected blessing, a remarkable turn of events, a surprising answer to prayer? It’s unlikely that many of us would envision a visit from an angel and an assignment that involves being used by God to change the world. Yet Luke seems to specialize in these life-changing stories. First Zechariah and Elizabeth, and now Mary, are the unlikely recipients of God’s attention. Why does God choose them? We don’t know. Mary is portrayed as obedient, believing and worshipful, but that isn’t necessarily why God chooses her. The reason is hidden in the mysterious purposes of God. All Mary can do is respond in humility: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

How do you respond to God’s favor? You might be humbled to think that God wants to use you to carry out God’s purposes. But if not you, then who? And if not now, then when?

*Almighty God, thank you for visiting us in our time and place. Use us, as your servants, to change the world. Amen.*

Saturday, Dec. 20  
John 3:16-17

When someone mentions John 3:16, we might think of a painted sign behind the goal posts or even Jesus being lifted up on the cross, but chances are that we won’t think of the Incarnation. Yet that seems to be at the heart of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus: God sending the Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it. Love is at the center of God’s actions. The purpose is to share eternal life, which for John has less to do with a future life in heaven and more to do with a rich and abundant life in God’s love even now. When we stop to consider the incredible gift of God’s Son, our observance of Advent is a little richer than before. And we are more certain than ever that only God can come and give us the life for which we’ve been waiting.

*Almighty God, thank you for sending your Son in love. Fill our hearts with expectation at his coming. Amen.*
Rejoice, then, you sadhearted, who sit in deepest gloom, 
Who mourn your joys departed and tremble at your doom. 
All hail the Lord’s appearing! O glorious Sun, now come, 
Send forth your beams so cheering and guide us safely home.

Sunday, Dec. 21
Luke 1:46-55

The fourth verse of our hymn talks about rejoicing: “Rejoice then, you sad-hearted, who sit in deepest gloom, who mourn your joys departed and tremble at your gloom.” Truth be told, we often know more about being sad-hearted than actual rejoicing. The world promises happiness, but it often doesn’t deliver. With joys departed, we wait for God to come and make things right. Luke tells us that the baby inside Elizabeth leaps for joy at the sound of Mary’s greeting. Soon Mary is singing her heart out because of God’s gracious actions to redeem the world. Mary’s song expresses great confidence in what God is about to do. As a way of suggesting that salvation is already at hand, the song uses past tense verbs to describe God’s actions in the future. Without a doubt, Luke is saying, God’s promises can and do come true.

*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. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.*
Your People Long to Greet You

Monday, Dec. 22
Psalm 96:1-3, 10-13

“The Lord is coming.” That’s what the psalmist announces. The arrival is so close we can almost taste it. We are invited to sing and rejoice at the universal reign of God. The nations witness it. All of creation—heaven and earth, field and forest, sea and dry land—are called to join in praise of the Lord. This psalm is sometimes linked with God’s return in glory to Zion after the exile. It speaks of God coming to judge the world in righteousness and truth. “The Lord is coming.” Whether then or now, we wait and watch for signs of God’s coming. We yearn for the day when God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness and we will see the salvation of our God.

God our King, we wait for you in hope. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.

Tuesday, Dec. 23
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Are you preparing for some sort of homecoming this Christmas? If so, your plans are likely filled with a sense of joy and anticipation. The thought of going home can stir deep feelings inside. The same is true for the Israel of old. God shares an incredible promise through the prophet Zephaniah: “I will bring you home.” The beginning of Zephaniah links these words to the days of King Josiah in Judah. Like most prophetic writings, however, the words continue to speak to subsequent times and places. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” There will come a day when there is no more judgment, no more fear, no more hunger and want. In whatever context these words are heard, the thought of going home leads to feelings of care and safe-keeping. God will gather God’s people. All will be well. What more could we want?

Lord God, as many families journey home this Christmas, we ask you to come and make a home with us, and tenderly care for your people. Amen.
Wednesday, Dec. 24
Luke 2:1-20

One of the delightful surprises of Luke’s nativity is the shepherds. Inspired by a choir of angels, they hurry off to Bethlehem. They find Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manager. Upon seeing the family, they bear witness to what the angels have told them about this child, starting first with the parents. This is really quite amazing. It’s as if Mary and Joseph, tied up with the demands of the baby, can’t consider the cosmic implications of this humble birth. That role falls to the shepherds. Thus, the shepherds are the first to tell the “good news of great joy for all the people.” Eventually the shepherds return to their sheep, glorifying and praising God for all they have seen and heard. A question arises: If God can use a band of lowly shepherds to bring good news of great joy, what do you suppose God might want to do this Christmas through you and me?

_God of heaven and earth, we come to Bethlehem looking for the one of whom the angels sing. Give us joyful hearts as we worship the newborn king. Amen._

Thursday, Dec. 25
Isaiah 52:7-10

What’s the best news you ever received? A wedding announcement? A dream job? The birth of a baby? According to Isaiah, there’s no news quite like the announcement of peace. Our striving is over, tensions have ended, conflict has ceased. “How beautiful ... are the feet of the messenger who announces peace” (Isaiah 52:7). Clearly, for Isaiah this isn’t just any peace. God’s messenger announces salvation, the breaking in of the very reign of God. Christ the Savior is born! In a world of seemingly endless conflict, we join the angels in singing of peace, goodwill to all. We give thanks for a light shining in the darkness. And we long for the day when “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

_All hail the Lord’s appearing!_
_O glorious Sun, now come,_
_Send forth your beams so cheering_
_And guide us safely home._