

CREATOR OF THE STARS OF NIGHT

2023 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Creator of the Stars of Night (ELW 245)

1

Creator of the stars of night,
your people's everlasting light,
O Christ, redeemer of us all,
we pray you hear us when we call.

2

When this old world drew on toward night,
you came; but not in splendor bright,
not as a monarch, but the child
of Mary, blessed mother mild.

3

At your great name, O Jesus, now
all knees must bend, all hearts must bow:
all things on earth with one accord,
like those in heav'n, shall call you Lord.

4

Come in your holy might, we pray,
redeem us for eternal day;
defend us while we dwell below
from all assaults of our dread foe.

5

To God the Father, God the Son,
and God the Spirit, Three in One,
praise, honor, might, and glory be
from age to age eternally. Amen.

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Sunday, December 3

“Creator of the Stars of Night” (ELW 245)

Our theme hymn imparts visions of a night sky with sensations of both majesty and serenity. Close your eyes and think about what it feels like to stand under a starry sky. Remember the darkness and quiet. The stars—their bright points of light barely pricking through a vast blanket of darkness—are a perfect image for this Advent season. There is so much we cannot perceive, and yet, we are surrounded by their light.

This hymn captures much of Advent’s mystery and power—the God who strung the stars in the sky is cradled in the arms of a young woman as night falls heavy around them. But we’re not there yet. During Advent, we wait—and we hope, as from creation to redemption our hymn casts a vision of a world united in praise of an extravagant, complex, three-in-one God. Our dark midwinter sanctuary is lit by only a handful of candles in a simple circle of evergreen—it’s not much, but it’s enough.

Creator of the stars of night, we wait eagerly for you, looking for the signs of your reconciling work, trying to remember that you like to come in ways we don’t expect. Hear our prayer when we call to you—for we know that your Word is trustworthy. And so with the hosts of heaven we pray, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Monday, December 4

Isaiah 40:1–11

Wherever you live, wherever you are from, landscape shapes your imagination. Take a moment to picture a landscape that might have been formative for you. Does it give you a sense of possibility? Of grandeur? Of security? Of isolation? Of barrenness? Of being hemmed in?

Today’s reading from Isaiah 40 is a familiar one for many of us, though I wonder how much we notice that it’s all about landscape. The prophet’s word comes to a people in exile—that is, in a foreign land—telling them they can come back home. This comes as a relief, but the landscape—both emotional and physical—that separates them where they are now from where they used to live will be a challenging path to walk. Mountains, valleys, wilderness, and just generally rough places. The prophet’s word does not just promise a homecoming—which surely won’t be easy—but also brings a word that God will be tending to the journey back.

Comforting God, you call us back home time and again—to our communities, to ourselves, to you. When the journey is difficult, remind us that you are preparing a way where none seems to be. Help us to find comfort and delight in your everlasting Word of promise. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5

Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

As you read today's psalm, let your imagination play with the way this beautiful ancient poem's imagery works. God's work is all around and bombards the psalmist with God's goodness. God's voice comes from outside, and it echoes in the hearts of those who reflect with the psalmist. Abstract concepts like love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace are meeting and embracing. In one verse, we even get an image of them shooting up from the ground like new plants and "looking down" from the sky like rain—they will come together and make life and growth possible.

Can you recall a time in your life when your circumstance felt so entirely rich with blessings? We certainly don't always feel that way, but it's helpful to remember the sensations and emotions that come along with those rare moments.

O Lord, we wait for the shoots that spring from the ground to remind us you are at work to bring new life into this world. In the faithfulness and forgiveness that we know through your Son, we turn our hearts to you today, knowing that you give what is good. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, December 6

2 Peter 3:8–15a

With a small child at home, my spouse and I experience days as a patchwork of messes, snacks, tiny pieces of play sets, and a lot of "big feelings." But for our growing and learning toddler, the thing that still seems to escape her comprehension is time. For her, there is only now and anything else is unacceptable. It takes a lot of parental patience to practice letting her have those feelings and help her respond to them in a way that is safe for herself and those around her.

At the same time, I also admit that there's a lot in this text that resonates with me as a human being. I am keenly aware of the tension and unpleasantness of waiting or not knowing what the future holds. Today, I'm trying to hear in this reading that it's okay to have "big feelings"—and that God sees all of this; maybe God is trying not to laugh, trying to let me learn some self-regulation and perspective.

Nurturing God, pull us close and hold us near to you with cords of love that cannot be broken. Help us to learn that living in your ways means trusting your wisdom; give us a sense of security and patience when we want things to happen now. As hard as it can be to live this out, keep us mindful that your time is the right time. Amen.

Thursday, December 7

Mark 1:1–8

One of the first things I remember learning in seminary is that in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is “on the move”—events in the narrative often happen “immediately” after the ones before them. We get a sense that the time of waiting is over. Now, the time has come to hang on for dear life as Jesus reveals a profound new chapter in God’s work of reconciling the world to Godself. And so, the Gospel of Mark opens *in medias res*—right in the middle of the story. There is no birth narrative, no stories of Jesus’ childhood—it’s time for his ministry to begin, right now. With the mention of John the Baptist, we get just a glimpse of the waiting that has characterized the time leading up to the present. Perhaps we’ve been waiting so long that there’s no time to waste!

Creator God, open our hearts to the fullness of time in your world. Give us the clarity to see what has come before and what is happening in our midst. We trust in your plans for the future, and commit ourselves to your work in the meantime; in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friday, December 8

Mark 1:1–8

One of the most remarkable things about the opening of the Gospel of Mark is not what it cites from the Old Testament, but how it cites it. Earlier this week, we read how Isaiah the prophet cries out (40:3): in the wilderness, God is making a way for the people to return home from exile. Mark tweaks the prophet’s words ever so slightly, so that the voice calling out belongs to someone in the wilderness—namely, John the Baptist—who is preparing the people for the coming of a long-awaited Messiah. Mark the Evangelist uses his knowledge and imagination to give new meaning to the words of Isaiah the prophet in order to clarify the preaching of John the Baptist. Here, we are reminded of the gospel message that calls us to expect that God can always do something new and genuinely surprising in the story of Jesus the Messiah.

O Holy Spirit, come. We are weary from waiting and hoping for so long that sometimes we fear we have lost sight of what we are waiting and hoping for. Renew us with the feeling of boldness—of those who proclaimed words of comfort to the dislocated, who ministered to the weary, who saw something new breaking forth and were bold enough to name that it was you, O God, coming fully into our world so that we might know how far your love goes. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, December 9

“Creator of the Stars of Night” (ELW 245, Verse 1)

An amazing thing about how the Bible presents and reveals God is the constant tension it holds between God as the creator of the cosmos and God who pays attention to individual humans. It makes no sense that the divine being who strung the stars up in the skies would hear the call of a single, anguished (or joyful, or tired, or relieved, or grateful) human heart. And yet, that’s what we see time and again in Scripture. Recall the scene in Genesis 15, where God and Abraham are about to enter into a kind of formal relationship (which people in the ancient Near East called a “covenant”). Abraham stands outside under the night sky, unable to count the stars, and so to comprehend the immensity of God’s promises. The creator God is also the God of this close relationship—the God who hears when we call, and the God who redeems us all.

Creator God, we marvel at the immensity of your power and promises. The stars showed Abraham how big your promises can be, and that, even when our lives feel small, there is enough light in the darkness for us to find our way. Through this relationship you sustain us. Bring us into your everlasting light. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Sunday, December 10

“Creator of the Stars of Night” (ELW 245, Verse 2)

The text of our theme hymn for this Advent devotional series was written in the ninth century C.E. It was arranged into the form we know it in the 1940s but originated nearly 1,000 years before that, at the turn of the first millennium after the time when Jesus was born. Both then and now, I suspect that the line “when this old world drew on toward night” could have felt so true to the moment. In every age, I bet things have felt weary, tired, dark, and difficult. But in every age, God can and does bring light, renewal, and a way to go on. Advent is a season in the church when we slow down and pay special attention to the darkness and the waiting, but the waiting is always there. Hearing the story anew reminds us that we may need to look for hope in places we never expected to find it.

Lord, you know we get weary, especially when we feel we have been waiting too long for something to change. Let us remember that we are not alone in this waiting, and that newness of life is always possible. Even if not in splendor bright, we trust hope will come, because the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection is true in every age. We are wrapped in holy mystery. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, December 11

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

When I served as a campus minister, each year we would anoint our graduates before they set out to wherever God was calling them. We marked their foreheads with oil and charged them to be God's love embodied in the world and to pay special attention to the ones Jesus spent the most time with—the most vulnerable in the community.

We are right in the middle of Advent. Perhaps your life is feeling very full of all the “merry and bright” preparations we feel we have to do in this season.

Isaiah 61 reminds us that the same Spirit that brought order to creation, resurrected a valley of dead bones, and called Mary lives in all of us, too. We are anointed with God's Spirit. With what kind of anointed work might the Spirit be calling us to fill our Advent lives? To bring good news to the oppressed. To care for the grieving and imprisoned. To pay special attention to those Jesus spent the most time with.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and renew in us your call to embody your saving love, justice, and grace with all people. Amen.

Tuesday, December 12

Psalm 126

What does Advent hope look like to you?

Psalm 126, most scholars agree, refers to a time when God heard the longing of God's people and finally responded after a long season of waiting. It was a time of joy and restoration for God's people, a time when God did what God does best—making broken things whole, again! The Temple was being rebuilt and the Judean exiles could return home. There was restoration and new life for Zion! The psalm sings of how the longing of God's people and their generations of prayers had been answered!

Perhaps, as for this psalmist, Advent hope is claiming that truth and proclaiming it loudly, that because God has brought restoration once, God will do so again. God made a way when it seemed like there was no way—God will do it, again.

I wonder what longing of your heart needs that kind of hope during this Advent season?

God Of Hope, hear the longings of our hearts and the cries of your people across the world. Bring your restoration and your peace. Amen.

Wednesday, December 13

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

Every time I hear Paul's words in this reading, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances," I want to say to him: "Really? That's the best you could offer to the church in Thessalonica?"

Perhaps, with me, you can think of many seasons of life where it was terribly difficult to rejoice and give thanks. And yet, I can also name days and seasons where laughter broke through grief and surprised me, a moment of clarity broke through disorientation, or a glimmer of light broke through the darkest night. Each time, I was reminded what joy and gratitude feel like and the ways they nourish and sustain me.

Paul was writing to a community where suffering and loss and disorientation were not abstract ideas. Perhaps his encouraging words—and the Season of Advent—don't dismiss pain, but invite us to acknowledge the hard things and in the same breath dare us to choose joy and gratitude in spite of it.

Emmanuel, God with Us, in the darkest of nights and in the most unexpected places and seasons, you show up with faith, hope, peace, and joy. Come quickly, Lord, Amen.

Thursday, December 14

John 1:6–8, 19–28

I wonder what feelings bubble up in your body, mind, or spirit when you hear the word "testimony." Perhaps you think of a street preacher yelling something like "repent now or else!" Or maybe you recall an old confirmation assignment that required you to confess your faith in order to "pass confirmation." Or perhaps your community regularly practices sharing faith stories, or testimonies, to bear witness to God's grace and love in the world.

Regardless, whether the word testimony brings forth good or queasy feelings in you, the Gospel of John here reminds us that we, like John the Baptist, are called to bear witness to Christ in the world. To be truth tellers. To testify about why we continue to follow Jesus in a world where so often brokenness, violence, and death get the last word. What story do you have to tell? What testimony is burning in your heart and is ready to be told?

Jesus, Light of the World, give us eyes to see you, ears to hear you, and words and lives that testify to your life-saving love in the world. Amen.

Friday, December 15

John 1:6–8, 19–28

When leading worship at Christmastime, one of my favorite moments in the liturgical year is watching when all the lights are turned off, Silent Night arises from the voices of the congregation, and the once dark space becomes ablaze. A little flicker of light can light up a large space.

So often as followers of Jesus, we gather around light. We sit around campfires to sing and tell stories. We light a candle to mark the start of worship. We gather in vigil to mourn the loss of a beloved or to renounce hate in our world. There is something truly holy about inviting light into a place where the darkness feels too mysterious, big, and overwhelming. It's an embodied faith practice and boldly proclaims faith and hope to a weary world.

John the Baptist made it clear: "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." Where are you being called to bear God's light? Where do you need to testify that evil and death do not get the last word and that hope and love will win out?

Holy One, your light shines in the darkness and nothing can overcome it or extinguish it. So, shine in our hearts, Oh God. Amen.

Saturday, December 16

"Creator of the Stars of Night" (ELW 245, Verse 3)

Verse 3 of our theme hymn draws images of the day we all wait for and long for in Advent—that good day when all of Earth shall know Jesus as Lord and all of creation will be made new.

In biblical times, many thought that day was imminent. But after long ages, we are still living in the tension of what is and what is not yet. In Advent, we wait expectantly for Jesus to come to make all things new—even when we know he is already present. In Advent, we let our finite human weary selves acknowledge and name out loud our longing for the day we're promised, when God's expansive love, justice, and peace will reign once and for all—even when we know that work is already begun here on Earth as it is in heaven. In Advent, we join the voices of saints across the millennia in praying, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

Jesus, we long for the day when every knee will bow at the sound of your name and your love will reign forever. Until that day, transform us to be bearers of that love to the world. Amen.

Sunday, December 17

"Creator of the Stars of Night" (ELW 245, Verse 4)

I often wonder how Mary ever slept at night knowing that the baby she carried in her womb and eventually held in her arms would redeem the whole world from sin and death. It seems people expected God to send a Messiah full of power and royalty and military might, and yet, so long ago, God surprised us by sending a dependent, vulnerable, tiny baby, who had a typical Jewish woman from Nazareth in Galilee as a mom, to be the Savior of us all.

Verse 4 in this hymn invites us to pray for God to come again in "holy might." I wonder how many of us still imagine Jesus coming as a big, powerful, charismatic, and dignified leader, ready to take down all the powers and principalities in one fell swoop? Might we miss Jesus if we're looking for that kind of Savior? Might we miss Jesus if we ignore the margins of society and the most vulnerable among us?

Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and make all that is broken whole again. Amen.

Monday, December 18

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

In today's reading, we find King David new to the throne and recently moved into his newly built royal palace. He seems to be bothered, though, that while he lives a royal life in a fancy palace, his God lives and resides only in a simple tent, or tabernacle. So, King David and his prophet Nathan devise a plan to build God a fancy temple and royal home. But, in God's typical surprising way, God tells King David not to build a temple because God instead will build a "home" among God's people marked by an everlasting covenant from God to Israel through David. This lineage and reign will not be for David's glory, but for God's and it will be forever. And thus begins the Davidic lineage that reaches all the way to the Savior and King who was born as a baby in Bethlehem, the City of David, who came to save the world from sin.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, come and dwell in our hearts today and every day and make us more and more like you. Amen.

Tuesday, December 19

Luke 1:46b–55

We like our stuff. We like our stuff big—and even bigger. House, car, reputation, bank account—the bigger the better. And then mix in an economic system that seems to encourage excess in, well, everything, and you have a big focus on BIG.

Mary likes bigger, too. But so unlike our obsession with stuff and size, Mary wants God to be bigger. In fact, she wants to magnify God, especially a God who becomes small. For Mary the focus is on the startling prophecy that she will give birth to God. And this God's ministry will be amongst the small and insignificant and overlooked. Children are blessed. Beggars are fed. The blind are given sight.

As for us and our infatuation with big and bigger—it makes you think.

Holy Lord, forgive our silly chasing after stuff and size. By your Spirit shift our gaze to the manger and help us to magnify the infant Jesus lying humbly in the straw. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20

Romans 16:25–27

The great composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, put the letters S.D.G. at the bottom of his remarkable compositions. They are shorthand in Latin for *Soli Deo Gloria* or "to God alone be the glory." In our reading for today we see that the Apostle Paul ends his letter to the Romans in a similar way. Both men were geniuses but thought it important to point away from themselves and direct all attention to the light of glory that illumines our Advent walk: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus, by your Spirit redirect our attention from ourselves to your gracious presence among us. Amen.

Thursday, December 21

Luke 1:26–38

God must like upheaval and surprise. God almost seems to delight in shocking people. Stunning news comes Mary's way, and it comes in three parts:

She will bear a son even though she is a virgin.

Her son will be a ruler even though the land is in the iron grip of the Roman Empire.

Her son's name will be Jesus or "the one who saves."

Most astonishing, this message was meant for more than Mary. It is addressed to you and me. It travels down through the centuries and reverberates in our own ears. In Advent we confess that the blessed virgin's Son has come to rule our own lives, reigning over us in grace, mercy, and love.

Lord Jesus, startle and revive us so that by your Spirit you may move us from trust in ourselves to trust in you. Amen.

Friday, December 22

Isaiah 9:2–7

Advent heralds the arrival of Jesus as the Prince of Peace. But what does it mean to identify Jesus with peace? The secular world suggests that peace brings some kind of blissful serenity or sense of contentment that delivers us from worldly trouble. But it might be better to say the peace connected with Jesus leads us deeper into the world and all its messiness. Pastor and writer Frederick Buechner has suggested that the peace of Christ brings not absence of strife but rather the presence of love. In other words, a life of faith is often full of doubt, trouble, and suffering. But it is never outside the pale of Christ's unconditional love.

Prince of Peace, you have chosen us for service in your name. Keep us on the path of your peace in the midst of trouble and suffering. Amen.

Saturday, December 23

Psalm 96

"He will judge the world with righteousness."
(Psalm 96:13)

We don't like the idea of God as judge, but the Bible and especially the season of Advent declares again and again that God will not only judge us but that the standard is God's own righteousness. That should make us pause, reflect, and even tremble. And eventually we must move on to an even greater truth—that God's judgement against us has been executed on the cross.

So, God is righteous and in the crazy logic of God's love, so are we. In a miracle that ought to make us really tremble, God's righteousness has actually been transferred to us in Christ. He takes from us our anxieties and guilt and gives us his peace and forgiveness. The judge is judged in our place!

Righteous God, open the eyes of our faith so that we may dwell in the love you have given to us in Christ's death on the cross. Amen.

Sunday, December 24 Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

The Christmas story in Luke begins with power—worldly power. There is talk of the Empire ordering people around for the purpose of imposing a tax. Verse 3 suggests that all obeyed, undoubtedly fearful of Rome's cruel authority.

And then, in the midst of this display of worldly might, there suddenly appears real power. A baby is birthed in a barn, and the heavens burst forth in song: Glory to God in the highest! In other words, the Empire—and all empires—are put on notice. Their glory will inevitably fade. Christmas announces that a different ruler is now in our midst—one who reigns not in fear and intimidation but rather with mercy and love.

Lord Jesus, be born in us this day. Renew, refresh, and delight us with the shocking power of your love. Amen.

Monday, December 25

Christmas Day

“Creator of the Stars of Night” (ELW 245, Verse 5)

We have a problem with the Trinity. It is a central teaching of Christian faith. But for many, it makes God seem so static, aloof, and abstract. It becomes a complicated math problem as we try to explain God’s three-in-oneness.

Maybe it is better to begin thinking about God through the lens of Christmas. In the birth of Jesus, we are reminded that God is not motionless and above us, but rather on the move and in our midst. The dynamic and active God of Israel demonstrates the great depths of divine love for us by becoming fully human—a squirmy, burpy, and crying infant. He lies in a wooden manger, and he will die for us on a wooden cross.

Holy God, you are never greater than when you became small for our sakes. Grant us the faith to see in the infant Jesus the depths of your love and mercy. Amen.

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