



November 30: Advent 1 Feeding the wanderer.

Leviticus 19:1-10

This text is part of what was called the “holiness code” for the people of Israel, as given by God via Moses. There is no hierarchy in this calling to faithfulness. Love of God is the same as not stripping fields bare, but leaving edges and remnants for the traveling stranger to glean for free. There was no judgment placed upon those who needed such generosity to survive; the judgment was upon those who failed to offer such a kindness.

- **Contextualize:** Who in our time might we consider the “gleaners” to be – the people on the edge of our social systems of support?
- **Reflect:** How do these people in our times have moral judgment placed upon their need? Does God judge them?
- **Imagine and Act:** In the face of recovering from a SNAP benefit crisis, and of this time of year when people living with very little often face greater hardship, what does holiness look like for us? How can we see God’s face in the stranger seeking help?

Ruth 2:1-12

The idea of kinsman-redeemer was significant in the time of Ruth and Naomi. Women were only safe (or not) in their relation to men, who held power. Boaz was Ruth’s kinsman-redeemer as a distant relative. Ruth was fleeing a famine. Ruth began her gleaning not knowing Boaz would provide for her that way. But that holiness code in Leviticus laid the foundation for such care, ensuring she could glean the edges. Boaz took this faithfulness guide even further: inviting Ruth to glean from the good crop, to drink her

fill of water, and, very importantly in that time (and ours), to clearly say that Ruth's body was not to be bothered by the men around her. Boaz fed Ruth in many ways, just as Ruth fed Naomi's grief with her steadfast love. Boaz came from Bethlehem, signaling a God child who would be born in Bethlehem, of Ruth and Boaz' family line. Bethlehem means "house of bread" in the original language. We cannot welcome the Christ child without becoming a house of bread – feeding all the forgotten ones, and grieving ones.

- **Remember:** When has someone acted as a kinsperson-redeemer to you – nourishing you in body and spirit?
- **Act:** Make a commitment this Advent to the spiritual practice of Bethlehem – being a house of bread. Set a regular reminder on your phone to donate to NEED and the Presbyterian Night Shelter. Invite someone to lunch and nourish them with food and company. Keep warm things in your trunk for those who are unhoused in need of care.

December 7: Advent 2 Blessing within and beyond borders.

Ezekiel 47:1-23

Ezekiel was part of the exiled community of Judah. In our time, we would call him a refugee, and a prisoner of war. After 70 years of exile in Babylon, the people of Judah were finally coming home again, and rebuilding what was in ruins. God through Ezekiel and other prophets like Haggai called them to rebuild the temple. Here, in chapter 47, God is instructing Ezekiel on how the twelve tribes of Israel would organize themselves on the land. This land has many features: clean water flowing through it, plentiful food sources, and carefully crafted boundaries. Each tribe of Israel will receive a territory. And then God through the prophet adds an essential feature in verses 21-23: "So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the foreigners who reside among you and have fathered children among you. They shall be to you as native-born of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe foreigners reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord GOD." Foreigners are given the same status in this newly re-created community as native born.

- **Consider:** This text seems to make a strong biblical case for God's support of birthright citizenship. How might this idea be reflected, or not, in what are often named "biblical values" in our time?
- **Remember:** When have you crossed a border, be it geographic, national, ideological, or theological? How did that journey change you and your worldview?
- **Discern:** Much of our discourse around border policies in our country is highly charged and volatile, with sharp accusations of political opponents as supporting a totally borderless country or a highly militarized and racialized border. How does this text invite us to reframe those conversations? Where are the tensions between borders and belonging for all people, especially the foreigner in our midst? Consider that fundamental human need for feeling safe, and how all people deserve this. How does Jesus coming as a refugee in a strange land redraw the borders we imagine?

- **Act:** Donate to legal aid organizations assisting migrants who are being detained illegally (Opening Doors International Services started by Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton is one such organization - <https://www.odisinc.org>) Volunteer teaching ESL classes. Start learning Spanish yourself!
- **Create:** Draw your own map of God's world. How is it like ours? How is it different?

December 14: Advent 3 God's holy road.

Psalm 146:5-10

There is in the whole witness and scripture, and especially in the life and teachings of Jesus, what has been called "God's preferential option for the poor." Faithfulness for the people of Israel and Judah, was directly linked to their care for those people whose lives had the most uncertainty, distress, and suffering. This meant God showed up in a powerful way for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger, giving those who would have the least resources in their time special care. In our time, we might call this God showing up for the foster kid, the one moving through the fog of grief this time of year, and the migrant, so much so that God showed up in this weary world as a migrant, seeking safety and hope.

- **Ponder:** What do the words "God's preferential option for the poor" stir in you? Do they bring comfort, or challenge?
- **Remember:** Recall a time that you felt truly safe. Was God in that safety? What material resources allowed you to feel safe?
- **Act:** So often in our political and even theological discourse, we talk *of* the poor, the struggling, and the migrant, or *for* them, but not *to* them. This Psalm calls them happy and blessed. They have agency. God has agency. Learn the story (either firsthand or through another source) of someone whose life is very different from yours. Listen for their humanity, their wisdom, and what they have to teach you.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah is a complicated book! It calls out idolatry, it exacts God's judgment on abuses of power, and it lays out a covenantal promise of God's loving kindness for all nations. Chapter 35 is part of this covenant promise: describing a creation-saturated vision of God's coming kingdom. The people who have strayed through idolatry find that God has created a highway for them to come home again: a holy road. It will be a road that is safe, where no traveler will go astray. That road is paved with everlasting joy, and sorrow and sighing flee away. God saves everyone on this road.

- **Ponder:** What does idolatry look like in our time? How does God's holy road proclaim another way to be in relationship with God, one another, and creation?
- **Remember:** Recall the different roads you have traveled in life. What road do you feel like you're on this Advent journey home, as we wait for God who makes a home with us? What are the blessings on that road, and the challenges? Who journeys with you?
- **Create:** This text is rich in imagery. Draw this holy road, writing alongside it words that remind you of who God is, and how we can keep each other safe and loved.

December 21: Advent 4 The risk of home.

Hosea 11:1-11

This text is a love letter from God to the people of Israel. It tells the story of God's steadfast love for the people despite their turning away from God. God has the voice of a parent, describing teaching them their first steps, bending down and feeding them, leading them with chords of human kindness. God loves them relentlessly despite their rebellion, declaring, "how can I give you up?" God promises to come and save them yet again, not in wrath, but in patient love. This text is drawn from in the promise of the Messiah: "out of Egypt I called my son" signaling the escape to Egypt of the Christ child in the face of Herod's murderous wrath.

- **Imagine:** This passage anthropomorphizes God – imagining God in a human form like a parent. Some may find this imagery comforting, and others difficult, if they have a tense relationship with parents. How have you experienced God like a parent? Which image from this text do you find most encouraging?
- **Create:** Consider writing a personal or collective love letter to God, naming God's presence through different seasons of your life and faith.

Matthew 1:18-25, 2:13-15

We are jumping ahead on the Christmas story just a bit in order to remember how God came into the world in Jesus. This is not the warm fuzzy story of Hallmark cards. This is the story of Mary – the God bearer – who faced real shame and even harm if Joseph had not been told to remain with her. It is the story of the baby Jesus being born in a borrowed place as this wandering family made their way to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of Joseph, for a government-ordered census. After Jesus was born, and was visited by the Magi, or Wise Ones, the family had to flee to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. Herod was threatened by this baby Jesus, and ordered the genocide of all Hebrew boys. The holy family were refugees fleeing political persecution and violence. God coming into the world and making a home with us was full of risk.

- **Consider:** How does the incarnation of Jesus seem like a risky thing? Does this change your perception of Advent and Christmas?
- **Contextualize:** If we were to retell the story of God breaking into the world to make a home with us in a modern way, who might be experiencing such risk as refugees fleeing political violence now? How can we welcome them as we welcome the Christ child?
- **Act:** Write letters to encourage our government leaders to provide safety for refugees and migrants. See the human behind the immigration status, and God who came in such a risky, vulnerable way.