"Like a shepherd you feed your flock,
gathering the lambs and holding them close,
and leading mother ewes with gentleness."
— Isaiah 40:11, The Inclusive Bible

Advent can be filled with worry about finding the perfect Christmas gifts. Deep down we want people in our lives to know they are special and that we love them. But sometimes we overlook the greatest gift of all… our very presence. Our spiritual ancestors were also worried — often about survival in the midst of political occupation. And the response of the scriptures is "the Holy Living One is with you." Like a shepherd who never leaves the flock, we are held close. This season, we are invited to be the gift of presence for our loved ones, for our communities, for those who need it most.

A worship series based on the scriptures from the
Revised Common Lectionary, Year B.

All scripture fragments in this document
are from The Inclusive Bible, Sheed & Ward.
See the full notations of RCL Year B scriptures HERE (NRSV)

Advent One: Being Present with Hope

Shepherd of Israel, hear us,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned on the cherubim, shine out!
Shine out before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh!
Awaken your power and come to save us!
O God, return to us— let your face smile on us, and we will be saved!
Psalm 80: 1-2

I continually thank my God for you because of the gift bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, in whom you have been richly endowed with every gift of speech and knowledge. In the same way, the testimony about Christ has been so confirmed among you that you lack no spiritual gift, as you wait for the revelation of our Savior Jesus Christ. — 1 Corinthians 1: 4-7

"What I say to you, I say to all: stay alert!" Mark 13:37

Our spiritual ancestors cried out in the midst of their political occupations: "Save us!" The idea of a Messiah went hand-in-hand with the need for God to help them in their distress. The Roman occupation of Jesus' time and of the early Christian community is expressed with a sense of waiting, watching, and anticipation of restoration to freedom. All this points to the presence of hope, essential to survival in difficult times. Let us be present with hope to those who need it most.

Advent Two: Being Present with Peace

"Console my people, give them comfort," says your God. — Isaiah 40:1

But what we await are new heavens and a new earth where, according to the promise, God's justice will reside. So beloved, while waiting for this, make every effort to be found at peace… — 2 Peter: 3: 13-14a

…as it was written in Isaiah the prophet: "I send my messenger before you to prepare your way, a herald's voice in the desert, crying, 'Make ready the way of our God. Clear a straight path.' " — Mark 1: 2-3

Preparing the way for new beginnings, fresh starts, a clear path, is a classic theme in the faith narrative and in our own lives. Life can contain many chapters. The Good News is that the Holy One is continually making

a way for do-overs. In this we can find peace, even when life doesn't feel so peaceful. This week we focus on what it means to be a gift of non-anxious presence for those who need it most.

Advent Three: Being Present with Joy

God has sent me to bring good news to those who are poor;
to heal broken hearts;
to proclaim release to those held captive
and liberation to those in prison;
to announce a year of favor from YHWH, and the day of God's vindication;
to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve in Zion —
to give them a wreath of flowers instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of tears,
a cloak of praise instead of despair. — Isaiah 61: 1-3a

When YHWH brought us captives back to Zion, we thought we were dreaming!
Our mouths were filled with laughter then, our tongues with songs of joy.
And from the nations we heard, "Their God has done great things for them."
Yes — YHWH has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
Psalm 126: 1-3

Mary said: "My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed. For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name." — Luke 1: 46-49

The words of the prophet Isaiah offer a prophetic vision that Jesus will also claim in his ministry. Likewise, we are called to claim the gift of being fully present with all people — those who mourn, those who grieve, those who have suffered indignity and oppression. Mary's Magnificat is prophetic as well. She claims the overturning of injustice even before it has come to pass. Joy is not the equivalent of happiness, but rather the deep conviction that we are called to be present in the work of bringing about "great things" — a better world for those who need it most.

Advent Four: Being Present with Love

“Now then, tell my servant, David, ‘This is what YHWH Omnipotent says: I took you from the pastures and from following sheep to be the ruler of my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you went…” — 2 Samuel 7: 8-9a

Forever I will sing the wonders of your love, YHWH,
proclaiming your faithfulness to all generations!
I’ll tell them that your love stands firm forever,
your fidelity is fixed in the heavens.
“I have made a covenant with my chosen;
sworn an oath to David, my faithful one:
‘I will establish your line forever,
and make your throne firm throughout all generations.’ ” — Psalm 89: 1-4

Six months later, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman named Mary; she was engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. Upon arriving, the angel said to Mary, “Rejoice, highly favored one! God is with you! Blessed are you among women!” Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel’s greeting meant. The angel went on to say to her, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You’ll conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus — ‘Deliverance.’ ” — Luke 1: 26-31

The faith narrative is careful to show us a lineage from King David to Jesus. It is no ordinary lineage; it is one that began in the shepherding of sheep, of leading and delivering the people in search of a home. Mary’s womb becomes part of that lineage of love, offering the world the gift of God’s presence “in the flesh.” As we enter the story of the birth of Love Among Us, we are invited to be present in love with those that need it most.

Christmas Eve: Being Present with Light

The people walking in darkness
are seeing a brilliant light —
upon those who dwell in a land of deep shadows
light is shining! — Isaiah 9:2

There were shepherds in the area living in the fields and keeping night watch by turns over their flock. The angel of God appeared to them, and the glory of God shone around them; they were very much afraid. The angel said to them, “You

have nothing to fear! I come to proclaim good news to you — news of a great joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in David's city, a savior — the Messiah — has been born to you. Let this be a sign to you: you'll find an infant wrapped in a simple cloth, lying in a manger." — Luke 2: 8-12

It is the night we celebrate the opening of the most precious gift of presence we know — the birth of the Christ Child, the Light of the World. As we light our candles, we open our hearts to becoming part of the gift of light in the world. Like the choice the shepherds faced, will we live in the shadows of fear, or will we dare to run to the manger to know and believe the Good News of new possibility for all who need it most?

Sunday after Christmas: Being Present with Assurance

The nations will see your vindication, and the rulers your splendor;
you will have a new name that YHWH's mouth will bestow.
You will be a garland of beauty in YHWH's hands,
a solemn crown worn by your God. — Isaiah 62: 2-3

When the designated time had come, God sent forth the Christ — born of a woman, born under the Law — to deliver from the Law those who were subjected to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted heirs. The proof that you are children of God is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of the Child who calls out "Abba!" — Galatians 4: 4-6

Now there lived in Jerusalem a man named Simeon. He was devout and just, anticipating the consolation of Israel, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit… he took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Now, O God, you can dismiss your servant in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the peoples to see — a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." — Luke 2: 25-32

The overwhelming message of the Christmas story is the assurance that we, too, are children of the Holy One. In this, our very presence is a gift if we will only allow the Spirit to move in and through us. Every day of our ordinary lives, we can show up — be present — and proclaim the assurance of hope, peace, joy, and love to those who need it most.