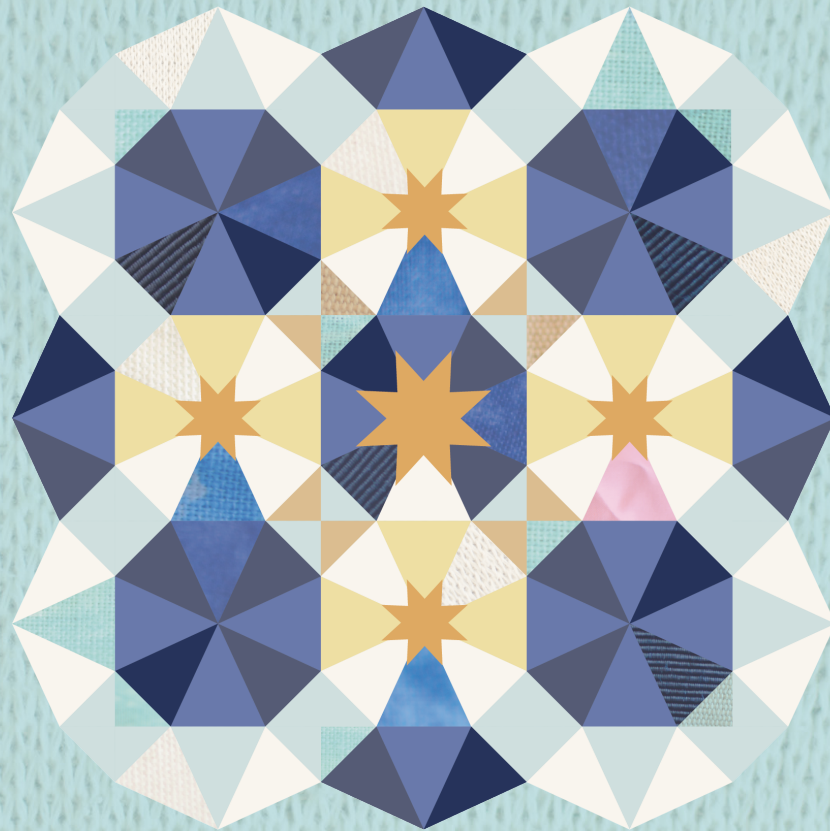


AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



FOR THE **BEGINNING**

Art, Poetry, &
Reflections
for Advent

 *a Sanctified Art*
sanctifiedart.org

Advent is a season of endings and beginnings. As the calendar year comes to a close, a new church year begins. Christ's birth ushers us into new ways of living and loving; and yet, the world as we know it spins madly on. In many ways, pregnant Mary was surrounded by endings—large and small, personal and political. But Mary proclaimed hope in a God who was and is making all things new. Christ's birth offered a beautiful new beginning for shepherds and Magi alike—all the while, King Herod tried to bring Christ's story to an end. When we ourselves navigate seasons filled with endings and beginnings, we need reminders. We need words that can feel like steady ground, like a path for our feet to find as we step forward into the unknown.

This devotional is shaped around several reminders we all need from time to time: *you are a blessing; we can't go alone; do the good that is yours to do; hope is worth the risk; love knows your name; don't forget to laugh; the road isn't straight.* These reminders root us in the fundamental truths of our faith. Many of them are life lessons we teach to children—lessons that adults continue to learn and relearn. They may resemble the blessings we impart to loved ones during special ceremonies like weddings or baptisms. And so, we invite you to move through this Advent season as if you are entering a sacred new chapter, holding fast to the reminders that will bolster you for the journey ahead.

Read, look, and sing your way through the pages of this devotional. Each week offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns to give you strength, courage, and grace. As you journey through this season, may you find words for belovedness and hope. May you find words for beginning again. For no matter what you are facing, no matter what this new day brings, love is your beginning.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

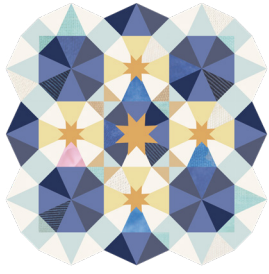
Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Hannah Garrity

Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Rev. Anna Strickland



ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM

REV. LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (*she/her*) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist) and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. Her faith is rooted in creative practices that help her break free from perfectionism and control and participate in creating a more whole, just world.

REV. LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren (*she/her*) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, linoleum carving tools, and her trusty Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. Visual exploration offers her a holy space to ask questions, find her voice, take risks, and make bold statements.

HANNAH GARRITY Founding Creative Partner of SA

Hannah (*she/her*) is the Director of Christian Faith, Life, and Arts at the wonderful Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. She also serves as liturgical artist for the Summer Worship Series at Montreat Conference Center (Montreat, NC). Hannah is currently pursuing a Master's of Divinity and Master's of Christian Education at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA.

REV. SARAH A. SPEED

Founding Creative Partner of SA

Sarah (Are) Speed (*she/her*) is the Head of Staff/Senior Pastor at Second Presbyterian Church of Kansas City, MO. Sarah feels called to welcome people into the church by using her energy and passion for beautifully-scripted words, raw and relevant liturgy, and hands-on worship experiences to engage our longing for God and the need for justice in this messy world.

REV. ANNA STRICKLAND

Creative Partner | Operations Support

Anna Strickland (*she/her*) looks for the Divine in the everyday like treasure in clay jars and first encountered God in the integration of her spiritual self and artistic self. She is a former teacher and college minister, a proud Texas Longhorn and graduate of Iliff School of Theology, a Baptist to the core ministering in ecumenical spaces, and a lover of chaos anchored by the belief that the Spirit is most active in the spaces between us.



ABOUT OUR GUEST CONTRIBUTORS



GUEST WRITER Kayla Craig

Kayla Craig (*she/her*) is a former journalist who brings deep curiosity and care to her writing. She's the author of two books: *Every Season Sacred: Reflections, Prayers, and Invitations to Nourish Your Soul and Nurture Your Family throughout the Year* and *To Light Their Way: A Collection of Prayers & Liturgies for Parents*. Kayla graduated from Drake University with a B.A. in Magazine Journalism from Drake's well-known School of Journalism & Mass Communication. She minored in Sociology and English, and has been writing professionally for more

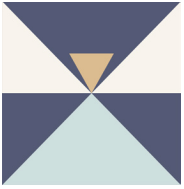
than 15 years. With a poetic, prophetic voice, she created the popular "Liturgies for Parents" Instagram account, which Christianity Today named an "essential parenting resource." Kayla's nuanced and accessible reflections, essays, and prayers are featured in various books, devotionals, and Bible studies. Kayla lives in a 115-year-old former convent in her Iowa hometown, where she hopes to create spaces of welcome alongside her four children, two dogs, and husband, Jonny. kaylacraig.com | @liturgiesforparents | @kayla_craig



GUEST ARTIST Rev. Nicolette (Faison) Peñaranda

Rev. Nicolette "Nic" (*she/her*) is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America serving as the Program Director for African Descent Ministries. Nic is the creator of MONadvocacy, a racial justice resource grounded in play, as well as the "Talks at the Desk" series which celebrates the voices of leaders in the ELCA African descent community: livinglutheran.org/2022/02/a-love-letter-to-african-descent-communities.

She is passionate about queer Black liberation, cultivating diverse leadership in faith spaces, and the art of creation. She is also the illustrator of *God's Holy Darkness*, written by Sharei Green and Beulah Selnick (Beaming Books, 2022). The book deconstructs anti-Blackness in Christian theology by celebrating instances in the story of God's people when darkness, blackness, and night are beautiful, good, and holy. She resides in the Chicagoland area with her spouse, two daughters, and two cats, Penne Pablo and Rigatoni Braxton.



The First Sunday of Advent
WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING
YOU ARE A BLESSING

JOY AND CELEBRATION

You are a blessing.
If you hear nothing else,
if the wind howls,
if your brain runs amok,
if rebuttals and denials line up like little toy soldiers,
then hear *this*—
you are a blessing.

I knew it the first moment I met you / heard your name
/ learned there are 7 billion of us
on this planet.
I knew it in my bones,
the way my feet know the way home.
You are a blessing.

For our creating God
breathed life into your being.
And there is simply no way that,
along with that life,
some of God's goodness
didn't slip right in.

So tell the rebuttals to rest.
Tell the toy soldiers to find another hill,
because this one is reserved for joy and celebration.
You are a blessing.
Breathe it in.

*Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed*

YOU ARE A BLESSING

READ Luke 1:26-38 | Isaiah 43:1-7

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

The Advent journey unfolds like a well-worn quilt, each patchwork piece lovingly threaded across time and space. In each thread, we find blessed assurance that with every sacred stitch, God has been moving toward us all along.

This season reminds us that, what some may see as discarded scraps, the Maker of heaven and earth calls beautiful and blessed. Mary, an ordinary girl from the obscure corners of Nazareth, was not cloaked in power or prestige—but was blanketed in belovedness.

And that was enough.

Advent invites us to reflect on how we, like Mary, are invited into God’s redemptive narrative—no matter how ordinary or small we might feel—for each of us has the potential to carry God’s love into a weary world.

In Luke 1:26-38, the story of Mary and the angel, Gabriel illustrates how God selects someone the world might overlook to be part of something beautiful. Gabriel’s message, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” isn’t merely a formality but a declaration of Mary’s essential place in this divine quilt.

Mary’s encounter with Gabriel, a pivotal moment in the Advent story, marks the unveiling of a promise and a prophecy of a miraculous birth that subverted every expectation of what a coming King’s arrival might look like.

Mary’s response—“How will this be?”—is profoundly human.

In this moment of divine mystery, Gabriel offers a blessed reassurance: “Do not be afraid.” When we wonder if our quiet worries or loud wonderings matter in the vast expanse of the cosmos, these words remind us that God *knows* our wandering hearts, acknowledges our fears, and moves toward us.

Isaiah 43 echoes this comfort, promising we will not be alone when we pass through deep waters or face the fires of trials: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

In a world often drenched in pain, suffering, and injustice, it is a gift to remember that we are formed and made by a God who loves us and doesn’t leave us.

We often feel compelled to *earn* our worth and belovedness, but the One who grants each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God’s infinite love, we are beloved, the very fibers of our being woven with care. *We* can’t work our way to receiving God’s compassion. It’s already there—as present as the twinkling stars in the sky, as near as the clouds of breath on a cold night.

You are a blessing because the One from whom all blessings flow sees you, knows you, and calls you by name.

When you are facing impossibilities, as Mary did, it's not your productivity or power that will push you through, but the grace of God. This divine assurance doesn't clarify every outcome or guarantee a life of ease—Mary's path, like many before and after, was fraught with challenges. Yet this promise of Love that makes a way when there is no way offers us hope that we do not face our challenges alone. As we journey into the Advent season, may you rest under the warmth of these truths.

By embracing our inherent blessedness as a starting point, we open our hearts to recognize and affirm the blessedness in others, which transforms our interactions and communities. God's perfect love invites us to live out our belovedness by transforming our world with love and entering into the good work God's hand began weaving many years ago.

This Advent, consider your sacred place within the divine quilt.

BLESSING

You are a blessing—known, chosen, and called for a purpose. May you boldly live into this truth, recognizing and cherishing your inherent worth so that you may honor God's image in others. Trust in your belovedness as you enter the redemptive work God has invited you into this Advent season.



BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *In you, O God,*

EXHALE: *I find my worth.*



Favored One | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

YOU ARE A BLESSING

READ Luke 1:26-38

FROM THE ARTIST | Lauren Wright Pittman

At an early age, I learned that because I am human, I am sinful, and by my very existence, I am unsuitable to be in God's presence. Without Jesus to intercede on my behalf, my unworthiness was untenable to God. Needless to say, this was not good for my self-esteem or self-image, and there is a lot of lingering self-doubt—bordering on self-hatred—that I have yet to root out.

I originally created this image for Sojourners Magazine. I was invited to create an illustration based on Natalie Wigg Stevenson's reflection on the Annunciation through a queer theological lens.¹ Stevenson's writing stretched me beyond my limits, and once I got past my discomfort, I became grateful for this challenge. Her commentary broke open my perspective and rebuilt it with affirmation, agency, consent, and pleasure. She notes that Mary is affirmed by the angel: "Greetings, favored one!" (v. 28), Mary exhibits agency: "How can this be?" (v. 34), and offers consent: "Here I am... let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38). She introduced a question I had never considered: *What if Mary experienced pleasure?* This notion proved incompatible with my internalized shame. It challenged my deep-seated feelings of unworthiness and threatened to overturn the construct of a God who is repelled by anything human. The exercise of sitting with this thought felt revolutionary.

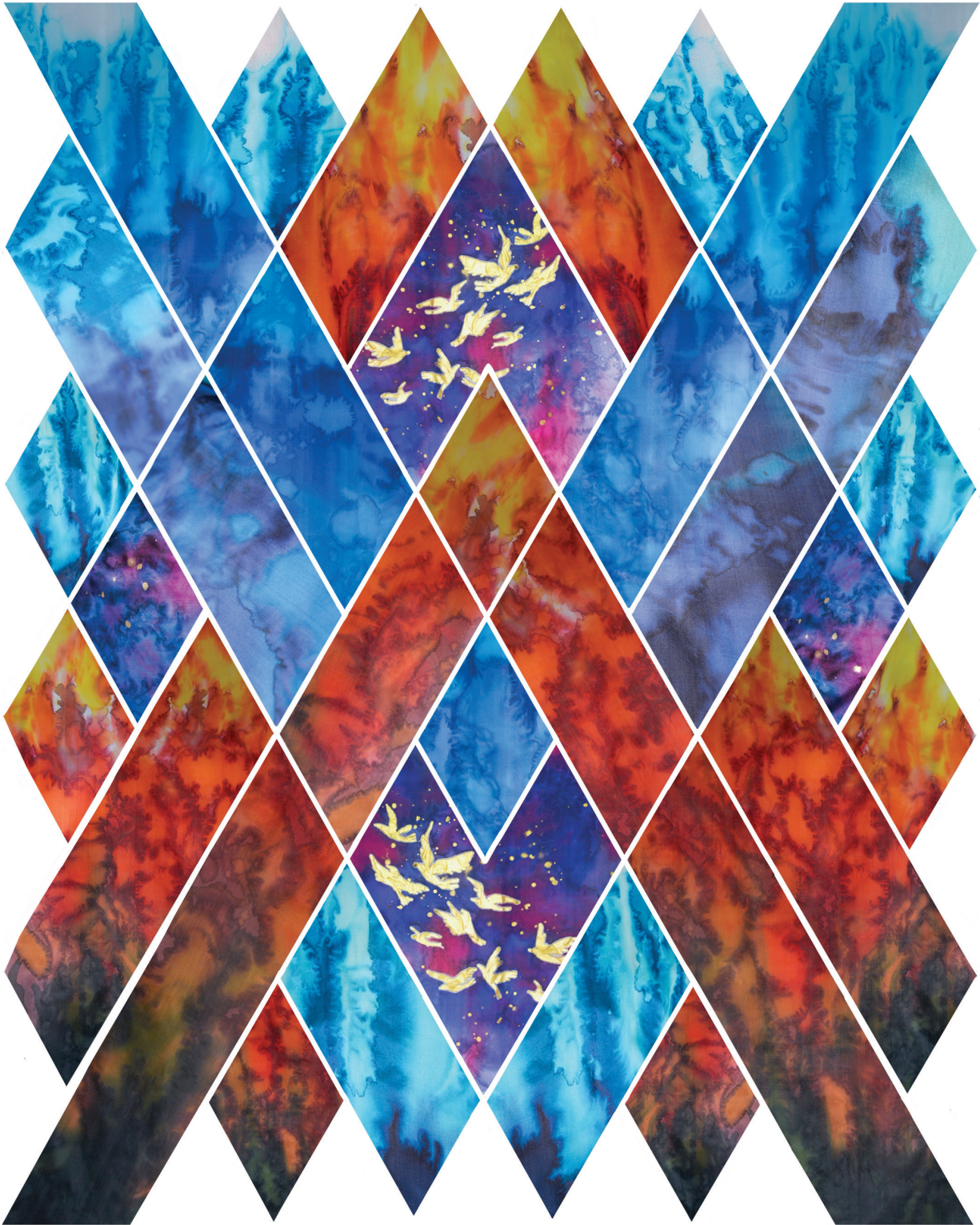
As I attempted to create imagery to accompany her work, I found myself in tears. What if my fully embodied self, including the most human parts of me, are not only acceptable but beloved by the creator of the universe? What if because of my me-ness, God couldn't stay away, and chose to come near and take on flesh too? As I drew, I felt a few steps closer to accepting the steadfast, limitless, unconditional love of God that I claim to believe in, but have yet to fully receive.

What resulted was an image of Mary and Gabriel in a warm, intimate embrace. Mary has a peace to her that is like a wave of relief over her whole being. A kaleidoscope quilt pattern surrounds them and patterns Mary's clothes. If we could open ourselves up to receive the incomprehensible love of God, maybe we would constantly feel wrapped up in a soft, cozy, lovingly-stitched-together quilt. Favored one, God delights in you—every single bit of you. Never forget: you are a blessing.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

¹ <https://sojo.net/magazine/december-2023/how-queer-theology-can-invigorate-advents-anticipation>



Lisle

When You Pass Through the Waters | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Ink dyes and gold resist on silk, with digital collage

YOU ARE A BLESSING

READ Isaiah 43:1-7

FROM THE ARTIST | Lisle Gwynn Garrity

When we began working on our Advent theme, we were inspired by the storied tradition of quilting. Though I am not a textile artist—and can hardly use a sewing machine—I turned to the fabric medium I enjoy: painting with ink dyes and gold resist on silk. As I read through my assigned scriptures for this series, I created a list of the images and patterns I found in my texts: water, fire, spirit, fruit trees, mountains, stars, sky. Then, I stretched my silk and began to paint, creating a series of 6 small banners.

Next, I moved into a digital space. I photographed my silk banners and then began drawing quilt patterns with my stylus pen onto my iPad, collaging the photos of my silk paintings into the designs. As I digitally stitched together patterns and geometric shapes, I realized I was quilting, just in my own unique way.

This piece is meant to be a visual prayer, inviting you to internalize and personalize the words of blessing from Isaiah 43. And so, I invite you to take a deep breath in, then let it out, and pray with me:

*“When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.”* (Is. 43:2a)

Rest your gaze on the art, following all the shapes with water imagery. Notice the textures and the colors. Offer a prayer for all the ways you feel as if you are drowning or being overcome by forces beyond your control. Now pray for God’s waters to nourish you. Ask for a raft. Imagine you are floating gently down a river.

*“When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.”* (Is. 43:2b)

Look again at the art. With your eyes, trace all the areas you see fire imagery. Offer a prayer for all the people and places in the world experiencing devastation and destruction. Now ask God to renew all the earth. Ask for healing. Ask for protection for those who are hurting.

Lastly, inhale deeply, and release. You are precious in God’s sight. Imagine God gazing upon you, delighting in all that you are. You are a blessing. Let that truth buoy you as you breathe each new breath.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



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