

# LET HEAVEN & NATURE SING

An Advent Devotional Resource

Presbyterians for Restoring Creation (PRC)

*\*for ecology and justice\**



\* In 1990, the 202<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) passed a policy called “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice” from which various eco-justice efforts were founded, including the formation of PRC: a nationwide network that equips, inspires, and connects Presbyterians and other people of faith to care for God’s creation. To learn more about PRC, go to:

[www.prcweb.org](http://www.prcweb.org)

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**Presbyterians for Restoring Creation (PRC)** is a member-based grassroots organization. We invite you to join PRC as a member if you are not already and/or to give a donation if you appreciate this resource. Find us at [www.prcweb.org](http://www.prcweb.org). Mailing address: PO Box 2855, San Anselmo, CA 94979. Phone: 415-451-2826. Email: [prc@sfts.edu](mailto:prc@sfts.edu).

## Introduction

### Using This Resource

We hope that this Advent devotional resource will be for you a simple, thought-provoking tool to connect this season with caring for God's creation. It includes a reading for each of the Sundays of Advent, for Christmas Eve, and Christmas. Written by a different member of PRC, each reflection opens with a scripture verse and ends with a closing prayer. These readings can be used for individual reflection or used in a group setting.

In addition to the reflections, we are including a list of ways to celebrate Advent so that as we prepare for the coming of Christ, we also might prepare our homes, churches, and lives for better care of creation.

May your Advent journey be blessed and may both heaven and nature sing in the joy of this holy season!

### Alternative Christmas Tips

We know as Christians that we are called to focus on the birth of Christ and to give gifts that reflect our love and God's grace this season. Yet it can be difficult to avoid the mass consumption of unnecessary goods at Christmastime. Fortunately, great resources abound for celebrating this season more simply. We can focus on giving fairly traded gifts, purchasing gift memberships to worthwhile organizations (like PRC!), and/or giving gifts of time and love rather than tangible products. Some churches even set aside an afternoon or day for members to shop an "Alternative Christmas Market" where they have booths set up to share fair trade goods and local crafts. We recommend the below organizations as you plan how you will celebrate this year.

*Center for a New American Dream* helps Americans consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice, offers great resources for simplifying the holidays. 877-68-DREAM, [www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org)

*Alternatives for Simple Living* equips people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly and celebrate responsibly (800) 821-6153, [www.SimpleLiving.org](http://www.SimpleLiving.org)

*National Green Pages* (Co-op America) harnesses economic power—the strength of consumers, investors, businesses, and the marketplace—to create a socially just and environmentally sustainable society. 202 872-5307. [www.coopamerica.org](http://www.coopamerica.org)

*SERRV International* markets hand-crafts from developing regions that pay a fair price to artisans. 800 723-3712. [www.serrv.org](http://www.serrv.org)

*Ten Thousand Villages* markets hand-crafts from developing regions paying a fair price to artisans. 717 859-8100. [www.tenthousandvillages.org](http://www.tenthousandvillages.org)

*Heiffer Project International* helps people develop a sustainable source of food and income around the world, (800) 422-0474 [www.heiffer.org](http://www.heiffer.org)

**First Sunday of Advent:  
The One Who is More Powerful**  
By Rebecca Barnes-Davies

*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...* Mark 1: 7

As we prepare our hearts and homes and churches for the birth of Jesus, we anticipate the coming of a powerful savior. Yet our long-sought Messiah was born a baby, on the margins of society. Making friends of outcasts and turning temple tables upside-down, Jesus refused throughout his life and ministry to fit into the traditional image of power. So we realize today—even as we bake holiday treats, hang greens around the mantle and prepare gifts for loved ones—that we must await the coming of Christ not just into the warm and cozy places but also into the gritty, uncomfortable, and hard realities of poverty, injustice, and environmental destruction. We know that Christ’s birth is indeed for the whole world.

This Advent season we are living also in a “season” of global climate change (though climate change will not soon meld into another season, unless we change our behavior). What we await in Advent is what we also need in this time of climate change: an outpouring of God’s love and power for the world. As Christ’s disciples we are called to participate with God in the healing needed and to model and live the power that Jesus taught: a power that uplifts the lowly and challenges injustice. Just as we seek to live intentionally in Advent so must we work to wield Christ-like power in order to alleviate the pressure on creation, including the world’s most vulnerable people.

The good news in these two “seasons” is that because we are a people of faith and of hope, we have every reason to feel confident of, and compelled to respond to, God’s promise and goodness. We learn about environmental destruction and practical solutions because it is part of discipleship. Caring for creation is part of the way to live and act out the gospel message of love, grace, and justice.

How can we reduce our energy use, to insure that the light of God is the brightest one on earth, to help move us beyond this “season” of climate change? In June 2006, the Presbyterian Church USA General Assembly passed a recommendation to encourage all Presbyterians to live carbon neutral lives. This means that we are called to discover the impact of our lifestyles (individual and corporate) on climate change—particularly our energy use and the related carbon dioxide emissions (greenhouse gases). It means we then are called to reduce our current impact and to contribute financially and otherwise to the development of sustainable alternatives (such as wind and solar power) through such things as the purchase of carbon offsets. This Advent as we prepare to welcome Christ, may we also take active steps to live rightly and righteously with all God’s creation so that the good news can spread to all places on earth.

Prayer:

Holy One, we know you came to us as a child. You shrug off all the powers we try to place on your shoulders so that you can make room for the real power that is life, and love, and salvation for the whole world. Teach us once again to model this power, to care for all the earth, and to live as you call us, in this Advent season and always. Amen.

**Second Sunday of Advent:  
Prepare the Way of the Lord!**  
By Alan Jenkins

*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the Way of the Lord!' Luke 3:4*

In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist is likened to the prophet Isaiah, who proclaims: *Prepare the way of the Lord!* In essence, this is John's call to those gathered by the river Jordan. And in this Advent season, this revolutionary and urgent call beckons us as well, for the sake of God's people, for the sake of all creation, for *LIFE!*

Alongside the river Jordan, John clarifies how to prepare: Clothe those in need and give food to the hungry. For this seemingly naive vagabond, with his locust and wild honey-eating ways, preparation for the coming of the Messiah means deepening our practice of compassion and care for the physical needs of God's people. Mother Mary, in our Advent narratives earlier in Luke, clearly makes these connections, also, in her Magnificat, (1:53). And we, located smack dab between a world in need and a creation groaning in hope, are called to connect the dots, as well . . . and even expand them.

We have only scratched the surface in understanding how intimately connected the physical well-being of God's people is to the ecological health of all creation. One case in point is the organic community gardening revolution (e.g. Cuba- surprising many, or even here in Atlanta- over 120 new community garden initiatives just in the last several years). Not only is this leading to better public health, but it's also bringing about cleaner streams, rivers, and less need for CO2 producing transport. We, too, must act on these connections. I once heard author Paul Hawken simply state, "If we are to care for humanity, we must first care for the earth."

So, if we are to be mindful of the Good News implications for all creation, how should we prepare the way of the Lord? Or as the crowds ask John alongside the River Jordan, *What then should we do?* (Lk 3:10). Might I add some suggestions:

*Prepare the way of the Lord!*

Prepare a new compact fluorescent light as you prepare each Advent candle. Prepare your boots for walking. Prepare the way on public transportation. Prepare congregational carbon reduction goals. Prepare a chart of the goals in the hallway for all members to see. Prepare your windows for energy efficiency. Prepare a letter to newly elected government officials on the connections of global warming to need for clean energy production. And if they don't listen . . . Prepare crowds to march to their offices! Prepare your own list and print it in the church bulletin and newsletter. *With revolutionary hope . . . prepare for the coming of the Lord!*

Prayer:

Glorious God, creator and redeemer of all that is . . . We celebrate the birth of your incarnate hope, born in a back-yard stable and filling every corner of creation. We celebrate the new possibilities in creation which you are already showing us. And yet the winter can be cold and our spirits become weary. Fill us with the urgent hope of John the Baptist. Weave our spirits with the groaning hope of your earth. Embolden us to prepare the Way. In the name of the one who is the Way, Amen!

**Third Sunday of Advent:  
Shining Light in the Wilderness**

By Betty A. Little

*The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has the light shown. Isaiah 9:2*

Excessive cutting in forests and opening them to motorized vehicles (ATVs) accelerates the melting of glaciers and the march of deserts –all these tragedies bear the mark of humanity. Nature follows its own cycles but the activities of people –their use and abuse of resources – has a significant negative impact.

I propose that those who “come into the light” in our time are those who have gained knowledge and understanding about creation –both creatures and habitat. A change in attitude towards the creation is needed, and these new light-bearers are those who have learned enough to make attitudinal changes now and to be stewards of the earth.

I tell my story not because it is the most pressing environmental issue but to share my pain and struggle and as an invitation to you to tell yours. By sharing, we become a source of renewal for each other.

I am working with those of many faiths who struggle to protect special wilderness areas in Vermont. We shared our knowledge of what should be saved, and why, and showed how wilderness fit into Global Climate Change Initiatives. We found strong public support, people who felt deeply the need for wilderness. They wrote letters and spoke up at public hearings, often in the presence of vocal opponents. Those opposing ANY restrictions want to use the entire wilderness for their own purposes. They manipulated the process for designating wilderness areas blocking the political process. Now, I wait with others not knowing the outcome, waiting for the miracle.

Passage of law is important but law alone cannot protect this wilderness. Only a change in the spirit within the people can provide security. In this dark moment we fear for the fate of the Wilderness.

Advent Season gives us a chance to renew our faith. We walk step by step through December with the people of an earlier time, sharing their hope and expectation. In the gospel of John we find the God who brings light into the world. All is not lost; we are God’s Stewards of the Earth and we are called to live in hope.

Prayer:

Dear God, in the midst of struggles to protect your creation, give us the courage to persist and skills to change the minds and hearts of others and be drawn with them into the light. Amen.

**Fourth Sunday of Advent:  
Drawing Living Water**  
By Bill Knox

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Isaiah 12:3-5*

After a year's follow-up to our national conference which focused on water, this Advent scripture just leaps right out at us. Its precious life-giving water presents a strong symbol of Hope. People living in a dry and barren land (such as the Israelites) would find it uppermost in their dreams and yearnings.

Having just seen *An Inconvenient Truth* again, I was struck by the images of drought and floods, which are forecast to become more powerful. The ominous prediction of the increase in these trends reflects global warming already in motion. Under these conditions, useful water becomes ever more precious.

In the midst of despair, Isaiah's summons presents a strong word of hope in the midst of despair. It can be for us a vigorous call in Advent, well worth watching and waiting for. It can give us the energy to "get ready" for such a gift, and makes our hearts grateful and full of praise.

Such an intense recognition of God's powerful acts readies us to share the good news. It is good news to the poor when projects through the Synod of Living Waters makes new wells possible for drinking and irrigation. When these are extended to areas of drought or polluted wells they indeed become living water.

We stand in need of a new stewardship of water in local and global terms. We need to turn from the wars of destruction to the peaceable building up of necessary infrastructure. We need to acknowledge God's kingdom instead of the greediness of empire. We must resist the privatizing of our water resources in the land and the seas.

So we are called to watch and pray, and get ready for Christ's Advent. He is coming, whether we are ready or not. We can share the good news and give thanks for God's mighty acts among us.

Prayer:

Mighty God: you have made us and all creation to serve you; now ready the world for your rule. Come quickly to save us, so that violence and crying shall end, and your children shall live in peace, honoring each other with justice and love; Through Jesus Christ, who lives in power with you, and with the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen. *(taken from the Worship Book)*

**Christmas Eve:  
The Lowly and the Light**  
By John Preston

*The Mighty One has done great things for me.....he has pulled the mighty down from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. Luke 1:52*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of darkness, on them has light shined. Isaiah 9:2*

The Eve of Christmas dazzles us with color, and light! It calls up in memory a time of childhood when we experienced the linkage of family, gift giving, celebration, and worship. This nostalgia of color and light provides a foundation for our present Advent outlook.

As adults this light becomes even more meaningful because we know the reality of different kinds of darkness within our world. We begin to understand, in faith, the depths of meaning spoken in that powerful verse from John's gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Yet light is more than powerful metaphor. For us who know ourselves as part of Earth's body, it means photosynthesis, energy, growth! When a star is born, we witness it as light. When it dies, we know it as a "black hole."

Mary knew the black hole of the collaboration of the wealthy Jewish class with the Empire of Rome. She saw in Jesus' birth a cosmic-political event. This child of light would pull down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the lowly. She was excited by hope because she was among the lowly---those peasant people whose work was exploited by the powerful and wealthy.

Today we are aware of "the lowly" in a new way. The lowly are all species, and all the "other than human" flora and fauna of creation. Economic talk often speaks of "exploiting" natural resources. We need to listen to the deeper connotations in that word. And that brings us back full circle to the coming of the light.

What is it that is breaking into the darkness? God as light, as Spirit, is becoming incarnate. Yes, we celebrate Jesus as the human point of the reception of this light, this Spirit. And yet, can we not think of Jesus as the receiving point for an incarnation that includes the lowly? Can we go beyond the dogmatic exclusiveness in how we normally think of incarnation?

Faith can envision the light of God's presence with lowly and exploited plants, trees, waterways, animal life, and people. In looking at creation in this way, sustainability is a matter of both justice and spirituality. Advent signals a new day. And in that bright, light, new day, we collaborate with the Spirit, glorifying God as we glory in the creation.

Prayer:

O Light that provides and sustains life-energy and growth, let our light shine as stewards of creation, that we may help exalt the lowly. Amen.

**Christmas Day:  
Let Heaven and Nature Sing**

By Janet Adair Hansen

*For God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only begotten Son... For God did not send his Son into the cosmos to condemn the cosmos, but to save the cosmos through him.* John 3:16-17

It was my first time on snowshoes.

I was participating in the “Winter Wonderland Walk” at Lime Hollow Nature Center the week before Christmas. Paper bag luminarios lit up the trail paths through this patch of hilly woods in upstate New York. Fresh snow had fallen that day and the snowshoes crunched as we moved along. Moonlight glistened on the red maple, spruce and white pines, interspersed with a few ash, elm, and oak. Boughs were heavy laden with the white frosting left from the earlier storm. But now the night was clear, crisp and cold.

In the rich velvet sky, the full moon visible through the branches illuminated the forest. The air sparkled as snowflakes drifted from the trees overhead. We could hear a group of hikers ahead of us, singing holiday songs and Christmas carols. Strains of the melodies echoed uncertainly back to our ears, as some of the sound seemed absorbed by the blanket of snow everywhere. The four of us sang, too, the last group out for a walk, led by my friend, who was Program Director for the Nature Center.

Carol asked if we wanted to walk deeper into the woods, leaving behind the luminarios and venturing out onto trails no one else had hiked that night. The moon on the snow was bright enough to travel safely, and Carol was very familiar with all the paths. We broke trail, our snowshoes negotiating the 8 inches of new snow on the ground. The moon revealed tracks of deer and rabbits and squirrels that had been in motion since the storm had abated. Traversing a gully we delighted in the tinkle of a tiny creek that had not yet been totally iced over.

Stopping on a knob we paused, our breath coming out as mist in front of our faces. Quiet, we watched and listened to the snowy woods, feeling transported by a vibrant energy that seemed to sustain our own lives as well as the trees and all that lived among them. Very softly we began singing to the unseen deer and rabbits and squirrels, and even to the trees themselves: “Silent night, holy night...” It was almost Christmas. Heaven and earth were not divided. The Divine had wrought reconciliation for the whole world, and the snowy woods shone with the brilliance of heavenly light.

Prayer:

This Christmas Day, may we experience the transcendent truth that not just humans, but the whole cosmos, all of creation, are saved by God’s love incarnate in the babe born in Bethlehem. And as we sing the familiar Christmas carols, may we be aware that heaven and nature are singing along with us. Amen.

## 30 Ways to Celebrate Advent, Save Energy, and Care for Creation Presbyterians for Restoring Creation (PRC) [www.prcweb.org](http://www.prcweb.org)

### Gift giving

1. Simplify gift giving (whatever this might mean for your family!)
2. Avoid gifts made of plastic. Choose organic cotton, wood, cloth, and other natural materials instead. Look for fair-trade and/or locally made goods.
3. Give an educational movie (such as *An Inconvenient Truth*) or book (such as *Eco-Justice: The Unfinished Journey*)
4. Give the gift of time: visit homebound members of your church or give “gift certificates” to friends and families for activities you’ll do together
5. Give the gift of membership to Presbyterians for Restoring Creation ([www.prcweb.org](http://www.prcweb.org))

### Food

6. For holiday meals, cook seasonal foods from local sources (ie, farmers’ markets)
7. Bring fresh fruits and vegetables to your local food bank (if they take such donations)
8. Pick apples, pumpkins, or squash as a family outing to a local farm
9. Celebrate the Sundays of Advent by eating lower on the food chain for at least one meal

### Energy

10. Combine exercise and nearby errands by walking or bicycling to your destination
11. When running errands by car, plan ahead and combine trips
12. Buy carbon offsets for holiday travel plans ([www.nativeenergy.com](http://www.nativeenergy.com) or [www.b-e-f.com](http://www.b-e-f.com))
13. Caulk your windows to keep the heat in your home during these cold days
14. Turn off your computer and unplug appliances when not in use
15. Turn off lights when not in use
16. Keep thermostat at 68F or lower, using clothing to stay warm indoors if needed
17. As you decorate your home, add in the step of replacing some of your incandescent light bulbs with energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs)
18. If buying appliances or electronics, buy EnergyStar approved ([www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov))
19. When cooking, use the microwave, toaster oven, and electric appliances instead of oven/stove
20. Minimize the amount of holiday lighting when decorating
21. Arrange an energy audit of your church by the local utility, as a gift to the congregation
22. Consider paying for one of the recommended changes from the energy audit as your end of year gift to the church.

### Activities

23. Walk outdoors and enjoy the change of seasons
24. Practice a random act of kindness at least once a week
25. Make home-baked bread with friends or family
26. As you clean and decorate, consider simplifying stuff and clearing clutter
27. Read a book that will encourage your commitment to creation care
28. If going to the movies as a holiday treat, consider going to see “The Great Warming” ([www.thegreatwarming.org](http://www.thegreatwarming.org)) or another environmentally themed film
29. Send Christmas cards to your Senators and Representatives and state your desire to see their pro-environment vote on bills in the New Year
30. Gather a small group to read the Bible and pray together during Advent, think about ways you connect Advent to energy use and caring for creation