

Vision of Peace

December 7, 2025

Second Sunday of Advent

PURPLE

Isaiah 11:1-10

The year was 1481. Switzerland was on the verge of a civil war — again. Forty years earlier, the Old Zürich War raged over succession issues. For a country whose name is synonymous with “neutrality,” such factions seem unfathomable. Human nature, though, is predictable and conflicts are inevitable. This time, though, there would be no bloodstained alpine meadows. Instead, a child of God would emerge to broker peace among the divided villages.

Nicholas of Flüe was his name. He was a man of the mountains who bid farewell to his wife and 10 children two decades earlier to devote his life to God. He left with just a cloak on his back and no shoes. Legend has it that Nicholas, who would later be called “Brother Klaus,” sustained himself with the elements of the Eucharist, eating bread and wine for the remainder of his life.

When unrest came to the country, Nicholas, a former soldier who had seen his share of carnage, knew he had to speak for peace. History does not record what he said, but opposing parties miraculously came together. What was documented was how church bells pealed triumphantly that Christmas of 1481, ringing continuously for four days.

It’s a beautiful story to have on this second Sunday of Advent — one that echoes the vision of peace Isaiah brings to us, where all get along and no one is harmed. There are cows feeding with bears, an infant plays near a cobra’s den, and a child puts its hand in the viper’s nest. The message is clear: On God’s holy mountain there will be no destruction to anyone or anything.

That holy mountain is still, though, a vision. Just ask Switzerland about its warring history. Yet that doesn’t mean we let go of hope. Rather, as God sent the prophets to speak of peace, we are being called to speak to our communities of a better way to live together. We are to be the brokers of peace who, like Nicholas, hold steadfast to the belief that “peace cannot be destroyed, but discord can” and that true peace is “always in God, for God is peace.” It was this thinking that led to Nicholas’ canonization by Pope Pius XII in 1947, making him Switzerland’s only saint.

The Christmas bells rang with the good news of peace on Earth in Switzerland in 1481 thanks to a soldier-turned-hermit-turned-saint who believed Isaiah’s vision was possible. Imagine the peace we could bring into the world today if we too believed.

God of Advent waiting, help us become brokers of peace. Soften our hearts and make tender our words so that love is heard rather than hate and discourse. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

Heartbeat of Justice

December 14, 2025

Third Sunday of Advent

PURPLE

Luke 1:46b-55

Mary, a teen engaged to Joseph, received the startling news that God had chosen her to birth hope into a bleak world. Quite an honor of the divine kind, yet quite a dishonor of the humankind. This pregnancy would ignite gossipy whispers and many a raised eyebrows among the villagers. Still, Mary said “yes,” relaying the brave and life-changing words to her angelic messenger: *Let it be according to God's will.*

While young and innocent, Mary knew what even the most learned and worldly person failed to grasp: The Mighty One can and will do great things for all who have been told that they are not good enough to garner any worthy attention.

The holy mother-to-be also knew there was something greater in the works than her own blissful domesticity with Joseph. Her “yes” would bless generations to come. How often do we realize that our “yes” to God creates a ripple of blessings? When will we ever truly allow God's plan to override our best laid plans for tomorrow? Can we give up our dreams so easily and so eagerly for that of God's vision for us?

So in awe to be cast in the salvation story, Mary begins singing of God's power that sends the rich away empty. While the scholarly name of Mary's song is “The Magnificat” it could easily be called “The Heartbeat of Justice,” for each word hits the right note of how God will dismantle the systems of oppression.

Mary had her season of saying “yes” to God. Now it is our turn, for we are being invited to play a pivotal role in the unfolding saga of salvation. It is our time to sing “The Heartbeat of Justice,” making clear every note of God's care for all who have been forgotten.

But what exactly would our “yes” to God require? According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, every “yes” to God is accompanied with a “no.” As the German pastor, theologian and anti-Nazi dissident during World War II once reflected, “Our ‘yes’ to God requires our ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor.”

“The Heartbeat of Justice” is playing. Who will sing it out loud?

Mighty and loving God, as Christmas songs fill the air with promises of jingling bells and flying reindeer, may our ears be attuned to the true song of Christmas. May we hear the

lyrics of a justice seeking Love that sets prisoners free and lifts those kicked to the gutter. May we hear, may we sing, and may we find ourselves whispering our “yes” to You. May Your will be done in our lives. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today’s *Sunday Bulletin*.)

God With Us

December 21, 2025

Fourth Sunday of Advent

PURPLE

Matthew 1:18-25

It was Christmas Eve, and I was joining my father at a church he had been attending. I settled into the pew, letting the medley of hymns soothe my still frazzled soul from the push to meet holiday deadlines at my Manhattan magazine job. Soon, though, I heard more than the music. I heard a silent prayer fill my heart.

God, thank You for being in my life. May I never forget to thank You even when dark times come. May I always know You are with me.

Why was I thinking about dark times descending upon my seemingly perfect life? I was young. My career was taking off. I had a wonderful apartment. I even had a special someone in my life.

Thankfully, the church school procession of angels with lopsided cardboard wings had begun, giving me something else to focus on. But throughout the service, every now and then, I kept thinking about, “May I never forget to thank You even when dark times come.”

Two months later, “the one” I envisioned building a future with was killed in a jeep accident while traveling in Africa. The proverbial rug was ripped out from underneath me. Yet through my tears, I remembered my Christmas prayer. And so, I prayed in my sorrow a prayer of thanks for God being with me here in my dark time.

The year of unwanted change flew by and once again it was Christmas Eve. This time, though, I wasn’t sitting in the pew of the church my father was attending. I was standing with a heavenly host of angels with lopsided cardboard wings. I had left my magazine job and was now serving the church as Christian ed director as I prepared to enter seminary. Little did I know then that down this unexpected path was a rural congregation waiting for me where I would find not only my call, but someone to share my life with.

As I waited with the overly excited angels, I thought about how drastically my life had changed. It was then the realization of where God had led me fully hit. I was standing in church named “Emmanuel,” which was located on a street called “Hope.”

The angels began fluttering as the organ bellowed with the first notes of the processional hymn. But I didn’t hear any of it. All I could hear was a familiar prayer, in which I invite you to say along with me:

God, thank You for being in my life. May I never forget to thank You even when dark times come. May I always know You are with me. In the name of Emmanuel, God with us always, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today’s *Sunday Bulletin*.)

Cosmic Praise

December 28, 2025

First Sunday after Christmas Day

WHITE

Psalm 148

How many forlorn Christmas trees, kicked to the curb and stripped of all their tinsel glory, did you see on your way to church today? One? Two? Perhaps even three?

Once again, the world has rushed the seasons, ushering in the bleak midwinter before its time. I have always wondered why we are quick to start our holiday celebrations earlier each year, and then seem to be in a rush to pack it all away? We are still in Christmastide until Epiphany, Jan. 6 which, before St. Nick came with a sack full of toys, was traditionally the time to exchange gifts, recalling the gold, frankincense and myrrh that the Magi presented to the Christ Child.

But rather than lingering to listen to the angels sing, we stop too soon, leaving many to come down with a severe case of post-holiday letdown. You might recognize the symptoms: sadness, lethargy, and trouble getting back into the swing of mundane routines.

While my Christmas tree stays lit until Jan. 6, I am still susceptible to post-holiday letdown. But when I find myself struggling to get out of bed and stare with dread at the computer, not wanting to check work emails, I reach for the best cure I know of. I reach for God’s enduring Word.

It is in the Good Book that we find the psalmist’s prescription for let downs and blues of all kinds (not just holiday!): A huge dose of praise, administered every hour on the hour.

*Praise him, all his angels! Praise him, all his host! Praise him you highest heavens!
Praise him!*

When we turn our attention to lifting our praises rather than cursing the darkness, our hearts start soaring with an indestructible hope. We begin believing that with God all things are possible. Frowns become smiles. Mountains become molehills. Strength, courage and energy return.

Praise is a transformative spiritual discipline that I urge us to add to our New Year's resolutions, that is, if you make resolutions. I remember reading years ago that Satan is more afraid of praise coming from our lips than praise. Yes, praise is that powerful. So my friends, practice praise — this day and always.

God of light and love, the Christmas decorations that filled our hearts with joy are being taken down. The corners of our lives that were illuminated with the glow of warm hope are now bleak and cold. Yet still we are being reminded to praise You — now and always. And so, hear our praises this day. And may our praise to You be the very thing that chases away the gloomy shadows all around. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

Another Road

January 4, 2026

Second Sunday after Christmas

WHITE

John 1:(1-9), 10-18

There's nothing more inviting than a candle's warm glow on a cold winter's night. The flickering flame dances as if being led by some divine melody. It's a light that calls to mind the opening of John's Gospel that speaks of a light in which no darkness can overcome.

Since the discovery of fire, a candle burning in the pitch black has always held symbolic hope. Back in the day, placing a candle in the window announced there was a birth in the house. It was also a sign of someone's passing or a remembrance of a loved one. During the persecution of Catholic priests in Ireland, a candle in the window let a priest know that the home was a place of refuge.

We all need a candle burning in the window guiding us to our place of refuge, for we all seem to be groping in the dark these days, wandering for far too long on uncertain roads. Where is that spark of hope leading us to a place of belonging?

Long after the Christmas season of light is over, I continue to embrace every opportunity I have to light candles. With a strike of a match, darkened nooks in my home magically come to life. I also find a soothing calmness wash over me while watching a candle burn. The limited reach of its flame is my reminder to stop trying to see so far ahead. Rather, trust what the light is revealing, no matter how narrow or short the path it

illuminates is. It's then I realize I don't need search lights to be found. All I need is the Christ light shining on me.

There's a poem by Howard Thurman who writes about lighting candles all year long. In it he encourages us all to light "candles of joy, despite the sadness; candles of hope where despair keeps watch; candles of peace for tempest-tossed days; candles of grace to ease heavy burdens; and candles of love to inspire all my living."

There's a light to be found in the world — one that the darkness will not overcome. May we do our part in keeping the light of Christ burning brightly in 2026.

Loving God, help us be the ones who light the candles of joy, hope, peace, grace and love this year, illuminating the darkness for those who are lost and shining a beacon of welcome to those who are lonely. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

Possibilities Unfolding

January 11, 2026

The Baptism of Christ

First Sunday after Epiphany

WHITE

Mathew 3:13-17

The sacrament of baptism is still so shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding. In conversations with families, I often discover the desire to have their child baptized is rooted in an expectation to carry on a tradition.

Baptism, though, is a rite not a tradition. It's a moment where a child is claimed as Christ's own. It's a moment where family — both blood and spiritual — make a commitment, promising to raise the child in the faith. And in that moment that I hold the child in my arms, there is a holy, fleeting second where I realize only God knows the future. It is only God that holds the possibilities born at the font that will keep unfolding for the child till the day their last breath is taken.

Yet after the water is sprinkled on a child's forehead, the excitement of these God possibilities is pushed aside for a slice of the celebratory cake and photo ops with the newly baptized.

What does it take for us to remember our baptismal identities as Christ's own? How would that identify then shape our lives?

Thomas Merton, a 20th-century Catholic monk, addressed unfolding possibilities in a letter he wrote to a young mission worker who had become cynical and jaded. First,

Merton urged the mission worker to stop relying on a job for fulfillment and to shape one's identity. This is only the world's way of trying to fend off a despairing sense of "nothingness."

Rather Merton advised that, "All the good that you will do will come not from you but the fact that you have allowed yourself, in obedience to faith, to be used by God's love."

Once we truly allow God to use our lives, the need to prove our worth disappears. We are set free to be our authentic selves, allowing God's power to work through us.

"The big results are not in your hands, but they suddenly happen. There is no point in building our lives on personal satisfaction," said Merton.

Through the waters of baptism, we are claimed as Christ's own. But the question remains to be answered: Do our lives reflect who we belong to? Are the possibilities unfolding before us truly God possibilities?

God, we know Your plans for us are higher and better than we could ever imagine. We want to die to self and live for You. We want to claim our identities as Christ's own. Give us the strength to do so. Help us to let go of our tight grip on who we think we are or who we wish to be. May we surrender completely to Your will, so that all Your beautiful possibilities might be revealed. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

All That We Are

January 18, 2026

Second Sunday after Epiphany

GREEN

John 1:29-42

When the Spirit descended from heaven like a dove and remained on Jesus at his moment of baptism, John saw it. He was in the Jordan River baptizing his cousin, Jesus. He witnessed that holy, amazing moment. He knew Jesus was the one to follow — not him — and so, he told his two followers just that.

"Look, there's the Lamb of God. That's who you want to follow," said John. So off they went after Jesus. Jesus, sensing he was being followed, turned and asked them bluntly, "What are you looking for?" To which they replied, "Where are you staying?"

What kind of question was that? So much meaning gets lost in translation as our modern ears hear this as a question of actual location or a curiosity about how one is living. But the former followers of John who wanted to be in the Jesus club, were not wanting to know if Jesus was in a hip neighborhood or residing in a swanky dwelling.

Their question we discover is much deeper for the Greek word we translate into “staying” should read “abide.”

The word “abide” is an important one in John’s Gospel. It is used 10 times in the first 10 verses in John 15. The biblical definition for abide means “to be held or kept” or “to remain.” So, what the soon-to-be followers of Jesus wanted to know was who was holding this prophetic teacher. Who was “keeping” Jesus — keeping him safe, secure, steadfast?

Jesus’ reply “come and see” is also one that goes deeper than an invitation to tour his home and have a cup of tea. Jesus’ “come and see” is an invitation to an adventure that unfolds throughout the entire Gospel of John.

Come and see how I abide in God. Come and see the importance of abiding in me as I abide in you. Come and see how, with God, you will always be held tightly.

Let’s now revisit this story. Jesus walks by and we realize he is the one we need to follow. Just as we catch up with his flowing robes, he turns to us and asks, “What are you looking for?”

Pause here and really think about your answer. What have you been looking for? What have been our expectations of Jesus? What is it we hope to discover? Now dare to ask the question, “Where are you abiding?”

Show us, Lord, once and for all, how we can also remain in the safe and transformative care of God, so that we can face the trials of this life victoriously — and with grace.

Tell us, Lord, where you abide because we would like to abide there as well. Let us end our time together praying the words of the great old hymn, “Abide with Me.”

*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, oh, abide with me. May
it be so. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

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Called Together

January 25, 2026

Third Sunday after Epiphany

GREEN

Matthew 4:12-23

Jesus calling the fishermen to leave their nets to fish for people has always been lifted as a call for evangelism. No matter what time or place, the message from pulpits has

been the same: Be like those fishermen. Put aside what you are doing and hook more people for Jesus.

While we are all called to share the Good News of the excluded finding inclusion, the sick finding healing, and the poor finding riches, there's a part of this story that often gets ignored in favor of the captivating imagery of lapping waves, bobbing boats and Jesus standing on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with windswept hair. It's the part where we must truly unpack — and understand — why we're being asked to fish for people. Hint: It has nothing to do with growing the church numerically.

Before Jesus walked the shores recruiting followers, he had retreated to Capernaum after hearing about his cousin John's arrest. His choice of location wasn't by chance. He was there to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah had written centuries before about that being the region where "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." They don't even have the strength or courage anymore to "walk in darkness." The troubles and trials of life have paralyzed them. The rolling clouds of gloom have immobilized them. Perhaps you can understand how this can happen.

Today, across the globe, there are still people sitting in darkness, in need of the renewing and revealing light of Christ. When we remember this part of the "go fish for people" narrative, we start to understand on a deeper level what is being asked of our congregations. It is time to cast our holy nets of welcome wide and start helping those sitting in darkness to stand and start walking again.

Jesus is calling our name to put aside what we think is important, set aside our schedules, reprioritize our to-do lists, and reach out to others. For Jesus doesn't care about bolstering membership rolls or increasing pledge cards. He only cares to rescue those he sees sitting in darkness.

Merciful God, help us hear the all-to-familiar "fish for people" story with new ears. Help us see how we are called together to cast nets of hope and healing to those who are suffering losses, who are in despair, and who battle depression. May our Christ light shine into the darkness this day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

The Vision Beautiful

February 1, 2026

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

GREEN

Matthew 5:1-12

When we hear someone say how blessed they are or how blessed a friend is, we automatically think of how their lives are filled with answered prayers, abundant grace,

and equally abundant provision. But when Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount to the masses, he turned the idea of what a blessing is upside down.

I wonder what the reaction really was when all those who needed to hear an inspirational message from Jesus heard his take on a blessed life instead.

Blessed are you who are poor in spirit. Blessed are you who mourn. Blessed are you who are meek. Blessed are you who hunger. Blessed are you who have been reviled and persecuted. Blessed are you in all the muck of life — my addition, not Jesus'.

I woke up the other the day desperately needing to remember once again that a blessed life is not a charmed life. I needed to know that no matter what this world throws at me or what others might say about me or do to me, that I am blessed because I am a child of God.

In my moments where I feel no one hears me, Jesus is listening. Those days I feel invisible, Jesus sees me. Those days when I really feel as if I hate the world (please tell me I am not alone here), I know that Jesus isn't judging me. Rather, like any understanding friend, my Lord and Savior walks alongside me, softening the calluses forming on my heart by a world filled with chaos, anger and violence.

Days like these I need to stop everything and run into the arms of Jesus. I need to feel the safety and security of his redeeming love. I need to hear his beautiful voice reassure my blessedness. For the world will try its best to drag us down, but Jesus is there to always lift us up.

So blessed are you this day. You who hurts. You who has been betrayed. You who are tired. You who are doubting. You who has lost your way, your purpose, you're your faith.

Blessed are you. Period. No questions asked. Why? Because you are a beautiful child of God — seen, heard and loved.

God of grace and great hope, we ask that You bless the brokenness in our lives, putting back together the shattered pieces of dreams or relationships in a new way. And, as You do, may we hear deep in our hearts the reassuring and restorative words that through all of life's ups and downs that we are indeed blessed. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

**Restoring Beauty
February 8, 2026
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

GREEN

Matthew 5:13-20

There's a white-washed stone and thatched roof cottage in Ireland that sits on a cliff. From every weather-beaten shuttered window there is a view of the sea that has inspired poets and composers for centuries. Wildflowers dance amid the grassy bluffs where a passing sheep or two can be found perfecting the storybook setting.

I stumbled upon this cottage during one of my bouts with writer's block. I had a pressing deadline, yet no inspiration. So, I decided to Google "Irish cottages for sale." Sadly, this dream cottage was not on the market. It was a vacation rental.

I was intrigued, but not with the possible dates in which to book a much-needed getaway. There on the website was the history of the cottage and how its owners restored the structure that had fallen not only into disrepair but had become what looked like just a pile of rocks.

Each before and after picture had me in awe. The restoration project was a massive undertaking. Yet what impressed me was not the amount of time, money and energy they put into bringing this ancient cottage back to life. What impressed me was that they had the eyes to see the beauty lurking in the rubble.

I am grateful that there are people who can see the possibilities in this world when others can't. I often show my husband, with great excitement, dilapidated old homes that are for sale. I begin pointing to the amazing stone foundation. I trace with my finger on the realtor's picture the faint outline of a chimney to what would have been a huge open hearth used for cooking. He, though, can't see what I see. He still sees just a pile of wood that would cost many dollars to rebuild.

But what would this world look like if we weren't blind to the "what can be's"? This question goes beyond Irish cottages, and even beyond the New England clapboard saltboxes I constantly dream about restoring.

I am talking about the "what can be's" that Jesus sees amid the broken beams, crumbling foundations and caved roofs of our lives. For just when we think rebuilding our life is impossible, Jesus not only sees that restoration is possible. Jesus makes it happen.

Many years ago, Jesus urged God's children to let their lights shine. Don't hide your light under a bushel basket. Shine — and shine brightly. Shine amid the rubble and ruin. Shine so that the God beauty can be seen. Shine to reveal that there is always hope. Shine, because the God truth is this: A pile of stone can indeed become a beautiful cottage once again.

Loving God, forgive us when we start believing that restoration work is just too hard and costly. Open our eyes to see what You see — that all things are possible with You.

Come into our lives this day and restore all that has crumbled. Restore, rebuild, reimagine — do what it takes for us to begin to shine once again. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

Dazzling Reign

February 15, 2026

Transfiguration Sunday

WHITE

Matthew 17:1-9

The setting sun cast a warm glow against the wooden beams of the Vermont barn where my wedding reception was being held. As candles flickered on the tables, the music for the father daughter dance began playing. My father's eyes glistened when he realized the song chosen for our twirl on the dance floor was from "The Sound of Music." The movie had always been a favorite in our family as Julia Andrews traipsing through the Alps always tugged at my father's Swiss heart.

Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow until you find your dream.

In the movie, Mother Superior sings this to young Maria — played by Julia Andrews — who is struggling with God's call in her life. The older nun reminds Maria that following God will always mean going in surprising directions. There will be struggles, doubts and tears. But search the high and low, Mother Superior says. Follow the dream that will indeed require "all the love you can give, every day of your life for as long as you live."

The season of Lent is upon us, but before we trudge along with Jesus on the way to the cross, we find ourselves having a mountaintop experience. It is here we join Jesus who takes two of his followers to witness divine glory. Jesus is transfigured in dazzling light and the pillars of the faith, Moses and Elijah, stand with him. Jesus' friends are in awe.

It is an amazing moment meant to renew us for the journey ahead, bolstering our waning faith. But we are not meant to stay on the mountain forever. There is life to be experienced. There are mountains to climb, streams to ford, and rainbows to follow.

I chose this song for my dance with my father because I got married later in life. I was at the point where I thought saying "I do" would never come from my lips. Yet through my setbacks my father would always encourage me to hang on to faith. Follow your dream. Don't give up.

Lent is beginning. Take one last look at the dazzling glory from your mountaintop view. Now grab hold of God's hand and make your way back down into the world. Give your hopes, dreams and desires to God. As you do, make sure to give them all the love they will need for as long as you live.

God of mountain highs and valley lows, give us the strength and courage to follow You no matter how difficult or disruptive the path might seem. Help us to trust that where You lead us is to the place where the deepest desires of our hearts are found. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is a communications specialist for the United Church of Christ and author of today's *Sunday Bulletin*.)

Abundant Grace

February 22, 2026

First Sunday in Lent

PURPLE

Matthew 4:1-11

The season of Lent begins with a 40-day trip into the harsh and desolate wilderness. While it might not be as enticing as a trip to Tahiti, it is an important one nevertheless. It is our time to learn from Jesus how to deal with our own wild beasts, our own hungers and thirsts, and our own run-ins with the Tempter, by leaning on God's Word.

This year, though, I don't need to say "yes" to this invitation to follow Jesus into the desert. That's because I have never emerged. I have been in a state of wilderness lostness for quite some time. Wild beasts remain nipping at my ankles. False promises of stones turning into bread have not satiated the hollow pit in my soul. And tempters seem to be trying to get my attention everywhere I turn.

It is easy to "do" Lent when everything is right in the world. When we feel safe and hopeful, Lent becomes a season of eagerly listening to God, slowing down, praying more, and helping others. But when worries of rising grocery bills and whether it is safe to go out in a public place overtake your thoughts, you wonder: Is this harsh world the norm?

I know I am not alone asking this, as studies show how hurtful and hateful society has become. There was a recent poll that revealed a whopping 47% of Americans agreed that people have become ruder to one another since Covid. The other day, a colleague shared an insight that I found profound. She observed how there was a growing sense of entitlement, yet no one had any shame over the things they said and did.

Perhaps this Lenten season is not so much about entering the wilderness as it is about helping one another exit it — to find our way back to hope by holding even tighter to

God's Word, by kicking the wild beasts away, and by claiming the name of Christ when tempters tout false promises.

For here is the good news for all my perpetual wilderness wanderers. There are always — always — angels among us eagerly waiting to administer the help that we need. Perhaps there is one sitting in the pew next to you.

Redeeming God, there are many of us who seem to be trapped in a never-ending wilderness. The weight of the world's worries and fears are robbing us of joy and hope. Strengthen us. Grant us courage. Increase our faith. May this Lent we reach out to one another so that we emerge from our desert desolation together, united in a love that no evil can destroy. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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