Field of vision

MATTHEW 24:42

"Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Shug Avery, in *The Color Purple,* offers this bit of holy mischief: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." It's a startling image of divine disappointment, but it has always struck a chord with me. I imagine God, the artist of stars and oceans and wildflowers, yearning for someone – anyone – to stop and take notice.

Jesus' words in Matthew carry that same ache. Keep awake, he says. Pay attention. Don't miss what matters. Advent begins not with sentiment but with summons: a call to wake up, to notice the beauty, the ache, the holy presence woven into our days.

Scripture is full of moments when God's people lost focus, when we drifted into distraction or despair. But even then, God did not turn away. Even then, the Artist kept painting. Kept reaching. Kept hoping we'd lift our eyes.

This first Sunday of Advent is less about countdowns and candles and more about clarity: Where is God in your field of vision? What distractions have dulled your sight? This season is a sacred invitation to reawaken our attention and open our hearts to the presence of the One who never stopped noticing us.

FOR REFLECTION:

Set a timer for 10 minutes and take an unrushed walk, outside if possible, inside if not. As you move, ask yourself: *What "purple" have I been passing by?* Notice one small, easily overlooked sign of God's artistry — a splash of color, a sound, a scent, a fleeting kindness. Pause with that sign, name it aloud, and thank God for the awakening.

How might staying this alert reshape the rest of your Advent?

PRAYER:

Awaken us, God, to your wonder and your artistry. Stir our sleepy spirits. Draw us near this Advent. Amen.

Keep looking out your window

GENESIS 8:6,8,11

"At the end of the forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ... Then he sent out the dove from him to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground ... and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf."

Noah may have been a flawed man – he drank too much, exposed his nakedness while sleeping – but he trusted God enough to follow instructions that sounded absurd. Build an ark? That big? Out here in the yard? Still, he obeyed.

God gave specific measurements. Told him what wood to use. What to seal. What to include.

Noah added a window.

Windows matter. They let in light. They let in hope. Can you imagine being trapped inside that dank-smelling ark, sealed off from the world, with no sense of time or space? That one window, his one view of the sky, was a lifeline.

I always place my desk by a window. It helps me lift my eyes from the tasks and to-do lists, to pause and remember there's more. More than what's right in front of me. More than the flood. If I had a dove, I'd send it out too, looking for signs of life. Signs that God is still with me. Signs that the storm is receding.

Advent reminds us to keep looking out the window. To keep searching for the olive leaf. To remember that God's promises still hold.

FOR REFLECTION:

Find a literal or figurative "window" today — a place where you can look beyond your immediate tasks. Pause for three slow breaths and ask: *What olive leaf might God be sending me?* Jot down one small sign of renewal you notice: a birdcall, a kind text, the scent of rain. How does this glimpse of hope change the way you face the remaining "floodwaters" in your life?

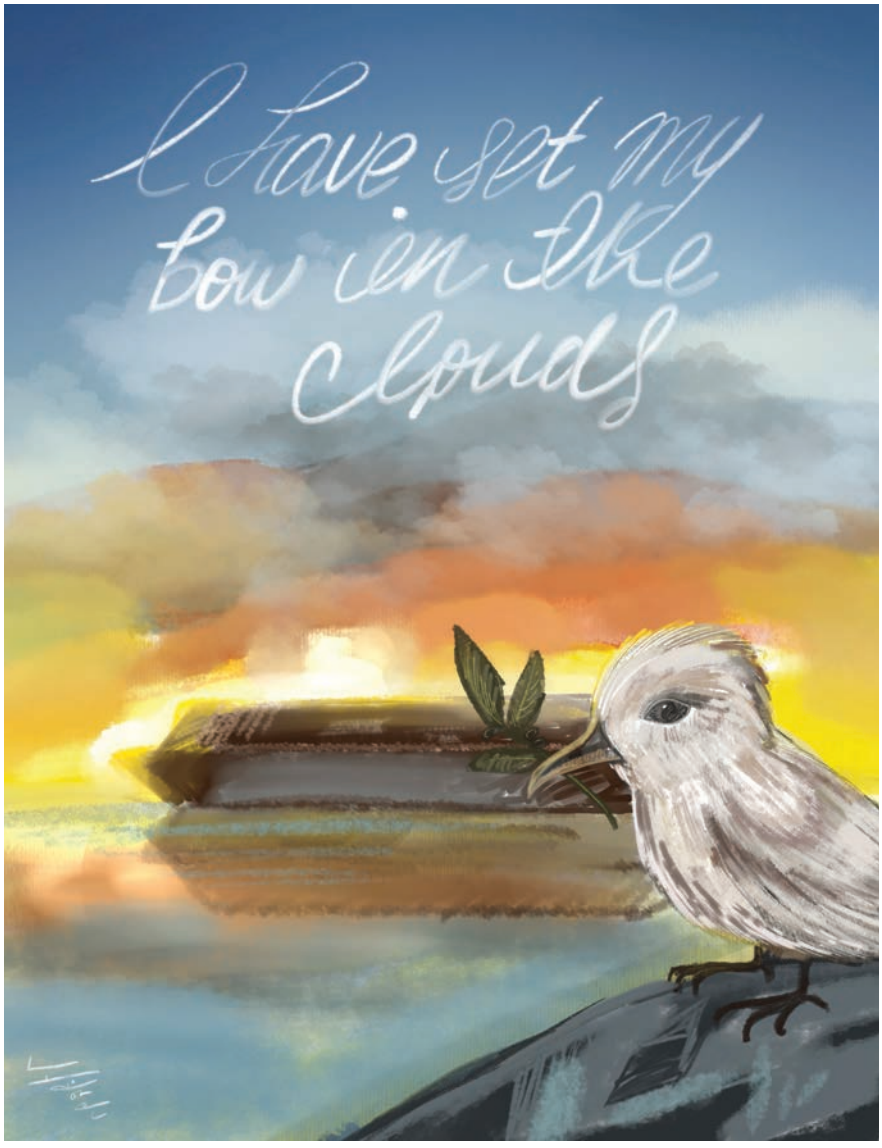
PRAYER:

God, grant us windows to your presence. When we feel lost in the flood, send us signs of life. Amen.

A rainbow moment

GENESIS 9:1-17, GENESIS 9:13

"I have set my bow in the clouds."



WATERCOLOR BY
JOY HUSKEY
AGE 15

WOODS MEMORIAL
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SEVERNA PARK,
MARYLAND

FOR REFLECTION:

Think of a recent "rainbow moment" — a burst of unexpected color, beauty, or mercy that caught your breath. Where did it appear, and what promise might God have been whispering through it? Take a few minutes to sketch or write a brief description of that moment, then ask: How can I carry this reminder of God's unbreakable covenant into the storms I'm facing today?

PRAYER:

God of the promise, write your hope in the sky and our hearts. Help us see and believe. Amen.

God's voice in the here and now

MATTHEW 24:35

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Advent means arrival, but not just of the Christ child. It means we're watching for what's coming, what's next, what's new.

Jesus' words in Matthew are apocalyptic, but not in the cinematic, world-on-fire kind of way. Apocalypse literally means to reveal. And in times of pain or upheaval, what we see – what is revealed – matters.

Apocalyptic scriptures are often written from the margins, by people suffering under empire. They don't predict doom so much as proclaim hope: even when everything feels like it's falling apart, God's Word endures.

When we feel unmoored by change or heartache, we can anchor ourselves in the stories of Jesus — his words, his life, his promises. Love your neighbor. Care for the vulnerable. Walk humbly. These are the teachings that guide and serve us well. These are the words that don't pass away. In Advent, we remember that God's voice still speaks not just once in Bethlehem, but also here and now.

FOR REFLECTION:

Recall a single teaching or promise of Jesus that has steadied you in the past — perhaps "Love your neighbor," "Do not be afraid," or another verse that echoes in your memory. Write it down, carry it with you, or repeat it aloud throughout the day. As the noise of news, deadlines, or worries swirls, pause and ask: *How does this enduring word reshape the way I respond right now?*

PRAYER:

Steady us, God, with your lasting Word. When the world shifts around us, help us hold fast to your love. Amen.

A vision of God's shelter

ISAIAH 4:5-6

"Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory, there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, providing shade by day from the heat and refuge from the storm and rain."

I thought I was prepared for the bitter cold and freezing wind on the sidelines of the soccer field in West Central Illinois, but the cold found its way in. My fingers turned numb inside my gloves as I clapped and cheered for my then-8-year-old daughter. My toes had long since lost feeling despite my wool socks. Yet there she was, running up and down the field, her cheeks pink but her movements unrestricted, as though the cold couldn't touch her. I couldn't run with her; I needed shelter.

I scanned the sidelines and noticed two dads huddled in a small pup tent. One of them caught my eye and waved me over with a mittened hand. The second dad shifted to make room, a silent offering of community.

"Smart move with the tent," I said as I ducked inside.

"Third season watching soccer in this county," the first dad replied. "You learn or you suffer."

Isaiah offers a vision of God's shelter: a canopy over Mount Zion, a refuge from storm and heat. Not flashy. Just enough. Just in time.

God's protection doesn't always come with grandeur. Sometimes it's a gesture, a tent, a friend with a mittened hand. Sometimes it's a Scripture that lands in your lap or a prayer whispered beside you.

Advent is a reminder that refuge is real — and often closer than we think.

FOR REFLECTION:

When has someone offered you shelter, literal or figurative, in a season of need? Who might need your protection today?

PRAYER:

Sheltering God, thank you for the small tents and the quiet kindnesses. Teach us to offer warmth to others this season. Amen.

Looking ahead, looking back

ACTS 13:16, 23–25

"So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak …
'Of [David's] posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised; before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of the sandals on his feet.'"

My grandfather wrote his memoir at age 93 — yellow legal pads filled with memories. My grandmother proofed it, my aunt typed it, and my father had copies bound at the office supply store for every family member. Inside the cover of my copy, he wrote: "To Teri, with love, Grandpa Mac."

I regularly purge my book shelves, following a one-in, one-out policy that keeps my collection from swallowing me whole. Prize-winning memoirs come and go, their spines cracked once before finding new homes. But Grandpa Mac's book remains unmoved, claiming its territory between literary giants with Pulitzers and National Book Awards. Those books will eventually join the donation pile. Grandpa Mac's book never will.

There is something holy about knowing where you come from. In Acts, Paul offers a sweeping retelling of Israel's story — how Jesus stands as fulfillment, not interruption, of God's long arc of grace.

Faith is often future-focused: we look ahead, long for what's to come. But Advent also calls us to look back. To remember the story we've inherited. To trace the thread of God's faithfulness. Hope also comes from history, no matter whether you are a descendant of kings, like David, or a long line of prophets, like John the Baptist, or a Scots-Irish American grandfather, whose story, even after dying at 103, lives on in his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

FOR REFLECTION:

Who shared their story of faith with you, and how do you carry on their legacy? What story would you pass on?

PRAYER:

God of generations, thank you for the storytellers who brought us here. Help us carry the legacy forward with faith. Amen.

Hope for the journey

ISAIAH 40:1

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

Why does Advent begin with hope? At some point in church history, someone decided that the first candle to be lit on the Advent wreath should be the hope candle. This has always puzzled me. Shouldn't hope be the climax, the top of the mountain you've just spent four weeks climbing? The pinnacle of our spiritual Christmas experience?

But hope is a crucial part of any journey. Without hope, we can't progress. Hope is what motivates us to lace up our shoes and start moving. Hope says, 'Let's go.' Why start a journey if you don't have hope in what's to come? Hope for discoveries. Hope for understanding. Hope for more hope.

Isaiah's people were exiled, displaced and grieving. But God speaks comfort — not empty words, but the deep reassurance that we are not alone, not forgotten. The signs are everywhere this Advent: candlelight softens the dark. The air carries the scent of pine and cinnamon. Cookies baked and shared. The hush of snowfall. The swell of music. The quiet expectation that something sacred is on its way.

Hope is not wishful thinking. It's trust in a God who keeps showing up to guide us on the journey. As we begin this Advent journey, don't wait to find hope at the end. Look for it now. Let hope lead you to Christmas and beyond.

FOR REFLECTION:

Besides hope, what other essentials do you need for this Advent journey?

PRAYER:

God of hope, light our path. As we begin again, meet us with comfort, courage, and grace. Amen.