

Luke 1:26–38

“God is Near: Believe in Love”

1. The sermon today will be a bit different than usual. I’m going to invite us to reflect together on the season of Advent and Christmas with stories we can share here in worship.
2. Advent has been about anticipation. We have eagerly awaited the arrival of Jesus at Christmas, which coincidentally, is tomorrow. We’ll celebrate it tonight.
3. Even as we prepare to hear stories of our Christmas traditions, I want to remind us not to forget the Christians in Gaza who will mark Christmas with grief, fear and anger tomorrow. We pray for the people of Gaza. Over 20,000 people have been killed by Israeli bombardment, about 9,000 of those have been children. Nearly 2 million people have been displaced and squeezed to the southernmost part of the Gaza strip. Yesterday some of us watched a service from Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, which sits in Palestine, in the Occupied West Bank. In solidarity, Bethlehem is not having its usual joyous Christmas celebration. Instead, it is a very somber remembrance because of the tremendous loss of life. The nativity scene at Lutheran Christmas Church is a scene of rubble, with the Christ child looking very vulnerable in the middle of all the rocks. The service link is in the church FB page, and you can watch the service (which is in Arabic and English). I’ve added a link so that you can also go straight to the sermon, which Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac preached in English. Munther said that Christians have forgotten Palestine in their most dire hour of need. We haven’t forgotten them, beloved. We condemn the terrorist Hamas attack. We pray for a ceasefire which stops the killing. We pray for the safe release of all the hostages. We pray for Gazans to be able to return to their homes and rebuild in just peace. Please say a prayer for them when you celebrate Christmas with your family. We have to let God know we have not forgotten them.
4. I’ll go first to give you a moment to think about an Advent or Christmas story or family tradition.
5. A memory I have from childhood and adolescence about anticipation for Christmas has to do with a set of traditional Mexican parties, called Posadas. Throughout the month of December, people have gatherings in their homes. To you and me, they look like any other Christmas party. However, if they’re doing it in the traditional way, there is a moment in the party when half the guests go outside the front door, and the other half stay inside the closed front door. Then they take turns singing verses of a song to each other that retells the journey that Mary and Joseph had to Bethlehem and, crucially, when they were not able to find a place to stay. The folks outside are Mary and Joseph asking for lodging, for posada. After a few verses back and forth, Mary and Joseph are joyfully welcomed into the home to rest. And to anticipate the birth of the Christ child.
6. What is one memory of Advent or Christmas that you may have?
7. Donna Brand told this story for me to share: One year right before Christmas, Cal and I and our young family needed to move quickly and we moved far out of town, to an abandoned home. The house had been lived in for some time by Squatters. Windows were broken-out and boarded up, etc. Additionally, Cal brought home the most pitiful specimen of a

Christmas tree and all the kids were so embarrassed. They were sure that Santa was going to turn up his nose at the house and the tree, and skip over them. I realized that the young children were more sensitive to our moving houses than I thought they would. That year, I worked hard to create Christmas cheer.

8. Cal Brand shared: I have happy memories of living in Albuquerque, NM. Farolitos/Luminarias/ luminaries lit up the old town. Also, the local custom was to share food with neighbors. Our neighbors saved ingredients for months in advance. They taught me how they made Tamales and shared their delicious food with me.
9. From Merry Carmichael: Growing up, Santa filled stockings hanging on our bedpost, usually with an orange , some candy, a game & a book. With this we were kept busy until our parents were ready. The doors to the living area were locked with a long-typed letter hanging on the doorknob, again to keep us busy. I remember our oldest brother usually read it to us. I wish I had some recollection of what those letters said. So, we carried out a similar tradition with stockings on the bed posts and wrapping paper taped over the entrances to the living area. While we prepared the movie & later, the video camera, the children would line up, youngest child first, and delight in running through the wrapping paper. Some of our children have carried on this tradition. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.
10. What is one memory of Advent or Christmas that you may have?
11. Today we celebrate that God is Near, and tonight and tomorrow we will celebrate that God is with us. We celebrate because we are called to Believe in Love. God's love