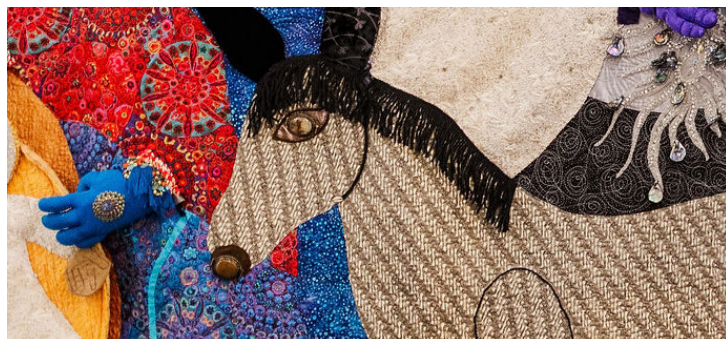




EMBRACING THE WILDERNESS

ADVENT DEVOTIONALS 2025



Table of Contents

Introduction | 1

Liturgy for Daily Devotionals | 2

Reflections for Advent | 3-29

Lectionary for Advent | 31-32

Service Schedule for Christmas Season | 33-34



INTRODUCTION

In the Bible, wilderness experiences take on profound significance. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness after Moses led them out of Egypt. Jesus spent 40 days there between his baptism and ministry. We at St. Luke's might feel like we've been sent there (again)—albeit under the leadership of our own Moses, The Rev. Michael White—as we find ourselves (again) in an interim period between rectors. This kind of experience can be a tough time of trial and tribulation, but, perhaps for that very reason, it can also be a time of renewal, refinement, growth, and transformation. People can have personal wilderness experiences, as can widespread communities. This year's Advent devotionals center on the counter-intuitive theme of *embracing* the wilderness. We hope you'll find these wilderness reflections resonate with you and prompt thoughtful reflection as you prepare for Christmastide. Welcome to the wilderness!

Bill McCarty, Managing Editor
Debbie Newman, Managing Editor Emerita
Catherine McCarty, Editor
Sue Rohan, Editor
Jackie Saylor, Editor

LITURGY FOR DAILY DEVOTIONALS

Becoming Still

Breathe in slowly and exhale slowly four times, calming your mind. Be ready to listen and observe.

Invocation

God, open my heart and mind so that I may hear you.

Reflection for the Day

Read or view the reflection for today found in this booklet or email.

Contemplation

Consider this reflection. Does it relate to you?
Your response?

Closing Prayers

Petitions and prayers. What do you wish to say to God today? For what are you most thankful?

Stillness

Be still and listen for God.

The Story of Here

by Bryan Sells, with the assistance of Gemini
(In the style of Padraig O'Tuama)

It is not always a holy silence.
Sometimes the wilderness is just noise.
The wind is a complaint.
The hunger is a distraction.
And the story we tell ourselves
about “transformation”
feels like a lie we put on
to stay warm.
But the invitation of this place
is not to be beautiful.
It is just to be.
To be lost, and to know it.
To be empty, and to name it.
And to find, in the bare-boned truth of it all,
that you are not,
and have never been,
alone.

A Prayer for Honesty

God, who is present in the wilderness,
Give us the courage to stop performing our faith.
Let us be honest about our emptiness.
Let us be brave enough to admit we are lost.
And in that very real place,
let us be surprised
by the simple, steady fact of Your company.
Amen.

Bryan is the husband of Deneta and the father of Sarah Elizabeth. He has been attending St. Luke's since 2019 and remains a work in progress.

Embracing Wilderness

Wilderness seasons often feel like emptiness—times when the path ahead is uncertain. Yet Scripture shows us how God uses the wilderness as a place of growth and transformation. What feels like absence becomes a deeper trust in God's daily grace.

In Scripture wilderness goes beyond mere geography. It refers to the space where comfort and certainty are lost, where God's people find what they truly need and discover God's true nature.

Israel's forty years in the desert, Elijah's solitary cave, and Jesus' own forty days of fasting all serve as reminders that the wilderness is not a wasted space but a sacred ground for transformation.

In my own life, wilderness often manifests as loss or uncertainty—times when familiar patterns no longer hold sway. Initially, these seasons felt like absence. However, over time, I began to realize how God reshaped my perspective. I learned to depend on grace instead of my own strength, to cultivate patience in the face of quick answers, and to develop deeper trust in the One who provides daily manna even when tomorrow feels empty.

At St. Luke's we've collectively experienced wilderness. Our congregation, like many others, has felt it through division, cultural change, and challenges that seemed insurmountable despite our considerable resources.

In the wider world, we are living through wilderness marked by violence, injustice, and fear. Yet, Advent teaches us to hold onto hope. For in the wilderness, God is already preparing a way.

The voice that cries "prepare the way of the Lord" reminds us that even in barren places, streams can flow, paths can be made straight, and the Christ child can still be born among us.

This Advent, let's embrace—not resist—the wilderness, trusting that it is not a punishment but an invitation. For there, stripped of illusions, we discover Emmanuel: God with us.

Don is the Media and Community Relations Liaison for the Georgia Public Defender Council. Previously, he was the communications consultant for the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. Don writes regularly on faith, justice, and the ways God meets us in unexpected places.

Embracing the Wilderness: Discovery

The morning began with calm seas and sunlight dancing on the water. I was celebrating my birthday in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, heading out with a few others on a small ten-passenger boat bound for a remote island. The ocean stretched endlessly before us—deep, wild, and a little intimidating. There was nothing between us and the horizon but open water.

Halfway through the journey, the captain slowed the boat. From a distance, we saw movement—enormous gray shapes rising and falling in rhythm. Whales. We stopped completely, letting the waves rock us as these magnificent creatures surfaced around us, exhaling great plumes of mist into the air. For several moments, time seemed to stop. The noise of the world, the restlessness inside me, everything fell away in reverent stillness.

In that moment, I was reminded that the wilderness—whether ocean, desert, or the unknown spaces of our lives—is not only a place of testing but also of wonder. Like the Israelites discovering manna in the wilderness, I realized that God provides nourishment for our spirits even in unfamiliar waters. Grace appears not as we expect it, but as we need it.

Advent invites us into this same mystery—to leave the safety of what we know and travel toward something sacred and new. The wilderness may be uncomfortable, but it's often where we encounter God most vividly, in moments that stop us in our tracks and leave us humbled by beauty and presence.

Reflection:

Where in your own life has God surprised you with grace in unexpected places?

Prayer:

God of wonder, help me to enter the wilderness with open eyes and a trusting heart. When the journey feels uncertain, remind me that You travel with me, revealing beauty and sustenance in the most surprising ways. Amen.

Edwin is a member of St. Luke's, where he serves in faith and advocacy ministries. He lives in Atlanta with his loyal Beagle, Andy, who reminds him daily to slow down and enjoy the walk.

My enduring wilderness began in fall of 2019 ... I just didn't know it yet. Three family deaths occurred in quick succession: a brother-in-law close to both of us, my mom, and then Jeff's mom. As the new year dawned, I thought, "Surely, 2020 will be better!" But Covid brought isolation, uncertainty, and intense anger. Even when "normal" returned it wasn't ever normal again. The pandemic subsided, but then came more deaths—Jeff's younger sister, our beloved dog—and distressing diagnoses for several people close to us. Uncertain change was on the horizon. Throughout, I've struggled to hold onto faith that God is still within reach.

I recall in fall 2020 thinking that I could not survive the coming winter. In the best of times, I struggle with winter; I dread the cold and the return to standard time. In 2020, with nothing to look forward to and insanity all around, I was terribly depressed.

But shortly before Thanksgiving we learned about a nearby church that was holding outdoor services on Sunday afternoons during the lockdown. My deep desire for in-person spiritual sustenance coaxed me into the chill and sustained me throughout that winter. Soon we were going out to dinner, too—under patio heaters, and wearing coats, hats, and gloves. What would normally have been unbearable became (almost) an adventure.

And then one evening Jeff suggested that we eat our dinner in front of our fireplace. How unexpected! The card table nicely set (with tablecloth!), Ella's bed underneath, close to the fire's warmth. This became a nightly ritual for all three of us. In fact, when Ella heard the tell-tale sound of the card table opening, she would race to take her position in front of the fire. This wintertime tradition has continued every year since, a bright spot on even the darkest and coldest days.

I'm still in my enduring wilderness, but I am trying to embrace whatever the future holds *and* the coming winter. God provides, in sometimes surprising ways, if we just open our eyes to see.

Elaine and her husband, Jeff Hopper, miss their faithful dog, Ella, who passed away in February 2025. She'll be with them, in spirit, by the fire this year.

Trust Him

When worry swirls
Like a storm unraveling the sky,
Stealing your stillness,
Awakening anxiety and dread,
Seek refuge in the arms of our Lord.
Remember, He is with you, always,
Never will He forsake you.
He will shield you fiercely.
You are cherished, in your solitude, you are not alone.
He knows your fears,
He will steady the reins.
Trust in God, forevermore!

Denise is a member of the St. Luke's family. She and her husband, James, enjoy traveling to sunny places, reading, and spending quality time with family and friends.

Who Is My Neighbor?

Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz ...

Oh come on, alarm! It's 6:00 a.m. on a Saturday. Give me a break! Wait a minute now ... this is the fourth Saturday of the month. It's Courtland Street Mission (CSM) Saturday. That's something to get out of bed for!

Well, at least the traffic is light, and the sun will be coming up soon. Looks like there are already 15 or so guests lined up on Courtland Street. How wonderful it will be when our “Back Door” project is completed!

Gotta get the coffee started. It takes a while for Elliott to fire up the grill and scramble eggs for 40 hungry folks, but if we can offer Krispy Kreme and coffee, our guests will be happy to wait for a little while. Clyde's kitchen is a beehive of activity as CSM volunteers put out the trays, paper plates, plastic silverware, and fruit and get ready to serve breakfast.

Meanwhile, Jeronia is starting Bible Study. By now there are about 40 guests sitting expectantly with Bibles open. She has been leading this ministry for 25 years, and she knows how to relate to her audience. She calls on guests to offer opening and closing prayers. She asks engaging questions, and her small congregation responds with enthusiasm.

Now it's time for all volunteers to grab a tray or a spatula and serve breakfast. This is when we get to interact with the guests. We join hands and pray together. We enjoy brief conversations. It's just a word or two here and there. Few lasting relationships are formed, yet there is something spiritual, something sacred in those short exchanges. Who is my neighbor? We are all connected. We are all one.

Some volunteers like Jeronia, Ginna, Becky, and Michael have been involved in this ministry for decades! Others like Carter, Ilouise, and me are rookies but are welcomed and quickly become part of the CSM team.

If you think that this ministry might have your name on it, and you don't mind getting up early one Saturday a month, come join the team! Please contact Jeronia Blue (jeroniadell@hotmail.com) or Rev. Kimberleigh Jordan (kjordan@stlukesatlanta.org). The personal benefits can be transformative ... and you can nap afterwards!

John and Paulette have been members of St. Luke's for a long time. They love their church family.

We '80s and '90s babies have had it pretty good, historically speaking. I'd imagine that our generation has the highest-ever share of people who have had multiple options for every meal and a safe, indoor space to lay our heads at night. When you consider the litany of atrocities and tragedies that humans have experienced throughout time, we've gone through the relative least of it.

It's in vogue to lament the current political climate and this American moment. But I believe we are objectively far, far from the figurative wilderness that it is possible to experience in our lifetimes.

Nuclear war. Pandemics far more virulent and deadly than COVID. Ecological disaster. Technological grid failure and anarchy. Mass joblessness and societal unrest. All these disasters could happen. But we might just thread the eye of the needle and find that everything works out better than we ever could have imagined.

I wonder, what wilderness we will walk through? Will the great incarnational love sustain us?

I believe the God of Light and Love wins in the end ... even if there's unfathomable wilderness headed our way.

Brent began attending St. Luke's with his wife Lindsey and eldest daughter, Nell, in 2021 (now four years old), and they've since added Lucy (3) and Ford (9 months) to the squad, who you may have seen running around during Communion.



I lie on the forest floor
Forest bathing
Looking up at an ocean of leaves
All green
All reaching for the sun
All nourished by the same creek water.
Lavish in their diversity ...
Redbud, walnut, sycamore
With a smattering of conifers thrown in
And towering over all, poplar.
The wilderness of God's creation
Where all belong
All belong.

Sue has been involved with a variety of ministries at St. Luke's since she joined in 1981 and currently co-chairs the Ebenezer-St. Luke's Partnership's Fellowship Action Group.

There's a voice in the wilderness crying

It's too dark and dangerous here
to see
to know
what will happen next
the guns are still firing
our beloveds, still dying
our earth, still crying
and I want to get out of here
press a button
change the channel
on the remote control
that's not in my hands
Only here
can I sink deep
into the humus
of my human soul
and remember
we are not God
but we so desperately need
to know
our need of God
Only in the wilderness
can the alchemy
of grace
take place and shape
twisted thickets
into nests
and sturdy straw
for mangers:
"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"

Carter has been a member of the St. Luke's family for nearly 12 glorious years. She loves music, poetry, her middle school students, and her family, including her 11-year-old kitty, Edie. You can find her sitting with her beloved Mama most Sundays (on the right side, of course).

Wilderness comes in many forms.

Sometimes easy to recognize.

(Who does not know something of the dark night of the soul?

That time of anguish and desolation and apartness –

Time of loss, or hurt, or shame, or inescapable loneliness)

Sometimes not so easy ...

Mom lived out her last year of life with us in our home.

Each day began with yogurt and fruit and cereal

Continued with *Regis and Kelly* and endless games of *Deal or No Deal*

Ended with a chocolate ice cream pop from Weight Watchers – this tiny woman, ever concerned about her 95-pound size.

Each day I watched her world get smaller, the edges closing in like a desiccating puddle. At first there were ten stories she could tell with ease, then eight, then only six, and finally two at most, and then only with help.

Her lifelong love of shopping shrank to selecting just the right loaf of wheat bread, and then not even that. Her interminable lists of every last mixer and vitamin and face cream hawked on infomercials disappeared entirely. Her delight in being in the garden, in strolling up the street wondering again and again what kind of house the guy next door was building, in being part of the village at her local Publix – all dwindled to the living room sofa and the great maple tree outside our window.

Deep abiding sadness filled me, knowing wilderness well.

Watching her ... lost, bereft, robbed of her life memories.

Yes, wilderness is sometimes not so easy to recognize.

And may be misnamed, misunderstood, or mis-taken.

May not be wilderness at all, but instead that final crucible, burning away all that does not matter.

Because here is what she remembered to the very nearly end, this little Italian Mom of ours.

That she loved her Jesus and hearing the Mass and praying the Rosary and being with her God.

Some wilderness, that!

Elaine lives happily with Annabeth, her wife and life partner of 36 years, and is privileged to serve as Co-Mentor to two St. Luke's EfM (Education for Ministry) groups.

As I think about the upcoming Advent season, my thoughts turn to a time spent in a wilderness of darkness, grief, and mixed emotions.

This time began in December 1994. I had started a new job that year—on the path of what turned out to be my career. As Christmas approached, I prepared for the drive to our family home in South Georgia, but a phone call placed me on what would become a long wilderness journey. Mom said that she wasn't feeling well and insisted that I stay with my brother's family that year instead of with her. If she didn't want me to help her with Christmas baking, then something big had to be going on. Of course I abided by her wishes, staying with my brother, and visiting her as much as I could.

In the days following Christmas and early into the new year I spoke often with my brother about Mom. Through our insistence, we accompanied her to the doctor. Following tests, we received the dreaded cancer diagnosis. Months progressed with chemo treatments and then surgery. Radiation was supposed to follow that but was precluded by Mom's death in July 1995.

Our wilderness shifted from doctors, hospitals and treatments to funeral arrangements, probating the will, settling medical expenses, and getting our family home ready to sell. As the year was coming to an end, I once again journeyed to my brother's home for our Christmas together. While a somewhat joyous time with the family, it was also a time of darkness and grief as we experienced our first Christmas without Mom.

Growing up, it was tradition in our house for Dad to read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke followed by a prayer before we could open gifts. My brother never followed that tradition with his children until Christmas 1995. That year he opened Mom's Bible and read the story of the birth of Christ. When he finished, he asked me to say a prayer. It was an emotional time for both of us, but also a time of honoring Mom. Although we still had much to get through, I felt the light shift, and I knew that we would find our way out of the wilderness.

Long ago a light shone brightly that still outshines the thousands of lights we see on the trees and displays around us. Although that light seemed dark to us during 1995, it was there leading us through the wilderness, shining brighter that Christmas day, and waiting to guide us in the new year as we continued the journey. We made it through that wilderness to face others, some that still seemed as dark, but the light was there providing guidance and warmth.

Kenneth and his husband, Warren Williams, happily call Atlanta and St. Luke's home, celebrating 10 years of love and family at St. Luke's.



In a thicket, it's hard to find the way. The promise of Christ is everywhere, though.

What do you seek? What do you see?

Kristina, husband Michael, and son James Henson live in East Point.

The Wilderness Speaks

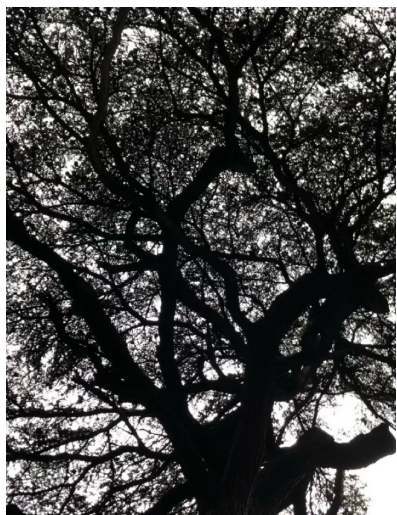
I tend to think of the wilderness *like a sandwich*. The outside of the sandwich can be either a positive, comforting place or a scary, threatening place. The middle of the sandwich is where growth happens. I got stuck on how to proceed, so I asked ChatGPT for ideas. Below is a poem ChatGPT wrote, and it is a perfect reflection of my views on the wilderness. I could not have said it better if I tried, and I tried ...

“The Wilderness Speaks”

The wilderness whispers in many tongues—
A hush of pine, a hawk’s sharp cry,
The shimmer of dawn where rivers run,
A mirror of clouds drifting by.
It calls the weary heart to rest,
To breathe where air is clean and wild,
To lose the noise, to find one’s chest
Rise steady as when you were a child.
But the wilderness can wound as well—
Its shadows long, its tempers cold,
The silence heavy, hard to tell
If comfort hides or fear takes hold.
The path may twist, the stars may fade,
The night may press too close, too near;
What once was beauty, softly made,
Becomes a wilderness of fear.
Yet both are true—the calm, the dread—
They share the same unbroken sky.
The wild within and out are wed,
And teach us how to live—and why.

Karen is a lifelong Episcopalian. She and her husband, James, chose St. Luke’s because it is a vibrant, inclusive, and diverse community of people and talents working together to help God’s people.

Wilderness and Advent



Most of us use the word “wilderness” solely in a figurative sense. Our automobiles, tall buildings, airplanes and technology shield us from knowing how genuinely frightening and life-threatening an actual wilderness can be. To the writers of the Bible, however, the wilderness was a very real, nearby place. The fear and risk associated with an actual wilderness help explain why, for the ancient Biblical authors, the wilderness was a powerful symbol for the risks and dangers of having lost one’s way. Without landmarks or paths, we have no reliable way of finding our way to moral safety.

This photo was taken from beneath a Cedar of Lebanon, a huge old tree under a gray sky. The black in the photo seems to overcome the light and thus is symbolic of an enveloping wilderness. Many of us now find ourselves figuratively lost in the wilderness of a genuinely trying time.

Advent is a time of reflection. With each December day, the sun recedes yet more. The darkness appears to be overtaking us. Advent is the spiritual path that takes us out of the darkness and leads us to the light of hope for a different future. As the eloquent writer of Hebrews explained, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1, *NRSV*.) Maybe you cannot now see the path that will lead you out of your wilderness, but God’s assurance is that you will find it. The rituals of Advent focus upon the joyful anticipation of the light growing brighter and showing us, step by step, the path out of the wilderness darkness.

This Advent hopefulness carries with it a personal responsibility to try to find that path, a path that will be unique to each of us. Having faith in the light is the key to sustaining the daunting struggle to find a path out of the wilderness. John’s Gospel contains these wonderful symbolic words about Jesus: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5, *NIV*.)

Mike is a retired attorney and has been a member of St. Luke’s since 2016.

The Sounds of Music

When I am in unscripted settings and apart from familiar relationships, it can feel as if I am in the wilderness. Particularly during these times, music occupies a significant space in my heart.

These lyrics, from “Hard Fought Hallelujah,” written by Brandon Lake and performed by Lake and Jelly Roll offer support:

God, You’ve been patient
God, You’ve been gracious
Faithful, whatever I’m feeling or facing ...

Each of these musicians, at a time, was in their own wilderness. Had the two placed ads for band members, it might have read something like:

“College minister, worship leader, Grammy winner seeks...”
and
“Tattooed, drug-dealing, incarcerated rapper seeks...”

Despite their differences and appearance as polar opposites, they came together as a dynamic, forceful grasp of magnets. Lake described the duo as “divinely guided.”

This collaboration seems unlikely to happen, right? Or maybe it sounds a lot like Jesus’ motley crew of disciples, who faced challenges, failed many tests, looked for the light, and yet, working together, received His enduring patience, faith, and grace.

I invite you to go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9iFy7XtwPo to watch and hear their performance of the song.

When I listen, the lines easily tug at my heart and bring me through my struggles to the other side. Often, I am surprised, but I am reminded God never leaves us in the wilderness!

Michele has been a member of St. Luke’s since 1984. She is an Animal Chaplain, sharing her home with Figaro, the American Short-hair who rescued her from the predictable, quiet life as an empty-nester to a world with a cat for a roommate. Figaro, who is sight impaired constantly reminds Michele how to walk, leap, and play by faith.

The Wilderness

A time of testing and preparation where God reveals God's truth.

A place of spiritual clarity.

A phone call from my doctor on a Friday night thrust me into an unknown emotional and physical space. A cancer diagnosis transported me to the edge of the Wilderness. The entrance gates had signs reading FEAR, DISBELIEF, LOSS and ALONE. The main pathways, labeled HOSPITAL, REHAB, and CHEMOTHERAPY, broke down into a myriad patchwork of mysterious lanes. My wandering in the Wilderness led to places and people previously unknown to me. The loss of all sense of control was scary and disorienting. The words I was hearing were spoken in a medical language I did not understand. Treatment rooms included scary words such as *nuclear*. A lifetime of identity and achievement was reduced to the reality of a lifesaving fight against cancer.

Through God's MERCY, guides for the journey appeared in the form of skilled doctors and nurses. A young aide wheeled me outside from the hospital room for my first breath of fresh air in three weeks. St. Luke's clergy visited with prayers and communion. Church members held me tight with prayers. Long distance family members re-connected, and local friends formed my essential safety net. The gifts of generous spirits were what I needed to survive the journey.

The Wilderness exit gate held signs reading SUPPORT, CONNECTION, HEALING, GRATITUDE, and TRANSFORMATION. Taking my first step out of that gate, I paused and asked myself the essential questions that would allow me to define the new reality of my life. Who am I now? How do I go forward?

May the Love and Grace of God show me the way.

Barbara has achieved "long term" membership status at St. Luke's. Her current passion is volunteering in the St. Luke's Archives and sharing its stories with the wider church community.

Into the Wilderness

I want to steel my arms against the door jamb,
prevent my shove into the unknown,
backhoe my heels into the floorboards,
stop my eviction into the unmapped.
After a sigh so mighty the cloud patterns shift,
I nod and step out.

Finding herself in her wildest wilderness yet, Sophia gets quiet daily, rides her bicycle, reads Ken Wilber and takes frequent naps.

A Wilderness Experience I Won't Forget

Goggle AI described the Biblical definition of “wilderness” as a place where God reveals himself, tests faith and where profound spiritual growth and purification occur leading to a deeper relationship with Him.

I was a new mother with an eight-month-old baby when I was told by my OB/GYN during a follow up IUD (intrauterine device) placement exam that my IUD was in place, but that I was pregnant, and the device had to stay in place to avoid complications for the baby. He also informed me that my Dalkon Shield IUD was under investigation because several women experienced severe infections and some died.

He assured me that I was healthy and that there were no signs of infection at that time, and that he would monitor my baby and me closely. He also asked if I would be willing to be interviewed on Fox 5 by anchorwoman Jacque Maddox to help calm other women who were scared after seeing so many severely infected and bedridden women on TV. I agreed to do the interview, and after clearance from Grady's PR Department, it was shown on Channel 5.

At the time of my pregnancy, I was Nurse Manager of Grady's Labor and Delivery Unit and Obstetrical Intensive Care Unit. I had extensive knowledge and experience in women's health, and my friends and colleagues in the medical field advised me to abort my son and save my life.

I did not.

I'm a strong believer in Romans 8:28:

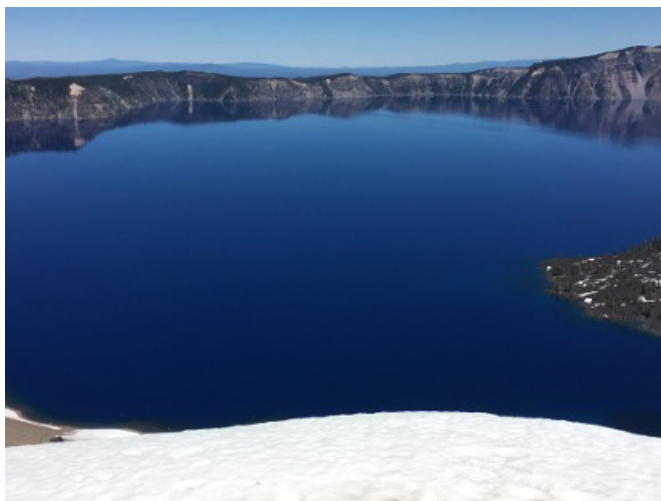
And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

– KJV

The IUD came out on a Sunday, five days prior to my due date. I was scheduled for an induction that Tuesday to prevent an infection. I prayed for a delivery without an induction. I made it to Georgia Baptist Hospital on that Monday night just in time for the resident to deliver my son.

According to Google, 18 women died from infection.

Jeronia has been a member of St. Luke's for over 30 years. She is a member of several ministries.



Often, when I ride my bike in such beautiful wilderness surroundings as Oregon, I encounter a “Crater Lake experience.” One time, after a couple of grueling hours pedaling uphill, I reached the North Junction and saw my first breathtaking view of Crater Lake. It was absolutely stunning. The deep, dark blue water was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen. The mirror-like reflection of the mountains on the still water was exquisite and, coupled with the refreshing calm breeze, quieted my thankful soul. I felt as though I was engaged in a contemplative prayer-like experience. I love the physicality, combined with the awe and wonder of God’s creation. It opens my heart, and in that space, I know that God’s creation is good. And, as one of God’s creations, I am good.

Kim began attending St. Lukes in 2019. She enjoys reading, long distance bike touring and hiking.

Embrace the Wilderness – Where Is the Light?

I'm in a dark place right now. Children are still getting shot in churches and schools. A democratic lawmaker and her husband were assassinated earlier, and recently a popular young right-wing man was shot.

How can we even accept this wilderness, much less embrace it? Embracing means deeper, more conscious engagement with the hot mess of the moment—actively working within it rather than retreating. Jesus did this through humble service and facing human suffering.

I must disengage fear, outrage, and blame to make room for outrageous compassion for all humans—including those advocating violence. We can't engage with the world and serve justice while carrying righteous anger and fear. We need to be fueled by God— not the Old Testament God of wrath, but the New Testament God of love.

In R.E.M.'s "Find the River" (written by Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Michael Mills, and Michael Stipe), Stipe sings about trying to find his way while life passes by when "nothing is going my way." The song ends:

Strength and courage overrides
The privileged and weary eyes
Of river poet search naïveté

Pick up here and chase the ride
The river empties to the tide
All of this is coming your way

This wilderness—this chaos of violence, hatred, and fear—is coming our way. We can't stop or wish it away. But we can choose how to meet it. To embrace the wilderness, we first need to accept it. Then, with strength and courage that overrides weary despair, we can perhaps start to embrace it together.

The alternative is staying paralyzed by fear and anger. If we find courage to embrace this broken world with compassion instead of condemnation, we might actually transform it. Not through force or blame, but through the harder work of love—even for those who embody everything we fear.

The river empties to the tide. All of this is coming our way. The question is whether we'll meet it with clenched fists or open hearts.

Rebecca (Becky) is a soon-to-be retired public service lawyer and administrator who's spent decades navigating politics while trying to do a little good in Georgia. Now at a crossroads, she is searching for what R.E.M. calls the place where "strength and courage overrides the privileged and weary eyes" with her clan at St. Luke's.

I am steeped in lay theological studies—for which opportunity I am deeply thankful—including four years of Education for Ministry (EfM), a multi-year study of seminal works with learned Episcopal priests (St. Jerome, St. Anselm, William of St Thierry, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Jeremy Taylor, John Donne); adult class studies of books over a wide range including St. Augustine, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Father John Behr; and personal reading of sermons by John Wesley.

My purpose is to highlight how odd is the barrenness and stripped-to-the-bones starkness of the prayer Wilderness in which I find myself ... notwithstanding the foregoing bounty of guidance in addition to Jesus' instructions regarding prayer and the thousands of prayers that I have joined in over almost 70 years of active church membership. My further purpose is to set the stage for the simple, not-remotely-erudite prayer that I embrace in this Wilderness:

Dear God,
I hate that person.
You love that person.
Amen.

Taking it line by line:

- Acknowledging the existence of God (even the complexity of the Trinity). No problem at all.
- Stating my human condition and the reality of me as a sinner. Deeply shameful, but it also comes readily.
- Speaking, not in a vacuum but with a concrete example, the reality that the single most defining attribute of God, the Ultimate Reality, is a love that knows no human bounds.
- Submitting to all the implications of God's boundless love by uttering the equivalent of "it is true" or "let it be so."

Yet here I am pressing onward in the Wilderness. And as I embrace that prayer and truly steep myself in all that it means, I am beginning to feel some peace even in the Wilderness.

Ellen aspires to St. Luke's membership. The prayer source is a former senior rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Marietta who in turn attributed it to one of his mentors.

Balance

I remember where I was standing and how the fragrance of the terraced gardenia behind me willed me to remember that good can co-exist in a world where health reports live.

It was August 2002, and I stood alone as I held the MRI scan up to the sunlight.

Light reveals hidden objects in the darkness, and just like the photograph on the page in the Mayo Health book, the round walnut-sized tumor stared back with startling clarity.

Later, it was identified as an acoustic neuroma, and it had grown—like a stealth bomber—toward my brain stem from the balance nerve in my ear.

This diagnosis would explain my bouts of dizziness and unsteadiness I had fortunately experienced only the weekend before.

With great care from God, family and friends, and immensely talented neurosurgeons, the brain tumor was removed, along with the right side balance nerve that had been its home.

The brain is a marvelous machine, and I learned that, in time, the balance nerve on the left side would begin to take over what had been removed from my right, and I could put away the walker and the cane and walk—maybe one day run—without assistance.

Before that communication was complete, I learned a lot about balance and what life is like without it. I was 47 when I was introduced to medical terms far beyond my understanding. I pored over images and mailed them in parchment envelopes to doctors I had never met in places I had never been. All this is between dropping off my youngest son in the third grade, my middle son into eighth grade, and my oldest off to his first year of college. There is never a good time for Mom (or Dad) to be less than full throttle. I learned about letting go. About trusting friends whose hands and feet held my boys' schedules, prepared our meals, and prayed over me.

Yes, I experienced all the fears that explode one's armor. What I was now facing placed those in-the-night, wake-up worries about nothing in perspective. At first, I thought I was fighting for my life. Over time, I let God do that, and I fought for my faith. I learned to stand on the promises of a God who had never let me down. A God who surrounded me with a cloud of witnesses, always there to remind me tenderly when I doubted. Friends who claimed God's Love for me when I could not see it or hope for it.

Cont.

Late in the night after surgery, God spoke these words over me: “Whether you turn to the left or the right, you will hear a voice behind you saying, ‘this is the way; walk in it.’” That same scripture (Isa. 30:21) hung from my bed on a ring of scriptures prepared by my friends. I had committed them to memory.

Through my bruised and broken brain, the God of Love spoke Love over me, and I was healed.

Kathy is married to Richard, and they have been communicants and involved in the life of St. Luke's since 1980. Three wonderful sons, a fabulous daughter-in-law, and three active grandchildren continue to bless their lives.

Merriam-Webster defines “wilderness” as a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by humans. In the Bible, it symbolizes a place of spiritual transformation, divine encounter, and testing. Raise a hand if you have ever felt you were in the wilderness with no one and nothing around? No support, comfortless, nothing tangible?

A favorite animated Christmas special of mine is *Nestor, the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey*. Nestor, an outcast because of his abnormally long ears, finds them to be unwieldy, a burden, and a tripping hazard. Other animals tease him mercilessly. His supportive mother often tells him his long ears will be of immeasurable use one day.

One frigid winter night, Roman centurions come to collect taxes from Nestor’s owner, Olaf. He does not have enough money, and so the centurions begin confiscating some of his animals. Nestor is among those they try to seize. Once they see his anomaly, they reject him, blame Olaf for attempting to pass off Nestor as “normal,” and take even more animals as punishment.

Olaf blames Nestor and throws him out into a raging snowstorm. His sympathetic and concerned mother escapes her stall and runs after Nestor. She finds him and covers him with her body to protect him from the storm—an act of unconditional love that leads to her own death. Distraught, Nestor wanders in the wilderness where he meets a cherub who foretells his destiny. Later, Nestor encounters Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem. When they enter a blinding sandstorm, Nestor envelopes Mary with his ears to keep her safe as his mother did for him. They arrive in time for Mary to deliver, and Nestor returns to his stable as a hero.

Nestor experienced wilderness twice. First after the death of his mother and then when guiding Mary and Joseph through a horrific storm. Mary, a teenager carrying the world’s Savior, and Joseph, a carpenter, were in their own wilderness of uncertainty as recently married, expectant parents.

Wilderness experiences can teach us much. Nestor’s experience taught him, though alone, to believe in himself. Mary and Joseph learned to implicitly trust God. They all embraced their wilderness. Those experiences strengthen us in our wilderness moments and teach us to rely on and trust a tiny, defenseless infant as our ultimate source for help.

Chris is a classically trained tenor, composer, conductor, amateur cellist, and oboist. He wishes his beloved St. Luke’s family a blessed Advent and a very joyous and Merry Christmas.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

– Gal. 3:28, ESV

A couple of times my wife, Elaine, and I have attended Catholic funerals where we debated whether we could—or should—disregard the “only-for-Catholics” rule for participating in communion. We have come up with brilliant rationalizations such as, “Our recently deceased friend would have wanted us to join in the feast” or “Nobody knows us here. We can just blend in.” Those darn Catholics. Why do they want to make things difficult? I won’t reveal what we decided, but suffice it to say that, in retrospect, these instances were not shining moments in my spiritual journey. Once I considered the multitude of problems going on in this world, I was a little ashamed I had plotted to do something others might consider disrespectful. We Protestants and Catholics both need to focus on the same simple things—loving God and loving each other. That’s it.

Recently, while vacationing in Quebec City, Canada, we came upon the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Trinity and the nearby Catholic Notre-Dame de Quebec Basilica. We learned from our guide that on December 22, 1922, the Catholic basilica burned to the ground. The Anglican bishop immediately reached out and invited the entire Catholic congregation to join in that year’s celebration of Christ’s birthday.

Reportedly there have been similar acts of Christ-like love by both churches dating back to the 1800s. These acts of kindness occurred amid more serious violent activities between the French Catholics and the English Protestants in Quebec. These two churches were able to see past all the differences and hostilities of their denominations and simply love Jesus.

As we St. Lukers are embracing the wilderness, we need to love and respect not only our fellow Christians but those of other beliefs. And one day, maybe, we Christians may find ourselves all drinking from that same chalice. Then we’ll just need to figure out how to handle that gluten-free thing.

Jeff lives in Druid Hills/Candler Park with wife Elaine. He was raised in the Methodist church but became an Episcopalian in 2004. He has not been ejected from any Catholic churches ... so far.

My Spiritual Wilderness

“Your brother’s spending Christmas with Jesus,” the hospice nurse said, attempting cheerfulness.

I stared silently at the gifts under the tree for my young nieces and nephew.

She repeated louder: “Your brother’s spending Christmas with Jesus.”

I faked a quiet chuckle to preempt a third attempt. The thought of my brother and all the company of Heaven wearing paper hats and singing “Happy Birthday Jesus” could not cheer me out of my spiritual wilderness.

Neither could medical science, which did a great job explaining *how* cancer killed my brother, but not *why*. I read a biologist’s blog suggesting genetic diseases were a small price for the benefits of mutations, which allowed single-celled organisms to evolve into humans.

While I consider evolution a scientific fact, it makes for a terrible philosophy. Some things unfit for survival are still worth protecting—like my brother, who died in 2017, and my wife (Leigh) and our young adult son (Liam), who have since been diagnosed with Huntington’s disease.

A couple of dear friends at work suggested, “God is testing you, but will never give you more than you can handle.”

I found much more comfort in Bishop Robert Wright’s interpretation: “God does not give us our hardships but will partner with us to use them for growth, depth and maturity.”

God has experienced the pain of being human.

The wilderness Jesus entered was a desert, but I like to imagine him in Deepdene Park—a small, wooded nature preserve off Ponce that I would visit on my darkest days.

During my wilderness moment, my friends and family have delivered unsolicited help with meals on my doorstep, parishioners inviting me to brunch after services, and clergy who inferred from my social media posts that the best way to get me to open up would be at a microbrewery or over a glass of bourbon.

All this furthered my love and appreciation for the community I had waiting for me, once I was ready to return from the wilderness.

Jonathan has been a member of St. Luke’s since 2005. He is a journalist and lives in East Atlanta with Leigh, Liam, and a hyperactive dog named Bandit.

The journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem was both a physical and a metaphorical wilderness experience. Physically, it was long, cold, and particularly difficult for Mary, who was almost ready to give birth. Their metaphorical desert was one of social isolation and uncertainty as to what was to come. Their faith in God and their hope for the future gave them the courage and the resilience to press on in spite of these challenges, thus fulfilling the prophecy:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. – Isaiah 9:6, NIV

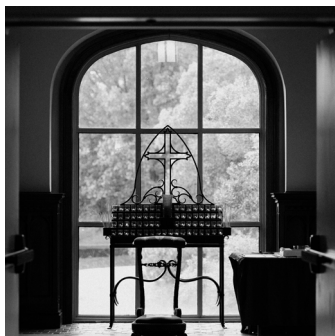
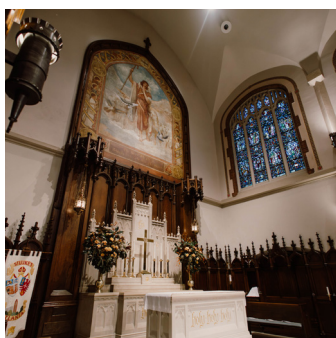


Madonna and Child by Michelangelo
Church of our Lady - Bruges, Belgium

During this Advent 2025, as we practice hopeful waiting during a tumultuous time in our country and in the world, may we realize that God is always with us, offering comfort, strength, and promise.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. – Isaiah 41:10, NIV

Brenda has been a St. Luke's parishioner since 2004. She and husband Mike Egan are so grateful for the many wonderful friends they've made through their St. Luke's involvement.



Scripture Readings for Advent 2025

Daily Office (BCP)

WEEK OF 1 ADVENT

Sunday, November 30

Amos 1:1-5,13—2:8

1 Thess. 5:1-11

Luke 21:5-19

Monday

Amos 2:6-16

2 Pet. 1:1-11

Matt. 21:1-11

Tuesday

Amos 3:1-11

2 Pet. 1:12-21

Matt. 21:12-22

Wednesday

Amos 3:12—4:5

2 Pet. 3:1-10

Matt. 21:33-46

Thursday

Amos 4:6-13

2 Pet. 3:11-18

Matt. 21:23-32

Friday

Amos 5:1-17

Jude 1-16

Matt. 22:1-14

Saturday

Amos 5:18-27

Jude 17-25

Matt. 22:15-22

WEEK OF 2 ADVENT

Sunday, December 7

Amos 6:1-14

2 Thess. 1:5-12

Luke 1:57-68

Monday

Amos 7:1-9

Rev. 1:1-8

Matt. 22:23-33

Tuesday

Amos 7:10-17

Rev. 1:9-16

Matt. 22:34-46

Wednesday

Amos 8:1-14

Rev. 1:17—2:7

Matt. 23:1-12

Thursday

Amos 9:1-10

Rev. 2:8-17

Matt. 23:13-26

Friday

Haggai 1:1-15

Rev. 2:18-29

Matt. 23:27-39

Saturday

Haggai 2:1-9

Rev. 3:1-6

Matt. 24:1-14

WEEK OF 3 ADVENT

Sunday, December 14

Amos 9:11-15

2 Thess. 2:1-3, 13-17

John 5:30-47

Monday

Zech. 1:7-17

Rev. 3:7-13

Matt. 24:15-31

Tuesday

Zech. 2:1-13

Rev. 3:14-22

Matt. 24:32-44

Wednesday

Zech. 3:1-10

Rev. 4:1-8

Matt. 24:45-51

Thursday

Zech. 4:1-14

Rev. 4:9--5:5

Matt. 25:1-13

Friday

Zech. 7:8--8:8

Rev. 5:6-14

Matt. 25:14-30

Saturday

Zech. 8:9-17

Rev. 6:1-17

Matt. 25:31-46

WEEK OF 4 ADVENT

Sunday, December 21

Gen. 3:8-15

Rev. 12:1-10

John 3:16-21

Monday

Zeph. 3:14-20

Titus 1:1-16

Luke 1:1-25

Tuesday

1 Samuel 2:1b-10

Titus 2:1-10

Luke 1:26-38

Wednesday

2 Samuel 7:1-17

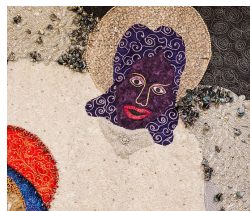
Titus 2:11--3:8a

Luke 1:39-48a(48b-56)

Christmas Eve

Isa. 59:15b-21

Phil. 2:5-11



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS SCHEDULE

NOVEMBER 30 | ADVENT 1

8 AM Holy Eucharist Rite I

9 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*

10 AM Advent Wreath Making Festival and Marketplace

11:15 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*^

DECEMBER 5

12 PM Lunchtime Live! | Spelman College Jazz Ensemble

DECEMBER 7 | ADVENT 2

8 AM Holy Eucharist Rite I

9 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music and Children's Chapel*

10:15 AM Advent Class Series:

- Advent Bible Study: The Nativity Narratives
- Spirituality: The Book Of Common Prayer For Everyday Life
- Advent Reading Circle: *Every Valley* by Charles King

11:15 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*^

7 PM 50th Annual Messiah Sing Along with
Reception following^

DECEMBER 10

12 PM Act III Luncheon

DECEMBER 12

12 PM Lunchtime Live! | Guitarist Luther Enlow

DECEMBER 14 | ADVENT 3

8 AM Holy Eucharist Rite I

9 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*

10:15 AM Advent Class Series:

- Advent Bible Study: The Nativity Narratives
- Spirituality: The Book Of Common Prayer For Everyday Life
 - Advent Reading Circle: *Every Valley* by Charles King

11:15 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*^

4 PM Advent Lessons and Carols with Reception following ^

DECEMBER 19

12 PM Lunchtime Live! | Organist Raymond Chenault

DECEMBER 21: ADVENT 4

8 AM Holy Eucharist Rite I

9 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*

10:15 AM Advent Class Series:

- Advent Bible Study: The Nativity Narratives
- Spirituality: The Book Of Common Prayer For Everyday Life
 - Advent Reading Circle: *Every Valley* by Charles King

11:15 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music*^

4 PM Longest Night/Blue Christmas Worship Service

DECEMBER 24: CHRISTMAS EVE

4 PM Christmas Pageant and Service of Holy Eucharist*^

7:30 PM Choral Prelude Sung by the Adult Choir ^

8 PM Service of Holy Eucharist ^

10:30 PM Choral Prelude Sung by the Adult Choir

11 PM Service of Holy Eucharist

DECEMBER 25: CHRISTMAS DAY

10 AM Holy Eucharist Rite II with music

DECEMBER 28

10 AM Christmas Lessons and Carols with Holy Eucharist Rite II^

*Nursery care is available.

^Service will be streamed live online







435 Peachtree St NE
Atlanta, GA 30308

www.stlukesatlanta.org
[@stlukesatlanta](https://twitter.com/stlukesatlanta)