

*Patterns of  
Divine  
Possibility*

An Advent Search

Written by Teri McDowell Ott



**THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK**

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# Introduction

In Abraham Verghese's 2023 novel *The Covenant of Water*, the main character, 12-year-old Mariamma, is preparing to meet her husband by an arranged marriage in India. She prepares to leave her childhood home and all its familiar comforts by recalling the words of her deceased father: "Faith is to know the pattern is there, even when none is visible."

Faith is to trust a pattern exists, to search for God's handiwork in the myriad designs of life. Too often we limit God's range, boxing our Creator into designs of our culture's making, denying the more of divinity. In his 2020 book *Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm*, Kazu Haga writes:

If we look back to any of our Indigenous worldviews, we understand that things are rarely, if ever, black and white. Our world is nuanced, and most things exist on a spectrum. Yet in a society that is oftentimes dominated by an Abrahamic worldview that pits "good" against "evil," we are unable to see nuance.

Haga's reference to the Abrahamic worldview, which includes our Christian tradition, piqued my curiosity and inspired this devotion. The seasons of Advent and Christmas highlight the binary pattern of light vs. dark. On Christmas Eve we read, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). This beautiful passage gives us hope as Christ, our light, illumines our lives and helps us to see in the dark.

But such binaries have also been used (and abused) to substantiate sin, with darkness representing evil, and light representing pure good. People have interpreted this light/dark binary to substantiate false claims of the White race as superior over darker-skinned and Black people. But race is a social construct, and the shades of our skin beautifully diverse. When I select foundation to match my complexion, my color choices include warm ivory, cool sand and golden almond. Rhianna's Fenty line goes beyond "tan" and "deep" to specify foundations with pink, olive, bronze and golden undertones. If the beauty industry can evolve to embrace the full spectrum of skin color, certainly we can.

This devotion explores a full spectrum of patterns: narrative patterns of Scripture, fractals (repeated patterns) with the natural world, and the myriad ways life can be organized and ordered beyond either/or binaries. Readers will be led to consider the perspectives of people who live on society's margins, people who have wisdom to share because their very existence counters mainstream patterns, as well as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people. Like a quizzical dog, we will perk our ears and cock our heads to engage God's world and our faith anew.

For each Sunday in this devotion, I explore the narrative patterns that emerge from and thread through the four *Revised Common Lectionary* texts. Each Saturday invites you to discern the patterns in a piece of art through the spiritual practice of *visio divina*. The remaining days are a swirling scattershot of reflections on observed patterns of God's world.

In writing this devotion series, I have found myself increasingly open and attentive to the existence of patterns I hadn't recognized before. I concluded this series curious and eager to discover more. As we walk together this Advent, I pray this devotion gifts you with the same openness and curiosity to discover the more of our Creator, the patterns of divine possibility. Happy Advent and thanks for reading!

- Teri McDowell Ott

# *First Sunday of Advent*

## *December 1*

### **The In-Between Time of Advent**

*Reflection: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36*

Before civil rights protestors marched, they gathered in churches to sing hymns and spirituals about the future God desired for them. This clear vision of promise strengthened them to non-violently endure water hoses, attack dogs and the beatings of police batons. Of these marches, Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1968, “We just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we’d go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we’d just go on singing ‘Over my head I see freedom in the air.’”

The lectionary texts for the first Sunday of Advent lift our eyes to the horizon, to the promised future of and for God’s world, each text a piece of a larger, unseen tessellation.

“The days are surely coming,” declares Jeremiah, for God to fulfill the promise to redeem and restore the houses of Israel and Judah. This promise will manifest through a branch of David’s lineage, someone whose reign will be characterized by “justice and righteousness” and lead God’s people to “live in safety.”

Until this manifestation, the psalmist says, we must wait, trusting in God as teacher and leader in the way of steadfast love and faithfulness. Waiting is difficult, though — the psalmist prays for God’s help in this in between, not yet time.

Waiting doesn’t mean doing nothing, though. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul celebrates the joy of their relationship and encourages them to build upon that love with one another. Paul prays that the church will increase its love to prepare for Christ’s coming.

“The kingdom of God is near,” Jesus tells us through the Gospel of Luke. Near in time — he’s coming soon! Be on guard! Be alert! But also near in location — God is among us, within our lives, our hearts, our communities. Pay attention to the signs of God at work among and within us, so we will recognize Christ when he appears on the horizon.

The goal of Advent is clear: Christ is coming, and we need to prepare ourselves for his disruptive, world-changing arrival. A better understanding and clearer picture of what Christ is bringing, the kind of world he will create among us, will help us prepare and strengthen us for the present work.

Prayer: Soon and very soon we are going to see our King! Christ is coming! Savior God, help us to prepare our hearts, our homes, our communities and world. Help us keep our eyes on the hoped-for horizon so we can be strengthened for the work today. Amen.

# *Monday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 2*

### **The Linear Journey**

In his 2013 book *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, Verlyn Klinkenborg writes:

Much of what's taught under the name of expository writing could be called "The Anxiety of Sequence." Its premise is this: To get where you're going, you have to begin in just the right place and take the proper path, which depends on knowing where you plan to conclude. Why not begin where you already are? Is there only one way to get where you're going?

Must we be beholden to a linear path, with a beginning, middle and clear end? Couldn't we meander for a while? Spiral off in a new direction? Explore the edges? Color outside the lines? The life of faith is not clear cut. God's love is expansive and available — unbound by our human need for structure and certainty.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a well-known medieval spiritual text on contemplative prayer, the anonymous author suggests that the way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's particular activities and attributes: to let go of the linear path, of our assumptions of faith, and surrender to our "unknowing." Within this humble stance, welcoming mystery and mysticism, we might glimpse the nature, patterns or workings of God.

Prayer: God, make us less certain, more humble. Encourage us in our doubting and questioning and unknowing. Help us approach Christ's coming with a beginner's mind, open to all that is new and yet to be discovered about you and your ways. Amen.

# *Tuesday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 3*

### **Organization Reflects Values**

We organize our day, our to-do list, our calendar, our bookshelves and our budgets. If anyone pauses to study us, our chosen patterns reveal what we value, how we prioritize time and resources, through what we experience beauty and pleasure, where we find meaning and purpose.

My home office is filled with books about writing, religion and spirituality. I keep track of all the books I read in a bullet journal, where I also track the work I need to get done this day, this week, this month, this year. My digital calendar is full of meetings and work-related travel, but my mornings are blocked out for prayer, meditation and writing time. Each Friday, I make a plan for the next week, including the weekend. Having a plan, even if it gets disrupted, helps me relax. That's how God designed me.

If a stranger were to observe the way you organize your home, your bookshelves, your calendar,

what would they learn about you? If we consider how God has organized our world through the Creation stories in Genesis, what would we learn about the Divine? What can we learn about God's values and priorities over the course of six days of Creation that conclude in a seventh day of rest? What can we learn about our God, who takes a formless void and gives it a form, a structure, a pattern? God is working toward something . . . with us and with our world. What is God's grand design? How can we better discern God's patterns and priorities this Advent?

Prayer: God, you are more than we can imagine, more than we can organize on shelves or in calendars or bullet journals. Guide us this Advent in seeking your grand design and discerning your priorities. Amen.

## *Wednesday of the First Week of Advent* *December 4*

### **Fractals**

Examine the head of a cauliflower, the leaves of a fern, the community within the fluff of a dandelion, the print on the tip of each of your fingers, or a snowflake. A fractal is a shape, design or pattern that repeats, over and over. Each small section reflects the pattern of the whole.

In her 2017 book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown writes about the way fractals ground her work as an activist and community organizer: "The patterns of the universe repeat at scale. There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale."

Many of our destructive patterns start small and then reverberate with large consequences. Our patterns of plenty lead to overconsumption and abuse of natural resources. Our patterns of productivity bring overwork and burnout. Our pattern of self-protection devalues the path of nonviolence and overvalues investment in weapons and warfare.

But small patterns can also initiate large, influential, positive change. Consider Jesus' life and ministry. He walked this earth as a single individual and lived a short life. But he patterned his life on love, compassion and justice. He countered cultural practices by spending time with tax collectors, foreigners, lepers, women. He modeled an alternative way of living – personally, communally and politically – to great impact.

What small patterns of your life make a large impact? What destructive pattern can you begin (start small) to replace with constructive or Christ-like action?

Prayer: The designs of your Creation are wondrous, O God. Microscopic repeating patterns dazzle us with your intention and artistry. Help us attend to the small ways in which we pattern our lives as we intentionally seek to follow Christ's big, consequential love. Amen.

# *Thursday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 5*

### **Fractals of Conflict**

In *Healing Resistance*, Haga relates the patterns of fractals to the patterns of conflict.

*I believe that the laws that govern conflict and harm are fractal in nature. Whether we are talking about intrapersonal conflict within our own hearts; interpersonal conflict between two people; or large-scale global conflicts between nations; the principles, practices, and strategies that guide the transformation of conflict are the same at every scale.*

According to Haga, the work of healing ultimately transforms conflict. Practitioners of nonviolence are often heard saying, “Hurt people hurt people.” But as Haga writes, “Healed people heal people.” This is true of personal relationships as well as large-scale global conflicts.

In a recent disagreement with an acquaintance on social media, I reacted with anger — at the person, the words they’d chosen and the way they treated me. It wasn’t until I sat and meditated on the heat of my still-boiling anger that I recognized the hurt and woundedness as its core. Anger was the arrow I shot. But pain was my loaded bow.

Consider a conflict in your life. Meditate on this conflict, honestly considering what might be the underlying pain or wounds at its root. Scale up this conflict pattern to your community. What community wounds have manifested in conflict? Scale up to a global conflict, such as the war in Israel and Palestine. What human pain, if transformed into healing, could possibly pave a path to peace?

Prayer: Prince of Peace, we are a wounded and wounding people. We hurt and we hurt others. Help us to recognize and acknowledge pain so we can work toward healing.  
Amen.

# *Friday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 6*

### **Watershed Land Patterns**

In the 2016 essay collection *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, contributor Ched Myers writes about the importance of watersheds to ecological survival. Water’s journey can be traced through the land’s topography. From its original source, draining from peaks and ridges along a waterway or stream, to its end point in a pond, lake or ocean, water shapes and maps our land. “A watershed,” writes Myers, “is the area covered in water’s journey . . . a unique mix of habitats that influence each other, including forests, wetlands, fields and meadows, rivers and lakes, farms and towns. All human life is watershed-placed.”

Wherever humans reside – urban, suburban, rural – our lives and our communities are patterned by



# *Saturday of the First Week of Advent*

## *December 7*

### **Visio Divina**

Visio divina (sacred seeing) is an ancient form of Christian prayer where we dwell on an image in contemplative silence, listening for what God may reveal. This holy week, as we contemplate the life, death, humanity and divinity of Christ, we invite you to reflect on this work from Hannah Garrity that engages the Incarnation.

#### Prompts:

- Prepare yourself for prayer — perhaps by reading Scripture or through deep, centering breaths.
- Dwell on the image: what are your eyes first drawn to? Linger there. Then take in the whole image.
- What does this image evoke in you?
- What patterns emerge?
- What thoughts or messages arise?
- Respond to your visio divina experience with the following prayer or your own.

Prayer: Divine Artist, you pattern our lives with meaning and purpose. Thank you for art that points the way to new vision and new understanding. May this sacred practice inform our living and guide us closer to you. Amen.





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*Hannah Garrity*