Sermon "Both Challenge and Comfort"
Kirk of St James
Sunday November 22, 2026
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

I was reading back through some of my former Christmas letters because I didn't want to repeat themes when I wrote this years and I had totally forgotten I had suggested some Christmas songs I could write back in 2023. They included the following hits "*Don't Ninja Kick Your Brother Under the Christmas Tree, Baby Jesus Knows When You're Not Sleeping (AKA This Isn't What I Meant When I Talked About Being Awake in Our Faith Lives)* and, *Baby Jesus Only Received Three Gifts So Don't Add Anything Else to Your Christmas List."* I thought to myself, I was so naive back then—it has only gotten worse over the last three years! I could add, *"Jesus Was Born in a Barn but Your Room Doesn't Have to Look Like One, Do you Hear What I Hear—No Because Everybody is Yelling, and the classic, "Go Tell It on the Mountain and Stop Tattling on Each Other to Me."* My CD will be out in December, tour schedule pending.

I am joking, it is not quite that bad however, I was thinking about life with its ups and downs. Sometimes we can laugh about difficulties and challenges and other times it can start to feel heavy. Today is Christ the King Sunday, which marks the closing of the church year, and next week on Advent 1 will be the beginning of a New Church Year. This morning, we are going to do something different from a typical sermon and I am going to blend a few things together to do so.

At Iona Abbey, each Tuesday night they offer what they call a Service for Healing. It is based on the Christian belief that "God's purpose for us all is a life of wholeness, as expressed in the life and teaching of Jesus…we each stand in need of healing, but in this ministry, we recognise the social dimension as well. The healing of divided communities and nations, and the healing of the earth itself, have their place alongside the healing of broken bodies, hurt minds

and wounded hearts, and of the hurts and divisions within ourselves…" This service is one of the most powerful that the abbey offers. One of the reasons I believe that is the case, is because it forces us to take some time to pause and actually take stock of our lives and hearts. It is a moment to be still. That can be a vulnerable thing, because if we keep busy enough it means we don't have to think about things too closely, we can keep glossing over the tough parts and keep going. However, that doesn't mean we are not feeling the weight of what we carry. Sometimes, taking enough time to be still, allows us to ultimately lay down some of the burden.

The other thing that shaped this morning was the worship time at presbytery a couple of weeks ago. Rev. Steven Stead used an outline to do something like this, albeit a different theme, and we did it in small groups. This morning, I am going to invite us to just take time with ourselves. Using our scripture and a few questions we will find some time for quiet this morning.

Looking at Ezekiel, we see a God who wants fullness of life for their people. If they are lost God will find them, if they are injured God will heal them, if they are weak God will strengthen them. "I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Isreal shall be their pasture, where they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my people…" As Iona, and the church affirms God wants full life for all God's people. There are times in our lives sometimes when we realize it, and even sometimes not, where our hearts are heavy because they are carrying so much both consciously and unconsciously. I am also aware it has been for lack of a better word a bit of a dumpster fire of a year. Globally things have been unsettled.

So, our first question to think about this morning is what things are we carrying? What is weighing us down, causing anxiety or, keeping us up at night? What burdens are pressing on us? Are we waiting on a diagnosis, do we have health challenges, the loss of someone we love, or

something that gave us meaning? What things are stressing us out and causing us worry? Sometimes just taking a moment to name those things before God can be helpful. So, in the quiet of the next few minutes take a moment to either write down or just think about what has been weighing your heart down and name those things before God trusting that God hears you and understands. That is what Immanuel God with us is all about, Jesus entering the messiness and complexity of humanity and loving us in the middle of it all.

After naming those things in our lives and trusting that God hears us and knows us, that God is the Good Shepherd we are reminded that we do not do any of this alone. Sometimes one of the worst parts about the things that affect our hearts and lives is the idea that it is our problem to carry alone. I admit that sometimes I get tunnel vision, and I feel like problems become mine to solve, and I need to figure it out on my own and that becomes a terrible weight. The account in Ezekiel today reminds us that is not true and we are never alone. We are God's beloved flock, and that means that not only does God help us bear our burdens but so does this community who surrounds you. Take a moment to think about the people and the moments that encourage you in your life and the ways they do that for you. If there are things you are struggling with alone consider whether you might ask someone to come alongside you, or even just hear you say them out loud, so you do not feel so isolated. Do not struggle alone.

The last thing I will ask us to consider this morning is that not only does God love us, hear us, and care for us, but in turn our lives are then moved to do the same. As Ezekiel demonstrates, "Shepherds give up all semblance of a normal life to care for animals that may not even be their own. Because we are God's beloved children, we can thus be assured that's God care and compassion will be even more pronounced. This shepherd image is about love and compassion for another living thing—to the point of self-sacrifice. The calling inherent in this

passage is to do as God does: to care for the least, the last the lost, and the excluded of society, out of a deep sense of love and compassion." My last question is how does Gods' love for us inspire us to love others? What are ways we can do that as a community? How do we help find the lost and offer love to those who need it most?

As we move into the advent season next week, we give thanks that we can lay our burdens at God's feet, that we do not walk this journey alone, and that together we can help lift others up. I would like to leave you with a few words from Jan Richardson to close this morning as wait at the edge of advent:

"With the season of Advent almost here, I have been thinking a lot about how I want to enter it this time around. It seems like such a familiar landscape for me: I know the characters; I know the story and how it will unfold over the course of the season. But one of the gifts of Advent is that it invites us to move through it anew every time, as who we are right now, and to see our ever-changing story in the light (and shadows) of the astonishing story that Advent holds. When we cross its threshold in just over a week, I will be praying to let myself see in a new way, that I might recognize the Love that comes to meet us—again, anew, always—in all of who we are.

Here at the edge of the season, I want to share some words that, along with this artwork, come from the beginning of my book Night Visions. Think of it as a kind of prayer that I am tucking into your hand, a blessing as you travel into whatever these days hold.
HORIZON
The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before.
It is not possible to keep it from coming, because it will. That's just how Advent works. What is possible is to not see it, to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you. And you begin to grasp what it was you missed, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, watching God's hindquarters fade in the distance.
So, stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder.
There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing.
For now, stay. Wait.
Something is on the horizon.
—Jan Richardson
"Horizon" image & words © Jan Richardson
from Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas