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[BLANK] [PRAYER] Welcome! Welcome to our beautiful church, which is such a place of grace. I have seen many of the great cathedrals of the world, I have seen many other amazing places that inspire people to worship our living God. But this place is a very special place, a place that lets the love of God shine in as few other places can. Every time that I enter this place, I can feel my relationship with God being refreshed and renewed.

We are journeying towards Christmas and beyond in our new Christian year, in Advent, our first Christian season. Advent is when we prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Advent is meant to give us a season of reflecting, refreshing, restoring, and rejoicing. [KIT] This year, we are celebrating Advent with our travel kits that you received as a gift here. The kit has reminders that we are to reflect, refresh, restore, and rejoice in Advent to open the gifts of faith for us all year long.

[XMITV] I had a good week reflecting in my faith journey with you, and reflecting on all of the hundreds of people whose lives we touched last week at our Christmas in the Village celebration. Many of these people prayed here in our sanctuary, and perhaps they began to reflect on the image of God in them, too. [CARDS] I also had a good time this week praying our prayer of invitation to God's possibilities. I have been praying it every single day, and I invite everyone, to pray it, together, and to begin to see the image of God reflected in those possibilities. [BLANK]

Even though I made it a point to reflect this week, it's been a busy week. I had meetings, preparation for our service of remembrance here yesterday, and more. And as the week went on, I began to realize: hey, wait a minute, when was the last time I took a shower? I finally got so itchy, and yes, so stinky, that I practically jumped into the shower. Boy, did that ever feel good, just washing it all away. It was very, very refreshing!

[SHOWER] Don't you love that feeling? Don't you love stepping out of the shower and feeling so refreshed, so ready for new things? Everything that went down the drain doesn't have to be a part of our lives any more. We're left with the freshest version of our birthday suits that we can manage! If only refreshing our faith were that simple. Well, in fact, it can be that simple, though perhaps not that easy. [BLANK]

God wants us to take care of our flesh, our bodies; God wants us to be refreshed for the journey of faith ahead. To be a person in living flesh is so important to God that God's own self became flesh, in Jesus. Even Jesus took time to make sure that he was refreshed physically. But faith reminds us that our bodies are not just our bodies. God wants us to be more than just our own flesh. It's so important to be not just our own flesh that God came to us as Jesus to invite us to be one flesh with every living thing, through faith in Jesus Christ.

So, as we use our tools to open the gifts of faith this Christian year, our Advent readings this week remind us that the purpose of Christian refreshment is not just to refresh our own flesh, but to refresh our connection to God and God's creation. To refresh ourselves as a Christian is not a situation where we refresh ourselves and then say to God's world, God's flesh, "I got mine, now you go get yours!" [PEOPLE] No, to refresh ourselves as Christians is to "re-flesh" ourselves, to reconnect to our oneness with every

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person and every living thing that has the flesh of life in this world. If we have truly engaged in Christian reflection, then we can't help but to see the reflection of all of God's flesh in our mirror of faith. [BLANK]

Our reading today from Luke's gospel reminds us that the flesh of God's world was not in a good place when Jesus was born. Luke sets the time when Jesus was born in a very interesting way. Luke didn't just say, "Well, I think that it was December 25th, year zero, when Jesus was born." That's not the kind of time-keeping that would have mattered to Luke, and other early Christians.

No, Luke set the time of Jesus coming into the world according to how the world was suffering, and waiting for the salvation of God. Luke describes every ruler of the world that affected life in the place where Jesus was born. The amazingly corrupt and brutal Roman emperor Tiberius, the corrupt and brutal Pontius Pilate, governor of the land of Israel, and all of the corrupt puppet kings and rulers of Galilee, Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Abilene, and the equally corrupt and cold-hearted rulers of the Jewish Temple, Annas and Caiaphas - all of these set the time of Jesus coming into the world. It was a time when all flesh in the world was suffering, and suffering badly.

The world of Jesus needed not just refreshing, but re-fleshing. The world of Jesus needed not just the connection of God with people individually, but the connection of God with people connected to one another in Godly ways. The world needed people taking not just a comfortable bath to get ready for a new day, but a deep washing of their souls, and hearts, so that everything that separated them from God and God's creation could go swirling down the drain of sin and death. John the Baptist tells us that all flesh needed to see the salvation of God, a washing away of everything that was not God.

And when we find ourselves in that place of salvation, when we sense that our hearts have smelled the stink of our sin, repented of it, and let God's mercy and forgiveness wash us baby-clean, as John the Baptist called people to do, then we come up from those re-fleshing waters to find a world that has suffered along with us. [WOMAN] We begin to reclaim our connection to God's world, a world that has hearts just like we do, that loves and that hurts just like we do, and that feels the oppressive hand of evil ruling this world, consumed in sin, just like we do. We begin to see not only that are we not alone, but that God's world is not alone, and not without God's hope.

[BLANK] Advent is the season when we prepare for coming to the God who is coming to us, no matter what. As both John the Baptist and the prophet Malachi remind us today, God's coming will reshape our lives, for a good reason. And that reason for God's coming is the reason for the reason of this season. The reason for this season is Jesus. The reason for Jesus is salvation. We need to find Christian refreshment, because our journey through the Christian year is our journey of salvation. We want our hearts, our minds, our lives, and God's world to look more like God's garden of Eden now, not later. Jesus, our new Adam and Eve, is coming again, to lead us into the cleansing and refreshing waters of faith, helping us to have hearts and flesh like a newborn baby again.

And as we look at our newborn reflection in faith, as Christian refreshment prepares

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us for the coming of Jesus, hopefully we see, alongside us, the world who Jesus invites into the hope of God's salvation, the reason for the reason for the season. The refreshment of Christian salvation is never about "I got mine, you go get yours." Christian salvation invites us to become the heralds of Christ in God's world, inviting all of God's world into the healing of flesh and spirit that is God's plan for salvation in Jesus Christ, now and forever.

The word "flesh" from today's translation of Luke's gospel could also be read as the word "humanity." That's a fine word, too, but it seems to miss the point. We are all one flesh, one body in Jesus. There is not this thing called "us," and this thing apart from us called "humanity." The world is one flesh, and God calls us to be servants of salvation for God's one flesh, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. You are that flesh. Everyone here is that flesh. Every person in your family, your community, your state, your nation, and in all of God's world, is God's flesh. And every person who has the courage to come to a faith group, to serve in a mission project, to pray earnestly, to open to a new chapter of faith in their lives, to share their walk of faith with one another humbly, is a part of God's flesh, that can find God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

When you go home, please don't put your travel kit in a drawer and forget it. Please take it out, and use these tools actively. Use the mirror to see if you see the image of God reflected in you. Use the wash cloth to refresh you in Christ, and to offer it to others needing God's salvation. This is a time to refresh our bodies, our hearts, and our faith, as we prepare the way of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Let us use this time wisely, together. Amen.