



Meditations and Prayers for the Season of Advent

SINGING WITH
THE SHEPHERDS
VOL. II

By the Faculty, Students, Alumni, and Friends of
The Graduate School of Theology
ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

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*The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymne for thee?*
(George Herbert, “Christmas” in *The Temple*)

Advent is the season leading up to Christmas and Epiphany, opening up the year of worship for many Christian communities. Celebrating Advent in a methodical and meaningful way allows Christians to find deeper meaning than the holiday season otherwise offers. We can leave behind the guilt, competitiveness, envy, and pride stimulated by the commercialism of what Christmas has evolved into in the United States and much of the rest of the world. The older Christian practice, which developed over the first few centuries of the church’s life, allows us to express our deepest longings for healing, repentance, spiritual growth, rich human relationships, and most of all, an abiding sense of the presence of God.

Advent is a season of expectation and longing. During this time, we look forward to the second coming of Jesus, when he will hand all things over to God after subduing all enemies, especially death itself (1 Corinthians 15:24–28). We also recall his first coming, not in glory but in poverty and suffering as he entered our world in all its rough beauty. Advent is an aid toward the expressions of longing and memory that together shape our souls in the direction of the Triune God.

Following Advent are the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, sometimes thought of as the Twelve Days of Christmas (as in the catchy carol with the milking maids and leaping lords). These days celebrate Jesus’s birth and presentation in the temple. They also remind us that our longing for God’s presence exists side by side with our awareness that God remains with us. Our perception of God’s absence is just that—our perception, our experience. We live every moment between a sense of our experience and a longing for greater awareness of the reality behind the appearances of our lives. Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany help us live in the two realities until the day when God will make them one.

The great English poet and devotional writer George Herbert (1593–1633) spoke to God and himself as he sought words fit for a season of devotion during Advent. His poem “Christmas,” which is part of his masterpiece *The Temple*, speaks of the entire season of Advent as one in which, “Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers/Out-sing the day-light houres.” Amid our remorse for sin and our longing for a better world, this season reminds us also of the joy that comes from the confidence that God hears our prayers and honors the broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17).

This small guidebook is designed to help readers who wish to pray and reflect on the coming of the Lord during this season of Advent. For each day of the season, we point readers toward a Scripture reading (the translation of which may come from various sources). Our excellent colleagues have composed a meditation and a prayer for each day’s reading. The readings chosen follow the Revised Common Lectionary for the Sundays of Advent and Epiphany in Year C with some modifications and additions. The meditations and prayers come from the faculty, students, alumni, and friends of the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University. We trust that readers will find this material useful to their own life of prayer and contemplation.

Kelli Gibson and Mark W. Hamilton

Schedule of Meditations

Date	Text
Sunday, December 1	Luke 21:25-36
December 2	1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
December 3	Jeremiah 33:14-16
December 4	Psalm 25:1-10
December 5	Psalm 90
December 6	Luke 11:29-32
December 7	Malachi 4:1-6
Sunday, December 8	Luke 3:1-6
December 9	Philippians 1:3-11
December 10	Luke 1:68-79
December 11	Malachi 3:1-4
December 12	Romans 8:22-25
December 13	Isaiah 40:1-11
December 14	Luke 7:18-30
Sunday, December 15	Luke 3:7-18
December 16	Philippians 4:4-7
December 17	Zephaniah 3:14-20
December 18	Isaiah 12:2-6
December 19	Hebrews 10:32-39

Date	Text
December 20	Psalm 80:1-7
December 21	Isaiah 11:1-9
Sunday, December 22	Luke 1:39-45
December 23	Hebrews 10:5-10
December 24	Isaiah 52:7-10
December 25	Luke 2:1-14
December 26	Psalm 96
December 27	Isaiah 9:2-7
December 28	Hebrews 1:1-12
Sunday, December 29	Luke 2:41-52
December 30	Colossians 3:12-17
December 31	Numbers 6:22-27
January 1	Luke 2:15-21
January 2	Psalm 8
January 3	Philippians 2:5-11
January 4	Galatians 4:4-7
Sunday, January 5	John 1:10-18
January 6	Matthew 2:1-12

DECEMBER 1

Lift Up Your Head

Luke 21:25–36

*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads,
because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28)*

At my church, we often welcome the Advent season with a Hanging of the Greens service. We sing joyful songs and pause to reflect on the symbolic significance of each traditional decoration as we bring it into the church. It really sets that “Advent mood,” you know? The scripture reading that kicks off our Advent series today, however, sets a very different mood. This reading from Luke is short on peace and joy, and long on angst and foreboding. There is a definite shortage of appropriate Advent hymns to accompany this passage.

The kinds of events Jesus speaks of in these verses might be expected to fill onlookers with dread, as he speaks of distress among the nations, confusion, and people fainting from fear. Yet he tells his followers to draw hope from these events. Lift up your heads, he says, because as surely as new leaves on trees mean summer is near, so distress, turmoil, and confusion in the world means that our time of redemption is drawing near.

As we stand at the beginning of another Advent season, there is no doubt that we witness such signs around us. In fact, it is hard to think of a time when our world has *not* been characterized by chaos, strife, and suffering. In the face of seemingly endless struggles, it may be hard to believe that redemption is drawing near. As we celebrate Advent once again, do we truly feel the hope that we proclaim? Or do we light the candles and sing the songs out of habit?

Maybe it is hard to perceive signs of redemption in the chaos around us. But if our proclamation of hope is little more than a habit, perhaps that is part of the point of Advent. If the chaos and struggle of the world are continual, the habit of hope is all the more essential for the people of God. It takes practice and intention to hold up one’s head and look for signs of Christ’s coming when our instinct is to focus on the distracting or overwhelming

circumstances around us. Advent gives us the opportunity to cultivate that practice, to build the habit of lifting up our heads, looking beyond the turmoil of the world. Advent asks us to seek to see where God is at work, where our Savior is present, where redemption is drawing near.

Advent brings time and resources to cultivate the inward habit of hoping for redemption. But even more importantly, it reminds us to build the outward habit of acting like we believe that redemption is drawing near. This season challenges us to resist the temptation to grow jaded towards the fear and suffering around us. It tells us we are not meant to calmly accept the broken status of the world. We who make a habit of hope have a calling in the midst of the chaos. If we believe that our redemption is near, we will want to work on the side of that redemption whenever we have the chance. If we hope for the coming of the Prince of Peace, we should also be agents of God's peace, speaking comfort into the world even on the most frightening of days. If we hope that Christ will bring perfect justice and mercy with him when he comes, then we will work now to ensure that our priorities, relationships, and actions better reflect the justice and mercy for which we hope.

Advent lets us examine whether or not we are prepared to live in a redeemed, rescued, healed world—the world we believe will be created when Christ brings the promised redemption. Perhaps our proclamation of hope at the beginning of Advent feels rote and routine, even as the turmoil of the world seems unending. But that is why we need this season: to reawaken our belief in the promises of God and to help us recommit to bringing our lives into alignment with those promises. So, whatever signs you see as you look at the world outside your door today, believe the words of Jesus. Lift up your heads, for your redemption is near.

Savior, as we prepare for Your coming, strengthen our hope so that we may believe Your promises, and give us courage so that we may live lives that reflect that belief. As we are strengthened in belief, use our proclamations and our actions as vessels to spread Your redemption to a tumultuous world, so that all people may find hope in Your perfect justice and unfailing love. Amen.

Penny Biddy

December 2

Loving Reunions

1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

*“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all,
just as we abound in love for you.”* (1 Thessalonians 3:12)

Considering Paul’s report at its most basic, it is a story as old as time. A loved one or family member becomes tragically separated from his or her dear ones. They worry about his or her fate. Eventually, the one separated is found or returns and they live happily ever after.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians sharing his emotions about a variation on this theme. Paul has been separated from this newly formed church too soon, though he does not say why (2:17–18); he has been worried sick about them (3:1); and he has tried to get back to them but has been unable (2:18). However, he has just received news that the church is doing fine (3:6). In the language of a prayer, he writes to them about the joy he experiences because of his relationship with that church (v. 9). This joy moves him to pray to God that he might be able to be together with them soon (v. 10). His hope is that by being together, whatever might be lacking in their faith might be filled (v. 10).

The theological underpinnings of Paul’s thoughts are expressed even more strongly in verses 11–12. Paul makes clear that his ability to return to the Thessalonians is in God’s hands. He also prays that their love for one another might increase and that this love might be expressed to all—not just to their brothers and sisters in Christ. And he prays that God might strengthen their hearts so that they will be prepared for Christ’s return.

Advent is a season in which many of us experience reunions with loved ones from which we are separated for much of the rest of the year. We travel to share Christmas with parents, or with children, or with friends. We share the joy that comes from being united and we celebrate the birth of Jesus together. For Christians, it is this celebration of the sending of God’s Son into the world that enriches our togetherness.

Paul's words to the Thessalonians can stimulate us this season to make even more of the joy of our reunions. Taking our cue from Paul's relationship with this church, let's not only celebrate the love that we experience in our togetherness, but let's let that love overflow to a greater number of people. Let's reach out to those beyond our family or beyond our church in ways that will signal to those in our world God's love that is made manifest in sending God's Son into the world.

The Advent season is also a wonderful time to remind one another that we are always in preparation for that time when Jesus returns. Just as Paul prays that God might strengthen the hearts of the Thessalonians and hopes that he himself might be able to help fill whatever is lacking in their faith, we can pray these words for one another and be inspired by the season to help prepare one another for Jesus's return.

O God, as we celebrate the birth of Your Son into your world, may we celebrate our family and friendship reunions in ways that grow our love for one another so abundantly that others will be blessed and feel that love as well. In addition, we pray that You strengthen our faith and help us prepare for the return of Your Son.

Richard Wright

December 3

The Days Are Surely Coming

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. (Jeremiah33:14)

If any prophet was a one-hit-wonder, it would be Jeremiah. He spends his entire career, over three decades, preaching and re-preaching the same sermon. He has one song and he plays it more often than the local radio station plays “All I Want for Christmas is You” in December.

Jeremiah’s basic message is that the people of Judah have turned their backs on God, worshipping idols, glorifying themselves, and relying on other nations for their sense of security. As a result, God is sending the Babylonian Empire to attack Jerusalem, destroy the city and its temple, and carry its leaders into exile.

But the people of Judah never buy it. They’re God’s chosen people, Jerusalem houses God’s holy temple, and they’re ruled by the divinely-appointed royal line. What could go wrong?

It’s not until the Babylonian army is practically outside the city gates that the people of Judah start to believe there may be a real threat to their city, temple, and kingdom. By then it is far too late.

Confined to the court of the guard for criticizing the king, Jeremiah couldn’t ask for a better opportunity to remind everyone who had warned them of their doom and begin printing “I told you so” t-shirts.

Instead, Jeremiah changes his tune. Laying aside the drum of judgment that he’s beaten his entire career, he begins to play a melody of hope.

As Babylonian soldiers march across Judah’s fields, Jeremiah proclaims God’s promise to restore the land to beauty and prosperity. In streets that will soon be filled with Judah’s dead, Jeremiah proclaims God’s promise of healing and restoration. To people whose lives are being turned inside out because of the wickedness of their kings, Jeremiah proclaims

God's promise of a righteous ruler who will do what is just and right. In the midst of the darkest time the nation of Judah has seen, Jeremiah promises light.

Few of us need to be convinced that we continue to live in darkness. Struggling economies, political polarization, wars around the globe. Cancer, loneliness, an epidemic of anxiety. Need we go on?

There is a time for the church to carry Jeremiah's mantle as cultural critic, warning the world of the inevitable results of our failure to live the lives God wants for us. Sometimes we need to remind one another that much of the darkness is our own fault. But during Advent we have a different calling. In the darkest time of year, the church is called to tell the world about the light.

Advent invites us to see the world through a different lens. It's not rose colored; we don't dare ignore the reality of the world's problems. The flashy, glitzy bulbs of the holiday season try to make us forget the darkness by sheer force of artificial luminescence, but only the true light actually overcomes the darkness. It promises a day when things will be made right. Fixed. Healed. The days are surely coming.

We may think that society is falling apart, but the truth is that there is a Kingdom being built that will last forever. It may seem like everyone is at each other's throats, but even now there is a community being formed in love and mercy. Many leaders may seem corrupt at worst and incompetent at best, but there is a true king, Jesus Christ, who reigns over all creation and acts on our behalf at all times.

When the church is at its best we exist as a living, tangible witness to God's faithfulness. The world can see that God keeps promises because God is keeping them in and through us by redeeming our lives, restoring our hearts, healing our communities, and leading us into an eternal kind of life. The church, at its best, plays God's song of hope so loudly and so often that the world can't help but hum along.

Produce in us, O Lord, unwavering certainty that You are keeping Your promise to heal the world's brokenness and the brokenness within us. Even as we wait for Your salvation, may we proclaim its sureness with our very lives.

Joel Childers

December 4

Relying on God

Psalm 25:1-10

“Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.” (Psalm 25:8)

In this first week of Advent, we actively remember that we are waiting on the Lord—waiting for the return of the Messiah to make all things right. Psalm 25 reminds us that as we wait, we trust in the God who has shown himself to be steadfast and true and faithful. This is one of many prayers in the Psalms that have been prayed for thousands of years. Although our circumstances may be very different, our feelings remain virtually the same as David’s were so many years ago. The human condition doesn’t change.

When times are uncertain, we often worry or get angry and rely on ourselves. David was wise to turn to God during uncertainty and hardship. He had the self-awareness to recognize his own sin and the wisdom to recognize that he was in a kind of trouble that only God could save him from. He knew that God was faithful and merciful and good. And he was humble enough to recognize that he needed God’s help—not only to save him but to instruct him.

God remains steadfast and faithful. The God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt and led them through the desert despite their inconstancy is the same God who took care of David throughout his life. The same God promised a deliverer to the Israelites when they were in captivity, sent Jesus the Messiah, and strengthened the hearts of all in the early church. The same God who listens to us today when we cry out is the One we are waiting on to make all things right today.

My church spent this spring studying 1 and 2 Kings, and we recalled the great disobedience of the kings and the people during this time. They were given multiple chances to change, and, although there was intermittent repentance and change, they constantly turned back to other gods. Eventually, the people were taken away by their enemies into exile. And yet, they clung to hope. Although they had done nothing to deserve it, they believed that one day God would save them. Can you hear them praying Psalm 25:1-10?

“In you, Lord my God,
I put my trust.
I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.”

Today we continue to pray these kinds of prayers! “Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me!” “Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.” “Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.” What have we done to deserve this kind of love and attention? What have we done to deserve this kind of mercy? We have done nothing. And, yet we rely on the God who is steadfast and full of grace.

One of the mysteries of the Christian faith is recognizing that for us to really follow God, we need God’s help. I know that without God’s help, I am hopeless. I am inclined to follow my own desires and my own wisdom. I do what I want to do without thinking about others. Sometimes I am not even sure what the right thing to do is. This psalm reminds us that we turn to God not only for salvation but also for instruction.

The God in this psalm is the One to whom the Israelites turned when all other hope was lost, and the God we continue to turn to today. Our hope is based not on who we are but it is based completely on who God is. God will continue to guide us as we wait on Him, teaching us with kindness and patience and keeping no record of our wrongs.

Lord, thank You for the Psalms and the way they continue to help us pray today. Thank You for giving us hope. Thank You for Your steadfast love and forgiveness. We know that we have done nothing to deserve it! Please help us rely on the hope we have in You. Give us the humility to recognize that the same forgiveness You offer to us, You offer to all.

Kaley Ihfe

December 5

Home

Psalm 90

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. . . . from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” (Psalm 90:1–2)

Home. A place bursting with potential for comfort and joy, but also with great ability to inflict longing and heartbreak. It’s the place we look to for love and safety and the place where, when those are absent, we feel it most keenly. The homes of our childhoods shape what we think, how we feel, and how we react to stress. Homes are the places where we take off our shoes, sit in our comfiest chair, and exhale. They can hold our favorite foods, our most visceral memories, and most complicated relationships. Homes are one of the most basic needs of humans and yet sometimes people don’t have them. The United Nations estimates that more than 117 million people in the world were forcibly displaced from their homes in 2023, exposing them to danger and deprivation of all kinds.

In Advent, we wait for the season in which we celebrate Jesus coming to live with people, but long before Jesus made his dwelling place among us, the author of Psalm 90 wrote, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” From a people with such heartache about home in their history—from times of enslavement in someone else’s home to homelessness in the desert to exile—this is quite a statement of faith. God, you have existed longer than the earth itself and you are our home, the psalmist proclaims. And yet, Psalm 90 is not a psalm of praise and rejoicing. It’s a psalm asking God to change, to turn and have compassion. People are suffering and the psalmist feels it can only be a result of God’s anger. Anger from one’s home. How terrifying. Perhaps you have felt that. Or perhaps you have felt the only way to make sense of suffering, your own or that of others, is to wonder if God is angry.

This psalm does not offer resolution or reassurance, as we might hope it would. We would like to hear God’s perspective and a word of comfort, but this text only gives us the viewpoint of the human looking up to God. We get no God’s-eye view here. It does offer honesty,

however. The psalmist speaks his fears and frustrations openly to God, talking about human frailty and the fleeting nature of human life. Our lives come and go as quickly as grass: flourishing in the morning and withering by evening. God, if you wait too long to help, our lives will have come and gone. God, you are everlasting, able simply to sweep away the years, but we humans only live a few short decades and it would be nice to have at least as many good years as bad ones. God, you bear responsibility for the situation we are in: “you turn us back to dust.” The psalmist brings all this fear and accusation to God and isn’t that just what a home should be: a place to speak aloud your fear and hurt?

After putting these fears before God, the psalmist, unsurprisingly, makes some requests of God. Some are what you might expect: a request for God’s characteristic compassion, steadfast love, and favor. Then this line: “Let your work be manifest to your servants.” Show us what you are doing, God. Let us see a bit of the big picture. If our situation is not going to change, at least let us see how we fit into Your story. If you won’t change our circumstances, please change our perspective.

God our dwelling place,

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we cannot understand Your perspective. Sometimes we look out at the remainder of our lives and fear You will not act before time runs out. Sometimes we feel very afraid and wonder why You don’t help us. Are You angry with us? Have You forgotten about us? You have promised us that You are abounding in steadfast love, so we ask for Your compassion. We ask You to change these circumstances that cause suffering. But if You will not change our situations, give us a glimpse of Your work. Show us what You are doing in the world and give us a job to do. God, You are our home; we have nowhere else to go. Amen

Tera Harmon

December 6

You Too Could See It!

Luke 11:29–32

“This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” (Luke 11:29)

Everyone can name a moment of regret, of the one that got away, the good deal that seems obvious in the rearview mirror. There are any number of times when we could look back and see the signs in reverse, and it seems so obvious! In today’s Scripture, however, no such excuse exists. For through Jonah and the Queen of Sheba, a clear warning is given in no uncertain terms, a warning we ignore to our peril. In both cases here, the sign of something great is clear and unmistakable, even if following after it is difficult.

Jonah’s career as a prophet is one which calls for us to believe the unbelievable: a man of Israel has come all the way to Nineveh, tasked with delivering the word of the Lord to his enemy, the Assyrians. The figure of an Israelite in Assyria, the preaching of judgment, the presence of a stranger in the capital: all of these come together as a spectacle, a clear warning not to be missed. The Queen of Ethiopia, in 1 Kings 10, is a similar spectacle. She undertakes a long journey to learn from Solomon, traveling thousands of miles not to conquer Jerusalem but to listen to Solomon’s wisdom. Like Jonah, she is an outsider, though one with great wealth: her appearance amidst the house of Israel presents a sign of something strange and important happening.

The question posed by today’s passage is, could something even greater than these spectacles take place, and yet be ignored? Throughout Jesus’s ministry, miracles and wonders have taken place, and yet, unbelief persists. One could understand missing the sign of a baby in a manger, for there was nothing, Isaiah tells us, which might draw us to him, nothing in his appearance which we might find attractive (Isa 53:1). But feeding the hungry? Healing the sick? Raising the dead? These seem too spectacular to miss.

And yet, unbelief persists. The Gospels go some way to help us to identify *who* misses seeing the new Jonah among them—the Pharisees, the powerful, the wealthy—but yet, among these groups there are those who see the signs anyway. For every crowd of Pharisees, there is a Nicodemus, and for every powerful ruler, there is a Roman centurion who sees the sign before them unmistakably. The deeper question is not *who* sees the sign of God coming into the world, but *why we miss it*. Here too, many reasons are given. The rich young ruler loved his wealth too much. The Pharisees are afraid of the people, and love their position. The powerful do not consider that anything of value could come from Nazareth.

In each of these cases, we are presented with a warning: *You too could miss it*. But for every Pharisee, a Nicodemus answers with a promise: *You too could see it!*

As we approach Advent, it is easy for us to assume that we will see things for what they are, that we will not be blinded by the light and will join the shepherds in welcoming God into the world. It is easy for us because we see the Christmas story in hindsight. But every day, God invites us to join in the work of the Holy Spirit, to listen to the call of God, to live bravely in discipleship to Christ, inviting us with signs and wonders. And many times, we see and yet do not respond.

In Advent, we are invited not to congratulate ourselves for having recognized Jesus in the manger, but to ask ourselves why it is that we ignore the sign of Jonah when he appears among us on a regular basis. In Advent, we are given a warning: *You too could miss it!* But we are also presented with a promise in the figure of the shepherds, of the wise men: *You too could see it!*

O God, give us eyes to see, and give us the strength to see and to believe. Open our hearts that we might have courage to follow where Your sign leads us, and to live into the world You have created and redeemed. Give us feet that are quick to go where You lead, and faith that believes that we too might see Your glory.

Myles Werntz

December 7

A Purging Fire

Malachi 4:1-6

*“All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble,
and the day that is coming will set them on fire” (Malachi 4:1)*

We don't tend to like these kinds of passages. I say “we” to make myself feel better: I don't really tend to like these passages. They make me uncomfortable. I don't like hearing words like “the people will be set on fire” or “I will strike the land with total destruction” coming from God's mouth. I believe in a God of love, and try as I might, it is hard to imagine those words spoken in a loving manner. This paradox of a loving and a destructive God too often bothers those who would have us think that we are wasting our time with such nonsense. We can't have it both ways, they say. And we respond bravely that God's love and God's wrath are one and the same. My mind is satisfied with this answer, and yet my heart remains troubled.

This passage more than anything shows us what a hopeless world it would be were it not for the hope of Jesus. When I look around me I see a world on fire, a world that simply can't help tearing itself apart despite all of its efforts to keep it together. It is a fractured world tenuously held together with scotch tape. Fires only burn when there is a lot of deadwood and tinder. That's what this passage seems to imply: that the world is filled with dry, dead branches that don't produce any fruit. And the world keeps feeding this raging fire.

I often speak of the wicked, the evildoer, the arrogant, as if I actually weren't one of them. The evildoer is a concept abstract enough that I can read it and quickly think about a long-forgotten group of Israel or Israel's oppressors who are all “other than me.” The wicked were the people practicing injustice and taking advantage of others and not fully loving God as they ought and being selfish and . . . oh. The evildoer still exists today, and they are anything but abstract. The fires of evildoers are fires of their own making; without the

extinguishing love of Jesus, they'd burn to stubble in their own flames. That is truly one of the scariest thoughts in the Bible, that God often gives people what they want.

And yet there is another way of speaking about fire that doesn't necessarily involve violence and destruction. Judgment, yes, but not destruction. This passage recalls the law with Moses and the prophets with Elijah—something is coming to fulfill them both. It clearly envisions a prophet like Elijah coming to prepare the way for something that will be great and dreadful. When John the Baptist comes preparing the way for Jesus, he speaks of a great winnowing fork and a purging fire for the fruitless. It is a fire of judgment and of baptism. Surely the day is coming when the flames of heaven burn like a furnace, alighting the hearts of the evildoer and arrogant, purging their wicked roots and branches of disease and rot. But a better root will remain, the root of Jesse, the True Vine.

In the healing rays of God's fire, we will frolic. I love that word, frolic. It implies a kind of uninhibited freedom of movement, where I can skip and dance without any burden or shackle holding me down. And when the newly redeemed frolic, they frolic on the wickedness that has been defeated, not vindictively or with malice, but with joy and thanksgiving, for they are frolicking on their old self, on a world healed by the loving fire of God. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us?" the disciples on the road to Emmaus ask. Yes, they were. May ours too.

O Father, whose holy fire burns without destroying, shields us from our enemies, consumes our offerings, refines our impurities, warms our hearts, and empowers us with Your Spirit, may we not be afraid of Your righteous judgment. May we gladly embrace what You send to us, and with Your servant John may we too boldly proclaim the coming kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May our hearts turn to each other in love. Amen.

Luke Roberts

December 8

A Voice in the Wilderness

Luke 3:1–6

“And he went into all the region of the Jordan preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. . . .” (Luke 3:3)

Every year, my family listens to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. It’s part of our family ritual, as are some of his more radical speeches. King recalled the ancient words of the Israelite prophet in Isaiah 40, “every valley will be exalted, every mountain and hill made low,” bringing them forward to a new era as a way of imagining a world without racially-based abuses. The image of a straight highway leading to a renewed land has fed people’s imaginations for over 2500 years.

It certainly fed Luke’s imagination and shaped early Christians’ memories of John the Baptist. Luke marks the beginnings of Jesus’s ministry by talking about John’s, just as he mentioned the miraculous births of these two cousins six months apart. Luke 3:1–6 takes us to Jesus’s adulthood by situating his predecessor’s life in time and space.

The verses in this short reading fall into three parts. The first part is a date formula (verses 1–2), which places John in the year AD 29 within a Roman Empire dominated by grand rulers. The dating formula sounds like the beginnings of Old Testament prophetic books, which usually connect a prophet’s work with the reigns of specific kings.

Luke’s dating formula does more, however, because it reveals a contrast between the mighty rulers and the lowly prophet who lives in the desert like Elijah and critiques abuses of power. John stands in a long line of prophets, honoring them by using their words in new ways. Jesus calls him the greatest in that line (Luke 7:26–28).

The list of important names in verses 1–2a contrasts with the description of John’s ministry in verses 2b–3, the second part of the reading. John lives on society’s margins, contrasting God’s coming rule with the mixture of peace and violence that characterized Roman domination.

But the punchline of the reading comes in its third section, the quotation of Isaiah 40. Maybe John saw a political angle in the ancient announcement of Judah's return from Babylonian Exile, with liberation from Babylon foreshadowing liberation from Rome. At least, he reminded his hearers that empires fade, but God and the human spirit remain. His hearers need to turn from their sins so they can hear the good news.

The quotation from Isaiah turns John into a prophet of hope, not doom. The early Christians remembered him as one who criticized Herod Archelaus for his moral turpitude, just as the ancient prophets had excoriated the powerful among their hearers. Yet Luke also portrays John offering hope, as well as criticism. "Prepare the way of the LORD" implies that God intends to show up for the people. John came to bear witness to the light.

There is an interesting paradox here: a text about fundamental innovation in Isaiah 40 has become a traditional text that nevertheless points to new innovation. The old and the new intertwine. This is so because it's not just any sort of innovation that Isaiah, John, or Luke imagines, but a particular sort in which the great powers of the world give way to the greater power of God. God's mercy and grace clarify everything, including our true position in life as sinners in desperate need of redemption. John adopted and expanded the old ritual of washing to point those he baptized, including Jesus himself, to God's commitment to washing away sins.

The last line of the quotation reveals something important, too. "All flesh will see the LORD's salvation." John's work in a small corner of Palestine, itself a small corner of the great Roman Empire, features as part of a much larger project of divine revelation of healing, reconciliation, moral renewal, and all the other fruits of God's saving work in Christ. We are among those who see, in part because we can read about John and Jesus and the ways in which God worked through them among people more like us.

I have always admired John the Baptist. His courage, moral clarity, and hopefulness deserve imitation. Like us, he sought God's redemption. He points us to the one we most need to follow, Jesus Christ. He asks us what we are doing to repent and to hope for the coming of Jesus. How are we—how am I—building the road to peace and justice on which God will walk? How will we receive the God who travels that road?

O God, help us to cry out in every wilderness of life so that we may prepare a space for Your presence. Help us not to be intimidated or seduced by human power as we pave the way for You, our Father, who truly holds all things together. Amen.

Samjung Kang-Hamilton

December 9

The Day of Christ

Philippians 1:3–11

“. . . the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6)

My grandfather prominently displayed engraved plaques of three hymns on the wall of his law office, all looking ahead to a “when”: “When We All Get to Heaven,” “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” and, his all-time favorite, “When the Saints Go Marching In.” He loved to recount the time a client studied the hymns and drily commented, “Well, I guess you know where you’re going when you die.” What most strikes me about these hymns is their location: not in a chapel or a private corner at home but a place of business, a law office no less. When clients sought Grandpa’s legal assistance, it was because catastrophe was imminent or had already struck. It was hard to see past today. Though he never told me so, I have always thought that Grandpa understood his choice to hang these at work instead of at home as a quiet witness to a hope that lies beyond the desperation of the present moment. It must also have reminded him of his participation in a greater story even as he conducted his daily business.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul also aims to bridge the gap between the present day and the day of Christ Jesus. As is his usual practice, Paul begins Philippians with a prayer that anticipates the major themes of the letter: joy in suffering, partnership in the gospel, deep affection for his addressees, discernment of what is best. Here Paul is attentive to his relationship with the Philippians over time: they have been his partners in the gospel “from the first day until now.”

Twice in this short passage Paul anticipates a “when”: the day of Christ Jesus, when God’s good work in the Philippians will be brought to maturity (v. 6), resulting in purity, blamelessness, and the fruit of righteousness (vv. 10–11). All this comes through Christ to the praise and glory of God (v. 11). Paul’s concern for the day of Christ is what makes this

passage good Advent reading: not only do we look forward to celebrating the birth of Christ in this season, we also orient our whole selves to his glorious second coming, our hearts both contrite and brimming with joy.

Some popular hymns might be criticized for their otherworldly sentimentality, but Paul's vision of the day of Christ is no sappy, pie-in-the-sky eschatology. In chapter 2, Paul will invite his friends to pull back the curtain on reality and visualize the first day to the last all at once. They are to picture Christ Jesus, willingly emptying himself of his divine prerogative to take the nature of a servant—a human nature—and humbling himself to the point of death. Jesus's self-gift reshapes the cosmos: God exalts him to the highest place and gives him the name above all names, "that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10–11). The passage is so lyrical that some have taken it to be a hymn. When Paul refers to the day of Christ in his opening prayer, this is what he means; while it will reach its fulfilment in the future, this renewal of the universe begins with the incarnation of the Son of God and continues into the present.

In this season of anticipation, how do we best attend to the coming of the day of Christ? There are probably as many concrete strategies as there are disciples. Paul's prayer for the Philippians is that their "love should overflow more and more in knowledge and full insight" so that they will be able to "determine what really matters" (vv. 9–10). Love here is not a fleeting feeling, but a way of knowing. True wisdom comes not just from clear thinking but from the overflowing of love, the fruit of God's initiative and our cooperation. This loving knowledge (or knowing love) results in a proper understanding of what is most important—just the kind of perspective that prepares us for the day of Christ in the midst of life's joys or sorrows, everyday frustrations or extraordinary events.

God our Father, by sending Your Son and giving us the Holy Spirit, You have poured out Your love on us so that we may know You, and as our knowledge of You deepens, our love for You and our neighbor abounds even more. Give us the grace to cooperate with You as You complete Your good work in us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Kelli Gibson

December 10

Songs of Salvation, Refrains of Joy

Luke 1:68–79

“Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78–79)

For nine months, Zechariah hasn't said a word. Ever since his encounter with the angel Gabriel in the temple, Zechariah has remained absolutely speechless. He has watched in silence as his wife Elizabeth's very late-in-life pregnancy became unmistakable and their community shared in their utter astonishment. In the intervening months, he's probably replayed that fateful scene in the temple, remembering Gabriel's words about this unexpected baby: that he would go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah, and that he would turn the hearts of Israel to God (Luke 1:16–17). We might imagine that Zechariah has especially replayed the moment when, in response to his unwise rejoinder to the angel's announcement of blessing—“How can I know this will happen?”—Gabriel tells him, “[B]ecause you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak until the day these things occur” (Luke 1:18–20). Zechariah hasn't said a word since.

At least not until this very moment. As soon as Zechariah confirmed that the baby's name should be John, his tongue was loosened and like Mary before him, Zechariah raised his voice in a prophetic song that praises God as the faithful redeemer. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them!” he cries in the opening words. God's action fills nearly every line that follows. God has raised up a Savior from the house of David, just as the prophets said. God has shown the mercy that he promised, keeping his oath to Abraham. And God's saving power, Zechariah proclaims, makes it possible to live as people who, “having been rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all of our days.”

Like Zechariah before us, we sometimes wonder how God's promises can possibly play out against what looks like impossible odds, and like Zechariah, we know something of what it feels like to be tongue-tied. In the face of deep disappointments, amid struggle and suffering, in the bone-deep weariness that can accompany a long wait for deliverance, it's not hard to identify with Zechariah's initial resistance to a message of hope. In the roiling tensions of our times and a world plagued as it has ever been by hunger and greed, sorrow and strife, the strangling weight of the world's worries can choke our amens and alleluias.

The season of Advent invites us to find, like Zechariah, our tongues newly loosened to proclaim praise. The Advent and Christmas seasons are marked by distinctive and beloved songs, ones we've sung since childhood: "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices. For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." Zechariah's song invites us to turn our faces to the light of the "dawn from on high" as it breaks over our horizons so that we, those who "sit in darkness and in the shadow of death," can see the path of peace that God has laid for us in the Way of Jesus Christ. His song of praise, heard again in this season of singing, also offers us a model for practicing hope during Advent. What might it look like for our families and communities to do what Zechariah does here—to proclaim together in community what God has done among God's people in the past, to name the signs of God's presence among us now, and to anticipate God's deliverance in the future?

This advent, let us, like Zechariah, raise our voices together, confidently proclaiming Jesus, the promised Savior, whose first coming we remember and whose second coming we anticipate with joy. May we hear through the discordant notes of a broken world and amid the refrains of our everyday responsibilities and relationships the deeper chords of God's deliverance and the richer melodies of God's mercy.

Faithful God, raise our weary eyes to see the light of our new dawn breaking upon us. By Your Holy Spirit, loosen our tongues to faithfully proclaim in word and song Your saving power with renewed hope and joy. Point our feet in the direction of Your peaceful way, that we might walk in the good news of Your peaceful kingdom. In the name of Christ our Savior, Amen.

Amanda Jo Pittman

December 11

Toward a Cleaner Future

Malachi 3:1–4

“I am sending my messenger, who will prepare the path before me. . . .” (Malachi 3:1)

Today’s reading is part of a larger paragraph, Malachi 2:17–3:5, which responds to the spiritual indifference and cynicism of a people who wonder “where the God of justice is” (Mal 2:17). Their smug questions seem legitimate at first, but really mask a false certainty. They think they have God all figured out, and they have concluded that God remains too distant and unfocused to bring about the better world the ancient prophets and priests have promised. Their self-involved, counterfeit religion and life have “tired” God.

This admittedly obscure text promises a coming messenger (or more than one) who can carry out the justice some of the more thoughtful people seek. Malachi remains unspecific about how any of that will happen, and that ambiguity has stimulated a lot of speculation and creative imagination among readers, both ancient and modern. Long ago, for example, the writers of the Synoptic Gospels connected the promise of the messenger to the coming of John the Baptist as one who called Israel to repentance (Matt 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). Perhaps the speculation about the text’s meaning began almost as soon as the ink was drying on the original copy of the book. It’s hard to say.

What may be clearer is the prophet’s promise that God will purify the people. Malachi uses two metaphors for the process that God will soon initiate: laundering fabric and smelting metals. Both processes imply an ability to distinguish the authentic and valuable from the inauthentic and worthless. We know how clean clothes look, smell, and feel, and we prefer them to the dirty kind. We also marvel at the energy and technical skill required to melt metals and separate the pure iron, gold, silver, or copper from the dross so that the expert smiths may craft whatever useful or beautiful object they desire.

Purification has power.

So, too, in life. If we are to grow as human beings, we must eliminate from our lives behaviors and attitudes that feel familiar, even comfortable, but in fact defeat the possibility of spiritual or moral growth. The self-help gurus make a legitimate point. But it is not Malachi's point. The prophetic words do not call upon Israel to purify itself. They promise that God will do so.

In his famous oratorio *Messiah*, Handel places these verses from Malachi near the beginning, before he tells the story of the coming Christ. He takes his cue for the location from the Gospels' references to John the Baptist. As the choir repeats, "and he shall purify the sons of Levi," we get a sense of joyful expectation tinged with remorse at our own sins. That mix of emotion lies at the heart of Advent and, in fact, the whole Christian story. In Malachi, the promise of purification contains an undertone of threat as God must do what the humans have given up trying to do. But within the foreboding of doom nestles a promise. Purification readies the people to receive the gift of God's presence. Without the refining trials, no glorious future will arrive.

This passage from Malachi is challenging because of its obscurity, no doubt. It is also challenging because of its clarity.

The book of Malachi, for all its obscure language at points, makes two things clear. Israel's God wants sincere religion from the people who share with one another a common heritage of salvation. First, in view of what God does for us, and offers all human beings, we can live with honor, joy, reverence, and a love of fairness. And second, what we can and should do does not equal what we do. The gap between expectation and reality always exists and always cries out for attention.

Advent always reminds us of our need to amend our lives, to repent, and so to prepare for something better. There can be no better world without reform, correction, and change. Peace cannot occur without justice or justice without peace. Moreover, the reform involves individuals and communities, since all of us live together and influence each other. Advent reminds us that the just and merciful God who met us at Bethlehem meets us still and calls us to meet each other on the same terms of mercy we have met our Savior.

O God, as You come into the temple that is Your expectant church in Your gorgeous world, align our desires with Your providential care, our deeds with Your redemptive work, our values with Your eternal goodness, and our commitments with Your love. Help us not to weary of Your presence, and do not tire of ours. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton

December 12

Echoes of Our Reality

Romans 8:22–25

“For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope.

For who hopes for what he sees?” (Romans 8:24)

Advent is a sacred season that beautifully balances the tension between suffering and hope, sustained by the promise of Christ’s return. I’m reminded of a time when my community, engulfed in uncertainty and fear, clung to this hope with unwavering faith. In our prayers, the words of Romans 8:22–25 echoed deeply, assuring us that our present sufferings are but a prelude to the glory that will be revealed. During this holy time, many find themselves again in that sacred tension, waiting for God’s promises to be fulfilled. For numerous Latin American communities, this is a liturgical observance and a lived experience intertwined with the daily realities of struggle and hope. This resonance now extends to many communities across the United States, inspiring us with their resilience and unwavering faith.

Paul’s message in Romans captures this profound tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of our salvation—a reality that speaks powerfully to those who dwell in the liminal space of the in-between. He describes creation groaning as in the pains of childbirth. This image vividly reflects a world both expectant and distressed, yearning for the fulfillment of God’s promises and the revelation of His children in their full glory.

This is a season of profound anticipation when we await the celebration of Christ’s birth and the ultimate fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth. This waiting becomes especially poignant in Latin America, where communities often confront overwhelming social, economic, and political challenges. Yet, in this very waiting, the hope of Advent shines most brightly, reminding us that even in the darkest times, the light of Christ is on its way.

This tension is not unfamiliar; it echoes the experience of those who awaited the Messiah in the Old Testament, longing for deliverance. Just as Christ’s promised return sustains us

today, so did the promise of His first coming to nurture those who came before us. In celebrating Jesus's birth, we acknowledge the dawn of salvation, the beginning of a new era for the church. Yet, we also recognize the world's ongoing suffering and brokenness, the reality that we still live in a world where God's kingdom, though initiated, is not yet fully realized. We inhabit this "in-between" time, a space where the seeds of God's kingdom have been sown, but the entire harvest is still to come.

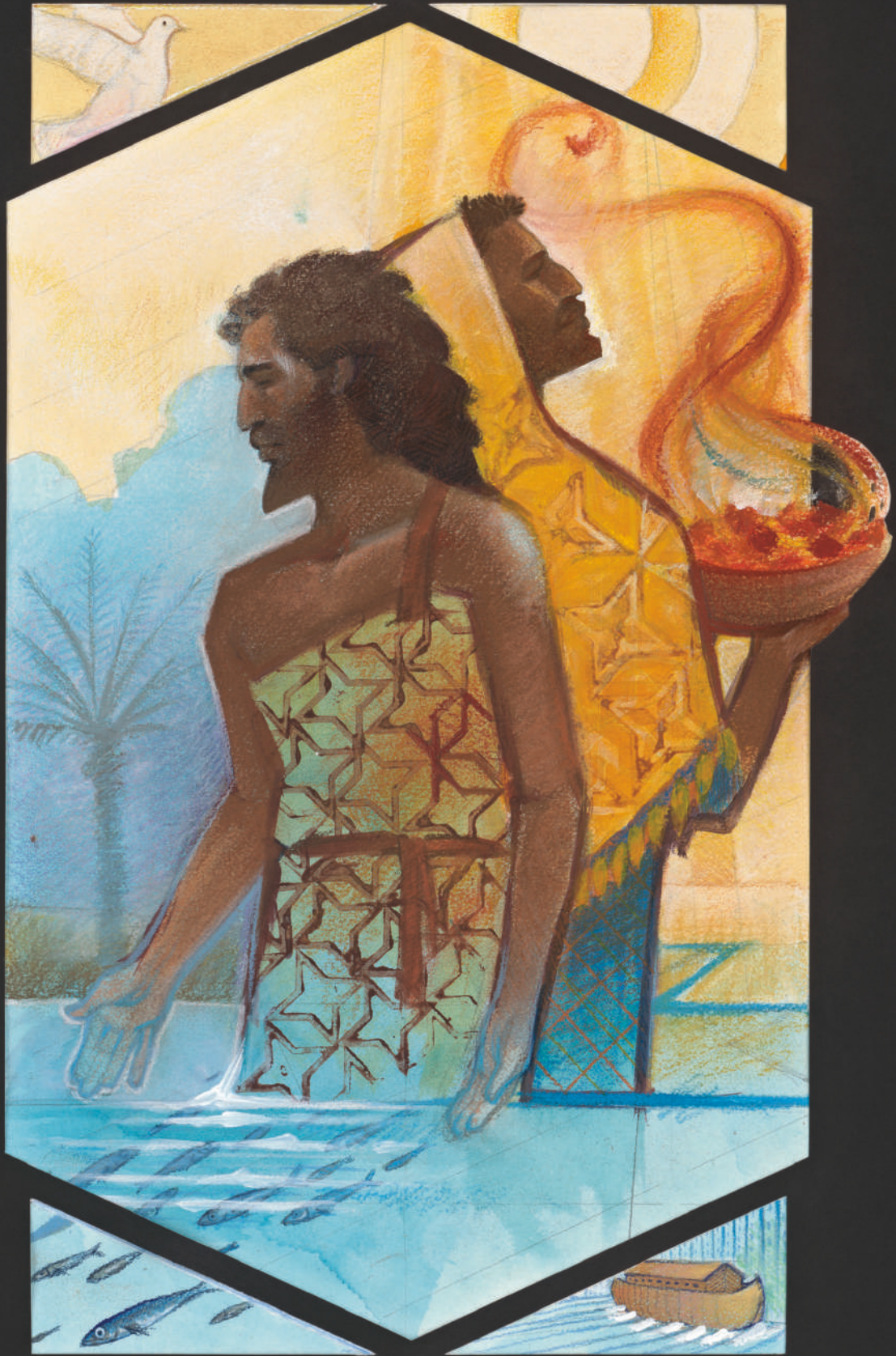
This concept of hopeful waiting resonates deeply in regions where harsh realities test faith. In these communities, faith is far more than an abstract concept; it is a living, breathing force that sustains people through the harshest adversities. The waiting reflects a deep longing for justice, peace, and the fullness of God's Kingdom. This longing resonates profoundly in places like Venezuela, where economic and political crises have driven many to despair. In El Salvador, a nation marked by violence, the cry for peace is ongoing, while Mexico continues to wrestle with deep-rooted corruption. For those unfamiliar with these regions, it's essential to understand that these challenges are the daily reality for millions, making the hope of Advent not just relevant but vital.

The groans of these communities are not merely cries of pain but also expectation. The prophet Isaiah's proclamation, "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former shall not be remembered" (Isaiah 65:17), is a powerful reminder that hope is central to our faith. This hope is not mere wishful thinking but a confident expectation grounded in God's unwavering promises. We are anchored in the certainty that just as Christ came once in humility, He will come again in glory to complete His work. Paul's metaphor of childbirth in Romans beautifully captures this truth: the suffering we experience now is purposeful, leading to the glory that will one day be revealed in us. This hope sustains us through life's trials, transforming our present sufferings into the very path toward glory.

As we walk through Advent, let us cling to this hope, allowing it to shape our lives and witness. Each of us plays a crucial role in this community of faith. In a world that groans under the weight of brokenness, may we reflect the light and love of Christ, guiding others toward the hope that burns brightly within us. Let our lives be a testament to the power of Advent's promise—that no matter how dark the night, the dawn is inevitable, and with it comes the fullness of God's Kingdom, a reassuring and optimistic truth.

Gracious God, in this season of Advent, we lift up those who groan so that Your hope sustains them as they labor for justice, peace, and a new day. Help us to live as people of hope, reflecting Your light in a world that yearns for redemption. Amen.

Omar Palafox



December 13

God is Showing Up

Isaiah 40:1-11

“Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear: say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9)

Comfort. I like the word. Comfort conveys being well-situated or having good food that evokes home. To comfort someone is to assure another person with the mysterious and wonderful power of presence. Offering comfort in difficult times is to say “you are not alone.” Comfort in stressful times suggests, “we will do this together.”

And our text opens with just such a word. The ancient prophet utters the word “comfort” to a people who were long in need of such a word. Yet this tender and gracious word is not merely a pair of syllables ushered into the wind. The prophet speaks more words. And the words he speaks are words that create the reality of God’s comfort. A voice speaks and things begin to happen. Winding, crooked roads straighten up. Roller coaster journeys level out. The rough and ragged pathways give way to smooth sidewalks. Geography is altered because God is showing up!

Since Isaiah began with the word “comfort,” it is worth asking whether the theme of our text missed a turn on all the roads, sidewalks, and pathways that shifted and changed. God showing up could easily be construed as trouble—not comfort. I suspect there is a little bit of Adam and Eve in all of us. When God came looking for our first parents, they “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees” (Genesis 3:8). God asks, “where are you?” The answer has a familiar ring: “I was afraid” (Genesis 3:10). Finding ourselves in the presence of God does have the capacity to create fear and send us running into craggy mountains, box canyons, and other isolated, crooked places of the earth to hide.

Yet, lingering with the text, the tempting assumption that God’s arrival is bad news is exactly what the prophet expects. And the prophet wants to drill down deep into our misplaced fears. A voice in verse 6 dictates action—Make the announcement! And (perhaps)

the prophet, speaking in the first person, laments: ““What shall I cry?” “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass” (Isaiah 40:6b-7). This declaration names the very dilemma. How can human beings be in the presence of God? People are short-sighted, short-tempered, and short-lived. Even at their best, humans do not have the staying power of a summer flower or of grass in a Texas pasture.

Now what I am about to point out is not altogether obvious in the text. However, it makes the best sense of the text. Once the prophet names the truth about human frailty in the presence of God, it seems that the heavenly voice that called for action picks up the narrative. So in verse 8, we read: “[Yes!] grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” This voice affirms the truth about humanity while realigning the assumption about God’s arrival. Humans are frail, yet God is a God who faithfully arrives and embraces humankind. There is no need to hide from God’s presence.

So what sounds like bad news—God’s arrival—is good news. And the voice invites us to take up action—again! “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9–10). Speak gospel—good tidings—God is arriving. Shout it out and do not fear.

The prophet seems bent on making the point that God’s arrival is a good thing. The text closes by using two images for God. God comes as a strong warrior (Isaiah 40:10) and a shepherd (Isaiah 40:11). God as warrior is the protector and a shield from harm; God as shepherd is the caregiver and nurturer. These two images concretize the power and wonder of a God who is arriving, always arriving. That seems comforting indeed!

O God of all comfort, we thank You for persistently announcing that You enter into human life and experience. We ask that You give us the courage to push back our fear, to move toward Your arrival and not hide. May we receive the gospel that You are showing up. And may we join with the prophets of old and our sisters and brothers of every generation to declare the good news of Your arriving. In the name of God-with-us, Emmanuel, we pray, Amen.

Carson E. Reed

December 14

“How Do I Know?”

Luke 7:18–30

*“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight;
the lame walk; those with a skin disease are cleansed; the deaf hear;
the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them.” (Luke 7:22)*

What does Jesus’s coming into the world have to do with Saturday? In this collection of meditations, Luke 7:18–30 is assigned to December 14, 2024, which falls on a Saturday. Monday mornings recycle our old routines every week. Jobs, dishes, laundry, school, and more laundry. Mundane lives are defined by Mondays. But Saturdays, that is a different story. Saturday is a day when we have breakfast in bed, a stroll in the park with our families, a long bike ride in the country, and maybe some yard work to beautify our surroundings. Saturdays require our most comfortable shoes and our deepest breaths of fresh air. And if Saturdays are used wisely, they prepare us for the coming of Sunday.

Whether it be Monday, Saturday, or Sunday, I wonder if Jesus’s coming makes any difference? Whether I am strolling in the park or worshipping in a pew, I wonder if life would be different if Jesus had not come? Does John ask a similar question? “John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?’” John was experiencing a glorious ministry. A ministry that Jesus praises. Yet, even John wondered, “How do I know?”

Luke has a consistent answer that fosters continuity between expectations and reality. For example, when Jesus inaugurated his ministry at Nazareth, he went into the synagogue, as was his custom, and read from the scroll Isaiah 61.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Isaiah 61:1–2 has a continuity throughout past, present, and future in the coming of Jesus. The story that has been unfolding about God is coming to completion. “Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’” What is Jesus’s agenda? Read Isaiah 61. Jesus is saying, “I’m God’s Messiah.”

And to John’s question in Luke 7 Jesus’s response is not a simple yes or no. Jesus points to his actions of healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, and preaching good news to the poor. This response aligns with Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah’s works. He tells John’s disciples in essence, “Go read Isaiah 61. I’m God’s Messiah.”

Similarly, in Luke 14:12–14, “Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Jesus tells the host, “Go read Isaiah 61. I’m God’s Messiah.”

The nature of God’s kingdom is one of healing, restoration, and good news for the marginalized, disenfranchised, and excluded. God’s kingdom is for the poor, the immigrant, and the socially unwanted ones. God’s kingdom is a DEI project. Jesus’s role is both to fulfill past promises and to initiate a new era in God’s relationship with humanity.

Whether it is the mundane of Monday, the recreation of Saturday, or the renewal of Sunday, a key way to know that Jesus is present is to listen to his answer, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; those with a skin disease are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Jesus has come. If God’s epiphany makes a difference, go and do likewise. Then when others ask, “Is Jesus for real?” You can say, “Go read Isaiah 61, then come and see.”

You who are our God, who sent Your Son to us, give us eyes to see how You are present in the world. Give us the courage to participate in Your kingdom by loving one another, loving our neighbors, and loving our enemies. Grant us compassion to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and lift the fallen. May all those who long to see Your coming, see You in us, even on Saturdays. Amen.

Tim Sensing

December 15

The Good News of God's Judgment

Luke 3:7-18

"So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people." (Luke 3:18)

Luke's summary of John's preaching in verse 18 always catches me by surprise. After a call to repentance that began with the description of his audience as "vipers" (3:7) and ended with the threat of burning as chaff in the heat of Christ's "unquenchable fire" (3:17), one could be forgiven for failing to understand how such a sermon is "good news."

Perhaps that's because the announcement of impending doom is not a message we typically associate with positivity. From our contemporary perspective, the ideas of God's judgment and the *goodness* of God's kingdom are so at odds as to render the whole incomprehensible.

Yet the announcement of God's judgment is undeniably central to the preaching of Jesus (see, for example, Matt. 25). Which leaves us with a quandary: if divine judgment is a necessary piece of the gospel as attested in Scripture, then how are we to hear that gospel as the announcement of good news?

If our desire is to submit to the Scriptures as authoritative, then perhaps the first step towards an answer would be to examine the response of this announcement's original hearers. Interestingly, in contrast to our internal resistance to even the mention of God's judgment, Luke's description of the original hearers' response in verses 10-13 reveals not even a hint of protest. Instead, we hear only one question: "What then shall we do?"

John answers this question with very practical prescriptions: if you have extra, share that extra with those in need. If you're in a position of power, don't use that power to exploit. If you already have enough, be content with what you have. In short: "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (3:8).

What's astounding is that after a verbal dressing down and a call to radical change, the crowd is so convicted that they begin to question in their hearts whether John himself might be the Christ. But John, as always, points to Jesus, saying, "[No]. He who is mightier than I

is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing work is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Why is this good news?

What we lack today is an adequate astonishment at the gift of repentance. This isn't to say that we no longer recognize sin. Even in an increasingly pagan culture, we see sin and its effects everywhere. In school shootings. In political turmoil. In sexual violence. In oppressive poverty. In oppressive policy. In racism. In broken families. In orphaned children. In each of our own relationships. Sin and its effects remain apparent everywhere. What we lack at present is any effective means to move towards restoration. We're acquainted with judgment and we know how to cast it, but the reason we struggle to see “good news” in judgment is because we see nothing beyond it. We see judgment as an end in itself.

The good news of John's preaching, as well as the good news of Christ's Second Advent, is that though with the coming of the kingdom of God comes necessary judgment, so does the opportunity to turn and be healed. The good news of God's judgment is that it's not announced as an end in itself; it's announced in order to awaken us to repentance for our restoration. In a world where things have gone terribly wrong, the good news of divine judgment is that through the grace of repentance what is wrong can also be restored.

Much deserved criticism has been leveled at the Church for its hypocrisy, for its willingness to apply God's judgment to outsiders while being unwilling to stand under God's judgment itself. One of the gifts the Lord gives us through Advent is the opportunity to redress that imbalance by beginning to stand under God's judgment ourselves. To look forward in expectation to the Second Advent of Jesus, not by making predictions, but by pursuing repentance, recognizing that, as the Apostle says, “Judgment begins with the house of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Perhaps the restorative power of repentance would appear more credible to the world if that restoration began with us.

Come, Holy Spirit. Make your home in us. Dwell in us. Cleanse us from every impurity, and build your Kingdom here. Amen.

Bradley Steele

December 16

A Joyful Peace

Philippians 4:4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

The Advent season is often described as a time of joyful anticipation. Yet, for many of us, the realities of this season are more complex. Family dynamics, financial burdens, and unmet expectations all become areas of fear and anxiety. It is easy for us to feel like we should be excited. But the burdens of life quickly make excitement seem unattainable.

Amid these struggles, the message of Advent provides a deep sense of hope. When the angels announced the good news of Jesus to the shepherds, they proclaimed “good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10). This joy was not rooted in the absence of difficulties but in the presence of God. During Advent, we anticipate the birth of Christ, but we must not forget the joy that we have in God’s presence with us, even in our waiting and anticipation. We have not lost God within the season of Advent, for God is still our shepherd and comforter.

Paul offers a profound perspective on anxiety and joy as he writes from a Roman prison to the Philippians. In Philippians 4:4-7, he acknowledges that anxiety is a part of life, but he doesn’t leave us without hope. Paul urges us to bring every worry, fear, or concern to God in prayer. We can bring all these problems to the same savior, Emmanuel, whose birth we celebrate every year. Paul continues to instruct us to pray, not just any prayer, but a prayer of thanksgiving.

Why thanksgiving, and what does it do for us? Thanksgiving is a vehicle that shifts our focus from what we lack to what we’ve received. The nature of the holiday season prods us

to focus on what we lack. Thanksgiving allows us to focus on areas of joy within our lives. When we thank God amid anxiety, we remind ourselves of God's faithful love.

The practice of thanksgiving deepens our relationship with God. It moves us from a place of simply asking for things to a place of recognition and celebration. This movement deepens our faith as we see more clearly how God has been at work in our lives, often in ways we might not have noticed before. In this space of thanksgiving we find our hearts being realigned with God's purposes and our anxieties being overshadowed by God's peace.

Here, our hearts find true joy. Living in a deep relationship with the Lord, we can obtain joyful peace. We might expect this joyful peace to be unalloyed and unchanging, but Paul points us in the opposite direction. This joyful peace transcends all understanding. God even blesses us with peace as we walk in our darkest valleys.

In times of stress, it's easy to hope for a quick solution. This is especially true during the holiday season when problems seem to abound, and solutions seem scarce. Quick solutions are a blessing, and they provide us with relief. However, Paul teaches that our joy and peace cannot depend upon them.

Instead, Paul gives us a better way. Our joy and peace can rest on a firm foundation—one that always stands firm during the worst of troubles. It is our relationship with God. The Advent season provides us with a great opportunity to be thankful for all of God's works. As we engage in this relationship and abide within God, our weary hearts can find rest. It is in Christ that we find peace, for Christ has overcome the world and its troubles (John 16:33).

God, we pray for the comfort of our souls during this season. Advent should be a time of excitement and anticipation, but our world has made it a place of stress and anxiety. Please grant us, Lord, a peace that transcends all understanding as we attempt to navigate the complexities of this season. And please allow us a deeper connection to You as we hope to be one in our thoughts and purposes. Lord, we love You, and thank You for the many blessings You've granted us. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Haden Paul

December 17

On Hidden Joy

Zephaniah 3:14–20

*“Remain silent in the presence of the Sovereign the LORD,
for the Day of the LORD is near” (Zeph 1:7).*

It has been a long half-century of divine silence when Zephaniah’s prophecy speaks into the gap. Too far gone for repentance, Zephaniah’s words call the community to silence. Kings have swung the extremes from godliness to godlessness, from Hezekiah’s prayerful trust to Manasseh’s idolatry. Then Hezekiah’s great-great-grandson Zephaniah lifts the veil darkening the moment and God’s hopeful work comes into view, though dimly lit at first.

Whether through undesirable consequences or even oppression, God can use what challenges people for their redemption. This is a hopeful word.

Manasseh’s unmatched wickedness and Ammon’s following in his father’s footsteps yielded a corrupt situation in Jerusalem that would soon lead to the exile. The prophet issues the charges: the city listens to no voice, the inhabitants accept no correction, they do not trust in the Lord, nor do they draw near to God (Zeph 3:1–2). The hopeful truth remains, God is in their midst, and what God sees God will surely judge. There is no real hiding from God for anyone.

Zephaniah, whose name means “the Lord hides,” precedes Isaiah’s prophecy which admonishes the people to hide until the Day of the Lord’s wrath passes, a day forecasted as long as there have been prophets. At first blush, this promised judgment can feel scary and appear random in the lives of the ancients. But comfort lies in God’s faithfulness, as always. God gives people what their hearts pursue, often allowing choices which bring disaster upon themselves.

Circumstances are often the natural culmination of the corruption of humanity, a “what goes around comes around” type situation. Why would Zephaniah admonish the people of

God to hide? And if this were possible, where? Does this not call the Garden-guilt to mind? This does not sound like a message of hope or comfort, not yet anyway.

Prophets are poets, and prophecy is the work of poets who are moved to describe what they see in life according to their gifts. Prophets use their imaginations while speaking from within their traditions. All of the prophets do the work of ushering in newness in their acknowledgement of grief, either God's or that of the people. Grief is often a precursor to joy, increasing the weight and magnitude of the joy that follows.

We are living in eternity now, so must the joy delay?

Zephaniah calls another day into view. His message, while full of warnings regarding the "Day of the Lord," takes a dramatic turn to praise in his final section. Engaging as God's prophet, Zephaniah has an experience with God in which his heart is drawn to the deepest understanding of the love of God. It is a "right now" kind of love in the present, though dark, moment as well as an eternal love that does not wait until the fulfillment of time for expression. Zephaniah prophesied a love of God that hinges not on perfection coming into view. Zephaniah sees a picture of God drawn to silence. Jehovah is resting or silent in his love, the perfect hiding place for the people of God.

It is one of the boldest ideas in scripture, stated simply in the New Century version:

The Lord your God is with you;
the mighty One will save you.
He will rejoice over you.
You will rest in his love;
he will sing and be joyful about you (Zeph 3:17).

The people and God will rest in God's love, together. God is in silent ecstasy over God's people, Israel. God has quiet joy in God's love. The silence is only broken with singing, also God's.

In this season of anticipation of the Messiah's coming, may the people of God join Jehovah who is in our midst and sing. It is a silent, holy moment enveloped in God's love. All is calm and bright with hope because the Lord is in God's holy temple of the universe and of the hearts of people.

Sovereign YHWH, when the silence seems unkind and the world full of darkness, hide us with Your nearness and Your quiet song of love. Let it break the silence of imperfection and further the work that is Yours in the world and in the hearts of all people. Amen.

Beth Ann Fisher

December 18

Trusting, Anticipating, Responding

Isaiah 12:2-6

“And you will say on that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.” (Isaiah 12:4)

*H*ow do you rejoice in something that hasn't happened yet? The twelfth chapter of Isaiah is the culminating hymn of the first section of Isaiah's prophecy to Israel. Chapter 11 gives us beautiful images of God's renewal and restoration. It announces a future day when a new king will rule with a justice and a righteousness that results in a world where long-time adversaries become friends and distinctions of “strong/weak,” “predator/prey” no longer have purchase. It promises a time for God's people that is defined by healing, return, and restoration. Out of that promise comes Isaiah 12; six short verses filled with images of praise abounding with thanksgiving for what God has accomplished. The challenge is that everything for which Israel gives thanks has yet to happen.

How do you rejoice in something that hasn't happened yet? Isaiah 12 offers us a much different rationale for praise and thanksgiving than the ones we often assume in our contemporary, North American context. To many of us, praise and thanksgiving are things that take place *after the fact*. Only after something has occurred—some blessing received, some good outcome secured, some good news shared—do we then give thanks to God for what God has done. Yet according to the prophet Isaiah, praise and thanksgiving have as much to do with trust, anticipation, and hope as they do with past-tense perceptions of God's activity. Praise and thanksgiving are qualities of Christian faith that arise from God's promises of what God will do as much as from what God has already done. They speak to the reality of God's trustworthiness and the power of God's promises to shape and transform life in the present even as we live in the expectation of their fulfillment.

And I cannot help but think this is an important learning of the season of Advent, that time of the Christian calendar when we look forward with anticipation and trust for God's

coming again to our midst. Advent, it's true, is a time in which we prepare ourselves for God's arrival. It is a season of preparation. Yet one component of that preparation is allowing the trustworthiness and surety of God's promises to shape our life in the present. We hope to experience now, in the present, a foretaste of the praise and thanksgiving the people of God will enjoy forever when the promises of God reach their fulfillment. And in that way, Advent becomes not only a season of preparation but also an invitation. We are invited to allow the promises and future work of a trustworthy God to define our life and lives together here and now. And when we accept such an invitation, the only fitting response is thanksgiving.

O Holy God, You who are trustworthy in Your promises and faithful in Your covenant, enlighten the eyes of our hearts in this Advent season so that we might respond to Your promises with praise and thanksgiving, and that by doing so we might serve as witnesses to the wider world that has begun and will be fulfilled through the work of your Son, who is our Way, Truth, and Life. Amen.

Mason Lee

December 19

In the Midst of the Darkness

Hebrews 10:32–39

*“We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed,
but to those who have faith and are saved.” (Hebrews 10:39)*

Human beings have a frustratingly short memory, particularly in times of discomfort. Living in West Texas, I have a preternaturally low tolerance for the cold. Here on the cusp of the winter solstice, my memories of heat and sun begin to fade. The days get shorter, the temperatures drop, and the winter coats emerge from storage. The cold drives us indoors, and the darkness, stretched to longer and longer proportions, can begin to feel suffocating. In the throes of winter, I sometimes wonder if we will ever feel the warmth of the sun again.

This is the type of situation I imagine the writer of Hebrews is addressing in today’s passage. Don’t forget those early days of the light, readers are cautioned, when you still had to deal with the pervasive darkness in the world. Those brothers and sisters had been persecuted and humiliated. They’d been thrown into prison. They’d had their property seized. And all this not just *after* they had come to know the hope of Jesus, but *because* of their hope in Jesus. As far as lifestyles go, this one is a tough sell.

Many well-intentioned but ultimately misleading believers have tried to fashion some form of Christianity that is somehow completely devoid of darkness. They preach a Jesus who shields his people from all pain and suffering. They set their eyes on the light and deny the lingering existence of any darkness. In an ironic reversal of the fate of C. S. Lewis’s Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, they create a land where it’s always Christmas and never winter. As appealing as this version of Christianity is, it fails to hold water when held up against our lived experience. We still feel the aches and pains of a world that seems intent on spiraling out of control. Wars and death. Famine and poverty. Sickness and violence and racism. The list goes on.

Our writer's instruction to these readers is frustrating in its simplicity: persevere. Hold tightly to what was promised to you. Revel in the truth of what God spoke of long ago. The confidence you keep in the face of darkness isn't folly; it's strength. In fact, it is the very will of God. The type of perseverance described here evokes sincere fortitude. It calls to mind clinging to a life raft in a raging ocean. Taking another weary step when every muscle screams for relief. Desperately stoking a flame to keep the darkness at bay for another minute. The hope of Jesus is described as something that inspires and encourages. I wonder how our churches—and indeed our world—might change if we lived as if it were so.

The claims of the Christmas season are as audacious as they are unexpected. The Christian tradition asserts with unwavering sincerity that even in the coldest, darkest, bleakest nights, hope can be found shining forth. Though the darkness can feel overwhelming, the light cannot be overcome. And in the midst of a world mired in chaos and bloodshed and death and destruction, God shows up to bring us some good news. And that good news is enough to sustain us, to kindle the fire within, to give us the strength to take one more step in the right direction.

Here we find ourselves, with the nights growing longer and the temperatures dropping colder. Every day is an opportunity to slip further into hopelessness and despair at the state of the world. Yet Christmas is coming. Hope is coming. Christ is coming. Whether you're wrapped in the joy and comfort that the season promises or you're struggling to remember a time when there was any light to be found, the message through Jesus Christ is the same. Cling patiently to the promises of God. There are far better things ahead. And the present darkness will not prevail.

God of all hope and comfort, we feel keenly the effects of the darkness that seems to fill the world. We often find ourselves discouraged or without hope. Give us the courage to patiently endure this never-ending night. Help us trust, even in our fear, that You will not be delayed and that Your light will overcome the darkness that surrounds us. Amen.

Riley Stirman

December 20

Communal Lament, Communal Waiting

Psalm 80:1-7

“Restore us, O God; Let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (Psalm 80:3)

Psalm 80 speaks out a lament. That much is obvious. As a psalm of worship it centers on Israel’s understanding of God as both shepherd and warrior (v. 1–2) through whom Israel lives and moves and has its being. But as a prayer of lament it speaks to Israel’s present experience of God’s absence, God’s refusal to act in these characteristic ways, and the danger such a refusal poses to Israel’s existence. And it is the recognition of both those realities—God’s power and the consequences of God’s absence—which lead the psalmist to a refrain: “Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we may be saved” (vv. 3, 7, and 19). It likely does not surprise us to encounter a psalm of lament. It is a concept with which we are somewhat familiar, even if we are less familiar with the *practice* of lament. But what may strike us as strange is that this psalm is not the lament of an individual, but of a *community*. It is the complaint and petition of an entire people, not only the longings of a single person. If that does not seem strange, it might seem at least a little *different*.

The practice of lament is missing from many communities of faith these days. But if it is present, it probably exists primarily in an individualized form. A person laments, complains to God about some aspect of their personal life. This is good and right, and as Christians we should engage in it. God is God and can handle just such laments. Yet it is also interesting that in the psalmist’s religious imagination lament is a corporate and communal act just as much as an individual and personal one. And it is exactly such communal forms of lament that give us trouble. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps chief among them is that it is rarely the case that every member of a community feels the same desire for lament in the same way, over the same matter, and at the same time. We do not all experience God in the same way at the same time. Any call for communal lament will include both those who are in a place to embrace it and those in the opposite place. In every community live both

those who desperately need communal lament and those who desperately need communal rejoicing. These two groups sit side by side in our pews. Thus, perhaps one question we might ask is how, given such communal diversity, we can actually engage in the kind of communal lament depicted in Psalm 80? What is required for an entire community to undertake such a practice?

Perhaps these questions reveal that the possibility of communal lament is based upon the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. It requires that those in the community who may not feel a need to lament are able to look beyond themselves to the needs of others, and in love stand in solidarity with them. It means resisting the temptation to deny lament to others because I “do not feel like it.” Instead, move towards that person, fulfilling the calls to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2) and “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15). Communal lament becomes important, then, because it is one of the avenues through which we are called out of ourselves, to look to those around us who are presently experiencing the dark night of faith, and to stand with them in that darkness. Lament then becomes one concrete manifestation of the love of Christ: those experiencing anguish and despair are not abandoned to them, but remain in the embrace of a community and God who can hold such realities.

During the season of Advent, we recognize that the world is not as it should be, and we await the coming of the God who will make all things new. It provides us with the theology, and with parts of the Biblical witness (like Psalm 80) which remind us that no one is an island, but that we exist within communities of faith that offer us opportunities to fulfill the greatest commandments. May it be so among us.

O Holy God, in this Advent season empower us in Your Spirit to look beyond ourselves to the needs of others. In so doing, may we practice neighbor love as we await Your coming. We ask these things in the one who is our Way, Truth, and Life. Amen.

Mason Lee

December 21

The Shoot from Jesse

Isaiah 11:1–9

*“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” (Isaiah 11:1)*

I’ve lived nearly 20 years of my life in West Texas. It’s a country not unlike the Holy Land in its climate and its type of vegetation. As a result, I’ve seen a lot of stumps in my day. It’s not the Pacific Northwest, where stumps are the result of logging and lumberjacks. Rather, the stumps around here are often the result of trees dying from natural conditions, giving in to frost or drought, and then either falling down or needing to be cut down.

The biblical prophets (including Isaiah) often used the natural world as a metaphor for the state of God’s people, and I think that West Texas stumps map naturally onto Isaiah’s audience’s views of the world. There were times when the Israelites were rotting from the inside out, neglecting to love God and their neighbor. With a nod to the songwriter Keith Green, we might say that their eyes were dry, their prayers were cold, and the drought and frost were nearly killing them. Their hearts were as hard as Texas pecan wood, and the first chapters of Isaiah illustrate well these characteristics.

But what about us? How might today’s text connect with us? If you are using a devotional tool like this one, I assume that your heart is not particularly hard . . . but maybe it is, and you’re trying to turn things around. I assume that your prayers aren’t very cold . . . but maybe they are, and this is a step you’re taking to try to warm them up. If so, I applaud your efforts and encourage you to continue! This text clearly speaks of God’s restoration, as does the rest of Isaiah, and it is amazing news. Even from a stump that looks completely dead, a shoot can rise, growing to a branch that will bear new, living fruit—fruit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, and knowledge of and reverence before God. In other words, as long as you are breathing, there is always hope!

What if things are indeed going generally well right now in your spiritual life, though? Perhaps the Advent word for you is the reminder that “stump-ness” is a possibility for us all. Sometimes we are cut down by the Enemy’s wiles or by our own foolish or sinful decisions. Sometimes it is the actions of others that can turn us into stumps. Sometimes it can even seem that God is the one who does so, as in John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer, where we pray that we might be put to work for God or laid aside by God. And sometimes, like ancient Israel, we can choose to act—or neglect to act—in ways that cause us to dry up, freeze out, or just plain rot.

In these cases, we don’t want to just remember that this can happen, although that is important. We also want to do the things we know will help us avoid “stump-ness.” We can maintain our spiritual lives, staying in touch with God in Christ. We can remain “constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12, RSV), pursue relationships with other Christians, attempt to be led by the Spirit who gives wisdom, understanding, and counsel, and cultivate reverence for the Lord in our hearts, as our text says.

But what if we discover that some stumps already exist in our lives? What then? This is where I think the rest of our text can help us. Did you notice that 11:3b-9 still seems to be about the “shoot,” the “branch” that sprouts from the stump . . . and yet the language is strongly reminiscent of other Scriptural language about God? In 1 Samuel 16, God is the one who judges with the heart rather than the eyes (like Isaiah 11:3b); Psalm 85 speaks of God’s righteousness and peace in concord (11:4a); Isaiah 30 has God’s rod striking down an enemy (11:4b); and Psalm 89 describe righteousness and faithfulness as characteristics of God. And of course, Isaiah 11:6–9 sounds like the shalom of God that we as Christians also associate with the kingdom of the Messiah.

As a result, the word for us may be to lean on the Lord this Advent, to depend on the faithful one of Israel. I cannot cause the fruit of the Spirit to grow in my life on my own, nor to sprout a branch of restoration in my heart. But God can. And the testimonies of Christians through history tell me that God does.

O God, Sovereign of the universe and Lord of all that is seen and unseen: please bring forth new shoots of renewed life in us and among us, that we may be a sign to the world of Your faithful love, and that we may bear fruit of Your reign and rule everywhere we go. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

David Kneip

December 22

Blessed are Those Who Believe

Luke 1:39–45

“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke 1:45)

Our passage begins with Mary’s journey to a Judean town in the hill country, to visit her relative Elizabeth. But Elizabeth has been on a journey of her own. Hers has been an arduous expedition—a six-month path into the impossible. As Elizabeth’s pregnancy progresses, the words of Gabriel materialize in her womb, “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Elizabeth was barren. For the reader who has endured infertility, the biblical word *barren* hits the ear with grating abrasiveness. It is a demoralizing, disenchanting, and utterly withering experience to long deeply for a child, only to be caught in a clockwork cycle of disappointment month after month, year after year.

Elizabeth surely knew what the scriptures had to say about childlessness. Deuteronomy 7:13–14 assured God’s people that their obedience would be rewarded with the blessing of fertility. Exodus 23:26 pledged protection against barrenness and miscarriages for those who serve the Lord. Elizabeth must have known the stories of Sarah (Gen 11:30), Rebekah (Gen 25:21), Rachel (Gen 29:31), and Hannah (1 Sam 1–2). I imagine as she progressed through her prime reproductive years, well-meaning neighbors reminded her of God’s promise of intervention. “Remember the words of the prophet,” I imagine they said to her. “For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of the one who is married!” (Isa 54:1).

But the months gave way to years, and Elizabeth grew old. Her perspective on divine blessing had long been sobered by years of disappointment. That she continued to lead a life of service to God is a testament to her faith; *she wasn’t in it for the blessing*. Hers was a

disinterested faith—righteousness for the sake of righteousness. Somewhere along the way, she decided that she would serve God even though the blessing of a child had not arrived.

There is never a guarantee of miraculous conception, a reality that Elizabeth had likely accepted. Sometimes, as in the cases of those barren matriarchs of Israel, God intervenes. And sometimes, God does not. For every woman named in scripture who received the child for which she longed, countless unnamed women remained childless.

So, when the angel Gabriel arrives with the news that Elizabeth will be numbered among the exceptions, that she will conceive by miraculous intervention, her husband is reasonably skeptical. I don't blame Zechariah for his response in Luke 1:18. It is unspeakably difficult to embrace the promise of such a gift when you have spent so many years coping with loss. Disillusioned from the expectation of blessing in return for faithfulness, Zechariah doubts.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, cannot discount what has taken root inside of her. As her belly grows, she gradually sheds the layers of disgrace that had accrued over the years. I can only imagine the first time she felt her baby kick in her womb, how she must have marveled at the impossibility of it all! With each passing week, her heart is making room for hope.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth and Zechariah's home, the Spirit stirs within Elizabeth, and John leaps in her womb. Seeing clearly the activity of God in their midst, she begins to testify. It is no small thing for Elizabeth to declare, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Blessed is she who took a risk on hope in these dark times. Blessed is she who dared to receive something good in the wake of loss. Blessed is she who remained faithful in the midst of uncertainty. As Mary and Elizabeth look upon each other, their belief finds fulfillment: God is good, and God is at work. Blessed are those who believe like Mary, bearing the good news of God in troubled times. Blessed are those who believe like Elizabeth, welcoming holy possibilities in impossible circumstances.

God, who lifts up the lowly and gives hope to the hopeless, we await the day when all our longings find fulfillment in You. How often we are tempted to stray from belief! How often we are tempted to despair. Though our hearts grow weary, may we continue in faithfulness. May we celebrate Your goodness in the presence of others as we anticipate the fullness of Your kingdom. Amen.

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby

December 23

The Right Tool

Hebrews 10:5–10

When Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.” (Hebrews 10:5)

During my senior year of High School, auto shop was my favorite class. I enjoyed rebuilding brake cylinders and packing wheel bearings more than I did reading government textbooks and writing English essays.

I learned many things in auto shop: how to replace a clutch plate, rebuild carburetors, and flush a heater core. I also learned the difference between working on a shop engine and putting my own engine “under the knife.” A shop engine was very forgiving when I made a mistake boring an engine cylinder, but when I worked on my own sweet ’73 Chevy El Camino, the stakes were much higher. This was the car I used to get to school, drive to work, and go on dates. Well, to get to school and drive to work, anyway. The job had to be done right because the repair was for real, not for practice.

Possibly the most important lesson I learned? To do the job well, you need the right tool. Torque wrenches, gear pullers, screwdrivers, mallets. The right-sized tool for the job at hand is what you need in order to fix what is broken and restore it to perfect working order.

What does this have to do with Advent? What does my lesson about needing the right tool, especially when the stakes are high, have to do with the Lord’s coming? “When Christ came into the world,” the Hebrews writer claims, he spoke to his Father: “*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.*” The words come from the ancient Greek version of Psalm 40:6–8, but the writer puts them directly into Jesus’s mouth. Upon joining us on earth, the Son of God declares, “*Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.*” Obedience, service, and salvation require a body.

Christ comes into the world with purpose—to begin setting things right, to restore God’s creation, to address the problems of evil and sin, to revitalize the souls and lives of

people. These are big jobs, hard jobs, with so much at stake. According to our author, these are jobs that Moses's law and the rhythms of annual sacrifices simply could not do, not fully (Hebrews 10:1–4). This job requires a better priest and perfect sacrifice; this job requires an obedient child, something you or I could never be—a will completely conformed to the Father's, even to the point of death. *A body you prepared for me.* To do the job and do it well, with perfect submission befitting a true child of God, in order to set things right, the Son needed the right tool: a body.

To enter the world and live among us, he needed a body.

To grow and to learn obedience under the burden of human experience,
he needed a body (Hebrews 5:8).

To show us what it means to be fully human and to draw the fabric of creation into
God's saving work, he needed a body.

To die on the cross for sin, he needed a body.

To enter the grave, trusting the Father to resurrect him by the Spirit,
he needed a body.

To pave the way for the renewal of all things when he returns one day in glory,
he needed a body.

At Christmas, we picture a little baby in the manger and in Mary's arms. It is a sweet picture, but it also reminds us of the essential tool God needed to finish the job of salvation: a body. But we are not just talking about the body Christ needed to suffer and die on the cross, though that was crucial. The stakes are high, but the birth of Jesus equips God with the tool he needed for every part of salvation: an obedient and willing human body.

As it happens, obedient bodies are still essential tools in God's work. How might I welcome the coming of Jesus by embodying the will of God in what I say and do?

*O God, I thank You for preparing a body for Your Son. I am grateful for his
obedience to Your will and his eagerness to do whatever You call upon him to do.
Here I am—I am ready to do Your will too. I am imperfect, but as part of the body of
Christ, I offer You myself as Your tool. Use me to put flesh on Your purposes this week.
Amen.*

Jeff W. Childers

December 24

The Hour Before

Isaiah 52:7-10

*“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger
who announces peace, who brings good news. . . .”* (Isaiah 52:7)

Moving, going, working, running. This is the hustle and bustle of Advent, the world rushing around to this party and that store, to finish deadlines, to purchase plane tickets. All of it is colored a little more gray by a year now world-weary, and perhaps for many, Christmas Eve’s shine is not what it once was. It may be that all the decorations become less exciting now that you must put them up yourself. Or perhaps the table is all set for a turkey dinner, only for there to be one less person to eat it. And of course, every day seems to bring yet another piece of news that we could never have predicted or dreamed up.

But it is only finally on Christmas Eve that there is a slowing of all of that, a pausing, the taking of a deep breath—all for the sake of “tomorrow morning.” We narrow our scope of care to the houses we inhabit rather than everything outside. One actually pauses to look at the warm light of the Christmas tree and allow ourselves to ask the favorite questions—what sort of gifts might appear miraculously overnight? Could it really be true that something so good will happen?

Isaiah turns and says, “Yes.” Now, finally, the whispers of *peace* start to trickle in. A rumor of good tidings. Gossip of salvation! For once, the papers consider running “Peace on earth and goodwill to all!” as a headline. Now, the only thing between anyone and that news is one last hour—it is the hour of the digital clock that glows 6:00 *a.m.* in the spare bedroom of a favorite grandmother’s house, just after Mom said seven o’clock was the earliest anyone should be downstairs. It is the longest hour of any child’s life. But perhaps on this Christmas Eve, we might choose to be that child, waiting with bated breath.

No wonder those feet came so quickly—even if they surely ache and bleed with such a long and arduous journey. Never mind, because the good news is nearly here! No pain

could stand in the way now. But who will receive it? Surely the most important first. The kings, those in-the-know, those who usually turn their backs to tell a friend some piece of gossip. But it is not so. It turns out to be a simple watchman in the tower, rubbing his eyes in disbelief at the sight of the exhausted but happy messengers. It is a shepherd counting all his sheep, not knowing what he is about to encounter. It is a man of wisdom, young and untested, scanning the skies long past bedtime for an inkling of a clue.

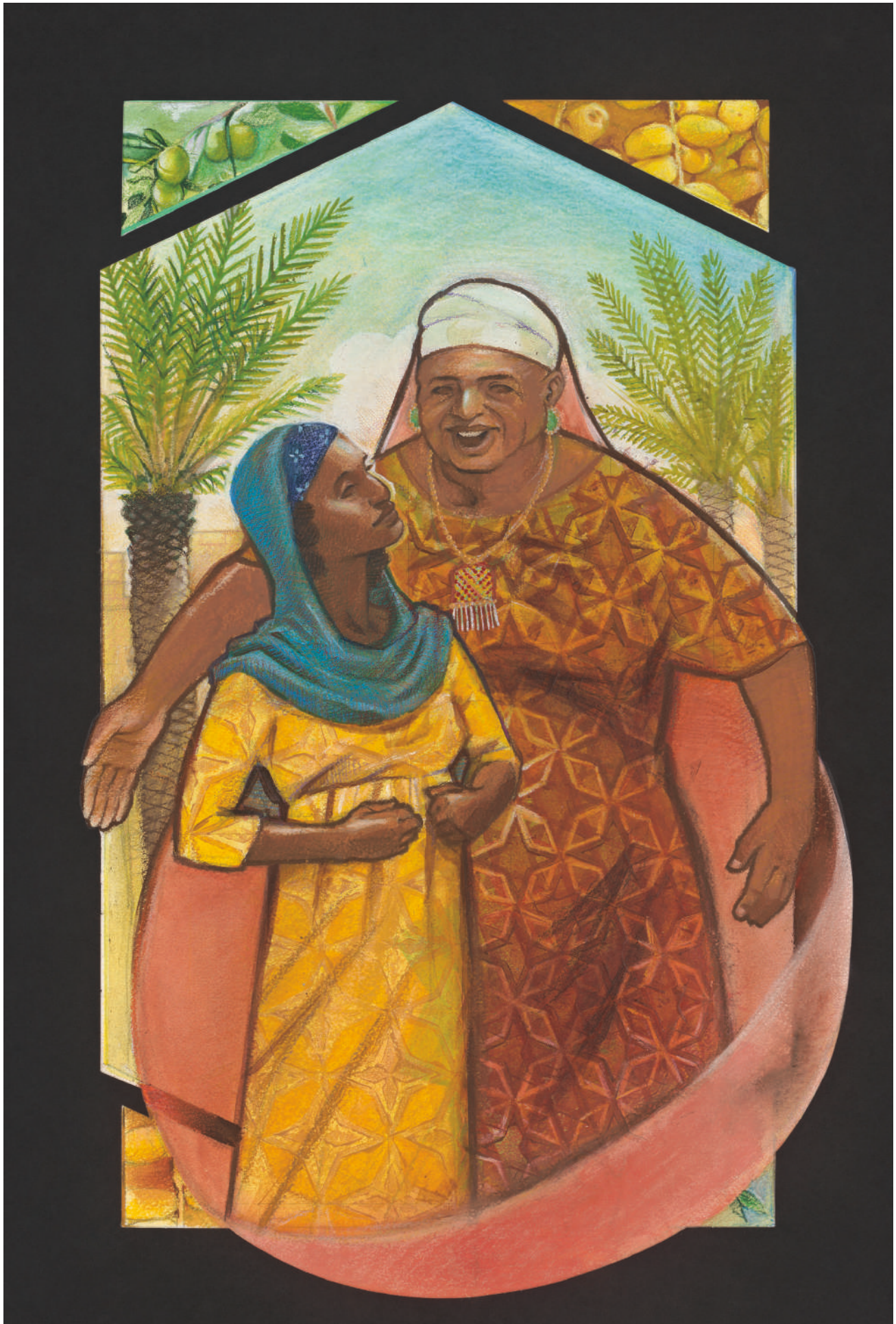
It is also the child at the banister, fighting sleep to see who it is setting out these gifts.

We finally know the good news: that all shall be well, and someone shall bring it. But in that hour, we ponder: How could such news be true? How could these gifts appear in the space under the tree that was so empty before?

Simply put: God reigns, and for no other reason. Need there be? The gifts do not arrive without the God who gives them. This is the cyclical, eternal joy of it all: the giver is also himself the gift. Let nothing stop this God whose sleeves are rolled up to finish a good work, for he will only bring good things. His reign in the here and now is marked by glimpses of a kind of eternal gift-giving, and with it, the promise that all of the taken-away will eventually end.

Lord God, we are humbled by the quiet joy of this day, which signals something greater than the sum of its parts. Let us never stop carrying the good news even on feet that are pained, to all across the earth, and even across our own doorstep, refreshed and reminded that You go with and before us. Finally, let us faithfully look forward in hope and surety to the moment that our waiting will end. Amen.

Leah Kranz



December 25

God's Humble Arrival

Luke 2:1-20

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” (Luke 2:8-9)

There are some curious things we should notice about Jesus's birth.

It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become emperor. In that familiar pattern comes the good news of joy and peace when Jesus is born. But the news of Jesus's birth did not resound in palace halls. Instead, it came to the fields. Poor and lowly shepherds heard the news first.

At the time of John's birth, there was a miracle (speech restored to Zechariah) and an inspired prophetic song. But not so when Jesus is born. Luke has stripped the story of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginalized. In the history of the church, many have been so poor and abandoned as to be able to identify with this scene. In many quarters, however, the church has not resisted the temptation to run next door to Matthew. From Matthew we've borrowed royal visitors with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We've placed a soft light on the manger straw. When we borrow the grandeur from Matthew's story, I fear we miss something important that Luke is trying to tell us.

Unlike many world leaders in the past, present, and future, Jesus did not spend His time here wielding His power. Jesus's ambition did not lead Him to seek a position in the Roman Senate. Jesus did not spend His days trying to impress important and famous people. No, Jesus was a different kind of world leader. His parents were poor peasants. The guests of honor at his delivery were smelly, common shepherds. The shepherds belong in this story, certainly, because they tie Jesus to the shepherd king, David. But they are also in this story because they belong on Luke's guest list for the Kingdom of God, along with the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame.

Luke reminds us that Jesus came to move into the places filled with the most darkness and brought light. Some people in this world believe what they've done is too bad for God to fix. Perhaps some reading these words feel that way. If so, this story is for you. Jesus didn't come here to impress kings and queens. Jesus didn't come here to cater to the rich and powerful. Jesus didn't come here to hang out with perfect people. Jesus didn't come here to keep clean; He came here to get messy. He came here to take upon Himself all our sin and darkness and to leave us with white robes and pure light.

Years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words:

The LORD God's spirit is upon me because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for the captives, and liberation for prisoners. . . . They will be called oaks of righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify Himself. They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore formerly deserted places; they will renew ruined cities, places deserted in generations past. (Isaiah 61:1, 3-4)

When folks in the first century learned about Jesus's inauspicious beginnings, this statement from Isaiah came into focus. Jesus arrived to preach good news to the poor. And the poor, in return, would become Oaks of Righteousness. Those formerly poor people would rebuild ancient ruins, restore deserted places, and renew ruined cities. With His Son, Jesus, God the Father has given us a tremendous Christmas gift. And now blessed, God invites us to go into the world as God's ambassadors to rebuild ancient cities and ruins, to restore formerly deserted places, to help restore broken relationships between moms and dads and children, and to find places of sadness to bring joy.

Lord, let us never forget that along with the peace, joy, and love of Christmas comes an invitation. We hold in our hands an invitation from You to join the shepherds. We've been invited by You to come, see, and celebrate the coming of God into the world. You invite us to leave the manger and go tell the world what we saw. Give us courage to bring these blessings of Jesus with us to give as gifts to the world.

Wes Crawford

December 26

Sing a New Song!

Psalm 96

“Sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth!” (Psalm 96:1)

As a child, I had a particular affinity for insects (much to my mother’s annoyance). In my defense, I was enthralled with the diversity and intricacies of nature, and my innate fondness for insects only caused significant consternation for my mother a few (yet highly memorable!) times. I was especially fond of butterflies and dragonflies. Although the metamorphosis of caterpillars into butterflies is common entomological knowledge, numerous other insect species pass through a metamorphosis from larva to adult. These processes have always fascinated me, filling me with awe, delight, and wonder. There is something profoundly sacred about these transitional phases, one stage following another in succession, even if some parts of these natural processes seem mundane. Within the created world, change will ever remain faithful to itself, and this truth may also manifest itself within our own lives.

This relatively short psalm introduces us to our Lord God as king and judge of the whole created order. As several commentators have noted, within this psalm is a three-part organization: a start of singing a new song to the Creator, ascribing to this God glory, splendor, and honor, and finally, a cosmic invitation for the creation—heavens, earth, and all that is in them—to take part in joyful adoration of God. Perhaps we may envision a cosmic symphony joined in the music of the spheres. And wondrously, humans made in the image and likeness of the Creator are not just passive listeners but may be active participants in this symphony, endowed with the choice to attune their lips to the melodies and harmonies of praise. All of humankind is not a large enough choir to properly praise the Lord as a great, good, and loving king. Perhaps it is only proper for all creation itself to worship.

As with insect metamorphoses, our transformations are not necessarily of our own design or making. They will possibly involve chaotic, nonlinear messiness that could easily

disconcert our rational sensibilities. Change, quick or slow, is often uncomfortable because we cross thresholds frequently. Of course, it is inappropriate to overemphasize extremes we may envision, such as an illusion of total control or utter lack of control. God is the sovereign Lord who created the heavens and earth, imbues and holds all creation together, and will again come to judge the cosmos with righteousness and equity. We also have our parts to play in obedience, humility, and constancy. The music of the spheres is lacking if we do not add our unique voice and melody to the cosmic hymn of praise.

Here we are, the day after Christmas, aware we serve a Creator who is love itself and who sent Jesus into the world. It is a gospel truth that transformation and newness are possible as a result of the incarnation. The newborn babe wrapped up in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger attests to a foundational gospel truth—that newness, change, and transformation are possible. In the incarnation, we see God the Creator entering the meekness and uncertainty of the created world. With God’s help, change and transformation are always hopeful possibilities.

We serve a faithful God whose mercies are new every morning. We may continually proclaim the good news of his salvation – from day to day. We serve a God who has promised to make all things new. With God’s help, change may happen – in our lives, communities, and even the creation itself. Therefore, we may move forward this day, trusting, believing, and hoping in a God who makes things new. Let us begin our good work and holy calling now.

O Creator God, You made the grand cosmos and each sparrow and butterfly and made each of us tenderly and intimately. You are the changeless Eternal One who is before all things and holds them all together. Renew us, O God, so that we may ever walk in Your ways all the days of our lives. May we glorify You with our thoughts, words, and deeds. Give us undistracted eyes, ears, and hearts to see, hear, and perceive Your workings in our world. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Kendra Jernigan

December 27

A Peaceful Kingdom

Isaiah 9:2-7

To us a child is born . . . He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (Isaiah 9:6-7)

The days of the prophets are days of wickedness. There is no need for a prophet when things are going right; it is only when things go off the rails that people need course correction. Isaiah does a good job describing the overall sense of living in this time: the land is in “deep darkness” and has been for some time now. And the state of the land is inseparable from the usually bad state of its ruler. Even good King Hezekiah, the probable subject of this passage, made some foolish decisions. A good king is hard to come by. A perfect king is impossible.

What makes the land so dark? We can point to the usual suspects: fear, oppression, bloodshed, which often brings with it hunger, thirst, homelessness, loneliness. In a word, injustice. Unrighteousness. This sounds like the complete opposite of peace. That word “peace” is so elusive, though. It is hard to nail down its opposite because it is hard to define. Conflict surely isn't peaceful, but neither is the absence of conflict necessarily peace. Noisiness might not be peaceful, but “peace and quiet” doesn't seem to hit the target either. I think what all of those contributors to darkness have in common is that they all constitute a kind of brokenness, a “something-not-quite-rightness.” Peace, then, it would seem, has to do with completeness, with wholeness, an “all-is-rightness.” The problem, as Isaiah has shown us, is that peace is hard to come by when those in charge of providing it are broken themselves.

Isaiah 7 presents the famous title “Immanuel” or “God with us,” and Isaiah 9 extends this name. We learn that God is willingly, gladly, compellingly, irrevocably *for* us. The only one who is capable of providing that which Israel—and by extension, the world—longs for and needs is God. All the way at the beginning of the monarchy, Samuel does not think the idea of an Israelite king is a good one, and he is proven right time and time again. Until he

is not. Because what the gospel reveals is that God has always intended and still intends on being Israel's king. God is *with* us because God is *for* us. And when God is for us, bloody boots are burned, yokes are broken, and weapons of war are turned into gardening tools. When God is for us, darkness turns to light. When God is for us, peace is no longer elusive, but ever present and everlasting.

One of my favorite writers in the Christian tradition is Mechthild of Magdeburg, a 13th-century German mystic. In her work *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (6.16), she writes in the style of medieval courtly love poetry and applies this to herself and God. What results is a compelling picture of God earnestly desiring Mechthild, and her soul rising to meet this desire. She writes: "Our Lord said: 'I longed for you before the beginning of the world. I long for you and you long for me. Where two burning desires meet, there love is perfect.'" I think of this when I read, "The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this." God wants to do this because God loves us.

John Chrysostom, famed for his rhetorical skill, preached perhaps his best sermon on the nativity. I think it pairs well with Isaiah's passage. Listen, and receive the good news:

The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched . . . now lies subject to the hands of men. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast . . . For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been in planted on the earth.

God our King, rescue us from ourselves. Deliver us from the darkness we perpetuate, and bring us into the light of Your countenance, that we may see You and live. We thank You for deigning to meet us in our flesh, not despising our weakness, but embracing and redeeming it. Increase our joy, and help our zeal for You and others to mirror Your zeal for us. Amen.

Luke Roberts

December 28

Comparing the Incomparable

Hebrews 1:1-12

*“ . . . in these last days God spoke to us through a Son,
whom he made heir of all things, by whom he made the worlds.”* (Hebrews 1:2)

It's an odd habit we have of saying that a given thing is not comparable to anything else, when of course it must be if we are to understand it in proper perspective. Item A may be much better or worse, larger or smaller, more or less durable than Item B, but they are properly speaking comparable if they have some points in common, in spite of their differences.

Here the epistle to the Hebrews addresses a tiny Christian community somewhere in the Roman Empire. “Don't give up,” is the message. Don't give up though few think Jesus has purified human sin. Don't give up though few accept him as God's messenger. Don't give up though faith comes hard. Don't give up though fear can overwhelm us, even as it did the ancestors who stood at Sinai and beheld God's overwhelming glory.

The plea not to relent in faith comes from the writer's conviction that the content and deliverer of the gospel, Jesus, bears the image of God in a way exceeding that of angels, priests, prophets, or any other remarkable person. When comparing Jesus to anything else, he wins.

This text begins with a thesis: God has habitually communicated a message of justice, hope, and peace to the Jewish ancestors via the prophets. That message pointed to God's character as a benevolent creator aiming at human flourishing, to whom Israel could respond with trust. Now, God has ratcheted up the communication by speaking not through prophets or even their angelic sources of information, but through the Son who was present at the foundation of the world.

Jesus embodies the divine wisdom through which the world originated (compare Proverbs 8), excels the angels in power and goodness, and bears the divine personality in ways unparalleled elsewhere. The tiny house churches embracing his message and worshipping his person may, therefore, have confidence in God's ultimate care for their well-being.

This seemingly abstract text opening the epistle to the Hebrews has at least one curious feature. It opens by saying God has spoken through the Son, but does not quote anything Jesus said. Rather, it turns immediately to words from Psalms and 2 Samuel about God's working through intermediaries, especially Israel's kings. The already ancient words begin to point the letter's author and readers toward the Son and his speech. These ancient words testify to his status as a trustworthy speaker of highly significant words. In short, they build his ethos.

The words come from one who is no mere messenger, not even an exalted one like the angels, but is a king on a cosmic throne. This king "loves righteousness and hates lawlessness," properly valuing good and evil in human beings and acting to ensure the triumph of the former over the latter. Everything the Son says or reveals derives from his character.

Why does the epistle turn from the content of the Son's speech to older words about the speaker? Why would this turn matter?

Perhaps we can find the answer by considering the text's understanding of time. Hebrews speaks of a deep, primordial time of creation and a future time when the Son overcomes his enemies, who turn out to be humanity's enemies as well. This end time completes the beginning time, as creation finds its ultimate reason for existence. Sandwiched in between these two end points are humanity's past, the era of prophetic speech, and humanity's present, the era of the Son's speech.

Hebrews does not begin with the Son's words until it has described the theater in which the Son speaks his lines. That theater is the cosmos itself. There, the Son's words and life shed light on the true nature of God's interaction with creation, an interaction characterized by mercy and love on God's side and faith on ours.

It's an odd, almost inaccessible text for Advent, this opening of Hebrews. It lacks the earthiness of the stories in the Gospels or the poetry of the prophets. But the very distance readers feel from this text perhaps reminds us that faith acknowledges the great mysteries of God. The elusiveness of the whole Christian worldview invites us to trust less in our own understanding and actions than in the One who gave the Son the words in the first place.

O God of mystery and wonder, equip us with the patience to listen and learn, to think and feel and act. Help us to keep in our heads both the vastness of Your mercy and the often tiny ways in which it manifests itself in the ordinary affairs of every life around us. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton

December 29

Growing in Wisdom

Luke 2:41–52

“But they did not understand what he said to them. . . . And his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” (Luke 2:50–51)

At the beginning of Luke, the evangelist describes his writing process: he has investigated everything from the beginning using eyewitness accounts and reported the events in an orderly fashion to demonstrate the truth of the things that “have happened among us” (1:1–4). When one reads the account of Mary and Joseph finding the boy Jesus in the temple in Luke 2:41–52, it is natural to suppose that Luke’s source was Mary herself. The account is not told from an omniscient narrator’s view but from the perspective of Jesus’s parents, particularly Mary’s. We readers travel one-day’s journey toward home in the caravan of their family and friends. We race back to Jerusalem when it emerges that his parents have left Jesus behind. We have a front-row seat to the emotional experience of Mary and Joseph—frantic anxiety at the realization that the child is missing and relief at finding him in the temple after three days of searching in Jerusalem. We are privy to their interior life: ignorance, astonishment, confusion, reflection.

At the heart of the story, we enter the temple with Mary and Joseph and find the boy Jesus. There he is, sitting among the teachers, asking them questions and offering his own responses. All the people, his parents included, are astonished at him. It would be easy, gazing as we do from the parents’ perspective, to interpret Jesus’s actions as those of a naughty preteen. He purposefully stayed behind in Jerusalem without telling them. When he is finally found after several days, with Mary, we too are wondering why he would treat his parents this way. Surely he knew his father and mother would be searching for him anxiously! When he responds to his mother, his words can sound impertinent to our ears: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” It makes perfect sense that

his parents did not understand; if we understand his words a little better than they did, it is because we know the rest of the story.

When we encounter a challenging story or saying in scripture, it is tempting to ignore it, explain it away, or tame it somehow. Mary's response to this difficult event is different: she stores up the memory of this event in her heart and dwells on it (Luke 2:51; see also 1:19). The evangelist doesn't sand down the rough edges of this story for us either. He invites us to join Jesus's mother in her reflection on the boy Jesus's puzzling actions and words. What child is this who inspires the song of angels (vv. 8–19)? How will this infant be the cause of the rising and falling of many (vv. 34–35)? Who is this remarkable young man who amazes even the learned of Israel (v. 47)? In many Eastern Orthodox icons, Mary holds the Christ child and gently gestures toward him while gazing out at the beholder. Her posture invites the onlooker to ponder the divine Son of God who is also her human son. Likewise, in Luke, Mary's style of evangelism is a simple and earnest invitation to look and reflect—to ponder Jesus Christ.

The finding of Jesus in the temple is an early glimpse of the mystery of the incarnation—a truth so deep that a lifetime of patient and steady reflection is not enough to plumb its depths. Here, in his human nature, Jesus is a minor who needs to grow in “wisdom and stature” (v. 52). He must return home to Nazareth with his parents and be obedient to them (v. 51). In his divine nature, the young man feels at home engaging with the teachers in the temple, his Father's house (v. 49). The story also foreshadows a further mystery of the incarnation—the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both events begin with a journey to Jerusalem for the Passover. The question “Why were you looking for me?” resonates with “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (24:5). His parents find him after three days just as he arose on the third day (24:7). At the tomb, the women remember what Jesus taught (24:8); Mary treasures up this memory for future rumination (1:17, 2:51). What seems a simple story about Jesus's youth turns out to yield much for a disciple's heart to ponder.

God our Father, fix our eyes on Your Son, our Lord. Let us store up His mysteries in our hearts and ponder them all our days, our lips overflowing with the praise of Your glory through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Kelli Gibson

December 30

Clothed with Love

Colossians 3:12–17

*“Above all, clothes yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Col 3:14)*

When I was very young my extended family all gathered to celebrate Christmas Eve together at my grandparents’ house. My grandmother had a tradition of giving all the grandkids a set of new pajamas that we got to open that night. This was before the trend of Christmas jammies, and they weren’t holiday themed. They were just new clothes, on a special occasion. We felt loved, and we used those new pajamas all year until they wore out or we outgrew them.

I think about that new clothes feeling during this time of year. This is always a disorienting week for me. The Christmas celebrations have ended, but the season is not done. I feel a kind of tension in this window between Advent and Epiphany. Am I still waiting, anticipating something to come? Or should I feel as if I have already received the gift and move forward? I never really know, so I try to let the damp and dark of winter in this season lead me to a quiet place where I can take stock of what has been given. I try on my new pajamas and figure out what to do with a renewed life.

After we’ve spent time counting down to the arrival of an infant Christ, it feels like we fast forward through time because we know the reason for His coming was to change us into something new. Those swaddling clothes give way to being wrapped in something else. It’s time for us to wear the hallmarks of what the Incarnation really means—to become people of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love.

Love needs to hit the ground running in this season, doesn’t it? Many of us have hustled through event after event with family, friends, and coworkers. We celebrated until we had nothing left to run on, but that is where our love has a chance to rise to the occasion. We

choose to keep walking forward, clothed in a love that binds us together, so we can enjoy harmony. And God doesn't leave us with a vague idea about what that means either.

This text offers no empty greeting card wish to "be more loving." Colossians 3 tells us we live into this new clothing by sharing our gratitude, by spending time in praise together, by teaching and holding each other accountable, doing absolutely everything in the name of Christ. These instructions to wrap ourselves in love and compassion come with instructions that look like the community of Christ. We do not have to stay lost in the confusion of the in-between because what's next is a familiar path. We have already shown love, offered forgiveness, and sought out peace. These new clothes feel familiar, like we are already part of the family.

Holy Father, shape our hearts to compassion. Open our eyes to opportunities of forgiveness. Give us the courage to be peacemakers, to praise You openly, and to bind ourselves to Your blessed creation through love. We are grateful to be Yours. Amen.

Dana Spivy Glover

December 31

Ending in Blessing

Numbers 6:22-27

“They will put my name over Israel’s Children, and I will bless them.” (Numbers 6:27)

About 700 BCE, a family from Jerusalem buried a beloved family member outside the city in Ketef Hinnom. With the dead body, they placed small rolled-up sheets of gold on which were inscribed a version of the priestly blessing from Numbers. (This is the oldest surviving copy of something resembling the current biblical text.) The little amulet spoke to the family’s hope that somehow the God of Israel would bless their dead family member and them during a time of grief. “May the LORD bless you and keep you” was, at that moment, not merely a vague sound bite but a connection to the world of the Creator.

The version of the blessing that appears in Numbers makes the same connection. It follows the “law of the Nazirite” and precedes a notice of activities accompanying the completion of the tabernacle. Both of those discussions point readers to means of contact between Israel and God. So, the location of the blessing is not random, even if it appears so at first. “Since we’re talking about interacting with God,” says the book of Numbers, “let’s recall the nature of that interaction.” Far from being one rooted in fear of the unknown and uncontrollable, Israel’s relationship to God rests on divine assurance.

The blessing itself has a framework. At the beginning, the LORD commands Moses to instruct the priests to pronounce this blessing. The lack of a specific occasion for the pronouncement means it can be uttered in many circumstances and for many purposes. Similarly, the other side of the frame ends with the assessment of the priests’ blessing as a human act placing the people under the protection of the LORD, and a divine act making the words of the pronouncement real.

Now the blessing itself. Each of the three lines has two parts, with the first being longer than the second. Each of the first parts focuses on God’s actions as the one blessing. The priests must invite God to smile (“make his face shine”) at the person receiving the blessing,

that is, to acknowledge that person's value and need. The second part of each line gives a more specific attitude God should take toward human beings: "keep you," "be gracious to you," and "put well-being/peace upon you."

These requests seem vague because, again, the blessing must fit many occasions and needs. They reflect, however, an overall stance toward the people who live inside God's world of promise. God protects them from evil, extends mercy when calamity or sin overtakes them, and moves them from a condition of turmoil to one of *shalom*. That new state of affairs may take many forms, but all the ways of *shalom* share in common a calm and resolute spirit that finds in any circumstance a way to live with dignity and honor.

Another worthwhile observation: Numbers frames the priestly blessing as something for all of Israel's Children, the entire people. It has a collective dimension. Yet within the blessing itself, all of the second person pronouns ("you") are singular. The blessing extends to each individual in the particularities of life, as well as to the entire community with its joint life of worship and mutual service. The God whom the priests invoke shows concern for the individual in need of divine help, counsel, and engagement.

It is altogether fitting, then, that this text should close the calendar year for us. To stamp divine blessing on the past twelve months, with their conflict and pain, is to acknowledge the deeper truth of our existence. The whole tendency of the world God creates is toward a state of harmony, fairness, and sufficiency. Yet this movement does not occur automatically as an emergent property of life itself. Rather, God acts and invites redeemed people to join in that action.

This blessing appears in Numbers in the context of laws for Israel's behavior as people open to contact with God. The state of *shalom* comes upon a gratefully receptive Israel because God wills it to do so. The blessedness they receive does not empower them to gain mastery over other people or anything else in creation, but rather to accept their status as created persons in harmony with their creator.

While shopworn theological words like "bless" and "blessing" are notoriously difficult to translate into ordinary English, we know harmony between humankind and God when we experience it and pronounce it over others.

O God, whose name is blessed forever and who brings all things into the state they need to be in, grant us a right spirit so that we as priests may speak over, and become, a similar blessing for all we encounter. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton

January 1

Move It

Luke 2:15–21

“ . . . the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now . . .’ So they went with haste. . . .” (Luke 2:15c,16a NRSV)

Imagine a group of ecstatic shepherds rushing from the fields where their sheep roam and hurrying into the city. They race through Bethlehem, searching for any spot with a manger for the baby Messiah. The more they search, the bigger their following grows. The shouts of victory echo as one shepherd finds Mary and Joseph, causing the rest to gather around. Before the surprised parents can respond, they recount everything they witnessed. The group starts singing, possibly a psalm, to praise God. At some point, realizing they have completed their mission of confirming that what God promised was true, they return to their sheep, but the praise of God continues on their lips.

Maybe it didn't happen like that, but the fact remains that the shepherds took immediate action following the announcement of Christ's birth. If, after such a spectacular sight of angels proclaiming the Messiah's birth, the shepherds had returned to their sheep and after their shift ended told a few people about how they saw the angels proclaiming God's glory and favor, their tepid reaction would have made people think they had made the story up. Instead, the story says, they immediately went to confirm what God had told them. The risks they took and the fervor with which they acted amazed people (v.18).

The shepherds may have risked social ridicule and their livelihoods in an act of faith, which is an example to us all. Starting with the latter, it is not far-fetched to speculate that they risked losing their livelihoods. Scripture tells us they left quickly, meaning they didn't have time to hire others to watch their sheep. Also, if they are moving with haste, then they didn't try herding their sheep along with them, a slow and painstaking process. Therefore, we can suppose that they took a large financial risk—after all, their entire livelihood rested on

those fluffy animals—to follow up with what God had told them. The risk, however, didn't end with leaving their animals.

After finding Christ, the shepherds “made known” what had happened, and the Scripture tells us that the people who heard it were amazed (vv. 17, 18). By telling their story to others, they invited ridicule by claiming the God of heaven and earth deemed them—simple shepherds—worthy of receiving Christ's birth announcement. Considering they were making a bold religious claim of seeing angels and the Messiah being born, they could have faced religious repercussions as well (something that occurred later to those who followed Christ; for example, John 9:22, 12:42). Yet, despite any risks, they still told others what they had seen and experienced. Their faith in God drove them to act boldly. Can we say the same?

I have never seen an angel or had one speak to me, but I have seen God's faithfulness and saving grace repeatedly in my life. Yet, when it comes to shamelessly seeking evidence of what I believe God has told me and then telling others about it, I remain in the countryside with my fellow sheep rather than boldly going into town. I can't remember the last time when religious fervor overwhelmed me to the point where I acted without caring about my safety (social, economic, or otherwise). What about you? As we celebrate the birth of the Messiah this Christmas season, what is the Spirit showing you and asking you to share with others? Do you need to seek confirmation about what God has told you or seek answers to questions you have? Or have you found the answers and need to proclaim them to others? Can you be like the shepherds—seeking God with haste and telling others what you have found?

God, I confess that I have limited my worship and faithfulness. I have allowed fear to keep me on the hillside rather than go into town to seek and see if what You have told me is true, and to then boldly proclaim what You have done to others. Forgive me. May I be more like the shepherds, moving in haste towards You and Your work. Then, in confidence, I can proclaim Your praise while returning, completely changed, to where You have sent me—doing that which You have entrusted me to do. May my eyes search the lands for Your work and lips always sing Your praise. Amen.

Ariel Bloomer

January 2

How Majestic Is Your Name

Psalm 8

“O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, NRSV)

Psalm 8 is a psalm of praise and adoration, a psalm of joy, a psalm of celebration. Psalm 8 celebrates the majesty of God’s creation and the honor bestowed upon humanity. This psalm sets the stage for our contemplation of Christ’s coming and revelation.

Psalm 8 invites us to meditate on the grandeur of God and our place within God’s creation. The psalm is a call to recognize the divine presence in the ordinary, a recognition that opens our hearts to the profound mystery of the incarnation.

It begins with a powerful declaration of “O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” The majesty of God’s name, reflected in all creation, calls us to lift our gaze from the lives before us to the splendor of the Creator. As we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the one through whom all things were made, this season invites us to renew our sense of wonder and reverence for the God who spoke the universe into existence and chose to dwell among us.

In the quiet after Christmas Day, we can meditate on the beauty and complexity of creation—the expanse of the night sky, the intricate design of life, and the delicate balance of nature. And the psalm invites us to ponder the vastness of God’s work—“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established” (Ps 8:3). This reflection calls us to a deeper appreciation of the Creator’s craftsmanship and a greater awareness of God’s presence in our lives.

We can marvel at humanity’s place within creation: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Ps 8:4). This question highlights the tension between our perceived insignificance and God’s profound care for us. In the grand scheme of the cosmos, we are tiny specks. And yet, the Creator of the universe is intimately concerned with each of us. This contrast becomes even more striking as we celebrate Christ’s

birth. In the person of Jesus, God's mindfulness and care are made clear in the most humble and unexpected way—a baby born in a stable.

God has bestowed dignity and purpose upon us. “Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). This is a profound statement of human worth and divine intention. At the end of Advent, we witnessed the fulfillment of this divine honor in the birth of Jesus, who embodies the perfect union of humanity and divinity. Through Christ, we see the ultimate expression of God's glory and honor falling upon us.

As we move toward Epiphany, we can reflect on how Jesus, the light of the world, becomes known to all people, and this revelation of Jesus as the Savior of all humanity underscores the truth expressed in Psalm 8. The same God who created the stars and named them has come into the world as a vulnerable child. This revelation illuminates our understanding of God's majestic name and the divine purpose for humanity.

When we read “O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” we also hear an invitation to respond with renewed worship and gratitude. We can let this refrain guide our reflections and celebrations. It can remind us that the Creator's majesty appears not only in the grandeur of creation but also in the humble and profound mystery of the incarnation.

Psalm 8 challenges us to live with a sense of purpose and reverence, understanding that our worth is defined not by our own achievements but by our relationship with the Creator. As we celebrate Christ's coming and revelation to the world, let us reflect on the majesty of God's name and the honor bestowed upon us. In this season, may we embrace the divine mystery and respond with lives that reflect the glory and honor we have received.

O Lord, our Lord, let us embrace the wonder of Your creation and the honor given to humanity. Let us open our hearts to receive the Christ child, who comes to us with divine majesty wrapped in human frailty. As we witness the unfolding revelation of Jesus, may we recognize the depth of Your love and the significance of our place within Your creation, and may our lives reflect the majesty of Your name in all the earth. Amen.

Jennifer Reinsch Schroeder

January 3

Considering Others

Philippians 2:5–11

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. . . .” (Philippians 2:5)

In a remarkable statement that is perhaps one of the earliest Christian hymns, the Apostle Paul provides an outline of God’s work of redemption through Jesus. He describes Jesus’s movement from being the image of God to becoming a human being. Paul identifies this act of humility as an act of obedience that results in Jesus’s death. The movement does not end with that death, however. God raises Jesus up and exalts him with the result that all of creation will honor Jesus as Lord.

Several aspects of this stunning story—especially the first part—make it appropriate to meditate on during this Christmas season. First, as soaring and grand as this statement’s conclusion is, Paul includes this summary of Jesus’s entrance into the world in the hope that it will lead to unity within the Philippian church. In verses 1–4, Paul chooses language to address a church with divisions. I don’t think anyone will be surprised if I claim that we live in a world in which human beings divide against one another. This occurs between nations; it occurs within nations; and, lamentably, it occurs within the church. So perhaps our reflecting on these words during this season can move us toward unity.

Second, Paul seems to connect the divisions in Philippi to misguided ways of thinking. Verses 2–4 are filled with “thinking” vocabulary: the Philippians are to “have the same mind”; they are to “be of one mind.” Paul also tells them to “regard others as better” than themselves and to look to the interests of others rather than to their own interests. Paul does not write to congratulate a unified church that thinks well; he is trying to improve their thinking so that they might live in harmony.

Third, Paul’s language makes clear that he introduces the story of Jesus’s entry into the world in order to help the Philippians think in more Christ-like ways. He calls attention to Jesus’s thinking about himself and, by implication, others. Paul says that Jesus “considers”

his status in relationship to God. Whatever exactly the phrases “in the form of God” and “equality with God” might mean, they surely indicate a status of the highest value. Upon considering this status, Jesus gives it up for a status much less valuable.

To emphasize the point, Paul states that Jesus took the form of a slave—a status less than human in the ancient Mediterranean world. He does this for the benefit of human beings. Even though Paul does not explicitly say so here, we know from other letters that Paul understood Jesus’s death to be for the sake of others (see, for example, 1 Cor 15:3). Many Christian writers call attention to Jesus’s emptying of himself. They rightly celebrate this act of humility—of obedience—that resulted in the reconciliation of the world to God. But what Paul wanted the Philippians to understand and what is so important for Christians today to see, is that Jesus’s emptying follows a healthy assessment of himself and a decision to act for the benefit of others.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we should heed Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians regarding the importance of proper thinking with respect to ourselves and others. Our world needs to see that human beings who honor God and recognize Jesus as God’s Messiah can live in unity and in peace with one another. Paul insists that Jesus demonstrated the way for this to happen and it comes through reevaluating our own importance in relationship to those who are our sisters and brothers.

God, we pray that as we celebrate Your Son’s coming into the world that we remember that this was a decision he made for the benefit of others. He chose to give up a valuable status to become and to benefit human beings. May we similarly live our lives in ways that consider the needs of others as more important than our own. And in so doing, may we grow closer to unity as your people.

Richard Wright

January 4

God's Redemption Story

Galatians 4:4-7

“So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” (Galatians 4:7)

When we think of Christmas, we often think of the nativity scene, which resembles parts of the birth stories in Matthew or Luke. When we read and re-read the Bible, we find that biblical writers have many ways of telling God's redemption story. Today's reading is from Paul, who took a birds-eye view in this passage.

In Galatians 4:4-7, in the midst of a long, complex argument to Gentile Christians, Paul gets right to the point by telling about Christ coming to earth and what it means for them. When the time was right, he says, God sent his Son, born of a woman, to redeem those under the law so that all might be adopted as God's children. As Gentiles, the Galatians were not anticipating a Savior or Messiah like the Jews were, yet they found out that they were redeemed anyway. As God had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, God has now rescued all people from slavery with the sending of his Son. God rescued those who had been enslaved to the law as well as those who were enslaved to “elemental spiritual forces of the world” (4:3). God's Son invaded a world where all are enslaved to something, in order to redeem and make adoption available for all.

This is amazing news for those who never thought they could be included in the Kingdom of God! This is also amazing news for those who thought they were included but that they had to follow a lot of rules to be included. Many of us today fall into one of these two camps: either thinking that we can never be saved or that we have to earn our way to salvation (or we might think of it as earning our way into God's good graces). According to Paul, we all need redemption, and God is the one who redeems.

In one of the earliest references to what we now call the Trinity, Paul writes that after God redeemed people through His Son, God sent the Spirit, who calls out “Abba, Father.”

We know God intimately because we have the Spirit inside of us. This is not a tale of being taught what to do, working hard, and achieving great things or winning a prize. We are not learning enough to save ourselves or doing enough to save ourselves. We are not working our way towards a relationship with God. We are not trying to become good enough to be God's children. God sent his Son to redeem us, adopted us, and has given us the Spirit to foster a close relationship with us. We can be close to God because God has made it possible.

And finally more great news! Since the Galatians are no longer slaves but God's children, they have also become heirs. Just as the Israelites were heirs to the promised land after God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, the Galatians and all Gentile Christians join Jewish Christians in being heirs to God's Kingdom. Notice that no work has been done by any people at this point in Paul's explanation of this amazing redemption story.

Many of us are familiar with the Broadway musical or movie *Annie*. How many of us watched it when we were young thinking how amazing it was that she was adopted by a rich dad? We understood her yearning for her real parents but maybe secretly thought that adoption by a millionaire was even better. Here Paul tells us that we are children and heirs to the one true God even though we have done nothing to deserve it. God has swooped in and saved us from enslavement to whatever we may give ourselves over to and has given us the freedom that comes with being children and heirs, knowing that we are completely loved. God has redeemed us, and we are his.

Lord, may our lives reflect the joy You have filled us with as we accept Your redemption. May we be in tune with the Spirit who leads us closer and closer to You. Thank You for sending Your Son for us; thank You for making us Your children and heirs of Your kingdom. Please help us live into Your amazing redemption story.

Kaley Ihfe

January 5

When God Is Revealed

John 1:10–18

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory” (John 1:14)*

This is it—the reason for Epiphany. This is the reason we wait expectantly to celebrate the joys of Christmas and why we stretch out our celebrations for 12 days. Until this moment, God has stayed mostly off the stage as the story is told. We read in Scripture that God spoke the world into existence and, in myriad ways, continued to guide prophets, judges, and kings, but God has only rarely become physically manifest. That changes here. God becomes incarnate, having a body as humans do. God lives with ordinary people: carpenters, shepherds, and fishermen; God works with them and grows weary with them. God rests, and eats, and has lively conversations with them, face to face.

The stage is set. The climactic reveal has come. This is the moment everyone has been waiting for across generations; promises have been kept; the glory of God is more present in the world than ever before. God walks among the people as one of them . . . and they do not recognize their God in this body. Isn't this the son of some carpenter in Galilee? No one important ever came from there.

It is easy to laugh, to ask how they could miss the miracle happening quietly before their eyes in every moment they spend face to face with their creator. But how many of us could see the face of God behind the trappings of a poor itinerant preacher who uses hillsides and fishing boats in place of a pulpit? It is easy, two thousand years later, to forget how extraordinary it is that God would meet humanity in such an ordinary body without riches or political connections. That is one of the reasons why we set time aside each year to remind ourselves of the miracle of the incarnation.

We take a season every year to remember the years of waiting and to marvel at the mystery of it all. For a season, we remember that God is kind enough to reveal the glory of God's

own self to us, and we sing cheery songs and reflect a little more of that kindness. But as much as Christmas is the season of joy and giving, we too often tire of it by this point. It is natural by the twelfth day of Christmas to have pulled down the boxes from the attic to store the decorations until next year. Epiphany will come tomorrow, and by January 7th we are expected to go back to our ordinary lives and take a break from all this waiting and remembering. As people born into the world after the first advent of Christ, it is all too easy to live our everyday lives without realizing that we live in a world forever changed by this moment.

Life comes in seasons. When Epiphany ends it will be time to pack away trees and wreaths, to lay aside these devotions and move on to others. Don't pack away the wonder and joy with the lights and garland. Just as God entered the ordinary and mundane parts of this world, God continues to work in everyday moments when special and holy seasons have come and gone. We have been intentional in receiving Jesus as children of God in this season, so let us continue to watch and wait for the moments when God will join us throughout the coming year. We worship a God who steps into our world, who invites us to look more closely, to recognize the divine in front of us, and to take part in God's own family. This invitation extends beyond Christmas and into eternity.

God, we welcome You into our world and our homes to live with us here and now. Give us the eyes to recognize You when You meet us here. We thank You for inviting us to live as Your children and to bear witness to Your glory. May we never regard these blessings as ordinary. Amen.

Karen Cooke

January 6

Homage

Matthew 2:1–12

“The sight of the star filled them with delight. . . .” (Matthew 2:10)

It is the season when Jack Frost nips at our toes and sugar plum fairies dance in our heads. We gather as families around familiar stories like Act 2 of the 1892 ballet *The Nutcracker* where dancing to the music of Tchaikovsky chills us. We anticipate retelling family stories around the table. And, of course, we retell the story of the first Christmas when Jesus was born in a manger.

If you consider most Christmas nativity scenes, you will find a conflation of Matthew and Luke’s narratives. Fortunately, the liturgical calendar separates Luke’s version from Matthew’s and retells the story on Epiphany on January 6. The theophany of the holy nativity of Jesus places us on holy ground; no one leaves unchanged.

Unlike Luke, Matthew’s version encompasses the tenacity of promise and the grit of threat. If adapted into a play, Matthew’s story shifts dramatically between scenes of a house of promise and a palace of threat. Let’s view the two scenes from the balcony. Such an angle allows our vision to shift between scenes without experiencing whiplash.

Everyone finds their seat, cell phones are silenced, and the orchestra begins. Enter stage right, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to pay him homage” (2:1–3). The signs in the heavens only partially lead these magi to their destination. They arrive in Jerusalem seeking further directions. Inquisitive magi from afar come to the seat of power seeking one who is truly worthy of their life’s devotion, though they lack the knowledge to find him.

But this is no children’s play. Sitting on his throne is King Herod, already designated “the king of the Jews.” If the wise ones had known Herod, they would not have come to him. A despot capable of genocide, Herod rules unpredictably. Herod turns to those who have the wisdom to know. He calls together the chief priests and scribes to inquire about the

Messiah's birthplace. Herod knows the right question to ask, and these scribes know the answer. But knowing the answer does not lead them to the way of wisdom. The irony of the scribes proof-texting Micah is that Israel missed it. Between threat and promise, Israel did not see their salvation. And when the magi later realize Herod's wickedness, they return on another road.

How they survive their first encounter is a mystery. The key is found deep in Herod's treachery, for he too asks, "Where indeed is he?" The talk of Messiah, a sign from God in the heavens, is both a promise and a threat. And in his fear, Herod says, "I too want to go and pay him homage" (1:8). Let the word "homage" linger, for the gospel alights here. And the lights fade as the scene closes and the curtain falls as the magi exit the stage.

During intermission, reflect on how we live in the tension between threat and promise. Whether economic, political, social, or psychological, the crux of the matter is spiritual. The promise of the Messiah fills the room with the hope of God's dawning restoration. Yet, we look at our neighborhoods, cities, and nations and still see that it is not yet so. In our angst, we fill the vacuum with false hopes, empty promises, and void dreams. We long for and pay homage to lesser virtues and deceitful vices. Phillips Brooks's words in his 1868 hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," capture the sentiment of Matthew's day, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." Will anyone follow the magi on their journey? Or will shrines along the way lure captives to idolatry or make the fainthearted cower in hiding?

Enter stage left, as the curtain rises the tenor of the scene changes. The magi come to Bethlehem overjoyed. Their first response when they see Jesus is to "kneel down and pay him homage" (1:10). They bow down with gifts and adoration. To "adore and offer" is a definition of worship in any language. In whatever way you say it, "To praise and sacrifice, magnify and forfeit, glorify and relinquish, revere and give, exalt and dedicate, honor and consecrate, love and devote," the couplet defines our only response. The house lights come on, and the only legitimate response is to join the magi in paying homage to the king.

Like many good stories, this one is followed by an epilogue. The little baby in a manger grew up and got killed. Not by Herod and the religious establishment of his day (although not for a lack of trying) but by Pilate and the political institutions of his day. From the beginning, Jesus was a threat. From his birth, they sought to kill him. And, in a different time and place, they succeeded.

Whether it was in Bethlehem or on a hill, he also represented a promise. In the midst of our fears, with threats to our faith, homage is often lost. While folk often leave the playhouse entertained, we must leave Matthew's play moved to adore and to offer.

Our dear Lord, in this season of Your appearing, what can we do other than magnify and adore You. Please accept our gifts of praise, our sacrifice of love, and our hearts of devotion. Amen.

Tim Sensing

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