

Meditations and Prayers for the Season of Advent

SINGING WITH THE SHEPHERDS

VOL. III

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

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DEDICATION

*To the Children Now Learning the Faith
and All Those Teaching Them*

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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 A 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.

Mark W. Hamilton and Kelli Gibson

SCHEDULE OF MEDITATIONS

Date	Text	Date	Text
November 27	Psalms 122	December 18	Galatians 3:23-29
November 28	Hebrews 11:1-7	December 19	Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19
November 29	Matthew 24:1-22	December 20	John 3:31-36
November 30 First Sunday in Advent	Psalms 25:1-10	December 21 Fourth Sunday in Advent	Micah 5:2-5a
December 1	Psalms 124	December 22	Isaiah 33:17-22
December 2	Genesis 9:1-17	December 23	Luke 1:46b-55
December 3	Isaiah 54:1-10	December 24 Christmas Eve	Titus 2:11-14
December 4	Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19	December 25 Christmas Day	John 1:1-14
December 5	Isaiah 40:1-11	December 26	Psalms 148
December 6	John 1:19-28	December 27	1 John 5:1-12
December 7 Second Sunday in Advent	Luke 1:68-79	December 28 First Sunday After Christmas	Colossians 3:12-17
December 8	Psalms 21	December 29	Psalms 20
December 9	Isaiah 41:14-20	December 30	Isaiah 26:1-9
December 10	Matthew 12:33-37	December 31	John 8:12-19
December 11	Ruth 1:6-18	January 1 New Year's Day	Philippians 2:5-11
December 12	2 Peter 3:11-18	January 2	Genesis 12:1-7
December 13	Psalms 146:5-10	January 3	Hebrews 11:13-22
December 14 Third Sunday in Advent	Philippians 4:4-7	January 4 Second Sunday After Christmas	Ephesians 1:3-14
December 15	Acts 5:12-16	January 5	Hebrews 11:32-12:2
December 16	Psalms 42	January 6 Epiphany	Isaiah 60:1-6
December 17	Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34		



NOVEMBER 27

I REJOICED WHEN THEY CALLED

Psalm 122

*I rejoiced when they said to me,
“Let us go up to the LORD’s house. . . .” (Psalm 122)*

Our Advent meditations begin this year with a pilgrims’ song. One of the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), this brief song words an individual’s celebration of a community’s love for a place and all that place stands for. Sometime after the reconstruction of Jerusalem following the Babylonian Captivity, the crowd of people singing the psalm parades toward a restored temple where they expect to meet the God who met their ancestors and would meet all who loved peace.

The song enacts a drama full of interesting characters: the “I” voicing the words, who rejoices in the prospect of pilgrimage and, long after the sanitation crew sweeps up the confetti, the ongoing peace of the once troubled city; “they,” the ones who also joined the parade to remember the past, good and bad, and welcome the future; and the “you” (feminine singular) of Jerusalem, the city not only of stone and mortar, but of dreams and hopes. The love of community and the love of place meet in the minds of all singing the song.

The drama also has a plot. A long backstory precedes the song, one filled both with the “thrones of David,” symbols of great rulers from Judah’s past (now charitably remembered) who wrought justice for vulnerable people, and with the moment of tragedy, the destruction of the city. The story continues in the moment of song as the community (“I” and “they”) joins together to sing a love song to their city and all it signifies.

The final chapter remains unwritten, however. This song presents characters in search of a conclusion. That conclusion comes under the head of *shalom*, peace or well-being or concord. The singer bids others to “seek” *shalom*, indicating its status as an aspiration, not a fixed reality and not a sure thing. They should work for, pray for, long for that peace for both the city’s buildings and for its walls, which the song hopes will never be needed for protection

but only as a status symbol (as in Isaiah 60). The absence of chaos and conflict both within and without—that is the sought-for conclusion of the story.

The song ends by naming those for whom such well-being or concord matters—“for the sake of my siblings and my neighbors” and “for the sake of the LORD’s temple.” The psalm ends where it began, with a community of righteous people coming to a house of prayer, a place of reconciliation and renewal.

This prayer figures as part of a long history of praying for Jerusalem itself as a holy place. That literal prayer deserves attention today, and it should be a given for Christians, who seek to live at peace with all people, as Jesus taught us.

At the same time, the prayer applies more generally, since we not only value the earthly place of Jerusalem and the good it can stand for, but we also value the eternal city to which it points and the eternal peace that reigns there. Yesterday’s injustice, today’s horror, and the dreams of future cruelty all fade away. Our prayers and the lives honoring those prayers help rewrite the human story so that it may end in such eventuality. This is not so because of our human capacities, but because our prayers seek the God who meets us, like the “I” and the “they” in this song.

Again, this song serves well as the source of our first Advent meditation because this season carries forward the ancient prayers of peace, the ancient love of place and community, and the ancient commitment to actions that help build a better world. Like the first pilgrims praying this psalm, we long for every place to be one of peace and every human being to experience well-being, wholeness, concord. We wish to say to all the world, “Come, and let us go to God’s house and celebrate together.”

O God who rebuilds ruined cities and ruined lives, who knits together seekers and makers of peace across lines of language, history, and culture, stitch together our severed relationships. Reorder our distracted, diseased minds so that we also may seek the peace not only of Jerusalem, but of every city and village. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



NOVEMBER 28

TRUSTING IN THE UNSEEN

Hebrews 11:1–7

*“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for
and assurance about what we do not see.*

This is what the ancients were commended for” (Hebrews 11:1–2)

My grandma put empty boxes under the Christmas tree. They were shiny and colorful, carefully wrapped, swathed in ribbons and bows. But empty. For eleven months they resided in a closet, holding holiday décor and other implements for the season. In November, after she’d brought the boxes out and distributed their festive innards around her tiny home, she closed them again and used them to fill the space under her tiny artificial tree in the corner of the front room. But they were empty—something I discovered the first time I sneaked a quick grab-and-shake while no one was looking.

The boxes looked like wrapped gifts, they promised Christmas joy, but they did not hold the real thing. I was still too young to appreciate Grandma’s simple economy of storage or the clever way she made her meager tree look more bountiful. After a Christmas or two, once I realized that the faux gifts were not the whole story and that Grandma would have genuine presents for us in time, I gained a new appreciation for those jolly, empty gift boxes. They heralded the season, they made promises about the future, they got us excited about what was coming.

The author of Hebrews is trying to remind a group of ancient believers about promises, to renew their trust in the unseen God they served, to reignite their hope and get them excited about what was coming. At first, they had trusted the promises of the gospel, believing the message, committing to the Lord and sacrificing for him. But time wore on. As things became more difficult, and what they longed for didn’t materialize, they wondered: How can we rely on something—on someone—we cannot see?

Today’s reading reminds us that this is what we were called to: faith, a confidence and assurance in the unseen, to a hope not yet realized. Yet it’s not a baseless faith or just wishful

thinking. It is a faith grounded in testimony and experience. Even creation is a glimpse of hope fulfilled. We weren't present at the moment of creation, yet here it is! And we believe God made it all. Even more, the very world in which we live teaches us that everything seen has its origin in the unseen. If I trust the ground on which I walk, my own footsteps are a way of practicing my trust in the unseen One who made and sustains it.

Abel could not see his future reward, but he trusted the God he worshiped. His suffering and death take nothing away from his faith, a faith that speaks to us from beyond the grave. His suffering was not the reward, but it accentuates hope in an unseen fulfillment, waiting beyond his sacrifice. The faithful are like Enoch, who was rescued from the struggles of this life by wonderful means that no human could foresee or understand because, like him, they believe that God exists and rewards those who earnestly seek him. Noah could not see the promised flood before it came, but he believed God, so he invested his labor, time, and honor, struggling at his assigned tasks for years because of his faith in something unseen: a promised day of rescue and a day of judgment.

Christmas Day is coming. We cannot see it yet, though the next few weeks will give us hints galore, making promises at every turn: shopping lists, the scent of warm spices, nativity scenes, caroling, brightly wrapped presents gathering under the tree. We cannot see the Day yet, but all the hints and promises will make it nearly impossible for us to disbelieve in its coming. As we lean into the activities, taking in the sights and smells, we practice a kind of hope for the Day.

Perhaps this gives us a clue about how to enter the season, with some appreciation for its trappings. They are not all empty; many are meaningful and hopeful. Yet they are provisional. Our true hope is in the Lord's coming. The season invites us to practice that hope, by attending to the hints and promises, the rhythms and gestures, telling stories of faith and living out our own faith. Reading and prayer, singing and service, celebration and endurance—these things help bring our hope into focus, orienting our lives toward the will of the God who keeps his promises.

O God, I believe in you and trust your promises, but I long for deeper confidence. On the days my trust wavers and I do not feel hopeful, I am grateful for your patience and support. As I begin this season, show me ways that I can practice my hope for the Lord's coming, through prayer, in celebration, and in service. Amen.

Jeff W. Childers



NOVEMBER 29

WHOEVER HEARD OF A PAINLESS BIRTH?

Matthew 24:1-22

*“These things are like the first pains when
something new is about to be born” (Matthew 24:8)*

Babies, babies, babies! God loves to create life, and people are God’s favorite. A name is announced, “Gretchen, Nasir, Alora, Omar,” and the world is forever changed. Jesus. In his last several chapters, Matthew fastidiously documents Jesus’s final week before his crucifixion and the teaching frenzy Jesus undertakes. Is it a birth story? It sure sounds like it.

2025 has been a year full of life. So many births, each with a different story as they join the life of their family. A planned C-section, an unplanned one, a completely healthy boy (yet skinny!) born a miraculous seven weeks early. A little girl born prematurely whose earthly life lasted only a few hours. One young gent arrived faster than Dad could (should?) drive and was born in the back of the car. For real. Such a story of beginning. Life is a miracle, dare we say born of terror every time. Every life, whether measured by minutes and hours or days and years, contains moments of inspiration and hope.

Because they are intimate yet common, people tend to share birth stories as a part of growing friendship. They tell about their own children and share about nieces and nephews over whom pride swells. Some children of friends feel like our own. Everybody has a birth story and no two are the same. There is no “yada, yada, you know how it goes.” As much as any anxious parent might learn and plan there’s literally no telling how it might go. The fact that there could be so many different ways a common story could be told is a miracle in itself: a way to know and a way to become known.

Jesus did this too. To shore up their hope, he told the story of his return and the birth of kingdom perfection. But it is not a story without pain.

Just before his passion, Jesus prophesies painful events to his followers. The Temple buildings will topple. Deceivers will claim to be God. War, famine, and terrifying events will come upon people even while the good news of the kingdom of God is preached.

Jesus describes the fruit of people distancing themselves from God and going their own way, corruption.

Jesus is not trying to scare the followers in his last days. Scaring people in order to force change is not Jesus's loving way.

Jesus, grieving, weeps for the holy city. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37). Not forcing change, but explaining what people understand most basically as "what goes around comes around," God gives to people what their actions ultimately prove they want. Humans functioning apart from divine guidance are limited in their ability to see that what they think they want is not what they truly want at all. It will destroy them, leaving no stone upon another. God does not force the gift of peace and the fullest possible joy of obedience on anyone. Jesus explains, as did God through the prophets of old, what a terrible time it will be when the consequences of people's own actions mature and come back on them. In God's grace this terrible time will be short.

Does it feel short like that back seat birth? Or does it feel more like that twenty-four hours of induced labor that preceded the C-section? When people find themselves in the wake of corruption, we can remember Jesus's grief and know our suffering grieves the heart of God.

Fast forward a few thousand years. We are these followers, and we wait. Regardless of the painful story we each could tell, new life is coming from, through, and despite our suffering. Advent begins; tomorrow is coming. Through the life of the Child of this season, heaven and earth are reborn. The pain of this life sharpens our vision to watch for when newness may come. It strengthens our resolve that the pain is productive. In this we find hope. It is often unexpected. Sometimes it is skinny, but it is real and it breathes and it grows.

"For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:39).

God, together we wait. As a community and because you are in community with people, we trust this strange path to blessing that is grief, pain, and struggle. We open our hands to your peace while releasing and trusting. Our faith is feeble; your faithfulness is flawless. We are here. Jesus have mercy; yes to you, Spirit. Amen.

Beth Ann Fisher



NOVEMBER 30

FINDING DELIVERANCE'S PATH

Psalm 25:1-10

*"Direct me by your truth and teach me,
for you are the God who saves me. . . ." (Psalm 25:5)*

With GPS on our phones, it's hard to remember the time, not so many years ago, when we carried in our cars big paper maps, which we read and re-read before stopping to ask for directions. Even today, the phone sometimes misdirects us because the map is not the same as the land itself. Finding the true path from Point A to Point B challenges us partly because we are not sure we want to arrive there after all.

The metaphor of pathfinding shows up in Psalm 25 as a way of describing not travel but life itself. The slogan "Life is a journey" has become a cliché, but it began as a substantial way of thinking about human existence. It began, in fact, in ancient times, when travel challenged even the most intrepid adventurer. Finding the right path, free from danger and leading toward the right destination was not something to take for granted.

Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem, with each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (except qoph, which somehow went missing). This poetic form allows the poet to hint at completeness as every thought on the subject "from A to Z" appears. The comprehensive idea here involves the role of God as the pathfinder and guide for life itself. Filled with infinite compassion and mercy, the psalm-singer's God invites anyone singing this poem to travel the path in full confidence of safe arrival at the ultimate destination.

Verses 5 and 6 seem especially salient, as the poem shifts slightly from the metaphor of path to the metaphor of teaching, or rather of God as teacher. "Direct me in your trustworthy way and teach me," the poem pleads. And then a line that could be rendered in one of two ways. Does the rest of the verse say, "teach me because you are the God who saves me" or "teach me that you are the God who saves me"? Or put another way, is God's commitment to delivering human beings the primary qualification of the divine teacher, or is it the content

of the curriculum? Either rendering makes good sense of the Hebrew text, though English translations generally prefer the former.

Perhaps at the end of the day, the decision does not matter. Either way, the psalm proposes a tight relationship between God's radical commitment to freeing human beings from whatever enslaves us, whether our sins or someone else's, and the response the human learning from God will make. We trust God's actions because we trust God's character. We learn about God's character through God's actions. The circle of the spiritual life draws us in and orients us toward our true selves and our true destiny. The Point A of our soul travels to the Point B of God's abiding presence.

Verse 6 takes all this a step further. It seems that humans do not do all the work in learning. The psalm prays, "Remember your mercies, O LORD." The prayer asks God to do what all teachers must do, to cultivate the memory in such a way as to lead the student in the proper direction. Here, God must manage memory by remembering acts of mercy and (v. 7) forgetting "the sins of my youth." Every teacher must do that, for otherwise we would never help anyone progress.

"Teaching" and "remembering" together describe an ecology of learning, a mental and social space in which the pursuit of truth can flourish, leading eventually to arrival at spiritual health. The psalm hopes for that, and of course we still hope for that. Awareness of the truth is itself a form of deliverance, since believing lies is necessary for living them. Disbelieving lies breaks their grip on us.

This psalm makes a final turn at the end. The last line does not fit the acrostic pattern, and it shifts the focus from the individual to the group. The praying person who trusts God seeks deliverance for the people of Israel, and so for the bearers of divine promise. We cannot content ourselves with deliverance only for ourselves. We must share the experience for it to gain its full power.

During this Advent season, let us recommit ourselves to the art of learning how to live by recognizing how often we wander off the map, how many wrong turns we take, and how easily distracted our driving can be. Yes, all of that. But let us recognize still more that the trailblazing, pathfinding God precedes us and shows us the way.

O God of long roads and life's glorious scenery, teach us where to go and how to get there. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 1

THINGS COULD BE DIFFERENT

Psalm 124

*“Our help is in the name of the LORD,
the maker of heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8)*

It might have been different.

When we reflect on our lives’ turning points, we realize the truth of that statement. During the long nights when we rehearse our mistakes or moral failures, we reckon with the moments when we might have treated loved ones better or shown greater integrity in our work or play. Things might have been different.

But the same is true of more positive features of our lives. Many moments of joy or success, times when the dice rolled our way also show up in our reflections on our lives. Probably those times far outnumber the more negative ones, and on balance we live better than we deserve. We all know that.

Yet there is a third zone of contingency that we must acknowledge. In the realm of faith in God, we also acknowledge that things might be different. Faith calls us to trust in God’s promises, to expect relief from the forces of evil, and to anticipate spiritual guidance in times of faltering and potential folly. Oftentimes, however, we do not know for awhile that God will deliver. Uncertainty is part of faith. Faith is not a mathematical formula, but a stance toward another person, God. In moments when we cannot imagine a solution to a problem or envision relief from oppression or suffering, nevertheless, we trust.

As an exploration of what might have been, Psalm 124 comes in a sequence of songs of pilgrimage, the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). In the songs’ first life, pilgrims to the temple in Jerusalem sang them as they processed into the Holy City. This psalm follows a song describing Israel’s relationship with God as that of a servant watching a master’s hands to see what the master would do. Deliverance should come, but it has not come yet.

Psalm 125, meanwhile, speaks of the deliverance “those who trust in the LORD” experience. Faith becomes sight over and over without the need for faith ever disappearing.

Psalm 124, meanwhile, sits in the middle, in the moment when what might be becomes what never was. The psalmist draws on the ancient language of the waters of chaos threatening all life and good. That language draws, in turn, on the even older primitive human terror of drowning. The waters that “would have swallowed us alive” symbolize any sort of power that can consume helpless victims. The waters and floods point to the helplessness of so much of human existence. The language of snares and escaping birds serves the same purpose. The endangered person and community lives to see another day.

What might have been? Disaster, that’s what. Suffering. Loss. Extinction.

The psalm invites the pilgrims to sing about moments of deliverance they as a community have experienced. It does not specify the timing or nature of those moments, leaving the pilgrims to fill in the gaps. Given the weight of the events surrounding Babylonian Exile, that experience played the role of Disaster Number One in the singers’ minds, but the psalm remains open-ended. Anytime the community faces the possibility of its end, it can call up words like these to remind itself that it has survived disaster before.

There is a risk for interpreters here, as always. Many of us sing the words “Had it not been the LORD who was on our side” in church, possibly without thinking much about the tensions they reveal. Smugness and complacency tempt us when we think of God as on our side, or if we translate the Hebrew even more literally, “for us” or “pertaining to us.” We may come to think of God as the ultimate insurance policy, a very big ace up our sleeve. But not so fast.

The psalm knows we face the spiritual danger of arrogance. Yet God remains God, and we remain creatures. We must live in the tension of not knowing but hoping, not seeing but imagining, not hearing but joining the song anyway. God cannot be a magician empowering our best life now, whether as individuals or churches. We live in a relationship with God built on trust because we have not yet seen all that someday can be.

The last line says it all, pointing to the ultimate contingency, the universe itself. “Our help is in the name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.” The reality of creation itself, which need not have happened, witnesses to the God who, in order to express love, created worlds to receive that love, including us. What might not have been truly is.

O God, be our helper so that the forces seeking to dissolve your creation, even those forces living inside our own souls, do not swallow us. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 2

A RAINBOW AND A BABE

Genesis 9:1-17

*“Whoever sheds human blood, by other humans must his blood be shed;
for in God’s image God has made humankind” (Genesis 9:6)*

Blood. It always comes down to blood. Written that way, it seems this will be an introduction for a horror or thriller rather than a Christmas devotional. Yet, here in Genesis 9, we read once again about the importance of blood, the importance of life, and the importance of God’s creation—a repeated theme throughout Scripture that resonates in Christ.

The devotional text in Genesis is part of a well-known story. However, most might struggle to recall anything beyond the rainbow promise, which often features beautifully in children’s books: after the flood, comes the rainbow, God’s promise not to destroy the world in the same way again. That reduction of God’s conversation with Noah, while understandable when speaking to children, fails to convey the full extent of this passage and, more importantly for our purposes this season, how it relates to Christ.

Let’s look at the story again. Following destruction comes a blessing, which begins this covenant. Familiar words—“be fruitful and multiply”—are spoken over Noah, along with the additional promise of safety from animals, as they would fear humanity. Then immediately, after these promises comes a warning not to eat the blood of animals nor kill other humans. Why? Blood is sacred because blood is life. By spilling human blood, we kill the person bearing God’s image. Hence the covenant: God won’t destroy the earth again by a flood, and we aren’t supposed to destroy God’s image. Thankfully, however, God’s covenant isn’t contingent on us. God’s willingness to keep God’s promise, even when humans fail, was evident when God neither made it a condition for not flooding the Earth, nor designated the rainbow as a reminder for humans (v. 15). Instead, the rainbow is a reminder for God.

God knew that humans would fail to honor life. Humans would destroy the image of God by taking the lifeblood of other humans, and we most certainly have failed. It can be

tempting to distance yourself from that moment in history. To claim it was *they*, not *I*, who killed Christ. I don't kill God's image, I want to say. Yet, to accept Christ as a savior is to acknowledge that it was my sin that put him on that cross.

Also, I have no doubt I would have been shouting with the crowd to crucify him. How do I know? Because I have tried to kill God's image before. Not physically (no need to call the cops), but in other ways—mentally, emotionally, and verbally. I have vilified people, been prejudiced, and treated people as less than I am. Every time I did that, intentionally or accidentally, I not only failed to acknowledge God's image in that person but tried to repress or destroy it. Are you willing to admit the same? Can you see how you, too, have failed to keep the covenant?

That moment, the shedding of Christ's blood, however, was God-ordained and the very reason Christ came. I do not have to die, as verse six demands, because Christ died for me.

I need reminders of this, though. In a busy life, it is hard to remember. In a season filled with pretty lights, warm feelings, and hot chocolate, the cross can seem distant. After all, it's hard to picture the bloody image of the savior in conjunction with the idealized nativity scenes resting on a mantel. Still, they belong together, just like a rainbow after a flood. Perhaps it is time we took a page from God's book and saw the baby in the manger as a reminder, a little like the rainbow: a reminder of the importance of life after destruction, of the blood and the cross.

Lord, Creator and Destroyer, Bringer of Justice and Mercy, thank you for the rainbow. Thank you for the manger. Thank you for the cross. Forgive us for destroying your image in our thoughts, words, and actions. Forgive us for mistreating your creation. May we not reduce this season to a children's edited story, as we often do with the Flood. May we not miss what you are reminding us of and calling us to in this time and place. You came to die so we can live. "Thank you" isn't enough, so here is my life as a fragrant offering. Praise be your name. Amen.

Ariel Bloomer



DECEMBER 3

A NEW FUTURE

Isaiah 54:1-10

“To me, this is like the waters of Noah, when I swore I wouldn’t make the waters of Noah deluge the earth. . . . Though the mountains erode and the hills shake, my steadfast love will not erode from you, nor my covenant of peace shake. . . .” (Isaiah 54:9-10)

How do you talk to a group of people who have suffered a shared tragedy? How do you help them avoid soul-searing despair or eat-drink-and-be-merry nihilism? How do you bring them back to their full humanity?

Isaiah 54 is part of the long collection of poems in Isaiah 40-55 responding to just these sorts of questions. This poem, or perhaps two poems (verses 1-8 and 9-10), begins with a controlling image, the childless woman who suddenly has more children than she knows what to do with (verses 1-4). It proceeds next to a closely related image, the abandoned wife whose husband returns home and patches things up (verses 5-8). Then it shifts the imagery altogether to the great flood of Noah. That sharp shift does important work, as I’ll explain.

The first two images—or are they one?—respond to the horrors of the Babylonian Exile, with its accompanying terrors of forced migration, murder, looting, degradation, and decay. Hell has broken loose, and sucked in all these people. When Zion, the woman in the poem, hears of her children, the poem is not speaking metaphorically. Real orphans have grown up and borne their own children. Catastrophe gives way at last to new beginnings.

The imagery of childlessness shifts to that of husbandlessness, and here things become tricky. On the one hand, the prophet must speak of God as duly angry at sin, but on the other, the experience of exile has been so awful that to speak of humans deserving punishment seems wrong somehow. So, the poem proceeds very carefully, acknowledging the old prophetic language of sin and punishment, but also highlighting the equally old language

of God as “redeemer” and “holy one.” God’s holiness shines through most clearly in mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

It is difficult to reconcile all these images, and modern interpreters easily err on one side or another, either by interpreting the divine speech too literally as a sort of gaslighting of the people, or by downplaying the poem’s favored voice of steadfast love and mercy. Probably the ancient audience heard the texts with more nuance as they connected it to their own situation.

In any case, the move to the final image, Noah’s flood, is all the more remarkable because it seems to come out of nowhere. But the analogy underlying it is clear: the horror of exile resembles the horror of the flood; the joy of return resembles the joy of surviving the flood. The poem searches deep into the past for the greatest horror an Israelite audience knows about, compares that horror to their immediate past experience, and offers a way forward.

The poem remembers the flood story particularly for its ending, when God promises not to allow such a calamity again. While even the majestic mountains erode away, God’s radical loyalty does not. The relationship with Israel has an eternal quality.

The poem’s reflection on that relationship uses the phrase “my covenant of peace.” That is, the relationship between God and Israel is not that of a master and slave, or of a user and the used, but one ideally filled with well-being or peace. The goal is far more than survival. It is flourishing in every sense. The new babies and the renewed land symbolize a happier future. The various metaphors cascading through today’s reading all point in the same direction: a renewed world.

In our own context, we witness calamities comparable to the Babylonian exile befalling many of our fellow human beings, even if we do not necessarily experience them ourselves. Large-scale state-sponsored violence has not ceased. Our own country is engaging in such activities as we speak. However, God’s commitment to the chosen people of Israel also extends to all suffering people. The divine care for the suffering shines through. The divine call to aid the suffering still echoes in our ears.

This hopeful text serves us well during Advent because in this season we think deeply about our hope for God’s future. We acknowledge the straitened conditions of the present but live convinced that tragedy will not prevail, horror will not last, evil will not triumph. All of that is the message we proclaim to broken human beings. All will come right.

O God who makes all things right, make our days like those after Noah and his family alighted from the Ark and began again. Help us to begin afresh as well. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 4

WHEN RIGHTEOUSNESS REIGNS

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

“ . . . In his days may the righteous flourish and peace abound” (Psalm 72:7)

There is no seasonal hymn more beloved in our house than “O Holy Night.” My husband and I share deeply imprinted memories of pacing the floor on long December nights with our newborn, whose long-awaited and much prayed for adoption had happened suddenly that Advent and brought a special poignancy to a season marked by waiting, longing, and anticipation of future joy.

Around and around the living room we walked and sang, with that bouncing pace unique to those trying valiantly to get a fussy infant to sleep: “long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.” With bleary eyes, we whispered, “his law is love and his gospel is peace...in his name all oppression shall cease.” That song took on a different resonance for us that year, a resonance that it holds to this day. “O Holy Night” evokes for us both those sleepless nights of quiet joy in a longing fulfilled as well as the longing we hold for the good news to be known and seen in the world that we, our children, and our neighbors inhabit together.

Psalm 72 is a psalm requesting God’s guidance of Israel’s rulers: “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son.” But this song, too, takes on a particular resonance during Advent, given the way this season is marked by our hope and expectation for the return of Christ the King who will reign in justice, mercy, and glory. When we hear the psalmist petition God for a king who would reign “while the sun endures, as long as the moon, throughout all generations”, we recall Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that Jesus would receive “the throne of his ancestor David” and that “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33).

When we hear the psalmist’s desire for a king who would “defend the cause of the poor of the people, [and] give deliverance to the needy,” we find ourselves in Nazareth again hearing

Jesus quote the prophet Isaiah to announce his ministry to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim release for the oppressed. When we hear the hopes that a king's reign might bring prosperity and abundance, we see Jesus turning five loaves and two fish into a feast fit for a multitude, with more to spare (Luke 9:12-17). When we reflect on the psalmist's imagery of the reign of a righteous king being like much needed rain upon dry ground, we think of the "times of refreshing" that the return of the Messiah will bring (Acts 3:19).

We wait, in this season of Advent, for a day when the righteousness of the reign of Christ is fully and forever realized on earth as it is in heaven. And until that day, we live and work in the world under the authority of human leaders, who may or may not embody the qualities of leadership for which the psalmist expresses his hope. We long for just rulers, for authorities in all their forms who operate in a way that mirrors the character and care of the God of Israel, whose defining features are righteousness and steadfast love. We long for what is broken to be mended, for what is suffering to be soothed, and for what is divided to be reconciled. In the language of Scripture, we long for the new heavens and the new earth, "where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:13). And, in the meantime, we pray for our leaders and all those in authority, as the psalmist does here and as Scripture bids us do.

And while we wait and while we pray, we work. For though we may not be kings, we are often people in authority in one sphere or another, whose work can, with God's help and in Christ's name, incline the world toward justice, righteousness, care for the vulnerable, and flourishing for all. So the season of Advent reminds us, like those faithful servants in Jesus's parables, to be faithful stewards as members of God's household to whom Christ will return at an hour we least expect him.

In this season of waiting, let us faithfully serve in the spheres of influence that we have, so that our way of life might bear witness to the righteous reign of Christ. By our words and our lives, may we, in the words of "O Holy Night," "his power and glory evermore proclaim."

Holy God, we join your ancient people in saying, "blessed be you, O God." You alone do wondrous things. Blessed be your glorious name forever! May your glory fill the whole earth, and may your people praise your name in words and in lives that honor you. Amen and Amen.

Amanda Pittman



DECEMBER 5

PREPARING THE WAY

Isaiah 40:1-11

*“A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3)*

A few summers ago, I served as a youth group intern. One of the highlights of the summer was summiting a tall peak in Colorado. Among our group of thirty-something teenagers and adults were both the experienced and the unprepared, those full of energy and those quickly running out of it.

We set out early in the morning to reach the top: crossing streams, trudging through snow, climbing over loose rock, and pushing past our growing exhaustion. The higher we went, the louder the complaints became. Yet louder still were the voices of encouragement: “We’re almost there!”, “The view will be worth it!”, “Look at the sunrise—what a beautiful morning!” These constant reminders kept us pressing on. Then we reached the summit. What a view! The peak that had challenged us now rewarded us with beauty and perspective we could only take in once we had endured the climb.

In Isaiah 40, Israel stands at the base of a different kind of mountain. The book’s earlier chapters resound with warnings of judgment and exile. God had levied a mountain of charges against Israel. But here, the tone changes dramatically: “Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. These are the first words of hope after a long silence. Beyond the future of destruction and exile, there lies a future of glory and hope. God’s final word to His people is not judgment but mercy; not despair but restoration.

Isaiah declares, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Centuries later, John the Baptist would echo this call, urging people to clear away the obstacles in their hearts blocking the coming Messiah. John’s cry in the wilderness was not simply a call to moral reform but a summons to spiritual readiness. To “prepare the way” meant to open one’s heart to the coming of God Himself.

In Isaiah's words, God bends down to whisper tenderly to His weary children: "It is finished. Your warfare is ended. Your sin has been paid for." In Christ, this promise is fully realized. He bends himself down, in humble submission, that we might know and hear this message of mercy from our God. He is the Comforter who comes not to condemn, but to redeem. After a long silence, Christ appears in the flesh to reveal the glory of God and restore all of Israel. The one who lay in the manger, who tenderly healed the unclean, who washed His disciples' feet, and who bore our sin in silence now speaks gently to our hearts: "Be still. I have done it. You are mine."

The imagery of mountains and valleys in Isaiah 40 is not merely topographical. It is spiritual. The valleys of despair in our hearts must be lifted by His comfort and whispers of grace. The mountains of pride must be brought low by His resounding word of power. The crooked paths of sin and self-deception must be straightened. The rough terrain of resentment, doubt, and fear must be made smooth. The preparation of the heart is the true labor of Advent. We clear the clutter of our hearts so that Christ may find in us a home.

Advent is a season of holy anticipation. We wait as those who know that the story ends in glory. The story ends on a mountain top where the glory of God dwells and flows down to all. We remember Christ's first coming in humility, and we await His second coming in majesty. Between those two comings, we walk the narrow mountain path of faith in the assurance that our God is faithful, for the Word of the Lord stands forever and He dwells in our midst.

When Isaiah writes, "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together," he points to that great and final day when the fullness of God's glory will be made known in Christ and all He has restored. For now, we see only glimpses, but the God who commands the mountains to bow down holds the end of the story. His word will stand when all else fades away.

So, this Advent, lift your eyes to the mountain. Listen for the voice crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord! The glory that awaits is worth every step of the climb.

Lord Jesus, you are the One who comes to comfort your people. In this season of Advent, make straight the paths of our hearts. Lift what is low, humble what is high, and smooth what is rough, that we may be ready to receive You with joy. Teach us to trust Your word that stands forever. Help us to walk in hope and to prepare the way for Your coming—until we see the glory of Your salvation, face to face. Amen.

John McCurdy



DECEMBER 6

WHO ARE YOU?

John 1:19-28

*“I am the voice crying in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way of the Lord’” (John 1:23)*

Sometimes, the world we live in can feel like an overwhelmingly dark place. One group of people wages war against another group of people. Reports of murder and other tragic crimes dominate news and social media outlets. Injustices of various kinds continue to exist.

The gospel of John understands this sense of a dark world and reminds the reader that God is at work to drive out the darkness with the advent of God’s Word. The Gospel writer describes a struggle between darkness and light; a struggle that darkness cannot win. The promise of the first advent is that the Word is light, and darkness is not able to overcome it (1:5). However, the Word comes into a world that he was instrumental in creating but that world does not recognize or know him (1:10-11). So, the question that the messengers in today’s text repeatedly ask John the Baptist is fundamental: who are you? Will the messengers recognize the light or will they remain in darkness?

The passage on which we meditate shines light on the work of John the Baptist. The reader knows that John is not the light but rather testifies to it (1:8). The religious authorities have noticed John’s work and are trying to make sense of it. The messengers sent from these authorities want to know who John is. Their question arises from a sense of expectation. Many Jews hoped that God would act soon to bring justice to an unjust world, bringing peace on earth. On the basis of generations of Bible study and rigorous teaching, different Jewish groups believed one or more human beings would arise to participate in or lead that transition from injustice to justice. Some were looking for a messiah—a king or priest who would usher in this just age. Others were looking for the return of Elijah before that time of judgment. Still others were looking for a prophet—perhaps a prophet like Moses—who would be part of this final age. John’s ministry included baptism, and this act led the religious

leaders to wonder whether John might be one of these end-of-time figures. John is unwilling to confirm their expectations; he insists instead that his role is none of the ones they suggest (vv. 20-22).

Who is John? John responds by pointing his questioners to a different passage in their Bible, words from the prophet Isaiah. John claims to be a herald—a “voice of one crying out in the wilderness” about the coming of the Lord (1:23). John insists that a person they do not know (and will not recognize) is coming. This person is worthy of honor. John understands his own role and identity, even if he does not yet know the identity of the one who is coming. The religious leaders have confused the messenger with the coming one. The puzzling behavior of John has resulted in them misreading the current events.

As we eagerly await the second advent of the Light, we can find ourselves in a position similar to that of the religious leaders. We read our Bible and struggle to make sense of a confusing world—a world that sometimes looks like darkness is defeating light. We struggle to interpret the events that we witness, though we are looking to find God in them. We sometimes wrongly look for governments or individual human beings to bring light into the darkness.

Today’s passage reminds us how difficult it can be for God’s people to make sense of what is happening in their world. It offers both a warning and hope. Confusion and fear can lead us not only to look in the wrong places for God and God’s work but also can blind us to God’s presence. The leaders entertain the possibility that John might be God’s servant but are unable to recognize the true light—as the rest of the gospel narrative makes clear.

But John knows who he is and what his role is. He is focused on preparing the way for the one worthy of honor who is coming. Like John, we can testify that God is light, and we can do what is within our ability to prepare for the return of God’s luminous Word.

Gracious God, we pray to you from the midst of the darkness that weighs on our world. We seek your light. Help us to recognize your ways. Help us prepare for your return. Amen.

Richard Wright



DECEMBER 7

THE PATH OF PEACE

Luke 1:67-79

*“By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us. . . .” (Luke 1:78)*

Perhaps we have all had the experience of not being able to see where we are going. Just recently, my husband and I were visiting family, and the lights happened to be off as we were making our way to bed. In the darkness of a room that was not our own he went one way while I went another and we smashed our heads together. No one was injured beyond seeing stars and a sore forehead, but it was one of many times in my life that I should have turned on a light instead of making my way in the dark.

The text for today is Luke 1:67-79, Zechariah’s prophecy about John the Baptist. The prophecy recalls the faithfulness of God and announces the role John the Baptist will play, namely, to prepare the way for Jesus. The end of the prophecy offers this image of what he will be preparing people for, “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” For those in darkness, Christ comes as a dawning light to guide in the way of peace.

Peace we perhaps think of as being free of war or conflict. We might think of it as a calm manner or resilience against being disturbed, having peace like a river. Peace shows up several times in these early chapters of Luke around the birth of Jesus: the angels announce the good news of Jesus’s birth with glory to God and peace; Simeon holds the infant Jesus and declares that God is dismissing him in peace. Peace in these instances is a gift God offers, but in Zechariah’s prophecy, peace is a path, a path that is hard to find in the darkness before dawn.

This image of a path of peace echoes Isaiah 59, a text depicting God’s people crying out against those who oppress. People are violent, the poet complains, they tell lies and sue people falsely, they shed blood and are bent on destruction. “The way of peace they do not

know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace” (Isaiah 59:8). There is a path to peace, but it is a winding and crooked one to those who oppress, invisible to those who don’t value justice and mercy.

So, John the Baptist comes onto the scene to prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah announces it at John’s birth and just a bit later in Luke 3, an adult John the Baptist appears, proclaiming the coming Christ with more words from Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Having grown up in northern New Mexico, I’m partial to mountain roads and tend to find them more beautiful than the long stretches of straight roads through plains. One thing mountain roads are not good for, though, is visibility. Light reaches more places on a flat and straight road. The path of peace has been unlevel and winding, full of blind corners, and John the Baptist comes to flatten the road and unwind it, to turn a dark and dangerous trail into a passable, straight road, one that glows the moment the morning light touches it.

How, we might ask, does John the Baptist make this path straight? When people come to him in the very next scene in Luke, he tells them not to console themselves with the belief that God is on their side, but to share what they have with those who don’t have as much, to treat people fairly, to refrain from taking advantage. The path of peace is one of generosity, concern for the poor, and honesty. In Advent, we wait for Christ to come, but we do not have to wait idly. We can prepare ourselves while we wait by living with open hearts and open hands. Then when Christ arrives, we will be ready to see the light.

God, who shines the light of salvation on all, prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. Show us the path of peace and help us walk on it. Open our eyes to see those who need us and open our hands to share. In the name of Christ who comes to bring good news to the poor and let the oppressed go free. Amen.

Tera Harmon



DECEMBER 8

PRAYING WE KNOW NOT HOW

Psalm 21

*“The king trusts in the LORD, and in the steadfast love of the
Most High he will not totter” (Psalm 21:7)*

Some prayers, biblical or otherwise, unsettle as much as they orient. This is one of those, not because it asks for outrageous things or seems smug or complacent, but because it is so political.

The psalm began its life as a prayer for the king of Judah, sung in the Jerusalem temple during some festival or another. It may celebrate victories in war, or perhaps the king’s recovery from illness. (Verse 4’s “he asked for life” should remind us of the story of Hezekiah’s prayer for healing in 2 Kings 20:1-11, though many kings must have needed prayer in times of sickness.) Whatever the specific point of origin, the psalm describes the conflict a ruler must face in generic enough terms to allow it to be used on multiple occasions.

Some readers might be tempted to squeeze a psalm like this into a view of God as a tribal deity protecting tough leaders no matter what they do. Such a reading would work only by ignoring the many biblical texts that demand that leaders obey laws, act transparently and without corruption, and focus on retributive and distributive justice for all. The Bible shows a thoroughgoing distrust of human power and a willingness to criticize rulers who crush or neglect the vulnerable or use religion as a mask for their greed and ambition. The psalm has to fit into that overall picture, and it does so by reminding readers of the king’s obligations to such high standards. Even this royal psalm praying for the monarch knows that the human king must know his limits.

At some point in its long life, the psalm took on another meaning because kingship disappeared from ancient Israel. For some readers, the psalm came to refer to the messiah, though the New Testament never makes such a connection. Reading the psalm with Jesus

in mind as the king who defeats cosmic enemies and trusts in God could serve us well in our meditations.

Another possibility: if we focus on the king's trust in God's deliverance and say to ourselves, "if a king with all his responsibilities can trust God, how much more can I with mine," we can find some spiritual aid. I need to ask for my life too. I need to know that the adversities and adversaries I face will ultimately not succeed in destroying my capacity for spiritual wholeness unless I allow them to. Those lessons seem relevant and helpful.

There is still another possible path for learning here. The psalm is prayed *for* the king, not *by* him. The community as a whole, or at least the temple singer speaking on their behalf, asks for God's help for the king knowing that such help will benefit everyone.

In other words, the psalm is part of a long tradition of praying for, as 1 Timothy 2:2 puts it, "kings and all in authority." This Christian (and Jewish) practice imposes itself on all of us as we call God's attention to political leaders. It became more acute as power moved further and further away from the believing community.

This is a complex topic, of course. Prayer is not an endorsement of rulers or their policies or characters. We may sometimes need to pray for their defeat because they clearly engage in evil-doing. But even if we do, we must also pray for their repentance and make space for God to work. This is not the place to work out all the details of this issue, and we must remember that praying for leaders does not preclude opposing them in some cases. But this psalm and the Bible more generally call us to hope for and work for the best outcomes possible in our politics.

Perhaps none of these readings appeal to you. So, we turn to the psalm's last line. The congregation prays, "Arise in your strength, O LORD—we will sing and intone your might." The song refers to itself since ultimately it does not concern human power but divine power. Its ultimate concern focuses not on military success but on the abiding relationship between two parties, God ("you") and Israel ("we"). The eternal dance between God and humankind in general and the Chosen People in particular continues. God saves, and we sing. May our song keep spreading to every corner of the world.

O God, you know how messy our power structures have become and how tyranny tries to wear a religious face. Unmask the powers and undo their bewitchments. Call us to the heights of justice, mercy, and peace, and fill our lives with the radical commitment to being human beings together before you. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 9

POOLS OF WATER, RUNNING DEEP

Isaiah 41:14-20

*I will make the wilderness a pool of water and
the dry land springs of water (Isaiah 41:18)*

My maternal grandmother was an impressive, almost formidable person. She had a no-nonsense air about her, especially since she was a lifelong farmer's wife and a retired schoolteacher. There were times she could be unyieldingly rigid and her tongue too sharp, yet she was also the one who taught me most about hospitality. My grandmother was always cooking and baking for others, especially for her family, friends, church community, and those who were in need. To this day, her cinnamon roll recipe is my favorite decadent dessert. She also knitted, crocheted, sewed, and quilted. Quietly, tenderly, and generously she would make beautiful gifts for those in need, facing difficulties, or simply needed to be reminded of God's loving kindness.

My grandmother was also the one who most thoroughly instructed me, through word and deed, in patiently attending to expectant hope. She would say time and again, "God can't ever give you patience, child. God can only give you opportunities to cultivate patience." I would be overly generous to my younger self if I said that I was content with her wise words because I did not like them. I was not a particularly patient child. Even though my grandmother no longer travels through the world with me, I still often hear her godly words reminding me of God's faithfulness.

Advent is a season of hopeful longing and patient waiting because we are keenly aware of the sense that all is not right with the world. We eagerly anticipate and expectantly wait for Christ to come and dwell among God's people. And as is often the case, God surprises humanity with the manner in which our Creator chooses to work. Christ the eternal Word enters into the created world as a vulnerable baby swaddled in a manger. The power and

strength of God is revealed, not through awe-inspiring might or overt displays of power, but through a tender little infant.

In this Isaiah passage, God self-identifies as Israel's Redeemer, the one to rescue God's people. Through the season of Advent, we look forward to our own Redeemer who comes in Christ, thus fulfilling a covenantal promise to save, renew, and restore. Christ, through the Incarnation, becomes more closely tied to the human family in order to bring about restoration.

Advent is a season when we weary pilgrims can be reminded of God's tender and loving redemption and renewal of all things.

The imagery of Isaiah 41:18-20 is exuberant because dry, dusty, parched wilderness valleys will be inundated with wellsprings of water bringing forth flourishing life including diverse, beautiful trees—the acacia, the myrtle, the olive, and the cypress. The water-loving trees in the wilderness herald creation's eventual renewal and restoration. The season of Advent is a season of patiently remembering Christ's birth and life on earth, yet it also looks longingly to the time when Christ will return. Then God will renew, restore, and reconcile all things. The sprouting of abundant botanical life in the desert foreshadows the flourishing kingdom of God.

God is attentive to the thirsty and weary creation, then provides rivers, springs, and fountains of life-giving water. This passage in Isaiah also resonates with the season of Advent because the people of God wait in eager expectation to quench their thirst for hope, mercy, justice, and peace. And these longings may be completely satisfied in Christ, who is the Living Water. Just as these desert areas will burst forth into a lush biologically diverse ecosystem, so also will the knowledge of the LORD and God's works become widely revealed to all.

Thus, the purpose of God's good work is "that all may see and know," just as in the season of Advent which proclaims Christ as the Light who reveals God to the nations. God is at work, here and now, and will continue to bring about reconciliation, restoration, and renewal. May we learn to partner with God in this high and holy work.

O God of all creation, you spoke and brought forth flourishing life on earth and have given creation over to the stewardship of humankind. During this Advent season, grant us an awareness of your presence and your work in us and in creation. Bring about restoration, renewal, and reconciliation, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns in unity with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Kendra Jernigan



DECEMBER 10

THE WORD OVER ALL WORDS

Matthew 12:33-37

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34)

I remember the very first time I opened a Bible to read it on my own. I was a young girl, just beginning to read full sentences, and my mother’s pink leatherbound Bible sat beneath a lamp on the end table in our living room. I pulled the Bible to my lap where I sat on the couch, flipped its pages to a random text, and leaned toward the lamp light so that I could begin to make out the words. I was elated to discover some words that I already knew: good, bad, tree, fruit, heart, and mouth.

But I also distinctly remember reaching an essential next step in my reading, once I had sounded out the words—I wanted to know what they meant, what they represent. I knew that Jesus was a teacher among other things, and I gathered from this text in Matthew’s Gospel that he was trying to teach us something about the relationship between a tree and its fruit, between a heart and a mouth. While the work of analyzing metaphors was a little advanced for me at that age, the image of the tree and its fruit were forever grafted onto my understanding of the heart and the mouth. My desire to understand Jesus’s words became intertwined with my desire to understand our own words.

In Matthew 12:33-37, Jesus offers a teaching about the gravity of speech. He begins by offering the image of a tree and its fruit, stating the obvious—that a tree that is good or healthy bears good fruit, but a bad or rotten tree produces rotten fruit. Anybody can understand this, even a child. But it turns out humans share a bit in common with trees. A good and healthy heart produces good and healthy words, while a rotten heart produces rotten words. Admittedly, as an adolescent I assumed that Jesus was teaching a lesson on curse words (and I am certain that a youth minister or two encouraged that reading). But as I grew into an adult, I began to see that there are far more pernicious abuses of language

happening all around us. Indeed, we are utterly inundated with speech that is rotten through and through.

In the United States, we find ourselves in a season of wrestling with the constitutional right to freedom of speech. People from all over the political spectrum have a vested interest in knowing whether they are free to express ideas, criticism, and opinions in the public sphere without legal repercussions. As a university professor, I am fully devoted to the protection of this freedom, as knowledge is largely explored and constructed by the weighing of varied philosophies and ideas.

However, at the individual level, the freedom to speak should never be considered apart from one's moral or ethical formation. For example, just because a person has the freedom to spew hateful rhetoric online or in the public sphere doesn't mean that a person *should*. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul instructs the believers in Corinth that just because something is permissible does not mean it is beneficial or good for the community. Having the freedom to speak is one thing, but being the kind of person who speaks goodness out of a good heart is another thing entirely.

Jesus warns: "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." The idea that words matter—that words can lead to life or to death—echoes throughout scripture, especially in the Bible's wisdom and devotional literature. Words contribute to the structuring of our societies and largely constitute the way we come to know ourselves and others. If we love our neighbors and enemies, and if we love the world that God so loves, our words will stand as evidence of that love. Conversely, if we detest or fear our neighbors and enemies, and if we resent or dismiss the world that God so loves, our words will stand as evidence.

The language we embrace to describe ourselves and everything around us indicates the measure to which we have embraced a godly perspective. Do I speak about my neighbor the way that Jesus would? Do I speak about my enemy the way that Jesus would? Our words spoken in both public and private places are litmus tests for the condition of our hearts.

Never mind the issue of who threw hurtful words in your direction; you will not be held to account for someone else's words. Rather, you must square off with the state of your own heart so that your words come to reflect an inner goodness—an inner life devoted to the way of Christ.

In a world where words are carelessly wielded and weaponized, let us remember to hold our own speech to the metric of the Word made flesh, to whom we are accountable. The Word who came into the world with a heart of love and mercy is calling us to a different way.

Holy Word, who took on flesh and spoke goodness among us, we submit ourselves to the curriculum of your love and mercy. May we love what you love, may we grieve what you grieve, and may our words reflect your goodness in this weary world. Amen.

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby



DECEMBER 11

WAITING TOGETHER

Ruth 1:6-18

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her

(Ruth 1:16-17 NRSV)

Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the Lord. During this season, we watch and hope for Christ's return even as we remember and rejoice in his incarnation in the Bethlehem manger. There are many rituals and traditions people can choose from to participate in during this in-between season of remembrance and anticipation. No matter how you prefer to prepare this season, as you read today you may find yourself thinking “What are Ruth and Naomi doing in the middle of my Advent series?”

Ruth's fierce promise of loyalty to her mother-in-law may seem “out of season” right now, but it actually tells the story of two people who, like us at Advent, stand in an “in-between” moment. They are grieving for a past life, one where they shared joy and love with a family that has now been shaken by death. They face an uncertain future. They do not know whether they will find helpers or homes or livelihoods at their journey's end. But they are not just stuck between grief and uncertainty. They also stand in between the memory of past joy and their hope for future restoration in the new home they are journeying toward.

Ruth and Naomi are not related by blood. They are bound together by love. They choose to stand by each other and support each other in the middle of change and uncertainty. They hope for better days. But whatever they face, they are determined to face it together.

During Advent, like Ruth and Naomi we are in between, but we are not alone. We have friends on this road! We have the family of God. We have the fellowship of others who remember the goodness that God has already shown the world in Jesus Christ, and who share our hope that God's promises will one day be perfectly fulfilled. Our family in Christ, created not by blood but by shared love and hope, supports each other in our commitment to participate in the calling God has placed on us in each season, even seasons of waiting, seasons of disruption, and seasons of grief.

As you wait on the Lord this Advent season, may you be surrounded by faithful friends who remind you of God's goodness and support you as you seek after God. May you find family in Christ who are fiercely dedicated to sharing life with each other. May you be filled with enough hope and perseverance to be the companion that others need. May we all stand with each other as we await the promise fulfilled.

Loving God, as we persevere in our faith and service to you, let us help each other along the way. Bind us tightly into the family of faith, so that we may remind each other of what you have done and encourage each other to believe in what you are going to do. Use each of us to strengthen the hope of the others. Let us live in the joy of the love we share, the love we learn only from you. Sustain us until we see you coming in your glory. Amen.

Penny Biddy



DECEMBER 12

HOLY WAITING

2 Peter 3:11-18

*“ . . . what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives
of holiness and godliness. . . .” (2 Peter 3:11b)*

Sometimes I think waiting might be the worst lesson to learn. It seems to test much (if not all) of my resolve. When we are learning to wait, we practice patience and self-control. We might employ hope and gratitude to help us get to the other side. Waiting seems so innocuous on the surface, but it truly requires an active and attentive discipline. It is not fun. So, isn't it interesting that we devote an entire season of the Christian calendar to practicing or honoring our ability to wait? The text asks us, *“what sort of persons ought you to be. . . waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. . . .”* (v. 11-12)

I know what kind of person I start out being—an impatient one. I remember that anytime I had to wait for something really good when I was a child, I just wanted to do anything else besides focus on the waiting. I knew a birthday party wasn't going to start any sooner if I begged for it to. I understood there was no chance of opening those holiday presents before Christmas morning. I chose to look actively for distractions so I didn't have to think about how hard it was to wait. Being a well-behaved child, I didn't try to end the waiting with shortcuts or sneaking around to find the surprises and gifts ahead of time. I read books, or made-up games, or indulged in curiosity about other people by asking one million questions. I could avoid the lesson of waiting with peace and patience by turning my attention elsewhere. I'm grateful for those lessons now, because as I matured I came to enjoy the gifts of delayed gratification. At the same time I still wish I could better heed Peter's advice to, *“strive to be found at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation”* (v. 14-15).

We practice our waiting during Advent so we can develop the skills needed to patiently wait for our Lord's return, in peacefulness. We go through the motions of what it meant for

ancient Israel to wait for a messiah's salvation and then be rewarded for that waiting. When I look around at how things are going in our society, and in our world, I confess I look for distractions from the waiting. I want to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," when I should also be feeding those who are hungry and bringing about justice for those who are marginalized. There is hope to remind us, ". . . since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability" (v. 17).

Seeking distraction from painful lessons is a sure path into poor choices and a chaotic lifestyle. I'm not even sure the author is only referring to avoiding a life of crime by being attentive to what you should. I think there is an inference about the law of love. If I am so busy avoiding the discomfort of waiting that I can't even put my hands and feet to the work of God's Kingdom on earth, I am surely not living a stable life of spiritual balance.

When I reflect on why I come back to Advent every year to relearn the benefits of waiting, I am grateful for a God who knew ahead of time that I would be constantly tempted to give up my peace for a little comfort, and yet prepared the way with examples and instructions for a holy kind of waiting. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity" (v.18). The one we are waiting for is the very lesson itself. The things we do while we wait could be about extending grace to others. God is ever-patient with us, bringing us peace and comfort and pointing us back to the path of righteousness. Most of all, God waits with us for the glorious coming.

God, show me clear reminders that I have work to do in the waiting. Open my eyes to where you want me to show compassion. Soften my heart to others who are also waiting. Allow me to be an instrument of your peace in the seasons of longing. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Dana Spivy Glover



DECEMBER 13

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Psalm 146:5-10

*“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob . . .
who keeps faith forever” (Psalm 146:5a, 6b)*

As I write this meditation, I have been reading the Old Testament historical books during my recent devotional times. As you probably know, those books are a crazy mix of encouraging and horrifying stories, showing some of the best qualities within human beings, as well as some of our worst impulses. I was named after King David, and he’s someone who displays both ends of the spectrum—sometimes one right after the other!

This time around, I have been especially struck by the prayers in those books. Three extensive and beautiful prayers are provided in 2 Samuel 7, 2 Samuel 22, and 1 Kings 8, and I noticed this year that each of them makes explicit reference to God’s faithfulness. I encourage you to read them for yourself.

I think that’s why, in the reading for today, it’s the end of verse 6 that jumps off the page at me. There the text says that the Lord “keeps faith forever.” Obviously, the idea of the faithfulness of God is deeply biblical, and it runs throughout Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Further, it informs our way of understanding Jesus. The Messiah didn’t just come out of nowhere. God had promised to send an Anointed One to be the King over his people, and as Christians, we believe that the incarnation of Jesus is the supreme example of God’s faithfulness.

But it’s also true that there are not many characteristics of God that are more distinct from the ways of human beings. Even the best of us struggles at times to keep our word, and the individuals who are far from the best put the inconstancy of human beings on display for all to see. Whether it’s wedding vows, the promises of politicians, or the intentions of adolescents that wilt under peer pressure, this area is one of great weakness among human beings.

Today’s reading tells us, though, that God always keeps faith. Always. Not merely when God feels like it, has slept well, or is not facing opposition. Not merely when God’s sports

team is doing well or our preferred government is in office. And as our experience tells us, God does not keep faith only if and when we do. It is not a matter of reciprocity, as is so often the case in human relationships. 2 Timothy 2:13a says it well: even “if we are faithless, God remains faithful.” What good news!

I wonder if this theme may be a way of understanding the whole selection for today. In the NRSV, verse 6a is in the past tense: God “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.” And verse 10a looks to the future, assuring us that “the Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations,” in that new heaven and new earth that was in our text from yesterday.

And what is in between, in verses 7-9? A list of the ways that God blesses us in the present: caring for us when we are oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, blind, bowed down, estranged, orphaned, widowed. We worship and serve an amazing God, one who “loves the righteous” and brings “the way of the wicked . . . to ruin.”

Are these not ways of keeping faith? We know from the biblical narrative that, just like the church, the people of Israel consistently faced obstacles, some from without and some from within. They were enslaved, attacked, oppressed, and exiled by others, and they themselves struggled to remain faithful to God. And yet God remained faithful to his promises to Abraham and others, rescuing them from oppressors, raising up good leaders, enabling his people to flourish, blessing them that they might be a blessing to the world—and always with a view toward God’s complete and eternal reign in the future.

I think that’s why the reading begins and ends as it does. If the majority of the text reminds us about God’s action in the past, God’s faithfulness in the present, and God’s total reign and rule in the future, then the beginning and end are how that faithfulness impacts us. Verse 5 says that we are happy (or “blessed,” in other translations) when we make God our help and hope, when we depend on the God who is faithful. And verse 10b is an imperative: “praise the LORD, y’all!” (the literal translation of “Hallelujah”).

The beginning tells us the truth, and the end tells us what to do about the truth. Let’s do so!

Lord God, you keep faith at all times, even when we struggle to do so. Please so move in our hearts that we can keep faith as well. May we show your heart and character to the world by our own faithfulness this holiday season and always. We ask all this in the name of Jesus, who is the Faithful One and the sign of your faithfulness to the world. Amen.

David Kneip



DECEMBER 14

NEARNESS AND GENTLENESS

Philippians 4:4-7

*“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5)*

I can still hear the voice of my old Bible professor in my head. I was a young Bible major in college, taking my first class with a group of fellow students, each of us trying to discern our calling to ministry. We spent that semester together learning the importance of the Bible for the life of ministry and how to read it well. “The first thing you need to keep in mind,” he shared, “is that the Bible was written in a much different historical time to people very different from us.”

We reflected on this, and then he concluded, “That is why the Bible can seem weird sometimes.” *Let your gentleness be known to everyone.* I thought about my old professor as I read Paul’s words in this section from his letter to the Philippians because it struck me as a command that seems weird to our modern ears. It comes as one of a series of exhortations at the end of the letter that provide some final urgings to the community about its collective life and worship. We might be quite ready to embrace every other admonition in this passage; “rejoice in the Lord,” “do not worry,” and “let our requests be made known to God.” But this one—“let your gentleness be known to all”—gives us pause.

Rather than a virtue to cultivate, our cultural moment sees gentleness as a defect that insinuates weakness. We value those things we can associate with “strength” and “winning.” We see it clearly in our politics and whatever new battle of the culture war is raging. But we also see it in our churches as groups disparage others in the name of “standing up” for what they believe or “pushing back” on those with whom they disagree. We see it even in our own relationships—our friendships and marriages—in our demands that those relationships happen on our own terms. We’ve become so obsessed with strength, winning, being

in control, and dominating that when Paul exhorts us to make gentleness a defining feature of our communal life, well, that's just *weird*. . . .

Yet Paul connects this instruction about gentleness to an important reality: "The Lord is near." For Paul (and for us as the church), the nearness of God is a reality that shapes the way we live in the world. The Lord is near in the sense that we await the return of Christ at which all will be made right (3:20-21). But the Lord is also near through the presence of the Spirit, empowering us to live as people and communities of love, compassion, and unity (2:1-4).

In both cases, the natural response to that divine nearness is a trust in the presence and provision of God that allows us to lead lives defined by gentleness. We need not insist on our own way, because we know that Jesus Christ stands as the judge of all. We need not "win" or "push back" because we place our trust in God, not our own strength. And we lead lives of gentleness because we worship and follow a Savior who "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (2:6). Paul calls us to be people of gentleness because gentleness is a defining feature of what it means to live "in Christ."

So perhaps Paul's exhortation to live lives of gentleness that arise from, and give witness to, the nearness of the Lord is fitting for those of us who more often see gentleness as something to reject. And particularly so in this season. For it is in this season that we remember that God chose to be "God with us" not in the form of a military general or culture warrior, but in the form of a baby. We remember that the manner of our Lord's arrival itself tells us something about the Lord who has arrived and therefore what it means to live our lives in his name.

O Holy and Merciful God, in your Son Jesus Christ you have revealed your love for all that you have made and your gentleness towards your children. Empower us by your Spirit, in this season, with your gentleness and the assurance of your nearness, so that, by your grace, our lives would become parables of your kingdom and witnesses to the Son who has taken on flesh and dwelled among us. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Mason Lee



DECEMBER 15

HELP!

Acts 5:12-16

*“By the hands of the apostles there were many signs
and wonders among the people” (Acts 5:12)*

Start from the beginning. Christians believe that God cares about and seeks to relieve the suffering of human beings. That conviction shines through in the prophets and sages of the Old Testament and in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The early church at times imitated his miracles of healing and, more normally, worked to feed the hungry, visit prisoners, clothe the naked, bury the dead, and comfort the grieving. Although modern movements like the “health and wealth gospel” have warped the Christian concern for healing into a sort of shamanistic magic aiding human self-indulgence, there must be something to distort in the first place. That something appears in the reading for today.

This small paragraph in Acts sits between the dramatic story of Ananias and Sapphira, in which two people died for exaggerating their charitable impulses, and the equally dramatic story of the persecution of the apostles. The transitional paragraph redirects the story away from an unpleasant cul-de-sac toward the main plot. Jesus’s followers try to relieve suffering and in doing so, they may experience resistance or even persecution. While the Holy Spirit calls us to account when we act as hypocrites, the divine capacity to join accountability with mercy prevails in the church’s life.

It’s an odd paradox. We resist mercy. We persecute people who stand for compassion, empathy, and justice. We also admire them and even honor them posthumously.

Luke signals the prevailing human confusion when he says in verse 13 that “no one dared join them” and in verse 14 “many men and women were added” as believers. Was he simply in a hurry in writing those verses back to back? Or did he want to signal time elapsing? Or does the response to the gospel in real lives simply confuse us, just as it confused those people twenty centuries ago?

The last option seems right. The gospel challenges us sometimes because accepting it brings suffering and sometimes because it alleviates suffering for others. Changing the normal scares us. Better the pain we know than the pain we merely dread. Almost by accident, Luke puts his finger on something deep in our psyche here.

Still, his larger point deserves even more attention. The followers of Jesus, whom Luke will eventually call “Christians” (Acts 11:26), closed ranks after confronting the lying Ananias and Sapphira, and they continued to work for the good. Luke says they were carrying out Jesus’s stated mission of bringing sight to the blind and liberty to the captives (Luke 4:18-19, citing Isaiah 61:1-2). They gathered openly and invited others to join them. They offered healing, not on condition of admission to their club, but as the natural outworking of the Holy Spirit who had raised Jesus from the dead and was busy transforming their lives. Their unity came from a sense of affiliation with the Risen Lord.

The text also offers another opening for our reflection. Verse 15 describes people bringing their loved ones on “mats and stretchers” from all around Jerusalem in order to receive healing. The families and friends of the most vulnerable people around, those too sick to move themselves, try to find help where it seems to lie. They come as they can to a place where desperation and hope meet. There, people gamble that the Christians might offer help.

That vision of the church as a community of healing still resonates today. During this Advent season, the suffering of the world still bears down upon us, in spite of all the cheery songs playing in the malls and the colored lights illuminating neighborhoods. No Santa is coming to town. His reindeer have flown away. Nevertheless, God is present, and God’s people have abundant capacities to help.

This paragraph is a small join between two powerful stories. But its importance belies its brevity. The vision of the community following Jesus still invites us to live in harmony and with ambition for a better world. Together, we can become again a community of healing and honor.

O God who dwells with us on our mats and stretchers, heal us from all the maladies that afflict our bodies and souls. Cure us of cynicism and arrogance, of apathy and misdirected passions, of merciless attitudes toward others. Repair our innermost spirits so we may live in one accord as did those who preceded us. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 16

YEARNING FOR GOD

Psalm 42

*“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:2)*

For me, college was a time of spiritual growth. I was consumed with Bible studies, prayer groups, and quiet time, and I can remember feeling close to God. As I got older, worries and tasks began to dominate my life. Now, my mind spends too much time thinking about what I need to do, the health and safety of those I love, what is happening in the world. The list goes on. On my best days, as thoughts crowd my mind, I ask God for help and guidance in all of it. Many days, however, I just keep thinking of all the things I need to do, and I worry about what I can't control.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist expresses a longing for God during a time of estrangement. He remembers when he used to go to the temple with many others, singing and shouting with joy and thanksgiving. But these times are no more. He is downcast and his question to God is “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by my enemy?” He is likely in Babylon, away from the land where God rules. Life is hard, and he can't “feel” God. He says that people are asking him, “Where is your God?” And he despairs.

This thought, “Where is your God?” is a modern day question also. Where is our God when those we love suffer? Where is our God when children are being killed? Where is our God when innocent people are taken away from their families? Where is our God when so many do not have enough to eat? If we don't ask the question ourselves, then we are asked by others, “Where is your God?”

Instead of turning away from God, the psalmist hopes in God as he despairs. He doesn't worry about what he can or can't do to change things. He doesn't think, “I shouldn't despair—I can fix this problem!” He actively remembers to hope in God and holds on to knowing that he will praise God again. He writes, “By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is

with me—a prayer to the God of my life.” He knows that even when he can’t feel God, even when he is asleep, God is there.

Many of us feel like our relationship with God changes as we go through life. We are close to God, we are not close to God. We feel God’s presence; we aren’t even sure if he exists. We remember to hope; then, we wonder where God is. Despair and hope can go hand in hand. Life can be hard. God can feel far away. If we believe that the only times we are close to God are the times that we *feel* close to God or when things go the way we think they should go, then we will have many times of deep disappointment.

During Advent, we think of what it was like before Jesus was born. Did the Israelites wonder if God was with them? They had been told of days when they were a powerful kingdom, but now they lived under Roman rule. They had been promised a Messiah, and they were still waiting. I imagine some waited with hope while others lived with despair and others had completely given up. Did God remember them? I wonder if they recited Psalm 42 to each other “Hope in God...my help and my God.”

I am struck by the desperation of the psalmist in his desire for God. His thoughts, his feelings—ALL of him is focused on wanting to be with God. I wonder if the Israelites of Jesus’s day were similarly caught up in wanting to experience the coming of the Messiah. Were they yearning for God with them?

In a world where there is so little we can control, we read Psalm 42 and remember that the whole of our lives revolves around God. Like the psalmist we should actively yearn and thirst for God, constantly pursuing Him. God is the center, the one we depend on. Our desire for God isn’t based on our feelings or on our circumstances. Even when we feel far away, God’s love and faithfulness always lead us back. God always remains our hope and the hope of the world.

Lord, please help us to want you above all things. In a world that often looks dark and dreary, please help us seek you. Help us remember that you are with us all the time and that awake or asleep, we can trust in you. Amen.

Kaley Ihfe



DECEMBER 17

ENEMIES AND NEIGHBORS

Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matthew 8:16-17)

As we eagerly await the arrival of Jesus, the gospels remind us of the reasons for our eagerness. Throughout those books, Jesus systematically defeats all of our most-feared enemies. He overcomes the chaos of the natural world by calming a storm. He feeds the hungry, heals the sick, and even confronts the demonic powers of the evil one.

Decades of critical biblical scholarship have made many of us quick to see psychiatric diagnoses and diagnosable conditions where biblical authors see demons, but Jesus seems utterly convinced that there *is* a spiritual enemy, he *does* have power, and many people are victims of his schemes.

At the end of Matthew 8, Jesus encounters two such victims who have been possessed by demons. Matthew describes these men as being so violent that none could even pass by the graveyard where they lived. Unlike most of the people who Jesus encountered, these two men actually recognize Jesus's true identity as the Son of God. Perhaps that is why, when the demons within the men beg Jesus to be driven into a herd of pigs, he obliges, and the possessed pigs churn into a frenzy and throw themselves into the nearby lake to die.

And then comes the celebration! Those living in the town nearby gather around Jesus, praising him for setting these men and their town free from the presence of evil. They hoist Jesus onto their shoulders and carry him into the village for a feast, where he and the two formerly-possessed men are guests of honor. There are no more pigs to slaughter, but a roast lamb will do just fine.

Of course that's not how the story goes. Matthew tells us "the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region." They could simply be afraid of his power, or perhaps they're angry about the pigs.

But I think at least part of the issue is that they aren't quite sure what to do with the fact that Jesus has just turned two enemies back into neighbors. They no longer have people to blame for their villages' bad luck, or something with which to scare naughty children. The men who once graced their wanted posters will soon move in next door. The figures who represented evil and darkness have become human again. The enemy has become a neighbor, and they're not sure what to do about it.

We love the idea of transformation. We all want to believe that people can grow, change, and be redeemed. But when we're actually confronted with the reality of a changed person, a changed life, we're not always sure how to handle it. It's almost as if, deep down, we'd rather have an enemy to hate than a neighbor to love.

What do you do with the Grinch once his Grinchiness is gone? His name is synonymous with being grumpy, mean, and sour. How do we handle a Grinch without garlic in his soul? Better to wrap the story up quickly so we don't have to deal with it. What do we say about Ebenezer Scrooge once he's no longer Scroogey? Can you really picture Mr. Potter joining in the singing at George Bailey's house with the rest of Bedford Falls?

We don't know what to make of enemies who have become neighbors, perhaps due to the loss of any belief in the demonic powers that Jesus does battle with throughout the gospels. The devil has become a cartoon character, and demons the things of Hollywood horror movies. With no transcendent evil left to fight, the only evils left are flesh and blood. The world's problems must be laid at the feet of our political opponent, our enemy, even our neighbor.

But Jesus understands that our true enemy is not flesh and blood, but the principalities, powers, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Our enemies are not the cause of evil, but victims of its cancerous spread.

Jesus refuses to let enemies remain enemies. He insists on loving enemies into neighbors, and loving neighbors into brothers and sisters. Perhaps we should join him.

Father in heaven, free us from the shackles of the evil one that we might become people of love. Drive hatred, anger, and fear from our hearts, that we might see each person as your good creation, destined and designed for a life of love in you. Amen.

Joel Childers



DECEMBER 18

CHILDREN OF GOD THROUGH FAITH

Galatians 3:23-29

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Galatians 3:26)

A vivid memory from both my childhood and the childhoods of my kids is the adventure of learning to ride a bicycle. We all started with training wheels on the bike so that we could begin to develop the balance required to ride on only two wheels. But when the training wheels came off, there was still an awkward period before we trusted that we could ride without those training wheels; we fell at first because we still had not developed the proper balance. We wondered whether we had taken the training wheels off too soon. Could we trust that we were ready to ride now without them?

My memory of learning to ride a bike isn't a perfect analogy for the situation Paul is addressing in the text for our meditation today. But perhaps it can help us appreciate an illustration that Paul uses with the churches to which he writes. It might also help us develop increased gratitude for our relationship to God accomplished with the advent of Jesus.

Paul is very worried about the churches in Galatia. They appear to have entered into an unhealthy relationship with their Bible. From the argument in the letter, it sounds like they were trying to establish their relationship with God on the basis of practices set out in Torah rather than trusting that God had established this connection for them as a gift on the basis of Jesus's death and resurrection. Paul believes they are in danger of losing this invaluable gift.

In the verses we are considering, Paul uses a couple of analogies from family life to help the Galatians rethink their relationship with God. The analogy that serves as the context for the whole discussion is that of a family. God has established a family. God did this by making a promise to Abraham (v. 29). The family began with Israel but God extended this family to the rest of the nations—and therefore to the churches in Galatia—through the death and resurrection of his own son, Jesus. The advent of Jesus makes this gift possible. Having been baptized into Christ, the Galatians are now children of God. God's gift puts them into a right relationship with God (v. 24)! But their temptation to depend on practices in Torah puts their family inheritance at risk.

Paul asks the Galatians to think of their lives in Christ and their relationship to Torah in terms of an analogy to the status young people attain when they transition from school-age children to young adults. In the world of ancient Greece and Rome, a family provided a school-age child with what was called a “pedagogue” (v. 24; some English translations say “disciplinarian,” “custodian,” or “guardian”). This person was normally a trusted domestic slave whose responsibility was to supervise the child’s activities from the time he or she left for school in the morning until turning in for bed in the evening. The pedagogue was responsible for attending to both the physical and moral well-being of the child. He ensured that the child’s journey to school was trouble-free; that the child did not wander into places they should not go nor become misled by people who should not be trusted. The pedagogue was not formally a teacher but assisted in both schoolwork and in cultivating moral values.

Paul’s point seems to be that the pedagogue’s role was primarily limited to a particular stage in the child’s upbringing. Once the child reached a certain age, he or she no longer looked to the pedagogue for guidance. Likewise, because of Jesus’s advent, the time when Torah would have been needed to guide the Galatians has passed. They now should trust that God has made them family.

Perhaps the Galatians were experiencing an uncertainty similar to the person worried that they might have removed the training wheels from the bicycle too soon. Perhaps, some people in these churches worried that some of the practices found in Torah were still necessary for being a member of God’s family. Paul writes to assure them that these practices are completely unnecessary. Jesus’s arrival in the world made this family relationship with God possible; their baptism into Christ made it a reality.

Advent is a season when we celebrate the things God has done for his creation in the incarnation. These verses remind us that we belong to God’s family; we are children of God because God became a child for us.

Today, we also examine ourselves and the ways we behave as members of this family. Some in Galatia were looking to the Bible (Torah) to establish their relationship with God. Are we doing something similar? Do we seek out teachings or practices in the Bible in an attempt to secure our relationship with God on our own merits rather than trusting God’s gift of that relationship?

Dear Father, thank you for taking on human form so that we might become your children. Help us trust that our presence in your family is your gift to us. Help us set aside anything that we might be using in an attempt to create that relationship on our own. Amen.

Richard Wright



DECEMBER 19

RESTORE US, O LORD

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

*“Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine,
that we may be saved” (Psalm 80:7)*

My earliest experiences with the Psalms involved poetry. The church of my childhood taught bits and pieces of them as beautiful and lyrical. I don’t remember being encouraged to read the ones about crying out for help, pouring out mournful lament, or calling for the destruction of my enemies. I think I would have been shaped differently with a fuller picture of these texts earlier in my life. I like to imagine I would have found a safe place to take my confusion and hurt and exhaustion when the whole world is just absolutely too much bear. At least now I know these places exist in the Scripture, and this is a season when I need those places.

The words of Advent—peace, love, joy, and hope—are meant to draw our attention to the goodness of God. We spend this season showing gratitude for the fulfilled promise of Christ being God on earth, living as one of us. We cover everything in shiny ribbons and shiny lights to ward off the darkness of winter and the darkness in our souls. *“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved”* (v. 3). Please don’t misunderstand me, this practice of wrapping hope and joy around our messy lives is good and necessary for our spiritual health. We need a season that is about both waiting and receiving so we can continue to tell the story of God in a world that is filled with longing for that day of New Creation.

Psalms 80 speaks of a time when Israel has tired of living through punishment and destruction. They are weary of the consequences of a broken covenant and a broken kingdom. *“O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?”* (v. 4b). The poet is calling on God as a leader of armies that could sweep in with retribution for those who have caused harm and asking God to make things right again. That’s what we’re doing in this season. We are acknowledging the struggle involved in our waiting for redemption

by drawing our attention to the Incarnation. Our world is full of brokenness and there are days when it feels like the enemies of righteousness are winning. But Christians still cry in the dark, *“But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name”* (vv. 17-18).

We have not given up hope. We aren’t just pretending that how God has cared for us in the past is enough to sustain life, because we know and trust that there is more to come. God will continue to give us life, to restore us. When cold winter winds chill my bones, and the onslaught of news about people that are suffering chills my heart, I turn back to words of the Psalmist because I know God will hear us and answer, *“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel. . . Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved”* (v.1a, 19).

God of hosts, please meet us here in the waiting. We long for your salvation and redemption to cover the world with hope, joy, love, and peace. Thank you for receiving our cries and restoring us with your presence. Let us be people who bring that restoration to others in the waiting. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Dana Spivy Glover



DECEMBER 20

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

John 3:31-36

*“The one who believes in the Son has eternal life.
The one who rejects the Son will not see life,
but God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36)*

In the classic Christmas song “Do You Hear What I Hear?” the night wind beckons a lamb to see, and the lamb in turn invites a shepherd to hear. Then the shepherd boy asks the king if he knows what he, the shepherd boy, knows from seeing and listening to the lamb. The king, understanding, calls to the people to listen to what he has to say, having learned from this progression of wisdom passed along. As I read the text for today, this movement from seeing to hearing, which leads to understanding and then a call for others to listen, echoes to me. Coming immediately after John the Baptist testifies about Jesus to his disciples, the author of John provides further commentary on Jesus, offering a summary of the lessons from the stories of both Nicodemus and John the Baptist, who were mentioned earlier in the chapter.

The commentary unfolds, and the author states that Jesus, who is from above, testifies to what he has seen. We are then encouraged to hear what Jesus says—to accept his testimony. The text seems to question us: did we know that God sent him, loves him, and has given him authority? But listen carefully, the writer warns, if you reject Christ, you reject life; if you accept Christ, you gain life. Do you see Christ coming? Do you hear the author’s message? Do you know who Christ is? Will you listen to him? What fitting questions during Christmas time.

When you hear the Christmas songs on the radio or sing them at church, are you listening to what they are telling you or just singing along out of habit? If the latter, I suggest you pause and pay attention. Reflect on whether you understand the words and agree with them. If not, ask questions and talk with other believers. If the former, worship God and share what you’ve discovered.

When you see the candy canes and Christmas lights, do you understand what we are celebrating? It can be easy to get caught up in the joy of the season and fail to honor the joy giver. When you smile at the beautifully decorated Christmas tree, stop and thank the Lord. When you are enjoying a peppermint hot chocolate, give thanks to the Lord.

Please don't just see and hear, but listen to the message of Christmas. Immanuel, God with us, has come. Listen to that truth echoing all around at Christmas time and know it in your heart. Let it transform you. Show the sacrificial love and mercy that Christ offers us to others. Even small gestures can make a significant difference, such as letting someone go first in line at the grocery store or covering the bill for another table. If we truly hear and see, if we understand, then our lives should reflect it, and we should tell about Christ to others. May you see the star, hear the song, know the Christ, and listen to the one who brings us goodness and light. And just as the shepherd boy was humble enough to listen to a lamb and bold enough to speak to the king, may you be the same.

Lord, open our eyes to see you this season. You are all around, but often we are too busy to notice. Forgive us. Please help us to listen to what you are saying, teach us your message, and show us how to embody it. We see what you have done and we hear your words. We understand the significance of all this and will proclaim it to others, calling them to listen as well. Praise be your name, Child shivering in the cold, visited by shepherds and wise people alike. Praise be to you, Child, as you bring us goodness and light. Amen.

Ariel Bloomer



DECEMBER 21

BETHLEHEM AND THE BARRIOS

Micah 5:2–5a

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times . . . He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD . . . and he will be our peace”

(Micah 5:2, 4a, 5a)

Micah directs our gaze away from the centers of power. Not Jerusalem, not the royal courts, not the halls of empire, but a small, overlooked town—Bethlehem—becomes the womb of God’s promise. The Messiah emerges not from greatness but from hiddenness, not from privilege but from humility.

This reversal speaks deeply to Latino and Hispanic communities. Many of our families have known what it means to live “on the margins.” From barrios and *campos*, from migrant camps and colonias, life often unfolds far from the centers of political or economic influence. And yet, in these very places of smallness, God’s presence has been made manifest. Micah’s vision affirms what our abuelas have always whispered in prayer: “God does not forget the little towns, the poor houses, or the tired hands.”

Bethlehem becomes a symbol of *esperanza* (hope) for us. It reminds us that Christ does not arise in palaces but in *pesebres* (mangers). Just as the shepherds of Bethlehem were called first, so too are those who live close to the land and labor with their hands. God chooses the overlooked as the starting point of peace.

Micah also says the ruler will “shepherd his flock.” This image is both pastoral and communal. In Latino and Hispanic cultures, *familia* and *comunidad* are central to identity. Leadership is not domination but *cuidado* (care). The Christ we await is not a distant monarch but a pastor who walks with his people, whose strength is rooted in God, and who “will be our peace.”

At Advent's edge, we wait not only for a personal Savior but for a shepherd-king who will bring *justicia* (justice) and shalom. Micah's words resonate with the longing of many churches for leaders who protect the vulnerable, nourish the hungry, and guide with humility. In the cultural memory of exile, migration, and resilience, we hear the good news: the smallest towns, the forgotten places, and the marginalized voices will be lifted, for from Bethlehem comes peace for all.

*Dios de Belén,
you choose the small and overlooked to reveal your greatness.
You come close to the humble home,
the migrant worker,
the barrio street.
Shepherd us in your strength,
gather us into your flock,
and make us instruments of your peace.
As we await your coming,
teach us to see your presence in every Bethlehem of our world.
In the name of Christ our peace,
Amén.*

Omar Palafox



DECEMBER 22

OUR BEAUTIFUL KING

Isaiah 33:17-22

*“For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our ruler;
the LORD is our king; he will save us” (Isaiah 33:22 NRSVUE)*

“Your eyes will see the king in his beauty; they will behold a land that stretches far away” (v. 17). Isaiah presents an image of hope, a future in which the faithful can look back and reflect on the terror of the past without fear, with a promise that “no longer will you see the insolent people” (v. 19). This raises the question, of course, what terror and what insolent people? Looking back at the preceding verses offers us a fuller picture to understand this vision for a hopeful future.

A few verses prior to the start of our reading for today, Isaiah chapter 33 begins “Woe to the destroyer.” The text speaks of treacherous and violent people receiving consequences for the wrongs they have perpetuated. The chapter speaks of people waiting for God to show up in tumultuous times when treaties are broken and people fear to travel, leaving the highways empty.

Isaiah 33 announces that God will come like a fire on the land and describes sinners as afraid and asking, “who among us can live with the devouring fire?” (v. 12) Those who do not profit from oppression, accept bribes, or condone violence will be safe. These marks of righteousness, merely avoiding complicity in corruption, do not set the bar very high, yet many still fail to meet these basic standards. In a world run by corrupt powers, standing against them and refusing to profit from their corruption takes courage and resolve.

Even with all of the pressures to chase power, some remain faithful and reject opportunities to profit from others’ suffering. These faithful ones will be safe as God overthrows corrupt leaders and restores justice. It is they who get the privilege to look on their new king, who is kind and just, in all his beauty.

Our text promises a new king, one who will bring an end to injustice, save the people, and rule fairly. It presents an image of peace and a quiet city safe from war. It is a beautiful image to contemplate. And yet, as we read a text about deliverance from violence, oppression, and war, it is hard to engage in reflection without acknowledging that our own world, as it currently stands, is filled with all of these things. Wars rage, and vulnerable people are paying the ultimate price for them while the wealthy and powerful profit from violence and oppression. As news of one horror dies down, another arises. Unless a miracle occurs, many more injustices will have made headlines and been forgotten between the writing of this meditation and the reading of it.

There may be a temptation to turn off all sources of news and sing Christmas carols more loudly to drown out the sound of a suffering world before it reaches our ears. There is certainly a faithful place for singing joyful tunes and proclaiming the coming of Jesus all season long, but in this moment, as we honor Advent, the season of waiting, we have an opportunity to open our eyes and see the ways in which our world mirrors Isaiah's. While they carry new flags, violence, corruption, and exploitation still plague our world.

Even in a world that was broken in many of the same ways that ours is today, this text offers a proclamation of hope. One day, God's kingdom will come in fullness. God will restore peace and tear down systems of power that thrive on the exploitation of people. Those who uphold and benefit from these systems will not like the changes brought by God's kingdom, but for all who live under the threat of these powers, this is indeed good news.

God does not forget or abandon us to the whims of empires and their rulers. God will one day restore justice. Until then, this text invites us to hope for a better tomorrow and trust that God will bring it. As we trust, may we join the ranks of the righteous and upright who refuse to sacrifice integrity and reject any profits that come from the suffering and oppression of God's children near or far. One day we will see our beautiful king bring true justice and peace to our world. May we remain faithful as we wait.

*We praise you, O God, and proclaim you as our great king, because you are good.
Give us eyes to see beyond the rulers of this world and witness your power at work.
Guide our hearts to reject violence and tyranny when it is close to home and when
it is far beyond our borders. Disrupt the powers that plague our world with violence
and oppression, and guide us in the ways that will lead to peace. In Jesus's name,
Amen.*

Karen Cooke



DECEMBER 23

MARY'S SONG

Luke 1:46b-55

*“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and
lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52 NRSVUE)*

In this moment, Mary joins a long line of prophets and poets who bear witness to the goodness of God. She follows in the footsteps of Miriam, Hannah, and Isaiah, declaring that our God notices injustice and works to undo it. She rejoices that God has chosen her to play a part in restoring justice to a broken world.

Mary lives in an occupied land, under the threat of the ever looming powers of Rome. Still, in this moment she declares confidently that God is her savior, that God is merciful, and that God remembers and keeps promises. Mary sees the ways that those in power work to accrue more power at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. She sees the effects of poverty all around her. In this prophetic moment she sees beyond her present reality to understand what prophets and psalmists have been saying since long before her birth: that the God who made this world and gave God's people commandments to love neighbors and strangers alike loves justice.

Mary sees that the God of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebecca notices when people are hungry and suffering. God sees these things and cares. Gabriel told Mary that her child will be God's great promised king; Mary, understanding that God loves justice and cares for the poor, realizes that this king she carries will not abuse power in the ways of the kings and emperors currently ruling over her land. He will turn ideas of power that exploit the vulnerable upside down. The wealthy, the proud, and those sitting on thrones built on violence and oppression will be scattered from their seats of power. Her king will feed the hungry and uplift the lowly.

As Mary carried her pregnancy, she carried the expectation that the God who worked in mysterious and profound ways in the past would do so again. When her baby grew, she

would get the opportunity to see and hear of him feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and uplifting the lowly while decrying the powers that exploited these people and made them vulnerable. She got to bear witness to her baby boy growing into a promised king who wielded power in a fundamentally different way than the Roman Empire did.

Many empires have risen and fallen since Mary first held her baby in her arms. While titles changed and borders were redrawn, some conditions remain true. Power continues to act as an addictive force, and many who have it continue to abuse it in order to amass more. Despite all of our modern technology and the ability to ship food across the world, wars and conflicts manufacture avoidable famines. Poverty and hunger still run rampant in our world, consuming the children God loves.

There is hope in this text, however. God will not allow injustice to continue forever. When the kingdom of God is fully realized, we will see the proud scattered and the lowly uplifted, just as Mary said. In the meantime, we wait with Mary to see the true and just King in all his glory.

May we take courage as we wait, rejecting the despair that tempts us to turn a blind eye to the injustice around us. As we pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, let us imitate our king. Let us reject injustice and embrace mercy, celebrating God's goodness wherever we see it at work in our world and accepting the invitations we receive to join in God's restorative work.

God, we praise you and rejoice in your great loving kindness. With Mary, we marvel that you care for the weak, lowly, and forgotten. We thank you for each mercy you have shown us and ask that you continue to form us after your own image so that we may show mercy as our Father does. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Karen Cooke



DECEMBER 24

THE GRACE THAT TEACHES

Titus 2:11-15

*For God's grace has been revealed in a saving way to all human beings,
teaching us that by rejecting impiety and worldly lusts,
we might live righteously and piously in the present age. . . . (Titus 2:11-12)*

Titus on Christmas Eve? No talk of gifts, milk and cookies for Santa, trees, and reindeer hooves on rooftops? What kind of meditation is this anyway?

The letter to Titus addresses a youngish Christian teacher tasked with forming a community of believers on the island of Crete. The letter takes a hard-nosed look at the congregation there, noting their struggles with petty gossiping, lying, and other antisocial behavior. The grand vision of the gospel collides with the trivialities of daily life. The Christian teacher takes up the task of elevating the people in light of their eventual state of blessedness before God. Live as much as you can in full view of God's desires for humankind.

Titus 2:11-15 follows exhortations to subsets of the church (old and young, men and women, free and enslaved). The text does not offer a full-blown program for social reform or a thorough analysis of the social structures of the Roman Empire. Instead, it assumes that everyone who hears its words enjoys a God-given degree of agency and can take responsibility for their own actions. Even the most stepped-on people can make decisions about their response, and those decisions matter to God. Even within the narrow constraints of ancient society, Titus must help his people live with integrity.

This paragraph, then, steps back from the specific exhortations to fundamental principles. These include such key Christian ideas as

- God's grace extends to all human beings regardless of their rank or prestige
- That grace is visible in the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom the church praises and imitates

- Grace empowers the removal of the practices that enslave us and the reformation of our desires for those things
- All of this is possible because of the imminent appearance of “the Great God and our Savior Jesus Christ”

This compact paragraph contains other key ideas and values, all pointing in the same direction. The letter to Titus calls Christian teachers and all learning from them to the highest possible plane of human existence, life with the self-giving God.

That last adjective matters. Verse 14 adds a pair of subordinate clauses describing Jesus as the one “who gave himself on our behalf, so we might be cleansed from all lawlessness and purified as a special people for himself.” Gentiles without a history with the saving God can begin such a history because of the work of Jesus of Nazareth. No longer slaves of tyrants or playthings of anarchists, they—we—begin to relate to and learn from God.

This text, then, seems entirely appropriate for Christmas Eve. The story of this day is about more than an ordinary birth or ordinary gift-giving to loved ones. It concerns the ultimate act of gift-giving as God becomes a Jewish man who suffers alongside of and for both Jews and Gentiles.

As fun as trees and reindeer are (if they stay off the lawn), something far better comes to us today: freedom. Freedom from bad ideas, misdirected desires, fear and anger and hatred. Freedom from death’s shackles. Freedom from the powers of evil and the evils of power. All of that is much better than even the best gift under the tree.

The paragraph ends by exhorting Titus to teach others, to cajole or warn or excite his hearers so that they can rightly appreciate the position they’re in. They have received the greatest gift possible, and to enjoy it, they must live into all its implications. The church’s teacher calls them to that sort of life by pointing them to their own teacher, God’s grace. In Titus’s teaching (and in the teaching of his many successors), God’s grace shines through in words and actions so that others may perceive the beauty of God’s mercy and live in imitation of it.

What sort of meditation is this? That does not matter much. Words do not suffice on Christmas Eve. The self-giving God has invited us all to the birth room to witness, to celebrate, and to proclaim. “For God’s grace has been revealed in a saving way. . . .”

Grant us, O God, both a vision of what you have done and a companion vision of what we may become because of that. We await your salvation expectantly. Direct our desires and hopes toward the right ends, for we know that what we desire we become. Show us what you will show us so that we may be what we need to be. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 25

ALL BEFORE DAYLIGHT

John 1:1-14

*“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes” (John 1:14, The Message)*

Christmas morning came to Castlemann Drive in Memphis, Tennessee, a neighborhood street meandering among magnolia trees. Arms branching and leaf-fingers wiggling in the breezes—just imagine these evergreens. They stretch as tall as if they are standing on tippy toes. Even then it was a well established, friendly place to live with plenty of ditches and alleys; just the kind to which a little boy would want to move. This neighborhood, loaded with young families, full of kids, was where Philip and Craig lived three houses apart when they were nine.

It was on this nine-year-old Christmas morning that Craig had his heart set on a kind of Christmas miracle. Padding on light feet, turning the knob silently while peering around the garage door, he saw what may have been the all-time greatest gift. Shining in the street light filtered through garage door windows sat a brand spanking new go-kart. It surpassed the greatness of the “Green Machine” he had pedaled up and down the neighborhood sidewalks with his buddies. He had graduated from the league of the “Big Wheels” and hit the big time. Their plastic three-wheeled frames had taught him to pull the brake and drift through the turns, but those were toys for mere boys. Clearly, he was a child no longer. The sight before his eyes on this Christmas morning justified the feeling he was ready for something more, and he did not hesitate. He had the engine going, the garage door raised, and was tearing down the driveway before anyone else in his family could rub the sleep out of their eyes. Moments later he would collide with his best friend’s brick house. All before daylight.

When our boys were young, we had a very basic Christmas morning rule. We wait until the sun comes up. As anyone might imagine, this versatile rule can be applied to many contexts. Craig did not grow up with this rule, and his parents upon hearing such a Christmas-morning clatter, rose from their beds to see what was the matter. Jim was the mastermind behind the go-kart Christmas; to Judy the gift was a surprise. There they stood in the garage: red bathrobe and pink curlers, white undershirt and baggy boxers, mouths

agape. This was not a warm and fuzzy awakening. A Christmas morning screech, crunch, and a hiccuping sputter ricocheted through the block and Philip's front door opened. I wonder what his father said first. "Oh hey, merry Christmas!"

Short-lived was the thrill. In the thirty seconds that the go-kart made its zippy first run, Craig's two pajamaed parents found themselves at the foot of the driveway. They had only begun to explore their way down the dark sidewalk when they heard the crash. There, sitting in the go-kart now three doors down, the new nine-year-old driver sat stunned, having bounced right off the brick section of wall between Philip's front door and his garage. What happened?

We have told this story in our family for years. It is both fun to tell and to hear told as people can all imagine the excitement and the shock. Linger over what happened next leaves us giddy every time. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson correlates the Gospel story to a modern context saying, "The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness" (John 1:5). It blazed out of the darkness all right!

Because it begins in the dark, this story serves as a parable pointing to why people need light. While John's preparation for Jesus got people excited about the light, Jesus's presence as a person remained shocking to those who allowed their minds to wrap around the concept of divinity choosing humanity. The complex simplicity of this concept still points people directly to the ineffability of God.

Rewind a few thousand years, and all before daylight on Christmas morning Jesus "moved into the neighborhood; the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). What happened? Augustine, in an attempt to relieve the tension the idea of God becoming human creates, suggested to his gentle listeners that they consider that Jesus remained no less divine and simply "took on" humanity like I might put on my writing shawl. The problem with that view, as David E. Fredrickson points out, is the removal of astonishment at Christ's coming. The bottom line is that it is shocking. The jolt of this truth might be compared to what one might receive should they run a go-kart into the front side of their best friend's house. The impact of Jesus the Word made flesh presses the human mind toward that which exceeds the capacity of words.

Wondering at the Christmas morning crash on Castlemann serves to set human minds up for continual wonder regarding Christ, his coming, and his crucifixion. These actions of Jesus's life occurred at a point in history yet are described in a way that indicates continual action. The moves of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection present a continual reality, one that people can receive and join at any point.

*Jesus, may we never cease to wonder at your continual arrival. Good morning.
Merry Christmas. Amen.*

Beth Ann Fisher



DECEMBER 26

THE MENAGERIE PRAISING GOD

Psalm 148

*Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens (Psalm 148:13)*

I learned to listen to the worship song of creation on the shores of Lake Huron. My family spent summer vacations there amid the cooler breezes, sandy beaches, and tranquil waters. We disconnected from the technological wonders of civilization and the hectic pace of our common life to reconnect with God, our family, and our greater community. We slowed down enough to breathe deeply of the deliberate slowness of nature and to become attentive to the enchanting marvels of God's beloved creation. I learned, as a young child, if I stilled myself enough, I could almost hear creation's symphony of praise to God if only I could cultivate the willingness to hear. I treasure these memories and carry them with me now, and every so often I will pause long enough to attend to the worship happening all around me.

Psalm 148 is a celebration of God as the One who brought all creation into being, and lovingly sustains it. The season of Advent directs our attention toward God's work of re-creation in and through Christ. The coming of Christ as King inaugurates a renewal of the world, wherein even creation itself longs for redemption. The cosmic scope of the creation praising its Creator in Psalm 148 eagerly anticipates the grand scale of Christ's redeeming work through the Incarnation.

Psalm 148 reminds us that all the cosmos—heaven and earth, kings and children, angels and animals—are all under God's universal lordship. The season of Advent fundamentally and vigorously proclaims another universal hope that Christ comes not only for the people of Israel but for all the nations; he comes not only to renew humanity, but to restore all creation. The universality and grandeur of the summons to praise the Creator lends itself well to the angelic announcement of “good news of great joy for all the people.”

In this glorious worship song, all the aspects of creation praise the LORD their Creator with one unified chorus of praise, even if there are resonant harmonies or variations on the theme. Creation is unified in its ardent worship of the Creator. The Word made flesh through the Incarnation may further unify all people into one harmonious melody, and thus unite heaven and earth in adoration of God. Advent, as a season of expectant waiting, also bears witness to the anticipation of that glorious day when every tongue, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, will confess Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

As this creation hymn indicates, the ultimate purpose of creation is to glorify the Creator God. The season of Advent proclaims that Christ has come to restore humanity to that vocation; we are not meant only for survival, but for joyful worship, renewed life, and partnership with God in bringing about God's kingdom. The hopeful waiting we experience in Advent parallels creation's longing to be restored and renewed. The Incarnation illuminates the fundamental truth of the Good News that transformation and new creation are always hopeful possibilities for the people of God and in the Kingdom of God.

Psalm 148 rejoices in and praises a God whose exalted majesty is "above heaven and earth," yet simultaneously emphasizes God's nearness to the people of God. In the season of Advent, this paradox appears again because the transcendent God of all creation draws near to the people of God through Jesus, Emmanuel or "God with us." In this Advent season, may we be attentive to the work of God in and through the people of God.

Holy God, Holy Immortal One, blessed are you, O Creator, because you spoke and the cosmos was born. All creation, from the delicate lily to the swirling galaxy, join in the symphony of adoration to praise your Holy Name. May your gracious will be done on earth and through your people as it is in heaven. May we long for the inbreaking of your divine kingdom, O God. And may all people come to know you and join in creation's never-ending songs of praise, through your Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Kendra Jernigan



DECEMBER 27

OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

1 John 5:1-12

Everyone believing that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten by God, and everyone who loves the one begetting loves the one begotten by him (1 John 5:1)

Loving. Begetting. Witnessing. Overcoming. Believing. Living. First John 5:1-12 comes near the end of a strange letter to a struggling church. This paragraph pulls together themes appearing earlier in the book, presenting a tangle of high-impact words that point readers to the intimate and intricate relationship they have with each other and with God. It asks a key question: what is our identity in Christ as we love God and our community in the realities of its own context?

Our first instinct is to untangle the words and make them carefully perform a logically laid-out argument. How does the Spirit testify to the revelation of divine love, and how do we come to believe that testimony? How does believing in the incarnation lead us to love our fellow believers, and failure to love them imply we don't believe in the incarnation? This text gives us much to untangle.

Perhaps, however, we ought to resist that temptation for a moment and let the words wash over us. First John asks its audiences, whether the first tiny group of recently divided congregants or our much larger but still divided contemporary church, to consider its own intimate relationship with God. I need to ask whether my love for my fellow believers reflects my conviction that Jesus became one of us—someone just like my neighbor—to rescue us from the power of sin and death. Has my love for others grown to the point that it begins to look like God's self-giving love?

How can we tell? If you ask me if I love the people around me enough, I'll probably tell you yes and keep my doubts to myself. Self-justification and self-criticism dance together in our heads with neither gaining a permanent advantage. There must be some test beyond my personal feelings, whether self-affirming or self-denying. There must be some way of

trying to live each day with careful attention to the image of God in each person around me. Otherwise, we will be stuck in an endless cycle of judging and justifying.

First John proposes the test of obedience when it says, “This is how we know that we love God’s children, whenever we love God and keep God’s commandments” (1 John 5:2). We know we love God when we love our fellow believers, and we know we love them when we love God. God’s commands are not irksome precisely because they reflect God’s love and because they teach us to love the right things in the right order and with the right passion and actions.

This reading also insists on something else. A community that loves each other experiences victory over the world. Jesus’s followers do not strive for mastery with the tools of empire, whether by brute force or by intimidation, slander, or deceit. Jesus’s sacrificial death offered an invitation to people, not a path of coercion. Jesus’s followers honor him when we also operate in a self-giving way. Those who try to win the world by the world’s means have already lost the war, and their own souls in the process.

This sobering, yet delightful, text from 1 John offers a place to stand in a world of shifting values and loyalties. Correctly focused love for God and other people transforms us from the inside out. It grows and grows, helping us see the world in a more expansive way. We gain better perspectives and rise above small-mindedness. We begin to see in each person either someone already reborn into a relationship with God or potentially so. All human beings become our concern and our delight.

My father, who was an atheist, said to me when I began to grow as a Christian, “If you have found the truth, stick to it.” I carry his message with me every day as I try daily to live into my identity as a recipient of God’s loving truth.

This text is challenging, especially a few days after Christmas as we head into a new year. At this moment, I want to resolve to love more deeply, to exercise mercy, and to bear witness to God’s love not just with my words but with my life. I want to imitate Christ and find my identity in loving God and the world God made.

Loving. Begetting. Witnessing. Overcoming. Believing. Living. Yes, all that, and much more.

O God, who in love gives everything to make us whole, empower us to give what we can. Help us see your work in our neighbor. Help us treasure the gifts you have given to each person. May we live together as a community filled with righteousness, hope, and peace. Amen.

Samjung Kang-Hamilton



DECEMBER 28

COUNTERCULTURAL CLOTHING

Colossians 3:12-17

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12)

What a fitting passage to follow so soon after Christmas! During Advent, we remembered the uncertain and sometimes dark days of waiting. We waited too, remembering the hope that God has given us. Then, we rejoiced with the coming of the Messiah! Christ is born! We remembered his humble birth in a stable, born to a carpenter and a young woman, two powerless people coming from a small nation, living under the rule of a powerful occupier.

Now, we remember with joy who we are together. Christ did not come just so we could each individually know that we are going to heaven when we die. He came to give us true life, and this life is lived with a community of people—a community of God’s chosen people.

Because of Christ, we are chosen, we are loved, and we are made holy. Instead of being a community filled with envy, competition, arguments, gossip and self-importance, we can be filled with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

From the beginning, people wanted signs for Jesus to prove himself. We read of this throughout the gospels, especially in John. When Jesus is calling some of his disciples in John 1:43-51, he sees Nathanael and says, ““Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Understandably, Nathanael wonders how Jesus even knows him. Jesus responds, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you,” and Nathanael is overwhelmed, believing that Jesus is the Messiah. In John 4:48, Jesus says to a royal official and presumably all others listening, “Unless you (plural) see signs and wonders you will not believe.” In John 20:24-29, Thomas wants a sign to believe that the resurrected Christ is really Jesus. We may judge these ancient people for their desire, but isn’t it true that we also want signs? How do we know that God is real? How do we know that the Son of God coming to earth changes lives?

I know of no bigger sign that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection makes a difference than a community that lives out Colossians 3:12-17. By nature, most of us tend to be selfish. We want what is best for us and those we love. We are inclined to create exclusive little communities that only include the people we want to include. Our world emphasizes getting ahead, making money, receiving what we deserve, and winning. In sharp contrast, Paul invites this community of Christians to be filled with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, gratitude, and love for each other. These are the qualities we extol as people who have been transformed by the Son of God who gave up his power to come to earth.

Being clothed in the new self (v. 10) shapes how members of this community ought to treat each other. They are to bear with each other, forgive each other, and love each other. Since they are formed by the Messiah who brought peace to earth, they are to let peace rule in them and, therefore, be thankful. They are to all treat each other as equals even as they teach and admonish each other, recognizing and affirming that all have wisdom to offer.

In the Roman world, the emperor held all power. In our world, there are also people who seemingly hold all the power. But we follow a Messiah who is the true king. He gave up every kind of power, was born in humility, and lived in humility. He grew up as the son of a carpenter, and he chose to travel as an itinerant teacher, healing and teaching people how to love God and love each other. He loved all those around him even when they messed up time and time again. Even though he was "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" and the one through whom all was made, he humbled himself and reconciled us all to God (Colossians 1:15-23). We are to model this same self-giving love to each other and to the world. In doing so, we become a sign of the miraculous work of Jesus.

What a great message for us to hear just after Christmas! We sing with gratitude to the God who saves us. We treat each other with kindness and respect, and we hold nothing against each other. We are filled with compassion and forgiveness for one another. We love as Christ first loved us.

Lord, please help us to love each other the way you love us. Please help us to see each other with your eyes, to be filled with your love and your peace. At a time when almost everything we are exposed to reminds us to hold on tightly to what we "deserve," please help us to hold on to you and to let ourselves be completely remade by your love.

Kaley Ihfe



DECEMBER 29

THE LORD WHO ANSWERS

Psalm 20

*“May the Lord answer you on the day of trouble!
May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!” (Psalm 20:1)*

When my children were small, the nights were rarely silent. Sometimes the cry came because of a bad dream, sometimes from sickness, and sometimes from the unexplainable loneliness that creeps into the dark hours of the night. No matter the cause, the pattern was always the same: I would hear my name called out, I would enter the room, and the crying would fade. Looking back on that time in our lives, what strikes me most is that usually I didn't have to solve the problem right away. I didn't need to banish the nightmare, heal the cough, or explain away the fear. Simply being there—my presence—was what was needed.

Psalm 20 is a prayer like that—a blessing spoken in anticipation of a moment when fear and danger are near. Before Israel's king went into battle, the people would sing these words: *May the Lord answer you . . . protect you . . . send you help . . . remember you . . . grant you your heart's desire . . . fulfill your plans . . .* These aren't just lofty words. They echo the voice of a people calling for God's presence and power in the most dangerous of moments.

The psalm has two halves: first, the congregation's prayer for the king (vv. 1–5), and then the confident declaration of God's saving power (vv. 6–9). The pivot is verse 6: “Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand.” The people have prayed, and they are certain God will act. That confidence doesn't come from denial—they are not pretending the battle is unthreatening. Their hope rests in the name of the Lord, not in their own chariots or horses (v. 7).

At Christmastide, we may read this psalm with new eyes. We see that the king for whom Israel prayed has come—not in armor but in swaddling clothes. The battle he came to fight was not against earthly armies. The “day of trouble” was not just the threat of enemies at the gate, but the deep trouble of humanity estranged from God. The God of Jacob has sent God's anointed, not merely to survive the fight, but to win the decisive victory.

The stable in Bethlehem is already a battlefield. The powers of darkness did not miss the significance of that birth—Herod’s anger, his order to kill all of the baby boys, and the flight into Egypt all testify that the enemy understood the threat this child posed. And yet, from his first cry, Jesus’s very presence is God’s answer to this day of trouble. Like a parent entering a dark room, God comes. God does not shout instructions from afar; God draws near.

This is why Psalm 20 belongs in Christmastide. The victory it anticipates begins in the manger. The confidence it expresses—“Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed”—is fulfilled in the one whose name means “The Lord saves.” Christmas is not just the sweet beginning of the story; it is the arrival of the king into enemy territory, the beginning of the final campaign that will end with every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

But here is the tension: the birth of Jesus does not sweep away every trouble at once. Wars still rage. Diseases still spread. Sorrows still pierce the heart. The day of trouble remains. What changes is how we face it. We face it as those who have already seen God’s decisive answer in Christ. We pray like the people of Psalm 20, with honest awareness of need, yet with unshakeable hope that the Lord will answer.

In these days after Christmas, we are still singing of Jesus’s birth, still marveling at his coming, but the church’s gaze already stretches forward to his return. Christmastide holds both—the first coming in humility and the second coming in glory. Psalm 20 gives us the language to live in that in-between time: praying for God’s saving help now, while also declaring with certainty that God’s final victory is sure.

So, we keep praying: for our loved ones, for nations in turmoil, for the marginalized, for the grieving, for the church to bear witness in this dark world. We pray in the name of the Lord our God, knowing that the name we call upon is the same name announced by angels over Bethlehem: Jesus, the Lord who saves.

The truth that comforted my children in the night is the same truth that steadies us now. The truth of presence. God has entered the room. God is with us, and because God is with us, we can face every day of trouble with a hopefulness—until the day comes when trouble itself is no more.

O Lord, in this season when we rejoice at the birth of your anointed one, hear us in the day of trouble and in the day of joy. Let the name of Jesus be our shelter and our song. Strengthen us with the hope that you have come to dwell among us, and teach us to trust in you alone. Grant us the joy of your salvation and keep us steadfast until you come again. Through the name of Jesus, Amen.

Jennifer Schroeder



DECEMBER 30

THE PEOPLE WHO YEARN TOGETHER

Isaiah 26:1-9

*Open the gates and let a righteous nation
who acts faithfully come in (Isaiah 26:2)*

The reading from Isaiah 26 combines parts of two songs that nevertheless fit together. The first, verses 1-6, celebrates the impending victory of righteous people over the forces of oppression and injustice that have beset them for too long. The second, verses 7-21, leans forward with anticipation to such a time of triumph but realizes it has not yet arrived. Already, but not yet. The people who have returned from exile reading this text need both songs, since God's salvation comes, but it also grows. We experience it with varying degrees of intensity and conviction.

The first song localizes salvation in a rebuilt Zion, where peace and justice reign. Parallel changes happen as a wrecked city becomes usable again and as wrecked lives also undergo renewal. The stones and mortar symbolize flesh and blood and spirit as renovation takes several forms at once. The once desolate city gains a new population.

And not just any population. "A righteous people" parade through the reconstructed gates. They invite each other to open the portals so all can crowd in. All may enter, but all must leave behind attitudes and behaviors that harm or betray others. A renewed city can only house renewed people. It does no good to reconstruct walls and streets unless the people occupying them have also experienced renewal of the spirit.

This song also speaks of reversal of fortune, a common theme throughout the Bible. The once triumphant city, in this case perhaps Babylon, full of cruelty and oppression and unequal outcomes, has experienced a fall as those once oppressed now take their rightful place as whole people. Renewal comes in all the forms needed, whether repentance of sin and moral regeneration or liberation from oppression and suffering. God makes everything right, and human beings do their part in the process.

That human part draws the attention of the second song, especially the first few lines: “the righteous person’s path is straight . . .” (v. 7). In fact, the focus on human righteousness links the two songs. As the first song ends with the feet of the newly liberated poor, the second opens with the path those feet will trod as they pursue true righteousness. The path leads through God’s trustworthy justice, which we must all count on.

The songs raise important questions for us at the end of one year and beginning of another. A privatized religion lacking room for a concern for justice, but locating every part of the experience with God in our private feelings and letting us avoid responsibility for the suffering of others—all of that sort of faith has to vanish before the presence of the true God who calls us to be a “righteous people.” Both the adjective and the noun matter.

But I wonder what such a community would look like today. So much of the church in the contemporary USA shows little evidence either of being part of a people or of being righteous. The apathy and sometimes cruelty that much of that church exhibits seems remote from the biblical call. Anger and fear are strangling many. Where is the cure for the spiritual disease ravaging us?

Perhaps v. 9 gives an answer: “As for my life—I desire you [God] in the light; yes, as for my spirit inside me—I long for you.” Like so many of our favorite songs, this one names desire as a key factor in life. We cannot be a community of righteous people without longing for God. A group without a passionate longing for the divine presence is merely a social club, perhaps having some merits and bringing its members some pleasure but falling far short of the full meaning of the title “church.” The desire for God’s presence lies at the heart of faith—it is faith—and so at the heart of the ethical behaviors required of Christians. We long for what we do not yet have in full, and that desire acts as a cleanser removing our misbegotten desires to dominate, to crush, and even to obliterate others. These songs in Isaiah 26 speak of a new world, and they invite us into it. Can we listen to the invitation?

O God of all mercy, infuse our lives with a steadfast desire to become a righteous people, not just in words or outward appearances but in our inmost thoughts and our every action. Overthrow the power structures that crush people, that celebrate evil in its many forms, that rob people of hope and joy, that pit us against each other. Amen.

Mark W. Hamilton



DECEMBER 31

LIGHT SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

John 8:12-19

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12b)

Over the last couple of years, I’ve been reading ancient Christian commentaries on the Gospels as part of my research work. I’ve spent the most time in commentaries on John’s Gospel, and I have been amazed at the depth of doctrine, worship, and spirituality that early Christians found in these texts. I’ve long struggled to stay engaged with these long discourses of Jesus in the middle of the book (maybe a symptom of my mild ADHD?), and the ancient commentaries have helped me connect with this part of the Bible. Of course, this is one of the great virtues of the spiritual classics! These writers have helped me think about Christology with John 5, the sacraments with John 6, the Law with John 7, theology proper with John 8, sin with John 9, and the church with John 10. It’s gorgeous, it’s edifying, and I encourage you to read some of these commentaries for yourself!

As a result, I could now point you in a number of directions with today’s text, largely building on the insights of other believers, but let’s spend time with the very first verse. Those of us who live in the Northern Hemisphere are currently in the darkest portion of the year. Days are short, light is weak, and nights are long. This is also a time of year that can also be dark in an emotional and spiritual sense. We may struggle with Seasonal Affective Disorder, and gathering with family over the holidays may be difficult for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps we are looking back with regret over a challenging year... or are looking ahead with dread to what looks to be a hard year upcoming.

This is when it is good to remember today’s text: not only is there a light that is strong enough to light up the whole world, but even when we do face situations that are dark, we still have “the light of life.” Early Christians regularly connected Jesus with ideas about light, probably influenced by texts like this one. One connection that is particularly powerful

in English is the link with Malachi 4:2, where God says through the prophet, “For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” Early Christians connected that “sun of righteousness” with Jesus, and of course in English we can make it “the Son of righteousness”—what a lovely homophone! Jesus does indeed rise in our hearts, in our families, in our churches, in our cities, and there is healing in his wings.

Maybe you have questions, though, about what it could mean that Jesus says, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”? Is this some sort of guarantee that Jesus will keep us from all suffering? A prosperity-gospel-friendly saying of Jesus that we can count on because God always keeps God’s promises? An abrogation of Psalm 23, that we will now never be in “the valley of the shadow of death” thanks to Jesus?

I don’t think so. I’m not doubting God’s power; I just see human suffering everywhere. Everyone I have ever known has experienced some kind of “darkness”: pain, doubt, fear, physical suffering, disappointment, relational breaks, church pain, etc. It seems to be a normal part of life, and being a follower of Jesus doesn’t give us a “get out of jail free” card when it comes to the hard things of life.

But notice: Jesus says that we will never “walk in darkness.” Several times in the middle of John’s Gospel, he uses the term “walk” in the sense of “normal, everyday going about your business” (John 6:66; 7:1; 11:9-10, 54; 12:35). It’s how you live your life. There are eight more such usages in John’s letters, where we see the author(s) mention walking in truth, walking according to God’s commandments, and walking as Jesus walked. It’s as though Jesus is saying in John 8:12, “Whoever follows me won’t make hanging around in darkness their normal pattern.” Darkness may come upon us, but we won’t seek it out, and we certainly won’t loiter there. As he says in John 12:35, “Walk while you have the light.”

That’s where we’ll end this meditation and this year. No matter our circumstances, as the year turns, we get to choose how we will go about our business. Will we walk in the light, letting God’s word be a lamp to our feet, being led by Jesus, the light of the world? Or will we make regular visits to the darkness? God lets us choose, so let’s choose wisely!

God Almighty, your word tells us that you are the Father of lights, from whom every good gift comes. As we end this year and embark on the next, please give us a powerful sense of your abiding presence, especially in the dark places of our lives. May we let our ways be illuminated by your Spirit. We ask all this in the name of Jesus, the light of the world who conquered darkness on our behalf. Amen.

David Kneip



JANUARY 1

RESOLVED: LET GOD'S WILL BE DONE

Philippians 2:5-11

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. . . . (Philippians 2:5)

Growing up, New Year's Day meant two things. First, there was TV, which consisted mostly of parades and college football. The *Tournament of Roses Parade* was a requirement, and bowl games filled the television. We measured the rhythm of the day by kickoff times. Second, New Year's Day was synonymous with resolutions. It was the cultural reset button: the moment when people everywhere declared they would shed bad habits, adopt new ones, and reimagine themselves as improved versions of who they had been the year before.

For most of us, however, those fresh starts didn't last. The enthusiasm of January quickly met the reality of February. Gym memberships gathered dust, journals went blank, diets slipped. Studies confirm what our own lives illustrate: by the end of January, only about half of people still hold onto their resolutions. And by year's end, only about 8–9% have followed through. In other words, we are not very good at keeping the promises we make to ourselves.

Yet the practice of resolutions is not uniquely modern. In fact, it stretches back thousands of years. Historians suggest that the Babylonians may have been the first to practice a form of New Year's resolutions. Centuries later, Julius Caesar reformed the calendar, fixing January 1 as the official start of the year. January was dedicated to Janus, the Roman god of beginnings. Depicted with two faces—one looking back, one looking forward—Janus symbolized reflection and resolve. Romans would offer sacrifices to him and make pledges of good behavior for the coming year. Christians also took up the practice, though often with an emphasis on confession, repentance, and resolve to walk more faithfully with God.

At their best, resolutions are about starting fresh and living well. But in modern practice, they too often become me-centered projects: efforts to improve my body, my productivity, my bank account, my reputation. That self-focus is not always wrong, but it can be

shallow. Philippians 2 offers us something deeper. It calls us to reframe resolutions not around self-assertion but around Christ-centered surrender.

Paul's famous passage in Philippians 2:5–11 can be seen in three movements:

(1) The Call: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word for “mind” (*phronesis*) is not simply about thoughts or ideas. It refers to one's orientation, outlook, or posture toward life. Paul is not asking us merely to think *about* Jesus; he is urging us to think *like* Jesus—to see the world through his attitude of humility and obedience.

(2) The Descent: Paul describes how Jesus, though equal with God, did not cling to privilege or status. Instead, he emptied himself, took on human flesh, became a servant, and humbled himself to the point of death—even death on a cross. This radical downward movement runs against every human instinct for self-protection, self-promotion, or self-exaltation.

(3) The Ascent: Because of this humility, “God highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name.” Honor, glory, and reputation were bestowed on Jesus—not because he grasped for them, but because he surrendered them. The paradox is unmistakable: the way up is down, the path to honor runs through humility.

What does this mean for us as we face a new year? It means God is not opposed to honor or reputation itself—Scripture speaks positively of seeking glory, honor, and immortality (Romans 2:7). The issue is *how* we seek it. Do we grasp for it on our own terms, or do we receive it on God's terms? Here is where Philippians 2 challenges our modern approach to resolutions. Instead of saying, “I will try harder, achieve more, or make myself better,” what if we resolve to let God reshape us? What if our resolution was not “I will rise,” but “I will humble myself, and God will lift me”?

So as we look ahead to 2026, consider questions like these:

- In what ways can I “empty myself” of entitlement, pride, or the need to control?
- Where is God inviting me to take “the form of a servant”—in my family, workplace, or church?
- How can my resolutions align me not just with cultural notions of success, but with the mind of Christ?

Begin this year not with the words, “my resolutions be done,” but with the prayer, “your will be done.” The call of Philippians 2 is not to make a list of self-improvement goals but to take

on the mind of Christ. And in that paradoxical move of humility, we discover what is most true: when we empty ourselves, God fills us; when we lower ourselves, God lifts us; when we seek his honor, he shares it with us.

Lord, may resolution, today and every day this year, be simple yet radical: to think like Jesus, to walk in humility, and to trust that the way down will indeed lead up. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Chris Flanders



JANUARY 2

A BLESSING IN TWO PARTS

Genesis 12:1-7

*“The LORD said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your kindred,
and your father’s house and go to the land I will show you’ (Genesis 12:1)*

“In the bleak mid-winter the frosty wind made moan; earth stood hard as iron, water as hard as stone.” The poet Christina Rossetti’s evocative language sets the stage for Advent. The Word of God enters into darkness and shadow. Yet darkness and shadow cannot overcome the light that enters the world (John 1:5). In the days following Christmas we may benefit by recognizing that Christmas is really a story about God. And consistently in the witness of Scripture is the thread of God’s Word doing redemptive work.

Consider Scripture’s stunning opening declaration. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Gen 1:1-3). God speaks a word into chaos and things happen.

When we attend to today’s reading, we find the theme again. Consistent with creation and incarnation we are introduced to a form of chaos, an expression of darkness. In short, the material in the end of chapter 11 suggests that it is the end of the road for a family. Slip up one verse from the assigned text to Gen 11:30. “Now Sarai (Sarah) was barren; she had no child.” The tower of Babel debacle, along with the genealogies leading to this identified family system, leave this community with no future. It is a dead end.

Yet, a voice emerges in chapter 12. God issues a word. It is an invitation. “Go from your country” and “to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). The word is also a promise. “I will bless you.” This dual word—command and promise—gives remarkable insight into the way of God with humankind.

The first part of this word from God is an imperative. Stark and unyielding on its own, the word is to go—“go from your country and your kindred and from your father’s house

to a land that I will show you.” Abraham and Sarah are presented with a dilemma. All they have left in their barrenness is their larger family, their culture, their way of life. And God asks them to leave it behind and go to a place they had never seen before. Even in a familiar place, they were still barren. This invitation is not merely a command; it is an invitation to hope in the possibilities of God.

That is where the second part of the word comes into play. God’s words to this barren couple speak of promise. These words of blessing pile on top of each other, each iteration offering more and more goodness and hope for this couple. Land, a people, a blessed reputation, and a remarkable legacy in which all peoples will be blessed. These things respond to the emptiness that the barren couple hold—and what all of us desire. To discover well-being, to possess a sense of security, and to offer a legacy of goodness to others is to be blessed indeed.

Here is the deep wisdom of receiving God’s Word. God’s word to us is not just a command—“go to a land.” Nor is God’s word just a promise—“I will bless you.” The mystery of receiving God’s word is the way in which command and promise are interconnected. God invites us into a new way, a particular way of being. That way of being is to acknowledge the darkness, the chaos, and the barrenness that characterizes so much of our human endeavors. God invites us to be truthful about our condition so that we can respond to his invitation out of hope. For human possibility is impossible. Only God can do the impossible.

That’s why the apostle Paul picks up the theme of our couple in his letter to the Roman Christians: “Hoping against hope, [Abraham] believed that he would become the ‘father of many nations.’ . . . No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God” (Rom 4:18-20).

What about us today? As we linger with the marvel of Jesus’s birth, perhaps we might ponder our response to the wonder of God’s action. In the birth of Jesus, we hear the echo of God’s invitation to Abraham and Sarah. If we are listening, we can hear the echo of Jesus’s invitation to his first disciples to come and follow. The blessing of God’s Word is the way in which God addresses the reality of our darkness, chaos, and barrenness and invites us to live with hope into God’s future.

O God of Abraham and Sarah, whose promise addresses all that is barren, give us this day the courage to step toward you in hope. We pray through the Word who brought light into the darkness, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Carson E. Reed



JANUARY 3

WALKING FORWARD. LOOKING AHEAD

Hebrews 11:13-22

*“... If they had been thinking of the country they had left,
they would have had opportunity to return. Instead,
they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one”*

(Hebrews 11:15-16)

“Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?” Many of the children in our lives have been asked some version of this question in the last few days. Maybe you’ve asked it, or even been asked it by someone else. It’s a well-meaning question, though perhaps a dangerous one; you always run the risk of encountering a child whose imagination far exceeds the limits of reality or who feels that he or she got too many articles of clothing. It’s a retrospective question, too. It recognizes that Christmas has passed, the anticipated presents have been received, and (the question asker hopes) certain holiday-related hopes have been met.

Given that, it’s striking that this section from Hebrews 11, assigned to a day that technically falls within the liturgical season of Christmas but after most people in North America have celebrated not only Christmas but New Year’s Day, travels the opposite direction. This isn’t a passage about hopes fulfilled but about faithfulness in the face of hopes as yet unrealized. The anonymous author of this “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22) pauses the survey of biblical models of faith in chapter 11 to make this observation: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

The life of the church, in both the first and the twenty-first centuries, can be thought of as a kind of wilderness wandering as we await the return of Christ. This theological framework informed much of the hymnody of my childhood—“Guide me, O thou Great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but thou art mighty, Hold me with thy powerful hand.” Or, to quote another hymn, “On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye to Canaan’s fair and happy land, where my possessions lie.” We can readily imagine the faithful “aliens and strangers” described in these verses singing such hymns. The people of God in the book of Hebrews are a people on the move, making their way through the wilderness to the promised land and promised rest. In this passage, the models of faith are aliens and strangers longing to arrive home.

This imagery of wilderness and wandering offers something important to the beleaguered community of Christians addressed by the book of Hebrews, who, now that the first blush of their turn to faith has long since faded and they find themselves in the midst of social tension and opposition, seem to be wondering whether the journey is worth it. I like the way one of my own teachers, James Thompson, puts it in his commentary on Hebrews—this is a community “disoriented by the chasm between the Christian confession of triumph and the reality of suffering that it has experienced” (Thompson, *Hebrews*, 20).

Given all of that, these words might be especially well-suited to meet us here, on the third day of January and at the beginning of a new year, with the festivity of Christmas behind and the return to our normal routes and routines in front. After the celebration of Christ’s birth, after tidings of great joy, the return to the ordinary can be dispiriting or disorienting.

We remain a people who live in hope of the coming of Christ, which is still in the future. We remain a people who are not home yet, but who are on the way, straining to keep our eyes on the horizon of God’s eternal promises. And we remain a people who, like our forefathers and foremothers in the faith, are called to step forward in faith amid uncertainty, walking together on the path set by the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and trusting that a God who can raise the dead can ultimately see us through. May we find ourselves both on this day and on this journey in good company with other faithful pilgrims, both past and present.

Holy and Living God, you still speak today, inviting us to hear your voice and respond with faithfulness and trust. See our weakness, our discouragement, and our weary hearts, and strengthen us for the journey ahead in the path perfected by Christ our savior. Help us, O God, to travel the road before us, confident in your provision, free of anxious striving, and full of hope in your heavenly home. Amen.

Amanda Pittman



JANUARY 4

THOSE WHO ARE MARKED FOR GLORY

Ephesians 1:3-14

“Just as God chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world so we could be holy and blameless before Him in love. . . . (Ephesians 1:4)

The sentence following the opening greeting of Ephesians, which goes on for twelve verses in Greek, is one of the most packed in the New Testament. The first believers reading that letter heard a long string of big words: adoption, redemption, wisdom, will of God, purpose, glory, and salvation, among others. They were all old words, appearing in Psalms and in the prayers of blessing early Christians could have heard in synagogues and in their own assemblies. The prose poem opening Ephesians is very much at home in the world of communal prayer, as well as in the celebration of baptism. Those initiated into Christ's body inevitably want to speak to and about the God who made all those big words come to life in a community of people living together.

When I was a child growing up in South Korea, we learned our identity. It came to us from our parents and grandparents, who constantly reminded us to act in ways that bring honor to ourselves, our siblings and friends, and our ancestors. Our conduct, decision-making, attitudes, and values mattered because we belonged to a family and a village that included other people. We believed the old Confucian idea that whoever masters herself can master the world.

When I became a Christian, I kept those values and widened them out to an identity in Christ. That identity draws its shape from God's actions in saving the world through the self-giving love shown in the incarnation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. We belong to God's family because God has adopted us, as Ephesians says.

The letter's opening blessing of God also talks about our commitments and values. Verse 4 says we should be holy and blameless, that is, we should develop spiritual and moral integrity. Verse 8 speaks of God's wisdom and thoughtfulness, which we also set out to learn as

students imitating our divine teacher. The body of Christ is a family that cultivates wisdom in each of us. As we live each day, we remember that we belong to God and to one another and we conduct ourselves accordingly. Whoever masters herself can be open to learning from God.

This text also shows something else, a sense of awe or amazement at what we are part of. That amazement must be part of the overall design of the blessing opening Ephesians. We experience a sense of awe as we contemplate the scope of God's work. We come to recognize not merely God's power, but the engine of that power, God's love. Our world shimmers with God's love. Christians become open to that love by growing more aware of our responsibilities, and we grow more aware of our responsibilities by observing God's love.

I know that all the big words of Ephesians 1, especially "God's love," have become clichés for many believers and outside observers. They're overused, misused, and abused. In our spiritual and mental laziness, we can rob these words of meaning and even start using them to manipulate and injure others. Nothing serves evil better than half-truths or acts that seem holy on the surface.

How can we understand God's love unless we imitate that love in every human interaction we have?

In spite of that danger, however, we need to hear the blessing from Ephesians. We need to reclaim the words because they tell the truth of both our capacity for sin and our capacity to live wisely and with integrity. The gospel is good news, not bad news. It is about our redemption, not our hopelessness. It calls us to bow our knees and lift our eyes with joy and wonder.

As the new year begins, we have an opportunity to live like those marked for glory. Let us begin.

O God our Eternal Parent, source of all wisdom and wholeness, redeem all the words we hear and speak, whether ordinary or grand, so that we can use them to point to the great work you are doing in us. Bring all things to their proper place, including all of us. Amen.

Samjung Kang-Hamilton



JANUARY 5

UNNAMED HEROES

Hebrews 11:32-40

*“All these, though witnessed to through faith,
did not receive the promise because God had prepared something better
for us, so that without us they would not be perfected” (Hebrews 11:39-40)*

My family has stories we tell over and over again. The time my mother attended Vacation Bible School at age twelve, opening the door for four generations of church engagement. The moment I met my wife in Memphis. The circumstances surrounding the births of my daughter and son. I could go on all day. My family knows these stories and could retell them almost word for word. These stories give us identity. They center us, steady us, and give us confidence to face the future. Even when the present feels uncertain, our past helps us live into what lies ahead.

Michael Gallagher in *Clashing Symbols* once wrote that J. R. R. Tolkien penned *The Lord of the Rings* because he believed we had lost touch with “the springs of wonder.” In our rush toward surface living, Tolkien wanted to refresh our imagination and reconnect us with larger hopes. A good story, he said, can give us a glimpse of “a sudden and miraculous grace,” a light that breaks through to remind us that the answer may be greater than we imagined. His fantasy writing, he believed, could awaken the human imagination to redemption and rekindle the adventure of faith. And that is why we tell stories about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to shape our national identity.

In the same way, Hebrews 11 recounts the stories of faith that shape us as God’s people. From childhood, many of us have heard them in Sunday school, at Vacation Bible School, or in bedtime rituals. We know the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. These stories still inspire us, sometimes even becoming the source of epic films like *The Ten Commandments* or *The Prince of Egypt*.

But as Hebrews 11 reminds us, there is not enough time to retell them all. Instead, the writer quickly names a few—Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets—and then sketches their faith in broad strokes: shutting the mouths of lions, quenching flames, escaping swords, conquering kingdoms. Women received their dead back to life. These are stories of breathtaking courage and God’s miraculous intervention.

And yet, Hebrews 11 also tells of others. “Others” who suffered. “Others” who were mocked, flogged, imprisoned, or even killed. “Others” who wandered in deserts, mountains, and caves. These “others” remain unnamed. Yet they are no less heroes of faith, even though the world did not recognize their worth.

Most of the faithful throughout Scripture are unnamed. Most of the faithful in the history of the church are unnamed. And if we are honest, most of us will be remembered not in grand histories, but in quiet acts of daily faith.

Think about the unnamed people in your own faith journey. Maybe a Sunday school teacher who listened patiently. A neighbor who prayed for you. A pastor who encouraged you at just the right time. They may never appear in history books, but their faith helped shape yours.

The Advent season is about remembering these kinds of stories—the named and the unnamed, the celebrated and the hidden. We wait for Christ’s coming not only with the great cloud of witnesses we know by name, but also with the countless unnamed saints who lived faithfully, trusting that God had “planned something better” (Hebrews 11:40). Their faith, joined with ours, points to the fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ.

*Lord of the named and the unnamed,
in this season of waiting, we remember the countless saints whose faith made
a way for us.*

*Some are celebrated in Scripture, others are hidden in history,
but all are precious in Your sight.*

*Give us courage to walk faithfully in our time,
even if our names are forgotten,
so that our lives may point to the coming of Christ,
the fulfillment of every promise,
the Light that no darkness can overcome.*

Amen.

Tim Sensing



JANUARY 6

LIGHT SHARED IN THE ROSCA DE REYES

Isaiah 60:1–6

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:1–3)

Epiphany is the day the church celebrates God’s revelation to the nations. Isaiah proclaims: “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” This is not just a personal word; it is a cosmic declaration. God’s glory breaks through the deep shadows covering the earth, and people from every nation are drawn to the brightness of God’s dawn. For Christians, the story of the Magi fulfills this vision. They travel from afar, carrying gifts and searching for the child who embodies God’s glory.

Latino and Hispanic communities celebrate this day with a beloved tradition: the *rosca de reyes*. This crown-shaped bread, decorated with colorful candied fruit, is shared by families and neighbors. It looks like a festive crown, a reminder of the kings who came bearing gifts. Yet within the *rosca* lies something hidden—a small figurine of the baby Jesus. Whoever finds it is honored with the responsibility of hosting a meal on *Día de la Candelaria* in February. This simple act captures the heart of Epiphany: God’s presence is discovered in community, in the breaking of bread, in the joy of gathering together.

The *rosca* is theology you can taste. Its circular shape reminds us of God’s eternal love, unending and unbroken. The jewels of fruit recall the offerings of the Magi, who recognized in a small child the King of all nations. And the hidden figure reminds us that Christ is still discovered in unexpected places. Just as Bethlehem was overlooked, so too do the powerful overlook our barrios, pueblos, and colonias. Yet God hides treasures in these very places.

The glory of the Lord does not rise in palaces alone but in kitchens, plazas, and migrant camps where people pray, sing, and share what little they have. Isaiah acknowledges that darkness covers the earth. Communities know this reality: the shadow of poverty, discrimination,

exile, or violence. Many families carry stories of migration, of leaving homelands in search of safety and work, of journeys that feel like crossing deserts in the night. Yet into this reality comes the word of God: “Arise, shine.” It is not a shallow optimism but a call to courage. God’s glory rises upon us even in hard places, even when hope seems thin.

In this culture, Epiphany is not complete without gathering, storytelling, and singing. The *rosca de reyes* is rarely eaten alone; it is shared. This practice mirrors Isaiah’s vision: light does not belong to one people only but shines for all nations. When we cut the bread together, we embody God’s dream of community—different people around one table, gifts exchanged, laughter rising. The Magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We receive our own gifts: our songs, our faith, our resilience, and our joy in celebrating, even under challenging circumstances. These offerings, too, are precious before the Lord.

Epiphany invites us to look outward. The nations come streaming to the light not because Israel hoards it but because it shines freely. The church is called to the same mission: to bear the light of Christ in such a way that others see and are drawn in. Latino and Hispanic churches, with their music, devotion, and vibrant fiestas, offer the global church a glimpse of Isaiah’s dawn. Every candle lit, every *rosca* shared, every child taught to pray is a testimony that the light has come and darkness will not overcome it.

Next time, when you gather around the *rosca*, passing slices from hand to hand, proclaim more than a tradition. We proclaim that Christ is among us, hidden yet revealed, humble yet radiant. Isaiah’s ancient vision meets our tables today: “Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

*Señor de la Luz,
we thank you for the star that guided the Magi,
for the bread that crowns our tables,
and for the hidden Christ who still appears among us.
Shine on every family that gathers in your name.
Dispel the darkness of fear and division.
Make our communities radiant with joy,
our homes places of welcome,
and our churches signs of your kingdom.
Receive our gifts—our music, our resilience, our hope—
as offerings laid before your Son.
Gather all nations into your light
until the world is one family in Christ.
Through Jesus, revealed to the nations,
Amén.*

Omar Palafox

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