

# Kith & Kin

--An Advent Devotional--



Nicholas J. Perry

# Introduction:

## An Advent Devotional

Advent 2021

Dear Church,

During the season of Advent, I appreciate the musings and devotional writings of countless others. The bookshelves alone in my office reveal my deep and growing interest in this season. Years ago, during one particularly meaningful Advent, I reasoned that I too could write an Advent devotional. However, the life of a pastor quickly becomes busy when these days approach and the added task of writing an Advent devotional fall to the wayside as a way of self-preservation. There is a blessing of writing a devotional out-of-season. There were many days I worked non-stop to create what is before you. Sometimes there were gaps of months between entries. This is my feeble attempt to stir the hearts, minds, and bodies of our congregation.

My ultimate goal is that the combination of carols and devotionals based (mostly) upon Year C, of the Revised Common Lectionary will challenge and encourage us in our readiness for the coming(s) of Christ into our world. I pray that we will sing the carols, read the Scriptures, and meditate upon the devotionals. Noticeably absent are scripted prayers for each day. However, most devotionals are loaded with thought-provoking questions. Perhaps, your prayer is asking for God's help in determining what your next faithful step will be.

I am grateful to travel through the various seasons of life with our congregation, especially the road that cuts through the wilderness of Advent. Along the journey, I would love to hear where and how the Holy Spirit continues to speak to the church. If something I have written is unclear or further engagement is desired, please feel free to reach out to me.

Advent Blessings,  
Nicholas J. Perry, *Pastor*

**Sunday: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile  
here  
Until the Son of God appear  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.



O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny  
From depths of Hell Thy people save  
And give them victory o'er the grave  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might,  
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height,  
In ancient times did'st give the Law,  
In cloud, and majesty and awe.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.<sup>i</sup>

WORDS: 9<sup>th</sup> century. Latin; trans. st. 1, 3, 5ab, 6cd, 7ab st. 2, Henry Sloane Coffin, 1916, st.4, 5cd,  
6ab, 7cd, Laurance Hall Stookey, 1986

MUSIC: 15<sup>th</sup> cent. French; arr. And harm. By Thomas Helmore, 1854

## Monday: Jeremiah 33:14-16



**“In those days at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David;  
and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”**

--Jeremiah 33:15

Have you ever lost hope? Given up? Thrown in the towel? Have you ever attempted to read the book of Jeremiah? How far did you get? What was that experience like for you? I lost hope while reading the book of Jeremiah. I became disenchanted that the book did not make sense and became discouraged by the emotional weight of what little I did understand. I promptly closed my Bible, feeling hopeless, as if I were lost in a vast wilderness without a compass or a map.

Biblical scholar Louis Stulman says, “[T]he book of Jeremiah presents a literary reenactment of the death and dismantling of one world (Jer 1-25) in preparation for the emergence of another (Jer 26-52).”<sup>iii</sup> The coordinates of Jeremiah 33, land us in what many call, “The book of Consolation.” From the vantage point of “The book of Consolation” we can see the landscape behind us littered with the destruction of the Babylonian exile. However, we can also view the future before us with the promised good news of restoration, a new and hopeful future.

From his imprisonment, Jeremiah dares to look forward in faith. In a hopeless situation Jeremiah hears the LORD promise, “The days are coming, when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah” (v.14) Make no mistake about it; the LORD speaks again, “In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness” (vv.15-16).

As Christians, we ultimately hold that the LORD’s promise comes true in Jesus Christ, the Second member of the Trinity. In these days of Advent, we are not merely seeking a new-born king, but Christ in all his kingly power. In his earthly ministry we catch glimpses of the way Jesus administered his power with “justice and righteousness.” Jesus cared for the sick, offered companionship to the isolated, gave nourishment to the hungry, and new life to the dead. Each of the gospel writers tell in their unique style of the dismantling and emergence of one kingdom for another.

This Advent, let us pay more than lips service to hope that we have in Christ. We must go in Jesus’ name to all people, especially those barely holding on to what little shreds of hope they cling. As we know, those without hope can be found in every cross-section of humanity: a single parent, the underemployed, the unemployed, a struggling student, a care-taker at their wits end, a fellow-co-worker, a person battling an addiction or a health concern, a lonely person, or someone spiritually adrift. Our mandate is to put the world on notice, that as agents of hope we will pursue justice and righteousness as we prepare for Christ’s return.

## Tuesday: Psalm 25:1-10

**“Lead me in your truth, and  
teach me, for you are  
the God of my salvation; for  
you I wait all day long.”**

--Psalm 25:5

When was the last time you were forced to wait? Where did your waiting occur? How did you wait? I think of myself as a patient person (most of the time). I will not cause a scene when the checkout lane hardly budes. I will

not storm out of the waiting room at the local tire shop. I will not complain when the waiter is slow in bringing my meal. However, below the surface, the disposition of my heart grows impatient and my spirit agitated.

On a road trip, when the children call from the backseat, “Are we there yet?” we might advise, “If you take a nap we will get there quicker.” Whether awake or asleep we know the destination will be reached in the same amount of time. Our culture fusses about Christmas, each year the Christmas decorations go up earlier, the radio playlists turn to secular holiday music sooner, and the Hallmark Channel airs continuous Christmas movies. During the season of Advent, the church in a dramatic countercultural move, taps the brakes and slows us down to ponder the mysteries of our faith, God’s relationship with us, and our role in the world. Christmas will arrive on time, but what remains to be seen is how will we arrive on Christmas Day: Frazzled? Exhausted? Broken? Renewed? Hopeful? Whole?

In Psalm 25, the psalmist knows about waiting. In fact, twice the Psalmist mentions waiting, “Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame” (v.3) and “for you [God] I wait all day long” (v.5). However, amid this time of waiting, the psalmist does not doze off nor enter the annual end of the year food coma. Instead, the Psalmist chooses to trust in God declaring, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust...” (vv.1-2) This trust is grounded in the faithfulness of God. Through all the seasons of waiting, especially the most difficult the LORD remains with us.

There is not a 1:1 ratio from the psalmist’s life to ours today. The “fears” might strike at our hearts from different angles; the “shame” might be in a different key, and our exact “sins” may not perfectly align. However, what we learn in the classroom of Psalm 25 can be transposed into the various situations and circumstances of our waiting. Our prayers can be just as bold: “Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long” (vv.4-5). As we pray, let us “be mindful of [LORD’s] mercy” and “steadfast love” (v.6).

The when and where of our waiting matters. The more important question is how do we wait? Pause and look for signs and sightings of God in the world and in us. Be present in the moment and behold the goodness of LORD. Slow down and listen for the sound of the LORD’s instruction. Stop and sense the Holy Spirit’s prompting to walk in the path revealed to us. Trust me Christmas will arrive in due time, how we arrive at Christmas is a matter of how we wait in the meantime.





**Wednesday: *Lift Up Ye Heads, Ye Mighty Gates***



Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates;  
behold, the King of glory waits;  
the King of kings is drawing near;  
the Savior of the world is here!

Fling wide the portals of your heart;  
make it a temple, set apart  
from earthly use for heaven's employ,  
adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come, with us abide;  
our hearts to thee we open wide;  
let us thy inner presence feel;  
thy grace and love in us reveal.

Thy Holy Spirit lead us on  
until our glorious goal is won;  
eternal praise, eternal fame  
be offered, Savior, to thy name!<sup>iii</sup>

WORDS: Georg Weissel, 1642; trans. by Catherine Winkworth, 1855

MUSIC: *Psalmodia Evangeleica*, 1789

## Thursday: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

**“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”**

-1 Thessalonians 3:9

When your eyes meet the words on the pages of 1 Thessalonians, they encounter the earliest writing in the New Testament. Paul's letter to the young and inexperienced congregation of Thessalonica predates, even the earliest written Gospel (Mark) by at least a

decade.<sup>iv</sup> Writing letters was an effective way for Paul to bridge the distance between congregations and himself. When the letters would arrive (often with long gaps of time from one letter to the next) someone would be designated to read the letter in its entirety to the church. The content, tone and length of the letters varied. Sometimes the church that received a letter from a church leader would forward the letter to another congregation in another part of the world.

Who was the last person you received a letter from? What was the occasion for the letter that arrived in your mailbox? How far did the letter travel? When was the last time you wrote a letter? What feelings stirred within your heart when you read the letter?

Sadly, I am a product of a different generation—a generation that does not write letters. I do not expect to receive letters sent through the mail or tucked under my office door. I freely confess that I can count on two hands (barely) the times that I have hand-written a letter to someone. I was convicted of this recently by an older gentleman that casually mentioned the sending of letters to various friends.

The New Testament is a mailbag of letters. The letters may have been addressed to an ancient people long ago. However, Paul's letters belong to the church; you are the church today. We read of Paul's deep love in one line, “How can we [Paul, Silas and Timothy] thank God enough for you [Thessalonians] in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God” (1 Thess 3:9). In another line we read of Paul's prayer, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again...” (v.10). And still another we read of Paul's concern to “supply what is lacking in your faith” (v.10). One thing the Thessalonians and Paul did not lack is affection for each other. They knew they needed one another, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov 27:17).

Whatever was lacking in the young congregation's faith will be spelled out by Paul within but most assuredly beyond the scope of today's reading. The apostle wrote, “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May [the Lord] strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (1 Thess 3:12-13). We have a phenomenal congregation, but as phenomenal as we are—there is still room for us to grow in our capacity to love the Lord, those on the membership rolls, and our community.

Did you know that approximately 1.3 billion Christmas cards will be sent through the postal service annually in the United States? Perhaps, like me you are unlikely to write a letter. Maybe after a few lines you fear you will have nothing more to write or worry about the grammar police. Paul used the ancient mail system to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ. What if we do the same? Instead of balking at the card industry, we realized this is a tool that clears “the way for us to come” to those you are not physically present (v.11). What if in the space left blank by the card companies, you offer a few personalized words of hope and encouragement? Send a card to let the persons that relocated to another state, into assisted-living, or a new family dynamic know that you love them and that they are a beloved child of the living God.



## Friday: Luke 21:25

**“Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree...’”**

--Luke 21:29

Most of my life, I have enjoyed the company of Norfolk Pines. Around this time of year, Norfolk Pines are plentiful in the marketplace. I have

not been gifted with a green thumb or vast knowledge about dendrology (the study of trees). However, nothing brought more excitement than to see a new bright sprout of new growth. Clearly, a Norfolk pine is not a fig tree, although they share enough in common and with a little playfulness drive home the point of Jesus’ parable.

Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim once termed the progressively destructive plagues of the Exodus story as “uncreation” or the undoing of an orderly world.<sup>v</sup> Jesus never uttered the world uncertain. However, the concept is never too far from his mind when he speaks of the End Times. Jesus predicts, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” (Luk 21:25). Jesus alerts the disciples, “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (v.26). In a word—uncreation.

In the opening chapter of Genesis, God speaks order into chaos. God gives salvation and purpose to an otherwise meaningless situation. Today, amid the catastrophe and disaster God ushers in order with the promise of “the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory” (v.27). Again, God gifts salvation through Christ with the announcement, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (v.28).

Anna Carter Florence wondered if the world around us is full of parables for us to explore. A parable is a riddle to ponder and then act upon. A parable as Florence argues is a sermon in miniature.<sup>vi</sup> Perhaps, Jesus catches us trying to consider the meaning of his parable for today. “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near” (vv.29-30). In the illustration we can see the ending of one thing and the beginning of another: the conclusion of winter’s uncreation and the new start of spring’s re-creation. Jesus’ parable bursts with hopeful anticipation.

Whether we lean towards a Christmas tree from creation’s garden or one we store in the attic, it is a good time to ponder the parable hidden before us in the tree. Perhaps, the parable of the tree invites you through the life and ministry of Jesus. What would it be like to have been the tree used to hold Jesus at his birth? What untold mysteries would the timber cut into a makeshift raft tell of Jesus’ intimate conversation with the disciples or the way Jesus cared for the crowds? What would it be like to be the tree used at the moment of Jesus crucifixion, holding his body high for all the world to see the depth of his love and faithfulness?

Difficult days will come our way and when they do be reminded that “when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (v.31). Perhaps, one way to “be on guard” (v.34) and to “be alert at all times” (v.36) is to be mindful that God speaks in our chaotic world and disordered lives. Sometimes a Norfolk pine’s new growth, a batch of dough, or a coin whisper into our ears a message of the Kingdom of God.





## Saturday: Isaiah 2:1-5



“[The LORD] will...”

--Isaiah 2:3,5

Are the words of the prophet Isaiah “concerning Judah and Jerusalem” too good to be true (Isaiah 2:1)? Do the facts on the ground negate and render the sound of “swords [beaten] into plowshares and “spearing into pruning hooks” unlikely (v.4)? Does not the prophet sound the part of a beauty contestant claiming to want world peace? How can we have world peace when people from different political affiliations cannot sit at the same table? Does Isaiah secretly utter these words with his fingers crossed, struggling to convince even himself that one day “all nations will stream” to Jerusalem (v.2)?

Recently, I was reading through these words from Isaiah, and noticed the important move the prophet makes. The prophet holds out a promised future in front of us declaring, “In the days to come” (v.2) and again later “[The LORD] will” (v.3, 5)... In the tight confines of five verses, Isaiah unmistakably uses “will” or “shall” no less than ten times. J. Richard Middleton theorizes that Isaiah, “speaks of *what will be* because it is too disheartening and too hopeless to speak only of *what is!*”<sup>vii</sup>

Barbara Brown Taylor once addressed a class of seminary graduates saying, “You know all about church decline, congregational conflict, and clergy isolation...with all that is going on in the world right now, who’s going to believe your good news? Who’s even going to *hear* it...?”<sup>viii</sup> Yet, Isaiah faithfully tells of God’s promised future to anyone who dares to listen and ushers an invitation to “come, let us walk in the light of the LORD” (v.5)!

Our disheartened and hopeless lives need the promise of God’s future. Maybe the future is not as far away as we might assume. What if Isaiah’s vision articulates what the LORD will accomplish, but simultaneously reveals to us “God’s ways” (v.3)? What if Advent is about living into the future promises of God in the here and now? Perhaps, Howard Thurman’s poem lays the foundation of our divinely appointed assignment:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.<sup>ix</sup>

**Sunday: *Soon and Very Soon***



Soon and very soon,  
We are going to see the King,  
Soon and very soon,  
We are going to see the King.  
Soon and very soon,  
We are going to see the King,  
Hallelujah, hallelujah,  
We are going to see the King.

No more crying there,  
We are going to see the King,  
No more crying there,  
We are going to see the King.  
No more crying there,  
We are going to see the King,  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah,  
We are going to see the King.

No more dying there,  
We are going to see the King,  
No more dying there,  
We are going to see the King.  
No more dying there,  
We are going to see the King,  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah,  
We are going to see the King.<sup>x</sup>

WORDS: Andrae Crouch, 1978

MUSIC: Andrae Crouch, 1978; adapt. By William Farley Smith, 1987

## Monday: Malachi 3:1-4



**“See, I will send my messenger,  
who will prepare the way before me.”**

--Malachi 3:1

Biblical prophecy has always intrigued me. The majority of the prophesy contained in the Bible does not predict the future, as much as it tells the truth about the present. In my graduation rehearsal from seminary, I remember sitting in the dark wood pews of Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, TX when a friend commented that this was the very spot the 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States had asked for and received a sign to make a presidential run. I suspect, the presidential hopeful expected God to answer in a relatively short-window of time. When a prophet uttered their prophetic utterances in the Bible, I suspect both the prophet and their audience had expectations that their words would come true sooner than later.

In today's Scripture reading God speaks through the prophet saying, “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me” (v.1). The centuries have led to various understandings of whom the “messenger” might be. Interestingly, the word used in Hebrew for “my messenger” (*mal'aki*) is originally a title or a job description. Traditionally, a *mal'aki* was someone that serves as a priest or prophet. Fast forward several hundred years, the gospel writers place the distinction of *mal'aki* onto John the Baptizer, the forerunner of Jesus (see Matt 11:7-10; Mrk 1:204; Luk 1:76). The Gospel writers understand that biblical prophecy is multi-dimensional, that it can come true at various times, places, and in various people.

Biblical scholar Stephen Breck Reid tells of a student that wrestled over the identity of the suffering servant readings in the prophetic writings of Isaiah. Jewish and Christian commentators love to try to solve the puzzle or to tie up loose ends. Reid's student provided numerous possibilities before concluding, “Maybe it is not a matter of who the servant was as much as it is who is a servant.”<sup>xi</sup> John Wesley encouraged the people called Methodist to study the life of the saints with the hope and intention that they themselves would become saints of God.

In a similar way God calls women, men, and children to be *mal'aki* in every generation. God called John in his generation to “prepare the way” (v.1) for Jesus' entry into a broken and sin-filled world. God calls us to “prepare the way” (v.1) for Christ's Second Coming. There is plenty of negative news today that rivals the contents of the prophetic book of Malachi. God was openly mocked, as God is mocked today on message boards. Pastoral malpractice happened, and continues to happens. There was utter contempt among one's own people and aimed towards God—sound familiar? Just as a *mal'aki* arose back then, they are in high demand today. Will you answer the call? Can God trust you with such an important title? Will you to the best of your ability in both word and deed be a *mal'aki* that directs a wayward world to Jesus Christ?

## Tuesday: Luke 1:68-79

**“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come and has  
redeemed his people.”**

--Luke 1:68



Theologian John Tyson recently taught a crash-course on Wesleyan theology to a group of upcoming pastors. I was fortunate to score a seat in the back of the room

and eavesdrop on the lecture. Tyson pointed out that as United Methodists we are a people of the “both-and.” We called to stay in what Bishop Scott Jones referred to as “the extreme center.”<sup>xii</sup> Being a people of the “both-and” is a difficult in an “either/or” world. For example, Tyson explained we believe in justification *and* assurance, sanctification *and* perfection, faith *and* good works, mission *and* service. How we do theology (God talk) centers on Scripture *and* Tradition, Reason *and* Experience.<sup>xiii</sup>

The inclusion of *and* in a sentence, reveals that the statements on both sides of it are equally important. Zechariah’s song, *Benedictus* is full of *ands*. The song opens, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come, *and* has redeemed his people” (Luk 1:68). Interestingly, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are described by Luke as “upright” and “blameless” (v.6). The couple we should note “were barren” *and* “well along in years” (v.7). During Zechariah’s service in the temple as priest he sees an angel of the Lord.

Zechariah was “startled” *and* “gripped with fear” (v.12). The angel cautions the priest to “not be afraid” (v.13). The angel’s promise is delivered with an abundance of *ands*: “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, *and* you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy *and* delight to you, *and* many will rejoice because of his birth... He is never to take to wine or other ferment drink, *and* he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” (vv.13-15). Before the beloved and holy couple’s story concludes, it is one filled with both silence *and* sound.

Zechariah’s song is pregnant with Old Testament allusions. However, what is noticeable is the string of *ands* that run through the song, God “has come *and* has redeemed” (v.68); God gives “salvation from our enemies *and* from the hand of all who hate us—” (v.69); God is “to show mercy to our fathers *and* remember the holy covenant” (v.72); “to rescue us *and* to enable us to serve [God] without fear” (v.74); “holiness *and* righteousness” (v.75). Scholars suggest that the *Benedictus* are two separate songs—if so, they are attached by another “and”—“*And you, my child will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him...*” (v. 76).<sup>xiv</sup>

John the Baptist straddles an interesting line. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets pointing the way to Jesus Christ. In fact, John *and* Jesus share the same message of “repentance” (Matt 3:2; Mrk 1:15). Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John did not live watered-down lives. They were passionate about God and the things of God. Their lives were located in the extreme center of God’s will. Our culture is pitted against itself, republicans against democrats, conservatives against progressives, the haves against the have-nots, Whites against Blacks... The list is a mile long. Perhaps, the season of Advent calls us to move toward the extreme-center, where we no longer need to live, divided, compartmentalized lives. Let the “ands” of Advent challenge us to strive for a better world where we reach across the aisle made too wide by our society to those that may not resemble us in their appearance, economic status, political persuasion, educational level, religious affiliation, or life choices. Maybe then we will appreciate Zechariah’s song.

**Wednesday: *Angels form the Realms of Glory***



Angels, from the realms of glory,  
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;  
Ye, who sang creation's story,  
Now proclaim Messiah's birth:  
(Refrain:)  
Come and worship,  
Come and worship  
Worship Christ, the new-born King.

Shepherds in the field abiding,  
Watching o'er your flocks by night,  
God with man is now residing;  
Yonder shines the infant Light: (Refrain)

Sages, leave your contemplations,  
Brighter visions beam afar:  
Seek the great Desire of nations;  
Ye have seen his natal star: (Refrain)

Saints before the altar bending,  
Watching long in hope and fear,  
Suddenly the Lord, descending,  
In his temple shall appear: (Refrain)<sup>xv</sup>

WORDS: James Montgomery, 1816

MUSIC: Henry T. Smart, 1867



## Thursday: Philippians 1:3-11

**“I thank my God every time I remember you.”**

--Philippians 1:3

Years ago, Josephine an elderly woman nearing the century mark invited me to her home. She lived a handful of houses from the church. I was welcomed into her modestly furnished home. I was led to a sitting room and presented a glass of water. As

Josephine waved her hand in a counter-clockwise manner, as if to motion to the pictures on the wall and displayed on the coffee tables. In her feeble voice she said, “Memories are what feed you when you are old.” If this is true, Josephine was well fed. For the remainder of our visit, I learned of the memories behind the old photographs of loved ones that had sustained her through the years; her husband, their children, relatives, cultural-exchange students, church members, and close friends.

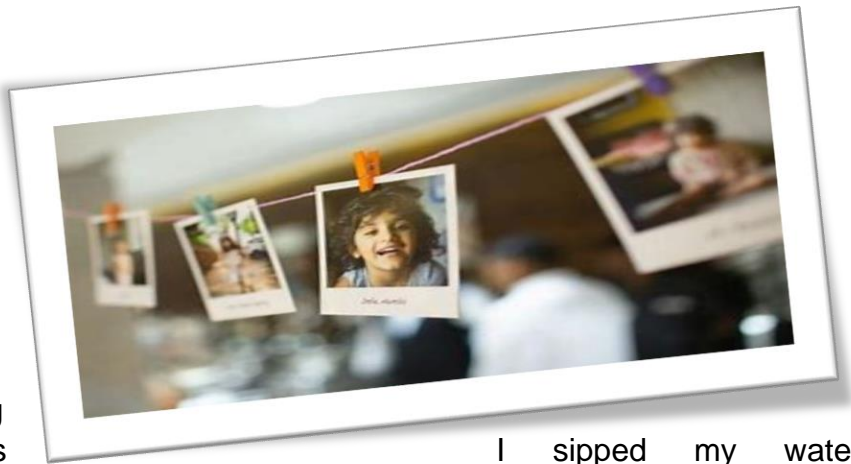
In today’s Scripture reading, Paul writes to the congregation in Philippi from prison. As I read the letter sent to the Philippian believers, I am reminded of Josephine’s words to me many years ago, “Memories are what feed you when you are old.” Some scholars argue that Paul drafts Philippians around 55 A.D. At this point, Paul does not know what the future holds for him. Will he be executed at the hands of the state or will his life be spared?

As Paul awaits his trial and the future he does not control, with great affection he writes, “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3). Perhaps, with a grateful heart Paul pictures the faces of various members of the congregation. Did Paul draw nourishment as he recalled their deep commitment not only to Christ, but to himself? Did Paul feast on the memories of a church who trusted the Holy Spirit’s leading in the past?

Paul’s heart bursts at the seams with the good memories he holds of the Philippians. As you read the opening of this letter, you will notice it is filled with positive expression of “joy” (1:4), gratitude (v.5), confidence (v.6), affection (v.7), and longing (v.8). What memories do you hold of someone that conjures up such emotions? How might you honor that person’s memory in your daily walk of faith? What memories are you creating through your faithfulness to God? What impression is your generosity to the work of Christ leaving on the world today?

Outside my office is a portrait of a local benefactor from long ago. At the time, one of the oldest members of our congregation shared with me the backstory of the well-dressed gentleman. This person stepped up and provided the needed funds to support a group of teenagers in our congregation. Maybe Josephine was right, “Memories are what feed you when you are old.” When I pass by the portrait, I look up and remember the thoughtful act from yesteryear. What “good work” is God cultivating within you? Will people remember as one who folded their hands in prayer and opened them in generosity to Christ?

Theologian Marvin McMickle wrote, “How sad it is that in so many churches, fewer than 20 percent of the people provide more than 80 percent of the money and ministry effort.”<sup>xvi</sup> Perhaps, Advent is the season to “discern what is best” (v.9) in order to change this unfortunate statistic. What might you place in the offering plate? How can you support the church with your “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and [witness]”?<sup>xvii</sup> How might you align with the Philippians to further the work of the gospel in the world? Paul’s memories do not merely become nostalgic. Rather they deepen his prayer that the believers might “be pure and blameless until the day of Christ...” (v.10). The call this Advent is to remember, to pray, and to give.



## Friday: Luke 3:1-6

**“[T]he word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”**

--Luke 3:2

Alberto Taule's hymn *Toda la Tierra (All the Earth is Waiting)* has found a home within my heart. I



suspect, if you have heard the song, it resides within you, too. Social justice is a common theme among our Advent hymns. Taule's lyrics are clear, "All the world, bound and struggling, seeks true liberty; it cries out for justice and searches for the truth."<sup>xviii</sup> James Montgomery's beloved advent hymn states of Christ, "He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free..."<sup>xix</sup> In *Blessed Be the God of Israel* Michael Perry penned, "He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free..."<sup>xx</sup>

The yearning for social justice is deeply rooted in the people of God. The Old Testament prophets are concerned about social justice in the land. Amos famously declares, "[L]et justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Am 5:24). Mary's Magnificat (see Luke 1:46-55) continues in the long tradition of social justice; she sings that the Lord "brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (v.52). Jesus locates his mission and ministry in the context of social justice when he reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, "The Spirit of the Lord is one, because he has anointed me to preach good news to poor...proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

In our Baptismal vows we were asked, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"<sup>xxi</sup> And we answered before God and the congregation in the affirmative, "I do."<sup>xxii</sup> Our aim for social justice, includes but goes beyond us simply being good citizens in our community. Our commitment to Christ and our Baptismal vows calls us to bring into light the "invisible" powers of systemic injustices (i.e., racism, agism, sexism, militarism, commercialism, etc.) and to do the work of Advent; to bring true liberty.

Our passage is grounded in history, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar..." (3:1). Luke knows that social justice needs to happen here in a world of powerful political figures such as, Pontius Pilates, and the members of Herod's family. Luke understands that social justice is all encompassing and that the high priests Anna and Caiaphas are never exempt from practicing justice.

As we ready the world for Christ's second coming, Luke tells how John prepared for his first. "The word of God came to John...in the desert" (v.2). In the Bible, the desert/wilderness becomes a classroom, where the unknowns of the territory, the uncertainties of ourselves, and the faithfulness of God is disclosed. The Rev. Kathy Beach-Verhey suggests that time in the desert brings about "renewal, rebirth, clarity, and purpose for God's people."<sup>xxiii</sup> John emerges from the desert with a word of "repentance" (v.3) for a world marred by individual and systemic sin.

The language of transformation is offered, "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation'" (vv.4-6). How will you actively wait for Christ's Second Coming? What are you doing to bring God's justice to the streets in our town? What will you do to usher in God's righteousness to our nation? As Taule so keenly observes, "All the earth is waiting..."<sup>xxiv</sup>

**Saturday: Isaiah 35:1-10**



**“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy...”**

—Isaiah 35:5-6a

Several years ago, I scanned the shelves at Barnes & Noble, searching for an author a friend had recommended. Instead, I discovered the new-to-me writings of Malcolm Gladwell. Today, there is a small section dedicated to Gladwell’s works on my bookshelves. Here are a few lines, I hope you enjoy:

“Have you ever thought about yawning, for instance? Yawning is a surprisingly powerful act. Just because you read the word “yawning” in the previous two sentences—and the two additional “yawns” in this sentence—a good number of you probably yawn within the next few minutes.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Did you yawn, too? I was taught that yawns are contagious. Once you finish your yawn, look around at the chain-reaction you started. You will soon discover an alarming number of people nearly lulled to sleep, folks struggling to arouse themselves to stay awake. Mail-carriers. FedEx drivers. Volunteer firefighters. Police officers. Doctors. Nurses. Teachers. Students. Receptionists. The cleaning staff. Customers. Care-takers. Nursing-home residents. Cooks. Waiters. Yes, even pastors.

The collective yawns in the United States are not surprising. According to *Harvard Health Review*, Americans get less than six hours of shut-eye each night, and 75 percent of us have difficulty sleeping a few nights per week. Author Leighton Ford argues, “When we are sleep deprived, it is difficult to pay attention: to God, others and ourselves.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Perhaps, the spiritual practice we could partake should be to receive the proper amount of restful sleep.

We are forever watching the orange needle on the gas gauge pointing to “E” trying to figure how much further in the wilderness of Advent we can go. What if Advent gives us permission to pull over on life’s “weary road” to fill our hearts with a renewed visions of what God is capable of doing? <sup>xxvii</sup>

The longer nights of Advent give us permission to dream of the world’s transformation, as dreamt by the prophet Isaiah. Advent’s prescription is for a good old-fashioned night of sleep. Perhaps, after we receive the gracious gift of rest we so desperately need, we will recognize that in many ways we were the “blind” whose eyes “shall be opened” or we were the “deaf” ones unable to hear the gospel’s proclamation (Isa 35:5). We are the “lame” now set free to “leap like a deer” or the “mute” who breaks their silence (v.6). Honestly, I wonder if the benefits of sleep stretch beyond ourselves as a “highway” connecting all of creation with the “joy and gladness” of the LORD? There is one way to find out. Tonight, tuck yourself in and dream away.

**Sunday: *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice***



Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;  
give ye heed to what we say:

News, news!

Jesus Christ is born today!  
Ox and ass before him bow,  
and he is in the manger now.

Christ is born today,  
Christ is born today!

Good Christian friends, rejoice,  
with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye hear of endless bliss:

News, news!

Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He hath opened heaven's door,  
and ye are blest forevermore.

Christ was born for this,  
Christ was born for this!

Good Christian friends, rejoice,  
with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye need not fear the grave:

News, news!

Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all  
to gain his everlasting hall.

Christ was born to save,  
Christ was born to save!<sup>xxviii</sup>

WORDS: 14<sup>th</sup> cent. Latin; trans. by John Mason Neale, 1855

MUSIC: German melody; harm. by Gary Alan Smith, 1988



## Monday: Zephaniah 3:14-20

**“Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel!  
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart. O Daughter of  
Jerusalem!”**

-- Zephaniah 3:14



The seventh game of the 1997 Eastern Conference Quarterfinals between the Buffalo Sabres and the Ottawa Senators forever shaped the way I understand words like “rejoice” or “joy”. Years earlier, William Barclay claimed that the word “rejoice” created a word-picture of one who “leaps exceedingly.”<sup>xxix</sup> On that evening, Sabres’ forward Derek Plante scored an iconic goal 5:24 into overtime. Plante took what appeared as a harmless shot onto the Senators’ goaltender, the kind of shot that is routinely turned aside. Except this time, in a hard-played series, when Plante scored the Sabres’ fans erupted with great celebration. It was the celebration on the ice that has left a lasting impression on my heart.

Everyone associated with the Buffalo Sabres leapt for joy at Plante’s game-winning goal. Did you know that hockey players can jump with their skates on? The coaching staff leapt with excitement with their fists clenched. The players on the bench leapt into each other’s arms before leaping onto the ice. The players on the ice gathered together as they leapt repeatedly and mobbed Plante with their exhilaration. I do not know if the Sabres’ color-commentator, Rick Jeanneret leapt to his feet, but his voice leapt with elation when he screamed, “Are you ready, Legion of Doom (the nickname for the Philadelphia Flyers best line)? Here come the Buffalo Sabres!”<sup>xxx</sup>

The prophet Zephaniah, had connections to the royal throne in Judah. At about twenty years old, Zephaniah began to prophesy. The prophet’s message was filled with the LORD’s warnings of future destruction. Zephaniah first takes aim at Judah’s idol worship, violence, and complacency. The prophet also charged the Philistines, the Cushites, and the Assyrians with the same crimes.

There is little reason to leap for joy. Zephaniah laments, “Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious, and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God” (Zeph 3:1-2). The forecast calls for more of the same gloom and doom, “Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves...” (v.3) and “her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law” (v.4). However, at the 5:24 mark of overtime everything changes when the prophet declares to his people that, “The LORD within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning [the LORD] dispenses justice, and every new day [the LORD] does not fail...” (v.5). The prophet carefully spells the LORD’s past, current, and future action, thus giving Judah the reason for why they sing.

“Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem” (v.14)! Such commands to “sing,” “shout aloud,” “be glad,” and “rejoice” almost feel out of place in an otherwise heavy writing. However, Fleming Rutledge reminds us that, “Advent begins in the dark.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Wave a metal detector over Zephaniah and a treasure trove of good news is found, “The LORD your God is with you, [the LORD] is mighty to save” (v.17). This is the promise woven through the pages of Scripture, Old and New Testaments. The LORD’s presence ought to cause our hearts (and our feet) to leap exceedingly.

Let us join the heavenly song of worship and praise to the LORD for rescuing us and saving us from Sin and Death. I encourage you to sing this song, I am going to use Charles Wesley’s *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* (my voice always cracks with excitement when I sing it) and Isaac Watts hymn *Joy to the World*. Allow the song to enter deep into your soul and find its way down to your soles. I don’t know how to dance. But I can leap. You can hold onto the counter top and rise on your tippy toes or raise heels as you sit in a chair. What is important is offer all of yourself to the “wonder, love and praise” of the LORD.<sup>xxxii</sup>



## Tuesday: Isaiah 12:2-6



**“Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;  
let this be known in all the earth.”**

—Isaiah 12:3

Musical artist Lauren Daigle is featured in the song *Noel* on Chris Tomlin’s album *Adore*. Every time I hear Daigle belt out the line, “Come and see what God had done” my entire body awakens.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The lyrics may trace themselves to the psalmist (see Psm 66:5), but Daigle’s voice brings them alive in me today. There are only a select number of songs, with special personal meaning that instantly cause my eyes to water, my heart to up its tempo, and my lungs to swell with such excitement.

The prophet Isaiah sings, “Sing praises to the LORD, for [God] has done gloriously...” (Isa 12:5) or to put it another way, “Sing praise-songs to God. He’s done it all!” (v.5).<sup>xxxiv</sup> There is a long litany of what God has done: created the world, opened the Red Sea, raised up kings, positioned priests, called prophets, closed the mouths of lions, placed a highway in the desert... Before the list continues, we can hear Daigle sing, “Come and see what God has done.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Where have you seen God’s work in the surrounding community? What has God done in the lives of those in our congregation? Where has God been at work in your family? Name the things that God has done in your own life. I do not know what today holds for you, let alone for me. What I do know is today’s reading concludes, the literary section of Isaiah 1-12 and provides as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann once claimed, “an act of buoyant and determined hope...”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In our free will, we are responsible for how we will respond to God’s activity in our lives. Isaiah writes, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid” (v.2). The rationale is provided, “for the LORD God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” (v.2). We get to choose to “draw water from the wells of salvation” (v.3). It is our choice to make whether we will “give thanks, call on [God’s] name, make know [God’s] deeds, proclaim God’s name” (v.4).

During Advent, we have the free will to, “Come and see what God has done.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> We have the ability to reflect on the providence, goodness, and love of God in us, the church, and the world. It is up to us today to “Sing praises to the LORD, for [God] has done gloriously...” (v.5). It is our call whether we will “shout aloud and sing for joy” (v.6). Of course, we do not need to sing and shout, but considering the rationale given “great in [our] midst is the Holy One of Israel” (v.6). I hope we make some noise and invite others to “Come and see what God had done.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

**Wednesday: *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus***



Come, thou long expected Jesus,  
born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us,  
let us find our rest in thee.  
Israel's strength and consolation,  
hope of all the earth thou art;  
dear desire of every nation,  
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,  
born a child and yet a King,  
born to reign in us forever,  
now thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By thine own eternal spirit  
rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all sufficient merit,  
raise us to thy glorious throne.<sup>xxxix</sup>

## Thursday: Philippians 4:4-7

**“The Lord is near.”**

--Philippians 4:5

In 1746, Charles Wesley borrowed a line from Paul's letter to the Philippians and turned it into hymn, “Lift up your heart, lift up your voice; rejoice; again, I say, rejoice.”<sup>xl</sup> Our hymnal classifies the hymn as the “RETURN AND REIGN OF THE LORD.”<sup>xli</sup> One verse says, “Jesus the Savior reigns, the God of truth and love; when he has

purged our stains, he took his seat above.”<sup>xlii</sup> Traditionally, the only time one might hear their name announced during worship service was at their baptism. The congregation would hear the pastor say, “I present \_\_\_\_\_ for baptism.” Just imagine the emotional swing that must have occurred for the Philippian congregation when Euodia and Syntyche are not named as baptismal candidates, but stains that disrupt not only the unity of the church, but the church's proclamation of the gospel. Paul pleads with them to “agree in the Lord” (Phil 4:2) and just as we vow to care for one another in our Baptism, the apostle Paul entrusts Euodia and Syntyche into the church's arms.

Paul trusts that Euodia and Syntyche will be received by the Philippian congregation with love, grace, and mercy. The congregation knows how Christ had “purged [their] stains” on Calvary's cross.<sup>xliii</sup> We too, know how important it is for us to reciprocate Christ's love, grace, and mercy towards the Euodia and Syntyche in our own day. Although the specific details of their disagreement are held in secret by history. We can attest to how easily a church can be divided. We have heard of churches that argue over important and trivial matters: the color of the new carpet for the parlor, the role of technology, the brand of coffee served at coffee hour, standing for the gospel reading, singing all of the verses of a hymn, how to fund the budget, engaging in missions, selecting Sunday school material, etc. Yet, Paul expects that a congregation devoted to honoring Christ will figure out how to live together.

For good measure, Paul leaves nothing to chance writing, “Let your gentleness be evident to all...” (v.5). It is a short list of instructions, not merely directed to Euodia and Syntyche but to the entire congregation. Essentially, the apostle is directing us to be Christ-like in our actions. Paul directs us to a posture and position of prayer, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (v.6). Perhaps, as preachers often do, Paul is preaching to himself, knowing as one hymn writer put it of the “peace we often forfeit...what needless pain we bear/All because we do not carry/ Everything to God in prayer.”<sup>xliv</sup>

In Paul's clear vision, he clearly sees that “The Lord is near” (v.5). This is somewhat reassuring when God feels like an eternity away. It is hard enough to live with the disunity in the world, and the infighting of Euodia and Syntyche often make the church feel like less than a sanctuary. “The Lord is near” (v.5) is not a threat (although it could be read that way). Instead, the close proximity of Christ as theologian Cynthia M. Campbell argues is “what makes Christian life possible.”<sup>xlv</sup> The nearness of God gives us the strength to push through another day. The nearness of God is what causes us to “Rejoice in the Lord always” (v.4) and to say do it again. The nearness of God, keenly felt late into the Advent season, blesses us with “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (v.7). As the Lord draws nearer, let us bend our knees, fold our hands, and close our eyes in prayer. When and where will we pray? What needs exist in the world, our community, our church, our family, and our own lives? Perhaps, we ought to bookend our prayers by singing, *Rejoice, the Lord is King*.<sup>xlvi</sup> After all, “The Lord is near” (v.5).



## Friday: Luke 3:7-18

**“What should we do then?’ the crowd asked.”**

--Luke 3:10

We encounter John the Baptist at several major moments in the church year. As the church unfolds the map of salvation, we are pointed to John located in the wilderness. We are bound to find John in the wilderness during Advent, The Baptism of the Lord, and Lent. We can hear his hoarse voice dare to utter words of truth amid a culture of lies and deception. Who among us wants John’s accusatory finger in our face calling us a “brood of vipers!” (Luk 3:7)?

For all of the superficial reasons, the crowd might turn away from John, his lack of fashion-sense, his dietary restrictions, and the rough edges of his unpolished messages. The crowd continues to seek “to be baptized by him” (v.7). Included within the crowd are tax collectors and some soldiers, that ask the same question of John, “What should we do then” (vv.10,12, 14)? Their questions are practical. They wrongly suspect that John “might possibly be the Christ” (v.15). However, John reroutes the crowds to Jesus, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (v.16).

Earlier John gives the imperative to the crowd, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father” (v.8). Then John offers the following warning, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (v.9). Yet, the crowd’s question lingers in the air, “What should we do then?” (v.10). The good news is that the crowd’s practical question receives several practical answers.

How would you keep warm on a cold winter’s night? Pretend that you only have two practical options to keep warm. You can either choose to wear a thick fur coat, or you can build a fire.<sup>xlvi</sup> Which option would you choose? Why? Remember in this example, you can only pick one of two options. If you choose to wear a coat, you alone are assured to keep warm. However, if you choose to start a fire, you could warm others and yourself in its steady glow. Perhaps, John’s message is for you to build a fire, to find some way to bring the warmth of God’s love to a world that has grown cold and hardened by sin.

Forgive me if the leap in my logic might see confusing, especially since Luke uses both “tunics” (v.11) and “fire” (vv. 9,16,17) in a different way than my question above. Along with the crowd you might find yourself asking, “What should we do then” (v.10)? Interestingly, John suggests to the crowd a series of practical options that, if practiced, could melt away some financial hardships and frustrations in the world. “What should we do then” (v.10)? Put a log on the fire, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same” (v.11). “What should we do” (v.12)? Place another log of the fire. To the Tax Collectors John says, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to” (v.14). “What should we do” (v.14)? Gather others around the fire. To some soldiers John replies, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (v.14).

Methodists are a practical, dare I say fire-building people.<sup>xlvi</sup> Who are the people in the cold (literally and figuratively) in our community? What practical action can we make to ensure the fire does not go out? How might we work alongside other fire-builders? Where is Christ’s transforming and empowering at work happening in the world?





## Saturday: Isaiah 11:1-10

**“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”**

--Isaiah 11:3



On the campaign trail presidential hopefuls make numerous promises of what their administration will do on the first day in office. However, the measuring stick often used is the one-hundred-day mark of the new presidency.

In the first hundred days did the president achieve their stated goals? Did he/she fail to deliver on their campaign promises once in office?

Every time a new king sat upon the throne, they never lived up to the hype of their coronation. In the Bible we find a combination of good kings and evil kings (see 1 Kin 12:1 - 2 Kin 25:26). The standard for kings was not what they accomplished within the first hundred days of their rule, but how they ruled. In Psalm 72, we find a prayer that establishes the high watermark for every ruler, especially the king, “Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness” (v.1).

In the Torah, there is only one small section concerning kings, “The king must not acquire great number of horses for himself or make people return to Egypt to get more of them... He must not take many wives...He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold” (Deut 17:16-17). In fact, the law concludes more positively requiring the king to “read [Torah] all the days of his life, so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of [the Torah]” (v.19). Surprisingly, that is the summation of the king’s responsibility.

In today’s Scripture reading the prophet Isaiah envision a new king on history’s horizon. In 586 B.C., the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, captured and tortured King Hezekiah and sent God’s children into exile. As far as God’s people could see, there was no future before them. Isaiah rekindles the fire of Israel’s most famous king, David announcing to no one in particular, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Isa. 11:1). Biblical scholar Andrew Bartelt suggests, “the hope of the Davidic line does not lie simply in another son of David but in a ‘radical’ return to the very roots of the family, to a new second David”.<sup>xlix</sup>

Throughout history God’s people have always known, “pandemics, wars, famines, economic hardship, hopelessness, despair, hurt and pain, grief and death.”<sup>l</sup> We look out our frost covered windows and our hearts too are weighed down. Maybe the season of Advent requires that we look down upon the hard crusted earth to name the realities of our discontent with every ruler and king and their empty promises. What if Isaiah motions us to look upon “the stump of Jesse” to remind us that the world is not void of hope or a future (v.1).

Standing trial Jesus stated, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jhn. 18:36). The hope of the world, indeed all of creation will not be found on the next ballot, but in the person of Jesus Christ, who rules with godly “wisdom and understanding”, “counsel and power” and in the “knowledge and fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:2). Christ reigns clothed with justice, righteousness, and faithfulness (v. 4-5). Everything is transformed. The salvation of creation centers on Jesus Christ.

Advent challenges us who claim Jesus is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14). Let today mark the first day we become serious about being appointed “Christ’s ambassadors” to the people around us (2 Cor 5:20). What aspects of God’s kingdom will we reveal to a world in the waiting? Where will we employ our gifts and graces to promote the name of Jesus? How will we faithfully promote the king’s agenda of justice and righteousness? Is Jesus reflected through our lives? One-hundred days from now, how might our community say we are doing in our Christ appointed role?



**Sunday: *O Little Town of Bethlehem***

O little town of Bethlehem  
How still we see Thee lie  
Above Thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by

Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in Thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary  
And, gathered all above  
While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
Their watch of wondering love

O morning stars, together  
Proclaim the Holy birth  
And praises sing to God the King  
And peace to men on earth

How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is given  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven

No ear may hear His coming  
But in this world of sin  
Where meek souls will receive Him  
Still the dear Christ enters in

O Holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in  
Be born in us today

We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel<sup>li</sup>



WORDS: Phillips Brooks, ca. 1868

MUSIC: Lewis H. Redner, 1868

## Monday: Micah 5:2-5a



**“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah... ,  
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel...”**

--Micah 5:2

Philipps Brooks’ hymn, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* is one of the most well-known Christmas carols. The entire hymn is full of sound theology. One timeless phrase that pulls on my heart strings says, “The hopes and fears of all the years/ Are met in thee tonight.”<sup>lii</sup> For years, I glossed over those lyrics. I never allowed them marinate in my heart. On a Christmas Eve many years ago, a Free Methodist pastor serving as our interim made a passing reference to the line, “The hopes and fears of all the years/ Are met in thee tonight.”<sup>liii</sup>

In today’s Scripture reading, the prophet Micah promises a future ruler from Bethlehem. Micah said, “[Y]ou, 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” (Mic 5:2). The Bethlehemites must have been eager for Micah’s prophesy to be true. Perhaps, it was this same emotion that stirred the hearts of the shepherds centuries later as they worked the fields one night. No wonder we sing, “The hopes and fears of all the years/Are met in thee tonight.”<sup>liv</sup>

The dark streets of Bethlehem shined with the wonderous light of the new and long-awaited king. In Micah’s day, the prophecy came true in Hezekiah, who became one of the greatest kings to sit upon the throne of Judah (see 2 Kgs 18:1-20:21; Isa 36-39). At his best, King Hezekiah resembled the kind of leadership “from of old, from ancient times” (v.2), namely that of the Warrior-King David. “The hopes and fears of all the years” were met in Bethlehem, David’s hometown long ago (1 Sam 16:1). It was David who stood against the Philistine’s Giant Goliath, and assembled a militia to defend his own people and interests (see 1 Sam 17; 1 Chron 12).

As Christians, we are also mindful the Micah’s prophecy is fulfilled with a Bethlehem stable in Jesus, the newborn king. The world places the weight of, “the hopes and fears of all the years” onto Jesus.<sup>lv</sup> The baby we seek in the manger, “will stand and shepherd his flocks in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God” (v.4). Unlike the former kings, Jesus does not lead his people into battle with instruments of war against a common enemy. Jesus does not simply bring peace to a troubled people, he is “their peace” (v.5).

Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung distinguishes between “negative peace” and “positive peace”.<sup>lvi</sup> Negative peace is the absence of violence. We see it when a ceasefire is enacted or a form of oppression has ended. Positive peace is the filling of good things. We see it when relationships are restored, creation is cared for, and in social systems that serve the needs of the underprivileged.

Two thousand years ago, Christ’s birth ushered in a new reign that embraces negative and positive peace. Jesus was non-violent and his entire life was dedicated to restore our relationship with God and one another. Especially during this hectic and hurried season, as we make our way to Bethlehem, we can feel the strain and stress in some of our relationships. Is Christ calling you to demonstrate negative peace? Are there words best left unsaid in the heat of the moment? Is Christ nudging you toward positive peace? Where might you give of your time to make to right a world so often bent on wrong? Just imagine what the Holy Spirit could do in our circles of influence if lived the way Christ chooses to reign in the world.

## Tuesday: Luke 1:46b-55

**“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been merciful of the humble state of his servant.”**

(Luke 1:46b-48a)

Upon learning from the angel Gabriel that she, “will be with child and give birth to a son...” (Luk 1:31) Mary responds, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (v.38). The angel suddenly vanishes from the scene allowing Mary’s words to linger in the air, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (v.38). What are we supposed to hear within those now familiar words? Traditionally, we have been taught to see Mary as passive, submissive, and compliant to God’s will.<sup>lvii</sup> In some interpretations, Mary’s response to Gabriel reflects her subordination as a woman. In your opinion, what kind of presence does Mary project?



Mary offers a beautiful, personal, and heartfelt song of praise, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he as been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name” (vv.46-50). Mary’s song almost sounds like a contemporary worship song. Regardless, if this is your preferred style of worship, there is little to find offensive. It is Mary singing from her own perspective.

However, half-way through Mary’s song, there is an abrupt shift that tells of a divine reversal. Mary’s personal experience with God, is a window of what God has done in the world at the macrolevel. Mary, as Biblical scholar Barbara Reid declares is a “powerful prophet”.<sup>lviii</sup> The few details that we have of Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel, trace themselves back to the same themes detected among the call of the Lord’s prophets in the Old Testament (see Exod 3:1-12; Isa 6:1-8; Ezk 2:1-8). This powerful prophet, follows the trailblazers of the female prophets—Miriam, Hannah, and Deborah when she clears her throat, places the world on high alert, and proclaims God’s mercy “His mercy extends to those who fear him, for generation to generation” (v.50).

Depending on the situatedness of the hearer/reader Mary’s song is either good or bad news, “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel remember, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers” (vv.51-55).

Theologian Marvin McMickle asked years ago, “Where have all the prophets gone?”<sup>lix</sup> The season Advent provides Mary her annual stage on which to shine. However, where are the rest of the prophets? Have we become passive, submissive, and compliant to a particular political agenda? Have we allowed the culture to paint us harmlessly into the proverbial corner? Or will we in the spirit of Mary rediscover our prophetic edge? Where does the church need to inflect her voice in the world? Who are the world’s people that desperately need the church to rediscover her prophetic work? Let Mary’s song become our anthem, as we partner with the Holy Spirit to transform the world and to better reflect the kingdom of God.

**Wednesday: O Come, All Ye Faithful**



O come, all ye faithful,  
joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.  
Come and behold him,  
born the king of angels.

Refrain:

O come let us adore him,  
O come let us adore him,  
O come let us adore him,  
Christ the Lord.

True God of true God,  
Light of light eternal,  
our lowly nature he hath not abhorred;  
born of a woman,  
here in flesh appearing. (Refrain)

Sing, choirs of angels,  
sing in exultation,  
sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above:  
"Glory to God,  
all glory in the highest!" (Refrain)

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,  
born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to thee be all glory giv'n;  
Word of the Father,  
begotten, not created. (Refrain)<sup>lx</sup>

WORDS: John F. Wade, ca. 1743; trans. by Frederick Oakeley, 1841, and others  
MUSIC: John F. Wade, ca. 1743

## Thursday: Hebrews 10:5-10

**“And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”**

--Hebrews 10:10



What image best captures the meaning of Christmas for you? What piece of art reveals the deepest truth

for you of Christ’s birth? Several years ago, I stumbled across an image of a wooden manger with straw with and burlap cloth resting within it. The artist cast the cross’ shadow over the manger. Essentially, claiming that Jesus was “born to die.” Some will be rightfully taken aback by such a claim. However, for me the simple image points to the meaning of Christmas.

I am not alone. In fact, in 1626 in his Christmas Day sermon, John Donne said to the congregation gathered at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London that Christ was “born to die.” Actually, Donne one of the finest English preachers put it far more eloquently, “He [Christ] found a Golgotha [where he was crucified] even in Bethlehem, where he was born...His birth and his death were but one continual act; and his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of one and the same day.”<sup>ixi</sup>

The Letter to the Hebrew is an odd place to find ourselves in Advent. Our Scripture reading picks up in the middle of an ancient sermon, the themes of which are illustrated with plenty of Old Testament allusions. The preacher alludes to the full scope of Jesus’ life; birth, ministry, and death in the sermon claiming that, “Christ came into the world” (Heb 10:5).

Sermons are meant to be heard. A few years ago, I read a published sermon by a highly esteemed preacher. It was a good sermon, but it left no lasting impression upon my heart. The preacher delivered the same sermon that I had read (big-named preachers recycle and reuse old sermons all the time), but this time I heard it and it left a much deeper impact on my life. If only we could hear the sermon from Hebrews. I suspect, the preacher of Hebrews painted a verbal masterpiece for the congregation, inserted pregnant pauses when necessary or upped the tempo to a gallop when called for. I imagine the preacher had the congregation lean in with interest when they were told how it used to be with the Jewish sacrificial system in one voice and incorporated a different inflection entirely on how it is *now* with Jesus Christ.

The preacher places the following words in the mouth of the incarnate Christ, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure” (Ps 40:6-8; Heb 10:5). Then Christ says, “See, God I have come to do your will, O God” (Heb 10:7). Notice that preacher underscores that Christ has “come to do [God’s] will” (v.7). In Hebrews, theologian Fleming Rutledge argues, “The miracle of Christ’s sacrificial death is that priest and victim [sacrifice] have become one.”<sup>ixii</sup> Throughout the sermon the preacher of Hebrews reveals the touchpoints of Jesus’ whole life with the beautiful faith tradition of his own people. Yet, each connecting point also diverges to illustrate that Jesus’ service to the will of God and the benefit of the world is effective—in its saving power against Sin.

Today, I encourage you to listen to an online sermon, especially one that proclaims the death of Christ. Or to read a large section of from Hebrews (e.g., chapters 5-10) and notice how the words of the ancient preacher fall upon your ear and stir your heart, what images emerge in your mind that help to capture the depth of Christmas’ meaning.



## Friday: Luke 1:39-45



**“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.”**

--Luke 1:45

Have you ever noticed that the gospel of Luke toggles back and forth between stories featuring men and stories featuring women? A quick survey through Luke’s gospel will reveal stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Jairus and an unnamed woman, an expert in the law and sisters Martha and Mary, the Sadducees and a widow with her mite, the centurion and the women from Galilee. It is remarkable the way that Luke weaves their stories together to tell the good news of the gospel.

Today’s Scripture reading features two strong and incredible women of faith; Elizabeth and Mary. Mary learned from the angel Gabriel of two startling announcements. First, Mary “will be with child and give birth to a son...” (Luk 1:31) and that her son will assume the throne of David, and “his kingdom will never end” (v.33). Second, Mary learned that her relative Elizabeth (of advanced age) is not only “going to have a child” (v.36), but is already nearing the end of her second trimester. With these double and surprising announcements Mary “got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth” (v.39).

A new trend in our culture is for the expectant couple to throw a gender reveal party. However, both Elizabeth and Mary know the gender of their respective babies. Throughout the Scripture and human history women are often relegated to role of bearing children. Although both Elizabeth and Mary will give birth to John and Jesus, their stories operate at a deeper level. Neither Elizabeth or Mary is defined by their status as mothers. Biblical scholars Claudia Janssen and Regene Lamb note that “Elizabeth praises Mary...not for her motherhood, but for her faith.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Instead, of a gender reveal, Luke invites us to celebrate the trust that these two remarkable women place in God, God’s promises, and each other.

Luke unable to keep the secret spoils the surprise earlier. Elizabeth breaks her faithful silence, “The Lord has done this for me...In these last days he has shown his favor...” (v.25). In fact, Mary displays her faithfulness and confidently says to the angel Gabriel, “I am the Lord’s servant...May it be to me as you have said” (v.38). If we missed it before, Luke tells us again. Good news is worth sharing, “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished” (v.45).

The relationship between Elizabeth and Mary is multi-generational. It is a relationship between two women who know the importance of supporting and encouraging one another in life and in faith. Where do you see this kind of healthy relationship taking place in your community? What would it take for you to have the wisdom and compassion of Elizabeth? What would be required of you to have the audacity of Mary? Who is your Elizabeth? Who is the Mary that can turn to you today?

## Saturday: Matthew 2:1-12

**“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”**

--Matthew 2:11



Although the story of the Magi's visit is reserved for the season of Epiphany, the hymn writers do not play by such rules. From where the “ox and ass are feeding” William Dix inserts in the next verse, “So bring him incense gold, and myrrh.”<sup>lxiv</sup> Scholars suggest that in this scene from Matthew's gospel Jesus is already a toddler. The traditional French carol, *Sing We Now of Christmas* dedicates two verses to the visitors “From the eastern country” as they present their “gifts of greatest price.”<sup>lxv</sup> In the traditional English Carol, *The First Noel* assigns three verses to the strangers “from country far” whom enter the carol and model for us what we ought to do as they “full reverently upon the knee, and offered there, in his presence, their gifts of gold and myrrh and frankincense.”<sup>lxvi</sup>

Years ago, I would have immaturely decried the blending of details of Luke 2:1-20 with Matthew 2:1-13. Mostly I was concerned with staying with the biblical text and honoring the unique voices of each gospel. However, I am delighted for this blending of the stories and tradition. In fact, I suspect we would be hard pressed to find hymns that do not borrow imagery from elsewhere in Scripture to communicate their message. Composer Lin-Manuel Miranda once commented on the challenge of having Eliza meet, fall in love, and get married to Alexander Hamilton in a single song lasting less than four minutes.<sup>lxvii</sup> The hymn writers have an even more difficult and far more important task of telling the story of Jesus Christ. For example, John Hopkins' beloved carol *We Three Kings* does high theology summarizing Christ's life and work by saying, “Glorious now behold him arise; King and God and sacrifice...”<sup>lxviii</sup>

In our Scripture reading for today the Magi have traveled to King Herod and ask, “Where is the one who have been born king of the Jews” (v.2)? They state their intentions, “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (v.2). It was said among the ancients that stars were the sign given by the heavens when a new king was born. No wonder King Herod is “disturbed” (v.3). I suspect Herod was not a well-differentiated individual; his anxiety puts all of Jerusalem on edge. Herod's cabinet begin to research the prophets for the coordinates of this new threat to the throne. (v.6; Mic 5:2). When one needs to look both ways before telling a joke—it probably shouldn't be told. When Herod has to “secretly” meet with the Magi and are sent on a secret mission to “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I to may go and worship him” (v.8) the gig is up.

The theologian Richard Foster remarked, “Worship is something we do.”<sup>lxix</sup> Our Salvation is not performance based, nor would Foster suggest such a notion. However, worship is what John Wesley calls a “means of grace.”<sup>lxx</sup> Participation in individual and corporate worship, is one of the many ways that we can express our love, praise and adoration to God. Through these moments of worship, we offer ourselves completely to the One who has already reached out in relationship to us first. What might we do that moves our worship beyond the lip service of old King Herod? From our bended knees, what could we offer Christ?

**Sunday: *Angels We Have Heard on High***



Angels we have heard on high  
sweetly singing o'er the plains,  
and the mountains in reply  
echoing their joyous strains.

Refrain:

Gloria, in excelsis Deo!  
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!  
Shepherds, why this jubilee?  
Why your joyous strains prolong?  
What the gladsome tidings be  
which inspire your heavenly song? (Refrain)  
Come to Bethlehem and see  
Christ whose birth the angels sing;  
come, adore on bended knee,  
Christ the Lord, the newborn King. (Refrain)  
See him in a manger laid,  
whom the choirs of angels praise;  
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,  
while our hearts in love we raise. (Refrain)

WORDS: Trad. French carol

MUSIC: French carol melody; arr. By Edward Shippen Barnes, 1937; harm. by Austin C. Lovelace, 1964

## Monday: Isaiah 9:2-7

**“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given...”**

--Isaiah 9:6

The dramatics are present on Christmas Eve; the sanctuary is decorated with the handcrafted ornaments from saints long ago; the coldness outside is countered by the warmth of friendly faces; the darkness the beckons on the other side of the stained-glass is met by the soft flicker of candle's flame. The pews offer weary travelers some respite for an hour, and overly excited children an eternity to wait. The treasury of Christmas carols is finally opened. We know we are inching ever closer to Christmas when the words of the prophet Isaiah read, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” (Isa 9:6). Then with the gusto of Handel we hear, “[H]is name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (v.6).



As I type, a plethora of disturbing headlines, photos, and reports are coming from Afghanistan. Kabul, the capital city has fallen to the Taliban. The Afghanistan government officials have presumably fled the country and remain in hiding as their nation walks in darkness, as a weary world watches on in disbelief. We may not understand the geopolitics of Afghanistan, any more than we do of those living in the eighth century B.C. However, Isaiah's words are no less haunting as they hauntingly hang in the air, “The people who have walked in darkness...” (v.2).

When the prophet speaks of “the people who have walked in darkness...” (v.2). It is a darkness that our artificial Christmas lights cannot brighten. A darkness that threatens to silence our songs. A darkness that suppresses any hint of joy. On Christmas Eve, the church is honest about the darkness of our world, more so than most Sunday mornings. The darkness known long ago in Zebulun and Naphtali, or in faraway places like Afghanistan is present on this most holy of nights, even within us in the loss of a loved one, the disappointment of failed dreams, the struggle to make ends meet, estranged relationships, feelings of unhappiness, and concerns about health. We know the darkness stretches across a bigger stage, beyond our own individualistic experiences.

On Christmas Eve, we arrive to and depart from worship surrounded by darkness. During the service physical darkness will be incorporated into the service as we recall God's response long ago. Originally, the words of Isaiah scribbled across our Christmas cards were first addressed to King Hezekiah, as the new leader described as “a light [that] shined” (v.2) and King Ahaz's failed reign is likened to “deep darkness” (v.2; see Isaiah 6-8). The New Revised Standard Version keeps the royal birth announcement in the past tense, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...” (v.6). The people then were overcome with their “increased joy” (v.3) and “endless peace” (v.7). For a moment, about twenty-nine years, “all was calm, all was bright” until it wasn't anymore.<sup>lxxi</sup>

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Tonight, when the angels spilt the heavens, no one has to inform the shepherds that King Ahazs and their dark reigns that operate in every generation. Luke cannot tell the Christmas story without the dark political references to Caesar and his oppressive decree (Luk 1:1). Just as Hezekiah stood in stark contrast to Ahaz, Jesus establishes a kingdom of “justice and righteousness” (Isa 9:7) is the counterpoint to the Ahazs in our day. Whether in the church's pews or the darkened corner of your home, strike a match and light a candle to dispel the darkness. Where are the places in your life that need Jesus, the light of the world (Jhn 8:12)? Where are the places need to work for God's transforming justice and righteousness in the world? As you ponder these questions stare into the flame and prayerfully sing, “Silent night, holy night! Son of God love's pure light. Radiant beams from Thy holy face With the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus Lord, at Thy birth Jesus Lord, at Thy birth.”<sup>lxxii</sup>



## Tuesday: Psalm 96

**“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice...”**

--Psalm 96:11

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories...”<sup>lxxiii</sup> Pastors and congregants know this to be true. No matter how hard a pastor labors on their Christmas Eve sermon, they cannot match the poetry in our

Christmas carols. In fact, someone remarked that Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth is rather boring (See Luk 2:1-20). I could write sermons and we could read Scripture with the imagination of Edmund Sears, “Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled, and still their heavenly music floats o’er all the weary world.”<sup>lxxiv</sup> Or the ingenuity of James Montgomery, “Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar; seek the great Desire of nations; ye have seen his natal star...”<sup>lxxv</sup> Or the inspiration of Joseph Mohr, “Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love’s pure light; radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord at thy birth, Jesus, Lord at thy birth.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> We are spellbound by the poetry of Christmas.

Luke’s gospel is filled with the poetry of Mary, Zachariah, and the Angels (see Luk 1-2). These lines of poetry have since been placed to music and have told the Christmas story faithfully for over two millennia. Allow the poets to guide you to the manger. Let the music seep into your soul. Grant the Holy Spirit permission, sense the wonder, depth, and newness of Christmas.

The Scripture reading from Psalm 96 is lyrical. The poem commands us to “sing” three times, “O Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day” (vv.1-2). Isaac Watts’ hymn is based on Psalm 98:4-9. However, Psalm 96, anticipates Watt’s poetry. “Let every heart prepare him room and heav’n and nature sing, and heav’n and nature sing, and heav’n and nature sing!”<sup>lxxvii</sup> And so on Christmas Eve, “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it” (v.11).

The Rabbinic tradition says, “The whole of creation was called into existence by God unto [God’s] glory, and each creature has its own hymn of praise wherewith to extol the Creator.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> In the white space between the black print of the Torah is found the poetry. In that space the poets describe all of creation joining the mighty chorus, “Gloria in excelsis Deo!” Every part of creation is gifted uniquely and beautifully with its own voice to honor God. The waters proclaim of God’s might. The heavens- sun and moon, orchestrate their daily rhythm of “Alleluias!” The clouds and winds offer their worship. The mountain and prairies, meadows and woodlands, deserts and glaciers join in the song. Through the eyes of poetry, the birds above sing of God’s praise, as do the fish in the depths of the sea. The lion roars, the fox cries out, the frog croaks, the reptile hisses, the mouse seeks, the dog barks, and the cat meows in perfect unison, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps 150:6).

Wherever you find yourself, on the road traveling, in the fields working, under the covers unable to sleep, or besides the manger let the poetry move your heart toward praise. I am not poetic, writing and reading poetry are a stretch for me. However, what happens at Christmas and Easter is worth the effort of flexing the small poetic muscles we might have. We are not called to be Edmund Sears, James Montgomery, or even Joseph Mohr. However, we are called to experience the presence of Christ in our lives and to “sing”, “tell”, “bless”, “declare” (96:3) of God’s love and goodness.



**Wednesday: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing***

Hark the herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!  
Peace on earth and mercy mild  
God and sinners reconciled"  
Joyful, all ye nations rise  
Join the triumph of the skies  
With the angelic host proclaim:  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"  
Hark! The herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Christ by highest heav'n adored  
Christ the everlasting Lord!  
Late in time behold Him come  
Offspring of a Virgin's womb  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see  
Hail the incarnate Deity  
Pleased as man with man to dwell  
Jesus, our Emmanuel  
Hark! The herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Hail the heav'n born prince of peace!  
Hail the Son of righteousness!  
Light and life to all He brings  
Ris'n with healing in His wings  
Mild He lays His glory by  
Born that man no more may die  
Born to raise the sons of earth  
Born to give them second birth  
Hark! The herald angels sing  
"Glory to the newborn King!"<sup>lxxix</sup>



WORDS: Charles Wesley, 1734; alt. by George Whitefield, 1753, and others  
MUSIC: Felix Mendelssohn, 1840 arr. By William H. Cummings, 1856

## Thursday: Titus: 2:11-14

**“[W]hile we wait for the  
blessed hope...”**

--Titus 2:13



Paul writes to Titus, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished...” (Tit 1:5). Left

behind, Titus must “appoint elders in every town” (v.5). Negatively, Paul directs Titus that the elders should not be “overbearing, quick-tempered, given to drunkenness, violent, pursuing dishonest gain” (v.7). Positively these elders are to be, “hospitable, lovers of what is good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined” (v.8). Paul dips his quill back into the ink and continues elders, “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [they] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (vv.8-9). If we find Paul’s ramblings about elders pointless for a mostly non-ordained crowd, the apostle will address various other people-groups (see Tit 2:1-9). What we will notice is that both church leaders and congregants are required to exhibit the same virtues.

In the Greek language, Titus 2:11-14 consist of a single sentence. Paul begins, “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all [people]” (v.11). In Luke’s Christmas story, the shepherds resemble “all people.” The message of Christ’s salvific birth was given to folks: powerless employees working the nightshift, trying to make ends meet, and survive another day with the stench of sheep on their clothing. Their jobs were not glorious, nor highly sought after, but what the shepherds encountered on that first Christmas was grand. We have no idea how the shepherds’ lives were changed the night of our Savior’s birth. Did they cleanup their language? Did they steer their sheep away from trespassing on someone else’s field? Did they treat the sheep and other shepherds with dignity and respect? Did they dismiss the whole night and return to their dead-end jobs?

The shepherd’s story is lost to the archives of history. However, the world was forever changed the night of Christ’s birth. Biblical scholar, Amy Peeler writes, “The celebration of the nativity is not just memorial...it is also living out, here and now in the present, the future hope of the gospel.”<sup>lxxx</sup> Paul de-sentimentalizes Christmas informing us that to truly celebrate the robust nature of this holiday includes both negative and positive actions. The Holy Spirit has empowered us to say, “No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify us for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (vv.12-14).

As we ponder the wonders of the very first Christmas, let us hear the angel’s ancient message of salvation anew. May the “ordained and non-ordained” receive the baton of the shepherds, and “run the race with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...” (Heb 12:1-2a). What heavy and restrictive vices need to be removed from our life? Any Paul might have listed? In our quest to celebrate Christmas and to honor Christ well, how will we strive to live holier lives? How will we run for God in our world “while we wait...for the [Second] appearing of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit 1:13)?



## Friday: Luke 2:1-20

**“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”**

--Luke 2:6-7a



In all of the commotion that happens in the Christmas story, it is easy to miss one of history's most understated lines, “she gave birth” (Luk 2:7)... We may recall Caesar Augustus' decree. We might remember how we felt when Joseph and a very pregnant Mary were sent away by the inn keeper. Undoubtedly, we have yawned with the shepherds “keeping watch over their flocks at night” (v.8). Perhaps, we joined the heavenly hosts singing of the birth of Christ into our world. Maybe like Mary, we too have pondered all of events in the shepherd's report and “treasured them” in our hearts (v.19). Yet, the moment all the earth has been waiting for is merely glossed over in Luke's telling of that first Christmas.

Hidden within the Christmas story, we are told of Christ's birth after the fact. Luke writes Mary “gave birth” (v.7). The angel's announcement to the shepherd's was in the past tense, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you” (v.11). We are never told how long Mary's labor took or if Jesus was born breached. Like the moment of the resurrection, Jesus' birth happened off screen. In fact, that is the scene (probably for good measure) left out of children Christmas pageants. Mary is plump with an oversized pillow under her gown. The scene changes and a thin Mary reappears with Jesus lying in a manger.

Biblical scholars J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays tell of a Christmas pageant in Dilla, Ethiopia. The church was jammed packed with people, the room was dark as Joseph and Mary wandered in, except the couple did not travel alone. Atypical to many of the Christmas pageants we have witnessed, the Ethiopians accompanied the holy couple with “over a dozen aunts and female cousins”.<sup>lxxxi</sup> In other words, a very pregnant Mary had a team of midwives to help bring new life into the world. While the presence of midwives is not mentioned in Luke's gospel, it is easy to see how they may have been present.

Today I am drawn to the simple words, “She gave birth” (v.7)... I was in the room for the birth of my children. My role was limited to mere amazement, as the doctor and nurses sprang into action in that wondrously tender and precious moment. However, this year I want to invite you into a makeshift delivery room of the ancient world. If Christmas is to be meaningful, we must accompany Mary as modern-day midwives, as we reenact the Christmas story. We are the ones kneeling on the floor in front of Mary encouraging her to breathe and push. From the vantage point, we can see both Mary's face and the emerging Christ child. Our role as midwives is hard messy life-giving work, that helps to turn profound suffering into profound joy.

Midwives perform many tasks: wiping the mucus from the baby's mouth and nose, allowing the baby to gasp its first breath, tying and cutting the umbilical cord, bathing and swaddling the infant from head to toe (to name only a few).<sup>lxxxii</sup> Your presence is needed as we prepare to celebrate the joy of Christ's birth. During this season, please keep all the spiritual midwives in your prayer— that we might together assist Mary in the birth of her Son. Your presence is requested at the stable where together we will help to deliver the very one who will deliver us.



**Saturday: *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen***



**1** God rest ye merry, gentlemen  
Let nothing you dismay  
Remember, Christ, our Saviour  
Was born on Christmas day  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we were gone astray

**Refrain:**

O tidings of comfort and joy  
Comfort and joy  
O tidings of comfort and joy

**2** In Bethlehem, in Israel  
This blessed Babe was born  
And laid within a manger  
Upon this blessed morn  
The which His Mother Mary  
Did nothing take in scorn (Refrain)

**3** From God our Heavenly Father  
A blessed Angel came  
And unto certain Shepherds  
Brought tidings of the same  
How that in Bethlehem was born  
The Son of God by Name (Refrain)

**4** "Fear not then", said the Angel  
"Let nothing you affright  
This day is born a Saviour  
Of a pure Virgin bright  
To free all those who trust in Him  
From Satan's power and might" (Refrain)

**5** The shepherds at those tidings  
Rejoiced much in mind  
And left their flocks a-feeding  
In tempest, storm and wind  
And went to Bethlehem straightway  
The Son of God to find (Refrain)

**6** And when they came to Bethlehem  
Where our dear Saviour lay  
They found Him in a manger  
Where oxen feed on hay  
His Mother Mary kneeling down  
Unto the Lord did pray (Refrain)

**7** Now to the Lord sing praises  
All you within this place  
And with true love and brotherhood  
Each other now embrace  
This holy tide of Christmas  
All other doth deface (Refrain)<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

WORDS: Trad. English carol  
MUSIC: English carol

## Endnotes

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- <sup>xx</sup> Ibid., “Blessed Be the God of Israel”, 209.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., “Baptismal Covenant I”, 32.
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