



# **Big Book of Advent Devotionals – Year 1**

## **Based on the Daily Lectionary of the *Book of Common Worship***

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's "Big Book of Advent Devotionals – Year 1" gives you a valuable resource for personal and corporate Spiritual formation during the Advent season. From Day 1 through Christmas Day, each section includes multiple biblical passages from the daily lectionary, reflections based on those passages, and accompanying prayers based on each reflection. Members of the Seminary community since 2008 have contributed to this resource as a means of blessing you not only in this Advent season but also in those to come!



# Year 1, Day 1

## **Isaiah 1:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>*The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

<sup>2</sup>*Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;*

*for the LORD has spoken:*

*I reared children and brought them up,  
but they have rebelled against me.*

<sup>3</sup>*The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master's crib;*

*but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ah, sinful nation,  
people laden with iniquity,  
offspring who do evil,  
children who deal corruptly,  
who have forsaken the LORD,  
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
who are utterly estranged!*

<sup>5</sup>*Why do you seek further beatings?  
Why do you continue to rebel?*

*The whole head is sick,  
and the whole heart faint.*

<sup>6</sup>*From the sole of the foot even to the head,  
there is no soundness in it,  
but bruises and sores  
and bleeding wounds;  
they have not been drained, or bound up,  
or softened with oil.*

<sup>7</sup>*Your country lies desolate,  
your cities are burned with fire;  
in your very presence  
aliens devour your land;  
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.*

<sup>8</sup>*And daughter Zion is left  
like a booth in a vineyard,  
like a shelter in a cucumber field,  
like a besieged city.*

<sup>9</sup>*If the LORD of hosts  
had not left us a few survivors,  
we would have been like Sodom,  
and become like Gomorrah.*

## **Allison Bauer '05**

Isaiah, son of Amoz, describes a desolate scene: people rebelling with eyes that cannot see, forsaking and despising the Holy One of Israel. "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint" (v. 5).

Things haven't changed much, have they? Still we rebel; still we forsake the Holy One. It is the human condition, this being mired in a pit of sin. But the hope of salvation persists.

As the Israelites waited for the Messiah to descend, we eagerly anticipate the return of the Messiah who will deliver us from evil. Now we sing "Love came down at Christmas/ Love all lovely, Love Divine." But then we shall sing "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (Rev. 5:12). The hope of salvation persists.

Living with one foot in heaven and one on earth is demanding. And frustrating. We pray for the "already" while living in the "not yet" of Christ's reign. But we persist because the hope of salvation, "Love Incarnate, Love Divine," came down at Christmas—and, we believe, will come again.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, strengthen us in our waiting so that our rebellion will cease. Hold always before us the hope of salvation as we await the day when Love will come down again. In Love's name we pray, Amen.

### **Matthew 25:1-13**

*<sup>1</sup>Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup>When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup>but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup>As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup>But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' <sup>7</sup>Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup>The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' <sup>9</sup>But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' <sup>10</sup>And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup>Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' <sup>12</sup>But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' <sup>13</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'*

### **Lisa Dormire '86**

The theme for this year's Advent Devotionals from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is "Expect the Unexpected." The Scripture reading from the 25th Chapter of Matthew presents us with a very good start.

This is a story about a wedding. In these days the bridesmaids carried little oil lamps as part of the procession. These were festive lamps meant to lead the way for the bride and groom. They were also necessary illumination in a time when there was no electricity. You could not have a wedding reception without lamps and the oil to fuel them. In this case the bridal party consisted of ten young women, half of whom Jesus describes as wise, the other half are called foolish. As we all know, the wise are the ones who had not just their lamps but extra oil just in case. For reasons that aren't made clear, the bridegroom is late for the wedding. And after waiting and being bored, the bridesmaids nod off to sleep.

Sometime later they are awakened by the cry, "They're coming, and they're coming." Great—the wedding can begin. But while they have been asleep, the lamps have run out of oil. The wise women refused to share with the foolish, sending the foolish scurrying off to the seven-eleven to buy more oil. They get their oil, rush back to the house, and furiously knock on the door. The groom opens it a crack as

he peers out overtop the little security chain. “I’m sorry,” he says, “do I know you?” And then the door slams shut. It sends a chill down the spine, doesn’t it?

I think that this story is meant to send a chill down our spine. Jesus really wants us to be prepared. None of these bridesmaids were bad people. Half of them simply were unprepared. Jesus tells his disciples to keep watch. You never know when the bridegroom is going to arrive—so be ready.

In our day to day lives and in our faith lives, we tend to get sloppy. At least I do. Getting by seems good enough. Just keeping my head above water seems good enough. I don’t usually think to carry extra oil. Literal or spiritual. But in this parable, Jesus calls us to a higher level of consciousness. Think ahead. Read Scripture. Pray. Take time for feeding the spirit. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Keep your oil reserves full—and then watch, wait, live expectantly. Don’t shuffle through life unaware—Look up—and be surprised once again by Christ among us. Expect the unexpected. Come Lord Jesus, Come!

### ***Prayer***

O living Christ—you were—you are—you come. Fill our lamps that we may be prepared for the feast of your reign. Keep us wakeful that our lamps may ever burn. Give us sight that we may recognize you among us. Give us strength to stand in your presence. So may all these things be, through your gracious spirit. Amen.

### **Hetz Marsh Jr. ’68**

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins was used by Jesus to respond to a question about the arrival of God’s Kingdom on earth, and the final victory on earth of God’s Son. In this parable and in many other teachings, Jesus tips God’s hand. He tells us how the end will be. He doesn’t tell us when he will return, or how he will achieve his final triumph, but he leaves no doubt that it will happen.

Usually when someone writes a novel he or she does not let the readers know how it ends. The end of the salvation story is sure and under God’s complete control. God does not leave us in suspense. God wants us to know.

We don’t know how, we don’t know when, but God wants us to know that someday God will be victorious. We need not worry about the outcome. Our human drama will not end with a dark cloud and stench of defeat. I will end in light and glory.

Bertolt Brecht wrote, “A ship will sink—that’s what we must resign ourselves to.” Pascal had another view. He said, “life is like a voyage on a ship which may be tossed by storms and waves, but a ship which we know will reach its harbor safe and warm.”

Jesus reveals a view of life that confirms Pascal. Storms and waves are allowed in our lives but God will work the final victory, of that we can be certain. Someday there will be a shout and the bridegroom will arrive. And then we will see how humankind is finally led not to a funeral but to a wedding.

Have an alert, expectant Advent.

### ***Prayer***

Holy and loving God, thank you for the Advent Hope in Christ. Awaken us this Blessed Season. Amen.

## **2 Peter 3:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>*This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you* <sup>2</sup>*that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles.* <sup>3</sup>*First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts* <sup>4</sup>*and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!"* <sup>5</sup>*They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water,* <sup>6</sup>*through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished.* <sup>7</sup>*But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.* <sup>8</sup>*But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.* <sup>9</sup>*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.* <sup>10</sup>*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.*

### **Cathy Brall, staff**

"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness . . ." For most of my life the adjective "slow" was not one I wanted applied to me. "Slow" was a synonym for being stupid, unproductive, or late as in "missing the boat" on something important. I wanted to be (or at least perceived to be) smart, efficient, up-to-date, and aware of whatever was important to be, know, or do. This passage tells us God risks appearing to be "slow" about Jesus' promise to return soon because God wants to give us extra time to get ready and be prepared. Here God's slowness is a good thing, a reflection of God's patience, mercy, and grace toward us because, in the final judgment, God doesn't want anyone to be without a gift under the tree of eternal life. With multiple messages and insatiable images, the secular world issues increasing demands upon us in the countdown to Christmas. Might we resist the pressure to appear smart, efficient, and up-to-date with the latest and greatest gifts, garb, and galas and opt instead to reflect God's slowness toward us and others by embracing the gift of the Advent season?

### **Prayer**

God of a thousand years and the blink of a millisecond, grant me the willingness to cast aside the demands of this world, now in the days of these weeks before Christmas, that my heart may be humbled to receive more fully the gift of the Christ-child and my life enlarged to await more hopefully the return of my Savior and Judge. Amen.

## **Psalms 24**

<sup>1</sup>*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;*  
<sup>2</sup>*for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?*  
<sup>4</sup>*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.*  
<sup>5</sup>*They will receive blessing from the LORD,*

*and vindication from the God of their salvation.*

<sup>6</sup>*Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

<sup>7</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*

<sup>8</sup>*Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.*

<sup>9</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*

<sup>10</sup>*Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.*

### **Jason Freyer '16**

There's nothing like a little self-esteem to start your morning, is there? When you read something like Psalm 24, particularly verses 3 and 4, you realize that you're in deep. A pure heart? Hardly. Do I from time to time place more trust in my cash than in my God, thus making the Almighty Dollar an idol? You bet. As a red-blooded American boy, I can't even go two minutes with hands devoid of mud or dirt. If you read Psalm 24 in the wrong light, you can get awfully depressed before you've even finished your bowl of Raisin Bran.

Then again, we could look at it another way. We could be reminded of the one who was worthy to ascend the mountain of the Lord, the one who is to come. We could be reminded that Jesus Christ came to us, even in the form of an infant in Bethlehem to do what we could not. He came to be what we are not. In our faith, we celebrate that God comes to us, not the other way around.

### **Prayer**

Gracious Lord our God, thank you for doing what we could not, for the promise we look forward to in Christ Jesus. Thank you for coming to us, for being what we could not be, for doing what we could not do. Help us to remember this day to let our view of ourselves be grounded in your love for us. Amen.

### **Psalm 25**

<sup>1</sup>*To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.*

<sup>2</sup>*O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.*

<sup>3</sup>*Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

<sup>4</sup>*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.*

<sup>5</sup>*Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.*

<sup>6</sup>*Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.*

<sup>7</sup>*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!*

<sup>8</sup>*Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.*

<sup>9</sup>*He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.*

<sup>10</sup>*All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

<sup>11</sup>*For your name's sake, O LORD,  
pardon my guilt, for it is great.*

<sup>12</sup>*Who are they that fear the LORD?  
He will teach them the way that they should choose.*

<sup>13</sup>*They will abide in prosperity,  
and their children shall possess the land.*

<sup>14</sup>*The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,  
and he makes his covenant known to them.*

<sup>15</sup>*My eyes are ever toward the LORD,  
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.*

<sup>16</sup>*Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
for I am lonely and afflicted.*

<sup>17</sup>*Relieve the troubles of my heart,  
and bring me out of my distress.*

<sup>18</sup>*Consider my affliction and my trouble,  
and forgive all my sins.*

<sup>19</sup>*Consider how many are my foes,  
and with what violent hatred they hate me.*

<sup>20</sup>*O guard my life, and deliver me;  
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.*

<sup>21</sup>*May integrity and uprightness preserve me,  
for I wait for you.*

<sup>22</sup>*Redeem Israel, O God,  
out of all its troubles.*

### **Kimberly Gonxhe '07**

Put one foot in front of the other. Follow God's voice. Trust God's voice. Although fear may creep up as self-doubt, naysayers and circumstances show themselves, remember the last thing God told you, and do that.

This life is full of doubters, dream stealers, people who mean you harm, but God is immensely greater than the culmination of them all. No matter where you are and whatever the circumstance, the Lord is there with you. You can soar in a prison cell. You can have peace while possessing no possessions. You can thrive in spite of tremendous opposition.

As we surrender our lives to Christ, Christ leads us out of dire places which seem to have no exit door. As we yield and let go, rough places become smooth and crooked places are made straight. As we obey

God's instruction, people who mean us harm will be silenced and dealt with. As we do those things which are possible, God then does the impossible. So wait on the Lord. The excellency is of God and not of you. You'll make it to the other side successfully; just keep your hand in God's hand and put one foot in front of the other.

***Prayer***

Lord, I know there are people who mean me no good and situations that seem so insurmountable, but I put my trust in you. Help me to walk in righteousness and not succumb to the temptations of doubt or fear. I put my hope in you and rest knowing that you always take good care of me and will continue to do so. Amen.



## Year 1, Day 2

### **Isaiah 1:10-20**

<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the LORD,  
you rulers of Sodom!  
Listen to the teaching of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!

<sup>11</sup>What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the LORD;  
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats.

<sup>12</sup>When you come to appear before me,  
who asked this from your hand?  
Trample my courts no more;  
<sup>13</sup>bringing offerings is futile;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—  
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

<sup>14</sup>Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.

<sup>15</sup>When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.

<sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
<sup>17</sup>learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.

<sup>18</sup>Come now, let us argue it out,  
says the LORD:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.

<sup>19</sup>If you are willing and obedient,  
you shall eat the good of the land;  
<sup>20</sup>but if you refuse and rebel,

*you shall be devoured by the sword;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

### **Ben Beres '10**

Last night at dinner, my son was singing one of my favorite Christmas carols, the Little Drummer Boy. I think there is something beautiful about seeing the smallest, meager talents bring a smile to Jesus' face. As my son sings this song to himself, it's sweet and touching and not at all what he's supposed to be doing. He's singing this song I love, but what I really want him to be doing is eating his dinner. He's not confused about where we are or what we're supposed to be doing, he's just choosing to do something else.

It's a lot like Israel during Isaiah's work there. The people have a multitude of sacrifices they're bringing. They have offerings, festivals, and feasts. All of these are good things in their own right. They just aren't what God has called Israel to be doing. In fact, because of this, God calls these activities sin; He can't even look at them when they pray!

As sweet as it is for my son to sing this song, after telling them several times that he needs to be eating his dinner, I start to get angry. I've told, encouraged, and now I threaten. Unless he eats his dinner, we won't be going to the bookstore. His face gets sad, his eyes get big, his chin trembles. And he picks up his fork. I have no desire to cause my son pain, but as his father, I have a responsibility to take care of him, even when it means correcting him so that he does what he ought to instead of what he wants to. I want my son to sing. I love to hear him sing. But I want more than that for him.

In much the same way, God does not enjoy causing pain, but neither will he let his people live for what they want to do (even "good" things) without doing what they ought. They ought to "learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow". These are where their focus should be. This is what God has called them to.

My son ate his dinner. He didn't eat everything off the plate and I didn't need him to. I needed him to eat the food to give him the nutrition so that he can continue to grow, learn, and experience life. God also has hopes for us, reasons why he wants us to live one way over another, His own way over our own. He wants to cleanse us, to make us holy. He wants us to be able to "eat the best from the land". But such things only come from obediently being his people. Expect the unexpected. God will judge us, not to destroy us, but for our redemption.

### **Prayer**

Giving God, help us to live as we ought, not as we want. Helps us to remember the fatherless and the widow this Advent, to love them as we love ourselves. Reveal yourself to us that we may understand better how to live for and love you in the places we find ourselves. May we live so faithfully that when we do sing, it brings a smile to your face. Amen.

### **Paula Cooper '10/'13**

Okay, God is piqued! In this passage of Isaiah, God sounds pretty annoyed with the leaders and people of Judah for their vain offerings and lack of obedience in the assemblies. God unequivocally says, "[T]hey have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them." But to me, it is liberating to know that even though God is piqued or weary at their (our) "fake" obedience and worship or liturgy styles, God ALWAYS provides opportunities—as often as necessary—for our behaviors and bad habits to be

transformed into obedient actions that are pleasing to God. In verses 16-18, God provides step-by-step instructions.

In addition, God invites us in to an argument (One scholar says, “God deigns to argue the case with us, that all may see the just, nay, loving principle of His dealings with men”); and God still offers an option, a choice, between redemption and destruction. What gracefulness—because no matter what decision we make, God will be God! I, myself, choose the opportunity of redemption! Will you? Jesus came so that we “may have life and have life more abundantly.”

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, during this Advent season we prepare ourselves for the Second Coming of Jesus, the Christ. May we open our minds and hearts to follow the instructions that lead to the opportunity of redemption so that we may be transformed into obedient, faithful, and truthful worshipers who present ourselves as “living sacrifices pleasing unto God” now and forever. Amen!

### **Luke 20:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders <sup>2</sup>and said to him, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?” <sup>3</sup>He answered them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: <sup>4</sup>Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” <sup>5</sup>They discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ <sup>6</sup>But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” <sup>7</sup>So they answered that they did not know where it came from. <sup>8</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

### **Tom Moore '07**

As we come to the Gospel reading from Luke we quickly discover that it occurs toward the end of Jesus’ ministry rather than the beginning. Why are we reading from those passages that lead up to Jesus’ crucifixion? What is the significance to hearing these passages at a time when we are called to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord and Savior?

In the midst of our reading, we’re reminded that Jesus is more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a performer of great and mighty deeds: Jesus is the Lord our God enfleshed, the one who rescues us from the power of darkness and transfers us into his kingdom. In our reading, Jesus proclaims the good news of salvation and does so with authority.

As we journey through Advent, it’s important to remember that authority and the power of the Lord our God made known to us in and through Jesus Christ our Savior. It is upon his authority that we cast our lives, for in Advent, we not only celebrate the fact that Jesus was born, we also celebrate the greater reality that he will come again to call all things to himself for the glory of his name.

### **Prayer**

O Lord Jesus Christ, Word and revelation of the Eternal Father, come, we pray Thee, take possession of our hearts, and reign where Thou hast right to reign. So fill our minds with the thought and our imaginations with the picture of Thy love, that there may be in us no room for any desire that is discordant with Thy holy will. Cleanse us, we pray Thee, from all that may make us deaf to Thy call

or slow to obey it, Who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, art one God, blessed forever (William Temple, 1881-1944).

### **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. <sup>2</sup>We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly <sup>3</sup>remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup>because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup>And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. <sup>9</sup>For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

### **Chris Brown '08**

The Apostle Paul begins his first letter to the Thessalonians with thanksgiving for the way they responded to the Gospel. After the Word of God came to them “in power and in the Holy Spirit,” the Thessalonians responded with such joy and faithfulness that they were an example to fellow believers throughout all of Greece. Particularly exemplary were their *repentance*—“turning from idols to serve a true and living God”—and their *hope*—“waiting for God’s Son from heaven . . . Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”

This Advent, *how is the Lord inviting you to live with exemplary repentance and hope?* From what idols does he invite you to turn, so that you may set your hope fully upon the Living God, and so bear witness to Christ?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us. Turn our hearts from idolatry. May our repentant and hopeful response to your Gospel bear true witness to the glory of your eternal kingdom. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

### **Psalms 122**

<sup>1</sup> I was glad when they said to me,  
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”  
<sup>2</sup> Our feet are standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem.  
<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem — built as a city  
that is bound firmly together.  
<sup>4</sup> To it the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the LORD,  
as was decreed for Israel,  
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

<sup>5</sup> *For there the thrones for judgment were set up,  
the thrones of the house of David.*

<sup>6</sup> *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
“May they prosper who love you.*

<sup>7</sup> *Peace be within your walls,  
and security within your towers.”*

<sup>8</sup> *For the sake of my relatives and friends  
I will say, “Peace be within you.”*

<sup>9</sup> *For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your good.*

#### **KJ Norris '14**

Images flood our minds of the sorrows of this world. Where is peace? Where is true shalom—peace that is not just absence from violence but holistic rest—encompassing internal and external peace with God and neighbor and earth and self?

Advent, the season of waiting for Christ to come, is a time to remember how very good it is to go to the house of the Lord. We go to the house of the Lord not to forget the troubles of the world, not to hide our eyes from the suffering, but to acknowledge them. For we remember that God does not stand far off, does not ignore suffering and sin, but God enters in. God took on human flesh, felt hunger and thirst and pain. Our Lord Jesus Christ defeated sin and death. So we await Christ's coming again when True Shalom will reign. We do not hide from sorrow, but we confess our sins, what we have done and what we have left undone, our individual sins and our collective sins. And we pray for peace while believing in the one who was and is and is to come, our Prince of Peace.

#### ***Prayer***

Almighty God, it is truly good to spend time in your house praising your name. We give you thanks that you do not stand far off, but that you enter into our suffering. Teach us to be advocates for peace in this restless world, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 3

### **Luke 20:9-18**

<sup>9</sup>He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. <sup>10</sup>When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>11</sup>Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. <sup>12</sup>And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. <sup>13</sup>Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' <sup>14</sup>But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' <sup>15</sup>So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? <sup>16</sup>He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Heaven forbid!" <sup>17</sup>But he looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? <sup>18</sup>Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

### **Randy Bush, Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council**

When confronted by one of Jesus' parables, a common tendency is to jump to explaining the metaphors contained in the text. But what happens if you let the unsettling reality described in the parable simply unfold as described? The parable of the vineyard appears in all three Synoptic gospels, usually after the cleansing of the temple scene. But before leaping to a deeper message about the Passion of Christ, take a moment to consider this parable as a lesson in faith and morality.

It opens with a description of a contract between an owner and tenants—a contract that is unjustly broken when the rightful compensation is refused to be paid. When a second attempt is made, this servant is insulted, thus breaking not only the business arrangement but also a fundamental trust between the workers and the owner. When a third servant is sent, this person is literally wounded and thrown out—a clear affront against common standards of human decency. Finally, when the owner's son is sent, the ungrateful vineyard leaseholders literally plot to kill and then act on their violent plans. Far beyond seeing a broken contract, broken trust, and broken social values, now we are told about broken humanity itself through the willingness to kill an innocent man for no just cause.

Bad thoughts and actions can escalate into terrible deeds of violence and pain. The slippery slope of unjust behavior is sadly a pathway human beings choose out of fear, out of pride, and out of sin. If we truly seek to live into God's righteousness and Christ's justice, we honor our contracts; we don't betray trusts; we respect common standards of human decency; we work to repair the world, not add to its brokenness and pain. Christ's "cornerstone" perspective truly is something upon which a beloved community (or a righteously operated vineyard) can be established to the glory of God.

### **Prayer**

Open our eyes, living God, to the ways we distance ourselves from you and denigrate your understanding of covenant, trust, and righteousness. Shine with your Advent light into our places of darkness so that owners and workers alike may dwell in mutual peace and lasting justice. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

### **1 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, <sup>2</sup>but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. <sup>3</sup>For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, <sup>4</sup>but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. <sup>5</sup>As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; <sup>6</sup>nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, <sup>7</sup>though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. <sup>8</sup>So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. <sup>9</sup>You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. <sup>10</sup>You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. <sup>11</sup>As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, <sup>12</sup>urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

### **Ellen Dawson '09**

As the apostle Paul was writing this letter to the Thessalonians, I bet he was feeling pretty surprised. He had sent Timothy to follow up on the visit they had made. Instead of returning with negative news, Timothy returned with an encouraging report, telling Paul that the people of Thessalonica had turned from idols to praise God! In fact, the Thessalonians, in spite of persecution and suffering, had become “a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” The report that Timothy gave Paul that day was probably the last thing Paul expected to hear!

In this time of Advent, we also can—and we should—be surprised by the power of the Gospel. Advent is a time when people’s minds, ears, and hearts are possibly a little more open. People are longing to hear more about the baby born in Bethlehem or how the star led the magi to the manger. Hearts are being filled with a commercialized holiday when they really want to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. As we hear the story of the nativity, read the Song of Mary, or sing “Silent Night,” we can believe that the story of the Gospel is penetrating people’s hearts in ways we cannot explain. But it is up to us to help people know, understand, and grasp on to the love of Jesus Christ.

Just as Paul dared to go and tell the Good News to the people of Thessalonica, we too are called to the “daring task” of evangelism. Advent gives us an awesome opening to tell friends, family, and co-workers about the love of God that came to us in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. So, let’s encourage one another in this task. Let’s also encourage one another to expect people to hear and know the true Reason for the Season! This holiday, I invite and encourage you to remember this passage as a challenge and calling to spread the Good News of the Gospel as Paul and the apostles did. Dare to tell friends and family about Jesus Christ. Remember you too are entrusted with the story of Jesus Christ. Delight to share the Gospel. Encourage one another to live in the light of this Advent season.

But most of all, I hope that all of us will approach the task with expectation and anticipation. Don’t be surprised if your efforts result in someone coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior!

### **Prayer**

Lord God, Thank you for the words of your servant Paul, who reminds us of our task to tell others of the Good News of Jesus Christ! This Advent season, help us to be daring, to be faithful, and most of

all to remember the power of the Holy Spirit at work in all of us! We pray to You, Lord, as we delight in the coming birth of the King, Your Son, Jesus! Amen.

### **Psalm 33**

- <sup>1</sup>*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.  
Praise befits the upright.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Praise the LORD with the lyre;  
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Sing to him a new song;  
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*
- <sup>4</sup>*For the word of the LORD is upright,  
and all his work is done in faithfulness.*
- <sup>5</sup>*He loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.*
- <sup>6</sup>*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.*
- <sup>7</sup>*He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
he put the deeps in storehouses.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.*
- <sup>9</sup>*For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood firm.*
- <sup>10</sup>*The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;  
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.*
- <sup>11</sup>*The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.*
- <sup>12</sup>*Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,  
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.*
- <sup>13</sup>*The LORD looks down from heaven;  
he sees all humankind.*
- <sup>14</sup>*From where he sits enthroned he watches  
all the inhabitants of the earth—*
- <sup>15</sup>*he who fashions the hearts of them all,  
and observes all their deeds.*
- <sup>16</sup>*A king is not saved by his great army;  
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.*
- <sup>17</sup>*The war horse is a vain hope for victory,  
and by its great might it cannot save.*
- <sup>18</sup>*Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in his steadfast love,*
- <sup>19</sup>*to deliver their soul from death,  
and to keep them alive in famine.*
- <sup>20</sup>*Our soul waits for the LORD;  
he is our help and shield.*
- <sup>21</sup>*Our heart is glad in him,  
because we trust in his holy name.*



<sup>22</sup>*Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,  
even as we hope in you.*

### **W. Terry Schoener '63**

I saw the green flash! No, silly, not a superhero. It is a rare natural occurrence when the light of the setting sun is bent through the atmosphere in such a way that for an instant only the green of the spectrum reaches your eye. Google it. Jules Verne mentions it saying that “if one were to peer into the light of the green flash they would gain the power to read the very souls of other people they meet.”

A life-long sailor, I have met mariners who tell me of seeing the green flash. I have waited a lifetime to see it—have sat at anchor half a thousand sunsets watching for it—to no avail. Then last February, while in Barbados with sailing friends, we gathered to view the Caribbean sunset. Someone said, “Maybe we will see the green flash,” and by God we did! Eyes wide, mouths grinning, we received what couldn’t be demanded.

As a pastor for 50 years I have experienced the waiting, “my soul waiting for the Lord,” waiting for infrequent flashes of God-sightings. Faith is mostly Advent and just enough epiphanies to hold it together. Congregants gather regularly hoping for Epiphany-dazzle, but each day the sun sets and no flash, only Advent-wait. Yet, while making nice at the church door, it’s not unusual for someone to say, “Pastor, I had the most amazing thing happen ....!” Never pooh-pooh these stories. I find they awaken thoughts of my own infrequent holy flashes of God sighting, and my eyes widen and my heart grins afresh. In the afterglow of the God-flash everything is seen with renewed lucidness. It was worth the wait. The waiting gave the flash value. See, “My soul waits” is a gift too, reminding that the flash is something that can’t be demanded, but is gifted.

“Our soul waits for the Lord, He is our help and shield ....”

#### ***Prayer***

Holy One, I wait—now with less impatience than before. With hands in my lap, open with palms turned upward, as if expecting to receive. Advent yourself to me in your own good time. I trust your timing; I trust your being; I trust your purposes; I trust your gifts of waiting and watching. So, I wait for you to cause your bright morning star to rise over us once more. Amen and amen.

### **Michelle Keane Domeisen '12/'16**

Yes, our lives are busy, and during this holiday season they seem to reel even more out of control. God’s power and dominion loom so much larger in our lives than any chore we have to do at Christmas. During this season of anticipation, we take time to stand in awe of God as we wait in joyful hope for the Incarnation. God’s about to do a new thing this season, and we must stand in attention.

The Psalmist points to God’s omnipotence while also saying that His word is perfect. He speaks and it happens. Knowing this, our souls wait for Him because we need Him, we trust Him, we can’t live without Him. Without His word and love, we have no hope. We immerse ourselves in the expectation of His inbreaking because the life-giving breath of God is about to be birthed in us. And that is the best gift we could receive this Christmas.

#### ***Prayer***

Precious Lord, it is with great humility that we turn our attention from the demands of this season to focus on you. We need you, we trust you, we hope in you. Let your steadfast love be upon us. It is

in your most holy name that we pray these words. You, the Alpha and the Omega, from ages unto ages.

**Psalm 94**

- <sup>1</sup>O LORD, you God of vengeance,  
you God of vengeance, shine forth!
- <sup>2</sup>Rise up, O judge of the earth;  
give to the proud what they deserve!
- <sup>3</sup>O LORD, how long shall the wicked,  
how long shall the wicked exult?
- <sup>4</sup>They pour out their arrogant words;  
all the evildoers boast.
- <sup>5</sup>They crush your people, O LORD,  
and afflict your heritage.
- <sup>6</sup>They kill the widow and the stranger,  
they murder the orphan,
- <sup>7</sup>and they say, "The LORD does not see;  
the God of Jacob does not perceive."
- <sup>8</sup>Understand, O dullest of the people;  
fools, when will you be wise?
- <sup>9</sup>He who planted the ear, does he not hear?  
He who formed the eye, does he not see?
- <sup>10</sup>He who disciplines the nations,  
he who teaches knowledge to humankind,  
does he not chastise?
- <sup>11</sup>The LORD knows our thoughts,  
that they are but an empty breath.
- <sup>12</sup>Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD,  
and whom you teach out of your law,
- <sup>13</sup>giving them respite from days of trouble,  
until a pit is dug for the wicked.
- <sup>14</sup>For the LORD will not forsake his people;  
he will not abandon his heritage;
- <sup>15</sup>for justice will return to the righteous,  
and all the upright in heart will follow it.
- <sup>16</sup>Who rises up for me against the wicked?  
Who stands up for me against evildoers?
- <sup>17</sup>If the LORD had not been my help,  
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.
- <sup>18</sup>When I thought, "My foot is slipping,"  
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.
- <sup>19</sup>When the cares of my heart are many,  
your consolations cheer my soul.
- <sup>20</sup>Can wicked rulers be allied with you,  
those who contrive mischief by statute?
- <sup>21</sup>They band together against the life of the righteous,  
and condemn the innocent to death.

<sup>22</sup>*But the LORD has become my stronghold,  
and my God the rock of my refuge.*

<sup>23</sup>*He will repay them for their iniquity  
and wipe them out for their wickedness;  
the LORD our God will wipe them out.*

**Jim Durlesser, adjunct faculty (retired)**

James Luther Mays begins his commentary on Psalm 94 by stating that the theme of the psalm can be found in the line from the hymn “This Is My Father’s World” which affirms that, “though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

There are, indeed, many times in life when “the wrong” seems so strong. There are times when we look around us and all we see are violence, injustice, suffering, loneliness, and hopelessness. It is at those times that we join the psalmist in praying that God will rid the world of all “the wrong” that we see around us and that God will bring renewal to our communities, transforming what seems to be a hopeless end into endless hope.

During this season of Advent, hold tightly to the affirmation that God is still in control—that “though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

**Prayer**

Almighty God, we affirm that, though the wrong seems oft so strong, you are the ruler yet. We join with the psalmist of old in praying that you will rid our world, our communities, and our homes of all of the wrong that we see around us, this Advent season and throughout the year. Amen.

**Psalm 146**

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the LORD!*

*Praise the LORD, O my soul!*

<sup>2</sup>*I will praise the LORD as long as I live;  
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.*

<sup>3</sup>*Do not put your trust in princes,  
in mortals, in whom there is no help.*

<sup>4</sup>*When their breath departs, they return to the earth;  
on that very day their plans perish.*

<sup>5</sup>*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the LORD their God,*

<sup>6</sup>*who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them;  
who keeps faith forever;*

<sup>7</sup>*who executes justice for the oppressed;  
who gives food to the hungry.  
The LORD sets the prisoners free;*

<sup>8</sup>*the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.  
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the LORD loves the righteous.*

<sup>9</sup>*The LORD watches over the strangers;*

*he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*  
<sup>10</sup>*The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise the LORD!*

**Leanna Fuller, faculty**

Although the psalms are read all throughout the church year, Psalm 146 takes on special significance when we read it during Advent. I am particularly struck by the language of verse 3: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” The princes and mortals of the world tell us that right now, we should be striving to accumulate more things and to show our love through material gifts. They tell us that Advent is nothing more than a set of shopping days.

But we know better: Advent is about preparing to welcome the birth of God’s son into our lives. And Psalm 146 reminds us of just what Christ’s coming calls us to do: to join God in the work of seeking justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, setting the prisoners free, and upholding the orphan and widow. These are the things to which we’re called to commit ourselves. This Advent season, as we consider what our priorities should be, let us look not to the princes and mortals in our midst, but to God and to the kingdom God is bringing into being all around us.

***Prayer***

Gracious God, during this season when the world overwhelms us with demands, remind us of what our true priorities should be. Help us to keep our eyes on you, and to focus our energies on bringing about justice and peace, which are signs of your kingdom here on earth. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 4

### **Isaiah 2:1-4**

<sup>1</sup>*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.*

<sup>2</sup>*In days to come*

*the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.*

<sup>3</sup> *Many peoples shall come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

<sup>4</sup>*He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.*

### **PJ Pfeuffer '12**

We normally revere seasons such as Advent and Lent with a view that we do not necessarily hold for the remainder of the Christian calendar. These moments may be considered “mountaintop moments” and why shouldn’t they be? They lead, after all, to the highest peaks in history. In a time in which we look backward in history, we must take time to look *forward*. The Lord becomes enthroned for all eternity—and not one thing will remain the same! “Beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks” reminds us that the Christ child is born into a world that was created and called good, but has been blemished by the actions and inactions of humanity. These—anger, violence, and hatred—are not the final words. Learning God’s ways—embracing the light of the Christ who bids us forgive, forgive, forgive—*these* are the final words.

### **Prayer**

Lord God, Allow us to cast off any turmoil—inner or outer—and to embrace the peace you offer us. Your way sounds too easy and a cynic may call it naïve, but break us of our stubbornness and our cycles and let us look forward—to love, to grace, to peace. Amen.

### **Ron Cole-Turner, faculty**

Deafened as we are by all the noise that clamors for our attention, sometimes we wish that One Voice would rise above the rest as the highest mountain towers over foothills, that everyone else would just be silent, and that the whole world would hear the message of peace echoing from the mouth of God. We know that is not likely to happen soon.

Disheartened as we are by violence so sickening that it makes us want to shut our eyes, sometimes we wish that One Judge would right our wrongs and bring such peace that weapons are refashioned as farm tools. Not much chance of that, either.

And yet we hope. Despite the evidence, the long wait, the rage, or the bombs. We hope because above it all we hear a voice, not a booming voice from the highest mountain, but in the cry of a child in the night. For thus it is that Peace is born.

**Prayer**

Come, Holy Savior, Jesus Christ, God with us. How we need you! If our night is dark, shine all the more with the radiance of your light. Amen.

**R. Drew Smith, faculty**

Isaiah's prophecy outlines a time "in the last days" that will be characterized by widespread conflict, but also by a systematic seeking of *higher ground*. According to the passage, many people in their seeking will look specifically to expressions of religious life for that higher ground. "God's temple," says Isaiah, will be "the highest of the mountains . . . exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."

An expanded appeal to faith realms that transcend socially-bounded identities and worldviews seems almost counter-intuitive within a contemporary context characterized by cultural captivity and political cooptation of religious life. Yet Isaiah's prophecy anticipates God's temple as a primary source and site of leadership within just such a world.

But what is also clear in the text is that this breakthrough of spiritual awakening will come to pass through God's doing, and not ours. Isaiah says that God will teach us the pathways to walk, and God's word and judgment will transform swords and spears into instruments of peace and livelihood.

Rising above our inherent social antagonisms and hostilities will require God-sized solutions. Isaiah assures us of God's leading—and that in seeking God's face we will find promised deliverance (cf. Ps 27:8; Matt 7:7).

**Prayer**

*(Derived from a hymn by Johnson Oatman, Jr.)*

Lord, by your grace,  
May we press on the upward way  
New heights to gain with every day,  
And praying as we onward bound,  
Lord plant our feet on higher ground.

**Luke 20:19-26**

<sup>19</sup>When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. <sup>20</sup>So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. <sup>21</sup>So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. <sup>22</sup>Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" <sup>23</sup>But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, <sup>24</sup>"Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." <sup>25</sup>He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>26</sup>And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

**Karen Baughman '06**

Expect the unexpected. What does that mean, exactly? It seems like a contradiction of terms. How can we expect, anticipate, prepare for something that we have no idea about, don't know it will happen, that's not even on our radar screen?

In the scripture for today, Jesus is preaching and teaching to a crowd of people. This story takes place toward the end of Jesus' ministry on earth. Like any good teacher or preacher, I imagine that he had certain things that he wanted to say to the gathered throng, an outline of sorts. After all, time was running short for him and he probably felt the pressure to tell his followers everything that they would need to know once he was gone. Imagine Jesus' surprise when, in the midst of his teaching, someone interrupted with a question---a question meant to trap Jesus into saying something incriminating. The unexpected broke in to change the course of the conversation.

When we think about it, the unexpected happens all the time. It can be an event that happens in the blink of an eye and is gone or one that consumes us for the foreseeable future; it can be something simple or something complex; it can be something good or bad. For example, we drive around a curve in the road and there in the sky in front of us is a rainbow in all its glory. We open our email and receive a message from an old friend. We hear of the sudden death of an acquaintance. We slip on a wet leaf and spend the next two years in recovery. We are surprised to learn of the anticipated birth of a child. The unexpected breaks in to our lives and changes us in ways we could never anticipate.

When Jesus was interrupted that day, he didn't exclaim how rude the person was or become befuddled when he lost his train of thought. He didn't bemoan the interruption. He simply "went with the flow" and answered the question. He expected the unexpected to happen and let it become a moment of grace for his followers.

Things break in to our lives unexpectedly every day. They may be large or small, joyous or tragic, funny or serious. But they will happen. We should expect them to happen. Those unexpected events can break into our lives and can become moments of grace for us, moments when God breaks into our lives in new ways to teach us new things or remind of us old ones. May we always live in expectation of the unexpected.

***Prayer***

Living Christ, As we prepare our hearts to celebrate your breaking into the world in an unexpected way, may we always live to expect the surprises of life and to let them bring grace to us in new ways. Amen.

**Lance Chapman '85**

"... and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25b). Their trap was slick, should we pay taxes to Caesar? Answering "yes", could turn the oppressed crowds against Jesus, saying "no" would be reported to Rome as promoting rebellion. Jesus asks for a coin. Isn't it interesting that those who posed the question had the coin in their pocket. "Whose picture's on it?" "Caesar." "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

The power of these words isn't in Jesus telling us to pay our taxes; it is in his call to give to God what is God's. You and I, made in God's image, belong exclusively to God. While we often want to "pigeon hole" our faith, there is not an area of life that is exempt from God's authority, no area outside his control.

As I write this the City of Pittsburgh is preparing to celebrate “Light Up Night.” The official kickoff of the “Holiday Season,” a commercial longing to use this time of the year to turn a profit, to grow and economy, to sell us the “stuff” we have been convinced we need.

Advent is different. It is about longing for the living Jesus to be alive in us. It is about giving to God, fully and completely, all that we are and all that we hope to be. It is about welcoming the Messiah into every nook and cranny of our being. It is about giving “to God what is God’s.”

### **Prayer**

Acknowledging O God that all I am is a gift from you, I ask that you help me to live today fully and completely for you. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 17**

<sup>1</sup>*Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;  
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.*

<sup>2</sup>*From you let my vindication come;  
let your eyes see the right.*

<sup>3</sup>*If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,  
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;  
my mouth does not transgress.*

<sup>4</sup>*As for what others do, by the word of your lips  
I have avoided the ways of the violent.*

<sup>5</sup>*My steps have held fast to your paths;  
my feet have not slipped.*

<sup>6</sup>*I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;  
incline your ear to me, hear my words.*

<sup>7</sup>*Wondrously show your steadfast love,  
O savior of those who seek refuge  
from their adversaries at your right hand.*

<sup>8</sup>*Guard me as the apple of the eye;  
hide me in the shadow of your wings,*

<sup>9</sup>*from the wicked who despoil me,  
my deadly enemies who surround me.*

<sup>10</sup>*They close their hearts to pity;  
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.*

<sup>11</sup>*They track me down; now they surround me;  
they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.*

<sup>12</sup>*They are like a lion eager to tear,  
like a young lion lurking in ambush.*

<sup>13</sup>*Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them!  
By your sword deliver my life from the wicked,*

<sup>14</sup>*from mortals—by your hand, O LORD—  
from mortals whose portion in life is in this world.  
May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them;  
may their children have more than enough;  
may they leave something over to their little ones.*



<sup>15</sup>*As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;  
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.*

### **William Boyd Grove '78**

Do you ever cry out to God to protect you, to save you? Are you crying now? There are many powers that threaten us, both without and within. I write this on Veteran's Day. How many young men and women, far from home at Christmas time, living in the midst of battle, afraid for their lives cry out in anguish" ....., "Hear a just cause O Lord, attend to my cry?" How many children facing bullying in school, terrified to leave home in the morning, cry out in the deepest places in their hearts "....hide me in the shelter of your wings." How many victims of family abuse hide in the closet in terror crying out, "hear a just cause of Lord, and attend to my cry." How many persons fighting addictions of all kinds, desperate for release from their bondage, whisper in the darkness of the night "guard me as the apple of your eye. Hide me in the shelter of your wings."

Jesus, in the prayer he gave to us, taught us to pray for our safety, our spiritual and moral safety. "Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. So, as the great Festival of Christmas draws near, we pray for safety and deliverance for all who are in any danger, physical moral, and spiritual.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray: Loving God, during these Advent Days, as we anticipate the coming of the Star Child, we pray for safety for ourselves and for those whom we love and for all your children everywhere. Keep us, we pray, as the apple of your eye, safe in the shadow of your wings. In Christ, Amen.

### **Psalm 147:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the Lord!*

*How good it is to sing praises to our God;  
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.*

<sup>2</sup>*The Lord builds up Jerusalem;  
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.*

<sup>3</sup>*He heals the brokenhearted,  
and binds up their wounds.*

<sup>4</sup>*He determines the number of the stars;  
he gives to all of them their names.*

<sup>5</sup>*Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;  
his understanding is beyond measure.*

<sup>6</sup>*The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;  
he casts the wicked to the ground.*

<sup>7</sup>*Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;  
make melody to our God on the lyre.*

<sup>8</sup>*He covers the heavens with clouds,  
prepares rain for the earth,  
makes grass grow on the hills.*

<sup>9</sup>*He gives to the animals their food,  
and to the young ravens when they cry.*

<sup>10</sup>*His delight is not in the strength of the horse,  
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;*

<sup>11</sup>*but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,  
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

**James Reese '49**

We have the knowledge that Jesus Christ has come. Therefore we can “Praise the Lord” and “sing to the Lord with Thanksgiving”.

Christians can celebrate and we can invite others to join with us. We can live our lives with comfort and assurance. Even those that were against Jesus recognized that he thought the way of God (Luke 20:21). We, as followers can live in this world with hope, confidence, bravery, certainty, and an assurance of triumph. God’s love will eventually overcome the hostility of the world. It is that incongruity that still astounds.

As George MacDonald wrote in a poem, “They were looking for a king to slay their foes and left them high; Thou com’est little baby thing, that made a woman cry.”

Let us live during this advent season with new enthusiasm, new happiness and an ever growing appreciation that Jesus Christ has come. “We also thank God constantly for this “ (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

***Prayer***

Almighty God, We thank you for the gift of Jesus, our Savior. Grant us grace to live with love and compassion and faithfulness every day. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 5

### **Isaiah 2:5-22**

<sup>5</sup>O house of Jacob,  
    *come, let us walk  
    in the light of the LORD!*

<sup>6</sup>For you have forsaken the ways of your people,  
    O house of Jacob.

*Indeed they are full of diviners from the east  
    and of soothsayers like the Philistines,  
    and they clasp hands with foreigners.*

<sup>7</sup>Their land is filled with silver and gold,  
    *and there is no end to their treasures;  
their land is filled with horses,  
    and there is no end to their chariots.*

<sup>8</sup>Their land is filled with idols;  
    *they bow down to the work of their hands,  
    to what their own fingers have made.*

<sup>9</sup>And so people are humbled,  
    *and everyone is brought low —  
    do not forgive them!*

<sup>10</sup>Enter into the rock,  
    *and hide in the dust  
from the terror of the LORD,  
    and from the glory of his majesty.*

<sup>11</sup>The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low,  
    *and the pride of everyone shall be humbled;  
and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.*

<sup>12</sup>For the LORD of hosts has a day  
    *against all that is proud and lofty,  
    against all that is lifted up and high;*

<sup>13</sup>against all the cedars of Lebanon,  
    *lofty and lifted up;  
    and against all the oaks of Bashan;*

<sup>14</sup>against all the high mountains,  
    *and against all the lofty hills;*

<sup>15</sup>against every high tower,  
    *and against every fortified wall;*

<sup>16</sup>against all the ships of Tarshish,  
    *and against all the beautiful craft.*

<sup>17</sup>The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,  
    *and the pride of everyone shall be brought low;  
    and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day.*

<sup>18</sup>The idols shall utterly pass away.

<sup>19</sup>Enter the caves of the rocks  
    *and the holes of the ground,  
from the terror of the LORD,  
    and from the glory of his majesty,*

*when he rises to terrify the earth.*  
<sup>20</sup>*On that day people will throw away*  
*to the moles and to the bats*  
*their idols of silver and their idols of gold,*  
*which they made for themselves to worship,*  
<sup>21</sup>*to enter the caverns of the rocks*  
*and the clefts in the crags,*  
*from the terror of the LORD,*  
*and from the glory of his majesty,*  
*when he rises to terrify the earth.*  
<sup>22</sup>*Turn away from mortals,*  
*who have only breath in their nostrils,*  
*for of what account are they?*

### **John Welch '02**

"You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years  
And get pats on the back as you pass  
But your final reward will be heartache and tears  
If you've cheated the man in the glass."

These words are an excerpt from Peter Wimbrew's 1934 poem "The Man in the Glass." It's by God's mercy that blind judgment is not dispensed, for God reveals the wrongs upon which judgment is warranted. Clearly, the ostentatious, self-indulging behavior of Judah provoked God, for this behavior evidenced the distortion of the image in which humankind was created. If we overlaid on our nation these allegations, leveled against Judah, what would be the result? We are also rich and prideful, yet the poor and marginalized are also victimized more than ever in our nation's history. When we look in the mirror, we should see the bloodstained image of Christ who came into a world suffering from the sin fruit of injustice. His image should challenge our self-made images.

### **Prayer**

Lord God, the well waters of poverty are rising around us while a select few sit on the perimeters with full water buckets in their hands, poised to add to the misery of others. Grant relief to the suffering and the hearts of those inflicting pain. Remind us all of why it was that You came. Amen.

### **1 Thessalonians 3:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>*Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens;* <sup>2</sup>*and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith,* <sup>3</sup>*so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for.* <sup>4</sup>*In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.* <sup>5</sup>*For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.* <sup>6</sup>*But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you.* <sup>7</sup>*For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith.* <sup>8</sup>*For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.* <sup>9</sup>*How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?* <sup>10</sup>*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and*

*restore whatever is lacking in your faith. <sup>11</sup>Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. <sup>12</sup>And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. <sup>13</sup>And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

**Lori Liller Arnold, staff**

Imagine a day when the sky is gray (easy to do in a Pittsburgh winter), it's chilly, and you are feeling downhearted about things happening in your life. Everyone has a day like this occasionally—a day when it seems that nothing is going well. Then . . . you get a text message, an email, or perhaps *even* a letter with wonderful news! Immediately your heart is lightened, your face is smiling, and you may do a little dance because of the happiness flooding your body. Paul describes such a feeling after Timothy's return with news that the church in Thessalonica was remaining faithful. Paul writes about being encouraged in the midst of his persecutions and, furthermore, states that he "now live(s)" because of the Thessalonians' steadfastness. This happiness is the same kind of joy we can carry in our hearts today because we already know the Good News and we don't need to wait for the arrival of a text, email, or letter. Thanks be to God!

**Prayer**

Dear Creator, thank you for the abundant joy we can feel in the midst of our daily trials. Help us to remember that standing firm in the Lord is a source of life now and forevermore. In your name we pray. Amen.

**Psalm 62**

- <sup>1</sup>*For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.*
- <sup>2</sup>*He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.*
- <sup>3</sup>*How long will you assail a person,  
will you batter your victim, all of you,  
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?*
- <sup>4</sup>*Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.  
They take pleasure in falsehood;  
they bless with their mouths,  
but inwardly they curse.*
- <sup>5</sup>*For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from him.*
- <sup>6</sup>*He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*
- <sup>7</sup>*On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Those of low estate are but a breath,  
those of high estate are a delusion;  
in the balances they go up;  
they are together lighter than a breath.*

<sup>10</sup>*Put no confidence in extortion,  
and set no vain hopes on robbery;  
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*  
<sup>11</sup>*Once God has spoken;  
twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,  
<sup>12</sup> and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.  
For you repay to all  
according to their work.*

### **Psalm 126**

<sup>1</sup>*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.*  
<sup>2</sup>*Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."*  
<sup>3</sup>*The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.*  
<sup>4</sup>*Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*  
<sup>5</sup>*May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.*  
<sup>6</sup>*Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.*

### **Karen Baughman '06**

We Christians are admonished to pray constantly. So we do. We almost besiege God with our constant prayers. It's kind of like the scene in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, where Jim Carrey's character is so overwhelmed by all the prayer requests coming in that he nearly goes crazy. We pray for ourselves. We pray for others. We pray for healing and strength and help and peace and food and shelter. We might even remember to give God thanks for the things that God has blessed us with. And it's all good. But sometimes we're so busy telling God what we want that we forget to listen for God's answer. Just as we wait for God's in-breaking into the world during this Advent season of waiting, let us begin to practice the silence of listening and wait for God's in-breaking into our hearts and lives, into our very souls.

### **Prayer**

Acknowledging O God that all I am is a gift from you, I ask that you help me to live today fully and completely for you. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 6

### **Luke 20:41-21:4**

<sup>41</sup>Then he said to them, "How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? <sup>42</sup>For David himself says in the book of Psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, <sup>43</sup>until I make your enemies your footstool." <sup>44</sup>David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" <sup>45</sup>In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, <sup>46</sup>"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. <sup>47</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." <sup>1</sup>He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; <sup>2</sup>he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup>He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; <sup>4</sup>for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

### **Sarah Ott '10**

In Jesus' time tithes were collected in a building beside the synagogue, much like a bank. Sounds of a trumpet were often used to alert crowds that a wealthy individual was preparing to place a gift in the treasury. These individuals wanted attention drawn to them as they gave. They gave to gain respect and honor for their contribution. Jesus looks over at the people flinging their offering into the baskets, intent on announcing to the crowd their generosity. Then a poor widow approaches the basket with an attitude of complete surrender and offers her two coins. How refreshing it must have been for Jesus to see someone so recklessly generous!

At Christmastime we often think a lot about money. We worry when the news reports a decrease in the stock market. We calculate the tax incentive we will receive if we make a monetary donation to a charitable organization by the end of the year. We worry about having enough money to buy just the right gifts and when we spend beyond our budget, we justify our action with the excuse that "The holidays are a time to give." Yet, when provided the opportunity to give back a portion of our wealth to God, we hesitate to offer our remaining money.

W. Graham Scroggie once said, "There are two ways in which a Christian may view his money--"How much of my money shall I use for God?" or "How much of God's money shall I use for myself?" In Luke we are reminded, by the example set by a poor widow, that we are called to give all we have, trusting that God will meet our needs." It wasn't hard for the wealthy individuals to drop a small portion of their wealth in the basket, but it was painfully hard for the widow to offer two copper coins. Yet, she does it without fanfare or attention.

William Barclay points out in his commentary of Luke that, "Giving does not begin to be real giving until it hurts." The ultimate gift from God, the birth of Jesus, shows the magnificent love God has for his people. God sent his son into the world with the full knowledge that he would be crucified on a cross for the sins of the world. Despite the hurt of knowing his son would die, he gave graciously and abundantly, so that we may have eternal life with him.

As people of God we are called to give abundantly of our money just as the poor widow did. In a season where financial uncertainty surrounds us we are challenged to give all that we have with reckless abandonment. As we abandon our worry over money and faithfully trust God, we can expect that the unexpected will be fulfilled through his son, Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer**

O Abundant God, you have blessed us beyond our imagination through the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. In this season of giving, we pray that you would ignite our hearts to surrender our financial anxiety and embrace a life of reckless generosity. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we ask that you would mold us into people who act more like the faithful widow and less like the wealthy individuals who seek fame and recognition. We seek to return all that is yours, trusting that in our reckless abandonment, you will meet our every need. Amen.

### **1 Thessalonians 4:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. <sup>2</sup>For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; <sup>4</sup>that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup>not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup>that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup>For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. <sup>8</sup>Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you. <sup>9</sup>Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; <sup>10</sup>and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, <sup>11</sup>to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, <sup>12</sup>so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

### **Richard Wingfield '02/'13**

Encouraging words can go a long way. Well-chosen words can inspire even the most challenging person to do even more to accomplish any goal. For sure, there were times when you needed that kind word to motivate you to do more than what you're doing. You knew your assignment, yet you wondered whether it was worth all the trouble. You were facing so many obstacles and so much opposition. Frustration had set in and you were ready to resign from everything. But someone came along side you at the right moment, placed a hand on your shoulder, and encouraged you to 'keep on keepin' on' despite the difficulties.

Today's passage challenges us to continue to do more and more in pleasing God. Paul encourages these young believers in Thessalonica, "You've come a long way. Great job! You're doing well. But there is always room for improvement. I need you to abound more and more in those areas."

Life in Christ is never static. It's a continual process of growth. There are areas where you have flourished—great job! But there are also areas, personally and communally, where you can improve. Be careful never to allow complacency in your walk with Christ, for that's your biggest enemy. Spiritual complacency denies a believer's verbal confession. Though you've made progress, there are still areas where your life can be strengthened.

Everyone lives to please someone, whether your spouse, your parents, your children, your boss, even your friends. To do that, you work harder. You do the extra things, the little things, to please that someone.



Our task is ultimately to please God. You're doing good things. You've made great strides. Keep doing more and more. Stay the course. "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).

### **Prayer**

Dear God, help us to please you in every aspect of our lives. Help us to speak an encouraging word to someone, even as we recognize our own need of that same word at times. Help us never to become so complacent or inwardly focused that we lose sight of our ultimate purpose, to please you.

### **Psalm 102**

- <sup>1</sup>Hear my prayer, O LORD;  
let my cry come to you.
- <sup>2</sup>Do not hide your face from me  
in the day of my distress.  
Incline your ear to me;  
answer me speedily in the day when I call.
- <sup>3</sup>For my days pass away like smoke,  
and my bones burn like a furnace.
- <sup>4</sup>My heart is stricken and withered like grass;  
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
- <sup>5</sup>Because of my loud groaning  
my bones cling to my skin.
- <sup>6</sup>I am like an owl of the wilderness,  
like a little owl of the waste places.
- <sup>7</sup>I lie awake;  
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.
- <sup>8</sup>All day long my enemies taunt me;  
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
- <sup>9</sup>For I eat ashes like bread,  
and mingle tears with my drink,
- <sup>10</sup>because of your indignation and anger;  
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
- <sup>11</sup>My days are like an evening shadow;  
I wither away like grass.
- <sup>12</sup>But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;  
your name endures to all generations.
- <sup>13</sup>You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,  
for it is time to favor it;  
the appointed time has come.
- <sup>14</sup>For your servants hold its stones dear,  
and have pity on its dust.
- <sup>15</sup>The nations will fear the name of the LORD,  
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
- <sup>16</sup>For the LORD will build up Zion;  
he will appear in his glory.
- <sup>17</sup>He will regard the prayer of the destitute,

*and will not despise their prayer.*  
<sup>18</sup>*Let this be recorded for a generation to come,*  
*so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:*  
<sup>19</sup>*that he looked down from his holy height,*  
*from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,*  
<sup>20</sup>*to hear the groans of the prisoners,*  
*to set free those who were doomed to die;*  
<sup>21</sup>*so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,*  
*and his praise in Jerusalem,*  
<sup>22</sup>*when peoples gather together,*  
*and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.*  
<sup>23</sup>*He has broken my strength in midcourse;*  
*he has shortened my days.*  
<sup>24</sup>*“O my God,” I say, “do not take me away*  
*at the mid-point of my life,*  
*you whose years endure*  
*throughout all generations.”*  
<sup>25</sup>*Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,*  
*and the heavens are the work of your hands.*  
<sup>26</sup>*They will perish, but you endure;*  
*they will all wear out like a garment.*  
*You change them like clothing, and they pass away;*  
<sup>27</sup>*but you are the same, and your years have no end.*  
<sup>28</sup>*The children of your servants shall live secure;*  
*their offspring shall be established in your presence.*

### **Jerome Creach, faculty**

Advent is a time to anticipate the coming of God’s kingdom that we have seen already in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is a time for reflection, for turning to God in prayer, to confess our sins and to petition God for the deepest needs of our hearts.

Given this description of Advent, Psalm 102 is a marvelous passage for the season. The heading of the psalm identifies the kind of person who might pray its words: “a prayer for one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the LORD.” Perhaps being “afflicted” is the main requirement for celebrating Advent. “Afflicted” translates the Hebrew term *ani*, which may also be rendered “poor” or “needy.” The Psalms suggest this description is a key self-identification of anyone who seeks God’s salvation (Psalm 40:17). But being “poor” or “needy” does not suggest we should be self-effacing or that we should deny the abilities God has given us. Rather, the expression of need is the first and necessary step in opening ourselves to God’s grace. Psalm 102 has been identified traditionally as a penitential psalm. Read this way, the psalm is particularly appropriate: our greatest sign of need, that which causes our spirits to wither (v. 4), is our sinful turning away from the God who loves us.

### **Prayer**

O God, You “are enthroned forever, and your name endures to all generations.” But our days are “like an evening shadow.” Therefore, we lay before you our every weakness— the brevity of our lives are but signs of our failure to live as your people. We trust ourselves to you, O God, and we pray that by your grace we might live securely in your presence, now and forevermore. Amen.

**Psalm 130**

<sup>1</sup>*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

<sup>2</sup>*Lord, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!*

<sup>3</sup>*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?*

<sup>4</sup>*But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.*

<sup>5</sup>*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;*

<sup>6</sup>*my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

<sup>7</sup>*O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.*

<sup>8</sup>*It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.*

**Rob Marrow '97**

Eugene Peterson translates verse one of Psalm 130 this way: “Help God, the bottom has fallen out of my life! Master, hear my cry for help!” Unfortunately, hopelessness is an all too common human cry. Have you ever gone through a period in your life when you felt that the words that you intended for God’s ear were pouring out of your mouth, yet you thought that God was not listening? Yes, you say? Well, you are not alone. We all have times like this.

Fortunately, Psalm 130 speaks to us during these difficult times. The Psalmist provides us with helpful words while we wait, words that help us to find hope!

“O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord, there is steadfast love.” (Psalm 130:7) As we light the candle of “Hope” during the first week of advent, find your hope in the Lord!

**Prayer**

Dear God, during this season of Advent, teach us where to find our hope. Thank you for the hope that is found in Jesus!

## Year 1, Day 7

### **Isaiah 4:2-6**

<sup>2</sup>On that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. <sup>3</sup>Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, <sup>4</sup>once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. <sup>5</sup>Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. <sup>6</sup>It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

### **Derek Davenport '05/'17**

Embedded within this passage we find cause for both hope and for fear. Isaiah speaks of burning and cleansing, but also of refuge and shelter. So often, we have difficulty embracing both of these aspects of our faith. We tend to focus either on God as judge or God as protector, yet here Isaiah unites both actions. It is only by “washing” Zion that God can make it safe.

As we celebrate Advent, the coming of Christ can be equally complex. Christ makes intense demands of his followers, yet also gives his life for them. He is both infant and lord, both God and human.

In the coming weeks, let us pay attention to the ways we portray the birth of Jesus and try to hold on to the complexity of a God who both cleanses and protects.

### **Prayer**

Lord, we thank you for the wonder of this season. We thank you that you are our refuge and strength, and we ask you to help us follow you even when it is difficult. Amen.

### **Luke 21:5-19**

<sup>5</sup>When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup>“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” <sup>7</sup>They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” <sup>8</sup>And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them. <sup>9</sup>“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup>there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. <sup>12</sup>“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. <sup>13</sup>This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup>So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; <sup>15</sup>for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup>You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup>You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>By your endurance you will gain your souls.

### **Carolyn Cranston '99**

Jesus startled the disciples when he foretold the destruction of the Temple. Was it possible? What were the signs? Jesus told them not to be deceived or follow false teachers. For his disciples, life would be difficult. They might be persecuted, perhaps put to death, in Jesus' name. But, all that truly mattered was their relationship with Christ. He said, "Stand firm, and you will win life."

The same holds true for us. We look for signs while trying to control our own destiny. Let's submit our lives to the outstretched arms of God. Don't look for signs, look for Jesus. We need to spend our time as faithful witnesses, building a relationship with Christ.

With our lives totally grounded in Jesus, we can celebrate God's gift of each day, knowing that one day we will stand in the presence of our Lord and Savior. At the coming of the Second Advent, there will be no need for fear and uncertainty. It will be a time of encouragement and hope—a hope that cannot be destroyed! By the grace of God, we will receive our hope through the life, love, and blood of Jesus the Christ. Amen!

#### ***Prayer***

Holy and Loving God, Thank you for blessing us with the gift of your Son, Jesus the Christ, the only sign we will ever need. Lord, may we be ever faithful in our witness and service to you. Amen.

#### **Kendra Buckwalter Smith '12/'13**

If we read this passage as a prediction of final judgment, we'd be hard pressed *not* to think that we're currently facing the end times. Fighting between and within nations, refugee crises, ecological crises, natural disasters that strip people of their homes and loved ones, stories of abuse and of corrupt leadership, and ongoing persecution, oppression, and injustice all prompt panic and fear. And these words of warning from Luke's Gospel might tempt us to interpret all these realities accordingly. Yet Jesus says, "do not be terrified." Jesus invites us to trust that he remains present in our lives and faithful to his promises, even when we face the most challenging of circumstances.

Rather than offering a prediction of future judgment, Jesus is describing the truth of the world in the present. It is a lamentable truth in that the world is not yet as God desires it to be. But it is also a hopeful and comforting truth in that God's desires for the world are coming to be through Jesus' present work. And we are invited to participate in this work as, in the midst of all the brokenness, Jesus gives us "words and a wisdom that none of [our] opponents will be able to withstand or contradict" (verse 15).

And so it is that we discover that Jesus' words here are not words of warning, but words of assurance. In the midst of a broken, divided, quarreling, uncertain world, Christ is at work—gathering, baptizing, communing, healing—and thereby making visible God's inbreaking Kingdom. It is a message of comfort and hope in Jesus' abiding presence and active reign even in the midst of the inevitable calamities and injustices we face.

In this time of Advent expectation, we are again reminded that we live betwixt and between. We cannot deny that we experience a world of destruction and pain. Yet God has chosen to bend down into that experience; therefore, let us fix our gaze on our coming Lord's present work, and let us trust that he is giving us the words and a wisdom to testify to that work in a hurting world that God so loves.

#### ***Prayer***

Gracious God, there is so much in this world that causes us to cry out in fear and sorrow. Help us to trust in your promise to wipe away every tear in the time when there will be no more death or

mourning or crying or pain. In the meantime, train our eyes to see Christ's loving and transforming presence in our midst. And give us boldness to testify to that presence. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

<sup>13</sup>But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. <sup>15</sup>For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup>Therefore encourage one another with these words.

### **Steve Tuell, faculty**

"Comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18)? Apocalyptic passages like these seem anything but comforting. Indeed, end-time visions are often used like bogeymen, to frighten people into the kingdom: "These are the last days! The Rapture could happen at any moment! Are you ready?"

The apocalyptic perspective on the future is not optimistic, but hard-headedly realistic, grounded in the experience of human cruelty (see Luke 21:5-19). Yet, ultimately, the future is not in the hands of emperors, or generals, or oligarchs. The future is God's, and God will bring in God's reign. Therefore Paul is certain that the "dead in Christ" will not be forgotten. They, together with those "who are alive," will be caught up in a joyful throng, meeting Christ in the air to welcome him as he returns to reign. This Advent, may we like Paul claim this promise, and "comfort one another with these words."

### **Prayer**

O Lord of past, present, and future, in your love no one is forgotten, and nothing beautiful is lost. May we then confidently entrust into your hands our own lives, and the lives of those whom we love. Grant us the assurance that those who have gone before us, and our children and grandchildren after us, are alike held securely in your love. Challenge us to live in the present with the confident assurance that your kingdom is coming—and is, indeed, already in our midst. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

### **Psalms 72**

- <sup>1</sup>Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
<sup>2</sup>May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
<sup>3</sup>May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
<sup>4</sup>May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.  
<sup>5</sup>May he live while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

<sup>6</sup>*May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.*

<sup>7</sup>*In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.*

<sup>8</sup>*May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

<sup>9</sup>*May his foes bow down before him,  
and his enemies lick the dust.*

<sup>10</sup>*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles  
render him tribute,  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts.*

<sup>11</sup>*May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations give him service.*

<sup>12</sup>*For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.*

<sup>13</sup>*He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.*

<sup>14</sup>*From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
and precious is their blood in his sight.*

<sup>15</sup>*Long may he live!  
May gold of Sheba be given to him.  
May prayer be made for him continually,  
and blessings invoked for him all day long.*

<sup>16</sup>*May there be abundance of grain in the land;  
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;  
may its fruit be like Lebanon;  
and may people blossom in the cities  
like the grass of the field.*

<sup>17</sup>*May his name endure forever,  
his fame continue as long as the sun.  
May all nations be blessed in him;  
may they pronounce him happy.*

<sup>18</sup>*Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
who alone does wondrous things.*

<sup>19</sup>*Blessed be his glorious name forever;  
may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.*

<sup>20</sup>*The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.*

### **Alina Kanaski '16**

This king is perfect: righteous, just, long-lived, well-loved, and with a huge kingdom. He provides peace to his kingdom, protection and justice for his people, and prosperity for all. He thinks of the poor and the oppressed and offers them his help. He is such an incredible king that the psalmist prays that he will live “as long as the moon, throughout all generations.”

This psalm was probably written to celebrate the coronation of Israel’s kings and sung at each coronation. No king could live up to its impossibly high standards, though, at least until Jesus was born. Now, thanks to Him, we can look forward to the fulfillment of these words: of a future kingdom full of

justice, righteousness, and prosperity for all. We can look forward to that beautiful kingdom through Jesus, the true perfect king!

Praise be to God!

**Prayer**

Thank You, God, for Your Son, the perfect king. Help us to prepare for His coming this Christmas and His final coming. Amen.

**Psalm 90**

- <sup>1</sup>*Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*
- <sup>3</sup>*You turn us back to dust,  
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."*
- <sup>4</sup>*For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.*
- <sup>5</sup>*You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;*
- <sup>6</sup>*in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.*
- <sup>7</sup>*For we are consumed by your anger;  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.*
- <sup>8</sup>*You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.*
- <sup>9</sup>*For all our days pass away under your wrath;  
our years come to an end like a sigh.*
- <sup>10</sup>*The days of our life are seventy years,  
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;  
even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*
- <sup>11</sup>*Who considers the power of your anger?  
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.*
- <sup>12</sup>*So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.*
- <sup>13</sup>*Turn, O LORD! How long?  
Have compassion on your servants!*
- <sup>14</sup>*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*
- <sup>15</sup>*Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,  
and as many years as we have seen evil.*
- <sup>16</sup>*Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.*
- <sup>17</sup>*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,*



*and prosper for us the work of our hands—  
O prosper the work of our hands!*

### **Ben Graves '09**

Our Scripture passages for today deal with hope. The Psalmist hopes in the Lord, that He will turn from His anger and once again be a shelter for His people. Isaiah hopes in the day of the Lord when He will cleanse Zion from its stains of blood and will once again make Jerusalem a refuge. Paul hopes in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that even those who have died have life in Him and a future in the Kingdom. Jesus tells his disciples to have hope when the world is crashing around them for it is at that time that they will proclaim the gospel with power.

Notice that these are not examples of the hope that the world offers. The world hopes for a bright future, for a better tomorrow, brought about by human hands and human goodness. The world puts its hope in education, in the economy, in charismatic leaders. The people in Luke's gospel put their hope in the Temple. The Israelites had put their hope in the strength and wisdom of their own armies and kings. And the early church, using the wisdom of the world, could not find its hope when confronted with the continuing reality of death.

The Christian, however, knows that tomorrow is filled with the same worries, pains, and sorrows that fill today because sin and death will still rule tomorrow. The Christian knows that human leaders, institutions, and man-made things are tainted with sin. Even though these things are good and necessary, we do not put our hope in them, for they have no power to save us. The Temple would fall, Israel would go into exile, and Christians will be persecuted by this generation. Nations will fall, economies will fail, and those on whom we depend will not live up to our expectations; because these things are not Jesus.

No, as Christians, we put our hope in Jesus Christ. He will be our guide through trials and hardships. He is our hope of life to fullest. It is he who will cleanse Mt. Zion. It is he who intercedes for us in our day of trouble. He is our hope and refuge today, tomorrow, and for all time. In this advent season, we remember the waiting and the hoping of ages past. And we too wait and hope for the coming of our Lord. And until that day, we live and work in this world, proclaiming the hope that we have, the real hope, for our hope is founded on the promises of God. And though we too will fail, we will also be lifted up in Christ.

### ***Prayer***

O Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You have sent your Son for us, that we may have hope. You have sent your Spirit that we may walk through this world with your guidance. You have promised us eternal life in Christ. And for all these things, we thank you. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 8

### **Isaiah 5:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
<sup>2</sup>He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.  
<sup>3</sup>And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and people of Judah,  
judge between me  
and my vineyard.  
<sup>4</sup>What more was there to do for my vineyard  
that I have not done in it?  
When I expected it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?  
<sup>5</sup>And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it shall be trampled down.  
<sup>6</sup>I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds  
that they rain no rain upon it.  
<sup>7</sup>For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts  
is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice,  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry!

### **Ron Cole-Turner, faculty**

God's love for us is like the love of one who plants a vineyard on a gentle hillside, clears the stones, protects it with a fence, builds a watchtower and a winepress, all simple pictures of what God has done and is doing even now reclaim and to safeguard our lives.

But when the one who loves the vineyard, who cleared it and planted it and protected it patiently year after year comes in due time to harvest the choice grapes, only wild grapes are growing. Again, a simple

picture of how so often our lives do not go as God wills or even as we promise. The bitter taste of wild grapes, too bitter to eat, too bitter for wine. God looks for justice and finds bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry.

Now at this point in the story, we want God to try longer, just be patient, maybe let the vines have another year to mature. If the California vintner will sell no wine before its time, surely God should not be in such a rush.

The truth is that as much as God is patient, even more God is righteous. God will not wait forever. God will not go on forever tolerating sin or stubbornness or the wild grapes of our willfulness. As much as God is gracious, even more God is just.

Tucked into the text is a simple lament on God's part: "What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done it?" It is as if God is speaking directly to you and me: What more can I do for you? How long must I wait for you?

Of course we must read scripture forward and backward. Read forward, this text doesn't look good for us. We have worn out God's patience, and the breaking down of our institutions, our economy, our health, and our lives is just what we deserve.

Read backwards, however, we see that, yes, there is one more thing God can and does do for the vineyard. From the very heart of God comes one who is God in our midst, born into a world of injustice, in a season of bloodshed, a time filled with the cries of the desolate, one whose life is broken to mend the brokenness of our lives and whose very blood is shed to become the wine that redeems the vineyard.

### **Prayer**

We praise you, O God, that you do not abandon us to our own brokenness but that you take our plight upon yourself through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

### **Luke 7:28-35**

<sup>28</sup>*I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.* <sup>29</sup>*(And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. <sup>30</sup>But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.) <sup>31</sup>To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? <sup>32</sup>They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.'* <sup>33</sup>*For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; <sup>34</sup>the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'* <sup>35</sup>*Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."*

### **Sarah Heppenstall '92**

"We played the flute for you and you did not dance" (Luke 7:32b). Have you danced today? In our stress over choreography and costumes, we forget that we have been invited to dance. Like everything else that is holy, Advent is not about what we do, but about how we let God prepare our hearts to receive God's amazing blessings. Praise the Lord!

“But in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth...” (2 Peter 3:13). Let us stop trying so hard to “make” Christmas meaningful. God already did that! We are to wait in joy and in hope. Put a Psalm in your heart and Praise the Lord!

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, teach me to dance. Fill my lips with Psalms of praise! Let my life overflow with signs of my gratitude to You! Let me join with everything that breathes to Praise the Lord! Amen.

### **2 Peter 3:11-18**

<sup>11</sup>Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup>waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup>But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. <sup>14</sup>Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; <sup>15</sup>and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, <sup>16</sup>speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. <sup>17</sup>You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. <sup>18</sup>But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

### **Karen Rohrer, staff**

*“ . . . we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. . . .”*

When I think about the Christmas story, the story where God made God’s home in our midst, where for a moment righteousness was at home in this troubled world, and new heavens and a new earth peeked in at us, for just 33 years, I am filled with longing. What would it be like if this world were not the kind of place that sent righteousness to a cross? Can we imagine a world where parents in war-torn countries weren’t clutching their children and running for their lives, only to find borders closed in their faces? Can we imagine a world without the Herods who murder children as pawns in their grabbing for power? A world where the innocent rest safely and the righteous are safe in homes, not under threat of tyranny, violence, or cruelty? To whatever degree we can imagine that, how can we ever be patient with the patience of our Lord? The more I learn about trauma, the more it seems to me that human suffering can be so deep and destructive that it cannot be quantified—yet we are to accept the patience of a God that tarries to come to the aid of children. How?

I can’t pretend to answer that question—but I am struck by the command to “regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.” What is being saved by this patience in a world that seems bent on growing destruction? That command is a hard word as we wait for Christmas, as we wait starving for the in-breaking of the kind of Messiah who will rule over powers and principalities, overthrow the ugliness of unjust governing powers, and rule the nations with an iron fist. But, friends, *that* Messiah isn’t coming. Whatever it does or doesn’t mean, if the text is to be trusted our Messiah doesn’t save with an iron fist—our Messiah saves with patience. We do not get to choose our salvation. No doubt we, like the disciples and the crowds of Palm Sunday, would choose differently. Instead, as we wait for

righteousness to make its home in our midst, we must be patient. We must be patient and love patience, because our slow and patient God is coming to us again as a baby, saving us again, over the course of 33 years and the course of human history, with the slow vulnerability of the very children we would defend. We may rail against the pace, but salvation is the slow patient work of God over our whole lives. This Christmas, may we find a way to be content to watch again over the baby Jesus—and over all the children of the human family—and to wait with hope, knowing that the salvation of our God always comes and stays with those who wait.

### **Prayer**

Patient God, in the midst of the world's grief and pain, give us the strength to stand with the vulnerable as we await the slow work of all our salvation together. In our watching and waiting, teach us to trust your ways, so that we might not lose heart. And, loving God, please don't delay coming again to us. We and those we love are frightened, broken, and hard pressed on every side. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

### **Psalm 24**

- <sup>1</sup>*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;*
- <sup>2</sup>*for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?*
- <sup>4</sup>*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.*
- <sup>5</sup>*They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*
- <sup>6</sup>*Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*
- <sup>7</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*
- <sup>10</sup>*Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.*

### **Erin Davenport '05**

"Comfort one another with these words" (1 Thes 4:18)? Apocalyptic passages like these seem anything but comforting. Indeed, end-time visions are often used like bogeymen, to frighten people into the kingdom: "These are the last days! The Rapture could happen at any moment! Are *you* ready?"

The apocalyptic perspective on the future is not optimistic, but hard-headedly realistic, grounded in the experience of human cruelty (see Luke 21:5-19). Yet, ultimately, the future is not in the hands of emperors, or generals, or oligarchs. The future is God's, and God will bring in God's reign. Therefore Paul is certain that the "dead in Christ" will not be forgotten. They, together with those "who are alive," will be caught up in a joyful throng, meeting Christ in the air to welcome him as he returns to reign. This Advent, may we like Paul claim this promise, and "comfort one another with these words."

### **Prayer**

O Lord of past, present, and future, in your love no one is forgotten, and nothing beautiful is lost. May we then confidently entrust into your hands our own lives, and the lives of those whom we love. Grant us the assurance that those who have gone before us, and our children and grandchildren after us, are alike held securely in your love. Challenge us to live in the present with the confident assurance that your kingdom is coming—and is, indeed, already in our midst. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

### **Psalm 150**

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the Lord!*

*Praise God in his sanctuary;  
praise him in his mighty firmament!*

<sup>2</sup>*Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!*

<sup>3</sup>*Praise him with trumpet sound;  
praise him with lute and harp!*

<sup>4</sup>*Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!*

<sup>5</sup>*Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*

<sup>6</sup>*Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!*

### **Candace Veon-Nyiri '96**

LET EVERYTHING WITH BREATH PRAISE THE LORD!

Psalm 150 reminds me of an invitation to a party! It gives us the who, what, where, why, and how of throwing a celebration in God's honor. All that have life and breath are invited to fulfill their very purpose for existence by praising the Creator, who gives us breath.

In a few days a celebration will be taking place and all people of this world are included to join in the crescendo of praise for our good and great and glorious God! For many of us, this most joyful celebration of God gets buried under the burdens and stress of everyday living. We forget our call to praise and worship! Let us refocus and remember that God has done great things for us. Let us celebrate with abandonment and enthusiasm the amazing fact that God came to earth as a child, the long awaited Messiah...and that child lived and breathed and grew to be the man who died and rose again so that we might have the gift of eternal life. It is time for a party.

LET EVERYTHING WITH BREATH PRAISE THE LORD!

***Prayer***

Gracious God, as we approach Christmas, may we join in the celebration like the heavenly hosts and angels, shepherds, wise men, and people of all times and places praising and saying: “Glory to God in the Highest”! May we be open and attuned to the wonder of celebrating the One who Christmas is all about. With grateful hearts we thank you, God!

**Leanna Fuller, faculty**

Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. It is a time of watching and waiting as we prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts and lives anew. This perspective sounds very different from what we see each December in our culture, which encourages us to set our minds on what we *want* or hope to receive as gifts. Psalm 150 reminds us that during this Advent season (and all year round) we are called first to praise God for God’s mighty deeds and according to God’s surpassing greatness. Without God’s grace and love, we would not exist. This realization should move us to praise God in every way we can think of, rather than focusing on what we want God to give us or do for us. This Advent, let’s turn away from the constant “I want” messages of our consumer culture and, instead, lift our praises to God in a spirit of gratitude and awe. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

***Prayer***

Gracious God, we praise you for the gift of life, and for your grace and love. As we journey through this season of Advent, help us shift our focus from the many things that we want to the opportunities we have to praise you in our lives and in our communities. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 9

### **Isaiah 5:8-17**

<sup>8</sup>*Ah, you who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is room for no one but you,  
and you are left to live alone  
in the midst of the land!*

<sup>9</sup>*The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:  
Surely many houses shall be desolate,  
large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.*

<sup>10</sup>*For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,  
and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ah, you who rise early in the morning  
in pursuit of strong drink,  
who linger in the evening  
to be inflamed by wine,*

<sup>12</sup>*whose feasts consist of lyre and harp,  
tambourine and flute and wine,  
but who do not regard the deeds of the LORD,  
or see the work of his hands!*

<sup>13</sup>*Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge;  
their nobles are dying of hunger,  
and their multitude is parched with thirst.*

<sup>14</sup>*Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite  
and opened its mouth beyond measure;  
the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down,  
her throng and all who exult in her.*

<sup>15</sup>*People are bowed down, everyone is brought low,  
and the eyes of the haughty are humbled.*

<sup>16</sup>*But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice,  
and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.*

<sup>17</sup>*Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture,  
fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins.*

### **Derek Davenport '05/'17**

This passage is not particularly Christmas-y. At least, not at first glance.

So often, when we get ready for Christmas, we want tender moments and sweet babies. We want Jesus to be happy, gentle, and peaceful. We want *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger* along with hot chocolate and warm blankets.

Those aspects of Christmas are appropriate, but they're just one side of our celebrations. We sometimes forget how radical and revolutionary Christmas really is. This passage from Isaiah reminds us of how shocking God can be. The haughty are humbled and lambs feed among ruins. As strange as these images are, their very strangeness makes them appropriate for Christmas—for the celebration of the infinite born an infant, reality redeemed through resurrection.



As you prepare for Christmas this year, as you hear your favorite songs and see those nativity sets, remember the words of Isaiah. Remember how revolutionary Christmas truly is.

### **Prayer**

God of reversal and resurrection, we thank you for this season. We thank you for the ways you surprise us. We ask you to open our eyes to your work around us where we least expect it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

*<sup>1</sup>Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup>For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup>When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! <sup>4</sup>But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; <sup>5</sup>for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. <sup>6</sup>So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; <sup>7</sup>for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup>But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. <sup>9</sup>For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup>who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. <sup>11</sup>Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

### **James Estes '10**

Do you lock your doors at night? That's the habit at my house. Of course, if someone really wanted in they would find a way; the night's dark silence would be disrupted with breaking glass. It's troubling to imagine, yet it's also how we are to anticipate the coming of the day of the Lord: like a thief in the night. In fact the prophets remind us the Day of the Lord is not light at all, but rather great darkness; the Day of the Lord is night itself. The great and terrible Day of the Lord will come as a thief, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and there is no escape.

What shall we do then? Well, we have a contingency plan for this at my house, and I'll bet you do too. When out of town we employ a small army of dial-timers to switch lights on and off at all hours of the night, and not just lights to be seen, but also radios and televisions to be heard. Why? Because we hope would-be thieves will move on to one of those "not a creature was stirring" homes. If we are not awake, we at least don't want the thief to know it.

But, of course, Jesus is not a thief coming to plunder. The Day of the Lord is His day! Jesus is the rightful King returning to claim His day, coming suddenly with judgment for all days. Let's not think that Jesus will not come back simply because He has not done so yet. He is not slow as we consider such things, but is patient, and His patience means salvation. This is the flame atop the candle of hope, that we are His people. What fear of darkness is there for those who are light in the Lord?

Beloved, there is no eternal night for us. We are children of the day, the heritage of light and so we set aside the habits of night people. We don't live any longer for fading night-pleasures with no thought for tomorrow.

What are the children of light to do? We remember and we wait together. We remember the lowly manger, the garden tears, the cruel cross, and we remember the empty tomb; we remember that just as

he did not wait overlong in that tomb, so He will not sit overlong at the right hand of power. We remember, waiting through the night watches, we gaze forward, giving Him no rest until righteousness shines like a lamp, waiting we whisper together into the darkness, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

***Prayer***

Lord, help us to encourage one another and build each other up, because Jesus is coming—suddenly. Hallelujah!

**Laura Strauss '09**

In two weeks Clinton United Presbyterian Church will welcome two international students into its faith community for the Christmas holiday. As the church has corresponded with these young women, a certain question has been repeated: "What will Christmas be like?" These Asian students do not know what to expect from an American Christmas celebration.

As those with significant experience of the Advent season, there's much that we have learned to expect. From carols to candlelight services, we know what is coming. Yet, 1 Thessalonians reminds us that in this season of expectedness the unexpected remains. We are reminded this Advent that we cannot expect when Jesus will return. However thoroughly we may study the Scriptures, Christ's return remains unpredictable. There is a distinct presence of the unexpected in the midst of all that we may expect from the Advent season.

***Prayer***

God, there is much that we've come to expect from Advent. Remind us of the unexpected time of Christ's coming. Send your Holy Spirit amongst us as we grow closer to you in preparation for that glorious day. Amen.

**Sue Montgomery '77**

Some congregations celebrate advent with a look towards Easter. Their Christmas tree is chosen for its beauty and trunk. On Jan. 1st, the trunk is saved and formed into the cross for Lent and Easter. The wood of the birth of Jesus, the Christmas manger becomes the cross, the symbol of death, the empty cross the symbol of resurrection. Thessalonians reminds us of these powerful opposites as we seek to live in darkness and light, despair and hope, life and death. Our faith is a transformative faith that moves us through times of darkness and suffering and surprises us with resurrection promises and grace. God's good gifts come to us for we are the named, blessed, children of light. We don't belong to the darkness. Faith comes alive in the relationships we have with God, in Christ and in the communion of believers who encourage and build one another up in the Spirit of grace and love.

***Prayer***

Gracious God, thank you for enabling us to serve you while being embraced by your love, strengthened by the support of our families, upheld through the communion of neighbors, and rejuvenated by the birth of hope in your grace. Thank you for trusting us to be your children of light as we bear witness to the peace and security you give us in Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. May we move through this advent season giving thanks knowing that in life and in death we belong to you. With the angels we sing, alleluia! Amen.

***Psalms 67***

<sup>1</sup>*May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us,*  
<sup>2</sup>*that your way may be known upon earth,  
your saving power among all nations.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.*  
<sup>4</sup>*Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth.*  
<sup>5</sup>*Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.*  
<sup>6</sup>*The earth has yielded its increase;  
God, our God, has blessed us.*  
<sup>7</sup>*May God continue to bless us;  
let all the ends of the earth revere him.*

### **Rob Weingartner '82**

Psalm 67 is a beautiful reminder of our dependence upon God and of how God's faithfulness in our lives can make known to others God's saving power. Too often, in our consumer-driven culture in which even religion can function as a kind of marketplace, we imagine that life and faith are primarily about us, about getting ourselves saved, about getting our needs met. I love the opening line of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*: "It's not about you."

How different a self-centered approach is from the truest spirit of Advent. We prepare anew to celebrate the birth of One who offered himself for the sake of the world, One who promised to return, the One in whom God is gathering up all things.

When we follow Jesus, he leads us out into the broken world to display his glory and grace—that all the peoples might sing for joy.

### ***Prayer***

Gracious God, in this season of watching and waiting deepen our trust in you. And help us to see how we can make your mercy and power real in the lives of those around us. Amen.

### ***Psalm 145***

<sup>1</sup>*I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.*  
<sup>2</sup>*Every day I will bless you,  
and praise your name forever and ever.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
his greatness is unsearchable.*  
<sup>4</sup>*One generation shall laud your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.*  
<sup>5</sup>*On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.*  
<sup>6</sup>*The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,  
and I will declare your greatness.*

<sup>7</sup>*They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.*

<sup>8</sup>*The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

<sup>9</sup>*The Lord is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

<sup>10</sup>*All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,  
and all your faithful shall bless you.*

<sup>11</sup>*They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,  
and tell of your power,*

<sup>12</sup>*to make known to all people your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*

<sup>13</sup>*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*  
*The Lord is faithful in all his words,  
and gracious in all his deeds.*

<sup>14</sup>*The Lord upholds all who are falling,  
and raises up all who are bowed down.*

<sup>15</sup>*The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.*

<sup>16</sup>*You open your hand,  
satisfying the desire of every living thing.*

<sup>17</sup>*The Lord is just in all his ways,  
and kind in all his doings.*

<sup>18</sup>*The Lord is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.*

<sup>19</sup>*He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and saves them.*

<sup>20</sup>*The Lord watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

<sup>21</sup>*My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.*

### **Roger Owens, faculty**

Descartes said, “I think therefore, I am.” A Christian might say, “I desire, therefore I am.” Human beings are creatures of desire. Growing in the Christian life is about learning to have our desires reordered. My children had a friend over a few weeks ago. They were looking together at Christmas toy catalogue. One of my kids said to the friend’s mom, “You should buy this for her; it would make her day.” She replied, “We hope she might find satisfaction in other things besides toys.” In other words: We are trying to help her desire the right things.

Psalm 145:16 says of God, “You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.” This doesn’t mean God satisfies all of our shallow, fleeting desires. Rather, God knows our deepest desire is to rest in God. *That’s* the desire only God can satisfy.

May God give us, this Advent, the stillness we need to discover this deepest desire for God, and then joy when we see the fulfillment of this desire in the face of a Child.

***Prayer***

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set they 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.

## Year 1, Day 10

### **Isaiah 5:18-25**

<sup>18</sup>Ah, you who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood,  
who drag sin along as with cart ropes,  
<sup>19</sup>who say, "Let him make haste,  
let him speed his work  
that we may see it;  
let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment,  
that we may know it!"  
<sup>20</sup>Ah, you who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter!  
<sup>21</sup>Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,  
and shrewd in your own sight!  
<sup>22</sup>Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine  
and valiant at mixing drink,  
<sup>23</sup>who acquit the guilty for a bribe,  
and deprive the innocent of their rights!  
<sup>24</sup>Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,  
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,  
so their root will become rotten,  
and their blossom go up like dust;  
for they have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts,  
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.  
<sup>25</sup>Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,  
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them;  
the mountains quaked,  
and their corpses were like refuse in the streets.  
For all this his anger has not turned away,  
and his hand is stretched out still.

### **Luke 21:29-38**

<sup>29</sup>Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>34</sup>"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." <sup>37</sup>Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. <sup>38</sup>And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

### **1 Thessalonians 5:12-28**

<sup>12</sup>But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; <sup>13</sup>esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. <sup>14</sup>And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. <sup>15</sup>See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. <sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup>Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup>but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup>abstain from every form of evil. <sup>23</sup>May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. <sup>25</sup>Beloved, pray for us. <sup>26</sup>Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. <sup>27</sup>I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. <sup>28</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

### **Linda Sue Boehmer '09**

Today, as we continue preparing to wrap our hearts and minds around the Incarnation, we hear the best news possible: God shows covenant love for us by reaching out to us again and again, in many ways and circumstances, to draw us into closer relationship. Our psalms for today weave together the other three texts to guide us along the way to renewal and revival for God's people. What could be more unexpected when times are uncertain than to be reminded that our hope and future are in Jesus Christ, who is the way?

In Isaiah we read some of the reasons that God understandably gets angry with us: 5:20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!

Today's psalms express confidence that God will forgive and restore and deliver us, as the history of God's people shows. In the midst of end times discussions in Luke's Gospel, Jesus unexpectedly shows confidence in our common sense: 29 And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; 30 as soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Our psalms anchor our wisdom in listening to God's word(s). In a chapter that begins eschatologically, the apostle Paul offers Trinitarian encouragement, but also shares practical advice: 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good, 22 abstain from every form of evil.

Our psalms ground us in God's timeless character and timely provision for our sanctification. We love to wrestle with complexity, to unravel mystery, to clarify and codify all the "-ologies"—and there is a time and place for that. But sometimes we make things more difficult than they need to be. These passages make life unexpectedly simple in the midst of all the confusion around us. God expects us to have the wisdom to know the difference between good and evil.

We seek the spiritual strength to choose light over darkness. We pray for the faith to trust God's covenant faithfulness in our journey. We can expect God to revive and renew us in unexpected ways.

### **Prayer**

Spirit of the living God, revive us again that we may rejoice in you! LORD, guide us in your way. Help us trust in your righteousness to bring us peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

**Helen Blier, staff**

When my children were little, we had two rules in our house: Be Kind and Do Your Job. (Later on, when the eldest became a teenager, Tell the Truth was added, but that's another story.) The challenge was to identify what simple rules would best name the behaviors that let us live as a family by lifting up some of the practices required of love without burden or distraction? These two rules worked for us, and they grew as the kids grew. When they were little, being kind and doing their job meant fair play on the playground and brushing teeth before bed. As they got older, it got more complex—time management, making good choices about friends, leveraging their privilege in behalf of the common good. Over and over again, the simple rules became an invitation to have important conversations about what we are called to do as family members, community dwellers, Christians, children of God. (And if you ask me, I think the two of them are turning out pretty well!)

Paul's exhortation to his friends in Thessalonica isn't so much a laundry list of behaviors or rules to follow—it's naming some of the things that happen when the Spirit is present and people live in the joy of the Good News. And what's obvious to me is how much Paul really *loves* these people! The delight he takes in them is infectious. He wants them to do the right thing because he wants them to participate in the promises of Christ—and in his enthusiasm he's reminding them of what makes that possible. Seek good for all. Give thanks always. Greet others with delight. Rejoice! In other words, be kind and do your job. These are the hallmarks of love practiced, the conditions that create welcome, as he says, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in addition to commanding his friends to do, Paul participates in this joyful expression himself.

As we head toward the third and joyful Sunday of Advent, what can you do to make sure that this love, practiced in delight, marks your own preparation for the coming of the Christ child?

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, on behalf of my beloved community,  
May we pray without ceasing  
Give thanks without reason  
Do good to all because it is good to do—  
And in doing so welcome the Christ child with joy and love into this, our human family.

**Psalms 33**

<sup>1</sup>*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.*

*Praise befits the upright.*

<sup>2</sup>*Praise the LORD with the lyre;*

*make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.*

<sup>3</sup>*Sing to him a new song;*

*play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*

<sup>4</sup>*For the word of the LORD is upright,*

*and all his work is done in faithfulness.*

<sup>5</sup>*He loves righteousness and justice;*

*the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.*

<sup>6</sup>*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,*

*and all their host by the breath of his mouth.*



<sup>7</sup>He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
     he put the deeps in storehouses.  
<sup>8</sup>Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
     let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.  
<sup>9</sup>For he spoke, and it came to be;  
     he commanded, and it stood firm.  
<sup>10</sup>The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;  
     he frustrates the plans of the peoples.  
<sup>11</sup>The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
     the thoughts of his heart to all generations.  
<sup>12</sup>Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,  
     the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.  
<sup>13</sup>The LORD looks down from heaven;  
     he sees all humankind.  
<sup>14</sup>From where he sits enthroned he watches  
     all the inhabitants of the earth—  
<sup>15</sup>he who fashions the hearts of them all,  
     and observes all their deeds.  
<sup>16</sup>A king is not saved by his great army;  
     a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.  
<sup>17</sup>The war horse is a vain hope for victory,  
     and by its great might it cannot save.  
<sup>18</sup>Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,  
     on those who hope in his steadfast love,  
<sup>19</sup>to deliver their soul from death,  
     and to keep them alive in famine.  
<sup>20</sup>Our soul waits for the LORD;  
     he is our help and shield.  
<sup>21</sup>Our heart is glad in him,  
     because we trust in his holy name.  
<sup>22</sup>Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,  
     even as we hope in you.

### **Psalm 146**

<sup>1</sup>Praise the LORD!  
     Praise the LORD, O my soul!  
<sup>2</sup>I will praise the LORD as long as I live;  
     I will sing praises to my God all my life long.  
<sup>3</sup>Do not put your trust in princes,  
     in mortals, in whom there is no help.  
<sup>4</sup>When their breath departs, they return to the earth;  
     on that very day their plans perish.  
<sup>5</sup>Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
     whose hope is in the LORD their God,  
<sup>6</sup>who made heaven and earth,  
     the sea, and all that is in them;  
     who keeps faith forever;

<sup>7</sup> *who executes justice for the oppressed;  
who gives food to the hungry.  
The LORD sets the prisoners free;*  
<sup>8</sup> *the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.  
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the LORD loves the righteous.*  
<sup>9</sup> *The LORD watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*  
<sup>10</sup> *The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise the LORD!*

#### **Don McKim '74**

Advent is for anticipation. God's promised Messiah is coming. God's promises are being fulfilled. There is no better Advent action than praising God's greatness and goodness, God's help for the world and us. Psalms 33 and 146 provide language for this praise, exalting God for who God is and what God has done.

Climactically the psalmist proclaims: "The Lord will reign forever" (Ps. 146:10). This God loves "righteousness and justice." The earth is "full of the steadfast love of the Lord" (Ps. 33:5). This God is our "help and our shield" (Ps. 33:20). No wonder "our heart is glad" in God because we "trust" in God's "holy name" (Ps. 33:21)! As Calvin said, "whether living or dying, we shall be safe under the keeping of a king who reigns expressly for our salvation" (Comm. Ps. 146:10).

#### ***Prayer***

O God, in Jesus Christ, your promises come true. We praise, we trust, we rejoice! Amen.

#### **Doris Calian, McMillan Society member**

As we prepare to greet and celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, let us approach each day with our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to finding glimpses of Christ in all our daily encounters. Let us start each day observing and appreciating each member of our household. Move on to those we meet regularly at our work and study places. Remember to observe those who serve us by bringing mail, tending our stores, repairing our roads. Keep in mind many whom we do not see who are suffering from infirmities, lost or fighting in desperate situations, some even oblivious to their surroundings. These souls are all children of God, and Christ looks to us to be one with them as we expectantly approach the gift of the Holy Babe in Bethlehem.

#### ***Prayer***

Dear Lord, guide and lead us as we seek each day to recognize your presence in our midst. Help us to be sensitized to your love for all humanity and humbly accept all people of your creation as our sisters and brothers. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 11

### **Isaiah 6:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" <sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." <sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" <sup>9</sup>And he said, "Go and say to this people:

'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;  
keep looking, but do not understand.'

<sup>10</sup>Make the mind of this people dull,  
and stop their ears,  
and shut their eyes,  
so that they may not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and comprehend with their minds,  
and turn and be healed."

<sup>11</sup>Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said:

"Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is utterly desolate;

<sup>12</sup>until the LORD sends everyone far away,  
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

<sup>13</sup>Even if a tenth part remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains standing  
when it is felled."

The holy seed is its stump.

### **Eric McIntosh '12**

At first glance, I am captured by the wonder. Can you imagine seeing the Lord sitting on His throne? Can you imagine setting your eyes on the glory of the His robe. That just the hem of it fills the temple is amazing. Creatures with three pairs of wings flying in attendance to God anticipating His next command testifying to how holy God is to one another. I am struck with awe trying to see in my mind what Isaiah saw. What a privilege and honor to be given such a moment, gift, vision; at least at first glance.

Instead of honor and privilege, self-reflection, self-loathing, recognition and an overwhelming feeling of self-degradation was invoked in the mind, heart and deep recesses of Isaiah's soul. Being in the presence of God and His holiness required of Isaiah a posture of unworthiness because he was unclean. Isaiah understood that he did not belong there.

But it is just like God to look beyond Isaiah's faults and provide a cleansing. At first glance, you could think that God cleansed him to make him feel at home. However, this too was not an honor as much as it was a necessity to send Isaiah back to do His will. Israel was unclean and in fact no longer worthy to be called God's people. Did God disown them or did Israel disown God? What is true, God was not pleased and His answer to their condition was to devastate them and render their land desolate.

But, if we give a closer look there is still hope. Isaiah sees it too. Isaiah cannot believe that this judgment on Israel is eternal and asks, "How long will this last?" God gives him hope that there is a remnant and that answer is in the holy seed. I see from this story that salvation while a gift is not an honor that I deserve but a necessity to gain access to God. I also see that it is impossible to do God's will without it. His will is to tell a dying world that it is dying but there is hope. At first glance the advent season is one of wonder. The bright lights illuminate trees, houses and cities. The glory of the season is amazing. How do we forget that the reason Christ came was because we were unclean, dead, and in need of a savior to come and die for us?

We do not need to open our eye very wide to see the devastation and desolation today. God says, "Who will go for us?" Who will tell the world that Advent is still about Jesus and not the lights of the trees but the Light of the World? I will go! Will you? I bet if more of us go we could expect the unexpected! I bet we would see the world light up with Jesus. I bet we would see hope grow from a stump to a forest. Ah and when we all get to heaven...! Faith says expect the unexpected! Go with me because faith also says you haven't seen anything yet.

#### ***Prayer***

Lord God Almighty, help us, to enter into your courts with thanksgiving and praise because your Son has made us clean. Strengthen our faith that we may light up the world. Help us to value our salvation so much that we respond to advent with the expectation that the world around us will turn to you! Grant us all visions of your glory and hope for your Kingdom in Jesus, holy and righteous name! Amen.

#### **Erin Davenport '05**

Isaiah tells us in verse 5 that he sees the King, the Lord of hosts, *before* he is clean. That is grace, isn't it? The revelation of the love of God for us is not dependent upon our cleanliness, our goodness, our worth; it is dependent upon the King, the Lord of hosts alone. We prepare in this time of Advent for the coming of the Christ child, but we cannot adequately prepare ourselves. We certainly try. And we certainly fail. God, through the love of Jesus Christ, is the only one who can prepare us. So in this time of preparation, take time to depend upon the God who gives us grace. Not because of what we do or who we are, but because it is God's power at work in our lives. Let us give thanks to our gracious and good God. Praise the Lord of hosts!

#### ***Prayer***

Lord of hosts, we give thanks this day for your grace, which amazes, astounds and humbles us. We give thanks for your great and abundant power. We give thanks for your understanding that is beyond measure. Amen.

#### ***John 7:53-8:11***

<sup>7:53</sup>Then each of them went home, <sup>8:1</sup>while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup>Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. <sup>3</sup>The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, <sup>4</sup>they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. <sup>5</sup>Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" <sup>6</sup>They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup>When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup>And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup>When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup>Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" <sup>11</sup>She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

### **S. Balajiedlang (Bala) Khylllep, staff**

We live in a very polarized world where we can't seem to have an open conversation with one another without being in conflict. An open conversation with mutual respect for one another's opinions even when we disagree seems to have lost favor in our society today. We are automatically programmed to point fingers, blame, disagree, and even condemn others. This is exactly what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing in the Scripture reading today. Just because they disliked what Jesus was teaching and doing for the least of these in the society, they sought ways to get rid of him. They dragged and shamed a woman who was caught in adultery not necessarily to settle the matter, but mainly to test Jesus and to see whether they could find ways to condemn him and have him arrested and then be killed.

Yet what Jesus did changed hearts. Jesus simply asked the religious leaders and then, in turn, asks every one of us to take a deep look within ourselves first, before we jump into negative conclusions about others. Doing so is difficult for us. And to be honest, one problem in our world today is the fact that most of us generally see ourselves as heroes, as good and righteous persons, whereas when evaluating others we tend to villainize or criminalize their behaviors we see as wrong. I think the world would be a better place if we could recognize that within ourselves there is a mixture of both evil and good and that through God's grace and strength we are able to choose good for ourselves and for others.

I've been pondering lately the state of our country and our world—the hate, the prejudice, and the heartless attitude we as humans have toward one another. I can't help but ask myself, "Is it possible for us to listen and understand one another ever again amid our current differences?" My hope and prayer is that as we are waiting for the coming of our Lord this Advent, may we have the courage to deal with one another and with ourselves as Jesus would have us do—to love in the face of hate, to forgive in the face of condemnation, to be kind in the face of bigotry, and to walk in humility in the face of superiority.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, thank you for loving and accepting us even when we don't deserve it. Forgive our inability to listen and our desire to condemn others within our hearts. Help us to see our daily need of your forgiveness so that we can, in turn, offer grace and mercy toward others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Psalms 17**

<sup>1</sup>Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;

*give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.*  
<sup>2</sup>*From you let my vindication come;*  
*let your eyes see the right.*  
<sup>3</sup>*If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,*  
*if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;*  
*my mouth does not transgress.*  
<sup>4</sup>*As for what others do, by the word of your lips*  
*I have avoided the ways of the violent.*  
<sup>5</sup>*My steps have held fast to your paths;*  
*my feet have not slipped.*  
<sup>6</sup>*I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;*  
*incline your ear to me, hear my words.*  
<sup>7</sup>*Wondrously show your steadfast love,*  
*O savior of those who seek refuge*  
*from their adversaries at your right hand.*  
<sup>8</sup>*Guard me as the apple of the eye;*  
*hide me in the shadow of your wings,*  
<sup>9</sup>*from the wicked who despoil me,*  
*my deadly enemies who surround me.*  
<sup>10</sup>*They close their hearts to pity;*  
*with their mouths they speak arrogantly.*  
<sup>11</sup>*They track me down; now they surround me;*  
*they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.*  
<sup>12</sup>*They are like a lion eager to tear,*  
*like a young lion lurking in ambush.*  
<sup>13</sup>*Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them!*  
*By your sword deliver my life from the wicked,*  
<sup>14</sup>*from mortals—by your hand, O LORD—*  
*from mortals whose portion in life is in this world.*  
*May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them;*  
*may their children have more than enough;*  
*may they leave something over to their little ones.*  
<sup>15</sup>*As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;*  
*when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.*

### **Heather Vacek, faculty**

Advent is a time of waiting and hope. It's a time of eager excitement. The world's adaptation of messages of hope, however, can cloud the reality that during Advent we sometimes await the promise of salvation while suffering.

Some of us navigate Advent through raw grief, thinking of loved ones with whom we will no longer share the miracle of Christmas. Others experience these days amid illness that poses uncertainty. For others, conflicts in relationships make life disorienting. Holding on to hope while suffering deeply can prove challenging.

Yet, even in the midst of struggle, we find that the Psalmist holds fast to God's promise of protection and salvation. The Psalmist remains confident that God hears the cry of the one who suffers.

As we consider the realities we hope to be delivered from this Advent, let us trust the Psalmist's confidence in God's powerful and protective love. And, when our own suffering makes the promise of divine healing difficult to grasp, may there be those around us who are able to carry and proclaim that promise on our behalf.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, incline your ear to us. Hear our supplications—our desire for celebration, our longing as we wait, and especially our expressions of pain or doubt. Holy Lord, as we anticipate and wait, help us to do so confident of your steadfast love. We pray for ourselves, and for all who suffer, to find refuge in the shadow of your wing during this season of Advent. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

### **Psalm 50**

- <sup>1</sup>*The mighty one, God the LORD,  
speaks and summons the earth  
from the rising of the sun to its setting.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Our God comes and does not keep silence,  
before him is a devouring fire,  
and a mighty tempest all around him.*
- <sup>4</sup>*He calls to the heavens above  
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:*
- <sup>5</sup>*"Gather to me my faithful ones,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!"*
- <sup>6</sup>*The heavens declare his righteousness,  
for God himself is judge.*
- <sup>7</sup>*"Hear, O my people, and I will speak,  
O Israel, I will testify against you.  
I am God, your God.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;  
your burnt offerings are continually before me.*
- <sup>9</sup>*I will not accept a bull from your house,  
or goats from your folds.*
- <sup>10</sup>*For every wild animal of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills.*
- <sup>11</sup>*I know all the birds of the air,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.*
- <sup>12</sup>*"If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
for the world and all that is in it is mine.*
- <sup>13</sup>*Do I eat the flesh of bulls,  
or drink the blood of goats?*
- <sup>14</sup>*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and pay your vows to the Most High.*
- <sup>15</sup>*Call on me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."*
- <sup>16</sup>*But to the wicked God says:*

*"What right have you to recite my statutes,  
 or take my covenant on your lips?  
<sup>17</sup>For you hate discipline,  
 and you cast my words behind you.  
<sup>18</sup>You make friends with a thief when you see one,  
 and you keep company with adulterers.  
<sup>19</sup>"You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
 and your tongue frames deceit.  
<sup>20</sup>You sit and speak against your kin;  
 you slander your own mother's child.  
<sup>21</sup>These things you have done and I have been silent;  
 you thought that I was one just like yourself.  
 But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.  
<sup>22</sup>"Mark this, then, you who forget God,  
 or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver.  
<sup>23</sup>Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me;  
 to those who go the right way  
 I will show the salvation of God."*

**Psalm 147:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Praise the Lord!  
 How good it is to sing praises to our God;  
 for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.  
<sup>2</sup>The Lord builds up Jerusalem;  
 he gathers the outcasts of Israel.  
<sup>3</sup>He heals the brokenhearted,  
 and binds up their wounds.  
<sup>4</sup>He determines the number of the stars;  
 he gives to all of them their names.  
<sup>5</sup>Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;  
 his understanding is beyond measure.  
<sup>6</sup>The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;  
 he casts the wicked to the ground.  
<sup>7</sup>Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;  
 make melody to our God on the lyre.  
<sup>8</sup>He covers the heavens with clouds,  
 prepares rain for the earth,  
 makes grass grow on the hills.  
<sup>9</sup>He gives to the animals their food,  
 and to the young ravens when they cry.  
<sup>10</sup>His delight is not in the strength of the horse,  
 nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;  
<sup>11</sup>but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,  
 in those who hope in his steadfast love.

**Erin Davenport '05**

During Advent we prepare for the coming of God to earth. These Psalms remind us that God comes to us and does not keep silent.



The miracle of Advent is God coming to earth, the reality is that God comes but does not keep silent. God comes and speaks to us in the stillness of a moment. God comes and shouts at us through our children. God comes and comforts us through our friends. God comes and directs us through our pastors. God comes and helps us through our parents. God comes and tells us that we are not faithful. God comes and declares that we are forgiven. God comes to us and does not keep silent. And we are thankful and give praise!

***Prayer***

Lord, thank you for coming to us and not keeping silent. Help us to hear your voice today. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 12

### **Isaiah 7:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it. <sup>2</sup>When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. <sup>3</sup>Then the LORD said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, <sup>4</sup>and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. <sup>5</sup>Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, <sup>6</sup>Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; <sup>7</sup>therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

*It shall not stand,  
and it shall not come to pass.*

<sup>8</sup>For the head of Aram is Damascus,  
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

*(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)*

<sup>9</sup>The head of Ephraim is Samaria,  
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.

*If you do not stand firm in faith,  
you shall not stand at all.*

### **Chris Brown '08**

The king of Judah was anxious. He had just survived an attack on Jerusalem, but the threat was not gone. The enemy had merely changed tactics. Knowing these things, the “heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” And to this fearful king, the Lord sent the prophet with an exhortation to have faith: “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.”

Faith. It seems that like Ahaz and all of God's people, we are deficient in faith. But we are in good company. In Luke 17:5, we read, “The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’” The original apostles acknowledged to Jesus their own lack of faith. But they did so with a request made in faith to the only One who can increase our faith.

Ahaz placed his faith elsewhere, calling for help from the king of Assyria (2 Kings 16:7). This season, despite its joy and celebration, many are in the position of Ahaz. We do not face literal war, but the holidays can create feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and stress. Contrary to the lies of the world, consumerism and gluttony do not relieve such feelings. The enemy uses different tactics against us now, but the temptation is still the same: to seek peace and security through worldly means, rather than trusting in the Lord. This Advent, will we respond as Ahaz did, or as the apostles?

### **Prayer**

Lord, increase our faith! Amen.

### **Luke 22:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. <sup>2</sup>The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. <sup>3</sup>Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; <sup>4</sup>he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. <sup>5</sup>They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. <sup>6</sup>So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. <sup>7</sup>Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. <sup>8</sup>So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." <sup>9</sup>They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" <sup>10</sup>"Listen," he said to them, "when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters <sup>11</sup>and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"'" <sup>12</sup>He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." <sup>13</sup>So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

### **W. Hulitt Gloer '75**

There are always at least two possible responses to the coming of Jesus. Nowhere is this any clearer than in today's gospel reading. On the one hand, in Luke 22: 1-6, we learn that Jesus' way of teaching and acting has become a such threat to the ways of the "chief priests and scribes" ( i.e. the comfort of the status quo) that they hatch a conspiracy to kill him. Jesus was/is always a threat to "the powers that be" even in diapers! On the other hand, Luke 22: 7-13 tell us that someone is prepared to welcome Jesus and provide a place for he and his disciples to meet and break bread together. So there you have it. Hostility or hospitality: two possible responses to the coming of Jesus.

#### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, even when you challenge our ways of thinking or acting and the comfort of the status quo, help us always to welcome you with hospitality.

### **Jen Haddox '06**

In the gospel of Luke, we read about the preparation of the Passover meal in the shadow of Judas Iscariot's impending betrayal. Jesus sends out Peter and John to make the necessary preparations for the Passover. All the while, the plot to kill Jesus is underway. Surely, Peter and John and the others were well aware of the danger they faced in the city, and so they follow Jesus' instructions to find this mysterious Upper Room by way of a servant carrying water.

As we prepare for Christmas gatherings and celebrations this season, we do so not just under the bright star of Bethlehem. We prepare under the shadow of the cross. For this shadow casts God's grace over our lives and opens the way for us to truly celebrate the eternal gift of Emmanuel. Our holiday preparations can be full of joy and light because we have seen God's judgment pass over us at the cross.

#### **Prayer**

Lord God, as we make ourselves busy preparing for family gatherings in this season, cast your light of salvation upon us again. Make us ready to welcome you, not only as a baby in a manger, but as the Passover lamb. And as we wait, make us ready to receive you when you come again in glory. Amen.

### **Rebecca DePoe '16**

For Jesus, meals have a sacramental quality. How we eat together matters, regardless of Judas's pending betrayal of Jesus. Jesus instructs the disciples to prepare the Passover meal in a stranger's guest house.

The disciples are to rely on the hospitality of others even as they prepare for one of the most important meals of the year.

I believe Jesus' insistence on relying on a stranger's hospitality is what allows him, a few verses later, to feed his betrayer. Part of the disciples' preparation for Passover is to learn from Jesus how to receive and give hospitality. Part of our preparation for Advent is learning how to rely on the hospitality of others. We prepare to be with others as we prepare for the birth of Jesus—our Savior, who chose to be with us. When we talk about preparing our hearts for Christmas, we're talking about preparing ourselves to receive the hospitality of Jesus so that we can share that hospitality with the world.

### **Prayer**

Loving God we thank you for creating us so that we have to depend on you, and each other, for our daily sustenance. We pray that that in giving of our time, our talents, and our resources you would strengthen our faith in you and our bonds to our communities. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **2 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

*<sup>1</sup>As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, <sup>2</sup>not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. <sup>3</sup>Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. <sup>4</sup>He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. <sup>5</sup>Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? <sup>6</sup>And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. <sup>7</sup>For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. <sup>8</sup>And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. <sup>9</sup>The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, <sup>10</sup>and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup>For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, <sup>12</sup>so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.*

### **Paula Cooper '10/'13**

After reading this passage, one may propose that Saint Paul's letter to the church of Thessalonica is still relevant in the 21st century. As were the Thessalonians, we too are saturated and influenced by voices and teachings of various persuasions. These persuasions come to us through media such as the television, the radio, the internet, the newspapers, our families, our friends, and, yes, even from unbelievers. Some of the voices are so intense and persuasive that they tend to permeate into our own thoughts and lead us into questioning our own beliefs. We may begin to ask that, oh, so famous question of the infamous Pontius Pilate: What is truth?

Paul's letter attempts to be the voice of truth to his congregation. They had many concerns. One of the concerns was teachings that proclaimed that the Lord had come. To assure them of the truth, he told them that before the Lord comes a rebellion will take place, the man of lawlessness will be revealed, and the breath of the Lord and His coming will slay the man of lawlessness. This man of lawlessness and others who are apparently working Satan's activities will perish.

The unbelievers who had chosen to believe the false teachings and did not accept the love of Truth that would save them would perish. They rejected Paul's teachings, so God gave them a delusion and they believed the lies and the unrighteousness. We cannot be fooled by the voices of untruth; we cannot allow ourselves to be deceived by false teachings. Jesus Christ is the love of Truth. The believer must be careful when one's survival depends on believing or declining the Truth. One does not want God to give delusions that has one believing in lies or in unrighteousness.

The delusions will have one believe that one's survive through unexpected economic crises depend on higher returns on stocks; foreclosures decreasing tremendously; or the employment rate reaching an all-time high. What a delusion!! Do not be fooled!! It is only in one's belief in the Truth that one is assured of survival. His Truth will save us from receiving delusions from God. We need to listen to the voices and teachings that will draw us into deeper relationships with the Expected One, Jesus Christ. God's faithfulness and love for us is no delusion. We can depend in God during times of uncertainties!!

It is in times of uncertainties that we are tried by false expectations! Put your expectations in the Truth! Our survival is in the One whom is Expected to come. We must shut-out the voices and false teachings and rest in the love of His Truth. In Him we will find Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. But most of all, we can expect the unexpected in Jesus Christ!!

***Prayer***

Lord, may we not only expect Your coming during this Advent Season but may we expect Your reign in our lives forevermore!! This, we pray in the Name of the Expected One, Jesus Christ, Amen!!

**Scott Hagley, faculty**

This past spring, I went to Home Depot to pick up some cedar boards for a garden box. It was only after digging up the front yard and assembling the raised bed that I recognized the risk involved with a front-yard garden. While the sun-saturated site was ideal from a gardening perspective, the very publicness of the garden made me uneasy, for gardening is something over which we have marginal control. This summer we prepared the soil, we planted the seed, we watered the ground, but mostly we waited and watched in a very public sort of way as neighbors and strangers passed by with advice, judgment, and comments.

Our New Testament texts wrestle with this very Advent-like dance between preparation, anticipation, waiting, and the ways this dance can go wrong. As Passover nears, Judas takes drastic action to force change in the status quo and betrays Jesus. Paul cautions the Thessalonians to avoid jumpy and anxious conclusions regarding Christ's second coming. The fulfillment of God's promise, the coming of Christ, can be received, anticipated, and prepared for, but not produced. This Advent, may we learn to cultivate soil and prepare, may we learn to anticipate and wait. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel.

***Prayer***

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

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind

In one the hearts of all mankind;  
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,  
And be yourself our King of Peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to you, O Israel!  
Amen.

### **Psalm 62**

- <sup>1</sup>*For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.*
- <sup>2</sup>*He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.*
- <sup>3</sup>*How long will you assail a person,  
will you batter your victim, all of you,  
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?*
- <sup>4</sup>*Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.  
They take pleasure in falsehood;  
they bless with their mouths,  
but inwardly they curse.*
- <sup>5</sup>*For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from him.*
- <sup>6</sup>*He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*
- <sup>7</sup>*On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Those of low estate are but a breath,  
those of high estate are a delusion;  
in the balances they go up;  
they are together lighter than a breath.*
- <sup>10</sup>*Put no confidence in extortion,  
and set no vain hopes on robbery;  
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*
- <sup>11</sup>*Once God has spoken;  
twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,*
- <sup>12</sup>*and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.  
For you repay to all  
according to their work.*

### **Michelle Spomer, faculty**

It is both amazing and discouraging that some things just don't change when it comes to human nature. Slander? Lies? Extortion? Greed? All these vices existed hundreds and hundreds of years ago just as they exist today. While this note may sound a bit dire, be assured that there has always been another constant—God's presence in our lives.

Throughout Psalm 62, the descriptions of humanity's shortcomings are surrounded by affirmations of God's strength, shelter, and trustworthiness. The trick is to be deliberate about recognizing God's presence and what God wants to be for us in our day-to-day struggles.

Take refuge in God. Try carving out some time for your soul to "wait in silence." Create space so that you can "pour out your heart" before God. There are no better ways to anticipate and prepare for Christ's coming this Advent season.

***Prayer***

Lord, my soul waits in silence. You alone are my rock, my salvation, my fortress. My refuge is in you, and I trust in your power and steadfast love. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 13

### **Isaiah 7:10-25**

<sup>10</sup>Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup>Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup>He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup>For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. <sup>17</sup>The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah - the king of Assyria." <sup>18</sup>On that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. <sup>19</sup>And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the pastures. <sup>20</sup>On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River - with the king of Assyria - the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well. <sup>21</sup>On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, <sup>22</sup>and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey. <sup>23</sup>On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. <sup>24</sup>With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; <sup>25</sup>and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.

### **Psalms 148**

<sup>1</sup>Praise the Lord!

*Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights!*

<sup>2</sup>Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his host!

<sup>3</sup>Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!

<sup>4</sup>Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

<sup>5</sup>Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for he commanded and they were created.

<sup>6</sup>He established them forever and ever;  
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

<sup>7</sup>Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,

<sup>8</sup>fire and hail, snow and frost,  
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

<sup>9</sup>Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!

<sup>10</sup>Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds!

<sup>11</sup>Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!



<sup>12</sup>*Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!*  
<sup>13</sup>*Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his glory is above earth and heaven.*  
<sup>14</sup>*He has raised up a horn for his people,  
praise for all his faithful,  
for the people of Israel who are close to him.  
Praise the Lord!*

### **Sonya-Marie Morley, Metro-Urban Institute Fellow**

The word “Immanuel” in Isaiah’s prophecy explains why Advent is the season of solidarity. Just as we share time and space during Advent season by reading familiar narratives of Jesus’ birth, singing carols and hymns about the baby Jesus, breaking bread together and buying each other gifts to commemorate the greatest of gifts to the world, so the Divine, being poured into human flesh, shared time and space with us by living “among us.” Christ joined in radical solidarity with us: in service, supper, supplication, suffering, sin, sanctification, salvation and Spirit. It is this same sense that the psalmist uses as an invitation and imperative for all creation to join together to praise the One who created all and who relentlessly loves and seeks to reconcile all. Advent reminds us that Christ continues to join in solidarity with us, in each breath through the Holy Spirit, for God’s good, merciful, just, gracious, and redemptive purposes.

#### **Prayer**

As we seek you, God, and wait expectantly to celebrate with great joy the anniversary of Christ’s birth, help us to hear how we are being called during Advent and always to stand in solidarity with those experiencing injustice and oppression, knowing that you shows your face in unexpected ways and places—like the finite and fragile face of a babe in a manger all those years ago. Amen.

### **Luke 22:14-30**

<sup>14</sup>*When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. <sup>15</sup>He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; <sup>16</sup>for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” <sup>17</sup>Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; <sup>18</sup>for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” <sup>19</sup>Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>20</sup>And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. <sup>21</sup>But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. <sup>22</sup>For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” <sup>23</sup>Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this. <sup>24</sup>A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. <sup>25</sup>But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. <sup>26</sup>But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. <sup>27</sup>For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. <sup>28</sup>”You are those who have stood by me in my trials; <sup>29</sup>and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, <sup>30</sup>so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

**Beth Arnold Creekpauw '10**

Often as adults, there is a sense of repetition when it comes to Christmas. It is easy to get caught up in all that has to be done. Our to do lists get long and often overwhelming. And what is worse, all that we have done we must do again. It does not matter that we sent out 150 Christmas cards and baked 12 dozen cookies last year. We must do it again. In this repetition we often get stuck in the task rather than remembering the season. We begin to think we know what is happening and what needs to happen.

We have very specific expectations regarding our Christmas season. In this text, the disciples must have felt the same as we do. They gathered in the upper room expecting the same Passover that they had experienced from their youth. It must have been an utter surprise to hear Jesus take the words of the ancient Passover and make them his own. "This is my body..." I wonder what these disciples must have had running through their heads when their expectations were not only unmet radically altered. I would imagine they were confused, maybe even shocked. "What is this guy doing?" they must have thought.

I would imagine this confusion became even greater when Jesus stated within their celebration of the Passover that they must be like children. I would guess that the disciples were thinking something like this: "Children, the greatest in the kingdom of God? But we have worked so hard and given up so much, Jesus!"

Jesus would say the same to us in our Christmas celebration. We must also be like children. Think about the children in your life. Think about a son or daughter, a niece or nephew, a grandchild, a neighbor, or a Sunday school kid. Everything is new. The repetition is not old, but exciting. They inherently trust that this season of Advent and Christmas is something exciting and beyond themselves. Not only does Jesus want us to be like children in our attitudes of humility and innocence, but also in our attitudes of joy and wonder. This is true all of the time, but we must be reminded, especially in this season.

Having these qualities of wonder, innocence, humility and joy is often against our human nature. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can do this. And what a great time it is for us to ask for an attitude of a child now. This is a time when as children of the most high God, we can wait for something new and expect the unexpected. And in this comes great joy! Jesus came! Jesus comes! Jesus will come again! Thanks be to God!

***Prayer***

Lord God, we thank you that You desire to do a new thing this season and in us. We ask today for You to give us the heart of a child, Your child. Help us to see Your work in each day specifically in this season. Thank you for Your work in our lives and the world around us. Open our eyes to see it. Help us to not only expect the unexpected, but to seek it and praise You for it. Amen.

**Peggy Shannon '09**

How dare the events that lead to Jesus' death distract us from the joy of advent preparations? We do not want our anticipation of the sweet scent of hope and hay from the manger to be jarred by the sour smell of wine and betrayal from the Table.

But is that not how we people of God live? Paradox. We humans have a hard time holding both ends of it together and understanding how it mingles together. Blessing and curse. Judgment and salvation. Promises and reneging. Life and death. The last who will be first.

The good news is that Jesus holds onto both ends with his arms outstretched and is always on the right side of the paradox. Always on the side of life, promises, salvation, blessing. The baby who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords is also the one who sits as host of the table and stoops to serve. First and last.

***Prayer***

O God, if we could truly comprehend what you have done in your coming and your going, perhaps our preparations would be different. Jar us from our expectations. Amen.

**Jo Ann Griffith '59**

In its essence, Advent insists that we humans focus on the Son of God humbling himself to become the Son of Man. All he had ever experienced was life in the presence of his Heavenly Father as a Royal Heir. Then, in God's timing, this Son came to earth as a baby, living a short life of unprecedented sacrificial love. On the last night of his life on earth, this Jesus is found in an upper room surrounded by the twelve apostles, his closest friends, before he is led away to be crucified.

Today, just now, shall we his 21st c. disciples sit figuratively with him there? We hear him say, v. 14, "You've no idea how much I looked forward to eating this Passover Meal with you before entering my suffering." Then within minutes of this close congeniality, there's an interruption caused by their not uncommon, self-centered bickering over 'greatness'. And in response, Jesus directs them to his common theme of servant hood v.27, one he exemplified perfectly, followed by v. 30, "Now I confer on you the royal authority my Father conferred on me, to eat and drink at my table...and be strengthened as you take up responsibilities among the congregations of God's people."

In such times as these, with upheavals of cataclysmic proportions, are we disciples not highly favored and blessed to serve The King, alongside the very one who trod this path of 'serving others' to His very death?

***Prayer***

Our Heavenly Father. Teach us how to serve, rather than be served, in a world where position is so admired and enjoyed. Have mercy upon us and our congregations for we often ignore those who need Christ's healing power the most. Amen.

**Eric McIntosh '12**

Given our current political climate, the racial divide, the increase of the non-religious in the U.S. and the Me Too movement, I cannot help but think the church is headed for greater persecution in America. Reflecting on the aforementioned realities, I am ever focused on these words of Christ: "Take this and divide it among yourselves . . . ." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said this!

Given our current state, I cannot look at this cup and ignore the cup Christ mentions in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked that this cup be taken away but succumbed to the will of God the Father. Neither can I ignore what Christ said on the cross: "I thirst!" I imagine that in those words, "I thirst," he was saying to God and the world, "Give me the cup!" So how might that statement relate to the words here at the Passover table when Jesus refers to the cup: "divide it among yourselves"? I believe Jesus was inviting all of us to take, intentionally, the mantle of sacrifice he was offering—to share in his cup! Jesus said to the disciples at his resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Perhaps he was suggesting that we, too, have to face our cup of persecution and to follow his lead for how to do so.

During Advent we reflect on Jesus' coming. Is the cross why he came? Is that why we have come and been sent? I hope that persecution is not coming to the church in America, but if it is, such reflection is worth considering.

**Prayer**

Lord God Almighty, prepare us for tomorrow even though it is not promised. Equip the saints for what comes as we prepare once again for the coming of Christ. This Advent, make us fully aware of your call and sending of us into the world. Make us aware of your desire for our imitating Christ. Remind us that we all have a cup and we all have a cross to bear. Give us the courage and strength to pick it up and to say, intentionally and boldly, "Give it to me!" May we be your witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth! For the sake of Jesus Christ your son our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

**Psalm 130**

<sup>1</sup>*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

<sup>2</sup>*Lord, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!*

<sup>3</sup>*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?*

<sup>4</sup>*But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.*

<sup>5</sup>*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;*

<sup>6</sup>*my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

<sup>7</sup>*O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.*

<sup>8</sup>*It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.*

**Matt Williams '15**

Last October I preached on Reformation Sunday from Psalm 130. It seemed to be an appropriate passage that demonstrated God's faithfulness to the Church throughout history, as well as continuity to the Lord's work. However, this scripture communicates something in a different light as we now encounter the season of Advent. As a prayer of lamentation and an address that is ordered out of abysmal circumstances, the text narratives hope to those drowning in the tumultuous waves of life. Advent can often feel like we are just naively whistling in the dark, while the sea consumes us. But just as the Psalmist waits and anticipates God's promise, Advent teaches us the extraordinary thing that when everything seems to reel in the undercurrent of the waters, Resurrection and Life come piercing through the storm, or perhaps just in the form of baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

**Prayer**

Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and grace, and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Savior and give us the strength to grow

in grace, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 14

### **Isaiah 8:1-15**

<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, “Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz,” <sup>2</sup>and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah. <sup>3</sup>And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, “Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; <sup>4</sup>for before the child knows how to call ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria.” <sup>5</sup>The LORD spoke to me again: <sup>6</sup>“Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; <sup>7</sup>therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; <sup>8</sup>it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

<sup>9</sup>Band together, you peoples, and be dismayed;

listen, all you far countries;

gird yourselves and be dismayed;

gird yourselves and be dismayed!

<sup>10</sup>Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught;

speak a word, but it will not stand,

for God is with us.”

<sup>11</sup>For the LORD spoke thus to me while his hand was strong upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: <sup>12</sup>“Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. <sup>13</sup>But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. <sup>14</sup>He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

<sup>15</sup>And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”

### **Erin Davenport '05**

Isaiah is warning the people of the two Kingdoms of Israel that the Southern Kingdom will fall to the Assyrians in less than a year (less time than it takes for a child to learn to speak). Isaiah and the Israelites are living in a time of political chaos that feels like it has dramatic and lasting historical significance. He is living and speaking in a time of split kingdoms, split narratives, split alliances—and *everyone* is full of dread. The Lord speaks to Isaiah and says in verses 12 and 13, “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears or be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.”

Like Isaiah, our hope is not in the kingdoms and powers of this world, but in Immanuel, God with us. Our hope, security, and future are found in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer**

Lord, give me the voice of a prophet today. Help me to speak hope into the midst of chaos, love into the midst of hate, and joy into the midst of sorrow. Thank you for reminding me again and again that you are God, and even when it seems that everything is splitting apart, you remain steadfast and holy. Amen.

### **2 Thessalonians 3:6-18**

<sup>6</sup>Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. <sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup>and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. <sup>9</sup>This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup>For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. <sup>11</sup>For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. <sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. <sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. <sup>14</sup>Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup>Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers. <sup>16</sup>Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you. <sup>17</sup>I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. <sup>18</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

### **Dave Morse, adjunct faculty**

At the end of this enigmatic letter, the writer issues a straight forward series of commands that are summed up in the admonition of verse 13, "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right." Regardless of what issues may or may not have prompted this letter, this word of direction is a timely word for us today, and it is especially relevant for our celebration of Advent. During this season we remember the one who came to be with us, and who, in the power of the Spirit, continues to come to be there for us.

As in every season of life, including Advent, we are not to be idle. We are not to grow lazy with the gift. We are not to become weary in doing what is right. We do what is right when, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we embody His gift to the world. Just as He was and is our hope, our peace, our joy, and our love, so also we are called to witness to that grace and truth by embodying it in the world. The one who has been sent by God into the world sends us to be His body in and for the world.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, help each of us to enter into this season as persons ready to be disciples of Jesus Christ, ready to take what we have been given and then to give it away to the world in lives of loving service. Let us seek justice, love mercy, and strive to do what is right through the power of the risen Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

### **Psalm 72**

- <sup>1</sup>Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
<sup>2</sup>May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
<sup>3</sup>May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
<sup>4</sup>May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.  
<sup>5</sup>May he live while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

- <sup>6</sup>*May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.*
- <sup>7</sup>*In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.*
- <sup>8</sup>*May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*
- <sup>9</sup>*May his foes bow down before him,  
and his enemies lick the dust.*
- <sup>10</sup>*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles  
render him tribute,  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts.*
- <sup>11</sup>*May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations give him service.*
- <sup>12</sup>*For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.*
- <sup>13</sup>*He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.*
- <sup>14</sup>*From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
and precious is their blood in his sight.*
- <sup>15</sup>*Long may he live!  
May gold of Sheba be given to him.  
May prayer be made for him continually,  
and blessings invoked for him all day long.*
- <sup>16</sup>*May there be abundance of grain in the land;  
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;  
may its fruit be like Lebanon;  
and may people blossom in the cities  
like the grass of the field.*
- <sup>17</sup>*May his name endure forever,  
his fame continue as long as the sun.  
May all nations be blessed in him;  
may they pronounce him happy.*
- <sup>18</sup>*Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
who alone does wondrous things.*
- <sup>19</sup>*Blessed be his glorious name forever;  
may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.*
- <sup>20</sup>*The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.*

### **John Stewart '59**

Arguably, three interpretative avenues lead into the province of this “royal” Psalm 72. One way understands it as David’s prayer for the flourishing of his son Solomon’s reign. Many commentators remember that Psalm 72 is recited at the coronation of the kings and queens of England. According to another way of interpretation, some Jews and many Christians interpret this psalm as messianic. Early on, Christians understood Psalm 72 as forecasting Jesus, David’s heir, as Messiah whose coming reign will endure like the sun and moon. Peace and righteousness will abound. Lesser powers will bow to his wisdom. Even people living in cities will blossom. Most significantly, however, this Messiah will be an advocate for justice, not just a vague, generic justice, but justice for the poor and for “those who have



no helper.” Might there be a third way into and out of Psalm 72? Is it not an edict to any person in any position of authority—teachers, parents, union stewards, CEOs, judges, stock brokers, civil servants, pastors, coaches, presidents—to “give deliverance to the needy” even while overseeing the “prosperity of the people”?

### **Prayer**

We await your coming again, Lord Jesus. While we wait, give us an unwavering passion for your Kingdom’s agenda to “seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly” with you. Amen.

### **Psalm 80**

- <sup>1</sup>*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth*
- <sup>2</sup>*before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!*
- <sup>3</sup>*Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*
- <sup>4</sup>*O LORD God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?*
- <sup>5</sup>*You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.*
- <sup>6</sup>*You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.*
- <sup>7</sup>*Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*
- <sup>8</sup>*You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.*
- <sup>9</sup>*You cleared the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.*
- <sup>10</sup>*The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches;*
- <sup>11</sup>*it sent out its branches to the sea,  
and its shoots to the River.*
- <sup>12</sup>*Why then have you broken down its walls,  
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?*
- <sup>13</sup>*The boar from the forest ravages it,  
and all that move in the field feed on it.*
- <sup>14</sup>*Turn again, O God of hosts;  
look down from heaven, and see;  
have regard for this vine,  
the stock that your right hand planted.*
- <sup>15</sup>*They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;  
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.*
- <sup>16</sup>*But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.*

<sup>18</sup>*Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.*

<sup>19</sup>*Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

### **Lexi Joachim Scoggin '09**

Despite the mounting joy and excitement that accompanies the season of Advent, Christmas can also be a time of immense sorrow for those who look back on the past year and remember the tragedies, losses, and moments of despair that they have felt. For those who have lost a loved one, it is especially a time of bittersweet nostalgia. Or maybe just bitterness, because things are not as they were a year ago.

Although no one close to me died this past year, I can think of other people who lost a friend or family member unexpectedly. At the church where I was doing my field education, a 12-year-old girl in the youth group was killed by a teenage drunk driver in April. A 21-year-old boy from a youth group I formerly led died in September from a drug overdose. The man who was to become the choir director at my father's church committed suicide in March on the same day he was hired. I'm certain there are countless more stories of tragedies like these.

Those of us touched by that person who died are now faced with the harsh fact that they are gone from this life for good, and no holiday or event in our life will ever be the same. Nor will the pain of that loss ever completely fade away. Even though we do our best to enjoy the Christmas season and embrace the excitement of the Messiah's entrance into the world as the infant Jesus, there is still perhaps deeply-rooted anger or frustrated perplexity that this all-powerful, holy God we worship did not save that person from death.

And then we are "trapped" by people all around us who are joyfully spending time with their loved ones as we inwardly mourn for the person(s) who aren't with us to celebrate this Christmas. But are we really "trapped"? Have we forgotten the promises that came with Jesus' birth and God's saving acts on behalf of Israel?

When God chose Israel as a "vine out of Egypt," he saved them from wilting under oppression. Thus, Israel has witnessed the saving power of God firsthand, and now they implore Him to shine His face upon them once again, so that they may be saved from scorn, despair and feeling abandoned by their Shepherd. All has not been lost. Behind the psalmist's words of desperate pleading to God for restoration and salvation, there is hope.

Therefore, let us not lose hope in this season of Joy. No matter what has happened, God has promised to us through His son, Jesus Christ, an offer of salvation, forgiveness of sins, and restoration in this life and the one to come. This is the greatest gift we could ever receive—May you accept it with faithfulness.

### ***Prayer***

Dearest Lord, May your face shine upon those who are feeling more sorrow than joy this Christmas season. By your scriptures and the Holy Spirit, may you mend their hearts, bodies and lives with the hope-filled promise that You always remain true to Your Word. Guide us to be a compassionate presence and to lovingly embrace those who need your restoration. We praise your name forever and ever, our King and Savior. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 15

### **Isaiah 13:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>*The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw.*

<sup>2</sup>*On a bare hill raise a signal,  
cry aloud to them;*

*wave the hand for them to enter  
the gates of the nobles.*

<sup>3</sup>*I myself have commanded my consecrated ones,  
have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones,  
to execute my anger.*

<sup>4</sup>*Listen, a tumult on the mountains  
as of a great multitude!*

*Listen, an uproar of kingdoms,  
of nations gathering together!*

*The LORD of hosts is mustering  
an army for battle.*

<sup>5</sup>*They come from a distant land,  
from the end of the heavens,  
the LORD and the weapons of his indignation,  
to destroy the whole earth.*

<sup>6</sup>*Wail, for the day of the LORD is near;  
it will come like destruction from the Almighty!*

<sup>7</sup>*Therefore all hands will be feeble,  
and every human heart will melt,*

<sup>8</sup>*and they will be dismayed.*

*Pangs and agony will seize them;  
they will be in anguish like a woman in labor.*

*They will look aghast at one another;  
their faces will be aflame.*

<sup>9</sup>*See, the day of the LORD comes,  
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,  
to make the earth a desolation,  
and to destroy its sinners from it.*

<sup>10</sup>*For the stars of the heavens and their constellations  
will not give their light;  
the sun will be dark at its rising,  
and the moon will not shed its light.*

<sup>11</sup>*I will punish the world for its evil,  
and the wicked for their iniquity;  
I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant,  
and lay low the insolence of tyrants.*

<sup>12</sup>*I will make mortals more rare than fine gold,  
and humans than the gold of Ophir.*

<sup>13</sup>*Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,  
and the earth will be shaken out of its place,  
at the wrath of the LORD of hosts  
in the day of his fierce anger.*

## Steve Allman '09

Today's passage from Isaiah isn't one that we'd expect to read during advent. We like the suffering servant, or the way of the Lord being made straight, better. The day of the Lord coming to make the land desolate seems too ominous, and even contradictory to the stand message of this season. But as Hebrews reminds us, God is so holy that his presence is cause for fear and trembling; even Moses approached him with awe.

Yet Hebrews also tells us that "you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." How is it that a mere mortal who must be stoned for even setting foot on God's mountain can come into the assembly of God himself? John the Baptist knew the answer. John says of Jesus, "'He must become greater; I must become less'" (John 3:30). Jesus himself came from heaven so that we would no longer need to be separated from God. When we were unable to approach the Lord, he approached us instead.

John's statement didn't apply only to himself. Jesus must become greater, and we all must become less. Trying to make ourselves greater is the basis of all the sin that separates us from God. As Jesus becomes greater in our lives, we begin to grow into the life that God wants us to have, and which will continue in God's presence in the world to come.

This is what was really unexpected about Jesus' message. It was believed that a hero was coming to overthrow the Roman government and vindicate Israel as a state. What God provided instead was a man who could live in our hearts and teach us how to become less, in order that we could become closer to God than we could think possible. How often do we reflect on this? It's more popular to take the message of Christmas as a story about a God who loves us and came to live among us, redeem us from our sins, and then go back to heaven, leaving us once again to our own devices. But that's not what the Bible offers us. Instead, we are told of a God who, because he became human, reestablished contact with us so that we could become like him. But for that to happen, we must come to God on our knees and become less, so that, through Jesus, we can become what God means us to be.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, we come to you on our knees, thanking you for coming to us when we were unworthy to approach you. We ask that you help us to lay aside our egos and learn to love you with our whole hearts, so that we may give them more fully to you. Amen.

### **John 3:22-30**

<sup>22</sup>After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. <sup>23</sup>John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized <sup>24</sup>—John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. <sup>25</sup>Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. <sup>26</sup>They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." <sup>27</sup>John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. <sup>28</sup>You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' <sup>29</sup>He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. <sup>30</sup>He must increase, but I must decrease."

**Connie Gundry Tappy, staff**

"He must increase, but I must decrease." Surely not the response John's disciples were expecting. After all, the competition was winning. What about keeping up with the Joneses? What about climbing the ladder? What about staying at the top of your game, and taking care of number one? What a countercultural posture the Baptist models for us moderns. He recognizes his secondary place as the one "sent before," and he's happy about playing that supporting role: "this joy of mine has been made full." What's more, he's determined to become less—to fade into the shadows as the spotlight comes into sharper focus on Jesus. For people in a world that largely measures success by the amount of attention one attracts—in *whatever* way—John's stance is both challenging and at the same time stress-relieving . . . if we let it be. If we move over. If we relinquish center stage to God.

**Prayer**

Most gracious heavenly Father, when I am tempted to live my life out of determination to gain everything that I, and not you, have put on my life's Christmas-wish list, please remind me that I, too, "can receive nothing, unless it has been given [to me] from heaven," and that I have already received the greatest heavenly gift of all in Jesus Christ, your son and my Savior, who lives in me through your Holy Spirit. Glory and praise to you, and to you alone.

**Hebrews 12:18-29**

<sup>18</sup>*You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, <sup>19</sup>and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup>(For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." <sup>21</sup>Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") <sup>22</sup>But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup>and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup>and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. <sup>25</sup>See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! <sup>26</sup>At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." <sup>27</sup>This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. <sup>28</sup>Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; <sup>29</sup>for indeed our God is a consuming fire.*

**Karen Bowden Cooper '98**

At Mount Sinai, Israelites retreated before the overwhelming power of God, experienced as fire, darkness, storm, and a shattering voice. The full power of God was more than humankind could bear, and in its necessary retreat from God's immediate presence, Israel struggled.

The life and death of Jesus bring a new covenant—a new understanding of God's will for humankind and an invitation to approach God at another mountain, Zion. Here the power of the living God transforms—purifies, orders, and unites. Here God is as a consuming fire.

Service to this live God is rooted in faith and in hearkening to the voice of Jesus, whose life and teaching are evoked in the exhortation that follows in Chapter 13: "Let brotherly love continue . . . Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers . . . Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison

with them, and those who are ill-treated. Let marriage be held in honor among you" (Heb 13:1-4). As we await the transformation, the consuming fire is reflected where there is love.

**Prayer**

Gracious God, we thank you for this season's promise of new life. Strengthen us to do your will and sustain us in faith in things to come. Amen.

**Lisa Dormire '86**

True confession. I'm a TLC, History, and Discovery Channel junkie. Please don't judge. Recently in flipping channels, I've often stumbled on shows prophesying the end of the world as we know it on December 21, 2012. Thanks to the Mayans they say. While I'm more than a little skeptical on the theories, those who have eyes to see and ears to hear know that we are living in concerning and complicated days. Financial fears, natural disasters, war... does it get much darker? Once again in this season of Advent and Expectation, we find ourselves with much to fear. How good is the word for us this day then from Hebrews 12. While it may appear that we stand at the mountain of fear and fire, we have come to Mount Zion: the city of the living God. Yes, the world may shake, but we are receiving a kingdom that CANNOT BE SHAKEN! Nevertheless the shaking that surrounds us, we come to the mountain of joy. We watch. We wait. We pray for a better world and we work for a better world. Our trust is firmly placed in the living God who came to us in Jesus Christ. As we read in this passage, "Let us be thankful." Alleluia.

**Prayer**

Holy God, though the earth shakes, we need not fear. In you we find our confidence and hope. Thank you for this season of joyful expectation. We place our trust in you. Amen.

**Psalm 24**

- <sup>1</sup>*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;*
- <sup>2</sup>*for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?*
- <sup>4</sup>*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.*
- <sup>5</sup>*They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*
- <sup>6</sup>*Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*
- <sup>7</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*

<sup>10</sup>*Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.*

### **Myles MacDonald '55**

Psalms 22, 23, and 24 form a trilogy, all attributed to King David. In all probability, these three psalms were among the scripture passages interpreted by Jesus to those two disciples on the Emmaus Road on the first Easter evening. How we wish we could have been present with Cleopas, & that other disciple, to hear such an authoritative and informative exposition of scripture.

The phrase “the King of Glory” is mentioned no less than five times in the last four verses of Psalm 24. And it is significant that Matthew’s gospel, at the outset, asks, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2) The answer to that question is found near the end of Matthew’s gospel with a sign above the cross, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.” (Matt. 27:37)

With David, we ask, “Who is the King of Glory ?” And we respond, “The Babe of Bethlehem, He is the King of Glory.” We ask again, “Who is the King of Glory ?” , and answer, “The Christ of Calvary, He is the King of Glory.” We ask once more, “Who is this King of Glory ?, and affirm, “The Risen and Living Lord, He is the King of Glory.”

In this Advent season, along with the angels from the realms of glory, we worship and adore the newborn King, the King of Glory.

#### ***Prayer***

We thank you, Lord, that Jesus is the King of Glory. He alone has made our hands clean and our hearts pure, so that we may worship in spirit and in truth. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

### **Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13**

Psalm 24 declares the sovereignty of God—Creator God, to whom all the world belongs, including humanity and God, the King of Glory, to whom all honor, majesty and worship belong. We can almost hear this song of praise and adoration being sung as worshipers entered into temple to worship Yahweh. We are told that only those who are “guiltless vessels” with clear, sincere, and pure souls, hearts, and minds—those who have not, nor will not, be carried away or influenced by evil or falsehoods—shall receive blessing and vindication from the God of salvation. It is almost paradoxical that only by the grace of God, through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, are we thus prepared to receive God’s gifts. In this season, may we look ever to the “hill of the LORD,” from whence comes our help, our salvation, our redemptive holiness, and worship the only sovereign God, who is the King of Glory.

#### ***Prayer***

Majestic and sovereign God, you alone are worthy of praise and honor. Lord, we confess that there are times when we enter into your presence distracted by the cares of life and do not give you the honor and presence of mind you are worthy of. As we contemplate the coming Christ child, direct our thoughts and create in us clean hands and pure hearts, that we might be found worthy of your love and the sacrifice of Jesus, for you are the King of glory, majesty and honor. Amen.

### ***Psalm 110***

<sup>1</sup>*The LORD says to my lord,  
 "Sit at my right hand  
 until I make your enemies your footstool."*

<sup>2</sup>*The LORD sends out from Zion  
 your mighty scepter.  
 Rule in the midst of your foes.*

<sup>3</sup>*Your people will offer themselves willingly  
 on the day you lead your forces  
 on the holy mountains.  
 From the womb of the morning,  
 like dew, your youth will come to you.*

<sup>4</sup>*The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,  
 "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."*

<sup>5</sup>*The Lord is at your right hand;  
 he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.*

<sup>6</sup>*He will execute judgment among the nations,  
 filling them with corpses;  
 he will shatter heads  
 over the wide earth.*

<sup>7</sup>*He will drink from the stream by the path;  
 therefore he will lift up his head.*

**Jacob Wilson, student staff**

Melchizedek calls You priest; You sit at God's right hand; You judge people and nation;  
 To You I come.  
 You are Messiah; Christ; Savior and Lord.

Seven verses call You by name:

You are one with the Godhead; both unity and division; completion and resurrection; sabbath of creation; grace upon grace; human and slave, our weakness set free.

You are Perfection.

Enthroned in Psalm:

In honor; in victory; in judgment.

From Holy Mount to lowly stream,

You are there.

From where You sit to where You send:

Your children come.

Lift Your head:

*Adventus; parousia; maranatha.*

By the path:

Purple and blue; candle and wreath; carol and calendar.

Between memory and hope; between past and present, we wait for Thee already come.

"O Antiphons: *ero cras*," and "O come, O come Emmanuel."

From Zion to footstool heads shatter:



You have come; You are risen; and You will come again!  
Advent to Christmastide; four Sundays to five;  
One season begets another: one hope begets all joy.

Jesus: You are Priest forever.  
I have sworn this and will not change my mind.

***Prayer***

Lord, Teach me to remember You as You have remembered me. Let me anticipate my neighbor with love and expect my enemy with kindness. Make me to work in praise and rest in humility. Bring me into light and deliver me from darkness. Lead me to Your kingdom and save me from my own.  
Amen.

## Year 1, Day 16

### **Isaiah 8:16-9:1**

*<sup>8:16</sup>Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. <sup>17</sup>I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. <sup>18</sup>See, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. <sup>19</sup>Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, <sup>20</sup>for teaching and for instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! <sup>21</sup>They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, <sup>22</sup>or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness. <sup>9:1</sup>But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

### **Tim Browning, former staff (deceased)**

I hate waiting, especially for important things. If something is going to affect my life I want to know about it now. If someone has something to say, I want to hear it now. If there's bad news I'd rather know what it is sooner than later so I can go ahead and deal with it. Waiting means being in doubt. It means lack of control.

I've had to learn patience through the years and I've had to learn how to deal with waiting patiently while someone else makes decisions about my life. I remember one particular event that tested my patience to the very limits and beyond.

My wife and I decided it was time to have children in the middle of our fifth year of marriage, but that was not to be. Like many couples we went through the painful struggle of infertility. Month after month we faced the uncertainty of wondering if we would be blessed with a child only to have our wonder turned to despair. We tried every recommendation that seemed reasonable and many that weren't. We went to doctors and specialists who promised solutions to our childlessness. As months turned into years, we had to deal with the growing realization that we would remain childless, that our genes would end with us. Surely God's face had been turned against us and we were forced to settle in a place of exile where no happy couple wishes to go. All around us other young marrieds were announcing their future bliss. Sunday after Sunday new babies were being presented in worship. Every place we went had child care that was overflowing. No place was safe from those young voices that reminded us of our plight. Mother's Day became the most dreaded holiday of the year.

I believe that this is the type of emotion that Isaiah was dealing with as he tried to speak God's word to Israel. People had fallen into despair and with good reasons. Even if they didn't realize it yet, a deep darkness was overshadowing everything. Their plans for the future were becoming shadows of meaninglessness. Life has times when it seems we have been abandoned, forgotten by God. Times when we are tempted to turn to anything in our society that might hold a glimmer of hope, even if we know that hope to be baseless, or built on the sand. Others may turn to those false promises, but they will prove to be only destructive in the end.

It is in those times of doubt and darkness that we must remember the God who is the foundation of our hope and faith. Our days may be dark but we have not been forgotten by our God. It is in those times

that we must remember that God's promise has not been removed from us. There is a bright future for those who can find the strength to persevere. Those of us who live our lives based on the gospel of Jesus Christ have a foundation for hope that goes beyond anything we can imagine, if we but trust in God.

Fortunately for my wife and me, God's plans for us did include children. Once we decided that we could adopt we found a world that needed the love and care we could provide. Amazingly, only nine months after our initial contact with an adoption agency, a beautiful baby boy only three weeks old was placed in our care. It may seem that God's face is turned from us for a time, but that is only the result of the limitations of our human perspectives. God is faithful to the end.

### **Prayer**

O God of hope, continuing to abide with us that we may not lose sight of your promises for our future. Help us to cling to you and your ways that we may realize the abundance of your love in this time of uncertainty; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Luke 22:39-53**

<sup>39</sup>He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. <sup>40</sup>When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." <sup>41</sup>Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, <sup>42</sup>"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." <sup>43</sup>Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. <sup>44</sup>In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. <sup>45</sup>When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, <sup>46</sup>and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." <sup>47</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; <sup>48</sup>but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" <sup>49</sup>When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" <sup>50</sup>Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. <sup>51</sup>But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. <sup>52</sup>Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? <sup>53</sup>When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

### **Jim Davison '69**

"Waiting" is a major theme during Advent. In the Lucan reading today, Jesus takes the disciples with him to Gethsemane, asking them to pray that they not enter into temptation. He says in effect, "Wait and pray." That's what Advent is all about, isn't it? As we go through Advent, waiting for the celebration of the Christ-child's coming into this world, we are encouraged to reflect on the mysteries of God's greatness and God's grace. And what better way to ponder these things than to be in a spirit of prayer?

From this passage, we might take the disciples as a model for our celebration of Advent, but there's a problem here. The disciples wait, all right, but instead of praying, they fall asleep. The cares of this world—not to mention their worries and anxieties—are too much for them, and they escape into sleep. While we may not fall asleep, will our own cares and anxieties keep us from praying as we wait during Advent?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, as we wait during this Advent season, enable us to be awake to your greatness and grace, alert to the mystery of the coming Christ-child, and attentive to the movement of your Spirit in our hearts and lives. Assist us to “wait and pray” with joy and gladness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## **2 Peter 1:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: <sup>2</sup>May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup>His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup>Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. <sup>5</sup>For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, <sup>7</sup>and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. <sup>8</sup>For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. <sup>11</sup>For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

### **Stephanie Boddie, Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council**

A few years ago, I was worshipping at Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in Philadelphia and heard the song *Heaven’s Christmas Tree*. I later learned the pastor that penned the song also wrote a sermon with the same title. In the sermon, the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933) asked, is “Christ really a tree? . . . And if so, are there packages in this tree?” He answered, “Yes, a package with your name on it is hanging on the limb of Heaven’s great Christmas Tree.” Tindley suggested that Christ bears a package of rare blessings for every human being throughout the world.

According to these verses from 2 Peter, through Christ we have been given a precious faith and the precious promises of God. Our needs have already been anticipated and met. We have been given all we need for life and godliness. The gift of faith help us to claim these other gifts—moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and above all, love. Having received these gifts, we will live into our new life and our new identity. We will become partakers in the very nature of God.

Like the expectant child on Christmas morning, we must come and receive these gifts. We must not toss them aside after the excitement of Christmas is over.

Keep reaching up with all your heart, soul, and strength to receive from Heaven’s Christmas Tree!

### **Prayer**

Loving God through your goodness and glory you have given us rare blessings in your son, Jesus Christ, and everything we need for life and godliness. Fill our hearts with peace as we share in your divine nature and grow in faith, adding courage, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, kindness, and above all, love.

**Psalm 40**

- <sup>1</sup>*I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.*
- <sup>2</sup>*He drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.*
- <sup>3</sup>*He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear,  
and put their trust in the LORD.*
- <sup>4</sup>*Happy are those who make  
the LORD their trust,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after false gods.*
- <sup>5</sup>*You have multiplied, O LORD my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you.  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted.*
- <sup>6</sup>*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,  
but you have given me an open ear.  
Burnt offering and sin offering  
you have not required.*
- <sup>7</sup>*Then I said, "Here I am;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.*
- <sup>8</sup>*I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."*
- <sup>9</sup>*I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,  
as you know, O LORD.*
- <sup>10</sup>*I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;  
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.*
- <sup>11</sup>*Do not, O LORD, withhold  
your mercy from me;  
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
keep me safe forever.*
- <sup>12</sup>*For evils have encompassed me  
without number;  
my iniquities have overtaken me,  
until I cannot see;  
they are more than the hairs of my head,  
and my heart fails me.*
- <sup>13</sup>*Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;  
O LORD, make haste to help me.*

<sup>14</sup>*Let all those be put to shame and confusion  
who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor  
who desire my hurt.*

<sup>15</sup>*Let those be appalled because of their shame  
who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"*

<sup>16</sup>*But may all who seek you  
rejoice and be glad in you;  
may those who love your salvation  
say continually, "Great is the LORD!"*

<sup>17</sup>*As for me, I am poor and needy,  
but the Lord takes thought for me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
do not delay, O my God.*

### **Brian Lays '15/'16**

If the spiritual life can be summed up in one word that word might be "wait." Nothing is more fundamental to the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers, who repeatedly urge their pupils to "wait in your cell, and it will teach you what you need to know." If we are to mature in faith, we must become masters of waiting, masters of the long hall.

Yet few things are more counter-intuitive to the culture in which we find ourselves. When we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, we quickly seek to move on. The Psalmist acknowledges that after waiting patiently for the Lord, rescue from the slimy pit finally came. But waiting came first. The slimy pit was the Psalmist's cell; the desert fathers would have urged the Psalmist to wait and learn what the cell had to teach. If you find yourself in a pit of mud and mire, your first impulse might be to search for an emergency exit. Perhaps the only option will be to wait. Rescue will come; God will put a new song in your mouth. But first, see what the pit has to teach you. Don't waste the wait.

#### ***Prayer***

O God, none can compare with you for great are the things you have done. In this Advent season, grant to us boldness in our waiting, courage in our desolation, and strength to sing a new song. Give us eyes to see what you would have us learn and help us to reside in your love and faithfulness to which we are called as witnesses. In Your Son's name we pray, Amen.

### **Kendra Buckwalter Smith '12/'13**

"Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away, never dies away." This text of a song comes to us from the Taizé community in France. Generally, songs end with a stable harmonic resolution, with the final chord offering a sense of arrival, of completion. But this particular song ends with a chord that feels unresolved. Even as the song ends and our voices fall silent, this unresolved chord hangs in the air, thus filling us with the sense that there is something more to come. Advent is the time when we are filled with hope and expectation for that something more.

The Psalmist is in the pit. He is crying out for God's mercy in much the same way that we cry out in the midst of racial injustice and natural disasters and refugee crises. But the Psalmist has been pulled out of the pit before and trusts that the God who has been faithful in the past will again bring deliverance. This is our Advent hope. Remembering that God's Kingdom came into our midst long ago, we cast our gaze forward in assurance of something more to come—the fullness of that Kingdom. And so, God has put a

new song in our mouths—a song of trust and hope, a song sung even (or perhaps especially) in our darkest nights.

**Prayer**

Almighty and most merciful God, may your Spirit kindle a light in our darkness. Give us hope in times when your Kingdom seems too distant. Even as we long for something more than this broken world, put a new song in our mouths that we may proclaim your steadfast love and faithfulness. Amen.

**Psalm 67**

<sup>1</sup>*May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us,*  
<sup>2</sup>*that your way may be known upon earth,  
your saving power among all nations.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.*  
<sup>4</sup>*Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth.*  
<sup>5</sup>*Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.*  
<sup>6</sup>*The earth has yielded its increase;  
God, our God, has blessed us.*  
<sup>7</sup>*May God continue to bless us;  
let all the ends of the earth revere him.*

**Jen Haddox '06**

I'm reminded this season that the reason we give gifts at Christmas is because God gave us a gift. But in the hustle and bustle of shopping for gifts, I tend to overlook the scope of this gift God gave to us! I forget the global nature of this gift! Jesus was given as a gift to all nations. Jesus is "...a light for revelation to the Gentiles" as foretold by Simeon in the temple (Luke 2:32).

Psalm 67 is a call to worship, but not just a call for those who have received God's blessing or even for those who are near and dear to us. It is a call for all the nations to worship. "May the peoples praise you, O God!"

As God shines his face of blessing on us this Advent season, may we also live in this call of Psalm 67. May we share the blessing we have received by giving to others, so that God might be made known in the world!

**Prayer**

Gracious God, we do seek your face and pray for your blessing. As we receive your blessing, give us clear opportunities and generous spirits this Advent season, that we might share your light and love with the world. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 17

### **Isaiah 11:1-9**

- <sup>1</sup>*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*
- <sup>2</sup>*The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*
- <sup>3</sup>*His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;*
- <sup>4</sup>*but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*
- <sup>5</sup>*Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*
- <sup>6</sup>*The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.*
- <sup>7</sup>*The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*
- <sup>8</sup>*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*
- <sup>9</sup>*They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.*

### **Bob Koschik '76**

Imagine if you heard music coming from down the street, looked out the window and parading in front of your home were animals who were natural enemies, but they marched as one, reoriented and transformed and led, by of all things, a little child. Yet, as astonishing as that seems, is that not what we kind of sense in Isaiah 11. Animals who were the oldest of opponents: wolf-lamb, leopard-kid, calf-lion, cow-bear, lion-ox are made friends. Does that not hint at where the consummation of history is leading us—to reconciliation and peace and it is all GOD's DOING, God's gift. No wonder, Advent is a time to repent of all mortal strategies and scheming that peace comes from worldly security or status and to prepare ourselves to receive anew the little child whose birth we await and who is our peace.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray . . . Lord Jesus, you alone are our heart's desire, you alone are our peace and security, you alone are the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings and longings. In our successes and failures, help us to sense where you are calling us anew to yourself this day. Accept even our hearts as mangers, to your glory and honor. Amen.



**Carolyn Jones '77**

Looking back on the wearisome season of political campaigning so recently ended, it's tempting to imagine how different things might have been if the agenda for our elections had been guided by Isaiah's description of the ideal ruler, rather than by partisan politics. The trouble is that, since Isaiah 11 is most often read as part of our observance of Advent/Christmas, we tend to associate the prophet's words only with Jesus—not with all who govern.

As unlikely as it is that any of us will ever be a king, we probably will be called upon to exercise leadership in our family, community, place of business, or church. According to Isaiah (11:2), the Spirit blesses those set apart for leadership with intellectual qualities and practical skills which are grounded in the "knowledge and fear of the Lord." The judgments of such leaders are marked by justice and righteousness—themes which appear in all of this day's readings, describing the character of God and/or the hope of God's people.

That hope is renewed each year at Christmas as we celebrate the faithfulness of God who, in Jesus, opened the door to a Peaceable Kingdom in which the peoples of the world live in harmony with one another and with the created order. And to that end, God is working still . . .

**Prayer**

Guide your people, O God, as we seek to make connections between the witness of Scripture and our own calls to discipleship. May the prophecy of Isaiah rekindle our hope, and the life of your Son be our inspiration, as we offer our prayer in his name. Amen.

**Helen Blier, staff**

Oh, the peaceable kingdom—wolves and lambs, calves and lions—I always loved the harmony suggested by the image! And it lends itself to a great art project when you're doing children's church.

But look more closely—this isn't just a matter of enemies all just getting along or opponents crossing a theological divide. There's a big power differential reflected in these pairings; wolves eat lambs, not the other way around. Lions hunt calves. The peace that will be brought by the Lord is one in which those who are in positions of power and privilege no longer pose a threat to the weak and oppressed.

Indeed, the option of the Lord is for the lamb and the calf, the poor and the meek—the Lord, who will come as a shoot, a tender stem, an infant, opts for fragile life that is easily bruised and trodden. The God of mercy comes to us as one most in need of mercy and gentleness.

Who are the lambs among us today? The calves? Who needs the protection and care of those of us with some measure of power or privilege, whether it comes from what we have or who we are? Matthew 25 gives us a clue—those who are hungry, sick, lonely, poor, imprisoned. Children, elderly, refugees. Those on the margins. When we protect and cherish them, then, says Isaiah, "earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

**Prayer**

God, we await the feast of your coming! And we wonder at the knowledge that you came as a baby, a displaced person, born to parents of no means or status. Attune our hearts and hands to those who mirror your incarnation among us, that we might know the righteousness that comes when we embrace them with equity and compassion. In this way will we best prepare ourselves for your arrival. Amen.

**John 3:16-21**

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

**Carolyn Cranston '99**

From the time that I was a young child, I have loved the candlelight service on Christmas Eve. My very favorite part is when all of the lights are turned out and the minister lights the Christ candle at the front of the church. The first time I saw this, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that it was very dark until that first candle was lit. Then, the pastor walked down the aisle lighting the candles of the first person in each pew. In turn, the first person passed the light to the next and they passed the light to the next.

Eventually the candles were lit throughout the church and what had been total darkness was now bright as day. It is a beautiful sight to behold as the darkness disappears and we enter into the light.

The symbolism is beautiful. God sent the light into the world in the form of Jesus Christ, his only son. Jesus, God incarnate, came because God loves us unconditionally. While we were still of a sinful nature, God chose to give us eternal life through Christ. It is right there in John 3 verse 16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

God called us to come out of the darkness and enter into a new world that was filled with the light of God's love. Christians generally understand and accept this concept with our minds. The difficulty comes when we have to translate what the mind knows into our everyday living. It is easy to proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior, but do we live as though we believe it?

If we truly love God, we are called to be like Nicodemus and be born again. That means that we are not Sunday Christians. We are called to a new way of living. It is out of the love that we have for God that we should desire from the depths of our very being to give up our selfish ways and die to self. We are called to live into the life of Christ and follow his teachings.

So, this Christmas when you stand in church on Christmas Eve, I challenge you to once again expect the unexpected. For who would have ever believed that God would love us so much that he would give us his son, Jesus Christ, the light of the world. As you stand in darkness, consciously turn your sin over to God and ask that as the light fills the room, you too will stand in the light. Ask that all that you do may be done in the light to the glory of God.

**Prayer**

Holy and loving God, creator of all things, we thank you for our many blessings and praise your Holy name. As we await the coming of the Christ child, we ask that you continue to call us out of the darkness of self and into a new way of living. Help us to always follow the Light that is Jesus the Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup>Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

### **Dave Keys, staff**

What if this Christmas you found a simply wrapped box under your tree? You excitedly rip off the wrapping and take off the lid. You find a simple note which reads: "This is the Armor of God." You notice that attached to each article is a note. The *Belt of Truth* indicates to wrap this around your waist to protect yourself from deception and wickedness. The *Breastplate of Righteousness* is present to protect your heart and spirit from those who wish to hurt you. The *Shield of Faith* defends you from evil's powerful bolts of immoral energy. The *Helmet of Salvation* is to help you focus your thoughts on love and compassion and safeguard you from your sinful ways. And finally, it tells you to lift the *Sword of the Spirit* high above your head and proclaim the victory which is born this Christmas day.

After you unbox the contents, you notice on the bottom of the box is simply written, "Be Strong. You are not alone."

In this season of profound love, please cherish these gifts from God. You have been empowered to use them to further the kingdom of God and stand firm against the evil and chaos in this world.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, Father that you have not left us defenseless. Rather, you have called us to the battleground of prayer and have fully equipped us for the task. Now strengthen us each day to carry forward the gospel of Christ as we wage war against the evil one. Teach us to preach, to pray, and to persevere; and as the dust settles after each victory, may we be found standing our ground, prepared for the next foray into battle. Amen.

### **Psalms 94**

<sup>1</sup>O LORD, you God of vengeance,  
you God of vengeance, shine forth!  
<sup>2</sup>Rise up, O judge of the earth;  
give to the proud what they deserve!  
<sup>3</sup>O LORD, how long shall the wicked,  
how long shall the wicked exult?

<sup>4</sup>*They pour out their arrogant words;  
all the evildoers boast.*  
<sup>5</sup>*They crush your people, O LORD,  
and afflict your heritage.*  
<sup>6</sup>*They kill the widow and the stranger,  
they murder the orphan,*  
<sup>7</sup>*and they say, "The LORD does not see;  
the God of Jacob does not perceive."*  
<sup>8</sup>*Understand, O dumbest of the people;  
fools, when will you be wise?*  
<sup>9</sup>*He who planted the ear, does he not hear?  
He who formed the eye, does he not see?*  
<sup>10</sup>*He who disciplines the nations,  
he who teaches knowledge to humankind,  
does he not chastise?*  
<sup>11</sup>*The LORD knows our thoughts,  
that they are but an empty breath.*  
<sup>12</sup>*Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD,  
and whom you teach out of your law,*  
<sup>13</sup>*giving them respite from days of trouble,  
until a pit is dug for the wicked.*  
<sup>14</sup>*For the LORD will not forsake his people;  
he will not abandon his heritage;*  
<sup>15</sup>*for justice will return to the righteous,  
and all the upright in heart will follow it.*  
<sup>16</sup>*Who rises up for me against the wicked?  
Who stands up for me against evildoers?*  
<sup>17</sup>*If the LORD had not been my help,  
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.*  
<sup>18</sup>*When I thought, "My foot is slipping,"  
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.*  
<sup>19</sup>*When the cares of my heart are many,  
your consolations cheer my soul.*  
<sup>20</sup>*Can wicked rulers be allied with you,  
those who contrive mischief by statute?*  
<sup>21</sup>*They band together against the life of the righteous,  
and condemn the innocent to death.*  
<sup>22</sup>*But the LORD has become my stronghold,  
and my God the rock of my refuge.*  
<sup>23</sup>*He will repay them for their iniquity  
and wipe them out for their wickedness;  
the LORD our God will wipe them out.*

### **Mary Grey Emmett '89**

Who were they who first thought to shape the Christian year in such a way as to give us Advent? This gift that "keeps on giving" stirs the memory, prompting us to feel its rhythms, to hear its poetry. It is the time of extraordinary promise and hope that shower us with grace upon grace. We reflect on God's eternal vision, God's forever dream of us.

Who was the ancient one who first sang, “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for God will speak peace to his people?” Who was that one who sang of steadfast love and faithfulness, of righteousness and peace both surrounding and holding us? Let us hear, O God.

I do not think God is waiting for peace to come among us. I do think God continues to speak peace in a million, million ways.

Last year on Christmas Eve our time of Advent waiting merged with our daughter’s pregnancy. Her contractions began as we arrived at their curb in Philadelphia. We shared in the long night of watching and waiting, of rubbing her back, of taking turns with our son-in-law as we timed the contractions. They left for the birthing center before dawn, and the baby was born on Christmas Day in the morning. We spent hours helping to tend mother and child. The prophet’s words, “A child has been born,” blessed my memory over and over again.

Pain, fatigue, laughter, tears. New life, new hope, new promise. God speaking peace once again.

### **Prayer**

A Celtic Benediction: Deep peace of the running wave to you . . . Deep peace of the flowing air to you. Deep peace of the quiet earth to you . . . Deep peace of the shining stars to you. Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

### **Psalm 146**

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the LORD!*

*Praise the LORD, O my soul!*

<sup>2</sup>*I will praise the LORD as long as I live;*

*I will sing praises to my God all my life long.*

<sup>3</sup>*Do not put your trust in princes,*

*in mortals, in whom there is no help.*

<sup>4</sup>*When their breath departs, they return to the earth;*

*on that very day their plans perish.*

<sup>5</sup>*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,*

*whose hope is in the LORD their God,*

<sup>6</sup>*who made heaven and earth,*

*the sea, and all that is in them;*

*who keeps faith forever;*

<sup>7</sup>*who executes justice for the oppressed;*

*who gives food to the hungry.*

*The LORD sets the prisoners free;*

<sup>8</sup>*the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.*

*The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;*

*the LORD loves the righteous.*

<sup>9</sup>*The LORD watches over the strangers;*

*he upholds the orphan and the widow,*

*but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

<sup>10</sup>*The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise the LORD!*

**Cecile Springer, Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council**

This advent comes in the midst of division around us. We go forth in pursuit of joy and gladness as we await the coming holy season. Glad tidings surround our thoughts, for we forecast Christ's coming in glory. Thanks be to the Lord for lifting us up daily. By rejoicing loudly, we fill our souls with gladness as we pray for peace and happiness in the knowledge that Jesus' love conquers us all for God.

***Prayer***

Lord, let me be patient,  
Let me listen intently;  
Let me not judge,  
But rather extend my love to others.

Lord, let me be wise,  
Keep me faithful forever.  
Lord, keep me from foolishness,  
Open to love you forever.

## Year 1, Day 18

### **Isaiah 11:10-16**

<sup>10</sup>*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. <sup>11</sup>On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.*

<sup>12</sup>*He will raise a signal for the nations,  
and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,  
and gather the dispersed of Judah  
from the four corners of the earth.*

<sup>13</sup>*The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart,  
the hostility of Judah shall be cut off;  
Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,  
and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.*

<sup>14</sup>*But they shall swoop down on the backs of the Philistines in the west,  
together they shall plunder the people of the east.  
They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab,  
and the Ammonites shall obey them.*

<sup>15</sup>*And the LORD will utterly destroy  
the tongue of the sea of Egypt;  
and will wave his hand over the River  
with his scorching wind;  
and will split it into seven channels,  
and make a way to cross on foot;*

<sup>16</sup>*so there shall be a highway from Assyria  
for the remnant that is left of his people,  
as there was for Israel  
when they came up from the land of Egypt.*

### **Sonya-Marie Morley, Metro-Urban Institute Fellow**

The title of Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again* became a household phrase after its posthumous publication in 1940. Indeed, that concept seems like an apostasy during the season of Advent, when, for better or for worse, we often find ourselves immersed in complicated family systems that can, in fact, evoke a sense of home. But the notion of home for the original audience of today's devotional text was a luxury that was as foreign to some of them as their own surroundings were. After all, the United Monarchy of Israel had split into two kingdoms, and the ravages of war had left hundreds of thousands of Israelites displaced, much like Joseph and Mary at the time of Jesus' birth.

As hearers of today's text, we are invited to imagine a future when the Lord will "acquire," "gather," and "collect" those who have been dispersed. We are encouraged to envision a destiny in which a babe born in a lowly manger is "lift[ed] as a signal flag for the nations" and, in the process, "draws all people to" himself (John 12:32). We are inspired to hope for a "road" that is "the way, and the truth and the life" for all of us (John 14:6). This road leads us out of the exile of sin and death and assembles us together, here, at the foot of the manger, where we wait for the coming Messiah. Waiting reminds us that Christ in our world changes our reality: those who were dispersed are reassembled, reunited, restored, and adopted into the family of God through Jesus Christ.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, we thank you for loving us so much that you created a forever home for us in the Christ babe. As we gather with family and friends to wait, fill our hearts with the hope, peace, joy, and love that are the hallmarks of the Advent season. Amen.

### **John 5:30-47**

<sup>30</sup>"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>31</sup>"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. <sup>32</sup>There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. <sup>33</sup>You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. <sup>34</sup>Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. <sup>35</sup>He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. <sup>36</sup>But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. <sup>37</sup>And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, <sup>38</sup>and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. <sup>39</sup>"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. <sup>40</sup>Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. <sup>41</sup>I do not accept glory from human beings. <sup>42</sup>But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. <sup>43</sup>I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. <sup>44</sup>How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? <sup>45</sup>Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. <sup>46</sup>If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. <sup>47</sup>But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

### **Eric McIntosh '12**

I believe that sometimes we really get Jesus upset. Jesus comes with eternal life in his hands but often finds many of us rejecting his gift. Don't get me wrong—we want life . . . we just don't want Jesus. We look for life in our places of employment, in our degrees, in our spouses, our bank accounts, and our possessions. When we find that these temporal things or people fail us, we look to upgrade. We find ourselves in a lifestyle of acquisition and in turn really miss out on truth and blessing because we look for the eternal in the temporal. We make Jesus even more frustrated when we say we are His but live as though He is not ours. Jesus told those who rejected him, that neither the word nor the love of God was in them. This Advent season as he comes, is he telling us the same?

### **Prayer**

Jesus, as you come to us, help us to come to you for life, eternal life, the most wonderful gift possible. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Revelation 20:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. <sup>2</sup>He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, <sup>3</sup>and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while. <sup>4</sup>Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They



*came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. <sup>5</sup>(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup>Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. <sup>7</sup>When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison <sup>8</sup>and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. <sup>9</sup>They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. <sup>10</sup>And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*

### **Steve Tuell, faculty**

One of my favorite plays is “The Fantasticks,” a two-act musical fairy tale. In the first act, two best friends, pretending to be bitter enemies, forbid their children (a son and a daughter) to see one another. Sure enough, just as the friends had planned, the boy and girl fall in love! Next, the fathers stage a phony kidnapping, with the boy “rescuing” the girl and so winning her father’s “grudging” approval. As the first act curtain closes, the cast is frozen in a smiling, hugging tableau: happy ending! In fact, when I first saw this play, I turned to my wife Wendy and asked, “What could possibly happen now?” Act two begins with the characters still frozen in their happy-ending poses. But they can’t hold the pose for long. Soon the group hug breaks apart. The best friends discover, now that they are in-laws, a dozen little things they can’t stand about one another. The boy and the girl lose their infatuation, and break up. In short, “The Fantasticks” turns out to be about what happens after the happy ending—just like today’s text from Revelation.

John’s vision describes what certainly looks like a happy ending for our world: Jesus has returned, Satan has been bound, and a thousand years of peace on earth ensue. But then, as the vision unwinds, the enemy is released. Why? Perhaps because, even after a millennium of kingdom rule, the enemy can still find a multitude ready and willing to turn on God in rebellion: a vast host, “as numerous as the sands of the sea” (Rev 20:8), assemble behind Gog and Magog.

On a personal level, this vision addresses a universal experience: everyone knows what it’s like to be blindsided by failure or tragedy at the very moment when everything seems to be under control. Life doesn’t have closing-act curtains: the action continues, for better or for worse, and we must deal with whatever comes. The rise of Gog and Magog, even after a thousand years of Christ’s reign, underlines the power, pervasiveness and perversity of sin. Perhaps one lesson of John’s vision, then, is simply, “Don’t get cocky!” Overconfidence is a dangerous error, for even the best of us fail. Then again, in John’s vision, the enemy is not destroyed by human effort, but by “fire. . . from heaven” (Rev 20:9). Ultimately our salvation depends, not on our success or failure, but on the Lord’s faithfulness. Now that’s a real happy ending!

### **Prayer**

Lord, sometimes we think we have it made. Remind us that the play is not over: keep us attentive, and responsive, and obedient to you. Then again, sometimes we think that we are finished. Remind us that the end of the play is in your hands, not ours, and teach us to trust you to bring about our happy ending. In the name of your son Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, Amen.

### **Psalm 53**

<sup>1</sup>*Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."  
They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts;  
there is no one who does good.*

<sup>2</sup>*God looks down from heaven on humankind  
to see if there are any who are wise,  
who seek after God.*

<sup>3</sup>*They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse;  
there is no one who does good,  
no, not one.*

<sup>4</sup>*Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,  
who eat up my people as they eat bread,  
and do not call upon God?*

<sup>5</sup>*There they shall be in great terror,  
in terror such as has not been.  
For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly;  
they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.*

<sup>6</sup>*O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!  
When God restores the fortunes of his people,  
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.*

#### **Don McKim '74**

Psalm 53 (cf. Psalm 14) presents a dismal picture of humankind: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'" and "there is no one who does good no, not one." Fools are "corrupt" and "perverse" (vv. 1, 3). They are "practical atheists," living without reckoning with God in any dimension of existence. God does not matter.

But "fools" run a risk—certain jeopardy of God's judgment. They will live "in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly" and "they will be put to shame" (v. 5).

What can change? Help can come from only one source: God. The prayer is for "deliverance" ("salvation")—that "God restores the fortunes of his people" (v. 6).

This need is humankind's greatest—the need for "salvation," deliverance from our sin and from disregard for God. In Advent we anticipate God's deliverer to come: Jesus Christ! In him true help is ours!

#### ***Prayer***

O God, we live as fools, denying your presence and power. We prefer our own ways, apart from you. O God, deliver us. Save us. Help us. As we anticipate our Savior Jesus Christ this Advent season, make our hearts full of the knowledge of you. May we rejoice! Amen.

#### ***Psalm 147:1-11***

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the Lord!  
How good it is to sing praises to our God;  
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.*

<sup>2</sup>*The Lord builds up Jerusalem;  
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.*

<sup>3</sup>*He heals the brokenhearted,  
and binds up their wounds.*  
<sup>4</sup>*He determines the number of the stars;  
he gives to all of them their names.*  
<sup>5</sup>*Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;  
his understanding is beyond measure.*  
<sup>6</sup>*The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;  
he casts the wicked to the ground.*  
<sup>7</sup>*Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;  
make melody to our God on the lyre.*  
<sup>8</sup>*He covers the heavens with clouds,  
prepares rain for the earth,  
makes grass grow on the hills.*  
<sup>9</sup>*He gives to the animals their food,  
and to the young ravens when they cry.*  
<sup>10</sup>*His delight is not in the strength of the horse,  
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;*  
<sup>11</sup>*but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,  
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

#### **Dawn Sherwood '15**

"Let me thy inner presence feel; Thy grace and love in me reveal" ("Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gate", stanza 3, Georg Weissel, 1642; Trans. Catherine Winkworth, 1855).

When reflecting on this psalm in relation to this Advent season, I am struck by the hope that lies within the words of the Lord gathering the outcasts, healing the brokenhearted, and binding up their wounds. Although God is great and powerful without measure, the Lord continues to be present for us even when we are at our weakest. God has promised His steadfast love and is delighted when we recognize this and are in awe of Him. We have the opportunity during this Advent season to share this hope to those who are at their weakest. For true HOPE rests in the faith of the Lord's abounding grace and never-ending love.

#### **Prayer**

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this day and this season of hope. You promise your steadfast love to those who are weary, brokenhearted, and outcaste. We ask that your Holy Spirit guide us to people who feel this way, so that we reflect your love and grace to them, and thereby becoming instruments of the hope that lies in the faith in you. It is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.

#### **Ed Newberry '71**

The 147th is the second of the last five Hallelujah Psalms. Praise the Lord is the marvelous refrain. Old Testament scholar, James L. Mays writes "Psalm 147 begins with praise of praise itself." But true praise is for the Holy One of power and compassion. Sovereignty is expressed not just with creation, but also God's care for the outcasts, brokenhearted, downtrodden of Israel. Being counted among the needy blessed by God, we cry Hallelujah.

Reformed theologian Cornelius Plantinga reminds us that "Advent is a time when Christians draw alongside the Hebrews of the Old Testament. We share the longing of the people of God for the

anointed one.” We join the great refrain of praise in Advent. We sing gladly because we trust God and entrust ourselves to divine grace. We rejoice with hope in God’s steadfast love witnessed in God’s visitation to this earthly realm in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

***Prayer***

Gracious God, along with our ancestors in the faith we pray fervently, “O come, O come Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” With amazing grace, free us from our captivities and restore the glad hope we can have because Christ comes to us and to the world. May our hearts and minds receive your gift of Jesus. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 19

### **Isaiah 28:9-22**

<sup>9</sup>*"Whom will he teach knowledge,  
and to whom will he explain the message?  
Those who are weaned from milk,  
those taken from the breast?*

<sup>10</sup>*For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,  
line upon line, line upon line,  
here a little, there a little."*

<sup>11</sup>*Truly, with stammering lip  
and with alien tongue  
he will speak to this people,*

<sup>12</sup>*to whom he has said,  
"This is rest;  
give rest to the weary;  
and this is repose";  
yet they would not hear.*

<sup>13</sup>*Therefore the word of the LORD will be to them,  
"Precept upon precept, precept upon precept,  
line upon line, line upon line,  
here a little, there a little,"  
in order that they may go, and fall backward,  
and be broken, and snared, and taken.*

<sup>14</sup>*Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers  
who rule this people in Jerusalem.*

<sup>15</sup>*Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death,  
and with Sheol we have an agreement;  
when the overwhelming scourge passes through  
it will not come to us;  
for we have made lies our refuge,  
and in falsehood we have taken shelter";*

<sup>16</sup>*therefore thus says the Lord GOD,  
See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,  
a tested stone,  
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:  
"One who trusts will not panic."*

<sup>17</sup>*And I will make justice the line,  
and righteousness the plummet;  
hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,  
and waters will overwhelm the shelter.*

<sup>18</sup>*Then your covenant with death will be annulled,  
and your agreement with Sheol will not stand;  
when the overwhelming scourge passes through  
you will be beaten down by it.*

<sup>19</sup>*As often as it passes through, it will take you;  
for morning by morning it will pass through,  
by day and by night;*

*and it will be sheer terror to understand the message.*

<sup>20</sup>*For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it,  
and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it.*

<sup>21</sup>*For the LORD will rise up as on Mount Perazim,  
he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon;  
to do his deed—strange is his deed!  
and to work his work—alien is his work!*

<sup>22</sup>*Now therefore do not scoff,  
or your bonds will be made stronger;  
for I have heard a decree of destruction  
from the Lord GOD of hosts upon the whole land.*

### **Felix Rivera-Merced, Metro-Urban Institute Fellow**

It's a bit hackneyed to say we live in confusing and complicated times. Yet what I find striking in this passage is that it is exactly this sentiment that the people of God are using as an excuse: "Whom will he teach knowledge . . . Those who are weaned from milk?" That is, is the prophet speaking to babies? Does Isaiah not realize the problems we're facing—and all he says is, "One who trusts will not panic"? If there is to be a tomorrow, let alone a good one, we must act and make difficult choices.

Yet Isaiah here lays out for Judah God's "alien" plan: God will go against God's people—against those who "have made a covenant with death." God is going against them *so that* a new foundation stone, trust in God, can be laid and justice and righteousness made the standards of this new building.

Advent reminds us of God's alien work that breaks us: In the midst of oppression, God came down as a babe. God lived life as a babe, a toddler, a teenager, then as an adult for a bit. God's alien work took some time—for even through the story of Acts we see that the church lived in the midst of an oppressive empire, in an oppressive world.

The cornerstone upon which justice and righteousness are laid? Trust in a little peasant boy.

### **Prayer**

Lord, as we wait for Christmas, bring us to Holy Saturday, bring us to today. Teach us to wait for your coming. Let it break us, that whether we sit or act, eat or fast, we might hope for it to be in the holiness of your love and justice, of your kingdom. Amen.

### **Luke 1:5-25**

<sup>5</sup>*In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.*

<sup>8</sup>*Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the*

sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” <sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” <sup>19</sup>The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” <sup>21</sup>Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup>When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup>When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. <sup>24</sup>After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup>“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

### **Jean Henderson '68**

Advent—twenty-one centuries ago—a time of juxtapositions:

Gabriel talking to an old man about a baby;

Gabriel talking to a young girl about a baby.

Gabriel punishing the old man for his unbelief;

Gabriel praising the young girl for her belief.

A baby born to the old man and Elizabeth, named John;

A baby born to the young girl and Joseph, named Jesus.

John, preparing the Way, and dying—his head on a platter;

Jesus, the Way, dying—his body on a cross.

Advent—now—a time of juxtapositions:

Tears of sorrow for war-scarred earth and innocent dead;

Tears of joy for reunions and signs of resurrection.

The garden of Creation where sin dimmed the flowers;

The garden of Resurrection where death will be no more.

And all because God became one of us—

The ultimate juxtaposition!

### **Prayer**

God, Alpha and Omega, make wide our minds, make deep our hearts, to absorb your love for us.

Amen.

### **Revelation 20:11-21:8**

<sup>20:11</sup>Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. <sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup>Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; <sup>15</sup>and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. <sup>21:1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from

*God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
"See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;*

*<sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away."*

*<sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." <sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. <sup>7</sup>Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children <sup>8</sup>But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."*

### **Michael Gerhling '08**

"Behold, I am making everything new," says the one seated on the throne. Reading these words in Revelation always make me pause in gratitude. I can think of so many areas in my life where I long for a fresh start. Relationships with loved ones lost to death. Words and deeds that have made others weep. A life of prayer that, at times, feels barren and without hope.

But God's new creation in Christ brings much hope. An elderly priest offers incense, and sees an angel. A barren woman gives birth to a prophet of God. Tear-filled eyes are wiped clean by the caring hands of God himself. Death dies. Mourning, crying, and pain meet their demise. Thirsty people drink free water from the spring of life.

Everyone gets a fresh start in Christ. I know I can use one.

### **Prayer**

O God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendor of creation and the beauty of human life. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us, to share your blessings with our sisters and brothers, and to experience the joy of life in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord and Savior, Amen.

### **Psalm 126**

*<sup>1</sup>When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.*

*<sup>2</sup>Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."*

*<sup>3</sup>The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.*

*<sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*



<sup>5</sup>*May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.*

<sup>6</sup>*Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.*

### **Carol Pitts '89**

For the first time in her life, beloved Alisha is spending the Advent season in a memory care facility. Alisha is physically healthy, but Alzheimer's disease has ravaged her brain, leaving her unable to care for herself. She has become too difficult for her children to manage as they provide for their own children. Despite daily visits from her children, Alisha feels abandoned and alone. Her children feel guilty. It is a time of sadness with no hope of recovery, at least not in Alisha's lifetime. Still, in the midst of this disease, there are good times. In moments of lucidity, Alisha expresses her love for her children in a way she never has before. We must take the bitter with the sweet. But the Psalmist reminds us that bitter is never the end. "Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy." The Christ is coming!

### **Prayer**

God of all things, give us patience to deal with the trials in life. Grant us patience to wait with you until we see the Light. Amen.

### **Psalm 147:12-20**

<sup>12</sup>*Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!  
Praise your God, O Zion!*

<sup>13</sup>*For he strengthens the bars of your gates;  
he blesses your children within you.*

<sup>14</sup>*He grants peace within your borders;  
he fills you with the finest of wheat.*

<sup>15</sup>*He sends out his command to the earth;  
his word runs swiftly.*

<sup>16</sup>*He gives snow like wool;  
he scatters frost like ashes.*

<sup>17</sup>*He hurls down hail like crumbs—  
who can stand before his cold?*

<sup>18</sup>*He sends out his word, and melts them;  
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.*

<sup>19</sup>*He declares his word to Jacob,  
his statutes and ordinances to Israel.*

<sup>20</sup>*He has not dealt thus with any other nation;  
they do not know his ordinances.  
Praise the Lord!*

### **Danielle Estelle Ramsay '16**

When the psalmist calls Jerusalem to praise the Lord,  
we are reminded of the honor we have been given,  
the honor of being God's chosen people.  
The season of Advent is one of preparation,

preparation for the great gift our Lord has given us.

We wait, we remember, we remain, we praise.

We who are blessed among humanity to have seen the Lord.

And all of the great things he has done for us:

He fills us with fine wheat, with provision, with food and shelter and family.

He has given us a savior to rescue us, in our weakness.

He has not dealt in this way with any other nation.

We who are blessed among humanity, who have the peace of the Lord in our hearts.

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!

While we wait for his return,

with Zion,

we take up the great and beautiful task of praising our God!

***Prayer***

Lord, as we linger in this season of anticipation, help us to truly live in remembrance of you, coming together as the One Body to praise your name. Amen.

## Year 1, Day 20

### **Isaiah 29:9-24**

<sup>9</sup> *Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor,  
blind yourselves and be blind!*

*Be drunk, but not from wine;  
stagger, but not from strong drink!*

<sup>10</sup> *For the LORD has poured out upon you  
a spirit of deep sleep;  
he has closed your eyes, you prophets,  
and covered your heads, you seers.*

<sup>11</sup> *The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, "Read this," they say, "We cannot, for it is sealed." <sup>12</sup>And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, "Read this," they say, "We cannot read."*

<sup>13</sup> *The Lord said:*

*Because these people draw near with their mouths  
and honor me with their lips,  
while their hearts are far from me,  
and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;*

<sup>14</sup> *so I will again do  
amazing things with this people,  
shocking and amazing.  
The wisdom of their wise shall perish,  
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the LORD,  
whose deeds are in the dark,  
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"*

<sup>16</sup> *You turn things upside down!  
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?  
Shall the thing made say of its maker,  
"He did not make me";  
or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,  
"He has no understanding"?*

<sup>17</sup> *Shall not Lebanon in a very little while  
become a fruitful field,  
and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest?*

<sup>18</sup> *On that day the deaf shall hear  
the words of a scroll,  
and out of their gloom and darkness  
the eyes of the blind shall see.*

<sup>19</sup> *The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,  
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.*

<sup>20</sup> *For the tyrant shall be no more,  
and the scoffer shall cease to be;  
all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—*

<sup>21</sup> *those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit,  
who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate,  
and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right.*

<sup>22</sup>*Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham,  
concerning the house of Jacob:*

*No longer shall Jacob be ashamed,  
no longer shall his face grow pale.*

<sup>23</sup>*For when he sees his children,  
the work of my hands, in his midst,  
they will sanctify my name;  
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,  
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*

<sup>24</sup>*And those who err in spirit will come to understanding,  
and those who grumble will accept instruction.*

### **Edwin van Driel, faculty**

We are taught to experience life's events as a predictable chain of cause and effect. The stock market goes up and we rejoice, we lose an election and we feel depressed, we see empty pews and we feel deflated.

Today's readings offer a completely different take on history. Eyes are closed or opened, ears are covered or made to see, the meek are lifted up and tyrants are no more—not by the inevitable forces of history, but by the surprising, contingent, sovereign acts of God.

That's what Advent wants to prepare us for. Babies are born out of virgins, salvation comes from crucifixion, and the resurrecting One breaks open the grave. "You turn things upside down!" says the prophet (v. 16) in an amazement that echoes through the ages (see Acts 17:6!).

So fear not, for nothing will be impossible with God (Lk. 1:37).

#### ***Prayer***

Lord our God,  
You who cast down and lift up, you who close and open  
according to your sovereign will,  
help us to rest safely  
in the assurance that only you  
are history's Lord,  
leading us to the glory and peace  
of your Kingdom.  
Amen.

### **Kelcey Bailey, Metro-Urban Institute Fellow**

The prophets and seers are stumped. The human visions and plans constructed for our future are lost. And time and time again, the people of Israel come to worship God in rote rhythms dictated by human dogma. How often do we so easily seize the opportunities to make good! To prosper! To be victorious in our lives! But as the prophet cries to us, we're doing it all wrong when we believe ourselves to be the makers and creators in charge. We can at times so easily forget to turn to God as the potter and remember ourselves as the clay. Though our human power and arrogant wisdom can so easily turn things upside-down and in the wrong direction, there is grace in to be found, brothers and sisters: No matter how many times we try to root ourselves in our own plans rather than God's, God promises to do amazing things with God's people—AGAIN.

### **Prayer**

Dear God, in this season of preparation, prepare our hearts and minds to be open to your amazing reversal of the world's darkness. Help us loosen our tight grip on our plans and understandings and instead rest in your promise of fresh joy and light. Amen.

### **Luke 1:26-38**

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

### **Andrew Purves, faculty emeritus**

The angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, a virgin, and told her that God would come upon her. She would become pregnant with a boy, whose name was to be Jesus. He would be the son of God.

I cannot improve upon the story. No example will illustrate it. It tells of something unlike anything else that ever happened. If you don't believe it, Christianity is more or less a lie. If you do, Jesus is God and Savior.

God breaks open the bounds of the possible. Can such a thing happen—an angel announcing a non-sexual conception? The Bible is not interested in that question.

So Gabriel appears to Mary and greets her with words of gracious announcement: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you." God has chosen her to be the mother of Jesus, who is God. That the Lord is with her is a statement of fact that prepares Mary for a service that is the most remarkable God-getting-involved-with-us event since the creation itself. History is about to turn on what Gabriel announces to Mary.

Mary was confused and afraid. The angel calms her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Now the announcement that surely could never have been anticipated: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." The God-given name of the child means 'the LORD saves.' And the angel gives the divinely conceived child the most remarkable title: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High." His identity is established. He is not to be a holy man who aspires to godliness. He is not to be a great religious leader. Rather he is one in being with God.

He is God with us, God for us, the very sign and actuality of God's truth and purpose. The birth of Jesus as God means that God is revealed concretely and specifically in and as the child whose conception is here told. The child of this conception is the hinge on which all other truth will turn, the beginning and the end. He will sit on "the throne of his father David;" "and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Biology meets its boundary in the face of biology's creator. "How can this be?" Mary asks. Adam is reborn. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you"—the angel's words echo the story of creation when the Holy Spirit moved upon the formless void. This is now no longer the old creation continuing, but a new creation. Nature's God acts upon creation in sovereign freedom to do a new thing.

Old creation, creation apart from Christ, cannot understand what has happened. The law of the old order has been opened up beyond what was and is possible for nature. God who created reproductive biology is not himself subject to reproductive biology. If creation is the first act of God on his own terms, the second creation, the conception and birth of Jesus, his son, is the second. A new creation and therefore a new future is announced and made actual. The story means what it says: God entered into the world and took our birth in order to be our way home to God.

#### ***Prayer***

Our Father in heaven, as you sent the Holy Spirit to come upon Mary, that she would conceive and give birth to Jesus, we pray that we too may be bearers of your Spirit. Let us, with Mary, be willing and faithful servants of the Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

#### **Susan Vande Kappelle '95**

I recently participated in the birthing of my daughter's son. Although I have given birth to two children and now witnessed one directly, I have no idea how a baby is born. And I certainly cannot imagine that God could somehow be born into this world.

We talk easily of the glory of God, and yet it is beyond description or understanding. Like Mary we are overshadowed. It is beyond us, incomprehensible; yet we receive it. The Son of God was born of a woman like each one of us. And God's glory is present in this dark and hurting world.

All we can do in our stupor is say "yes" as Mary did and sit in awe and wonder. And perhaps sometimes cry or sing for joy.

#### ***Prayer***

God of wonder and grace, forgive our blindness and deafness when it comes to our comprehension of your work among us. Give us new insights this holy season. And help us to share your glory with someone today. Amen.

#### **Steve Crocco '78**

In a few short verses Mary goes from asking how she will conceive the Son of the Most High in her virgin womb to "Here am I. . . let it be with me according to your word." Millions have speculated about how Mary came to grips with such momentous yet difficult news. The truth is we simply don't know what went through Mary's mind. None of us will ever be in a situation as weighty as Mary's. But when we are surprised by God's will, particularly when any way forward will be difficult, we find ourselves in a position similar to Mary's. "Really God? You want me to do what? It's impossible." As God's people, we are invited to take comfort in the angel Gabriel's words to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God," before we get to "Here I am."

### **Prayer**

Almighty God I stand in wonder that you have called me to be your child. Your words to Mary, “do not be afraid,” are also your words to me as I face life in a broken world. Let me see afresh how Mary trusted you and how you used her to bring redemption to your world. When your will crashes down on me, let my response be, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 16**

<sup>1</sup>*Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.*

<sup>2</sup>*I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;  
I have no good apart from you.”*

<sup>3</sup>*As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,  
in whom is all my delight.*

<sup>4</sup>*Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;  
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out  
or take their names upon my lips.*

<sup>5</sup>*The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.*

<sup>6</sup>*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
I have a goodly heritage.*

<sup>7</sup>*I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.*

<sup>8</sup>*I keep the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.*

<sup>9</sup>*Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.*

<sup>10</sup>*For you do not give me up to Sheol,  
or let your faithful one see the Pit.*

<sup>11</sup>*You show me the path of life.  
In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

### **Tucker Ferda, adjunct faculty**

There are several terms in this Psalm that also fill advertisements this time of year: “Delight,” “gladness,” “rejoicing,” “joy,” “pleasures.” These ads call us to adopt these attitudes in the same way we would purchase products and thus are ultimately about our own gratification and enjoyment of the holiday season. The psalmist offers a different picture, and one with deepened significance in the light of the incarnation of Jesus Christ: “Delight,” “gladness,” “rejoicing,” “joy,” “pleasures” are due to God’s character and God’s nearness to us. We affirm, with the psalmist, that our hearts are “glad” and our souls “rejoice” because God is “always before” us and has come near to us in Christ. We are “secure” because of that gift, and “shall not be moved.”

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, enable us to sing “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” Be our delight, portion, and cup this day, as we wait for what only you can provide and have in fact provided. Let us sing this psalm with lives that delight to take refuge in you. Amen.

**Ellen Little, staff**

If you've ever played peek-a-boo with a baby or small child, you know that babies cover their heads with a blanket or their hands and seem to think they are invisible...safe. As we mature, however, the world becomes more complex, filled with problems and struggles and simply hiding our faces doesn't help.

Thankfully, God doesn't change. This Psalm reminds us that He is our refuge. He provides our portion and our security. If we watch for Him, He will instruct us and show us the path and He will not abandon us. So hold on tightly to Him and to that assurance!

**Prayer**

Thank you, Lord, that You don't change; that You are with us and guiding us and will not abandon us. And thank you most of all for the gift of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

**Psalm 130**

<sup>1</sup>*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

<sup>2</sup>*Lord, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!*

<sup>3</sup>*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?*

<sup>4</sup>*But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.*

<sup>5</sup>*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;*

<sup>6</sup>*my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

<sup>7</sup>*O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.*

<sup>8</sup>*It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.*

**Fred Graham '55**

Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day: I remember being called in from play on a dismal winter Sunday afternoon. Japanese planes had attacked our naval yards at Pearl Harbor and air facilities nearby wreaking incredible damage and killing many on the ground and on our ships. We listened as President Roosevelt pronounced this "a day that would live in infamy." We cannot know what events had plunged the psalmist into the depths where he despaired of life and begged God's ear to hear his lament. (Or she: Huldah the prophetess must have felt unappreciated much of the time, and perhaps the psalm is her lament?) Many a believer has felt abandoned, lost in personal failure or beaten down by exterior forces. R.A. Dickey, knuckleball hurler, was devastated by his failure to stay in the major leagues; and even more by his personal failures as husband and father. Although a Christian, unexplored childhood abuse surfaced in harsh and unfaithful behavior. His wife Anne, an insistent and persistent believer, struggled with him and showed that "there is forgiveness with God." Freed from the demons of his past



Dickey put 16 years in the minor leagues behind him and fellow players voted him the most valuable pitcher in the National League this year.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, let your ears be attentive to my prayers as well. I try to do your will and (as one of your saints said) believe that you honor my attempt even if my discernment of your will is in error. Guide me today; may I see my Lord in every human face. Amen.

**Melanie Kim Hamill '12**

*It's late. It's dark in my house with only the faint glow of my digital clock which reads 2:40 a.m. It might as well say 7:00 a.m. because sleep eludes me. I can't get out of my head. My stomach is in knots. I'm so worried. I'm fraught. There is no way out. I feel so alone. I will be found out.*

Have you ever found yourself in over your head? Out of your depth? Sometimes, despite our best intentions we can find ourselves overcome with self-doubt and driven by self-preservation at any cost. This plight is especially the case when we have messed up and left the trustworthy, narrow path to find our own way. In turn, we are led to a place of deep anxiety, fear, and isolation. Taking up residence in this place of darkness is our undoing. The Psalmist knows this place—intimately. However, the Psalmist also knows that God is the only sure thing. God is relentless in God's pursuit of us. With pure love, grace, mercy, power, and strength, God rescues us, redeems us, and sustains us through God's own son. We have a way out and a way through in Christ. Christ is our assurance that we are in fact never alone and always welcome, even if we have gone rogue. As we wait, we hope. We hope because we are lavishly loved.

**Prayer**

We wait upon you, Christ our Lord  
for you come in love,  
you come in peace,  
and you come for us.  
Grant us courage oh long expected One,  
for you are the fulfillment of our hoping.  
In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer, Amen.

**Psalm 148**

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the Lord!*

*Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights!*

<sup>2</sup>*Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his host!*

<sup>3</sup>*Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars!*

<sup>4</sup>*Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!*

<sup>5</sup>*Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for he commanded and they were created.*

<sup>6</sup>*He established them forever and ever;  
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.*

<sup>7</sup>*Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,*  
<sup>8</sup>*fire and hail, snow and frost,  
stormy wind fulfilling his command!*  
<sup>9</sup>*Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!*  
<sup>10</sup>*Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds!*  
<sup>11</sup>*Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!*  
<sup>12</sup>*Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!*  
<sup>13</sup>*Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his glory is above earth and heaven.*  
<sup>14</sup>*He has raised up a horn for his people,  
praise for all his faithful,  
for the people of Israel who are close to him.*  
*Praise the Lord!*

#### **Angela Dienhart Hancock, faculty**

There's a legend about Christmas Eve immortalized in Thomas Hardy's poem *The Oxen*. Go out to a stable or pasture or sheepfold at midnight on Christmas Eve, the legend says, and you will see the farm animals kneel in worship of God. A haunting idea: the descendants of the first witnesses to the incarnation bear witness still. Psalm 148 shares this vision—praise is the work of all creation, not just the humans. Sun, moon, stars, water, snow, mountains, wind, things with feathers, things with fur, things that crawl—even sea monsters have a part in creation's love song to the Lord of all. How would it change our relationship to the life all around us if we saw this menagerie as a congregation at worship, bearing witness to Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all creation?

Last month a new species of frog was discovered in Los Angeles, Calif. Los Angeles! Amazing. Surely there could be sea monsters out there somewhere, who knows? Wouldn't you love to hear them praise the Lord? And if someone invites you out to the barnyard to see the animals on their knees this Christmas Eve, go gladly into the gloom, hoping, with Hardy, that it might be so.

#### **Prayer**

Lord of all things, Thank you for planting us in the midst of the congregation that is creation. As we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Firstborn, may your Spirit open us to the song of praise all around us, that we might contribute a verse. In the strong name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

## Year 1, Day 21

### **Isaiah 31:1-9**

- <sup>1</sup>*Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help  
and who rely on horses,  
who trust in chariots because they are many  
and in horsemen because they are very strong,  
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel  
or consult the LORD!*
- <sup>2</sup>*Yet he too is wise and brings disaster;  
he does not call back his words,  
but will rise against the house of the evildoers,  
and against the helpers of those who work iniquity.*
- <sup>3</sup>*The Egyptians are human, and not God;  
their horses are flesh, and not spirit.  
When the LORD stretches out his hand,  
the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall,  
and they will all perish together.*
- <sup>4</sup>*For thus the LORD said to me,  
As a lion or a young lion growls over its prey,  
and—when a band of shepherds is called out against it—  
is not terrified by their shouting  
or daunted at their noise,  
so the LORD of hosts will come down  
to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill.*
- <sup>5</sup>*Like birds hovering overhead, so the LORD of hosts  
will protect Jerusalem;  
he will protect and deliver it,  
he will spare and rescue it.*
- <sup>6</sup>*Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. <sup>7</sup>For on that day all of you shall  
throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you.*
- <sup>8</sup>*“Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals;  
and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him;  
he shall flee from the sword,  
and his young men shall be put to forced labor.*
- <sup>9</sup>*His rock shall pass away in terror,  
and his officers desert the standard in panic,”  
says the LORD, whose fire is in Zion,  
and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.*

### **Helen Kester '06**

Here we are in the 21st century. We are so much more sophisticated than those uneducated folks in Isaiah's time. We know that statues of gold and silver or wood carvings have no power. We cannot be deceived by people who have big horses and heavy body armor and the most troops to fight. We would never worship a person thinking that they are a god.

We are sure that we have come so far from those ancient Israelites that we convince ourselves that we are not tempted by the same sins that lead to the downfall of their nation. But just listen to the

conversations around us. Parents bemoan the fact that they cannot buy the latest electronic devices for their children and that they are letting their child down. I have yet to hear a parent bemoan the fact that they have not taken their child to worship and to learn values that will lead to the real source of being lifted up. We will spend exorbitant amounts of money to see our favorite group or sports team, or gamble, but cry in outrage that the church dared to ask for a pledge or increase in giving that will lead to a discipline in our lives that will bring us true joy. We look at the criminal behavior around us and instead of falling on our knees in prayer we buy a hand gun.

We deceive ourselves, if we truly believe that we have left the sins of Israel behind us. The Good News for us is that Jesus comes to seek and to save as much today as he did 2000 years ago.

***Prayer***

God of might and power, call us back from following after false power and idols to the only true source of strength and protection. Help us to engage in activities and worship that will draw us closer to you. In Jesus' Name through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Darrell Yeane '56**

Perhaps the greatest challenge to people of faith is to live courageously, as Jesus did each day, in a world that rejects the compassionate rule of God and replaces it with the competitive standards of a win-lose culture. Advent is the Christian season that emphasizes active waiting. Isaiah the Prophet spoke of the folly of nations relying on military might and fragile alliances to make themselves powerful conquerors over others (Isaiah 31:1-9).

Generations later, God chose a young girl, not only to bear the messianic Prince of Peace, but to inspire her to sing God's revolutionary message: —The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. God drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in place of power. God gives the hungry good things to eat and send the rich away with nothing. (Luke 1: 51-53)

God call us to the challenge of active waiting in the midst of a culture of violence, a culture we are called to resist in the power of God.

***Prayer***

Compassionate God, awaken us once again from our distracted preoccupation with the culture of glitter, glamor, guns and glory and be reborn in us today. Save and empower us by your love. Amen.

**Nancy Hammond, staff (retired)**

Hmmm! Just a couple of days before Christmas. Again!

I've begun to see quite a few Christmases in my life, and this year, like most all years before, the background to Christmas is war. No, not war as in last minute shopping trips to the mall. War, as in war. I've lived Christmas with WWII in the background, the Korean conflict, the Vietnam war, Grenada, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, ISIL....Oh Dear Holy Lord God, forgive us.

*Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong. Oh Dear Holy Lord God, forgive us.*

***Prayer***

Please let this be my last Christmas with war in the background. Help us turn back to Him who we have so deeply and continually betrayed. Let this be the year that we throw away our idols of silver and gold. Come this Christmas, Oh Dear Holy Lord God. Amen.

**Luke 1:39-56**

<sup>39</sup>*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

<sup>46</sup>*And Mary said,*

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,*

<sup>47</sup>*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

<sup>48</sup>*for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

<sup>49</sup>*for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*

*and holy is his name.*

<sup>50</sup>*His mercy is for those who fear him*

*from generation to generation.*

<sup>51</sup>*He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

<sup>52</sup>*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

*and lifted up the lowly;*

<sup>53</sup>*he has filled the hungry with good things,*

*and sent the rich away empty.*

<sup>54</sup>*He has helped his servant Israel,*

*in remembrance of his mercy,*

<sup>55</sup>*according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

*to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

<sup>56</sup>*And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

**Cathy Brall, staff**

As the oldest child in a family of seven children, I have memories of family vacations that always include a good dose of long rides in a packed car, buoyed along by our family's singing one of the many simple songs we still sing when we gather these days, yet frequently punctuated with the plaintive question by one of my siblings, "Are we there yet?" Here we find ourselves today, with nearly 90 percent of the season of Advent behind us and with only three days remaining until Christmas. Are we so ready for Christmas that we wish it were already here, or even over, or would we prefer a few more days to get everything on our to-do lists checked off?

This account in Luke's Gospel relates the wondrous meeting of Elizabeth and Mary—each both joyfully (miraculously!) pregnant and yet likely also aware of the very real complexities that accompanied the bearing of their sons. Elizabeth was old and had been barren—certainly a shameful condition made worse by her husband's profession of being a priest. At her advanced age it would be more difficult for her to care for her child, and she probably was not likely to live to see him reach adulthood. On the

other hand, Mary was too young a woman—by today’s standards a mere child who was called to bear the son of God. The older man to whom she was betrothed had every right to leave her in the lurch (or worse), as he knew the child she carried was not his. The circumstances of both Elizabeth’s and Mary’s lives were “complicated,” as we like to say—perhaps much more so than most of our lives are, even with the difficult dynamics of blended families, political differences around the dinner table, and rushing around to get everything ready three days before the big holiday.

What Mary and Elizabeth model for us is the joy of knowing that, in the midst of their difficult predicaments, they are exactly where God would have them to be. They are both blessed for believing that God would fulfill what God had brought into their lives. They have learned that life with God is a continuous journey, rather than a stable place at which to arrive. They encourage us to hope and believe that God will be with us in the difficult predicaments of our lives—even those right around the corner that are coming with this year’s celebration of the Christmas holidays.

When Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, the child inside her leaps for joy and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Do we each have an “inner child”—a part of ourselves at the core of our being that is open, receptive, and perhaps even longing to be filled again with the Holy Spirit? Are we there yet?

### **Prayer**

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Come remind us of all the promises that God has spoken to us through the years, even as we await the coming of the Christ child once again. Help us to be with God, here, now, and always—with joy in the midst of our many predicaments. Amen.

### **Psalm 90**

- <sup>1</sup>*Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*
- <sup>3</sup>*You turn us back to dust,  
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”*
- <sup>4</sup>*For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.*
- <sup>5</sup>*You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;*
- <sup>6</sup>*in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.*
- <sup>7</sup>*For we are consumed by your anger;  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.*
- <sup>8</sup>*You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.*
- <sup>9</sup>*For all our days pass away under your wrath;  
our years come to an end like a sigh.*
- <sup>10</sup>*The days of our life are seventy years,  
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;*

*even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
 they are soon gone, and we fly away.*  
<sup>11</sup>*Who considers the power of your anger?  
 Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.*  
<sup>12</sup>*So teach us to count our days  
 that we may gain a wise heart.*  
<sup>13</sup>*Turn, O LORD! How long?  
 Have compassion on your servants!*  
<sup>14</sup>*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
 so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*  
<sup>15</sup>*Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,  
 and as many years as we have seen evil.*  
<sup>16</sup>*Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
 and your glorious power to their children.*  
<sup>17</sup>*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,  
 and prosper for us the work of our hands—  
 O prosper the work of our hands!*

### **Psalm 149**

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the Lord!  
 Sing to the Lord a new song,  
 his praise in the assembly of the faithful.*  
<sup>2</sup>*Let Israel be glad in its Maker;  
 let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Let them praise his name with dancing,  
 making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.*  
<sup>4</sup>*For the Lord takes pleasure in his people;  
 he adorns the humble with victory.*  
<sup>5</sup>*Let the faithful exult in glory;  
 let them sing for joy on their couches.*  
<sup>6</sup>*Let the high praises of God be in their throats  
 and two-edged swords in their hands,  
<sup>7</sup>to execute vengeance on the nations  
 and punishment on the peoples,  
<sup>8</sup>to bind their kings with fetters  
 and their nobles with chains of iron,  
<sup>9</sup>to execute on them the judgment decreed.*  
*This is glory for all his faithful ones.  
 Praise the Lord!*

### **Lexi Joachim Scoggin '09**

If we were able to look at the entire span of our life from God's eternal perspective, it would be like a pinprick on a spectrum that stretches infinitely in both (or many) directions. If we magnified that pinprick, we would observe that of all the messages that God was trying to instill in us, year after year our whole life through, the two outstanding would be those of Christmas and Easter. What did God want to drive home in these about Himself and our relationship to God?

- Trust only in the arms of the Father, just as a child understands no truer love, protection or comfort apart from its own mother and father.
- Admit your helplessness, your inability to survive without constant nurture, just as that which an attentive parent gives a newborn infant.
- Give up your cross—that is, yourself—which you cannot carry alone in your weakness, and rely on the strength, love and everlasting grace that is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the Advent season, let us experience these messages yet again—with the newness that they bring to our life this day—and let us turn our eyes to the manger and to the cross in humbleness and awe.

***Prayer***

Dear Everlasting Father, help us to approach you with the longing of an infant for its mother, the meekness of a child who wants only to be held in love, and the repentance of a man or woman who knows our limits. Thank you for your grace that reaches into eternity. Amen.



## Year 1, Day 22

### **Isaiah 33:17-22**

- <sup>17</sup>*Your eyes will see the king in his beauty;  
they will behold a land that stretches far away.*
- <sup>18</sup>*Your mind will muse on the terror:  
“Where is the one who counted?  
Where is the one who weighed the tribute?  
Where is the one who counted the towers?”*
- <sup>19</sup>*No longer will you see the insolent people,  
the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend,  
stammering in a language that you cannot understand.*
- <sup>20</sup>*Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals!  
Your eyes will see Jerusalem,  
a quiet habitation, an immovable tent,  
whose stakes will never be pulled up,  
and none of whose ropes will be broken.*
- <sup>21</sup>*But there the LORD in majesty will be for us  
a place of broad rivers and streams,  
where no galley with oars can go,  
nor stately ship can pass.*
- <sup>22</sup>*For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler,  
the LORD is our king; he will save us.*

### **Jennifer Christmas '11**

Are you feeling besieged!? Are you overwhelmed by To-Do lists, activities and commitments to family, friends, or at church? Are you feeling under attack spiritually or being threatened physically? Are you facing discrimination, exploitation, or oppression? Are you engulfed by grief? Is your heart especially burdened for others experiencing any of the above?

As we near the end of Advent, a season that for many of us is a flurry of activity, and approach that day when we celebrate the first coming of our Lord, you are invited to pause . . . Pause. Breathe. Look up and behold the King in his beauty, the majesty of our Lord!

Many scholars place today's Scripture reading in the context of the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians in 701 BC, during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. Jerusalem was able to withstand the threat, in part due to the foresight of Hezekiah to make sure the city was provided with a reliable source of water. This detail is actually supported by both Scripture and archaeology, with the find of the Siloam Tunnel Inscription.

In this passage of Scripture, however, we see more than a single spring as the source of water. Instead, “there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams,” where no other powers that might threaten or harm us can come near. In fact, those previously under siege are invited to “muse” over the terror that is now gone: those who sought to extort, demand, oppress, and attack—insolent people, voices bragging or speaking nonsense. Further, we are invited to “Look on Zion,” a place of gathering and celebration, to “see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation.” It is a place of refuge, “an immovable tent,” a strong covering, indestructible, a place of tranquility, with our Lord at its center. “For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; He will save us”!

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, thank you for being with us when we are worn, weary, and besieged. As we prepare to celebrate your first coming, may we also be reminded of the peace, joy, and healing in fullness ahead, in your presence, when you come again. Amen.

### **Luke 1:57-66**

<sup>57</sup>Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup>Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. <sup>59</sup>On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. <sup>60</sup>But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." <sup>61</sup>They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." <sup>62</sup>Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. <sup>63</sup>He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. <sup>64</sup>Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup>Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. <sup>66</sup>All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

### **Bob Kelley Jr. '51, faculty emeritus (dec.)**

The Gospel text presents a three-fold outline: parentage, birth, destiny. Zechariah and Elizabeth (an aged, childless, priestly couple) are the devout parents. The angel Gabriel, God's sentinel, suddenly appears to announce the forthcoming birth of John. His destiny? That's something the hill country neighbors ponder as they ask, "What will this child become?"

We who live, worship, and serve as faithful Christians centuries later know full well what this child became and what he did as the Forerunner of the Messiah, the Advance Man, THE Herald of Advent. To John's everlasting credit he never sought to steal the spotlight that rightfully belonged to Jesus. Rather his motto was unwaveringly "He must increase, but I must decrease." May it be so with us as well.

### **Prayer**

Oh Lord, many are the persons who played a part in the original Advent and Christmas story. The roles indeed were both large, like John's, and small. As the premier birth once more is celebrated, help us to rediscover our own assigned place in the unfolding drama and fulfill that role faithfully. Amen.

### **Revelation 22:6-11, 18-20**

<sup>6</sup>And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." <sup>7</sup>"See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." <sup>8</sup>I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" <sup>10</sup>And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. <sup>11</sup>Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." <sup>18</sup>I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; <sup>19</sup>if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this

*prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.* <sup>20</sup>*The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

### **Drew Smith, faculty**

When grappling with situations in life that seem entrenched or irredeemable, the selected scripture readings provide important reminders about God's interventionary power. In the Psalter passages here (33, 85, 94, 146), the Psalmist celebrates God as majestic Creator who spoke the world and its inhabitants into being. The Isaiah (33:17-22) and Revelation passages point to God's intervention as the sovereign Lord whose promises are sure to be fulfilled and whose judgments are enforced. And the Luke passage extols God's intervention as the incarnate Savior whose advent is heralded through the birth and life of the especially anointed prophet, John the Baptist.

God indeed intervenes in our lives and in our world, and those interventions are assuredly transformative. For some, God's interventions might seem unremarkable at the time, or they may even go unnoticed. But remember—a baby born in a Bethlehem stable might have seemed inconsequential. Those who've learned how important that was, however, rejoice.

### **Prayer**

God, we seek your presence, for we need transformation in our lives and in our world. Let your loving kindness be upon us, according as we have hoped in you. Amen.

### **Psalm 24**

- <sup>1</sup>*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;*  
<sup>2</sup>*for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?*  
<sup>4</sup>*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.*  
<sup>5</sup>*They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*  
<sup>6</sup>*Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*  
<sup>7</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*  
<sup>8</sup>*Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.*  
<sup>9</sup>*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*  
<sup>10</sup>*Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,*

*he is the King of glory.*

**LindaJo McKim '77**

In Handel's Messiah "Lift up your Heads, O ye gates" is based on Psalm 24. The chorus is reminiscent of an ancient antiphon where a question is posed by a voice standing outside the temple door and answered by a voice inside. Voices command the temple gates to open so the King of Glory may come in. Those inside ask, "Who is this King of glory?" The response by the outsiders is "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

The ancients believed God was in a constant battle against forces that would throw the creation into utter chaos. They believed God had heavenly armies aiding favored nations during war. We may not be comfortable picturing God as head of an army. But today God is at war with physical and spiritual enemies that rob life of all it was meant to be. This advent season we prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus Christ the King of Glory to enter.

***Prayer***

Creator God, Renew my spirit as I open the gates of my heart to receive the coming Christ. Amen.

***Psalm 150***

<sup>1</sup>*Praise the Lord!*

*Praise God in his sanctuary;  
praise him in his mighty firmament!*

<sup>2</sup>*Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!*

<sup>3</sup>*Praise him with trumpet sound;  
praise him with lute and harp!*

<sup>4</sup>*Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!*

<sup>5</sup>*Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*

<sup>6</sup>*Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!*

**Brendan Ashley '16**

What an appropriate text for the Advent season. The Psalm mentions the word praise 13 times. It demands that we praise in the sanctuary. It demands that we get ready to meet the incarnate God, our king, through dancing, singing, and playing instruments. It demands praise from everything that breathes; everything that lives.

During this Advent season remember that there are many ways to praise our Lord, and this Psalm is a great example of that. Let us give praise to our Lord Jesus who came on our behalf so that we might know God in the most intimate way. The Lord came and found us in our wandering and complacency. Jesus came for the hungry, the oppressed, and the sick. Our Lord continues to reveal himself to us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope that Advent can draw us ever closer to the movement of the Holy Spirit, so that we can continue to praise God in different ways and places each day.

***Prayer***

Lord God, creator of the universe, thank you for the life you have breathed into your beautifully diverse creation. Thank you for finding us in our wandering, for meeting us wherever it is our feet take us. I pray that we join in the celebration, praising you with our whole selves. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

## Year 1, Christmas Eve

### **Isaiah 35:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. <sup>3</sup>Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup>Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." <sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup>the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. <sup>8</sup>A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. <sup>9</sup>No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. <sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### **Rebecca Dix '15/'17**

There have been days  
I've gone down to the river to pray  
But the river bed has been empty for days  
A lingering, barren ravine  
Where I'd expected a mercy filled stream  
Canyon carved stretch marks of a belly  
Once with such life within  
Leaving only sand to be baptized in  
And a parchment tongue  
Desiccated from praises it's forgotten how to sing  
Yet tomorrow, I will return again  
Eyes piercing the sky in anticipation  
For flood waters anointing,  
Poured out, pores soaked  
Washed in the words of the greatest Love story  
Whose torrents push and move and remake what has been  
Saturate my sin filled body  
With grace like rain

### **Prayer**

Healer and Sustainer, pour out your flood waters to saturate our dryness and break through our dams and roadblocks that keep us from holy communion with you and with our brothers and sisters. Strengthen us with the hope of Emmanuel as we await his arrival. Amen.

### **Luke 1:67-80**

<sup>67</sup>Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: <sup>68</sup>"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from

*of old,<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us<sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.<sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,<sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.<sup>78</sup> By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”<sup>80</sup> The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*

### **Michelle Wahila '05**

Zechariah's blessing, traditionally called the Benedictus, recounts God's promises through the retelling of salvation history. A reminder that the hand of God has rescued God's people, Zechariah's blessing speaks of God's mercy and holy covenant through generations of the Lord's servants.

Though God's redemption comes about by no action of our own, God's people are invited to participate in the covenant, that they might “serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness, all of [their] days.” Zechariah proclaims his own son's role in this work—preparing the way for the heavenly king and deliverer.

Have we listened to the prophet and prepared room in our lives for a mighty savior this Advent season? Our answer comes by way of our response: grateful worship and serving the Lord, all of our days.

#### ***Prayer***

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have raised up a mighty savior to deliver us! We pray that as we welcome Christ the babe, we might prepare a place for him in our lives, on this Christmas Eve and always. Amen.

### **Ken Woo, faculty**

We anticipate. We prepare. We dream. But what do we really expect? And when is the waiting worth it? Zechariah was accustomed to waiting. He waited for a son. Then he waited to get his voice back. And when he did, it was worth it. He who had expected so little of God now dares us to expect too much! God's promise spans generations, overcomes resistance, endures forgetfulness, and—in Zechariah's case and our experience—transforms doubts. This Christmas Eve, may Zechariah's song deepen our anticipation, guide our preparations, inspire our dreams: Dawn has broken from on high! By the light of Emmanuel those who sat in darkness and walk in death's shadow can serve God without fear in the way of peace. Whether in joy or in the sorrow of sin, injustice, and despair, let us hope in God's tender mercy in Christ and learn to expect nothing less.

#### ***Prayer***

Gracious and merciful God, fill our hearts with the hope of Zechariah as we celebrate this eve of Christ's arrival. Guide our feet into the way of peace, that we might walk without fear to reflect and extend the light of Emmanuel, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### ***Philippians 2:5-11***

<sup>5</sup>*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

<sup>6</sup>*who, though he was in the form of God,*

*did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup>but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup>he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.  
<sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him  
 and gave him the name  
 that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus  
 every knee should bend,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess  
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.*

### **Gordon Tait '51**

It was November 1951 and I was a new graduate student at the University of Edinburgh looking for Christmas cards to send to family and friends in the U.S., inexpensive and appropriate cards that said much more than just —Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Surely it was grace that directed me to one small, plain white card. On the cover there was a simple dark line from a star in the upper left corner down to a small manger in the right bottom corner—an unpromising design, I thought.

However, when I opened this small card the simple message grabbed me hard: AND GOD STOOPED DOWN SO LOW. Despite the anthropomorphic cast, the truth of the Incarnation in that simple line was stunning. That surely is why one of the Christmas Eve scriptures is Philippians 2:5-11, where we read, “though [Jesus] was in the form of God, . . . he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

That’s it. And God stooped down so low.

### ***Prayer***

Sacred Infant, all Divine  
 What a tender love is Thine,  
 Thus to come from highest bliss  
 Down to such a world as this! Amen. (Edward Caswall, 1814—78)

### **Wendy Keys '00**

Jesus emptied himself of his divinity in order to come to us in humble human form. What could be more humble than a baby born in a stable laid in feeding trough? Paul is urging the church in Philippi and us today to be imitators of Christ. We need to learn how to be servants and not the ones being served. That we need to learn to love each other hour by hour and day by day. It is that basic. When Paul urged the Philippians to be of the same mind as Christ, to imitate him in humility and obedience, he was



saying, kneel down and empty out. We must purge ourselves of our pride and self-confidence in order to be filled with the divine love that Christ offers us.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ to teach us what true humility is and that we should be examples of it to the world. For it is in Jesus name we pray all things. Amen.

### **Psalm 145**

- <sup>1</sup>*I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Every day I will bless you,  
and praise your name forever and ever.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
his greatness is unsearchable.*
- <sup>4</sup>*One generation shall laud your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.*
- <sup>5</sup>*On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.*
- <sup>6</sup>*The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,  
and I will declare your greatness.*
- <sup>7</sup>*They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.*
- <sup>8</sup>*The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
- <sup>9</sup>*The Lord is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*
- <sup>10</sup>*All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,  
and all your faithful shall bless you.*
- <sup>11</sup>*They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,  
and tell of your power,*
- <sup>12</sup>*to make known to all people your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.*
- <sup>13</sup>*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.  
The Lord is faithful in all his words,  
and gracious in all his deeds.*
- <sup>14</sup>*The Lord upholds all who are falling,  
and raises up all who are bowed down.*
- <sup>15</sup>*The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.*
- <sup>16</sup>*You open your hand,  
satisfying the desire of every living thing.*
- <sup>17</sup>*The Lord is just in all his ways,  
and kind in all his doings.*
- <sup>18</sup>*The Lord is near to all who call on him,*

*to all who call on him in truth.*

<sup>19</sup>*He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and saves them.*

<sup>20</sup>*The Lord watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

<sup>21</sup>*My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.*

### **Dave Throop '71**

In the Old Testament, the word “Lord” is a reference to God. However, for followers of Christ, the word “Lord” in the Old Testament often implies Christ. While Psalm 145 is an Old Testament reading, we who are followers of Christ understand it as a psalm which clearly speaks of our Lord Jesus: “Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise!” “The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.” “The Lord is righteous in all his ways . . . and is near to all who call on him.” Don’t these descriptions also proclaim what we truly believe about Christ? Christmas is all about Incarnation—God taking on human form in order that what was foretold might be fulfilled in Christ for each one of us!

### ***Prayer***

Gracious Lord God, during this Advent season, thank You for the gift of Jesus, truly the culmination and perfection of Your grace, compassion, and love. In his strong name we pray. Amen.

## Year 1, Christmas Day

### **1 John 4:7-16**

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. <sup>13</sup>By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup>And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup>God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup>So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

### **Bill Paul '59**

The meaning of Christmas is made abundantly clear in this passage. Christmas is the announcement that in the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem God was giving the world a Savior. To celebrate it is to receive the love and life that the Holy One intends for all. John writes: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." Christmas is the divine signal that the Eternal One has come to us in human flesh. It is the call to celebrate that the Word became flesh and lived among us. It is the life changing message that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. It is that, but more.

It is also an invitation to action, to share God's love in words and deeds. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." It is to become a bearer of God's love to others. That's the test of genuine faith and the incontrovertible sign that God abides in us.

### **Prayer**

Dear God, having received your saving gift through the Babe of Bethlehem, now empower us to be instruments of your love. May your grace pass through us and bring healing and peace to a troubled and hurting world. Amen.

### **Don McKim '74**

In Sunday school, I remember learning the verse: "Let us love one another, because love is from God" (1 John 4:7). This verse captures the nature of Christmas. Today we celebrate the greatest message in the world: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (v.9). As John Calvin said, "Christ is such a shining and remarkable proof of the divine love toward us that, whenever we look to Him, He clearly confirms to us the doctrine that God is love" (Comm. 1 John 4:9). As the Christmas carol puts it: "Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love Divine."

This message impacts our lives. God's initiative to enact a radical love in Christ for us sinners orients us now to "live through him." Our new life in Christ propels us to a radical love for others. Today is Christmas. Let's embrace God's love; and love others!

### **Prayer**

O God, may we love others because you first loved us. Amen.

### **Rebecca Dix '15/'17**

It can be deceiving to look at the pile of presents built up at the base of the tree or the decorations streamed from wall to wall or the half consumed dinner whose remnants can be witnessed in the bulging of bellies or the smeared, crumb stained faces, and think: *And so this is Christmas.*

I'm not saying those things cannot contribute to the joy and festivities, because they do, but when the ripped wrapping paper is gathered and the leftovers put away, does the joy remain? Or do we pack away the Nativity with the tinsel and the snow globe collection? Beloved, the true joy of the season is in this revelation of God's love for us, a love so whole and perfect, a love that "sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." It is in this Love we have joy, and we are called to live our lives as a litany of this hope, this joy, this love, witnessing to the Kingdom, so that we may all remember and in seeing these reminders that point us to the true hope and love, we all can say: *And so this is Christmas.*

### ***Prayer***

Today Christ is born, O God, and your love is revealed among us. In Jesus Christ your light shines in our darkness. Fill us with the mystery of your Word made flesh, until our hearts overflow with praise and joy so that we, your church, may be a sign of your hope and love. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

### **Michael Gehrling '08**

It's Christmas, and I am exchanging gifts. Gifts express love. Receiving a gift can also change us. The gift may be as mundane as socks, changing the recipient's wardrobe ever so slightly, or as profound as an engagement ring, changing the course of the recipient's life forever.

In his letter, John tells of God's two most profound gifts—Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. These gifts show God's love. They have also changed every person who has ever received them. Just consider Mary, or the apostles, or any of the thousands who have opened these gifts.

It's Christmas day, and I'm also grieving. This is the first Christmas I'm celebrating without my mother, who died this year. In grieving, God has convicted me that God is not going to bring back the past, but God will give new gifts to me that are good. Put another way, God has something new in front of me, and it's going to be good.

This Christmas, be open to God's doing something new in your life. It may be unfamiliar, but it will certainly be good.

### ***Prayer***

God, what new gift are you giving to me today? Jesus, to what, or to whom, are you calling me? Holy Spirit, what new thing do you desire to do in me? Even if it changes me forever, I'll open your gift, because You are good.

### ***Psalm 2***

<sup>1</sup>*Why do the nations conspire,*

*and the peoples plot in vain?*

<sup>2</sup>*The kings of the earth set themselves,*

*and the rulers take counsel together,*

*against the LORD and his anointed, saying,*

<sup>3</sup>*Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us."*

<sup>4</sup>*He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the LORD has them in derision.*

<sup>5</sup>*Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,*

<sup>6</sup>*"I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."*

<sup>7</sup>*I will tell of the decree of the LORD:  
He said to me, "You are my son;  
today I have begotten you.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.*

<sup>9</sup>*You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."*

<sup>10</sup>*Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.*

<sup>11</sup>*Serve the LORD with fear,  
with trembling <sup>12</sup>kiss his feet,  
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Happy are all who take refuge in him.*

### **Jermaine McKinley '98/'00/'05**

I wonder how many awake expecting the unexpected. No, not a gift you would not like, but the second coming of Jesus Christ. Commercialization of Christmas suggest 'the reason for the season' is to stimulate the economy; using the power of money to show we care for others; family, friends, and those in need. Various legal challenges to Christmas—to ensure inclusion, avoidance of religious alienation, and separation of 'church and state'—offer us the political correctness of "happy holiday." The love of God reflected in the first coming of Jesus Christ is sometimes juxtaposed with adoption of a cynical practice of airing grievances against another as suggested by the Seinfeld episode that introduced "happy festivity, a holiday for the rest of us." Yet, at Christmas we should remember the birth of Christ and consider our personal preparation, living expecting the promised unexpected glorious return of the one in whom we should be placing our hope.

For two millennia many have looked at prophecies, the heavens, and the world for signs of the return of Jesus Christ. Advent prayers and songs like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" speak of the one truly able to instill hope, offer relief, and bring change in the midst of a human experience replete with suffering, turmoil, unrest, and chaos. There seems to be a global desire for one who has universal and ultimate power to lead the way toward reconciliation, bringing peace in the midst of warring nations and communities experiencing intentional or random acts of violence. I believe no "ordinary" national or world leader can bring about the kind of everlasting change, relief, or fulfillment of hope we truly need. What we need can only originate with God. Thanks be to God for our Creator's plan. The salvation of humanity, redemption and reconciliation, are embraced in the one who has known the truth of God through divine intimacy in and since the beginning. We are saved by the shed blood of the one crucified for no sins of His own. Christian tradition identifies this as Jesus Christ, conceived under the power of the Holy Spirit to a virgin named Mary.

Jesus of Nazareth is the one who provided fulfillment of the expected Messiah of the Old Testament. He brought joy to an Almighty God who loved humanity so much He gave us His only begotten Son. Through Christ, we are called to the common ground of faith in God, a demonstrated love of God and love of neighbor. We are to love God for all of the qualities associated with being the all-powerful, all-knowing Creator for Divinity's own sake. We are to love neighbor for the sake of God as an act of discipleship, reflecting an unselfish agape love that leads toward peace and justice. God has blessed us once through the gift of Jesus. This Christmas, I pray we each prepare ourselves for the Second Coming of Christ, loving God and neighbor. If we do less, we should expect the unexpected.

### **Prayer**

Lord, help me recognize the meaning of Christmas. Open my eyes, ears, and mind that I might perceive the magnitude of the gift You gave the world by sending Your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Help me to respond to detractors seeking to diminish this holy season. Continuously show me the best way to express and share Your love within my community and in the world. Hear my prayer in the name of Jesus.

Lord, I thank You for sending Your Only Son. Help me live expecting the unexpected. Lead and guide me to be prepared for His glorious return. Show me the best way to reflect Your Divine love to my neighbors, especially those who do not know You and the gift of everlasting salvation available through Christ. I pray You will make me an instrument of Your peace and Your justice in the name of Jesus. AMEN.

### **Psalm 33**

- <sup>1</sup>*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.  
Praise befits the upright.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Praise the LORD with the lyre;  
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Sing to him a new song;  
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*
- <sup>4</sup>*For the word of the LORD is upright,  
and all his work is done in faithfulness.*
- <sup>5</sup>*He loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.*
- <sup>6</sup>*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.*
- <sup>7</sup>*He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
he put the deeps in storehouses.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.*
- <sup>9</sup>*For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood firm.*
- <sup>10</sup>*The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;  
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.*
- <sup>11</sup>*The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.*
- <sup>12</sup>*Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,  
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.*

<sup>13</sup>*The LORD looks down from heaven;  
he sees all humankind.*  
<sup>14</sup>*From where he sits enthroned he watches  
all the inhabitants of the earth—*  
<sup>15</sup>*he who fashions the hearts of them all,  
and observes all their deeds.*  
<sup>16</sup>*A king is not saved by his great army;  
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.*  
<sup>17</sup>*The war horse is a vain hope for victory,  
and by its great might it cannot save.*  
<sup>18</sup>*Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in his steadfast love,*  
<sup>19</sup>*to deliver their soul from death,  
and to keep them alive in famine.*  
<sup>20</sup>*Our soul waits for the LORD;  
he is our help and shield.*  
<sup>21</sup>*Our heart is glad in him,  
because we trust in his holy name.*  
<sup>22</sup>*Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,  
even as we hope in you.*

#### **Derek Davenport '05/'17**

“... those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.” How strange—to hope in what we fear. We don’t like to talk about “fearing” the Lord. Yet, we can only hope in the Lord if the Lord is worth fearing.

A god weaker than our weapons or no stronger than our soldiers is worthless. A god who fears famine or dreads death cannot deliver us. A god we cannot fear is hopeless. Our hope is in the Lord.

The Lord destroys defenses, mightier than an army; stronger than a warhorse. The Lord defeats our deepest fears, the dread of death and the horror of hunger. The Lord conquers the tangible—soldiers and stallions, and the intangible—fatality and famine. The Lord is to be feared.

This almighty God, with power to destroy and defeat, comes to us . . . as an infant. The Lord comes to us not as a soldier on a warhorse, but as our help and shield. God comes to us able to defeat death, able to vanquish famine. God chooses to use this infinite power to deliver us, to keep us, to save us.

God is to be feared. Thus we can hope in God’s steadfast love.

#### **Prayer**

Lord, We thank you that you are mightier than we are. We thank you that you are stronger than our fears. We thank you that you come to us not as an overpowering enemy, but as our help and our shield. Help us to place our hope in you this Christmas season in particular. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

#### **Ted Kalsbeek '51**

As a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth, Advent features music which is preparatory, such as “Come, Though Long Expected Jesus.” There is eager anticipation of more

celebratory music as we move from preparation to celebration in spirit and in song, joining the heavenly host saying “Glory to God in the Highest.” All the stops were pulled out in that celestial crescendo of angelic praise. The beauty and power of Advent lies in preparation for the moment when the God of the Psalms would step into human history as our Savior and Lord.

Christmas and Advent have personal meaning with profound implications relevant for life now and eternity. The splendor and power of God’s revealed glory in history and in human hearts now, is but a foretaste of what is to come. In a sense, all of life is an “advent” in preparation for the ultimate revealing of God’s glory. Advent allows for a diversity of praise to be given to God. It recognizes the divine participation of God in the world and in our lives. It also declares the promises of God to whom we should gratefully give all glory and honor.

Let us, then, echo with triumphant joy that which the heavenly host sent reverberating over Judean hills, not in seasonal superficial happiness, but with the inner joy of salvation, peace and hope, enabling us to sing praises to God even in sorrow, to glorify God in grief, and to be grateful even in loss. Amen.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, we are grateful that in your sovereign grace and power, the birth of Jesus Christ became a reality after long preparation. As we anticipate and then celebrate the Incarnation, we join the host of heaven in lifting our glorias in praise and thanksgiving. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 85**

- <sup>1</sup>*LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.*
- <sup>2</sup>*You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.*
- <sup>3</sup>*You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.*
- <sup>4</sup>*Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.*
- <sup>5</sup>*Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?*
- <sup>6</sup>*Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?*
- <sup>7</sup>*Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.*
- <sup>10</sup>*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*
- <sup>11</sup>*Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*
- <sup>12</sup>*The LORD will give what is good,*



*and our land will yield its increase.  
13 Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.*

### **Roger Owens, faculty**

Old Testament scholar James May points out a striking feature of Psalm 85: The psalm begins by testifying to God's already finished saving work; it sings of a *fait accompli*—God's salvation is a done deal. Then the situation changes: "Restore us again," the psalmist pleads. "Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?" God's salvation is a done deal, and yet the people are still awaiting it.

Christians reading this psalm in Advent can relate. We look back to God's accomplished salvation in Christ—it's a done deal. And yet we look around and see a world still broken—sin has not been vanquished, shalom does not yet prevail. In Advent, we look forward to the time when God will make clear and complete what is already finished in Christ, when "faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from on high"—in other words, when God's kingdom of peace will fill all.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, who through your Son Jesus Christ brought your kingdom to earth, in this season of Advent give us patience as we wait for your often-hidden kingdom to burst forth from the ground and rain down from the sky, until righteousness and peace fill all things. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Kathy Dain '11**

There's been a lot of talk about change recently. Politicians proclaim it; advertisers' gleefully tell us their product is NEW and IMPROVED. Change is good! But I think what most people are looking for is a return to a simpler time, when life was much easier than it is today. The way things used to be, carefully shaped and softened by our memories; it is what we like to refer to as "the good old days."

Change requires us to move forward, not backward. But true change means stepping outside our comfort zone, replacing the familiar with something not so familiar, or perhaps looking at the familiar in a new light. Change can be very uncomfortable. For many, our present days appear very dim, and the promise of hope a distant memory. I recall a September morning not too long ago when darkness covered the sky, or more recently watching our financial markets collapse. We look overseas at senseless acts of violence filled with hatred. Sometimes you wonder what this world is coming to as we cry for restoration. But as dark as the day may seem, eventually morning comes. Monday is replaced by Tuesday and the promise of a better day.

Sometimes it is only through the darkness that we can truly see God's light. It is the steadfast love of our LORD, our salvation through Jesus Christ and the promise of The Holy Spirit guiding our steps through the darkness. There is no darkness that can conceal God's light.

The Psalmist reminds us that true restoration begins first with a change of heart. As the promise of spring lies beneath this blanket of snow, God's assurance of restoration is at hand.

In this season of Advent, Expect the Unexpected. Many years ago our people cried for a savior and God responded in a most unexpected way. All the knowledge and wisdom of the universe safely harbored within an infant child--the promise of hope, the assurance of salvation.

Beyond the tinsel and the holiday lights let us look above with wonder. Christ the Lord has come. Christ, the King will come again.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for we know your Word is faithful and true. Above the cosmos, beyond the outer limits of our imagination, you sit enthroned between the Cherubim—the creator of all things, whose love for us is so great that you gave us the promise of hope and restoration through Jesus Christ. Teach us, O' Lord, to walk in your ways. Give us hearts without boundaries; selflessness instead of self-righteousness. Darkness is waning; a new day is on the horizon, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Psalm 96**

- <sup>1</sup>*O sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth.*
- <sup>2</sup>*Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.*
- <sup>3</sup>*Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples.*
- <sup>4</sup>*For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be revered above all gods.*
- <sup>5</sup>*For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.*
- <sup>6</sup>*Honor and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.*
- <sup>7</sup>*Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
- <sup>8</sup>*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
bring an offering, and come into his courts.*
- <sup>9</sup>*Worship the LORD in holy splendor;  
tremble before him, all the earth.*
- <sup>10</sup>*Say among the nations, "The LORD is king!  
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.  
He will judge the peoples with equity."*
- <sup>11</sup>*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*
- <sup>12</sup>*let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy*
- <sup>13</sup>*before the LORD; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth.*

**Kimberly Gonxhe '07**

Our God reigns!!! On this day we celebrate the divine one who became flesh out of sheer love, even for a fallen humanity. On the day of Christ's human birth, hope arrived. Hope. It rings in our hearts. Hope. For this fragile baby would go on to change the course of history forever. The world would be "firmly established" and the peoples would be judged "with equity." Through Christ all people would become valued and the marginalized would be seen through the lens of dignity. The first would become last and the last first. The design of God's reign in heaven would be the blueprint for earth. Through Christ's birth we all have hope. So take courage on this day from knowing that God loves justice and God loves you. No situation is too dark for the light of God's love to enter. No circumstance is too far gone for the hand of God to permeate. Come behold the one who is our Savior! Come experience the love of God! Come embrace hope!

***Prayer***

Lord, we pause to remember that you are God: mighty, holy, supreme, and just. Thank you for always taking care of us. Thank you for being concerned with what concerns us. Thank you for loving us. Help us on this day and always to be ever grateful for all that we have. Help us to follow your example to leverage our privilege in behalf of those without it. Help us to recognize the disparities in this world and be agents of change for your glory. Amen.