



Big Book of Advent Devotionals—Year 2

Based on the Daily Lectionary of the
Book of Common Worship

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary’s 2023 “Big Book of Advent Devotionals—Year 2” gives you a valuable resource for personal and corporate spiritual formation during the Advent season. Each section includes multiple biblical passages from the Daily Lectionary, reflections based on those passages, and accompanying prayers based on each reflection. Seminary alumnae/i, faculty, staff, Board members, and students have contributed to this resource to help enrich your Advent worship for many years to come.



The Big Book of Advent Devotionals – Year 2, 2023

This compendium of devotionals follows the Daily Lectionary readings for Advent 2023. In this resource, you will find one or more devotionals and accompanying prayers on each of the passages listed, *except for those passages highlighted in red.*

You will also find Advent devotionals and prayers on two additional Gospel readings—Luke 2:1-20 and John 1:1-14—as well as Advent-related excerpts from selected faculty publications, again with accompanying prayers.

The devotionals in this compendium are grouped into sections, which appear in the following order:

Morning and Evening Readings: Psalms
First Readings: Old Testament Law and Prophets
Second Readings: New Testament Epistles
Gospel Readings
Readings from Faculty-authored Publications

Click on the hyperlink (Ctrl+click) to a given passage to navigate quickly to the text, followed by the related devotional(s) and prayer(s). To return to page 1 after reading the selection, click Ctrl+Home.

Day 1 – December 3

Morning: Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
First Reading: [Amos 1:1-5](#), [1:13-2:8](#)
Second Reading: [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)
Gospel Reading: [Luke 21:5-19](#)
Evening: Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 2 – December 4

Morning: Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
First Reading: [Amos 2:6-16](#)
Second Reading: [2 Peter 1:1-11](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 21:1-11](#)
Evening: Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 3 – December 5

Morning: Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
First Reading: [Amos 3:1-11](#)
Second Reading: [2 Peter 1:12-21](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 21:12-22](#)
Evening: Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Day 4 – December 6

Morning: Psalms [50](#); [147:1-11](#)
First Reading: [Amos 3:12-4:5](#)
Second Reading: [2 Peter 3:1-10](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 21:23-32](#)
Evening: Psalms [53](#); [17](#)

Day 5 – December 7

Morning: Psalms [18:1-20](#); [147:12-20](#)
First Reading: [Amos 4:6-13](#)
Second Reading: [2 Peter 3:11-18](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 21:33-46](#)
Evening: Psalms [126](#); [62](#)

Day 6 – December 8

Morning: Psalms [102](#); [148](#)
First Reading: [Amos 5:1-17](#)
Second Reading: [Jude 1-16](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 22:1-14](#)
Evening: Psalms [130](#); [16](#)

Day 7 – December 9

Morning: Psalms [90](#); [149](#)
First Reading: [Amos 5:18-27](#)
Second Reading: [Jude 17-25](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 22:15-22](#)
Evening: Psalms [80](#); [72](#)

Day 8 – December 10

Morning: Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
First Reading: [Amos 6:1-14](#)
Second Reading: [2 Thessalonians 1:5-12](#)
Gospel Reading: [Luke 1:57-68](#)
Evening: Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 9 – December 11

Morning: Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
First Reading: [Amos 7:1-9](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 1:1-8](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 22:23-33](#)
Evening: Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 10 – December 12

Morning: Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
First Reading: [Amos 7:10-17](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 1:9-16](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 22:34-46](#)
Evening: Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Day 11 – December 13

Morning: Psalms [50](#); [147:1-11](#)
First Reading: [Amos 8:1-14](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 1:17-2:7](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 23:1-12](#)
Evening: Psalms [53](#); [17](#)

Day 12 – December 14

Morning: Psalms [18:1-20](#); [147:12-20](#)
First Reading: [Amos 9:1-10](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 2:8-17](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 23:13-26](#)
Evening: Psalms [126](#); [62](#)

Day 13 – December 15

Morning: Psalms [102](#); [148](#)
First Reading: [Haggai 1:1-15](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 2:18-29](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 23:27-39](#)
Evening: Psalms [130](#); [16](#)

Day 14 – December 16

Morning: Psalms [90](#); [149](#)
First Reading: [Haggai 2:1-9](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 3:1-6](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 24:1-14](#)
Evening: Psalms [80](#); [72](#)

Day 15 – December 17

Morning: Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
First Reading: [Amos 9:11-15](#)
Second Reading: [2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 13-17](#)
Gospel Reading: [John 5:30-47](#)
Evening: Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 16 – December 18

Morning: Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
First Reading: [Genesis 3:8-15](#)
Second Reading: [Revelation 12:1-10](#)
Gospel Reading: [John 3:16-21](#)
Evening: Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 17 – December 19

Morning: Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
First Reading: [Zephaniah 3:14-20](#)
Second Reading: [Titus 1:1-16](#)
Gospel Reading: [Luke 1:1-25](#)
Evening: Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Day 18 – December 20

Morning: Psalms [50](#); [147:1-11](#)
First Reading: [1 Samuel 2:1-10](#)
Second Reading: [Titus 2:1-10](#)
Gospel Reading: [Luke 1:26-38](#)
Evening: Psalms [53](#); [17](#)

Day 19 – December 21

Morning: Psalms [18:1-20](#); [147:12-20](#)
First Reading: [2 Samuel 7:1-17](#)
Second Reading: [Titus 2:11-3:8](#)
Gospel Reading: [Luke 1:39-48](#)
Evening: Psalms [126](#); [62](#)

Day 20 – December 22

Morning: Psalms [102](#); [148](#)
First Reading: [2 Samuel 7:18-29](#)
Second Reading: [Galatians 3:1-14](#)
Gospel Reading: [Luke 1:57-66](#)
Evening: Psalms [130](#); [16](#)

Day 21 – December 23

Morning: Psalms [90](#); [149](#)
First Reading: [Jeremiah 31:10-14](#)
Second Reading: [Galatians 3:15-22](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 1:1-17](#)
Evening: Psalms [80](#); [72](#)

Day 22 – December 24

Morning: Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
First Reading: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#)
Second Reading: [Galatians 3:23-4:7](#)
Gospel Reading: [Matthew 1:18-25](#)
Evening: Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Christmas Day – December 25

Morning: Psalms [2](#); [145](#)

First Reading: [Micah 4:1-5, 5:2-4](#)

Second Reading: [1 John 4:7-16](#)

Gospel Reading: [John 3:31-36](#)

Evening: Psalms [98](#); [96](#)

Selections from Faculty-authored publications are taken from:

“A Meditation on Matthew 2:1-12,” by [Martha Robbins](#)

After Baptism, by [John Burgess](#)

Ecstasy and Intimacy: When the Holy Spirit Meets the Human Spirit, by [Edith Humphrey](#)

Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times, by [Andrew Purves](#) and [Charles Partee](#)

Ezekiel (New International Biblical Commentary), by [Steven Tuell](#)

Journey through the Word: Exploring Biblical Themes, by [James Davison '69](#) and [Sara Covin Juengst](#)

Pastoral Genetics: Theology and Care at the Beginning of Life, by [Ron Cole-Turner](#) and [Brent Waters](#)

Psalms (Interpretation Bible Studies Series), by [Jerome Creach](#)

Reclaiming the Old Testament from the Christian Pulpit, by [Donald Gowan](#)

Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation, by [Andrew Purves](#)

To Everything a Season: A Spirituality of Time, by [Bonnie Thurston](#)

“‘To Know Nothing Except Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified’: Supralapsarian Christology and a Theology of the Cross,” by [Edwin Christian van Driel](#)

Why Scripture Matters, by [John Burgess](#)

Morning and Evening Readings: Psalms

Psalm 2

1 Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, 3 "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling 12 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.

Scott Hagley, faculty

Psalm 2 moves from asking "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain?" to presenting nations and kings foolishly conspiring against God and God's purposes for creation. Scholars call the Psalm a "divine enthronement Psalm" because it celebrates the placement of God's anointed king in Zion in the midst of global turmoil. When Joseph and his pregnant fiancé left for Bethlehem, this psalm must have been far from their minds. The nations did rage, and Roman occupiers made their sovereignty crystal clear. Augustus counts—and thus controls—his colonized subjects. But in the midst of soldiers and census takers, imperial decrees and forced migrations, and among farm animals a child is born who will be called "Beloved Son" by the Father and "Lord" by future generations. The One the Lord enthroned does not colonize or manage subjects, but rather comes near, invites, and calls; God comes near in a child, invites us to the table, and calls us by and for love. Augustus did not endure, nor Rome. But we know who does.

Prayer

Move us, Lord, by the subversive power of this story. Remind us not only *that* You rule, but also *how* You rule creation. Impress us with the awareness that, though the nations do rage and the kings of the earth do take their stand, they cannot do so with the finality that only You may claim.

Psalm 16

1 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. 2 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." 3 As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. 4 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. 5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. 6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. 7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. 8 I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. 10 For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. 11 You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Betty Voigt '85

The writer of Psalm 16 reminds us of God's desire and longing for creation: *a path of life that leads to fullness of joy*. Let us choose this desire for ourselves and our world.

Turn off your electronic devices for a while. Fast from the continual doomsday, fear-mongering news. This is Advent. Seek the Holy. Hold a baby or the hand of a dying one. Spend time giving thanks for everything! Turn on some beautiful music and let it fill your soul. Offer a small gesture of kindness and support to a stranger. Open your heart to receive the ordinary goodness around you. Be silent. Go within. Touch into the deeper truths that we call God, right here and now. Breathe in this incredible Mystery in us, with us, and all around us.

Prayer

O Beloved One, “my chosen portion and my cup,” I often wander away from the true path of life you hold before me. My thoughts, heart, and actions get captured by inane distractions and fear. I run away from your presence. Keep wooing me back to yourself, and hold me in your heart of Love.

Rebecca Kahnt '19

I think I underestimated the importance of presence in life until I became a mom. When I became a mom, I quickly learned that every activity I did in the house became a “team sport.” And if I would dare to go into another room by myself and have enough nerve to close the door behind me, it would mean the end of the world had arrived, with screams and gnashing of teeth coming from the other side of the door until I would open it again and I would be reunited with my family.

In many ways, I treasure that my children find my mere presence a place of rest and security. I also hope and pray it can point the way to the One who is the place in this crazy world where “my heart is glad, my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure” (Psalm 16:9).

In this season of Advent, as we remember the birth of Jesus to bring hope and light to a world filled with hopelessness and darkness, and in this season of Advent as we look forward to the day when we are all brought together in the heavenly kingdom when death is gone and pain has ceased, may we heed these words from Psalm 16 as we “keep the Lord always before (us).” May the awareness of the presence of the Lord with us through this Advent season bring us a daily source of abiding hope, joy, peace, and love.

Prayer

Gracious God whose presence shows us the path to life, fill us with your Spirit so we may feel your real presence with us always as you love us into being this Advent Season. In your holy, precious and powerful name we pray. Amen.

Psalm 17

1 Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. 2 From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right. 3 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. 4 As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. 5 My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped. 6 I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. 7 Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand. 8 Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, 9 from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me. 10 They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly. 11 They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground. 12 They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush.

13 Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them! By your sword deliver my life from the wicked, 14 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. 15 As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

Danielle Graham '14

This psalm is an interesting bedtime prayer. As opposed to the sweet prayer we teach or were taught to recite as children “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep . . .,” we find David offering a desperate prayer of protection and revenge and vindication. David is practically begging God to pay attention to his prayer and request for help. Protect me from these evil people who seek to destroy me. But what if the evil, the callous hearts, the mouths that speak arrogance and the ferocious lions seeking to devour your joy, peace, progress, and faithfulness are coming from within? What if your own mind, your own unforgiving heart, your own fears, your own self-loathing or self-hatred are your biggest enemies? Advent is a time of introspection as we wait in anticipation for the proof of the promise of our Savior. Christ came to save us even from ourselves.

Prayer

Gracious God, I pray that during this Advent season you will help make us mindful and aware of the things within that seek to destroy us. Help us to pray just as desperately that you protect us and avenge us from thoughts of self-hatred, callous and bitter hearts, depression, grief, unforgiveness, shame, isolation, stagnation, and all the dark lioness things that often grip your people during the holiday season. I pray that you give to all of us peace and renewed joy and a glimmer of hope during this time. Let us be satisfied with seeing Your likeness, for we were all made in Your image and after Your likeness. We wait in anticipation and with expectation and gratitude of what You will do in our lives and in this season. We pray all these things in Your precious Son, Jesus', name. Amen.

Psalm 18

1 I love you, O LORD, my strength. 2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. 3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies. 4 The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; 5 the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. 6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. 7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. 14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. 16 He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the LORD was my support. 19 He

brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. 20 The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.

Bill Myers '67

Beset by adversaries, Psalm 18's author offers testimony. When God was called upon for help, God delivered. The psalmist's enemies were defeated and peace fills the land. Because the psalmist knows, in his bones, that God pulled him out of the entangling cords of those who would kill him, the psalmist extravagantly sings praises to God. It's not enough to sing about God's healing the brokenhearted and binding their wounds; the psalmist wants us to fear God's hailstones, coals of fire, and well-shot arrows, all directed at the enemies of the psalmist. This God is a powerful God, angered by those who oppose him. This anger is made visible: God's nostrils are filled with smoke; his mouth contains a devouring fire. All who experience such mighty acts join the psalmist in this hymn of praise to God.

Prayer

Creator God, you who calmed the storm and who stand with us even as we tremble, be with us when we are beaten down and desolate. Hear us when we call for help. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul Fanous '20

We live in a world where power is given to those who are strong, rich, influential, or charismatic. But there is a power that has long been forgotten. And that is the power of God working with humanity, or with each of us specifically.

David the Psalmist in Psalm 18 sings of the power of God, His power over death and Sheol, His power over nature, and His power over our circumstances. But by far the most important aspect of God's power is that He has made it accessible to "me." He has given us the power, that our prayers would be heard and answered by Him: *"In my distress I called upon the Lord, And cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, And my cry came before Him, even to His ears"* (Psalm 18:6). This is real power—that the Hand which can make the *"earth (shake) and tremble,"* and the One who can make the *"foundations of the world ... uncovered"* by his *"rebuke,"* would bend down his ear, hear my voice, and allow Himself to be moved by my prayers.

When we feel weak, and powerless in this world, let us try to remember the true power that is made available to us.

Prayer

Dear Lord, it is a wonderful gift that you would hear my voice from your dwelling place, that you would regard my prayers. Thank you for this tremendous power you have bestowed on me. I request that you would never let me stray far from this strength that you have shared with us, your children. Amen.

Psalm 24

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

come in. 8 Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.

Jennifer Stroud '04/'18

Since the Industrial revolution humankind has sought to “subdue” the earth. Driven by greed, we have allowed the destruction of the planet in the name of progress and material gain. We have forgotten that all of God’s Creation is the Lord’s, and it is held in our keeping until the next generation becomes its caretakers. In our desire to master the physical realm we have, perhaps purposely, misunderstood our true calling.

Psalm 24 reminds us that the real work in our lives is the growth of our souls by the subjugation of our ego, our pride, and our selfishness. It is our choice, once we have given our hearts to our Lord Jesus Christ, whether we will allow the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us, thus enabling us to live out the grace of God gifted to us—to live it out humbly, with clean hands, pure hearts, and unsoiled tongues.

Those who live their lives striving to subdue their inner world by following in the footsteps of Jesus are the “generation that seek God.” It is only after this godly work that the gates and doors which stop the Holy Spirit from entering our souls can be lifted up and the King of Glory come in. Just as the Temple attendants physically labored to lift up the everlasting doors so the faithful might come to worship the Lord, so also let us be about our work to subdue our world within and welcome God into our hearts and our lives once again!

Prayer

Glorious Lord, we live in this material world and often don’t see the wonder of its beauty. We stress over our bills and our health, we worry about our family and our friends. In a world filled with noise it is hard, so hard, to be quiet and know—no matter the misfortune or catastrophe—that You are God. Help us in the varied distractions and disasters of our lives to seek Your face—to find our strength, our peace, and our place within Your loving, faithful, heart. In Jesus’ Holy Name we pray. Amen.

Deborah Smith '18

Advent is a unique time of transformation. We bring out special family recipes, get creative with appetizers, and try so many different kinds of cookies. The air is filled with cinnamon and pine. We hear songs about shepherds, angels, and joy as well as Frosty and Grandma’s unfortunate reindeer mishap. We bring trees inside and take lights outside. We don special clothes—some sparkly, others whimsical. We watch *Rudolph*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and *A Christmas Carol*. We spend time with people we haven’t seen in a while. During Advent, there is a transformation in what we see, smell, hear, eat, and do as we prepare to welcome Emmanuel. ‘God with us’ brings about an extraordinary transformation that lasts beyond the season. Here on this first day of Advent, let us lift up our heads and open wide the gates of our hearts that the King of Glory may come in.

Prayer

King of Glory, come abide in our hearts and continuously transform us. Give us pure hearts to love you fully and clean hands to serve our neighbors with love. In the precious name of Emmanuel, Amen.

Kathy Shirey '12

By today, we have all but forgotten this year's Black Friday, Deer Widow, and Cyber Monday sales. Retailers are digging deep to find new ways to entice us to spend more than we had planned in search of just the right present for everyone on our list. If you haven't started gathering together the items that will become brightly wrapped packages, you might be starting to feel the edge of nervous anticipation, fearing stores will be sold out of "just" what you wanted.

Gratefully, we pause in today's morning Psalms to remember that the commercialism of Christmas and the rush which obscures our view of the patient waiting of Advent don't win – unless we let them! Let's take some time today, and each day, to shout praise to our Creator! Let's put our world in God's order, not the world's! Praise the Lord!

Prayer

Almighty God, we rejoice that this world is yours and so are we! Help us to pause and take time to savor the waiting, allowing time to praise you! You are the King of Glory and we bring you our worship! Through Christ's mighty name we pray. Amen!

Sally Henry '12

Ever since my friend and fellow Seminary student Shea Cole '12 wrote a song to this Psalm, it has consistently brought me to a place of worship every time I listen to the song or read the Psalm. Its words lead me to recognize again and again God's kingship in all aspects of life. He brings order in chaos. He brings provision in need. He brings power in weakness. He is my king. And amazingly enough, despite my continued lack of total righteous living, he still pursues me, comes to me, and bids me to let him in, even more, to every recess of my life . . .

Lift up your heads, O you gates! Look! The King of glory wants to abide in you, LIVE in you! Be reminded this Advent season that we have a King in Jesus Christ. May all we do be worship to our King!

Prayer

O Lord you are our King. Even in this world where the idea of kingship is foreign, we can claim you as King – because you are not of this world. You pursue us, you love us, and yet we don't always welcome you into every corner of our lives. Forgive us, O God. Help us to "lift up our heads." Help us to open our eyes and our hearts and to welcome you, our King of glory, to enter in – in all your fullness and glory – and take up permanent residence. Help us to use this season of Advent as an opportunity to welcome and worship you even more fully in our lives. We give you all thanks and praise, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Psalm 25

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. 2 O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. 3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. 4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! 8 Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. 9 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. 10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. 11 For your name's

sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. 12 Who are they that fear the LORD? He will teach them the way that they should choose. 13 They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. 14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. 15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. 16 Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. 17 Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. 18 Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. 19 Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. 20 O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. 21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you. 22 Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles.

Tim Dooner, D.Min. student

In the 25th Psalm, the psalmist affirms that living within the streams of God's loving intentions for us always leads to good and true life. Living within the rhythms of God's good and eternal will for humanity safeguards us from shame, relieves the troubles and fears of our hearts, and rescues us from the trappings and troubles that result from our imperfection and our propensity to live according to our own will and desires. We join the psalmist in longing for God's guidance for the sake of life that is good and true, and we cry out, "Make us to know your ways, O Lord! Teach us your paths! Lead us in your truth!" God's guidance is always lovingly offered to us, and if we discern and implement it, we are carried forward in the stream of life to places of goodness and integrity. But how do we truly know what that guidance is?

As we journey together through this season of Advent, we consider that God has answered the prayers of the Psalmist most powerfully and clearly in the Christmas incarnation. We are imperfect people who long to be shown the way. We long to live with integrity in ways that are truly prosperous, upright, and powerful for God's sake. In the incarnation of God in Christ, our longings are met. God's love, instruction, guidance, and redemption are ours in Christ. God help us to accept this long-awaited gift that comes to us freely by God's grace!

Prayer

Eternal God and creator of all life, when we find ourselves waiting and longing for your guidance, protection, rescue, and healing, point our focus to Jesus. Reveal your grace and intentions through his witness, and bring us redemption through the Christ-like attitudes and actions of the people. Amen.

Psalm 33

1 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. 2 Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. 3 Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. 4 For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. 7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. 9 For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. 10 The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. 12 Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage. 13 The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. 14 From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth — 15 he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds.

16 A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. 17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. 18 Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, 19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. 21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. 22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Mark Basily '20

One of the most painful feelings in life is the feeling of loneliness—the feeling that no one is there, no one is interested in my life, and no one even cares. The solution offered to us in Psalm 33 is simple—look up, because there is One who looks down! In fact, the psalm repeats this truth three times: “The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind”; “From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth”; and “Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him.”

God looks down at us because He loves us, because He is interested in us, and because He wants to protect us. Knowing that our heavenly Father is watching us gives us the comforting feeling that we are not alone, and it inspires us to live a godly and pure life. So throughout your busy day, take a moment to stop and look up at the compassionate eyes that are gazing down upon you.

Prayer

Thank You Heavenly Father for Your love and protection. It gives me tremendous joy to know You are watching me and encouraging me through my life's journey. I confess that all too often I am occupied with the affairs of this world. Never turn Your eye away from me, but rather, remind me to turn my eyes up to You, my Savior and my God.

Susan Moudry '10

Advent is a time of waiting and hoping, as the end of our morning psalm reminds us. Recently, though, I've found myself very aware that waiting does not always bring hope; it does not always bring excitement. Sometimes waiting is anxiety ridden and even pain filled. A professor and mentor of mine spent the last several weeks with this kind of waiting. Waiting to hear if the cancer has returned, waiting to hear if it has spread and waiting to hear what all this means. The emotional turmoil is very real and I imagine that most people can relate in their own ways, with their own stories of waiting.

So, this year I find this psalm speaking to me in new ways. It is into this world of waiting with our anxieties and pains that God speaks. He reminds us with this season of Advent that hope is on the way, and that our waiting will one day turn to great joy. I am grateful for these reminders, spoken into our midst. For all those waiting, Christ is on the way.

Prayer

God, be with us as we wait expectantly for you. Give us renewed hope. Remind us that you are never far away. Amen.

Corinne Cameron '23, Board member

Today finds us in mid-December, less than two weeks away from Christmas. A lot of planning has brought us to this point, and we are now fulfilling these plans. For those of us involved in feeding programs, it is quite likely that our initial planning began in the summer with securing locations, obtaining insurance certificates, and ordering food. Choir leaders and bandmasters will have planned (and ordered music) with rehearsals that have been underway for a couple of months. The temptation

at this point is to rely upon the plans that we have made, to see us through to the finish line. The morning Psalm for today cautions us from relying upon our own plans as we discover in verse 10: the Lord “frustrates the plans of the peoples.”

While I certainly do not hope that any of our plans are frustrated today, as plans shift, as wrinkles in our day occur, we have the choice to either become frustrated or to seek invitations from God within the wrinkles. To turn away from relying on the counsel of our own plans, to relying on the counsel of God. To see God in the faces of the people we serve, to encounter God in an unplanned line-up, to breathe and turn our eyes away from our human planning and consider the incredible plan that gives to us this season.

As our eyes and hearts return to God’s plan, we will find these invitations from the closing of our psalm: hope in God’s steadfast love (v. 18); our hearts trust and find gladness in God (v. 21); and to feel the steadfast love of God resting upon us (v. 22).

Prayer

Our steadfast Lord, help us rely upon you today and not just on our human plans. Help us seek you when our plans go astray, and in this seeking help us encounter your invitations to hope in you, find gladness in you, and to rest in you. We give to you this day, we give to you the remaining twelve days of our Advent season. May your plans be our plans. Amen.

Psalm 40

1 I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. 2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. 3 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. 4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. 5 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. 6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. 7 Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. 8 I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” 9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. 10 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. 11 Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever. 12 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. 13 Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me. 14 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. 15 Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, “Aha, Aha!” 16 But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, “Great is the LORD!” 17 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.

Lisa Heckman '98

Whenever I read Psalm 40, the song that sings through my head is not an Advent hymn or a Christmas carol, but a spiritual from an old 1970s book of praise songs. As much as I love, love, love Christmas music, the nostalgia of perfect Christmases past or images of a clean, sweet-smelling stable with fluffy sheep and silent nights is contrary to the messy world into which God came.

Real life has us stuck in miry bogs of loneliness, stress, or life-the-way-it's-always-been that are not healthy. We battle evils of apathy, entitlement, and pervading public meanness. And we constantly confront those who want to snatch away our lives with too many holiday responsibilities, expectations of perfection, or all we "should" be, think, and do.

Immanuel, God-with-us, became flesh in Jesus to move into our messy neighborhoods, right where we are—and with us as *who* we are. Jesus came to lead us out of the bogs, fight evil with the strength of love, and deliver us from the snatchers of life. God is present right now, in this moment of living, whether we're in a muddy pit or standing on solid rock. The Incarnation didn't begin and end 2000+ years ago, nor is it only the means of gaining a seat in heaven someday. Jesus is with us now, in *our* neighborhoods, neighbors, family, friends, . . . even enemies.

In thanksgiving we sing songs to tell the world of God's enduring, unconditional love and faithfulness. May we not restrain our lips or hide from proclaiming what we've learned about God. Those are songs the world needs to hear more than the carols that play on endless loop this season. So . . .

"You can tell the world about this! You can tell the nations you're blessed.
Tell them that Jesus makes you whole and he brings the joy, joy to your soul!"
(Traditional spiritual [alt.])

Prayer

Yahweh of the low places, high places, and all the places in between, may we seek you in times of trouble. May we declare your marvelous deeds in times of triumph. May we walk with you every ordinary day, knowing that life is better—and we can be better ourselves—when we share our days with you. Put new songs in our mouths to sing praise to you each and every day so the world can know you and the nations hear how greatly you have blessed us. Amen.

Rebecca DePoe '16/'20

The poem "Yesterday's Pain," by Ann Weems, explains our need for deliverance during Advent:

Some of us walk into Advent
tethered to our unresolved yesterdays
the pain still stabbing
the hurt still throbbing.
It's not that we don't know better;
it's just that we can't stand up anymore by ourselves.
On the way to Bethlehem,
will you give us a hand?

Amid the hustle and bustle of Advent, it's easy to forget why we need a Savior. We need a Savior because we cannot deliver ourselves from yesterday's pain.

But our deliverance is best embodied in Christian community. The Psalmist writes, "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips . . . I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation."

On your journey to Bethlehem this Advent, I encourage you to reflect on the role Christian community plays in your deliverance from yesterday's pain. Yes, we need a Savior to deliver us from yesterday's pain, but we also need a community of faith to remind us that our identity comes from our deliverance, not from yesterday's pain.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we look with anticipation for the birth of your Son to deliver us from yesterday's pain. We pray this Advent that you would provide us with great congregations to give us a hand when we can't stand up by ourselves anymore. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Anthony Hita '13

Christmas is a time when we celebrate and remember the deliverance that came in Christ so long ago. But in the midst of the holiday season, it can be easy to forget God is still a God of deliverance and hope. The Psalmist writes of the LORD drawing the writer up from a desolate pit. We might be tempted to stop there; after all, most of us probably recall a time that God has delivered us. But the Psalmist doesn't stop there. They go on to say that they will not hide the news of their deliverance; they will tell others of God's great faithfulness. This Christmas there will be so much to draw our attention. But in the midst of the celebrating, don't forget that this world still has many seeking to be drawn up from deep pits. Don't hide the message of deliverance—proclaim it and live it out for the benefit of others.

Prayer

Dear Lord of deliverance, open my eyes this season to see those who are in need that I may proclaim your steadfast love and faithfulness in word and in deed, that all who seek You may rejoice and be glad in Your salvation. Amen.

Psalm 50

1 The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. 2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. 3 Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. 4 He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: 5 "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" 6 The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. 7 "Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. 8 Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. 9 I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. 10 For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. 12 If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. 13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? 14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. 15 Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." 16 But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? 17 For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. 18 You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. 19 You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. 20 You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother's child. 21 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. 22 "Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver. 23 Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God."

Catherine Mallick Gillis '90

In Psalm 50 I see the Temple of Zion—God’s beacon of light shining for all to see. The Temple is high and therefore receives the light of the sun in the morning, as well as the evening’s setting sun. Day and night, God is a welcoming beacon of hope for all who go *up* to worship God. For God’s presence is in his Temple.

Like the ancient Hebrews, today God judges his people, but not like the Gentiles, who do not know God because they are not in a covenantal relationship. God judges his people—judges *us*—because we hate his discipline. Judgment comes upon God’s people who have ignored his teaching and whose lives do not glorify God. The psalmist specifically mentions that it is our mouths which condemn us; it is our own deceit and slander that diminishes the God who demands single-minded obedience.

Now we are rebuked because we have forsaken the sacrifice of thanksgiving for falsehoods. At this time of preparation, as *always*, we are to choose the way of thanksgiving. We are to call out to God during these days of trouble. In each one of our own hearts, we are to turn away from disobedience and trust God to deliver us to his goodness. We are to walk God’s pathway so as to give all glory to God—not to humans, not to institutions, but only to God, who alone is worthy of praise.

Prayer

O God, as I prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus, remove all falsehood from my heart. Fill me by your mercy with a heart of truth and thankfulness. Then your light will shine, day and night, for all to see, so that all the world will acknowledge your truth and glory by the witness of your eternal truth and light in the lives of your covenantal people. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen.

Charles L. Fischer III, staff

“The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.” (Ps 50:1-2)

As a child, I knew when I heard my mother or father calling out to me in the yard to come back home. Depending on what they were calling for, I could tell by their cadence and the octave as to what I should be expecting when I reached the door of the house. It was a comforting sound which assured me that awaiting my return home, even in the worst of times, a loved one was calling out to me.

This was a blessing that others may not have experienced—the voice of a loved one that brings comfort at all times.

I long to hear the voice of the mighty one. I have imagined what the voice of God the Lord might sound like, only to accept that it would be a voice that I desired and would bring comfort and assurance to me alone. Yet, I understand that to hear the voice of the Lord and to comprehend that it is good, it must be a voice that resonates with all, a soothing sound versus a clanging cymbal.

In the season of Advent, we await for the birth of the Christ child and his second coming. When Jesus was first born and laid in the feeding trough, the cry of the Lord sounded like the wails of a baby who was able to gain the attention of the angels. And who might hear his voice when he comes again? We will surely know when all the earth responds.

Prayer (Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, *Book of Common Prayer*, 211)

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Psalm 53

1 Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good. 2 God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. 3 They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one. 4 Have they no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? 5 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. 6 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 62

1 For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. 2 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. 3 How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence? 4 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. 5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. 8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. 9 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. 10 Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain

hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.11 Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, 12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13

I am a fixer by nature. A significant part of the ministry God has entrusted to me is to help others, to make sure they are secure spiritually, emotionally, and financially. Over time I have come to realize that my desire or need to fix things for others often gets ahead of what God is doing. I've learned that it is better to wait on God than to wish later that I had.

Our ability to wait on God and lean not to our own understanding is difficult, especially when there are so many issues in the world that we are moved to address, try to mitigate, or hope to fix—inequities, injustices, inequalities, maltreatment of people based on a wide range of unjustified factors. Yet the psalmist reminds us to wait in silence and assurance, for God is our rock, salvation, and refuge.

Waiting on God is not a passive act, but a peaceful stillness that manifests when we yield our fears, anxieties, and insecurities to God out of faithful trust and hope-filled living. In the letter to the Philippians Paul writes: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7). During this season of Advent, may our minds, hearts, and spirits be at peace as we wait with assurance for Jesus Christ, the ultimate "fixer" of all things, and trust that God has not relinquished control of this world, but is working everything out for our ultimate good. As the psalmist concludes, so shall we: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord."

Prayer

Gracious, loving, and all-powerful God, quiet our hearts, increase our faith, and help us always to look to you, the one and only God, who is able to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond anything we might imagine and think. Although the world seems out of control, teach us to wait on you, our hope, and to trust you with every aspect of our individual and corporate lives. For you are our rock, our salvation, and our refuge. Amen.

Graeme Wilson '18

The all-consuming bustle and noise of the Christmas season jostles our senses at this time of year. Presents to buy, cards to write, parties and functions to attend, Christmas holiday plans to be made. In this season of frenetic clamor, what does it mean for our souls to wait in silence? In whom, or in what, should we trust?

So often, too often, we place our trust in something less than God. We place our trust in busyness, in things, in politicians, in institutions, and in ourselves. We do so time after time, year upon year, and we wonder why it never satisfies.

The Psalmist rests content in God alone. The material things and the preoccupations of this age are "lighter than a breath"—of no consequence—compared to the unshakeable strength of God, the rock and fortress of our salvation.

In this Advent season of waiting and preparing we once again place our trust in the God who came among us, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. God is the dependable presence in whom we can trust, the source of our hope and our salvation.

For God alone our souls wait in silence.

We wait and we pray, “*Maranatha*. Come, Lord Jesus come.”

Prayer

Gracious and eternal God, whenever the busyness and clamor of this season take us over, remind us once again to place our trust in you. For you alone are our rock and our fortress, our hope and our salvation. We wait in silent expectation for the light in the darkness, the hope of the world, the Word made flesh. Amen.

Psalm 67

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

William (B.T.) Gilligan '11

When we read Psalm 67 we read a Psalm of great joy and a desire to see the whole world praise God. Have you ever wondered what it would like to see all the people thank God? Can you imagine the scene of the whole world praising God at the same time? What a sight that would be!

Sometimes, in the midst of this season we can find ourselves so tired and worn out that we don't even have the strength to praise God. How can we expect the whole world to praise God when we can't even find the strength to praise God?

If, in the midst of this busy season, we find ourselves tired, worn out, and struggling to find the strength to praise God, may our prayer be the prayer in verse 1. May God grant us peace and bless us and shine on us. Maybe we pray that prayer every day, or even every hour, but maybe in praying that prayer we can find grace and blessing and the strength to praise God.

Prayer

Sovereign God, be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Amen.

Psalm 72

1 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. 2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. 3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. 5 May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. 7 In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. 8 May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. 9 May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust. 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. 11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. 12 For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

13 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. 14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. 15 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. 16 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. 17 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. 18 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. 19 Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen. 20 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.

Paula Cooper '10/'13

As I write this reflection, there’s a heaviness on my heart; perhaps on yours as well. The factors causing this heaviness have tirelessly held residence in my life for so very long. Yet it appears that many people have become anesthetized to them, probably because these things don’t affect all of us. I’m puzzled by the way some can just ignore the police killings happening in our society. The racial injustices and systemic structures that are perpetuating violence and brutality against our fellow Christian siblings, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color.

As anesthetized people, are we so possessed with unsympathetic and impenetrable hearts, minds, ears, and eyes that we ignore these issues and accept the status quo? Is this how we love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength? Is this how we love our neighbors?

Is this “stinking thinking” by some Christians produced by faith, or has it trickled down from those who possess wealth or have powerful leadership positions? I learned in 2014, when Mr. Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, that one driver of racism is “privilege and power.” Some of us have used our privilege and power to lord it over “the least of these,” marginalized people, to keep them in their less-powerful, less-privileged places. And at the very same time, we demonstrate that we think their lives don’t matter! Shame on us!

All lives matter, true, but the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color—matter particularly to God, because they are among “the least of these” who have been oppressed by those with privilege and power. When Jesus comes again, how will he find Christians treating one another? Will he find us acting out of our privilege and power? Will we, especially those in leadership positions, be humbly transformed and possess the justice of God that the psalmist prays for in Psalm 72?

My hope is that all who are in leadership positions will use their privilege and power to humbly observe verses 2-4. As verse 7 says, may peace abound for all under their leadership. May these leaders hear the calls of our needy siblings and respond as specified in verses 12-14. As these transformations and righteous actions are evident in their leadership, may they be blessed according to verses 15-17:

Prayer

Gracious Lord, with heavy hearts we pray that the season of Advent and Jesus’ return will find leaders who live by the words of Psalm 72. We ask that those in leadership positions, who possess privilege and power, would work for the good of all people. As this happens, help us to remember to give you, Lord God, all of the glory and praise. Amen.

Psalm 80

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! 3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 4 O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. 6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; 11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. 12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. 14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right hand planted. 16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. 17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. 18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. 19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Nathan Carlson ’11

Within this Psalm we find imagery that provides theological depth for our Christian faith. From the psalm’s opening with the image of a shepherd and its calling on God for the restoration of Israel—not only the restoration of a people but also of a “vine” out of Egypt—we clearly see contained herein messianic imagery associated with Jesus. The great Shepherd, Redeemer, and Restorer of life in this passage understands the trials of the day-to-day living we face.

During the season of Advent, each loss, each pain, and each sorrow we experience feels weightier. An unexpected illness, death, betrayal, or bill introduces that much more unease to our souls. The God described in Psalm 80 has seen it all before—on both a personal and a national scale.

When the vine from Egypt was “broken down,” “plucked,” and “ravaged,” the psalmist turned for revival to the God of hope. This passage does not end in defeat, but instead in new life, as the God of hosts restores the people of God. Psalm 80 reassures us that whatever “scorn” we face, “tears” we shed, and rebuke we bear, our God has gone with us through all of it.

Prayer

Redeemer and Restorer of life, before we know what we need, you are at work in our lives. During this Advent season, when trials and pains may feel particularly acute, be with us to guide and lead us through these valleys. As you restore us to life, may we remember to praise your name continually. Amen.

Joanne Spence '18

As I ponder this psalm, I hear a wistful and yearning tone. The repeated use of the word “restore” suggests to me that the sought-for restoration involved waiting. I have never known restoration to be a quick process, whether it has involved buildings, paintings, or people. Restoration looks like, and often is, a painfully slow process.

Slowness is not something I am good at, though my vocation involves teaching people how to slow down. Slowness usually involves being thoughtful and paying attention. But paying attention to what? To whom? In my early years of learning to slow down, my mind would go crazy and “chomp at the bit”—not unlike the minds of the Israelites, whom the psalmist reveals as pleading, “come to save us! . . . let your face shine, that we may be saved.” Three times in this psalm they make this cry to the Lord. Waiting and yearning. Waiting and yearning. The struggle is real!

I have a friend who is obviously pregnant. She is waiting and yearning for her baby boy to be born. As she notes, pregnancy is not only the perfect metaphor for Advent but even for our life as a whole. As Christians, we live in the “already-but-not-yet” space till Christ’s return, when all things will be made new.

But like me, most of us are not good at waiting. The slow work of restoration does not come quickly or easily. Just ask any child who has long awaited Christmas morning and tried to stay awake all night on Christmas Eve to watch and wait.

Prayer

Dear heavenly Father, may we practice a posture of readiness in our waiting for the time when you will again break into our current reality. As our brother Teilhard de Chardin reminds us to do, help us, “Above all, [to] trust in the slow work of God,” a long time though it may take.

Psalm 85

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. 2 You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. 3 You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. 4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. 5 Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? 6 Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? 7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. 8 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. 9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may well in our land. 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. 11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look

*down from the sky. 12 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.*

A. Gary Angleberger, McMillan Society member

Psalm 85 begins where many hymns and prayers begin: the psalmist lists the many favors God has bestowed on his people. We, in our own prayers, can easily identify with the psalmist's gratitude. The writer speaks of God's favor in the granting of the home-land and the establishment of a people who have been blessed in spite of their shortcomings and failures. This God is a forgiving God, so the psalmist acknowledges the many times in the past when God has forgiven his people—and is still willing to grant forgiveness. In the light of God's many past mercies, the psalmist pleads that the people of his day will hear the story of their failures and turn to their loving, forgiving God.

I wonder whether, in the midst of the political debating of our day, anyone can "lift our eyes" to where we, as a people, have come from—when we have failed and been unfair to the "poor and the stranger in our midst"—yet remind us that the call is greater than our failures. The call is to follow humbly in the path of "the Peace-maker" and trust that serving the needs of our neighbors and striving for justice may be a better path to peace than building walls and greater arsenals. Is this a vain hope? Advent begins with a hope—that if God comes among us, we will see and understand and follow. Today, will we allow the hope of Advent to be a vain hope?

Prayer

We wait for your coming, O Lord, when "our salvation is at hand," when "You speak peace to your people," when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet" and "righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Instruct us through your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, how to wait—not passively, not with resignation—but to wait claiming the power of your word of hope in our Lord, and to live abundantly in his Name. Amen.

John Shaver '98, Board member

The psalmist reminds us that God throughout history continues to provide us with great gifts: "steadfast love," "peace," restoration—"The Lord will give what is good."

Recently, I read a story about a missionary who was serving as a teacher in Africa. During one lesson, he took some time to share about the significance of Christmas. Later in the year, one of the students presented the missionary with an incredibly beautiful seashell before Christmas break. The missionary recognized that this shell could only be found a considerable distance from the school. When he was presented with the gift, he said, "What a beautiful shell. Thank you for traveling so far to get me such a lovely gift." The student replied, "The long journey was part of the gift."

As we walk through Advent, I hope you'll join me by remembering and reflecting on God's journey to us in Jesus Christ—the One who *brings* us "what is good." For God's journey in Jesus isn't just an ordinary journey or an ordinary gift. Remember the message of the angels as they journeyed to the shepherds: "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11)—the epitome of "what is good."

During our individual walks through Advent, may each one of us reflect on the ways in which we can share with others Christ's gifts of "steadfast love," "peace," restoration, and "great joy"—in this season and the seasons to come.

Prayer

O God, this journey of Advent stirs great excitement in us. In this season, we see anew all the good gifts you continue to bring to us through your journey to and abiding presence with us—gifts that remind us of your great love for each one of us. Please grant that in all we do and say, we will reflect your great gift of Christ our Lord to everyone we meet as we walk with you each day. Amen.

Michelle Spomer, faculty

Psalms can often be poetic and rich in imagery, and this psalm is no different. I was immediately drawn to “righteousness and peace will kiss each other” and the other phrases in verses 10 and 11. However, as I reread the psalm, it was one solitary word that captured my attention: again. By asking that God “restore us *again*” and “revive us *again*,” there is acknowledgement that the current relationship with God is not the same as it once was. There is also acknowledgement that God’s love isn’t a one-off, and that God can extend that love over and over.

As with many of you, my relationship with God ebbs and flows. At my lowest points, I’ve felt as though I have failed God, or worse, that God has failed me. During these times, I’m thankful to have memories of being more connected to God, of feeling God’s grace and love for me. And eventually, I ask for restoration and revival. Again.

If you’re at a low point in your life, or maybe just a little too cynical and jaded, it may be time to ask God for restoration and revival. Advent, a hopeful anticipation of God’s love and grace for us, might just be the perfect time to do it.

Prayer

God of love and hope, draw us near to you. Help us to remember how much you desire to be in our lives, and how you have given us your grace over and over. May our faithfulness “spring up from the ground.” Amen.

Psalm 90

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

Joseph Hedden Jr. '97

Is there any time in American culture more thinly sentimental than “the holiday season”? There is an expectation, even in the church, that we must be happy in December surrounding ourselves with plastic and neon trinkets which shout “GLAD TIDINGS!” One almost feels morally inferior for admitting any nuanced emotion beside a shallow cheer.

How refreshing, then, this Advent to turn to Psalm 90! Psalm 90 is a realist’s view of the tough moments in life. No tinsel and hot cocoa here. Rather, the Psalmist truthfully reports the alienation of humanity, being bound as we are by mortality and sin. Alongside our human experiences of dead-ends and bramble bushes, fears and anger, we discover the source of true joy: God and God’s works. God’s revelation pierces human struggle and a deep and authentic joy emerges (verse 14). May we all experience such joy this Advent.

Prayer

O God, you have been our dwelling place throughout the ages. As we reflect back on our lives, we can see your hands at work, molding us and shaping us. May we encounter you deeply today and may we be joyful in your unending love and grace. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

Erin Davenport '05, staff

Psalm 90 reminds us of the Lord’s GREATNESS and our itchy, bitsy tininess. In this midst of the craziness of classes, holiday plans, Field Ed, and family it is easy to think that the world revolves around us. Psalm 90 reminds us yet again, that the Lord is our dwelling place. The Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, our days just pass away. With the Psalmist we say, “Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on thy servants!” And with mercy the Christ Child is born. The Lord, who is from everlasting to everlasting, has come to earth to be with us. With mercy the favor of the Lord is upon us. With mercy we are reminded that the world does not revolve around us. Thankfully, God is GREAT, and mercifully this God has favor upon us.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord for your greatness and your mercy. Thank you, Lord that you are from everlasting to everlasting. Help us, your finite creatures to serve you this day in a way that is pleasing. Amen.

Psalm 94

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

consolations cheer my soul. 20 Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who contrive mischief by statute? 21 They band together against the life of the righteous, and condemn the innocent to death. 22 But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. 23 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 96

1 O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. 3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. 5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. 6 Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. 9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. 10 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.” 11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; 12 let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy 13 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.

Graham McWilliams '18

Having come to this glorious day of Christmas, I'm sure that many of us have, through the time of Advent, sung our hearts out in praise celebrating the promise of God in Jesus, our Lord. And it is right that we have done so, for, as the psalmist affirms, God has accomplished "marvellous works among all the people" and our response must be to share this good news with those in whom we come into contact. We need to remember, however, that God's actions are worldwide as God brings forward His great plan for all creation, because most of what God is achieving we don't hear about.

Bad news sells newspapers, Good News doesn't. So let us not be dismayed by the reports of terror, violence, and crime—the rise in what we may consider ungodliness. These incidents are the local signs of our troubled times and the opportunities that lie at the heart of Christ's mission for us, today. Only when we are confident in proclaiming that "The Lord is King" will those who are caught up in these acts of aggression come to realize that there is more to life than personal gain—and turn to God for life's fulfillment.

Celebrating the birth of Christ gives humanity a new beginning, a renewed hope for the future. Today we may faithfully encounter many challenges, but at His return the bounties of our faith will overflow and the glory of the Lord will uplift us beyond our understanding. Rejoice. Amen.

Prayer

Faithful God, fulfiller of promises, open our eyes to Your goodness and lift our hearts beyond the immediate that we may experience a taste of Your eternal Kingdom. May our voices continue to sing of Your greatness and our lives reflect Your love of us today and in the year to come. Amen.

Psalm 98

1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory. 2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. 3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. 4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. 5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. 6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD. 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. 8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy 9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Jen Haddox '06

As we gather for worship on this Christmas morning, many will sing, "Joy to the World!" This wonderful hymn based on Psalm 98 celebrates the joyful coming of Jesus into the world as King. There is no greater joy than the reality of Immanuel, God with us. The wonderful thing about the joy of Jesus' coming is that it is a gift to us and to the whole world. The Incarnation is the joy of God's love made manifest. If you are feeling blue this day, or struggling with heartache and loss, may you open your heart to receive the gift of joy. Prepare your heart, make room for the joy of Jesus. Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room, And heaven and nature sing, And heaven and nature sing, And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Prayer

We give joyful thanks this day for the coming of Jesus into our world and into our lives. Thank you, O LORD, for the gift of your love given as a babe in a manger. As we celebrate this day, prepare our hearts to receive you once again. Help us to make room in our lives for your presence in all the days to come. Amen.

Psalm 102

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. 2 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. 3 For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. 4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. 5 Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. 6 I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. 7 I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. 8 All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. 9 For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink, 10 because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. 11 My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. 12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations. 13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favor it; the appointed time has come. 14 For your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity on its dust. 15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth your glory. 16 For the LORD will build up Zion; he will appear in his glory. 17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer. 18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD: 19 that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, 20 to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die; 21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, 22 when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD. 23 He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. 24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away at the mid-point of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations." 25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 26 They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away; 27 but you are the same, and your years have no end. 28 The children of your servants shall live secure; their offspring shall be established in your presence.

Lezley Stewart '18

In the dark days of winter and in the midst of everyday life there can be difficult and brooding days—days when one might feel like a *lonely bird on a housetop*. In the midst of the Psalmist's longing and despair, there is also a glimmer of hope as he calls to mind the faithfulness of God from generation to generation.

Sometimes in darkness it is hard to discern the light, but gradually and slowly the merest glimmer can spread warmth and hope, pointing to a new beginning. It is often in calling to mind the past that we find the strength to live in the present and future.

The season of Advent takes us on that journey from past to future, darkness to light, and along the way we begin to see the transforming light of Christ reshaping our future and direction. We become part of what he the Psalmist described as the generation to come— a people yet unborn who praise the Lord.

Prayer

Open our eyes to your wonder,
Open our hearts to your warmth,
Open our lives to your embrace,
As we hope in the Eternal One. Amen.

Steve Werth '09

One of my most vivid memories of childhood is stepping outside in the early evening one December and finding the world in pitch darkness. I can't remember why I found it so shocking, or even where we had been. But I very distinctly remember stepping off the curb, looking up, and being in complete disbelief at the dense darkness of a moonless night. I've always found it strange that the things that we sometimes recall most clearly aren't the monumental moments of life, but moments of still, silent, disbelief. It's in those moments that the words of the psalmist speak into our lives. "Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you." And we wait. We wait with patience and we wait with hope to know and to see the presence of God with us. Still, silent, nights give way to vibrant new mornings. Still, silent, disbelief gives way to the clear presence of God who has heard us, and has set us free to new life in this moment.

Prayer

God of joy, in the stillness of this morning open our eyes to see your presence here. We know that we are no longer prisoners, but you have set us free to new life. As the long, dark nights break and give way to longer days and new mornings, Lord, make us instruments of your mercy. Help us to use each day and each morning to proclaim boldly that your love, your justice, and your presence are in this place. Amen.

J. Gregory Clark '71/'75

Our firstborn emerged from the womb on Epiphany, five weeks earlier than the gestation calendar predicted. As she grew out of her crib and toddled around the manse, she demonstrated a growing curiosity portraying a contagious, inquisitive mind, seeking to understand this world into which she was born and the Creator who gave her the gift of life.

Now, nearly a half century later, she continues to ask me, "Why, Daddy?" Of course, she no longer crawls up on my lap and looks me straight in the eye as a little child, but the longing to grasp the mysteries of God's provision has not abated. This past Mother's Day, she posted on Facebook a message that gripped my heart. She wrote, "Thank you Lance and my 3 sweet little angels in heaven for providing me the opportunity to be a mom." Our daughter, who surprised us with her early arrival, delivered a healthy baby boy who is now a teenager, bore two fetal forms that were swept away in miscarriages, and carried a still-born baby who could not survive long enough to take even a first breath.

The prayer of the Psalmist cries out, "My heart is stricken and withered like grass." Three times our hearts ached and broke along with the heart of our daughter as fleeting moments of joy almost erupted, but then suddenly vaporized as the dreams vanished from view. We rejoice with our daughter in the life of her son, who continues to bring great joy to his parents and grandparents and to extended family. Like our inquisitive daughter, we also ask our heavenly Father, "Why, Daddy?"

Advent, a season of expectation filled with hopeful signs and joy-filled anticipation, is at the same time a season of Divine Revelation. God, to whom the Psalmist prays most fervently, emerges in the most

unexpected way as a baby, born to a virgin by the miracle of the Nativity. God's promise is fulfilled in ways that far surpass our wildest imaginations. Emmanuel, "God with Us!"

God has never forsaken us. God accompanies us through all our darkest nights. God promises eternal blessings, in our generation and for all our offspring—those whom we know and love, and those whom we have yet to meet.

Prayer

Abba, Father, thank you for granting me unlimited opportunities to present my needs to You. Help me to be content in receiving whatever paths and provisions You offer. May my frail and feeble faith keep me open to trust that You know the way I must go and be all-sufficient as I continue my journey through life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Psalm 110

1 The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." 2 The LORD sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes. 3 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. 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." 5 The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. 6 He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth. 7 He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore he will lift up his head.

Jacob Wilson, student

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.

Psalm 122

1 I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the LORD!” 2 Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. 3 Jerusalem — built as a city that is bound firmly together. 4 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. 5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. 7 Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.” 8 For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” 9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Lou Nyiri '96

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’”

These words resonate within me, for they are the words my Presbyterian pastor father-in-law often used as he began worship when our family would visit on vacation. Hearing these words signaled it was time to calm our inner conversations that we might be open to an encounter with God’s gracious and gratitude-inducing presence in our midst. It was a signal to be open to God’s peace.

Psalm 122 was originally sung by pilgrims on the way to celebrate one of Jerusalem’s major festivals. Thereafter, it was used as a song of praise for the city and a prayer for the city’s well-being. We could use a song like this one today

As I write these devotional words, the news of late has been riddled with bad events. Shootings, hurricanes, nefarious behaviors by power players, racism, and sexism are often the lead stories on our news outlets. We could use a song of peace like Psalm 122 today

Peace of the city . . . ,

Peace within your walls . . . ,

Peace within [us]

What a blessing to remember during the Advent season that the one whom we prepare to meet is also the one in whom we rejoice, for this One is the very One who will “fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.” *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

Prayer

Ever-loving and ever-giving God, we thank you for your peace, which broke into this world in the cry of a tiny babe. We pray that your peace will be known once again, and as the song goes, “may it begin with us.” In the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.

Jane Alexander Carl, McMillan Society member

Memories of childhood. Opening exercises of Sunday School. Call to worship there or in “big” church. We were reminded by this verse to be “glad” to go to the house of the Lord. Life centered on church activities if we weren’t in school. Someone in our family made it a priority to get us to church.

If such was not the case for you “back then,” hopefully you are reminded now that peace in our hearts often starts in the house of the Lord, where we worship in community and remember that all good things come from the Lord, who seeks *our* good.

Advent calls us to active remembering as we prepare to enter into the presence of God, who was before us, is now with us, and will be with us forever. May we share that remembrance often with others as we gladly go to the house of the Lord.

Prayer

We come to you, Lord, in anticipation of receiving you in our hearts and lives so that we may do your will, grateful for your loving care now and forever. Amen.

Chris Taylor '19, staff

This summer, my wife and I had the opportunity to tour the Milan Duomo in Italy. Along with other tourists we marveled at the size and decoration of the interior; we stood atop the rooftop terrace gazing up at the Gothic spires, arches, and gargoyles adorning its exterior; we descended beneath the front piazza to see a baptismal pool dating to Ambrose’s time as bishop in the fourth century.

The Duomo is surely both a place of worship for residents and tourists alike. Just that same morning, a new bishop had been ordained. During our tour, my wife stopped to light a candle in memory of her late Catholic grandparents, knowing they would have loved being there. Other visitors sat and prayed.

Our journey there had been long—Milan was the last stop of our multi-country vacation. We were tired and ready for home, yet the holy met us there all the same. This house of the Lord in Milan is akin to Jerusalem, akin to wherever you find a sense of home in godly community. As the psalmist muses on reaching the destination of Jerusalem, planting one’s feet within the house of the Lord, I cannot help but imagine our Advent journey.

No matter how we get there, regardless of the craziness and chaos the season entails, we arrive at Christmas and are met by the holy one, “God with us” in the newborn baby Christ. And when we do may you be filled with the gladness, peace, and security the psalmist prays upon those entering Jerusalem.

Prayer

Hey God, we are so grateful for this Advent journey we are all on this year. Through the ups and downs, the energy and the tiredness, bring us to Christmas with a renewed sense of gladness, peace, and security knowing we are in your presence. Amen.

Psalm 126

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2 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." 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. 5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. 6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Wayland Coe '21

Think of a time when an enormous burden was lifted from you. Call to mind the feelings of relief, joy, and rest. Now think about the Israelites being delivered from bondage in Babylon. Having spent decades under the oppressive rule of Nebuchadnezzar, they were finally freed by the decree of King Cyrus.

Psalm 126, a song of ascent, describes that joy of the dream come true. Mouths filled with laughter and tongues with joy as they rejoiced in the great things God had done for them. With the incarnation of the second person of the blessed Trinity, Jesus, God has done even greater things for us. In and through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God has delivered us from bondage to sin and delivered us from the powers of death.

Like Israel, our mouths are filled with joy as we rejoice in the great works Jesus has done for us in his incarnation. The promise of God's long-awaited Messiah has come to pass, and we are the recipients of his great mercy and love. In his commentary on Psalm 126, St. Augustine wrote, "They have done ill with themselves, for they have sold themselves under sin [as we also have done]. The Redeemer came, and did good things for them." And also for us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have done great things for us in sending your Son, our Lord, to redeem us from the bondage of sin and death. Fill our mouths with praises of joy and thanksgiving for the wonderful incarnation of your Son, and grant that we might tell abroad the wonderful works of God. These things we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Dave Hosick '76

The psalmist declares, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy." He refers to the restoration of a "faithful remnant" of Israelites to their homeland from exile in Babylon, around 528 B.C. When first freed and enabled to return home, they were in shock, in a dream world, as is the common human experience when something wonderful or terrible happens to us. When the reality of their freedom sank in, their exuberant joy could not be contained.

For Christians it is interesting to note the phrase used by the psalmist, "restored the fortunes." It means "general restitution or liberation, a passing from the shadow of death into a full and happy life." On numerous occasions Jesus indicated this kind of restoration was a purpose of his ministry. "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly." "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live." We Christians understand and believe that Jesus made it possible for us to pass from the power of sin and death into a full and happy life, beginning now and continuing for eternity.

Psalm 126 reflects the message of the Bible from front to back. The psalmist remembers God's grace in the past, ponders God's help in the present, and relies on God's blessing in the future, all resulting in joy. For us the ultimate embodiment of these certainties is Jesus Christ, the celebration of whose birth we anticipate in Advent. Like the psalmist's, therefore, our lives are bordered on one side by the memory of God's faithful acts in the past and on the other side by the assurance of God's promises for the future. So in the present, let our mouths be filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy!

Prayer

God of hope and joy, the day draws near when the glory of your Son will brighten the night of the waiting world. Let no sorrow hinder the joy of those who seek him. Let no sin obscure the vision of wisdom by those who find him. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(from the Book of Common Worship, Daily Prayer, p. 104, WJK)

Psalm 130

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. 8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

James Kirk '08

Most of us who read the Psalms recognize that these words written by David touch and connect to whatever emotions we experience daily or seasonally. It seems that every Advent season is a time of waiting and a time of hope, as these two themes surround us. I have always had more trouble with the waiting than with the hope!

As children, I think most of us had trouble waiting for things: the end of the school year, the summer vacation trip, birthday parties, or the end of this season, Christmas. As adults, I think most of us still have trouble waiting, even though we have improved that skill. The fact that we have lived in an instant-reward, fast-food, IM world for some time hasn't helped! In fact, this impatience has filtered into our faith lives so much that somehow, someday, we might realize we are missing God's purpose for the wait.

In Psalm 130, David reminds us of the wait, the hope, and why we should be patient. The truth is that we wait for the divine redemption from the only One who can provide it. What if that redemption is already beginning during the wait? I discovered this quote:

"The secret of patience is to do something else in the meantime." – Anonymous

"Meantime" during this Advent season, take your mind off the wait and do those other things that David refers to: the crying out to the Lord and the dwelling in His word.

Prayer

Lord God, waiting for you can be so difficult for us. We have waited and are waiting to be prepared to receive you in your Word. Help us to cry out to you, out of whatever depths we find ourselves, as we wait. Every day, even now, remind us of your hope in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Diane Flynn '17

For Christians, the Advent season is a time to celebrate the expectancy of our savior Jesus Christ—the one God promised would take away the sin of the world. But for some, Advent can be a time of inward spiritual torment. Sin has a way of separating us from God, from a faithful relationship which had once been our delight and joy. Like the psalmist, we cry out to our creator in the depths of despair. While there is no one without sin, the promise of God is forgiveness. Faith has come, and with it we see that God's forgiveness can ensure that state of reverence which God desires to see in all of us. As we celebrate with expectancy the coming of our savior, we are reminded of God's redeeming love. Our guilt is washed away by the blessed assurance of forgiveness and restoration in the hope of God's unbreakable Word.

Prayer

Holy God, we thank you that as surely as the morning comes after the night, so surely will your promise of forgiveness and mercy restore our hearts to a deeper faith in you. As we celebrate with great expectation the coming of our savior, help us to remember with confidence that we will not seek or wait in vain. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Kelsy Brown '10, Board member

Every Advent I hope to spend December preparing for Christmas with holy reflection on what it means for Jesus to be born among us. Instead more often than not, I spend this season waiting for the other shoe to drop.

You know what I am talking about: the perfect Christmas gift won't arrive until after the holidays, the weather that keeps friends and family apart, the lead for the Christmas Eve service gets sick at the last minute, or family traditions keep getting put off until later. These are the small things that somehow become big things.

We can't forget about the hard stuff when everything goes off the rails, like when we are celebrating Christmas in the midst of grief, we get bad news from the doctor, or broken relationships make the holidays complicated.

Then there are the big things that stop us in our tracks—worries about yesterday, sins that haunt us, fears for the future, hate, war, judgment. These are like false prophets telling us the opposite of what Christmas is all about—hope in our Savior who brings love, grace and truth.

Our Psalm tells us to watch for these moments . . . but not the way you might expect. It isn't because we are supposed to fix it in order to get back to that perfect Christmas, but to notice how Jesus shows up when everything falls apart. The first Christmas included a young pregnant couple without a place to sleep, a king who was willing to kill all children to keep power, and a God who came to be among us in the chaos. This is where we find Christmas hope.

It will be like this every Christmas until Jesus comes again. So instead of stressing out about things that don't go right, I am going to remember the hope I have in Jesus because these are the exact moments when God always shows up.

Prayer

Jesus, when it all feels like my world is falling apart, remind me that you came in the chaos and you will come again in my chaos. Help me live into that hope. Amen.

Psalm 145

1 I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable. 4 One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, 12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. 13 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. 14 The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. 16 You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. 17 The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. 18 The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. 19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. 20 The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. 21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Joan Hogge '04 and W. Allen Hogge '08

“God is good, God is great.” How many times did you pray that prayer as a child? Did you ever ponder what it means to say that God is both good and great? Or, like most of us, did you just repeat it as part of table grace, never really thinking about what the words meant? These simple six words in a childhood prayer tell us a great deal about the nature of the God who came to dwell among us as Jesus of Nazareth.

The writer of Psalm 145 paints a picture of both the greatness and goodness of God. God has done mighty acts and awesome works. God’s mighty deeds are known to all people. But for some of us the image of a mighty and powerful God instills fear—fear of a vengeful and judging God. The psalmist, however, sees a God whose greatness and goodness are completely intertwined. This God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in love. God is good to all God’s creation, and “his compassion is over all he has made.” This powerful God who created the universe manifests that power in gracious and compassionate love toward that creation. The psalmist reminds us that God gives us our food, satisfies our desires, and is just in all his ways. God is near to all who call on him.

God is great and God is good! God’s very nature is love. In that knowledge we can have no greater joy. “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.”

Prayer

Holy God, like the psalmist, we too praise your name for your greatness, goodness, and mercy to each one of us. We give you thanks for your abundant blessings, which come to us each day. Your mercy is there to greet us and to guide our steps throughout the day. Most of all we thank you for your great love given to each one of us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Michelle Wahila '05

An acrostic, Psalm 145 uses the letters of the Hebrew alphabet successively to begin each phrase of praise throughout this piece of poetic wisdom. With each letter of the alphabet used, God is lauded. It’s

like saying everything, even every word from A to Z gives praise to the Lord. The Lord is “great” and “good.” Gracious and merciful, God’s steadfast love is abounding, and God’s compassion is over all things.

This hymn of praise could be a rather fitting angelic chorus – perfect for the Christmas season. But what about those years when Christmas carols don’t resound in our hearts and our cup of cheer is empty? As 2021 draws to a close, we may not be ready to string up twinkling lights; we may not be able to gather with family and friends to celebrate.

This Psalm, like the others in this section (139-144), is attributed to David. As we read the words of praise, we would do well to remember David’s own narrative. Assassinations, exploitations, war, grief, power, and privilege—David’s story is filled with turmoil. Amid dark valleys, David found words of praise for a King greater than he.

A life in turmoil and a world in turmoil is set in contrast to hope penned with poetic prose. From A to Z, we come to understand not just that God is to be praised, but why: the Lord upholds all who are falling... the Lord is just in all his ways... the Lord is near to all who call on him.

God sparks hope within darkness through mighty acts of justice, compassion, and mercy. The Lord picks up those who are falling and satisfies need. Forever and always on the side of the marginalized and suffering, these words describe a kin-dom where the foundation is God’s faithfulness to the weary and worn. God gives steadfast love to the failing and faltering.

The challenge for David and for us is to speak words of praise “in the midst.” We need not look far to see the faces of those suffering. Perhaps we ourselves are walking dark, tumultuous valleys. Praise “in the midst” must look like hope, and hope is sparked when holy words of justice, mercy, and compassion are put into action.

For hope to be concrete, it must be experienced, and we experience God’s steadfast love in our kinship. Words of praise are passed from generation to generation, because God’s mighty acts call us all into a new world and a new way of being—together.

Together, we await the birth of Emmanuel, “God with us.” May we do so “in the midst” with the justice, compassion, and mercy of God guiding our hearts and hands.

Prayer

God of abundant goodness, guide us in your compassion and justice. Draw us into new ways of being and living together. May our kinship be marked by your love; our actions marked by your mercy. May hope be sparked “in the midst” of turmoil. May our lives resound with songs of praise for the One who is with us, intertwining all into a story of eternity. Amen.

Psalm 146

1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! 2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. 3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. 5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, 6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; 7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives

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

Kevin Nnachette '21

“Praise the LORD, O my soul!” Unfortunately, the word “praise” seems nonexistent in the lives of many people today. Our lives have become tainted with complaints and supplications that betray an all-about-what-I-want attitude. But the psalmist calls our minds back to the need to be grateful regardless of our circumstances. After all, Christ’s love for us never wavered, despite what He endured—and not for His own sake but for our good.

The psalmist also encourages us to lift our eyes above our day-to-day troubles, difficulties, and challenges and up to the infinite realm of God. Of course, troubles will always remain, but God’s people will be better equipped to move forward in the midst of this chaos when we gather as a community to sing praises to God, for doing so leads us to strength and sustenance. Thus the psalmist issues a definite call to return to the early Christian practice of *koinonia*—fellowship.

Further, the psalmist admonishes us not to “trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” We moderns continue to rely on ourselves. We put much of our confidence in science and technology, despite their constantly failing and disappointing us, instead of putting our trust in God, who never has and will never fail us regardless of our betrayals. “But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Let us followers of Christ remember this amazing, wonderful truth in our daily lives during Advent and beyond. Praise the LORD!

Prayer

Heavenly and almighty God, give us the grace to be thankful every day of our lives, regardless of the difficult challenges facing us each day—the gratitude to appreciate your infinite mercy and love, despite our betrayal and disappointment of you. Let your Holy Spirit enlighten our hearts so that we constantly put our trust in you in the knowledge that you will never fail us, even if we do fail you. May the words of praise never depart from our lips, and may the thoughts of our hearts be pure and spotless in thanksgiving to you unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Mike Haddox '12

Christmas is a time of anticipation. For some of us, it is a desired present, visits and dinners with family, or that long awaited winter holiday. For those of us in the church, we celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ, and eagerly anticipate his second coming. However, for many of us, the preparation is only for a season. As January rolls around, it will be back to our regular routines.

The Psalmist reminds us to praise the LORD, not just for what God did or will do, but for what God is doing, made known through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through the power of the spirit, Jesus is still active today.

To prepare for Christmas is to abandon our plans and bear witness to Jesus, not just as a baby, or one who will come again, but to the man Jesus who reigns for us.

Prayer

Father, open our eyes, that we may see the presence of Jesus in our midst, and have the courage to faithfully and continually reflect his love and grace to those around us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Michelle Wahila '05

An acrostic, Psalm 145 uses the letters of the Hebrew alphabet successively to begin each phrase of praise throughout this piece of poetic wisdom. With each letter of the alphabet used, God is lauded. It's like saying everything, even every word from A to Z gives praise to the Lord. The Lord is "great" and "good." Gracious and merciful, God's steadfast love is abounding, and God's compassion is over all things.

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Jeff Eddings '08

Life often confronts us with challenging relational situations that immediately recall in us some form of response. Depending on the nature of the conflict, those responses can stir in us a multitude of feelings. Anger or frustration at someone who has wronged us. Guilt or anxiety over ways we may have wronged others. Often the first response in such a scenario is anything but compassion. But what if we were able to make compassion the first response instead of the last?

When Jesus was approached by the hungry multitudes after a long and tiring day, his first response was not to send them away (as the disciples suggested!), nor was it to get angry at their unending demands. His first response was compassion. "He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion on them" (Mark 6:34).

The psalm says "the Lord has compassion over all that he has made." The incarnation is the compassionate response of God to a world that is often in conflict with God's love and purpose for God's creation. It is God's first response to us and not the last!

So in this season of incarnational compassion, let our first response also be one of compassion. Whatever the challenge or conflict, can we first respond to our friend or sibling with compassion? Can we respond compassionately to ourselves when we know we have failed or fallen short of the love required of us? This Advent season, let us follow Jesus more closely by letting our first response be one of compassion.

Prayer

Gracious God, may we celebrate who we are as we celebrate who you are this Advent season. Thank you for the compassion that comes to us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. May compassion be our first response to ourselves, others, and all that happens in the world around us as we seek to follow you this Christmas season. Amen.

Psalm 147:1-11

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

Sarah Ott '10

Advent calls us to prepare for the arrival of our Savior Jesus Christ, yet often times our preparation is filled with the stress of planning. We wake up on a wintry day in December to face a to-do list of shopping, cooking, wrapping, and working so that we can enjoy the birth of God's son.

Admittedly, our preparation has the wrong focus and the wrong feeling. Psalm 147 encourages us to pause in the midst of our preparation and consider the question, "Who am I preparing for?" Are we preparing for Jesus Christ or for the world's expectations of Christmas?

I hope today we choose to prepare for Jesus! When we do, our preparations are less about doing and more about being. We begin to prepare with praise to God for God's provisions and care for His children. We wake up each day with less attention on what needs done during Advent and more attention on what's been done through God's power.

Prayer

Holy God, today we offer our praises for all that you have done, will do, and continue to do. Help us to prepare for the things that matter and ignore the demands of this Advent season that pull us away from you. We pray this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chelsea Leitcher '13

Each day I drive through the strawberry fields on my way to work. Working in the fields is dangerous, backbreaking, and demoralizing work. An expensive sports car briefly parts the haze of dust, manure, and pesticides whizzing toward a coastal vacation home. And the agricultural workers continue for hours either fully bent over picking strawberries or being made to take their heavy loads at a run to the trucks that keep us fed. Psalm 147 reminds us of the tension between God's intention for the created order and the current reality in which we live. It presents a model for how the world ought to be, in stark contrast to the reality in which we live. It gives us hope that, in this Advent season of waiting, the injustices and separations that plague us today will not last.

Prayer

Lord of all, help me to see those I would rather ignore. Help me to listen in a tongue I did not originally speak. Grant me the compassion and love to see all in my community as my neighbor and friend. Amen.

Mary Buckley '00/'05

The Psalmist in the text reminds us of how important it is for us to praise the Lord. Praise should be a continual act of sacrifice that we offer to the Lord daily. While we are praising God we are placing our entire focus on God. We forget for a moment about ourselves. This Psalm reminds me of how omniscient God is and how God's love for me is seen in nature I reminder how I felt when I saw snow for the first time.

Prayer

We thank you Lord for sharing your creative powers with us. We give thanks to God because you have included us in your master plan. We thank you God for receiving our songs of praise. We thank you God for allowing our hearts to burst and swell because you are our God. Amen.

Ellen Dawson '09

December 25, 2004, is a day I will never forget. I was serving as a PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer in the small town of Tiquisate, Guatemala. I had barely slept that not-so-silent-night, due to the roosters crowing, the constant fireworks, the laughter and singing.

I had been expecting a solemn Christmas Eve filled with candlelight, peaceful prayers, and hymns. But what I experienced at *La Iglesia Primitiva* was a rollicking birthday party for Jesus. And Christmas Day

wasn't any less rowdy. It was truly a celebration of the birth of Christ! That Christmas, I came to see that praise was indeed fitting! As Psalm 147 reminds us, we are to praise our God. Praise the Lord who is so great and powerful, so loving and gracious, that he would send His Son for us. What fun it is to show our gratitude for the incarnation of our Lord and Savior!

Prayer

Loving God, I praise you and thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, the ultimate gift of love. This day, I will strive to give you praise in all I do and all I say. Amen.

Brenda Henry '17

During the season of Advent, we sing songs proclaiming God's steadfast love. We sing of the hope and promise of the soon-coming Savior. Our songs often depict a duality: we remember Jesus' birth as the promise given to the Israelites of the coming Messiah, while we also keep in mind that Jesus came and died on the cross, ascended to heaven, and will come again. Thus, we await the second coming with great anticipation. We live in the tension of now and not yet.

So much of our world seems caught between this tension of how we are to be now while we await the future promise of that world to come where all will be well. The psalmist points us to this duality by inviting us to praise the God who heals the broken-hearted and binds up the wounded. The emphasis is on what God is doing now even as we live amid difficulties. The same care that God gives to the animals and to the plants, God gives to us. God tends to the smallest detail. We are precious in the eyes of God.

The psalmist reminds us that the faithful response is to continually praise God. Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving, we are told. And so we do. Assured that God's delight in us is not for our strength or might, but for our hope in God's steadfast love. And so we sing:

*Creator of the stars of night,
Your people's everlasting light
O Christ, redeemer of us all
We pray you hear us when we call*

*When this old world drew on toward night,
You came; but not in splendor bright
Not as a monarch, but the child
Of Mary blessed mother child*

*At your great name, O Jesus, now
All knees must bend, all hearts must bow
All things on earth with one accord
Like those in heav'n shall call you Lord*

*Come in your holy might we pray
Redeem us for eternal day
Defend us while we dwell below
From all assaults of our dread foe*

*To God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, Three in One,*

*Praise, honor, might and glory be
From age to age eternally. Amen.
(from "Creator of the Stars of Night")*

What is your favorite Advent song? How does it draw you closer to God's presence?

Prayer

Loving Creator God, how wonderful it is to sing praises to you. You came as a child, walked this earth in human form, and died to redeem us, all out of love for us—your creation. As we await your return, help us to do as you did and care for the wounded and broken-hearted, share food with the hungry, and be good stewards of your creation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 147:12-20

12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! 13 For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. 14 He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat. 15 He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. 16 He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. 17 He hurls down hail like crumbs—who can stand before his cold? 18 He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow. 19 He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. 20 He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord!

William (B.T.) Gilligan '11

Securing gates, blessing children, establishing borders, giving the best wheat, commanding the earth, spreading snow, scattering frost, and proclaiming words to people. So many things God is doing—how does God possibly balance all of them? How does God keep all those plates spinning at the same time? The simple answer is that God is the most supreme being ever. While that answer is correct, it also leaves out one of the more personal aspects of God.

The whole reason God is working this hard and is this dedicated is because God is playing favorites. God is biased toward those whom God created. The God of the universe is insanely in love with humanity, not just humanity as a whole, but you. The God of the universe who commands the earth is madly in love with you. You are loved so much that the same God who commands the earth was born of a virgin and lived among us as Jesus. In the midst of all that we have going on this time of year it can be very easy to forget about the reason why we do these things. Just as we keep all the plates spinning for those we love, the God of the universe keeps all the plates spinning because of a great love for us that was exemplified in Jesus.

Prayer

Almighty God, with so many plates to keep spinning remind us that you keep all the plates spinning and keep it all going because of your great love for us. Amen.

Psalm 148

1 Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! 3 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! 4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 5 Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. 6 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds,

which cannot be passed. 7 Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, 8 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! 9 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! 10 Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! 12 Young men and women alike, old and young together! 13 Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. 14 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!

Larry Homitsky, Board member

I don't feel like getting ready for Christmas at all!!!! Both my mother and my mother-in-law are in the final stages of life with severe memory loss and day-to-day needs that we continue to drop everything to attend to. My workload seems so over extended that every week I am physically worn out and not even able to squeeze in the "together time" my family so richly deserves. And at 6:00 p.m. today—the day I'm writing this Advent devotional—we will put our beloved rescue dog to sleep, because cancer and a stroke have already taken away her spirit. I feel like I should be writing on a text from Job! Have you ever felt like that?

But I'm writing from Psalm 148—one of the lectionary text for today. And it's placed in the midst of a whole section of writings that specifically celebrates the vast glory of God manifested in the world—all around, in everything we see and are nurtured by, and everything within that can provide meaning and purpose for life itself. I believe these writings exist just for these Job moments—writings to assist us in keeping perspective and faith!

I carry a beach stone in my pocket all the time—a stone found during one of my many beach walks. When I hold it up really close to my eyes, it throws everything else out of focus. But when I pull it away to where it belongs, everything else immediately comes back into proper perspective. I have so much to be thankful for. In fact, the loss I feel so close to right now is only because of the many years of great gain I have been blessed with. Psalm 148, thanks for reminding me. Merry Christmas!!!

Prayer

Oh Lord, hear our prayers of gratitude for all the glorious gifts we receive daily. Then help us keep life's many challenges in the appropriate perspective necessary for true health of body, mind, and spirit. And when the burdens of life coming knocking at our door, may the room they enter always be large enough to place them in the corners, where they truly belong, thus enabling our faith-filled celebrations to hold center place among all our experiences now and forever. Amen.

Darren Rogers '17, Board member

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Psalm 148 is a beautiful illustration of all creation being encouraged to "Praise the Lord!" For all creation was created to reflect and magnify the creator's glory. Humanity was created in the image of the Almighty to praise the Lord: "Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord" (Ps 50:6). Isaiah described mountains and hills breaking out in song while trees would clap their hands in adoration to God (Isa 55:12).

However, as our world deteriorates, and humanity marginalizes the pain of those who do not look like them, how is it even possible to come alongside the psalmist, amidst such intense suffering, and still praise the Lord?! Human nature might suggest that it is much too hard to praise the Lord when life is

challenging beyond measure and that the life is too painful to voice our praise. Yet, the psalmist resolutely exhorts us to “Praise the Lord.”

Psalm 148 begins with God being praised in the highest corners of heaven by the angels and all his host. That praise flows and filters from heaven down through the rain clouds, over mountains, through fire, hail, snow, frost, and wind. It is expressed in every living creature on land, sea, and air. But the question to be answered is, will humanity come alongside of creation to glorify of the Lord through praise? The fulfillment of the Lord’s Prayer is realized when humanity joins creation to praise God. If the Lord is praised on earth as he is in heaven, then his kingdom will come, his will be done, and God’s presence will inhabit the praises of God’s people on earth as God is in heaven. Yes, we can, and must praise God in this world of pain and suffering because praising God brings the kingdom of heaven into our broken world.

Prayer

Lord! You are worthy to be praised! Let all of heaven and earth bow before you and offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. You inhabit every utterance of praise that we offer to you. Help us to look beyond our present circumstances and praise you until your kingdom comes and your will is done on earth as in heaven! Amen!

Psalm 149

1 Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. 2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. 3 Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. 4 For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory. 5 Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. 6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, 7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, 8 to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, 9 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.

Psalm 150

1 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Dieuner Joseph '19

As Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ during the Advent season, we should be intentional about giving extravagant praise to the Christ who became flesh to dwell among us. Christ should be the object of our praise and the subject of our exaltation. Psalm 150 provides a model for the best way we should praise the incarnate Christ.

Psalm 150 is a song of praise designed to shine light on the majesty of the God of Israel. The psalmist uses the word "praise" 13 times. This word as used in the Psalm comes from the Hebrew *halal*, which can be translated "to shine," "to be boastful," and "to be made praiseworthy."

During the Advent season, followers of Jesus Christ should let the light of Christ in their heart shine so the world can be captivated by his majesty. Let the light of our hope and faith in our risen Savior shine in our social networks and in our circles of influence. We should boast about the love of Jesus, our redeemer, who died so we can live.

The praises of God should be all encompassing and comprehensive. The psalmist entreats the people of God to praise him everywhere and with everything. When believers give Christ extravagant praise, he will draw the world to himself and the lost will be saved. Then everything that has breath will praise the Lord!

Prayer

Holy Father, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your son, may we endeavor to give you extravagant praise through our testimony and our service to your kingdom.

Betty Angelini '09

Christmas day is on the way! How are your preparations coming along? Are your cards sent? Are your presents bought? Are your cookies baked?

Music at Christmas time abounds. Every artist-contemporary, jazz, country western, rap, rock-has a rendition of a Christmas album/CD. They are singing about snow and cozy fires and even reindeer playing all kinds of games. This music is fun, and sentimental, and perhaps even memory making. But is this music preparing our hearts for the Incarnation-one of the most central events in our salvation history?

In Psalm 150, the whole orchestra is making music to Praise the Lord—praising the Lord, for our triune God cares for us so much that God’s mighty works and unequalled greatness are demonstrated by the Lord’s loving gift of sending God’s son, Jesus, in the flesh to us. Now that is something to sing about! Is your heart singing *Joy to the World*? Are you praising the Lord this Advent? This year? With your life? Let’s praise the Lord by singing a joyful noise together as we prepare our hearts and wait for Emmanuel!

Prayer

Lord God, as we await the arrival of Emmanuel may we sing with joy with all of heart to your glory for all the blessings you have showered upon us, especially the birth of your son! As we praise you Lord, may our gratitude for all of your blessings be evident. Thank you for all the gifts we have received, especially the gift of Jesus in a manger. Amen.

Ben Phipps '15

“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” It’s a refrain that’s only fitting to conclude the great prayer book of God’s people. But it may also serve another purpose—to remind us that we must choose to praise God. The psalm urges and compels us to praise the God of surpassing greatness, the God who is great and mighty, the God whose deeds are known throughout the cosmos. Yet isn’t it too often the case that instead of choosing to praise this glorious God, many of us spend our waking hours finding an excuse not to praise? Deadlines. Distractions. Disagreements. The brokenness of this world and the weight of our sin tend to smother us into a “praise-less” routine. Praising God with passion seems impossible, and we long for something to remind us of God’s greatness and power, something to compel us to praise.

Perhaps the Psalms’ final verse is the clue: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” Sometimes we just need to slow down and take a breath. When we feel the air rushing into our lungs, we are reminded that we have life, and it just might compel us to praise. To praise the God who not only breathed life into humanity, but also took the form of a newborn baby in Bethlehem so many years ago, gasping for air to fill his tiny lungs for the first time. The God of surpassing greatness learning how to breathe in our midst, the God who would one day give up that breath on a hill far away.

That seems reason enough to praise. The God who gives us life came so that we too might have it! So do not delay. “Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

Prayer

Mighty God, fill me with a longing to praise you! May I praise you with every breath I take. Thank you for coming to earth and showing us the way to your kingdom. Show me how I can choose to praise you every day of my life. Amen.

Franklin Tanner Capps, staff

Many scientists are saying that a sixth mass extinction event is upon us. This conclusion has provoked skepticism and outright denial—reactions that are quite understandable, given how tough it is to face the fact that our lifestyles and collective behaviors are likely responsible for the decline of vast webs of life that may take us down with them when they finally collapse. It’s also unsettling news, because it asks us to come to terms with the fact that we’re creatures whose lives depend on the lives of others. And in a fundamental way, we’re reminded that we humans are neither the point nor the final goal of God’s creative purposes. Rather, we are invited—in our limited time and limited ways—to be worshipful participants in what God is doing across creation.

Like the news of a sixth mass extinction, Psalm 150 is displacing. Because God is not confined to the sanctuary, the psalmist calls on praise to arise in the firmament. The clap of human hands cannot be heard there, but the beating of griffon vulture wings in the skies above Ethiopia can. God will be praised with or without us. While humans have rerouted rivers and manipulated the elements, sometimes to catastrophic consequence, human hands have also fashioned bone and bark into trumpets, reed and bamboo into pipes, skin and wood into lutes and tambourines, and alloyed the basic elements of copper and tin into cymbals. For the psalmist, these instruments join a cosmic chorus that are voicing creation's praise.

Advent is an interlude for quiet listening. During this time of waiting and anticipation, may we pay closer attention to the de-centering and displacing hums, chirps, whistles, and drumming of so many other creatures who are inviting us to live lives of joyful care while joining them in the worship of the Creator.

Prayer

Lord God, grant us a spirit of listening that would open us to our fellow creatures, so that, through them and with them, we might come to know you more deeply and praise you more fully. Amen.

Tracy Riggle Young, staff

Visitors to our home, particularly in this season of Advent, quickly recognize that music is the heartbeat of our family dwelling. Silence and quiet are hard to come by as music permeates my children's bedrooms and the Alexa constantly hums while my husband is working his magic in the kitchen. Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker," classic folk songs from James Taylor, and Taylor Swift's latest re-release have become the heartbeat of our home. Music is for us all a mode of expression: a way to process the stress of a given day, a coping mechanism to help us deal with our emotions, a brief escape from the monotony of the day, an encouraging beat to inspire an impromptu dance party and, perhaps most of all, a way to connect more fully to God and one another.

The psalmist reminds us, in the book's final appeal, to praise God in all aspects of our lives. We are told that this praise can take many forms—from clanging and clashing symbols to the light strum of the strings and harp. In this season of preparation and hopeful anticipation, may we all find space to fill our lives with music. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the season, create moments to partake in the sounds and songs of worship. Let us come together united in one voice of praise in the small moments of music that bring us all together.

Prayer

God of all creation, on this eve of Christ's birth, ground us in your Spirit. Soften our hearts to one another as we exchange tokens of our love and adoration. Slow our minds and stress so that we may rest in wonder of you and your creation. Strengthen us in our commitment to praise you in all things. Inspire us to worship you with song and sound so we may never forget you as the ground of our being. Amen.

First Readings: Old Testament Law and Prophets

Genesis 3:8-15

8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

John Wilson, faculty emeritus

Paul Tillich interprets the fall of the first humans as an event that occurs for every human being, as he or she emerges from the simplicity of early life into adolescence and adulthood. Accordingly the shame and fear of Adam and Eve hiding belongs to everyone's story. In a certain sense the attitude of sinful human being is always one of concealment, even double concealment, as in the tale of the stolen apples: God knows but he doesn't tell. But in concealment judgment is despised and hated, and the darkness of sin clouds over all thought and doing. The light of Christ shines in the darkness, the light of love, of acceptance, of the justification of the sinner. In Christ we know the end and purpose of God's judgments, which is not that we must obey, but that we may and even can obey, so that we may and can live in truth.

Prayer

Lord, may your light shine anew, may truth dawn brightly, may your love heal the sickness of all shame and fear. Amen.

1 Samuel 2:1b-10

1b "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. 2 "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. 6 The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. 7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. 8 He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. 9 "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. 10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

Kimberly Greway '20

“My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.” The Song of Hannah is Hannah’s song of praise to God for her good fortune. After a long and difficult time of waiting, she will finally be a mother and will give birth to Samuel. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Song of Hannah sets the stage for a major theme of the Book of Samuel: the “power and willingness of Yahweh to intrude, intervene, and invert.”

Many have noticed the numerous parallels between the Song of Hannah and the Magnificat of Mary. Some posit that Luke used the Song of Hannah as a framework for the Magnificat: the themes and wording are very similar. The songs of both women rejoice in God’s greatness and in God’s reversing the fortunes of various groups—the proud and arrogant are humbled, the mighty are knocked off their thrones, the hungry eat their fill, the barren bare children.

In praying and singing with Hannah and Mary, who are anticipating the birth of their children, we join in the waiting that infuses Advent. Each soon-to-be mother praises God not only for her coming child, but also for the radical ways God breaks into the world and overturns our human systems.

In this Advent season, let us break forth into song and prayer not only for the good gifts given to us by God, but also for the shocking ways in which God radically transforms the world.

Prayer

Inbreaking God, who
Overturns expectations,
Makes the barren fertile,
Raises up the poor from the dust,
Guards the feet of the faithful—
Intrude in our lives,
Intervene in our hearts,
Invert our expectations,
All to lead us into your kingdom;
Through your son, Jesus the Christ, for whom we anxiously wait, Amen.

2 Samuel 7:1-17

1 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” 3 Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.” 4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges

over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever. 17 In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Laura Blank '13

Every Sunday growing up, I looked at a quilt that hung in the sanctuary of my 200-year-old home church. Depicting the congregation's history, it traced the story from a frontier congregation meeting in a tent, to a growing assembly worshipping in a log cabin, to a church housed in a succession of brick buildings. The story was one of growth and God's faithfulness. However, the Church in America today has much in common with those that gathered in tents in the woods. There is uncertainty and a wide open horizon, but God's promises remain. Because God was never really satisfied with just hanging around in stone buildings. God is always on the move. God will not sit still. And God continues to invite us to look beyond the houses of cedar or brick or stone where we worship, recognizing that we were and always will be sent as a pilgrim people.

Prayer

Holy God, you are always on the move. Prevent us from being satisfied with sitting still. Embolden us with pilgrim hearts to follow you on this Advent journey. Amen.

Michael J. Wallace '14

When we step into the story of David and learn about his desire to build a house for the Lord, we might nod our heads and think, "Of course! The mighty King David should be the one to build a house for the Lord. This makes sense!" At first, even Nathan the prophet is on board with David's plan. Yet, the word of the Lord comes to Nathan declaring that David is not the one to build God's house.

Eventually, we learn that when David dies, his son shall build a house for God's name. As we meditate upon this passage, we might find ourselves in David's shoes: we seem to be God's appointed person to do some exact thing, but we find out that God has other plans. May this serve as a reminder to us that the work of the church is not squarely on our shoulders, but it is ultimately up to God! Moreover, sometimes our job is to lay the groundwork for someone else's project that we may never see to completion.

In this Advent season, when we talk so much about waiting, we learn that David, too, had to wait. Except that David would not behold God's house during his life. May this passage serve us today so that we might recognize our limitations; God's plans will sometimes be realized through us, but other times apart from us.

Even when the days are short and our hopes are dashed, may we be reminded that God is in control and will bring about this beautiful story of salvation for us and for the whole world. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Almighty God, so often we feel the weight of ministry on our shoulders. Help us to recognize that you are in control and that it is not all up to us. In this Advent season, may we rest in the assurance that your plans will ultimately be fulfilled. May we find hope in the end of the story, and may it give meaning to our work today. Through your son Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:18-29

18 Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? 19 And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD! 20 And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD! 21 Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. 22 Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. 23 Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? 24 And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O LORD, became their God. 25 And now, O LORD God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. 26 Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel'; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. 27 For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. 28 And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; 29 now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

Amanda Horan '20

In a striking plot twist, David—who intended to build a house for God in the form of a temple—learns that God intends to build him a house in the form of a dynasty. In response to God's gift and promise, David prays. His prayer is a mixture of awe-filled humility and praise mingled with a bit of anxious insistence. Walter Brueggemann concisely characterizes David's prayer as "a sequence of deference, doxology, and demand." David's language in the latter half of his prayer is indeed forceful and assured: "And now, O LORD God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised" (v. 25). Perhaps we can imagine the anxious anticipation in David's voice as he dwells before the Lord in prayer.

Perhaps the idea of *demanding* anything from God in prayer makes some of us uncomfortable; it certainly makes me uncomfortable. And yet, David says that he is emboldened to pray as he does because he trusts in God's own promise. We know from the biblical narrative about David and his descendants that their behavior does not always merit divine favor, and yet God, through the prophet Nathan, declares the covenant promise will not be taken away. God's promise for David's house and kingdom "shall be made sure forever" (2 Sam. 7:17).

David brings his insistence, his urgency, and his anxious anticipation before God in prayer. Advent should be a time of anxious anticipation, not just for the delights of holiday celebrations, but for the coming of the One who "descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of

God with power according to the spirit of holiness..." (Rom. 1:3-4). Perhaps, in these final days of Advent, we may be inspired by David's courage to trust in the goodness of God's promise and anxiously anticipate the coming of the Son of God.

Prayer

O Lord God, as David says, you are God, your words are true, and you promise good things. Give us an eagerness for your gifts, and help us to pray and to live in the courage and boldness of your good promise. May our eagerness and urgency inspire us to worshipful prayer and action guided by your steadfast love and presence with your people. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Harold Abram '59

After the prophet has reviewed the tale of national wickedness in his time, he proclaims to the people that their light has arrived and the glory of the Lord has risen upon them. It is as though the prophet were speaking to us today, for we are in similar need.

As a society, we are a people in need of something beyond our selfishness, hate, deceptions, duplicities, and other divisions. We need the glory of the Lord to rise upon us. All the "-isms" we declare need cleansing by the "glory of the Lord." On our own we are helpless and hopeless before the evil of our time. We need something new to come into our lives—the "born-to-us" child whose name is Emmanuel, "God with us."

This is the time. The season is ripe for a new way that is older than time itself. God's glory is for *now*. It is here. Let us receive it by God's grace.

Prayer

Oh God, come, be with us in our lives today. Show us, your people, your new way. Imbue us with love, great hope, and peace beyond all comprehension. Hold us up by faith and trust that your promises will be fulfilled throughout Creation. Bring us wholeness, bring peace on earth, and bring goodwill among all humanity we pray. So be it! Amen.

John Pickles '22

In these deepest nights of the year, it is marvellous to consider God's hallowing of darkness. God does not destroy darkness. Instead it becomes the canvas upon which God's illumination is made brilliant. The light of light, the Christ-child, arrives in darkness to bring enlightenment to the world. Yet God resides in darkness, and we see as in a mirror dimly. We cannot comprehend the light.

Only at the end of days will we truly see face to face, when the dawn of Christ returns in glory. No more hidden motives, fear, secrets, or grudges, all will be drawn into the light. We will be seen, as Oliver Cromwell once boldly asked to be painted, “warts and all!”

Darkness is God’s gift to us. It hides our shame and covers our nakedness. But for God the night is a bright as day. God sees our totality, loves us, and by grace covers us so we may prepare to receive the light.

God comes to us in Jesus so as not to put us to shame like a faint candle in the night, which is easily snuffed out. But one day he will come in full radiance as the King of kings ushering an untameable blaze of joy.

Prayer

O Light Eternal, to whose dawning humanity lifts its darkened face, shine on us gathered who wait for you. Pierce the shadows that hide us from you and illumine our gloom of unbelief. May everyone who watches with us see the Son of Righteousness arise, with healing in his wings.

Jeremiah 31:10-14

10 Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.” 11 For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. 12 They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. 13 Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. 14 I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

Tanta Luckhardt Hendricks '82

Exile is dislocation, a yanking out of the socket of home, identity, security, and hope. Exile is despair and desperation, pain and hopelessness.

Restoration puts all back in place. It is a homecoming dance—a medical test that says you’re okay, not dying; a song of joy that comes from the heart and tummy; toes in the sand and a sigh of relaxation; a relocation of self in wholeness and hope. Jeremiah offers a vision of what will be when the time of exile is over, and the long journey home is complete.

Jesus of Bethlehem offers himself to share with us our time of exile, of dislocation. But Jesus also offers himself as the restoration of our wholeness and hope. At the same time, that restoration is yet to come. The long journey home is not yet finished. We continue to live in brokenness and despair.

But exile does not have the last word. The Lord who has come to be born in us, with us, and for us will bring us to our ultimate home, where joy breaks out in a dance, and songs cannot be silenced, and tears are no more. Jesus’ birth looks beyond dislocation as the Lord brings hope in the midst of exile, the whisper of the song, the shadow of the dance, the whiff of joy. Exile does not have the last word. Ever.

Prayer

Holy Child of Bethlehem, you come to us when we hurt with the pain of dislocation, so we are not alone in our despair. You come to us offering hope—the assurance that joy will prevail. As we grasp that hope, you restore our soul. How grateful we are for you. Amen.

Amy Newell '22, Board member

By this time in the holiday season I've had enough. I'm tired and my Christmas spirit is gone. I have nothing left to give, and I am counting down the days to Christmas. Not because I am excited, but because I want it to be over. The Christmas list has worn me down. Not the Nice or Naughty List. The list of things I have to do. And the list of constant problems: cranky customers, staffing issues, inventory shortages, extra expenses and late nights. As God ransomed Israel, I need God to ransom me from this holiday madness.

Every year I make a conscious effort to stay focused on the true meaning of Christmas. Promising myself that I'm going to enjoy this season of wonder and excitement. And revel in the love of God who left everything to be born of a woman. To. Redeem. Me. Offering the perfect gift. The ultimate gift of hope, peace, joy, and love. But then December 23 rolls around and I'm ready to give up.

Jeremiah paints a picture of what Christmas joy can look like. Similar to a scene from one of those Christmas movies, where everyone is happy, blissfully walking in the snow to deliver homemade cookies before returning to their beautifully decorated home. If we truly accept the gift of Christmas, the birth of our Lord and Savior, we can be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. We can sing aloud and rejoice in the dance and be merry. Our life can be like a watered garden, and we may never languish again. This is what I want my Christmas season to look like. The Holy Trinity has it all wrapped up for me. Now all I have to do is accept it.

Prayer

God of all peace, we thank you and we praise you for the gift of your Son. Forgive us for losing sight of your redemption. We ask that you turn our mourning into joy, giving us gladness for sorrow, and teaching us to be satisfied with your bounty. Amen.

Amos 1:1-5, 1:13-2:8

1:1 The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake. 2 And he said: The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up. 3 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. 4 So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. 5 I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Aram shall go into exile to Kir, says the LORD. . . . 13 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory. 14 So I will kindle a fire against the wall of Rabbah, fire that shall devour its strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a storm on the day of the whirlwind; 15 then their king shall go into exile, he and his officials together, says the LORD. 2:1 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. 2 So I will send a fire on Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; 3 I will cut off the

ruler from its midst, and will kill all its officials with him, says the LORD. 4 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. 5 So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem. 6 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; 8 they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

Steve Tuell, faculty emeritus

A masterful piece of street theater opens the book of Amos: imagine the crowds, cheering the prophet on as he condemns Israel's enemies and competitors! But then, Amos turns his attention to Israel, unexpectedly identified as just like its neighbors, and condemned as are they for injustice, cruelty, and false worship. It is Israel that turns out to be the true target of Amos' prophecy, and of the Lord's wrath. If what we expect in this season of expectancy is the deliverance of those like us, and the expulsion of the outsiders, then this will be an empty season of smug self-congratulation. May the unexpected twist of Amos' prophecy call us instead to a holy Advent of self-examination, and renew our commitment to justice for and the inclusion of those on the margins.

Prayer

O Lord, forgive our easy embrace of those like us, and our suspicion of the stranger. Empower us to participate in your ministry. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Amos 2:6-16

6 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; 8 they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. 9 Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of cedars, and who was as strong as oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath. 10 Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. 11 And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? says the LORD. 12 But you made the nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy." 13 So, I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves. 14 Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives; 15 those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride horses save their lives; 16 and those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, says the LORD.

Karen Bowden Cooper '98

Advent is a season of hope and expectancy but also a time to reflect on the darkness and suffering that Jesus came to confront. Through Amos, God delivers an impassioned condemnation of eighth century Israel that anticipates themes of Jesus' ministry and that resonates today. In the verses that precede this

passage, Amos pronounces God's judgment against Judah for its faithlessness and against the nations, each for a single brutal crime against its enemies. At 2:6, the prophet turns abruptly to the Israelites to condemn seven day-to-day abuses of the powerless - practices that deprive the Israelite poor of the most basic necessities to enrich those who have no need. These abuses are not the overt as the sins of the nations, but they inflict suffering, tear at the fabric of Israelite society and defy the requirement for justice at the heart of the Sinai covenant.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for this season of reflection. As we prepare to welcome your Son, open our minds and hearts to your yearning for justice. Amen.

Amos 3:1-11

1 Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: 2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. 3 Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment? 4 Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from its den, if it has caught nothing? 5 Does a bird fall into a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it? Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing? 6 Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster befall a city, unless the LORD has done it? 7 Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. 8 The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? 9 Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod, and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, "Assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria, and see what great tumults are within it, and what oppressions are in its midst." 10 They do not know how to do right, says the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds. 11 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defense; and your strongholds shall be plundered.

Graham Deans '06

As a Scotsman, I am aware that a great deal has often been made of the "special relationship" between the U.K. and the U.S. Similarly, a great deal has been made of the special relationship between the Lord GOD and the people of Israel.

But it cuts no ice with Amos, the rank "outsider" who, despite his lack of official prophetic credentials (7:14), demonstrates that the proclamation of theological truth is often far too serious a matter to be left solely to the professional theologians. He lives in an age of wealth and prosperity but is rightly dismayed by the moral complacency and spiritual bankruptcy of his times. This situation leads him to launch a powerful and passionate polemic against the shortcomings of God's people, as he proclaims an uncompromising theology of judgment.

His message is reinforced by a series of rhetorical questions, drawn from his experience of life and his observations of nature. Certain things happen because people have arranged to make them happen (3:1), and nothing that does happen is ever without significance. All actions have consequences, and each example he cites illustrates the principle of cause and effect. Appalled by the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, Amos declares that the lion has roared and is even now leaping on its prey. Through the crisis of contemporary events, judgment is inevitable. Those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds are therefore living on borrowed time and will be rendered defenseless before the Lord.

There is no possibility of calling in imagined favors to influence or, worse, pervert the course of divine justice. As commentator William Neil succinctly puts it in his *One Volume Bible Commentary*, “Nothing can prevent the collapse of a civilization that violates divine law. Religion is no insurance, nor is tradition, nor any racial privilege.”

Advent is a time for us to get our lives in order before it is too late. In short, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” This is of supreme importance for everyone, whether one is a Scotsman writing for St. Andrew’s Day(!) or a member of the beloved “whole family” that God brought out of the land of Egypt and who can trace their ancestry all the way back to Abraham. For ultimately, the only “special relationship” that counts is the one we are enabled, by grace, to cultivate with Almighty God—the Judge who alone is holy and wholly just.

Prayer

Great Judge of all the earth,
whose ways are always just,
and with whom perfect righteousness is found;
subdue our rebellious spirits,
and point us in the proper paths
that will lead us at the last
to our eternal home in Heaven;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Amos 4:6-13

6 I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 7 And I also withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would be rained upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; 8 so two or three towns wandered to one town to drink water, and were not satisfied; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 9 I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 10 I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword; I carried away your horses; and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 11 I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a brand snatched from the fire; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 12 Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! 13 For I, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

John Burgess, faculty

During Advent, we sing, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!” And when the Church proclaims the birth of Jesus, other lovely refrains will resound: “Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the new-born King!’” “O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore him, O come, O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!” “Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel.”

But we hear from the prophet Amos a very different refrain: “Yet you did not return to me.” Despite all the Lord’s efforts to get Israel’s attention—“I gave you no bread, I withheld the rain, I struck you with

blight and mildew, I sent pestilence”—they did not return. Therefore, declares Amos, “Prepare, O Israel, to meet your God!”

Have we paid attention? The God whom we will meet in the Christ child longs for us to return to Him.

Prayer

Lord, You form the mountains, create the wind, and reveal Your thoughts to mortal human beings. Prepare us to return us to you through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amos 5:1-17

1 Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: 2 Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up. 3 For thus says the Lord GOD: The city that marched out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which marched out a hundred shall have ten left. 4 For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; 5 but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. 6 Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. 7 Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! 8 The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name, 9 who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. 10 They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. 11 Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. 12 For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. 13 Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. 14 Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. 15 Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. 16 Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, “Alas! alas!” They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; 17 in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the LORD.

Susan Blank '15

Recently a short home video went viral. A father was questioning his toddler daughter about why she had painted her Barbie doll (and the carpet!) with blue nail polish. The little girl claimed that Barbie told her to do it, and she tried so hard to resist. But Barbie “said ‘yes,’ one hundred times, Barbie said ‘yes!’” This video reminded me of the many voices clamoring for our attention—especially at this time of year. “Buy this; you need it.” “Give this to make them happy.” “It’s expensive, but you’re worth it.” “The biggest sale of the season!” Spend your way to a joyous Christmas. The voices say “yes,” 100 times they say “yes!” It can be hard to resist.

The prophet Amos warns of the destructive powers of consumerism and self-interest that cause us to “push aside the needy in the gate.” But Jesus has moved into the neighborhood, and we can no longer pretend that the only voice we hear is Barbie’s.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, Jesus has shown us the way of service to the least and the lost. Quiet the clamor around us that we might attend to those long-silenced and “establish justice in the gate.” Amen.

Kimberly D. Russaw, faculty

Years ago, Throw Back Thursday (#TBT) went viral on social media. On Thursdays people used to post their awkward grammar school photos, pictures of their laughable high school hair styles, and reminisce about their youthful sports accomplishments. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter timelines were full of these self-deprecating images, as #TBT became a light-hearted way for people to put their imperfections on display for their virtual community. But people never posted images of them breaking laws, engaging in morally questionable behavior, or committing acts of violence on #TBT. Nobody shared their miserable failures, embarrassing mistakes, or poor life decisions on #TBT.

Have you ever made such a colossal mess of things that you wanted to make yourself invisible? Have you ever been entrusted with an assignment that you botched so badly that all you could do is hope time would make others forget about your transgression? It is one thing to mess up, but it is another thing to mess up publicly.

As Christians, we try, but we do not always get it right. Often we lament our own thoughts and actions. And when we fail to live into the life of faith, grace, and mercy, the words of the prophet Amos offer us hope during Advent season. Even when we have committed grievous acts, have mistreated others, or have been disparaged and punished for acting unjustly, there is hope in the midst of the lament. In the same way biblical Israel should seek the Lord and “seek good and not evil” (v. 14), so should we. We can seek to establish justice. We can change. We can do better. And the Lord will be gracious to us. There is hope in the idea that our Creator is gracious.

Prayer

Gracious God, we have not always gotten it right. Our thoughts, our words, and our deeds have not always aligned with your vision for our life. We are saddened by how our acts and the very remembrance of them grieves us. We seek good and not evil. We seek justice and not wrong. Have mercy on us. Forgive us. Be gracious unto us. Amen.

Amos 5:18-27

18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; 19 as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. 20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? 21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. 25 Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 26 You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; 27 therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

Jeffrey Dahle Sterling '88/'98

A worn-out old saying is, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." One may still find much truth in it, though.

"Looking over the fence" is a form of escapism—the belief that we should be able to find a "back door" away from our challenges and problems, without doing due diligence and "finishing the race." For some people, this "back door" becomes their relationship with God. How many Facebook memes have you seen that promise God will miraculously fix your problems, answer all your prayers, or bring "deserved" wealth your way if you just "re-post this"? There, God is a kind of "genie in the lamp"—rub it right and the genie will fulfill three wishes.

In this text, the prophet Amos says "No." Nope. No. When we choose a relationship with the living God, we accept God's call along with God's promises. And that call is not to the latest in worship fads (contemporary, traditional, "laughing in the Spirit," contemplative, Pentecostal, or throwing clams at the sun) or to hyper-generosity as a way to sway God's favor your direction. The prophet warns that this God thing is *real stuff*—and that if you think engaging the God of Israel is a cure for everything you don't like and a pass-key to the blessings closet, then you're in danger of, in the words of another old saying, leaping "from the frying pan into the fire."

So where is the good news? First of all, we are called to justice-seeking and righteousness. Amos hints that in them we will find both God's presence and God's enabling power. When we work for justice and seek to live "rightly," we will find our sails filled with the divine breeze of God's Spirit. Jesus hit the ground running in these pursuits. Even as a newborn, he brought together shepherds and kings, the oppressed and the oppressors. He brought them together to the cradle of truth and light. In his teachings Jesus gave us the blueprint for right living and the essential understanding that we are "in this together." As pastor/author Rick Warren once wrote, "It's not about you."

In this Advent season, may we shoulder afresh and with passion the call of God to the work of bringing in the Realm of God—for our neighbor, our world, and even ourselves. And may we be healed of the foolish idea that Jesus came only to make "*me*" happy rather than to reconcile the world—and *me*—to God!

Prayer

O God of redemption, God of the call, and God of exceeding-abundant grace, grant in this hour that the scales may fall from our eyes and we may behold the glorious work you are seeking to do in and through us as members of the Body of Christ. Forgive us for turning you into a talisman or a blank check to bring about our personal desires, especially when they are counter to your in-breaking Realm. May justice indeed roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream! In the name of the Lord of the Advent, Jesus Christ, our Savior, amen.

Nancy Lowmaster '11

The countryside around Kibbutz Gal'on in the Shephelah region of central Israel is crisscrossed by seasonal streams called wadis. These wadis overswell during the early autumn rains in October and the late spring rains in April. But throughout the long summer months, the wadis become as parched as the land that surrounds them.

Amos speaks the words of the LORD to the wayward nation of Israel, where the wealthy enjoyed ease and privilege while the poor they oppressed thirsted for justice and righteousness: ". . . let justice roll

down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing wadi.” It’s a paradoxical image: wadis are, by their very definition not permanent. Imagine the relief—the impossible dream—of having a dependable, never-ending source of water in an arid land. Imagine the joy—and profound blessing—of unending justice throughout a society, especially for the most powerless and vulnerable.

Thus the words delivered by the prophet serve as a double command. The LORD commands the powerful – of ancient days and of today – to be extravagant in their generosity and prodigal in their care for their brothers and sisters: such is the worship that delights the LORD. But it is ultimately God who acts to bring the deep justice and the righteousness that truly satisfies. And with the coming of the day of the LORD comes the loving, gracious, awesome, and holy judgment of our sovereign God, who commands and transforms creation in order to bring God’s redemption to all humankind. It is God who acts, through the coming of God’s promised Messiah, to establish God’s eternal kingdom of righteousness for which we all search and thirst.

Prayer

Holy God, by your Spirit, fill me to overflowing with Christ’s righteousness, that as your redeemed child I may today accomplish one deed or speak one word that demonstrates the justice that marks your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, the One whose coming we await. Amen.

Leanna Fuller, faculty

Today’s reading begins with a warning: “Be careful what you wish for!” In the first three verses of this passage, Amos strongly cautions the Israelites—who are longing for the day of the Lord—because they are making assumptions about what that day will bring.

Most scholars agree that “the day of the Lord” was traditionally a time for the people to remember God’s past mighty acts and to look toward God’s intervention on their behalf in the future. But instead of a day of deliverance, Amos describes the day of the Lord as a day of judgment. It’s as if the people of Israel have assumed that because God was faithful to them in the past, their choices in the present have no bearing on that relationship. They have assumed that they could offer empty worship and still expect God to be pleased with them. Instead, God closes God’s eyes and ears to the people’s praises (vv. 21-23), and powerfully points to justice and righteousness as the true goals of religious devotion.

I wonder what kinds of assumptions we make today about the relationship between God’s faithfulness and our choices. Do we assume that because we are “good Christians” who seek to honor God, our opinions are naturally correct? Do we assume that because God has been true to us in the past, it doesn’t matter what decisions we make now—even when our decisions lead us to ignore demands for justice from those experiencing poverty or oppression?

Today’s text suggests that when we make such assumptions, we are bound to be bitterly disappointed. Instead, we are called to examine the way we live our lives—both individually and communally—and do all we can to pursue faithfulness and justice on behalf of the world that God so loves.

Prayer

Gracious God, in this season of anticipation remind us that we await the birth of one who offered care and compassion to all people. Help us to show our faithfulness to you in ways that embody the justice and righteousness that you desire for this world you have lovingly created. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Amos 6:1-14

- 1 *Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts!*
- 2 *Cross over to Calneh, and see;
from there go to Hamath the great;
then go down to Gath of the Philistines.
Are you better than these kingdoms
Or is your territory greater than their territory,*
- 3 *O you that put far away the evil day,
and bring near a reign of violence?*
- 4 *Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;*
- 5 *who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;*
- 6 *who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!*
- 7 *Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.*
- 8 *The Lord GOD has sworn by himself
(says the LORD, the God of hosts):
I abhor the pride of Jacob
and hate his strongholds;
and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.*
- 9 *If ten people remain in one house, they shall die. 10And if a relative, one who burns the dead, shall
take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the
house, "Is anyone else with you?" the answer will come, "No." Then the relative shall say, "Hush! We
must not mention the name of the LORD."*
- 11 *See, the LORD commands,
and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.*
- 12 *Do horses run on rocks?
Does one plow the sea with oxen?
But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood —*
- 13 *you who rejoice in Lo-debar,
who say, "Have we not by our own strength
taken Karnaim for ourselves?"*
- 14 *Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation,
O house of Israel, says the LORD, the God of hosts,
and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Wadi Arabah.*

Michael Haddox '12

"Daddy's a liar!"

My son was only two, but through his tears, his words were clear: "Daddy's a liar!"

I was totally taken off guard. Five minutes earlier, he was a ball of excitement. He'd just finished his Happy Meal as I was double-checking the diaper bag. I wanted to make sure we had everything we needed for his first trip to Kennywood. Now, trudging across the parking lot, he was having a full-blown meltdown.

I was confused by the amused look on my wife's face. "Daddy didn't lie," she explained. "We're going to a bigger playground. A better playground."

I finally caught on. I had described Kennywood in terms he could understand. I had explained the day to him simply: "Finish your French fries, then we're going to a big playground."

What I failed to realize was my son's inability to envision anything other than the indoor play area ten feet behind us in the fast-food restaurant. He heard the promise, but his imagination wouldn't go beyond what he could see.

This passage in Amos forces us to consider what would make God's chosen settle for a complacency that leads to their destruction. This isn't just a question aimed at a group of people living thousands of years ago. It's a question relevant for our churches today.

I believe we often lack the imagination to picture who God is calling us to be, so we settle for what we can reach for on our own efforts. Our complacency has robbed the church of its vitality and witness.

Looking at my son, I realized I couldn't explain where I was taking him. I could only ask, "Can Daddy show you something different?" Through his tears, he simply said, "Yes," letting go of what he saw, to follow his dad to something better.

Prayer

Father, forgive us when we look to ourselves before we look to you and complacently settle for less than who you call us to be. In this season of preparation, may we have a faith that goes beyond our understanding, as we live a life rooted in the promises and call of your grace and love. Amen.

Amos 7:1-9

1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). 2 When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, "O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" 3 The LORD relented concerning this; "It shall not be," said the LORD. 4 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. 5 Then I said, "O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" 6 The LORD relented concerning this; "This also shall not be," said the Lord GOD. 7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line

in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; 9 the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

Connie Weaver, D.Min. student

One of the very first sermons I ever wrote and preached was from the Old Testament prophecy of Amos. It came at a time when I was extremely busy, and as occasionally happens despite the best of intentions, I found myself wrestling with Amos in the wee hours of the morning. It was less than ideal, to be sure, but the fatigue I felt in those moments opened me to the intensity of the prophet's words.

Drawn from his life as "a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees," Amos was called to the most difficult task of delivering bad news in good times. Never had Israel been more prosperous or safe than under the long reign of Jeroboam II in the 8th century BCE. Yet in the midst of their military might and economic prosperity, there was great social injustice and immorality. In a theme echoed throughout the words of the Old Testament prophets, God tires of such injustice and declares that it will no longer be tolerated. God uses the image of a plumb line, an old-fashioned tool that showed when the lines of a building or wall were straight and true, and when they were crooked, or "off."

As we look anew to the coming of our Lord into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, where do you think a "plumb line" needs to be dropped in your own life, or in the life of your community of faith, to show what is "off" and what is "true?"

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of this day, for its blessings and its challenges. As we navigate this life that you have granted to us, help us to see its beauty and to feel its goodness. Show us where we stray from your "plumb line" of perfect love and justice. In Christ's name, Amen.

Amos 7:10-17

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. 11 For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" 12 And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; 13 but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." 14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, 15 and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' 16 Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' 17 Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

Judy Zimmerman Herr '82

In the midst of the prophet Amos's thundering calls for justice comes a scene from his life. Amos's conversation with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, is a classic confrontation between the establishment and the prophet, the insider and the protester. And as can be expected, the priest tells Amos to be quiet. Amos comes from the other kingdom, Judah, and he should take his message home and stop bothering Israel.

“But,” says Amos, “I have no choice! I’m not a prophet, a professional who does this for a living. No, I’m really just a farmer. But God has put these words in my mouth and sent me to you.”

We live in a world that would look familiar to Amos: a world in which many have little and a few have more than they need, a world in which power protects itself and cares little or nothing for equity and right, a world in which even God’s people do not always live by God’s word.

Who are you in this story? Being a prophet is not a choice so much as a compulsion to speak, a fire in the belly, a push from God. Do you see wrongs about which you cannot remain silent? Or are you part of the establishment—one of those being called to account by prophets marching through the streets proclaiming a message the dominant culture doesn’t want to hear?

How is God pushing you to act? Where is God sending you—maybe out of your comfort zone—with words that must be heard? Or who is God bringing into your life with uncomfortable words that call you to change or that warn you of judgment to come?

In this Advent season of waiting, may we be open to hearing God’s call to us.

Prayer

Our God, your call to us is not always comfortable or easy. Help us to know when we need to speak and when we need to receive words of judgment. Make us open to being channels of your healing and hope to our world. Amen.

Amos 8:1-14

1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. 2 He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. 3 The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!" 4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, 5 saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, 6 buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." 7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. 8 Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? 9 On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. 10 I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. 11 The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. 13 In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst. 14 Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, "As your god lives, O Dan," and, "As the way of Beer-sheba lives" —they shall fall, and never rise again.

Philomena Ofori-Nipaah '22

“Stop, look, and listen!” Amos’s message addresses a complex issue faced by a people whose harvest is plentiful and business is booming, yet the poor are neglected. As the prophet delivers a message warning of the need for change—for the coming of the Lord—so it is for us today.

Upon hearing Christmas whistles and bells, we busy ourselves with looking for the best gifts to give. Amos’s message sounds like a train approaching with a full head of steam, its whistles and bells making us pause to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN. As a warning sign from a train causes us to pay attention, so are we to pay attention to Amos during the season of Advent. The words of warning are spoken about the coming of Christ the Lord and the need to be transformed. “The days are coming . . . not a famine of food . . . but hearing the words of the Lord” (verse 11).

Amos blows the whistle to get us to stop and be refreshed in God’s grace while looking at our surroundings to help the poor and the needy around us, to take time to look for guidance and comfort, to ask forgiveness from God, and to share the joy of Christ’s love with each other as we search for joy in the material gifts we give and receive. Advent is a time to listen for the mercy of God in meditation.

Christ whistles grace and love to us in the season of Advent. Let us prepare to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN, as we examine ourselves.

Prayer

Almighty God, help us to look and find your peace in all our Advent busyness. Make us people of truth, obedience, and sharers of your love so that, through our lives, you may be revealed to others. Lord, may we learn to listen more and speak less as you give us courage to trust in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

Jon Mathieu '21

Bodies—flung everywhere.

This is the prophet’s imagery of anger and judgment. It would be natural, and perhaps necessary, for us to question this imagery. To feel uncomfortable with a prophetic word of punishment that takes shape as physical violence.

But Advent invites us to pause and ask all our questions. We not only look back to prophets like Amos, but we look ahead (from their vantage point) to the promised one, Jesus. So let’s ask some questions.

Why is God so angry in this discourse? In a word: oppression. Needy and poor people are being trampled by the rich. What little they have is being taken away from them by the merchants’ corrupt and greedy business practices. We are invited to examine our own practices toward those who are barely able to survive.

At whom is God angry? Specifically the corrupt and oppressive ruling class within “my people Israel.” This is not an us-versus-them moment where some other nation or religion is being vilified. We are invited to consider how our families, our churches, our governments are treating the most vulnerable.

How will God answer this grave injustice? It turns out not to be violence against bodies so much as spiritual devastation. Religious festivals will turn to mourning. Shaved heads and sackcloth will mark a

time of famine—but it will be the absence of God’s revelation, not a famine of food or water. We are invited to acknowledge the pain of God’s absence in our own lives.

And yet Advent points us to something, or someone, beyond the famine. It will not be violence that topples injustice or lifts up the poor. As Mary would sing centuries later, God will scatter the proud and bring down the mighty from their thrones through a baby’s humble birth.

Prayer

God, we must repent. Help us to see the ways we oppress people and peoples. If we must shave our heads or put on sackcloth, teach us the humility and give us the strength. And yet we look for the same hope as the most poor and vulnerable among us—that you are near to us and will lift us up.

Amos 9:1-10

*1 I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said:
Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away,
not one of them shall escape.*

*2 Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.*

*3 Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them.*

*4 And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them;
and I will fix my eyes on them
for harm and not for good.*

*5 The Lord, GOD of hosts,
he who touches the earth and it melts,
and all who live in it mourn,
and all of it rises like the Nile,
and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;
6 who builds his upper chambers in the heavens,
and founds his vault upon the earth;
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth
the LORD is his name.*

*7 Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the LORD.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,*

*and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?
8 The eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom,
and I will destroy it from the face of the earth
except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,
says the LORD.*

*9 For lo, I will command,
and shake the house of Israel among all the nations
as one shakes with a sieve,
but no pebble shall fall to the ground.
10 All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword,
who say, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us."*

Edwin Chr. van Driel, faculty

Amidst all the eschatological and apocalyptic imagery that the Advent lectionary during these weeks selects from the Scriptures, today's readings draw particularly on the violent power of nature. One of the assigned psalms speaks of smoke and devouring fire, thundering, lightning, hailstones, and coals of fire (Ps 18). The other one references snow like wool, frost scattered like ashes, blowing wind, and flowing waters (Ps 147). The Amos text above references the mourning that the destructive powers of nature cause on the earth (vv. 5-6).

After the last few summers, I wonder if for many of us these images start to feel less and less as the vivid metaphors we once took them to be, and more and more as frightening, menacing realities. Language that speaks of the melting of the earth suddenly does not seem poetic license, but a real possibility. If this is the case, and if this kind of scriptural imagery may be more realistic than we even thought or feared, these texts also give us a word of consolation. They tell us that even if God's justice delivers us up to the terrible consequences of our own destructive behavior, we nonetheless will not fall out of the hands of the living God. The melting glaciers, the rising waters—they are not the result of random, unimpeded, unrestrained forces. In all their violence these powers still come forth out of God's vaults and upper chambers. We are still in the hands of one we know by name. We are still held by the one who says that as "his eyes are upon the sinful kingdom, and he will destroy it from the face of the earth, he nonetheless will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (v. 8).

Prayer

God of hosts, who has given us to know you by name, even as the waters rise and sink, and as you touch the earth and it melts, we entrust ourselves to you, knowing that you will be true to your promises of forgiveness, and salvation, and life. Amen.

Amos 9:11-15

11 On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; 12 in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this. 13 The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. 14 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. 15 I will plant

them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God.

Ron Cole-Turner, faculty emeritus

Ours is not the first generation to live through an economic crisis. But for all those who work without job security or health benefits or fair wages—and for those with no work at all—the past is no consolation. Winter threatens, and for too many this year Christmas brings something new and painful: The sorrow of not being able to buy gifts for one’s own children. Especially this year, as Americans protest in our cities and politicians throw blame at each other, we need more than ever to hear the word of the Lord, the word of our faithful God, spoken afresh to God’s chosen: “I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit” (Amos 9:14).

Prayer

O God, strengthen us by your promises and sustain us by your steadfast love, through Jesus Christ our Savior; Amen.

Scott Hagley, faculty

In Barbara Kingsolver’s most recent novel, *Demon Copperhead*, she explores in vivid detail the social, structural, and moral crises of our contemporary era. The protagonist—named Damon but called “Demon”—is shuffled from home to home by social services after losing his parents. Unable to make meaningful attachments and without any adults capable and willing to care for him, Demon falls from the graces afforded most kids, finding himself facing a capricious and cruel world all by himself. Kingsolver’s narration shines a flood light on the parts of everyday life in late-capitalism we would like to ignore. The economic pressures on families press parents into impossible choices between rent and food, parental neglect and a wage. Corrupt public officials and corporate greed siphon resources away from the poor, leaving behind failing schools, substandard health care, and lost opportunity. An avalanche of bad news that can lead to cynicism.

In our text for today, the prophet Amos refuses the moral paralysis or cynicism that can come from an honest assessment of the suffering around us. A time will come when God will take sides and rebuild what has been torn down, when God will restore the land to abundance, and Israel will flourish. This promise hangs in the air as a counter-narrative, an imaginative construal that invites impatience with the current order. It is an impatience picked up by the Hebrew prophets who come after, an impatience manifest in a Nazareth synagogue when a young rabbi reads “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives.” It is also the impatience that characterizes our Advent hope—may the light shine out from this darkness, and may we have eyes to see. May our hearts learn hope. Amen.

Prayer (today’s morning psalm, Psalm 24)

1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
2 for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,

and do not swear deceitfully.
5 They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

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

8 Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.

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

10 Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory. Selah

Micah 4:1-5, 5:2-4

*1 In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
2 and many nations 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.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
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;
4 but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
5 For all the peoples walk,
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God
forever and ever.*

*2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,*

*from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*

*4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.*

Andy Greenhow, staff

Sometime in the spring of 2016, John Hodgman joked on his podcast that his full-time job was thinking about the musical *Hamilton*, a remark that I found extremely resonant. One song I listened to on repeat was “One Last Time,” in which George Washington informs Alexander Hamilton that he is willingly stepping down from the presidency in order to model the peaceful transition of power. Washington’s farewell address as it is sung dreams lofty dreams for the young American nation, including the hope that “everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one will make them afraid.” Washington referenced this Scripture and sentiment often, most notably in a letter outlining his hope that Jews would find a safe home in the United States.

Even then, I thought of myself as a hardened cynic, but I now look back at *Hamilton*-obsessed Andy and cringe. The rise in anti-Semitism, disregard for democratic ideals, contested transfer of power, and so much else leads me to ask how I could have been such a Pollyanna, weeping in my office as I listened to a musical.

But then I remember a remark professor Angela Hancock made in a recent sermon in Hicks Chapel: when holding new babies, people make big promises. And this morning, we are all holding a new baby. So let’s make big promises.

Let us promise to dream eschatological dreams about justice and peace on earth, about the bounty of the earth providing enough for all, about unity and the end of fear—and promise to act in service to those dreams. But for me, the bigger promise will be to dream all of this without embarrassment or self-consciousness. It helps that today, we cradle the fulfillment of these dreams in our arms.

Merry Christmas!

Prayer

Incarnate God, grant us faith to trust the promises you have made, promises that find their fulfillment in your Son. Free us from the shame that prevents us from a wholehearted embrace of your vision for the world. Help us hold the magic of the incarnation in our hearts. Amen.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. 16 On that day it shall be

said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. 19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Eric McIntosh '12

What time is it? It is time to claim our identity. We are the daughter of Zion. For us, it is a time to rejoice. It is a time to sing aloud! It is time to do it with all our hearts! But we live in a time of war. Our service men and women are in the middle of Middle East uprisings. But our government is more divided than ever before. But the state of our economy is such that millions are fighting for their financial lives! The soul of America is lost some say. Even though we have an African American President, we seem to be no closer to a post racial society than we were 50 years ago, when Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed a dream that was heard and shared around the world. But the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. How then is it time to sing, and rejoice and exult with all hearts?

Now is the time! America is groaning, longing for us to sing. All of creation is groaning and longing to see the manifestation of the sons of God. What time is it? It is time for the Daughter of Zion rejoice! It is time for the redeemed of the Lord to say so! Say what, indeed what should we say? We should sing the reality of Advent! It is Advent time! It is time to celebrate the coming of the Lord. Even more it is time to celebrate that in the power of the Holy Spirit, he is here right now!

What time is it? It is time to sing! Sing, because Immanuel, God with us, forgives us. Rejoice, because while in the middle of war, God with us, will clear away our enemy. Why exult? Because God will rejoice over us, in our midst, and gather the outcast, and save the lame, and deal with our oppressors! It is time! Advent is a time to know that Immanuel, God with us is not only coming, he is already here and his presence will transform the world!

So what time is it? It's time to sing, rejoice, and exult with all our heart and the world needs to see it, hear it, from us if it is going to be transformed!

Prayer

O Lord, the world around us is falling apart. But you O Lord are with us. Cause us to be bold enough to sing, and rejoice right now, in the midst of turmoil, confusion, and strife. Cause us to remember what you have done, to discern and feel the power of your presence right now, and to sing the world unto discipleship, unto salvation! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rebecca Dix '15/'17

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. And no, it is not because of the snow. It's not because of the Christmas lights or the aisles of ornaments or tubes of brightly decorated wrapping paper. It's not because of bell ringers wrapped in Santa Claus guises or the halls being decked. And it's not because of persons piously carving time to be proper stewards of Advent. It's not because of the songs we sing or the foods we eat or the number of relatives we tolerate.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Because there is something in the air. It clings, it hovers with wings of feathers and rests gently on the soul. Threads woven through the spaces we inhabit, as we enter and as we leave. Most days traces of it may be thin, some days it may be harder to see than other days, but it is there. It is here. It is hope. Hope has come and is coming again.

Prayer

Holy God, Sustainer and Creator, grant us the sight to see you in our midst so that we can rejoice aloud with all our hearts as daughter Zion. We have nothing more to fear for our King has come, in whose precious name we lift up this prayer, Amen.

Haggai 1:1-15

1 In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: 4 Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. 6 You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. 7 Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. 8 Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. 9 You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. 10 Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 11 And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors. 12 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the LORD their God had sent him; and the people feared the LORD. 13 Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, saying, I am with you, says the LORD. 14 And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, 15 on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.

Derek Davenport '05/'17

We don't often read Haggai, especially during Advent. During Advent, we often spend our energy on things that are familiar. We read passages from the Gospels and Isaiah. We focus on traditions, family, and things that feel like "home." We spend the entire season trying to capture this sense of "home." That's where Haggai comes in. Haggai speaks to a people trying to recreate "home." They're trying, but not always successful. In the midst of that confusion, Haggai tells the people that the word of the Lord is "I am with you." That's the message of Christmas. God with us. Immanuel. The traditions, the familiarity, the sense of "home" are all wonderful parts of the season, but Haggai reminds us that the word of the Lord is much more simple. "I am with you."

Prayer

Lord, in the midst of this season filled with tradition, remind us that regardless of the confusion, the traditions, or the chaos, You are with us. Please remind us of Your love and presence this very day. Amen.

Haggai 2:1-9

1 In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: 2 Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, 3 Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? 4 Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, 5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. 6 For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; 7 and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. 8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. 9 The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

Andrew Wirt '10

In our Old Testament lesson, we hear that the people rebuilding the temple are discouraged because they remember the former glory of Solomon's Temple. The new temple seems like it could never compare to their memory of the past. But God promises, as He does repeatedly throughout Scripture, that everything will be ok, because He will be with them.

Advent is a season of preparation – preparation for Christmas, for the Second Coming, for a new church year. It can be a time of great joy and anticipation, as long as we don't let our memories of the past prevent us from experiencing and enjoying the present. We might think "It won't be the same this year without Mom," or "I don't know how we'll make it through after the layoff." But remember that God is always by our side. This year may be different, or more difficult, but do not fear, for the Lord your God is with you. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty.

Prayer

Eternal God, be with us this holiday season. Especially be with those who have suffered great loss this past year. Even when it seems nothing will ever be joyful again, remind us that hope is found in You. In the midst of the chaos of this world, Your love for us is steadfast. Amen.

Karen Baughman '06

The people of Israel had returned from exile just a few years before. They came back to a place that was home and yet not home. They had to live alongside with the unfamiliar 'remnant' in the land. They had to rebuild homes and businesses. They suffered through drought. Most of all, they had to rebuild the Temple and reconcile the faith they kept in exile with the faith they now needed to sustain them in the future. Their lives were unsettled and uncertain, full of unease and anxiety. In the midst of their struggle, the Lord encourages the people to be strong, to be courageous, to keep on, to move forward, not to let the past become the definition of the future. "It will be all right," says the Lord, "for I am with you." Today, we, too, live in uncertainty and unease. Some of us wonder whether we can make it

through tough economic times, or whether we will have a job tomorrow or next year. We fear the terrorist from another shore and the thief down the street. Even our familiar ways of faith are unsettled. Yet in this season, God reminds us in a most amazing way, with the birth of a child, that God is still with us and will bring us Shalom, wholeness, peace, and rest.

Prayer

Oh, God, thank you for reminding us that you are with us in all our struggles and uncertainties. We take courage from your presence in the world and with us. Help us to live in the hope of your presence always. Amen.

Second Readings: New Testament Epistles

Galatians 3:1-14

1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. 5 Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6 Just as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” 7 so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. 10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” 12 But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Edwin Chr. van Driel, faculty

The Lectionary makes the interesting choice of leading us through some parts of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians these last days before Christmas. In Galatians, Paul battles some “teachers” who have come from Jerusalem and preach in Galatia “a different gospel” (1:6) than what Paul had been preaching. At stake is, in one sentence, “What time do you believe it is on God’s watch?” Both Paul and the teachers believe that at some point God is going to radically interrupt the life of this world and re-create it. For the teachers, this is still in the future. For Paul, this is now (6:15). In this passage he gives one of his arguments. When God were to re-create the world, both Paul and the teachers believed, God would send God’s Spirit—the mighty Spirit, which once hovered over the waters of the chaos and called creation out of nothing, would once again call new life out of chaos. Well, says Paul, when I preached the gospel, did you receive the Spirit or not? What do you believe that Christmas is? Another chapter in the life of the world, or the radical invasion of God, the beginning of the new creation?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, bless your name for not wanting to be relevant to my life but making my life relevant to yours. Amen.

Galatians 3:15-22

15 Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person’s will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, “And to offsprings,” as of many; but it says, “And to your offspring,” that is, to one person, who is Christ. 17 My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise. 19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than

one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

C. Mark Scott '18

The right word often escapes me! I can think of a similar word, but it is not the word I really want to say because it is not precise. I stir around in my mental files and I ask my wife. The exact word comes to my rescue!

We are having a fence installed around our backyard so we won't have to worry about Rio, our dog, wandering loose. We told the fence-installer that we had ordered "quikrete" online and asked him if we should do the same with the fencing. But he felt better about going to the store personally and picking it out so that if any mistake was made, it would be his.

Specificity is so important. With the Galatians Paul gets specific. A will says exactly what it means, he reminds them. The inheritance is to Abraham and to his "descendant" (not descendants). The Law was added "430 years" after the Promise of inheritance, so the Promise holds precedence over the Law.

Advent is a time, I think, to be specific about our faith: Who exactly is this One to Whom Mary gives birth? Why is He born in such a way? Why to these parents? Why was Jesus born when He was? This Advent season, make specificity your spiritual discipline.

Prayer

Lord of Advent, Your coming into the world changed everything! Help us to focus on what the Scriptures tell us about who You are. Help us to continue to learn about our salvation and grow in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. To You be all Glory!

Galatians 3:23-4:7

3:23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

4:1 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ²but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. ⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Will Robbins '21

Resist plucking the low-hanging hermeneutical fruit from this passage. There, in verse 3:28, we eye Paul's call for unity and quickly run to pulpit, street, or social media to offer peace to intra-Christian conflict. Yet we all know that these appeals for unity, the "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God" clarion calls, strike the same dissonant chord as one saying, "All lives matter." We know that society doesn't value all lives, just like we know that Christians aren't truly one, not in this age of political, racial, and denominational division. The truth is, difference still matters to us, just as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female did for the Galatians.

Don't get me wrong. The pursuit for unity is an essential one for all followers of Jesus, yet might its achievement be possible through celebrating difference, not sameness? In what ways can we acknowledge, value, and honor differences that lead to unity? To do so seems counterintuitive, self-defeating, sort of like the idea of losing one's life in order to save it, or becoming great by becoming the least.

I want to suggest that Paul offers a path to such unity in this same letter. We might be tempted to dismiss Paul as pursuing unity through sameness in this passage, but later in this letter he reveals that true unity, the unity born of authentic love, comes only when we bear the unique burdens of another (Gal. 6:2). When we open ourselves to the suffering of another, we "fulfill the law of Christ" and ultimately become "a new creation" (Gal 6:2 and 6:15). That means we change, we become different, capable of loving our neighbor as ourselves (5:9), producing the fruit of the Spirit (5:22), and, this is key, not becoming the same as the one whom we are serving (5:15). Only then can we realize the mystery of becoming one in Christ Jesus (3:28).

The question is: what stories of suffering are you open to hearing?

Prayer

Dear God, who invites us to bear one another's burdens, may we come to faith in the example of Jesus Christ and achieve the unity that is possible only through him. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 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! 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 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. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Darren Rogers '17, Board member

It is difficult to be an encourager and look outside our private world when the integrity of society is breaking apart before our very eyes and institutions that seemed rock-solid are crumbling like brittle soil on a hot summer day! We are relentlessly bombarded with reports of mass shootings and divisive and

inflammatory rhetoric from elected leaders entrusted to proclaim and protect “liberty and justice for all.” The challenge to stay positive when faced with tragedy, illness, and loss is overwhelming—especially during Advent, when peace and goodwill are heralded from the mountaintops while so many are hopelessly struggling through the darkness of the valley.

Our quick fix is to insulate our minds from the distress and to blame others for our condition. We can deep-dive into work, serving, or pleasure-seeking, but the pain is still present when we come up for air. These kinds of solutions only drive us farther away from the One who can reassemble and illuminate this complicated puzzle we call life!

Jesus Christ entered our world of pain and sorrow to give his life for all to become God’s children through Christ—God’s *children*, “who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13), thus giving us the power and clarity to encourage and strengthen one another.

The birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ enable and entitle us to put on the breastplate of faith and love, along with the helmet of the hope of salvation! By the grace of God we are given new life and light to navigate through the darkness, confusion, and pain that blind humanity! “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day . . .” (vv. 4-5a). “So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober . . . since we belong to the day” (vv. 6, 8a).

Prayer

Father, thank you for the grace given through Jesus Christ, who through love alone sacrificed his life for all! Lord, help us look away from darkness and focus our eyes on you. We pray that your light will guide our steps and fill our hearts with hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Caitlin Rohrer Werth ’10

In today’s context, it can be difficult for us to wrestle with a passage that seems to draw so much attention to dualism, judgment, and the anticipated apocalypse. We do live in a world divided, and we have seen well-intentioned people use religion to increase this divide—to pass judgment on others and react out of fear.

But the overall message of the gospel guides us away from that reaction. It reminds us followers of Christ that we are all broken by sin, all connected as a body, all grafted onto the vine, not called to judge, and that nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus. So also *this* passage can remind us that as Christians we are called to see duality in a different way: it’s not “us versus them,” but holiness versus separation from God—faith, love, hope, and salvation versus destruction and pain. We know enough to live differently. And we are reminded that we can’t do so alone. We need each other to continue to live in and through God’s love.

The church in Thessalonica was being reminded to put on armor—not for battle, but for love. We are meant to be ready for whatever God brings. We don’t know the day or the hour, or even what the future holds, but we can be open and alert to what will come. We are also reminded in this passage that we live with Christ even if we fail—whether awake or asleep, we live with him.

Prayer

God of love, thank you for holding us in your care, for reminding us that we know a different world in you. Help us to be ready for whatever you bring forth, and keep our eyes open so we don't miss your movements. May your love radiate within us and spring forth from us as we live our daily lives, and may we continue to connect and build each other up to further spread your love. Amen.

Angela Dienhart Hancock, faculty

Why do people say things that don't need to be said?

It's a good question to ask when reading this passage from one of Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica. Paul claims his readers don't need to hear what he has to say, but he says it anyway.

On the surface, Paul's message is simple: there are good alert day people (his readers) and bad clueless night people (others). But that binary disintegrates if you read the text closely. Why does Paul need to tell us to be sober and alert if we already are? Why tell us to put on the equipment of faith, hope, and love if we are already wearing it? We are children of light, sure, sometimes, but not all the time, it seems. It's not just the day of the Lord that will come like a thief in the night, perhaps. Maybe doubt and fear sneak up on all of us some of the time. Paul doesn't come right out and say it, but he knows. It slips out in verse 10: Christ died for us, even when we are among the sleepers. Because we are both awake and asleep, in brightness and in shadow, we need encouragement, building up, and reminding from time to time.

We are going to hear and say and sing many things at Advent that we already know. "God is on the way," we sing, "bringing this world to a good end." We know this. But the night pulls on all of us, in spite of what we know.

I don't know whether you are brimming with faith, hope, and love today or lulled into shadow, but either way, God has got you. It doesn't need to be said, except when it does.

Prayer

God of the alert and the drowsy, we thank you for the ways you remind us that you are bringing the world to a good end. When we are alert and brimming with hope, empower us to build up the weary. On days when hopelessness blurs our memory, may we be carried by the encouragement of others. Amen.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. 6 For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. 11 To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, 12 so that the name of

our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jon Chillinsky '18

"God is just . . ." (2 Thess. 1:6a), yet is often proclaimed to be unjust. How can God truly be just if he commands whole people groups to be killed or condemns people to "everlasting destruction" for simply not knowing or obeying the gospel?

Sometimes it is the starting point of our thinking that determines the outcome. Choosing to start with the fact that God is just and then trying to understand how this is so in relation to the seemingly contrary ends with Paul's conclusion, a prayer. A prayer that glorifies Jesus in believers and vice versa. And in this Advent season, when we proceed in memory toward the birth of our Lord, we pray in the same way Paul did.

Prayer

Heavenly Father we come before you, through Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, with reverent hearts. Spirit guide our choices and soften our hearts so we can do good by faith. Help us understand your justice in this unjust world and make sense of where you want us to be. We thank you Lord Jesus. Amen.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (for 2:1-3, 13-17)

1 As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, 2 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. 3 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. 4 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. 5 Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? 6 And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. 8 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. 9 The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, 10 and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, 12 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.

Titus 1:1-16

1 Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, 2 in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began— 3 in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior,

4 To Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

5 I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: 6 someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. 7 For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; 8 but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. 9 He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.

10 There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; 11 they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. 12 It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said,

"Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons."

13 That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, 14 not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth. 15 To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Lee Platt '02

Paul's pastoral letter to Titus doesn't get much attention. Pieces of Chapters 2 and 3 occur only in the Lectionary's Christmas Eve or Christmas Day readings, but never Chapter 1 in any Sunday readings. Verse 15 of Chapter 1 is especially intriguing, especially as we approach Christmas, when purity (like that of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child) is central.

Paul wrote to Titus as some people were attempting to impose additional rules on the new Christian believers. Among the most notable of these rules was the need for Gentile converts to be circumcised. Paul called these instigators “distractors.” Those distractors were trying to exclude the uncircumcised because they were supposedly impure.

I think Paul is telling Titus that in the eyes of Jesus, everything and everyone is pure and not to be excluded. Not only are the accusations of impurity by human rule-makers untrue, but those rule-makers are themselves impure! Purity comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the works of the law (Galatians 2:15-21). When we discard the law and robe ourselves with faith in Jesus, we put on new eyeglasses that enable us to see everyone in purity. Those we might have excluded as impure, through the eyes of Jesus, are pure.

Prayer

God, you have created all in your image, and despite our frailties, you regard each of us as pure. Clothe us in full faith in your Son Jesus that we might look through his eyes at our neighbors and joyfully include them as those made in your image. Amen.

Titus 2:1-10

1 But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine. 2 Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.

3 Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, 4 so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

6 Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. 7 Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, 8 and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.

9 Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, 10 not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.

Rose Schrott '21

In Titus, Paul (or someone in the tradition of Paul) writes a letter to his church-planting disciple in Crete. Sections like Titus 2:1-10 detail ideal behavior for churchgoers based on Greco-Roman social expectations.

There are different rationales for why Paul upholds Greco-Romans social norms. Perhaps he is presenting the new church as a non-threat. Perhaps he is bringing the gospel into the context of Gentiles. Perhaps he is drawing a dramatic comparison between new Christians and false Christian teachers in the area (Titus 1:9-16).

Whatever the reason, we cannot read these household codes without acknowledging the hurt that comes from labeling and limiting others based on identifiers such as gender or class. Social orders, whether they exist today or in the Greco-Roman time period, create a hierarchy of value—but God calls us to see and value each other for our inherent, rather than socially assigned, worth.

Maybe the Advent invitation of this passage is to lament the ways that the gospel has been contextualized to its detriment. In other words, Titus 2 can invite us to grieve the times when the church in a broken world has labeled others rather than loved them.

If we read through Titus 2:14, we are reminded that faith is not simply about following social norms. It is about matching our professed beliefs with our actions. And we are empowered to do good deeds, to match our words and actions, because of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and promised return.

So, in many ways, Titus 2 encapsulates the circuitous mystery of faith. Despite good intentions, we sometimes follow the rules of society and not God. Yet, somehow, we are also on the miraculous journey to become more like Christ, a journey made possible only because of Christ. And this is the contradiction we sit with in Advent—God came, God is here, God is coming, but we wait in a broken world.

Prayer

God of grace, forgive us for the ways and times that we reflect the world around us instead of your radical love. Help the church to atone for the ways it has excluded people and perpetuated a hierarchy that goes against your will. Thank you for the gift of your Son, who lives on in us. Continue to create in us new hearts that empower us to match our faith and actions. Amen.

Titus 2:11-3:8a

2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. 15 Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you. 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8a The saying is sure.

John Magnuson '13/'22

This passage is the perfect reminder during Advent of what we celebrate and where we are in life; between the first and second coming of Jesus. Along with Paul we rejoice that God has appeared in Jesus, bringing salvation to all (2:11). This is our celebration of the birth of Jesus, full of festive love and joy. We sing *Away in a Manger* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

And yet, Paul continues in saying that we also wait for manifestation of the glory of our God and savior Jesus Christ (2:13). In this verse we find the hope and peace of Advent. We wait in hope for the coming peace manifested in the reign of Jesus as Lord over all. In this waiting period we sing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* and *Joy to the World*.

And so may your Advent season this year be full of Love, Joy, Peace, and Hope; for Jesus has come and we await his coming again.

Prayer

Loving God, we give you thanks for sending your Son our Lord Jesus into this world, bringing with him love and joy. We thank you for the salvation which we have received through your grace. In busy times, may we not forget and not lose hope that Jesus is coming again to manifest the reign of his peace throughout the whole world. As we sing this Christmas season may we join our voices with countless others in hope of new life that is given through you. Amen.

2 Peter 1:1-11

1 Simon 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: 2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 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. 4 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. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 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. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

Tega Swann, D.Min. student

The apostle here reminds us of the tension of the “already, but not yet” of our salvation story. Even while celebrating the indescribable gift of salvation, he reminds us that we currently experience only a foretaste of what is to come, and that we also have an active responsibility in working toward what is “to come.”

Peter reminds us that although God, according to His faithful character of holy love, initiated salvation and entrance into His kingdom through Jesus Christ, those saved by His grace must bear witness to their citizenship with *visible qualities and characteristics of personal and corporate nature*. And as long as these virtues are present in us, we declare our positive “Yes, I will attend” RSVP to participate fully in what is yet to come.

Peter’s charge discourages us as Christians from developing a sense of complacency born from the fact that salvation is solely effected by God in Jesus Christ and apart from our works. Instead, Peter reminds us that once we have said “yes” to God’s salvation in Christ, we must maintain that “yes” with a visible commitment to the pursuit of goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love in our personal and corporate lives.

May we add to our prayers this Advent season not only the petition, “Come, Lord Jesus come,” but also the determination to maintain our response to his invitation with good works borne out of commitment to the Kingdom that is to come.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to remember that your invitation is one that requires a constant, living response from us. Grant us daily grace and power to say “yes” to You by our willingness to press into to the more of Your life that we see revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Mark Russell, staff

In this passage, the author of Second Peter encourages the letter’s audience to stay on the path towards the kingdom of God and resist the corruption of worldly lust. To accomplish this, the author extols the letter’s audience to have faith, and to support that faith with other virtues, like goodness, knowledge, and self-control. This effort is portrayed as a chain in which each virtue supports the previous one listed, like goodness with knowledge and knowledge with self-control.

Reading about this chain of virtues in Second Peter reminds me of a commercial that I saw a few years ago. The protagonist in the commercial has a choice between a healthy snack and a snack with no nutritional value. The decision to eat the healthy snack inspires a series of other decisions throughout the day, including going for a walk over watching television, and passing on fast food in favor of a healthy meal. As the author of Second Peter would say, a healthy diet supports exercise, and exercise supports wellness.

Both the commercial and the passage from Second Peter show how an individual can harness the inspiration and momentum from one good choice to make another, but there is an additional, essential element that neither makes explicit. We need teachers, ministers, and parents to illuminate the path to a virtuous life, and friends, family, and co-workers to encourage us in our journey to well-being. The current tag line on the PTS web page is “Grounded in faith, formed in community,” and one cannot underestimate the importance of the latter half of that statement. On the other side, our personal choices effect our communities and our growth as individuals can only benefit those around us. As we begin this season of hope and anticipation, it seems right to acknowledge our interdependence, for we can only arrive at a better world together.

Prayer

God of hope, we give thanks for the many blessings that aid us on our path to the kingdom. As each step in the right direction supports the next, guide our hearts to help our neighbors as they take steps of their own. Amen.

2 Peter 1:12-21

12 Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, 14 since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. 15 And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. 16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic

Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. 19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Jim Davison '69

The author of 2 Peter says that he plans to remind his readers regularly to remain firm in the faith. Then as now, challenges and weaknesses can easily lead us away from faith. One challenge can be the creeping doubt that, perhaps, this whole story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is just that . . . a story. Our author cautions us not to be misled into thinking that these truths are only "cleverly devised myths." Rather, referring to the Transfiguration, he reminds us that the disciples were eye-witnesses of the "power and coming" of Jesus Christ. They heard God himself declare that Jesus is the "beloved Son." Christ's glory isn't all that obvious in this Advent season, for Jesus comes hidden in the humble form of a baby. But this story isn't just a "story." It's the start of a Life that will bring new life to Israel, and through them, to all the world . . . and to us.

Prayer

Gracious God, that you have taken on human form in Jesus Christ is more than we can comprehend, and sometimes it seems beyond belief. Grant that, during this Advent season, we will see signs of his glory, so that our faith may be firm and our hearts pure. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you, and in your glorious Son. Amen.

Kathy Dain '11

Sometimes in the cold concrete dawn of December, when the morning sky changes little from dawn to dusk, when our fields lie dormant and our hearts are still, when the autumn color of fall has faded and the first snowfall is still at hand. Sometimes in these wee hours of darkness it is hard to remember the excitement of that Easter morn, when the fresh dew of faith first awakened our eyes, or of the holy mountaintop set ablaze by Christ's resplendent glory. It is in these days when the world is shrouded in darkness we remember that the light of Christ still smolders in the coldest of hearts invoking the beauty of transfiguration—not of Christ, for his glory is ageless, but for us—for who we have become in Christ. Advent is the season of watchful remembrance and unsurpassing hope of who we are becoming in him.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, awaken our hearts and renew our Spirits to the light of Christ so that he may be reflected in all we do and say. Amen.

2 Peter 3:1-10

1 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 2 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. 3 First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts 4 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!" 5 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, 6 through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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. 10 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.

Katie Crowe '19

There are two ways in which we often speak about time. *Chronos* references linear, chronological time—human time as it were, marked by hours and minutes, days, weeks and years. *Kairos*, however, references the fullness of time. It is God's time, in a sense, whose accounting exists in the realm of the eternal.

Grounding the reader in the ancient landscape of creation and the promise of Christ's future return, the author of 2 Peter calls us to *kairos* living in a *chronos*-obsessed world. We are charged to set aside our impatience for the unfolding of all that is to come and instead be fully present, with "sincere intention," to the gifts of today.

As we dip below the surface of the bustle of these days, we find all creation waiting with baited breath for the coming of the Lord. As we surrender the need to control where we are going in our lives and the speed with which we get there, we awaken to the art of living with sincere intention for Christ today. We become conditioned to the ambiguities of the *kairos* in a way that suspends us in a state of Advent expectancy, and we are baptized into a resistance movement against the tyranny of the *chronos* in our overlooked lives in a way that serves God's redemptive purposes in the world in real time.

May God bless us with sincere intention each day of this Advent season as we wait with baited breath for Emmanuel.

Prayer

In the fullness of time, Lord Jesus, you became flesh and lived among us that we might be free from the fears of our timeworn lives. Grow our trust in you sufficient to stage a rebellion against hurry, that we might be fully present to the gift of these days. Amen.

2 Peter 3:11-18

11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 18 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.

Chip Blackshear '09

The one thing that most of us have to deal with in our lives is the fear of the unknown. We want to know what the future holds. Since the beginning of time people have tried to predict the future. As we approach a new year, people try to make predictions about what is to come.

One of the benefits of trusting the Lord Jesus and reading the Bible is that we already know what the future holds. Not that we know every detail, but we know how things turn out in the end. We know that the Christ will return and make things right, bringing the “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” That’s the focus of Advent. God came here in person and He’s coming back. But we also learn from Peter that we are not to just wait around for Jesus to return. We are to “be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.” We are to live “lives of holiness and goodness.” And we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we anxiously await the Advent of the Savior, help us to commit our daily lives to holiness and goodness, seeking out those places where our thoughts and actions do not align with your Word, and bringing every thought captive to you. Amen.

Alice L. Phillips '94

Waiting is usually pretty difficult for most of us. Whether we are waiting in line in a crowded grocery store or a traffic jam, or waiting for a special event like Christmas, a new baby, or a wedding, often our very best doesn’t shine through. Unfortunately, waiting—even in joyful anticipation—can sometimes cause us to be impatient, anxious, fearful, on edge, short-tempered... just to name a few descriptors! In this passage of Scripture, Peter instructs us as we await the most important event in life: the coming of the Lord. What sort of people ought we to be?? He tells us we should be leading lives of holiness, godliness, and peace, without spot or blemish.

When we think about being holy and godly, without spot or blemish, it may conjure all kinds of thoughts in our heads, like a “holier than thou” attitude, or maybe something that is reserved for a saintly Mother-Teresa-type person. But the Scriptures tell us to be holy because God is holy. Only our Lord God is fully holy. The Lord is the one who has called us to be more and more like Jesus. Being holy means being different, living by a different standard than the world around us; it means being set apart for a unique purpose.

Author Stuart Briscoe recalls how unprepared he was more than fifty years ago on the day he was married to his wife Jill. He says, “I had been set apart from the old life... there had been a cut. I was in a new environment. I had a new status. I had been set apart uniquely to my wife. There was only one problem. I never had been married before, and I didn’t know how to be married. Fortunately, God in his wisdom had prepared all of this.”

Stuart goes on to describe how all these years he has been learning how to be married. He then equates that to how we are to live holy lives. He says, “When I came to Jesus, I was made holy. And since I was a little boy, I’ve been learning only too slowly how to be what I became. Or if you like, he set me apart to himself and now he says, ‘Get on with it...and be what you became.’”

I love how he describes this! So how do we “be what we became” when we said yes to Jesus in our lives? Peter describes it best when he says, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” As we grow each day in our relationship with Jesus by spending time with Him, meditating upon his word, and worshipping him, we more fully understand. As we grow in Jesus, we become more and more

like him. As we become more and more like him, then we are able to live holy and godly lives, experiencing his peace without spot or blemish.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we thank you and praise you for being the Lord of our lives. We thank you for your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Heavenly Father, as we remember his coming into this world, we also anticipate his coming again! As we wait, help us to be good learners as we draw close to Jesus, seeking to grow in his grace and knowledge each day. Lord, help us to get on with it each day to be what we became when we welcomed your great invitation of the Savior into our lives. With joyful anticipation we wait! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

1 John 4:7-16

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 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. 10 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. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 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.

Judy Angleberger '96

For God so loved the world that he sent his only son . . . (John 3:16).

As parents of a newborn, we pour our love and attention into our infant through cuddling, talking to, cooing, and kissing day after day until one day that infant opens his or her mouth and bites Mommy or Daddy on the chin—an attempt at a kiss. Our baby has learned to respond to love. That love continues to grow and find expression in many ways.

John tells us in his first letter that we love because God first loved us. God pours love into us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and in time we learn to respond to that love. “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” (v. 9).

Today, we celebrate the expression of God’s steadfast love in that God poured God’s love into our world and into our lives through the birth of Jesus—God’s love personified. How do we respond to such love? John answers, “Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (v. 7).

Prayer

God of grace, thank you for loving us and showing us the Way to a personal relationship with you through your son, Jesus. We are thankful for his birth and for his saving grace on the cross. Teach us how to respond to such love by loving one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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.

Jude 17-25

17 But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; 18 for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts." 19 It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. 20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Derek Marotta '06/'20

Few days exist in the church when the reality and presence of division and strife are not present and noticed. It was true in Jesus' day as it is true in our day now. The "ungodly" actions we witness each day on the part of co-workers and family members can, and often do, harm our willingness to share the good news of Christ's soon-to-be-celebrated birth with those who need to hear God's story. We know that we participate in an active faith, a living faith that leads to the production of fruit but also requires a strong posture of discipleship which combats the divisions and strife we witness in our culture.

This text from Jude contains strong, affirmative words designed to encourage and inspire the church to live out our faith actively before the world and our communities. Followers of Christ are told to “build themselves up” and to “pray in the Spirit” because choosing to enact these practices helps unify Christ’s body, the church—us. Because we understand the importance of making those choices, we are told to look forward to “the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

With that in mind, I wonder: Right now, in what places is God showing you to display mercy on those who are wavering in their faith? In what places is God showing you people you can help “snatch . . . out of the fire” by living out this passage?

If we are going to continue to live and work as the church that is called and sustained by God, then even as we wait for the coming Messiah, we do so in a posture of active ministry. It is our calling—and it is our joy to participate in it.

Prayer

Most Holy God, as we continue our Advent journey, we are aware of our role in your evangelizing of the world as we are aware of the places and people you are sending us to—places where there are people who need your grace and mercy. Give us strength to work energetically as we actively share your message. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Revelation 1:1-8

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. 4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Nathan Leslie ’10

These opening lines from Revelation serve as a powerful reminder that Jesus Christ is Lord of all creation, and that he is coming again to set everything right. This is good news, because we constantly face forces like injustice, suffering, evil, sin, and death, which prove that this world is not as it should be.

Yet because Jesus remains Lord, we know that He is the one who has acted, is acting, and will act to restore our broken world. He has acted to defeat these forces by his life, death, and resurrection, so that when He comes again in glory, he will act to bring about their ultimate end. In the meantime, Jesus is also acting on our behalf. Because of his work, the Holy Spirit brings about the defeat of these forces in our lives so that we inherit freedom, healing and restoration. He confronts these forces in our world as the Gospel is proclaimed and the world is called under the reign of God.

So while our world is not yet what it shall be and we look for the day when all things are made new, may we find hope and peace in the victory of the One who was and is and is to come.

Prayer

God who was, who is, and who is coming: We thank you that in Jesus Christ, you have begun your loving purpose to restore us and all creation. Reveal in us the truth of your promise and help us to see you at work in and around us as we await the day of Christ's coming. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 2:8-17

8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

9 "I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

13 "I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. 15 So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Alan D. Olson '14

I have to admit, Revelation is one of the last books of the Bible that I think about reading as a devotional exercise in Advent. Yet it somehow seems appropriate here in the year 2021. For nearly two years, our lives have been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. This season of pestilence has been a revelation to all of us. The pandemic has removed the scales from our eyes and shown us how deeply divided we are; how far we are from Jesus' command to love one another, as he has loved us. In this season of Advent and pandemic, as we prepare for the arrival of our Lord, it seems appropriate to spend some time in the uncomfortable spaces of the book of Revelation.

In today's reading, we encounter the instructions of John of Patmos for two different congregations: Smyrna and Pergamum. These are two very different congregations, with different problems. The church in Smyrna was rich in spirit and firm in its faith, yet it had few resources and was threatened with persecution. In Pergamum, there was great pressure for the congregation to assimilate to the cultural forces of the Greco-Roman world—rather than being threatened, they were being seduced.

In our lives of faith, we reflect bits and pieces of all the problems from these congregations. We see this in our fights over wearing masks in worship. These internal conflicts threaten to overtake some congregations. At the same time, some pastors choose to erect walls of hostility, telling worshipers that they will be turned away from God's house if they choose to wear a mask. These instructions to the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum invite us to contemplate where we are in the midst of our own conflicts, and how we witness to the love of Christ for all of humanity.

Prayer

God of grace and mercy, in this season of Advent, we ask that you open our eyes and ears and hearts. We ask that you help us to see where we are in the midst of all the chaos and strife in our churches and in our world. Finally, we ask that you use us to reveal the love of Christ in and for the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Revelation 2:18-29

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

19 "I know your works your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. 20 But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. 22 Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call 'the deep things of Satan,' to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; 25 only hold fast to what you have until I come. 26 To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,

I will give authority over the nations;

27 to rule them with an iron rod,

as when clay pots are shattered

28 even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. 29 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Samantha Lowery-Coggins '20

At Advent, Revelation is not among the portions of Scripture that pop into my head, or my heart.

Isaiah? Yes. John? Definitely.

This extended metaphor about a woman false prophet? No.

But recently that changed for me, thanks to a rabbi. During the Jewish high holidays in early September, my colleague in Morgantown, WV, where I live and work as a campus pastor, pointed me to Psalm 27. One refrain of that psalm is "Wait for the Lord!"

When he referred me to this Scripture, which his Jewish tradition and my Presbyterian tradition have in common, the rabbi told me, “Think of us [those celebrating Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur], when you read about coming home to God.”

As we wait for God—like Psalm 27 insists we do—to show up as Emmanuel, I believe this passage from Revelation 2 has something to say about how to live in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives (Ps. 27:4).

It is one of seven letters written to churches in Asia Minor, and it shows off the wily blend of genres in Revelation as a whole. Like other Jewish apocalyptic literature, this Scripture is full of symbolism, and it reflects a context of oppression. And like other prophetic literature, it looks forward, not just backward into history.

The passage is not actually about an unfaithful woman, as the Jezebel references to 1 Kings and 2 Kings may lead us to think. We know this analogy was a typical format used to express the importance of discerning what is of God, and what is not, in the context of a patriarchal society.

Discerning how to avoid what is not-God is a task, in and of itself. As a new parent to a baby born in February, I am all too aware of what I idolize in my life right now: sleep. If there was a not-God who could promise me one extra hour of sleep every night, I would worship at their feet (yesterday).

It is a cliché about parenting, and it sounds hyperbolic. Yet for me, it is undeniably true. So what saves me from this not-God (in addition to naps on the weekend)? Remembering that there is a fourth reality which is Jesus Christ, a layer atop the brokenness of our pandemic-riddled, productivity-laden world.

There is a reality in which my zombie-like, tired body is enough for my daughter. There is a reality in which I am not alone at 4:15 a.m. rocking my child back to sleep, but together with other caregivers who are doing the same. There is a reality in which it is ok to function with the new brain synapses that come with parenthood. There is a reality in which I am not lazy or unproductive, but carer and keeper to a vulnerable human being.

This is the reality of Jesus Christ, the reality of God intervening in human form, affirming the sacredness of our physical selves: we are nothing less than children of God.

Prayer

God who intervenes in human form, during this Advent, may we come home to you with this deep knowledge: we are your children. Amen.

Revelation 3:1-6

1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 4 Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your

name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. 6 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Matthew Morris '16

Every year during Advent, I find myself listening to the same song at least once: “Rebel Jesus,” performed by the Chieftains and Jackson Browne. It’s certainly a unique Christmas song. Rather than celebrating Christ’s glorious destiny and humble birth, it is all about His message, particularly His concern for the least of us. It’s an important reminder for me, just like this passage, that as much as I might want to “take Advent off,” using it as a time for rest, reconnecting, and maybe a dash of introspection and prayer, preparing the way for Christ involves much more. It means opening my eyes and heart to the suffering and lonely and extending Christ’s message of healing to them in turn. It’s not easy, especially when the world seems so dark, as it has this year, but it’s in the darkest times that Christ calls us to be light.

Prayer

Christ our Savior and Guide, wash us clean this Advent, that our lives may be light in the cold, dark places of our world. Lead us, we pray, in your name. Amen.

Revelation 12:1-10

1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. 3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days. 7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.”

Susan E. Vande Kappelle '95

Birthing a child is a great portent. It is a time of uncertainty. There is potential for rejoicing, but also great anxiety. A woman so strong to carry a child to term is vulnerable at the moment of birth. To her the enemy is the unknown. What will happen? Will she and the child be safe, and what kind of help will be needed for herself and the babe?

On the other hand, dragons are dreadful creatures no matter how Jim Henson portrays them as muppets and friendly stuffed animals. This dragon in Revelation seeks to kill the child to be born, destroys part of creation, and wages war against heaven. Life can be seen as a fight against opposing forces, thus leaving us very little choice but to live in fear and anxiety.

But the Revelation to John offers more than an eschatological vision. It is another perspective about the struggles of life. The broader view of this conflict between the woman and the dragon reveals the saving love of God beyond and in spite of the battles. Not only is the dragon driven out of heaven by the angels, but also the woman and her child remain safe within God's care, and the future is secured for eternity.

We can choose to live in distress and fear in the midst of life's struggles, or we can take on the perspective in John's vision of a present comfort and great expectations. In this season of Advent, be still and seek the God who dwells in and around us, and find your own place of safety and well-being.

Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, pour out power on your people. Give your people wings to fly through the conflicts of this world and find saving help from earth and heaven. Encourage us—encourage me—to spend time this Advent seeking the Messiah, who reconciles all things.

Katelyn Fisher '22, staff

My Christmas Eve memories are infused with a reminder of waiting. As a young girl, I longed for the day when I would be mature enough to be chosen as Mary in our annual Christmas Eve pageant. In my memory, Mary was always beautiful, demure, and wearing powder blue taffeta, and I felt desperate to one day be her representative. My imagination for the mother of God never included anything about birthpangs, being clothed with the sun, or being confronted by dragons. I never did get the opportunity to play the part, but perhaps the fulfillment of my childhood Christmas wish came not in the donning of the regal blue gown, but in the moment I gave birth to my third child. All birth is difficult, and this one un-medicated; "crying out in birthpangs" somehow seems too gentle an expression to describe the guttural sounds emitting from my throat unbeknownst to me. Despite my fragile body and broken spirit, my son was born into the world and I was left with an adrenaline of triumph coursing through my veins.

We may not all give birth to children, but every one of us is called to participate in the restoration of God's kingdom. Mary pronounced the vision of that kingdom as a place where the mighty will be brought low and all the hungry filled with good things. And yet the fruition of this vision feels so far away. May these words of Scripture act as a midwife offering sustenance to continue in your difficult labor: the dragon of injustice will be thrown down. If that feels like an impossible task, I can assure you that the birth of a child through our fragile broken bodies does as well, and yet God's power sustains us as we co-labor to bring it to bear.

Prayer

To the God who is with us in the waiting, may you provide us glimmers of hope in the hours we are most weary. May we remember the power we yield because it is you who fills us. Help us to use that power to contribute to the kingdom where the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things.

Gospel Readings

Matthew 1:1-17

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. 12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. 17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Jason Freyer '16

Admit it, you almost fell asleep reading this morning's Gospel lesson, didn't you? It is one of those sections of Scripture that at first glance seems boring beyond repair, a simple listing of names of folks who are long dead. But take a look again. This is no simple list. This is the record of the mishaps, shortcomings, false starts, and outsiders that make up the family tree of the Savior. We're reminded of the disappointing (Rehoboam) and the scandalous ("the wife of Uriah") and the just plain weird (Tamar) stories of Israel. But they are the stories of Christ's history all the same.

If you're like me, sometimes you want to run from the stories of your history. But as we creep ever closer to the celebration of God's incarnation in Christ, we are reminded that he brings all things under himself: the good, the bad, and the insanely weird.

Prayer

So Lord of Grace, help us today to recall our history. Help us remember that through it all you continue to be in us and allow us to live and move and have our being. And as we celebrate this Advent season, we look forward to your returning, to the fulfillment of your Kingdom. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Gregory Steible '14

So many names! If you were to list out your own family of origin back to so many great-grandparents, you'd have quite a history represented there, too. But this history is more than just family myth and personal origin story. Jesus' genealogy tells us more than how closely related he is to Martha Washington or Kevin Bacon. Jesus' genealogy shares the history of God's people. It starts with God's covenant with Abraham and the promise of a great nation and land, briskly jumps to God's covenant

with David and the promise of a united monarchy. It leaps in time to God's fulfilled promise of deliverance from Babylon and finally lands on God's new covenant in Christ.

Jesus' genealogy is one of God's promises fulfilled through moments and methods we would least expect. If you look carefully, you'll see some names associated with stories you know. Some of those stories are wild. And you'll see some broken people—people many of us might feel quite at home with, others we might feel scared to be around. And you'll also see names you may not recognize outside of their inclusion in this genealogy.

The story of God's covenant fidelity with God's people is a messy one, and yet continually God claims us as God's own. Despite, and often because of, our own faults, failings, and brokenness, God embraces us and pulls us into the bosom of the Lord. The strange and twisted family stories in this genealogy underline a key element of who God is and what makes the next few days so special. The holiday is about God coming to be with us even though, and especially because, we are messy. We are incomplete. But in Christ's coming, just like God's promises, we are made complete.

Prayer

Eternal God, we thank you for this moment in history, right now, today. We look on former generations and toward future eras, and we know that in all of time you will be glorified. Be glorified, as well, in our own lives through all that we do. In the name of the one who is to come, we pray. Amen.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, "which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Ryan Pixton '10

Advent is a time of preparation and reflection for the coming birth of our Savior. Many times, however, it seems like Advent is a stress filled and exceptionally busy time of the year. Everywhere you look, people are running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Many activities during Advent can become attempts to earn favor from others and God. These words from the Gospel of Matthew are truly good news to us. They remind us that Love comes down at Christmas. Our Savior is Emmanuel - God with us. Today we are reminded that we can sit at Jesus' feet and don't need to run around tirelessly trying to earn God's love. Like hearing that an angel appeared to your virgin wife who is now pregnant, Emmanuel gently reminds us that we can face any amount of craziness because God is with us now and to the end of the age.

Prayer

Dear God, Give me eyes to see where Jesus is working in my life and give me peace this Advent reassuring me that the Holy Spirit will always be with me no matter what. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Matthew 21:1-11

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Will Scott '12

Hidden behind Jesus' dramatic fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy is a more mundane miracle. Jesus tells the disciples exactly where to go, exactly what they will find, and exactly what needs to be done. Go to the village, find a donkey and a colt, and bring them to me. Having known Jesus long enough not to ask too many questions, the disciples go and do just that.

Jesus needs both the donkey and the colt to fulfill the prophecy. Does he need to ride both? Why two animals? Some speculate that Jesus sat on a cloak rigged between the two animals. Others do not venture a guess. The answer is irrelevant. The prophetic sign remains.

The minor miracle accompanies the great one, like a colt with a donkey, just as we anticipate the once and for all incarnation every year.

Prayer

Gracious God, give us eyes to see who we are in light of the one who is coming, even now. Amen.

Taylor Barner '16

HOSANNA! Hosanna in the highest! It is an event that is seared into our minds, an event etched on our hearts—the triumphal entry of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem. What a sight to behold! There were people lining the road, spreading their cloaks, welcoming this prophet from Nazareth like He's in the Macy's parade. And we remember this event with joyful praise and the waving of palm branches. But what of Christ? What does our Lord see before him? What does he feel? With such joy He is welcomed in, but amidst the praise and joy there is the somber knowledge of what is to come in the next few days. The poor carpenter's son, welcomed as a king, the One True King, come to die so that we may live. So come, spread your cloak upon the road and wave that palm branch. Shout hosanna! For the King has come!

Prayer

Triumphant Lord, we praise you with shouts of "Hosanna!" May our hearts receive you with loud thanksgiving. Forgive us, O God, and turn us back toward your Son, that we may spread our cloaks and prepare for his coming. In Christ's great name we pray this prayer and all the hidden prayers of our hearts. Amen.

Matthew 21:12-22

12 Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." 14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry 16 and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'" 17 He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. 18 In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. 19 And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. 20 When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" 21 Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. 22 Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

Steve Tuell, faculty emeritus

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus twice quotes from Scripture. While driving from the temple those who buy and sell, Jesus says, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer' [Isa. 56:7]; but you are making it a den of robbers [Jer. 7:11]" (Matt. 21:13). In contrast to those who would restrict worship to those able to pay, Jesus welcomes all comers, healing the sick and even accepting the happy songs of children. When criticized, he again quotes from Scripture: "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'" (Matt. 21:16; cf. Ps. 8:2). The first quotation places Jesus among the prophets; the second affirms him as God! In this Advent season, may we prepare for the coming of Christ's kingdom through true worship, joining our praises to the songs of children and of outcasts.

Prayer

Holy Lord, may your Spirit set our hearts ablaze with your prophetic zeal for justice. When we are tempted to act as gatekeepers and brokers, remind us that your presence is not a commodity that we control, but a power that transforms our lives and our world. *Maranatha*—Come Lord Jesus! Amen.

Matthew 21:23-32

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did

you not believe him?’ 26 But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” 28 “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29 He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Andrew Purves, faculty emeritus

“By what authority are you doing these things?” The question put to Jesus is ultimately concerning power and its proper exercise. In response to the challenge to Jesus’ authority put by the chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus poses a riddle concerning John the Baptist, which they cannot answer. Because they have been found duplicitous in their questioning, Jesus will not answer their question. In theology we put our questions to God. In doing so we try to probe into the mystery of God’s self-presentation, first to Israel, then in, through, and as Jesus of Nazareth. But we must do our questioning in a manner appropriate to our subject of enquiry. We bring our questions honestly and reverentially, even prayerfully. We bring our questions as expressions of faith, within the framework of grace, seeking to know God more faithfully. In such manner, then, our questions of God are open to God. When that happens we too will be surprised by joy when we discover that God speaks to us.

Prayer

Lord, may our questions be honest and open. May our ears be receptive to your Word. May our minds be conformed to your truth. And may our hearts be warmed by your presence. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Matthew 21:33-46

33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Heather McLaughlin Sigler '95

What a difficult reading for the first week of Advent! But stay with this text for a while and some interesting similarities come into focus. Today we, the present caretakers of God's vineyard, are planning for the annual arrival of the Owner's most holy Son. While not planning to do him harm, we busy ourselves with baking and shopping and decorating and, yes, even attending extra worship services. In our busyness, do we neglect to provide the proper welcome?

This seemingly terrible parable provides an opportunity to pause during Advent and consider the best ways in which to prepare for the arrival of the owner's Son. Perhaps a large dose of repentance should be added to the "to do" list this year.

I wonder . . . do our preparations really provide the best welcome possible? I wonder . . . how prepared are we to be stewards of God's bounty? I wonder . . . how many times do we subvert God's plan for the vineyard?

Note well: As we consider this parable, let us not allow the Jewish – Christian conflict of Matthew's long-ago community shape our understanding of this text. Jesus never condemns the whole Jewish people. Jesus himself was a Jew, albeit one who had some differences with the religious leadership of his day.

Prayer

Good and Gracious God, keep us mindful of our responsibilities as caretakers of your earthly vineyard. Guide our preparations during this Advent season that we may truly be prepared to welcome your Son and greet our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Balajiedlang (Bala) Khyllap, staff

As a person who comes from a family in India, I remember how our tenant for our rice fields would not only till the soil and inform my family about any issues with the land and harvest but also would share part of the harvest with us. There is so much trust needed between landowner and tenants, and both benefit from the process.

Instead, the landowner in our scripture did everything and leased the vineyard to the tenants to only to care for what was already planted. There is so much trust from the landowner here. The tenants seem to tend to the vineyard properly as they were supposed to do. But we are not quite sure about their reaction—beating up and killing the slaves and even the landowner's son. Were they scared that the landowner would find out about their failure to produce anything and lease the vineyard to someone else? Or, had they become corrupt, not wanting to share the plenteous harvest, and even deciding to take control and steal what didn't belong to them? Both of these questions point to the reality we witness today—the power of control.

In a power-driven world sometimes it is so difficult for us to trust one another because we are afraid of losing control of the things we love or own. So as humans, we do the best we possibly can—holding on tightly to the things we possess, afraid that if we loosen our grip we would somehow lose our power to control and influence others. Yet the landowner, who is God, willingly entrusts us with God's plentiful vineyard so we may fully enjoy God's abundance and be able to share with others. May you find joy in sharing God's hope, peace, and love with the world this season of Advent.

Prayer

Generous and self-sacrificing God, thank you for entrusting us with the many gifts and resources. Help us to be good stewards of these gifts so that we may not only enjoy the fruits for our gain but to willingly share with our brothers and sisters what belongs to you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Matthew 22:1-14

1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."

Joel Montgomery '13

The guest wasn't wearing a wedding garment. Doesn't it seem a bit harsh of the king, after extending this vast invitation? What if this person didn't have a wedding garment and just came as s/he was to the last-minute invitation? Is that fair?

Then we realize it's not about the clothes. Not really. The person didn't even try. S/He wasn't prepared and didn't appreciate the invitation s/he'd been given. The king could have provided a robe if s/he'd only asked, but the person just stood speechless.

As we celebrate the Advent season, we remember that we, too, have been invited and called. And that call is a serious one—it changes our very world. God calls us as we are, but also clothes us in Christ so that we, too, are made worthy through Christ to celebrate at the feast. Are you "dressed" this Advent?

Prayer

Emmanuel, God with us, you have invited us to your banquet. You have invited us in our ratty jeans and rag-man shirts to come and dine with you. Accept the offering we give of the tatters of ourselves, Lord, and re-clothe us in Christ that we who have been called may also be chosen. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

John Bower '00

When I was pastoring a church, one of the events my wife and I enjoyed hosting was our annual Christmas open house. It was a chance for us to welcome the church into our home for an evening of Christmas cheer and fellowship. It was always enjoyable and memorable, except for those times when it

had to be canceled due to inclement weather. There is nothing more disappointing than planning an event, then having to cancel it because no one can come.

That situation reminds me of this passage. In the parable, God, the great King, has prepared the most wonderful Kingdom (so joyful and bountiful it is compared to a wedding feast). God called the people of Israel to join the Kingdom and pledged to be their God, but they rejected the invitation, so God rejected them, punished them, and destroyed their city.

Then he sent his servants into the entire world to gather all the people he could find in the name of the Son. It is the universal call of the gospel to all people. Those who respond are gathered into the church, the visible representation of God's Kingdom on earth. Yet even as they gather, only those who are wearing wedding garments are given permission to stay and take part in the celebration—only those clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Any other righteousness or claim will not suffice.

How then do we attain this garment? This question brings us back to Christmas. God's own beloved Son was sent into the world to provide the garment of righteousness for us. He lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death on our behalf. He, though righteous, took our sin upon himself to pay the penalty for it on the cross, and he offers us his righteousness in return. All who place their trust in him receive this gift through faith. This is why Jesus' birth is good news of great joy—for we who were once alienated from God by sin are now welcomed to the Kingdom now and forever. Amen!

Prayer

Almighty and gracious God, thank you for creating us, for loving us, and for not leaving us lost and separated from you by our sin. Thank you, loving Father, for sending your own Son into this broken world in order to redeem us and bring us into your Kingdom. Give us all joyful, thankful, and loving hearts this Christmas season as we celebrate once again your saving work on our behalf in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Beth Creekpaum '10

For many who read this, we find ourselves reading from an American context. We have been given immense freedoms through our system of government, but often as a Church we have had trouble distinguishing between faith in God and patriotism. Often when we talk about missions, we worry about syncretism, the mixing of the Christian faith with local people's beliefs, but the American church is far from immune from the sin of its own patriotic syncretism.

In this story, the Pharisees are trying to set up a false dichotomy. They are trying to trick Jesus into renouncing the kingdom of Caesar to his detriment. But Jesus knew what they were up to. He also knew that although we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, we are also resident aliens in the places we call home here and now.

Jesus reminds us that we do owe things to our country. We do owe our respect. We do owe our money and resources. Maybe we owe our vote or our public service. But our heart? Our ultimate allegiance? Nope. These belong to God and God alone.

In this time of Advent, we remember not only that Jesus came, but that he will return. In the same way, we remember our earthly duty—but we cannot ever forget that our allegiance belongs to the Kingdom of God. Advent is a time of preparation for the return of Christ, so it is a good opportunity for self-examination. Does my heart belong to God alone? Is this reflected in the way I spend my time, my talent, and my treasure? And at the same time, do I respect the authority of the government (even those I disagree with)?

Do I honor God with the way I submit to God's lordship *and* earthly laws?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, may I always keep my eyes on you. May I receive my identity in the Kingdom of God. Where I need to remove allegiances or add earthly duty, help me O God. Forgive me and lead me on this Advent path with the promise of your return that will set all things right. Amen.

Matthew 22:34-46

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." 41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42 "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? 45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" 46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Heather Runser '14

Love. It is a simple word, and yet it is complex in its simplicity. As people of faith, and especially as persons who are called to serve in some kind of public ministry, we think we know how to love. Loving God appears to come as easily to us as breathing, and we have loving others down to a science. We pray with strangers, help the poor, feed the hungry, and visit those who are in prison. But how well do we love ourselves? How are we with self-care? What if we loved ourselves as we do our neighbors? How would that transform your ministry? Advent is often the busiest season, and it is easy to forget to love and take care of ourselves. Practice what you preach. Spend time in the Word and in prayer. Do something you love. Love yourself this season, and watch God transform you!

Prayer

Dear Lord, this Advent season is one of the most joyous and yet stressful times of the year. As we rush about getting everything ready for Christmas, let us not forget to prepare our hearts. Help us to keep our focus on you and not lose ourselves in the process. We ask all this in your precious, holy name. Amen.

Laura Strauss '09/'23

The greatest commandment and the commandment which compliments it function best in unity. Perhaps, we are tempted to believe that it is easy to love God. We study God's Word, gather for worship, and pray. However, we deceive ourselves when we believe that this alone demonstrates love. The love that our Lord requires found in the devotions listed above, and in the way we love those God has placed along our path. The frustrations of life lived in the midst of fallen humanity tempts the Christian to hide in the solace of God's embrace. Yet, the call upon the believer is to love God through moving from God's embrace into the messy confines of our called communities. This is more than Bible study, worship, and prayer. But with the Spirit at work in our devotions, we learn to love the difficult as a means to love God.

Prayer

Loving God, you have called us to love a world that is often challenging in our eyes. Soften our hearts toward your people that we may love them as you, in your mercy, have loved us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Matthew 23:1-12

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Elaine Loggi '13

Jesus has a pointed message in this passage for leaders who use their positions to gain recognition and self-glorification. If we're honest, we all find ourselves guilty of such actions at times. The busyness of this season can become a competition or an opportunity to bring attention to ourselves and our own efforts: Do I have the best cookies on the table? Can I find the perfect present in the midst of all the others he'll receive? Am I sure my house is cleaner than hers? How can I make my sermon more memorable than those others? My liturgy more creative? My devotional more thoughtful?

Jesus reminds us that we are called instead to use whatever spotlight or leadership role we find ourselves in to humbly point back to Christ, our only instructor and leader. In this season of watching, waiting, and hoping for Christ's coming that so often gets swallowed up in shopping, cooking, cleaning,

and preparing, Jesus' message reminds us of who we are and of the humility and resulting joy in which we are called to live, during this Advent season and always.

Prayer

Holy God, we give you thanks for this season of watching, waiting, and hoping, and the opportunity it gives us to turn back to you. Refocus our lives, so that all our words and deeds may always point to your great acts and your amazing love and bring glory to your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Allan Irizarry-Graves '17, Board member

All of us desire to be someone of great worth and value. We live in a day and age where people determine their value by the number of likes, views, retweets, and followers they can rack up. With the advent of social media, there are seemingly endless opportunities to create new paths toward what many would deem greatness. While some have experienced the thrill of going viral and getting to know first-hand how it feels to be "great," the reality is that most of us will never go viral or have millions of followers. Despite this truth, there is good news in this passage for all of us. We all can be great. But how do we get there? How do we become great? What must we do to experience greatness? The answer to the questions above is provided in verse 11 by Jesus when he says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." Before giving the key to greatness Jesus provides examples of what greatness is not. It is not in the seat that someone possesses. It is not the position that one may hold, nor is it how many people see what you do or who you are connected to. But rather, greatness is determined by service.

I love the way that Matthew shifts as he brings this passage to a close. In verses 7-10, he shifts from focusing on earthly positions that we hunger for to Jesus as the ultimate example of what we should seek and desire as followers of Christ. May we not only remember the example of Jesus who came to serve, and not to be served, but may we be moved to serve others in the same manner knowing that service we render to others supersedes any power, position, and prestige that we might possess in the eyes of God. As this is the case, I encourage you to serve, serve well, and remember the servants during this season of Advent. When people are consumed with stuff and things, may we focus on service.

Prayer

May the grace of God, the sweet communion of God's Holy Spirit, rest, rule, refresh, and reform, until we meet at Jesus' feet, the bishop of the church, the bishop of our souls. Go in peace, go in love, go and serve. May the Lord be with you. Amen.

Matthew 23:13-26

13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it;

21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it. 23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! 25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

Sue Washburn '12

Woe to you, blind guides! Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You blind fools! Jesus, the healer of so many blind people, is frustrated at the blindness he so clearly sees in the scribes and Pharisees—a blindness that is a willful act of not seeing rather than a physical impairment that prevents sight. The scribes and Pharisees are blind because they are focusing on the wrong things in their religious practice—the gold, the gifts, and the outside of the cup. The justice, mercy, and faith that should be clearly visible are hardly a noticeable blur in the background.

As Christmas approaches we spend a lot of time polishing the outside of our cups—mailing cards and invitations, decorating sanctuaries, and producing pageants. Meanwhile the sacred gift of Jesus Christ remains unnoticed in a remote corner. Too often, we exhaust ourselves with the lesser things and forget that which is greater. Perhaps this is the year to unwrap the gift of Christ’s justice, mercy, and faith first.

Prayer

Holy God, gives us clarity of vision this Advent and Christmas. Allow us to focus on the greater gift of Christ, your Word as flesh among us. Open our eyes so that we may see opportunities for justice, mercy, and faith during the holidays and every day. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Nancy Hammond, retired staff

The season of Advent is an extremely busy time within most families. The shopping, the wrapping, the decorating, the baking, the cooking, the cleaning can be overwhelming! For me, it’s easy to become totally consumed with making the house look “just right” before the friends and the family arrive to celebrate Christmas. I don’t know about you, but I am always glad that my Christmas guests will NOT be looking inside my closets and cupboards when they come to visit. Even though I make sure that the house is clean and nicely decorated, I don’t usually find the time or make it a priority to clean behind the closed doors of the cabinets! This passage from Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that our spiritual lives suffer from this same confusion. We focus on the exterior appearances in our own lives, in the lives of others, and in our preparations for Christmas, while neglecting the inside matters of the heart. We are surprised by these words from Matthew’s gospel: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.” Before we focus on the outside and the wrongs of others, we have to focus on the inside and clean our hearts for the Advent journey. My hope for this Christmas season is that we will make the time to attend to the “inside of the cup” and focus on the fruits of the Spirit which will lead to a Christmas season that is meaningful and joyful.

Prayer

Holy God, thank you for the time of preparation that Advent provides for us. Help us to focus our attention on the inside of the cup, preparing our hearts and lives once again for the blessing of Christ's birth. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

Matthew 23:27-39

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, 30 and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. 33 You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, 35 so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. 37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you, desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Dave Dack '11

"Woe to you!" Jesus says. It seems an odd text for Advent. As church choirs begin to sing *Joy To the World*, the second half of the Advent season begins with Jesus shouting, "Woe to the Pharisees! Woe to the religiously serious!"

Pharisees were wonderful people, but they had forgotten how to wait expectantly on God. Maybe like the Pharisees it has been so long since you felt God's presence in your life that you have settled for religion instead of hope. You have taken the ancient biblical promises that you learned in Sunday school and buried them in tombs carefully decorated with your religious trophies. But no matter how beautifully you decorate a tomb, you will never find life there.

In bursts Jesus with shouts that call us out of our dark tombs and into the marvelous light of Immanuel, God with us, who resurrects the hopes and fears of all the years that have gone unmet for so long. This is Advent, when Christ shall come to gather his children at last.

Prayer

Lord, invade our tombs and wash our souls clean. Cast out our fear with your perfect love, so that along with the prophets of old we can once again pray the Advent prayer, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Amen.

Matthew 24:1-14, 32-44

1 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. 9 "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10 Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. . . . 32 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 34 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

William J. Carl III, McMillan Society member and former president

What do fig trees, Noah and the ark, two working in a field, two women grinding meal, and Christmas have in common? In every case, nature and human beings are anticipating something very important and good that is about to happen, but we don't know when. So we watch and wait the way children wait anxiously for Christmas to come.

The people of God had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah, and then he appeared in surprising ways that no one expected. He arrived in a manger instead of a gilded cradle. He rode a donkey instead of a warrior's steed. He mounted a cross instead of a chariot. He beat the grave in order to save. That's what we waited for, and it was worth the wait—well worth it! It's what we wait for every Advent—but we need to stay awake because he keeps appearing every day when we least expect it. Here is Jesus in a person we've never listened to before whose story moves us to tears because this time we actually paid attention to what she was saying. Here is Jesus in an unexpected kindness that came out of the blue. Here is Jesus helping us overcome temptations we've never been able to withstand before. Here is Jesus reminding us that we don't have to try so hard because we really are loved and need to remember this truth.

Unlike like a thief, however, Jesus arrives in the night *positively*. What Jesus steals away are our fears and our worries, and in so doing he gives us new life. So be alert this Advent for the coming of Jesus into our world and into your life. Be prepared to be surprised yet again by the glorious gift of Christmas!

Prayer

Holy God, we lay our lives before you now. We turn off our mobile phones and tablets and give our attention to you totally this Advent season. Surprise us again with unanticipated wonder so we can be awakened to a new and abundant life. We close our eyes to the things that draw us away from you and open them to the joys you share with us each day in small and unassuming ways. We listen with anticipation for your wake-up call, ready to love and serve you with every fiber of our being. All these things we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Carolyn Cranston '99, staff

During the season of Advent, we often become distracted by the preparations for Christmas Day. Shopping, Christmas cards, baking, parties; the list is long and the time is short. There is little time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child, let alone the Second Coming. We put off prayer, meditation and the reading of Scripture because there is always tomorrow. Or, is there? We have no idea when Christ will return to gather his own, yet we live as though we have all the tomorrows in the world. Biblical witness makes it clear that the Son of Man will return to judge the world by the way we have treated those in need, the most vulnerable among us. God expects us to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial love and obedience, upholding Christian standards. Don't wait until tomorrow; it may never come. Stay alert, watch, and be prepared!

Prayer

Holy and most merciful God, remove from our path anything that would distract or separate us from you. Fill us with your Holy Spirit and guide us to love our neighbor, recognizing you in our midst. Help us to stay awake, to watch, and to prepare ourselves – body, mind, and soul - for your coming. In the name of Jesus the Christ we pray, Amen.

LaNita Butler '14

At first glance, this pericope previews an end-times, apocalyptic world ripe for judgment. Similarly, our world today appears to be plagued with moral degradation, injustice, and waning reverence for God and neighbor. Yet there is "hope." Hope happens when believers stand amid chaos and insert God's possibility. Here in Matthew, Jesus makes the remedy to desolation available to us:

1. Beware, don't fear, don't waver . . .
2. "And this *good news of the kingdom* will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a 'testimony' to all the nations; and then the end will come" (v. 14).

A testimony is a firsthand authentication of a fact—the evidence, the outward sign, the witness of what the "power of God" can do and has done to transform our lives and circumstances.

It is God who heals, delivers, transforms, restores, and makes free. He is The Way, The Truth and The Life! He gives wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and direction. "*Anyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord – *will be saved*" (Acts 2:21). "So, if *anyone* is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Hope in chaos—The Good News!

Prayer

God of all nations, you overflow with love, mercy, and grace. You are the source of life, light, and all that is good and true. You have already told us what is good in your sight: To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Lord, recapture our hearts, indulge yourself in our lives, and by your Holy Spirit help us put into action all that you have instructed. Amen.

Lawrence James Lalama '93

During the liturgical season of Advent, we are encouraged to reflect on a multitude of themes: anticipation and expectancy; preparation and readiness; hope and peace; joy and love. These themes inform and infuse both our spiritual and physical practices in the days leading up to the celebration of the first coming of Jesus Christ.

Another theme which is brought into the light of our self-examination, yet is lesser welcomed into our Advent devotional praxes, is that of Jesus' so-called "second coming," the apocalyptic aspect of Advent. Generally, the first Sunday of Advent invites us to consider this *parousia* of Jesus which will mark the end of the age his first coming ushered in. The gospel lesson today from Matthew features Jesus speaking to his disciples of this very thing.

In the passage, Jesus is leaving the temple courts following a very contentious encounter with the religious leaders. His recent triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his populous support have greatly intensified their opposition to his mission. On the heels of his woeful indictments leveled against the scribes and Pharisees and his passionate lament over Jerusalem, the disciples can only marvel at the scope and grandeur of the temple, encouraging Jesus to do the same. His reaction is sharp and instructive.

In a private moment later, outside the walls of the city and out of the temple's shadow, the disciples need to know more. Their questions of when the temple's destruction would come to pass compel Jesus' sober assessment of the period between his first and second appearances. The very themes we incorporate into our Advent preparation and practice are fundamental to Jesus' discourse and parables, both in this passage and beyond: anticipation of his return; expectancy and joy of his appearance in power and great glory in the midst of the world's chaos; hope of being found in a state of readiness, esteemed trustworthy, and ultimately rewarded for good and faithful servanthood and love to others.

So this multitude of themes bridge the gap, in a manner of speaking, between the already and not yet; between the first and second comings of Jesus. Jesus, however, offers no false expectation that this time between would be a time of ease and casual observation. Rather, it would be a time marked by tribulation, trial, opposition, deception, hatred, sacrifice, and endurance, the very things with which Jesus was confronted in his incarnated life. And these are the very things we face in the life of our incarnated communities of faith in the midst of this, our 2021 Advent journey.

So perhaps this season we might offer a greater welcome to Advent's apocalyptic aspect. It calls us to less fascination with the worldly glitz and glitter and to more sober reflection upon spiritual preparation and readiness for the not-yet second advent of Jesus Christ, which will usher in a new and glorious age. In this waiting time, Jesus counsels us to not be alarmed, but to be expectant; not to be anxious, but to be steady; not to be foolishly led astray, but to be wisely discerning the times, all the while praying for endurance and confident that the good news of the Kingdom, now proclaimed, will be all in all.

In that spirit, we add to the proclamation, *“Come, Lord Jesus!”*

Prayer

Lord our God, help us to be faithful in our preparation, honest in our assessments, wise in our judgment, zealous in our service, and confident in the promise of Jesus’ return in power and glory. Help us to cast our vision forward and upward to that day when all is fulfilled in your new heaven and earth. This we pray in the name of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate and whose return we anticipate. Amen.

Patrice Fowler-Searcy ’13, Board member

I have had the privilege of traveling to many countries and I love doing so. One of the places I had the opportunity to visit and will always cherish was my time in Israel and specifically, the time I spent in Jerusalem. The experience of visiting many of the places Jesus walked, prayed, taught, was crucified, and resurrected from the dead, was life changing. I remember walking up the winding road to the Mount of Olives, and passing by a man with his donkey. That experience felt like I had been transported back to biblical times. Standing on the Mount of Olives, the place where, according to Luke 22:29, Jesus went to pray, to pour his heart out to God, was a surreal and sacred experience.

After reading today’s devotional passage, I closed my eyes and began to reminisce about some of the things I saw while standing on the Mount of Olives. I remember the opulence and majesty of the Temple Mount; I remember the perfect imperfection of the centuries-old walls surrounding the Old City; and I remember being overwhelmed and comforted as I walked into the Chapel of the Ascension, and the Spirit of God enveloped and surrounded me. Truly, the presence of the Lord was in that place and on that mountain.

As my attention returns to today’s devotional scripture passage, I am not surprised by the disciples’ curiosity about when the end time will come. Although this is a familiar passage, my spirit is troubled by the fact that many of the events Jesus described as foreshadowing the end of days—false prophets, people betraying and hating one another, falling away (from the church), increasing lawlessness, love growing cold, wars and rumors of wars—all of these signs are evident as I write.

Jesus speaks of these end-time signs and that his return is at hand, and he also shared the good news: the kingdom of God will be proclaimed throughout the world. That’s the message of Advent. Even though life as we know it is and can be unsure, unsettling, and tenuous, as we wait for the next moment, day, month, or year, we are not without hope because we have the assurance that God is with us and will come again. So, we wait with expectation, surrounded by the Holy Spirit, much like I was while in Jerusalem, with the comfort, peace, and faithful promises of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Faithful and gracious, God, we place all of our hope and trust in you as we move, breathe, and have our very being, for you have promised that despite everything that life may present, you are with us, and the kingdom of God shall be proclaimed. Today, we proclaim boldly, in and through Jesus Christ, that you have overcome all of the uncertainty, sin, and calamities of this world. Amen.

Luke 1:1-25

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. 5 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. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. 8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 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. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 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. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 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." 18 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." 19 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. 20 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." 21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 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. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "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."

Andrew Pomerville '18

"... so that you may know the truth ..."

As a father to pre-teens, I find myself explaining things more than I would like. I used to get away with guiding the children to do, say, or be a certain way, and they trusted my motivation, expertise, and general parental vibe to put them on the right path. Somewhere along the way, my son and daughter lost that naïve ability to accept and now need an explanation.

I can't really blame them. This is what their mother and I have wanted all along. We hope and pray our children will grow into thoughtful, considerate, compassionate individuals who will ask questions as they strive to become the adults God has called them to be. The problem is knowing how to share all that they might need to understand, believe, and become. How do I impart a lifetime of experiences that have influenced my faith, hope, and love? The task is daunting but it is oh so rewarding.

The author of Luke/Acts sets out on a similar journey—one of wanting the reader to believe in the truth of Jesus. And so, in a decent and orderly way, the author puts pen to paper and creates an account of

Jesus that is meant to help the reader grow in faith, just as he/she experiences God anew and afresh with each morning.

Let us think this Advent about how we share what we know about Jesus Christ. What stories, experiences, and moments are necessary for another to hear so that they might have a similar theophany with our Lord? Share your worries, wonder, and doubts as much as you offer your trust, hope, and faith. And in sharing the message, see the story unfold anew.

Prayer

Gracious and ever creating God, help us partner with you in the creative storytelling that helps us grow, learn, and love through your Holy Spirit. Open our minds to find new ways to live in the narrative of your life, death, resurrection and ascension as we further become the members of your Kingdom that you have created us to be. Amen.

Dan Frayer-Griggs '08, staff

Compared with many other species, newborn humans are remarkably immobile and dependent. While the offspring of giraffes and antelopes, ducks and geese are precocial, meaning they can stand and walk very soon after they're birthed or hatched, we're born without the capacity to do much besides nurse, cry, and make messes. We may crawl at around nine months and walk at around twelve, but it's several years before we can feed and fend for ourselves. We are, in a word, vulnerable.

It's striking, then, that Luke moves so swiftly from situating his narrative in "the days of King Herod of Judea" (v. 5)—a monarch notorious for having his own wife and three sons murdered because he perceived them as threats to his power—to recounting the promise of the birth of John, a frail and helpless infant born to elderly parents. The good news that Gabriel brings to Zechariah counters the oppressive powers that be, not with a display of strength but with the promise of a vulnerable child.

It seems that children's ability to so radically turn their parents' lives upside down has much to do with their vulnerability. If children were born fully capable and independent, those who love them wouldn't drastically rearrange their lives. We receive and care for them because of, not in spite of, their vulnerability and need.

This is how John the Baptist comes into the world in Luke's Gospel—not initially as a fiery prophet of judgment, but as a weak and helpless child who turns Elizabeth and Zechariah's lives upside down. And so it is with Jesus, who comes to us in his vulnerability to meet us in ours. In this time of Advent, let us wait with open and attentive hearts, listening for the still, small voice of the God revealed in the self-emptying love of Jesus, and let us be transformed by that love.

Prayer

Compassionate God, teach us to be imitators of Jesus, not clinging to status or ambition, but opening ourselves to vulnerable

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do

not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 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.

Dave Keys, staff

God makes the impossible, possible. A young virgin woman, Mary, pledged to be married, is about to get a message from an unlikely source that she will literally bring the good news into the world. Mary questions Gabriel about God’s message, indicating that she is struggling to make sense of what God has planned for her life. The angel’s words, “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” make no sense in this young woman’s mind. Mary finally lets go and trusts God to make the impossible, possible. Then Mary says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary’s YES changed the world, not only because of the son she bore, but because of the example she sets for Christians everywhere. Saying YES when God’s plan sounds crazy is, indeed, the foundation of faith. In this season of profound love, take time to say YES to God’s plan for you.

Prayer

This Advent season, as the world continues to prepare for Jesus’ birth, let all believers, like Mary, be open to God’s invitation, be brave enough to question and struggle, and be faithful enough to say YES to all that is possible in God. Amen.

Elizabeth Baisley, staff

In my house hangs a tiny reproduction of a wood-and-ivory retablo that depicts the annunciation. The work of an anonymous artist of the late Middle Ages, it shows an angel in whose left hand is a lamp, and whose right hand, in a gesture of blessing, indicates the ground upon which he stands. He faces the Virgin Mary, in whose left hand is a book—the Word of God; the open palm of whose right hand indicates the same ground. Above her haloed head is a bolt-from-the-heavens: the Spirit, poised to enter into the world. Mary’s facial expression is (to me, surprisingly) neutral.

In Luke’s account of this event, Mary is described as perplexed, pondering the angel’s greeting (“favored one!”). The angel responds with the news that God has chosen her to bear His son. Mary, no stranger to basic biology, asks for an explanation, and gets a whopper.

Both Luke and my anonymous artist have captured something extraordinarily powerful: a liminal, human moment, a moment of wonder, similar to what T.S. Eliot ponders in his poem, *Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*: “Do I dare disturb the universe? In a minute there is time / for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.” This moment is about possibility, rather than probability. We teeter on the edge of the world as we know it and the world as it could be.

Mary’s astonishing words of assent to this announcement—“Let it be with me as you have said”—make possible all that comes after. They bring long-promised hope, wisdom, and justice crashing into the

world. I look at my tiny icon and wonder how this woman is even standing up, but stand she does, in faith and love.

Prayer

God of power and mercy, we wait in joyful hope on the verge of the possible. Grant that we may hear your voice and give us the humility to do our part in the coming of your kingdom, in the company of all your saints and in the name of your son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. Amen.

Luke 1:39-56

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Alan Olson '14

Advent is a time of watching and waiting. It is about patience and it is about the hope for something new. It is winter. The crops have all been harvested and there is no work to be done, all we can do is wait for a new season.

In this passage, we meet Mary and Elizabeth. Both are pregnant; both are filled with joy. Their pregnancies are visible signs of hope—everyone knows that something new is coming, but nobody knows exactly what that something will be. Mary and Elizabeth don't know what God is up to. Mary doesn't know that she is carrying the Word of God in her womb. She knows that God has been faithful and will continue to be faithful.

And God will continue to be faithful to us! No, church doesn't look like it used to look. There are fewer people in the pews. There aren't as many young people. But God is faithful and God isn't done with us. In this season of waiting, be patient and look for what God is doing in your church and in your life. Like Mary, we don't know what's coming next. Let us approach the new season with hope and joy!

Prayer

Eternal God, we know that you have always been faithful to us. We know that you will always be faithful to us. Your love is from everlasting to everlasting. You are the alpha and the omega. Help us to remember your faithfulness during this time of waiting. Help us to live into the hope and the joy of Mary and Elizabeth. Thanks be to God. Amen!

Donna Giver-Johnston, faculty

This is a favorite passage of Scripture. It captures a tender moment filled with genuine surprise, prophetic words, and jubilant joy! Mary's powerful words are commonly called the *Magnificat*, Latin for "magnify."

Mary extols the mighty one for the great things done for her.

Mary esteems God's holy name for showing mercy from generation to generation.

Mary exalts God for showing strength: God brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things; came to the aid of those in need.

Mary glorifies God with what has become known as a song of power, promise, and praise.

For what better way to magnify God's holy name?

Songs are powerful! They join us to those around us, connect us with a purpose larger than ourselves in protesting evil, proclaiming good news, and promising peace on earth.

Songs are powerful! When we sing Christmas carols, it seems that all things are possible, even the Word to become flesh and live among us.

As a pastor, a great joy of the Christmas season is to lead worship services in nursing homes. I remember once being assigned to the Alzheimer's floor, warned by the nurses that I would likely not get any response. But in December, hope springs eternal; and so I said, "Good afternoon." No response. I read Scripture. A woman raised her hand and called out, "Charlie took me to dinner." I smiled. I started the Lord's Prayer. Silence. Then, I did something crazy. I said, "Let's sing a Christmas carol: *Joy to the World, the Lord is come.*" I started singing alone. But, then I heard a voice join in, "Let earth receive her king." Then another voice sang out loud, "Let every heart prepare him room." I heard a woman cry out, "I love this song." It was as if a choir was singing together, "And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and heaven and nature sing."

In that tender moment, it sounded to me like a *Magnificat*, as if heaven and nature were singing together with power and promise and praise.

Prayer

Let us pray: Holy God, with Mary, our souls magnify you. We extol, esteem, and exalt your holy name. Our spirits rejoice in your power and mercy. We glorify you for your love born unto us in Jesus, for us and for our salvation. We join our voices with heaven and nature in singing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come!" Amen.

Luke 1:57-68

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his

mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him. 67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

Clint Cottrell '00

Not unlike parents naming a baby today, Elizabeth and Zechariah were being pressured to name their eight-day-old son by the convention of the time, preferably by using Zechariah as the child's name. When Elizabeth used the name "John," there was immediate resistance—so much so that others were confused and turned to the mute father, who scribbled out the name "John" on a tablet (and who mysteriously regained his speech). No one in the family was named John—this just wasn't done!

But both Elizabeth and Zechariah knew the reason for naming the child "John": they were honoring what the angel Gabriel had declared (see Luke 1:13). In fact, Elizabeth and Zechariah honored the will of God, and clearly the aged couple were blessed. It was *others* who were filled with fear at what had happened, while still more were talking about what had occurred that day.

We are but a few days from the day we memorialize and celebrate the birth of Jesus. How much of our preparation for Christmas is about what the world expects? Parties, gifts, and even preparation for Christmas Eve worship can be all-encompassing in our lives. What is God calling us to do that goes against conventional wisdom? What can we learn from the example of Elizabeth and Zechariah? How are *our* actions giving others reasons to talk about the miracles of God this Advent season?

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Against all conventional wisdom, you granted them a child and much more. Help us in the final days of Advent to see how you, through us, are breaking conventions in the world today. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Nancy Lowmaster '11

The Gospel writer reports that when Elizabeth gave birth, the villagers—family and neighbors alike—rejoiced. A delivery safe for both mother and child was not guaranteed, so a celebration was indeed warranted. And Elizabeth and Zechariah were each well beyond the time in life when babies are usually conceived. This miraculous child was special cause for joy.

The people assumed that this baby boy would be named "Zechariah," like his father. Take a moment to be a little surprised at that assumption: of course—"Zechariah" was the name of the infant's father. It is a name with deep Hebrew roots—it means "the LORD has remembered."

But "Zechariah" is a name that casts its eyes backward—toward what *has been*. God, however, was looking forward. Listen again to Gabriel's announcement to this baby's father inside the incense-filled Holy of Holies: "You *will* have a son," "he *will* be great," "he *will* be filled with the Holy Spirit," "he *will* turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God," "he will . . .," "he will . . ." Would these villagers who gathered to celebrate fully recognize and eagerly embrace the new thing that God was doing (see Isa. 43:18-19)? Do we?

“John” is the name that God has pre-selected for this child. “John” is a name that lives in the present and looks forward into the future—it means, “the LORD is gracious.” And it is this John—himself a product of a miracle—who would proclaim the wonder of God’s new, loving act of salvation as he points to Christ Jesus, God-with-us.

Prayer

God of all-powerful love, grant us the grace both to remember your blessings of the past with thanks and to anticipate eagerly the new ways you are working in us and in creation this day. Grow our trust in you, so that we can confidently, peacefully, and joyfully rest in your care. Through Christ Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray. Amen.

Anna Parkinson '07

While long desired, Elizabeth’s pregnancy seems to have been a bit much for Zechariah to embrace. Fortunately, he had nine months to try to wrap his head around the miracle of a son being born in his old age. It seems that is how our lives unfold. We trust God to provide for us and that the Holy Spirit will help us discern God’s will. Yet, it can be shocking to get a glimpse of what God is up to, and perhaps challenging to embrace the strange ways in which God provides.

Just as the nine months of pregnancy allow us to wrap our heads around the idea of a new baby, the four weeks of Advent give us time to, once again, prepare for the spectacular gift of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. What gifts might God be calling you to name and embrace in this season?

Prayer

Generous and gracious God, help us in this season to embrace the incredible nature of your gifts. Restore in us the sense of shock and awe as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Draw our minds to the seemingly ridiculous ways you are at work in our lives, and help us to name them. Amen.

Luke 21:5-19

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 “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.” 7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” 8 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.” 9 “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.” 10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 12 “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. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13, Board member

I write this devotional on a beautiful mid-October day. The season is obviously changing as we experience shorter day light, chilly nights, cool mornings, and sunny or rainy afternoons. In the marketplace, the aisles of Halloween items are all but depleted, Thanksgiving supplies are on display, and Christmas decorations and paraphernalia are being placed on the shelves. These are the world's signs that Christmas is on the way.

Most are not ready to rush into Christmas celebrations, gift buying, and overindulgence; for Christmas is much more than the worldly signs, conspicuous consumption. This season is a time of expectant anticipation and preparation for the coming Messiah, Emmanuel, Prince of Peace, Comforter, and King. In the Luke passage discussion of the signs of the time, Jesus shares when we experience or hear of nations against nations, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, and plagues, these do not denote the end is at hand. Instead, these signs provide opportunities for believers to testify to all they have experienced, and to witness to the kingdom of God being among us.

The Advent signs of the season are: darkness cannot overcome light, poverty cannot overcome provision, ignorance cannot overcome wisdom, sadness cannot overcome joy, and hopelessness cannot overcome the hope we have received in Christ Jesus, who is and is to come.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, as we continue in this time of Advent, we pray for a faith that does not require signs of the time, but a faith that rest in the assurance that God's Son has come that we might live this day as the called of God; witnessing to God's goodness, grace and mercy manifest in the gift of God's son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 3:16-21

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. 17 "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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 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."

Jason Clapper '11

Some claim to find tension in the views of God that are portrayed in the Old Testament versus the New Testament, but our passages today reminds us that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Hebrews 13:8). God is and always has been a God of grace. In the passage in Genesis, Adam and Eve have just sinned against God. It is clear that God is not happy. Yet, when we look deeper, we find a glimpse of the grace of Jesus Christ. Despite dispensing judgment, God also offers a promise. His final words to his people are not a no, but a yes: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." Some have called this verse the "*protoevangelium*" or "The first Gospel," a promise of Jesus who is to come. When we are faced with our own sin in the light of God's righteousness, let us remember that God walked with us in the cool of the garden, witnessing to the incarnate Jesus, the baby that we are awaiting this Advent season, who came to walk among us once again.

Prayer

God of the garden, You are the same yesterday, today, and forever; You have created us to be with you. Thank you for your grace which makes this possible despite ourselves. Amen.

Alina Kanaski '16

Jesus was sent into the world—not just sent, but born, born into a human body to save humanity. The eternal light, the Word, was born into flesh. We celebrate that miracle even as we mourn what we know is coming. Death comes out of life, life of death. A circle, broken by Jesus' death and resurrection—a break started by a simple moment where a mother looked down at her newborn son.

Her newborn son—the light of the world. The promised Messiah. Light come to drive out darkness, and all for love. A love greater than a mother's for her child, greater than a husband's for his wife, or a wife's for her husband, greater than their love of their God in whom they placed their faith by agreeing to be together despite it all. A love greater than we can imagine and greater than we can comprehend. A love that encompasses the whole world.

That is what this child is born out of. That is the kind of love that Jesus is, the kind of love that drives out darkness and the kind of love that wants to save far more than it wants to condemn. It is the kind of love that leads to total sacrifice.

Prayer

God of light, we bask in Your light and Your love this Advent, reminded of the manifestation of Your love. Give us the courage to come into the light and believe in the name of Your son. Amen.

John 3:31-36

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

Dave Dack '11

I've heard it said that cooking is an art and baking is a science—which is probably why I prefer baking. When a baking recipe calls for a cup of flour, *it calls for a cup of flour*. The precision is comforting. It's a delicious version of paint-by-numbers. Cooking, on the other hand, leaves more room for improvisation. You can add a "splash" of this or a "dash" of that. My brain struggles with such blatant ambiguity. *How can you add ingredients without measuring?!*

Christmas has been harder for us to measure in the age of COVID-19. Usually we can prepare our gift-giving, family gatherings, and religious rituals with precision, but not during a pandemic. Planning Christmas has been harder, and we may not have the usual indicators by which to measure how "successful" it was.

But perhaps there is some grace in that. Perhaps the absence of a carefully measured Christmas recipe will let us peer more deeply into the holiday's holiness. And who better to help us peer more deeply

than John? In our passage, the evangelist carefully invites us into the full meaning of the incarnation: *the incarnation is not only the gift of Jesus, but the gift of God's entire triune life*. In John 3, Jesus is shown to be the *Spirit-giving Son* whom the *Father* loves. The incarnation is thoroughly Trinitarian, which makes possible our adoption into the triune life of God.

No wonder John says that the Son "gives the Spirit without measure." This gift of grace cannot be quantified. The steadfast love of the triune God cannot be measured, and it is precisely its immeasurability that makes it such good news.

Prayer

O generous God, you have given us access, by faith in Christ, into your extravagant grace. You have made us one with your beloved Son and heirs of your eternal life. Forgive our efforts to measure your grace, thereby containing it and making it small. By your Spirit, enlarge our hearts and give us the capacity to serve you with joyful obedience for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.

John 5:30-47

30 "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. 31 If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. 32 There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. 33 You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. 34 Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 36 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. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. 39 You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. 40 Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. 41 I do not accept glory from human beings. 42 But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. 43 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. 44 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? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. 46 If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. 47 But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

Don Dawson, retired staff

At least in recent history, presidents of the U.S.A., in order to establish their own agendas, claim that they have authority by virtue of their office to take certain actions. The courts are regularly asked to rule whether or not they actually have such authority on the basis of the law of our nation, the Constitution.

This way is so very different from Jesus'. He never argued for authority for himself. In fact, he said that if he had to assert his own authority, he should not be trusted. To those who challenged his authority to judge life and death, he simply pointed to two gauges of authority. First, what do his actions show, as declared in the testimony of those who can be trusted as messengers of truth? Here Jesus was referring to what John the Baptist said about him and to the testimony of people such as the paralytic whom he healed. Second, what is the testimony of the "constitution," in other words for Jesus' audience, the Law of Moses?

We should always be cautious of those who come beating their own drums and claiming power and truth for themselves. Power is given only by the Lord God Almighty, who has entrusted it to the only Son as both Savior and Judge. In Jesus only is eternal life.

Prayer

Ruler of the universe, thank you for sending your Son as the Arbitrator of all things. Bring all people to bow before him as the Giver of mercy and the only One in whom salvation can be found. In the name of our Savior, Jesus, amen.

Readings from Faculty-authored Publications

A reading from “A Meditation on Matthew 2:1-12,” by Martha Robbins, faculty emerita

So often we think of having a Christian faith as having a set of beliefs or truths given to us by Scripture which guide our lives as Christians. We forget that faith is also a journey encompassing moments of rupture, transition, insight or revelation, and repatterning. The inbreaking of God in our lives through events and persons, as well as in worship, sometimes dislodges us from our familiar ways of seeing things and our habitual ways of responding to others and to God. Such events may be occasioned by a joyful or painful disruption of the ways our lives have been organized, such as a birth of a child, or a separation from loved ones through divorce, death, or geographic relocation (events which disrupt our daily routines, our economic responsibilities, our way of organizing our futures). There is yet another way in which our lives may be disrupted. We may one day glimpse a star on the horizon and have a moment of truth when the deep inner stirrings of our beings are moved by a glimmer of the “more” of what we can be. The promise of God forever calls us to “more being.” Often these insights, intuitions, rumblings, awakened in us by the Holy Spirit, mediated through certain events (personal, social or historical), come when we least expect them. They may even come when it feels downright inconvenient to us.

Prayer

Holy God, in this Advent season, we pray that we would be open to your interruption in our lives. Awaken us with your Holy Spirit. Surprise us with your presence. Wake us up to the new life and new opportunities that you place in our paths – sometimes found in joy and sometimes found in challenge. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

A reading from page 5 of *After Baptism*, by John Burgess, faculty

Every time the church baptizes a baby, it testifies to a God who knows how to bring life out of death, strength out of weakness, and something out of nothing: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:10) Like Israel and the first followers of Christ, we too would be nothing, a people without a name, home, or identity, had not God bestowed a new life and a new identity on us. We do not first have to create an identity and ask God to approve it, nor do we have to earn an identity and ask God to deliver it to us as our just wages. In Jesus Christ, God has already placed his seal of approval on us, before we could do anything about it. From the beginning, God has known us better than we will ever know ourselves: “It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13). God has claimed us and identified us as his own.

Prayer

Gracious God, we rejoice when you come to us. We give you thanks, Emmanuel, for loving us and choosing us. May we find mercy in the living of our days and courage for following you. As we are loved, so let us love one another, in this season and always. Amen.

A reading from pages 74-75 of *Ecstasy and Intimacy: When the Holy Spirit Meets the Human Spirit*, by Edith Humphrey, faculty emerita

In the light of what God has done in Christ, there is no need for us to go far afield to find ultimate reality. We need neither to ascend to the realms of heaven nor trek down to the abyss (Romans 10:5-7), nor need we search feverishly for methods, spiritual techniques, and unseen power. For this One who is the very active Word of God is near us; indeed he has visited us, has plunged into the matter of this world,

rescued us from the darkest regions, and now dwells intimately with us through the Spirit. It is due to his questing, his agony, and his victory that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13). Faith, then, does not mean believing “in spite of the evidence.” Faith is not a human accomplishment or work. Human trust, or faith, simply responds to the faithful work of the God who creates out of nothing, and gives life to the dead. Our confidence in God responds to this story of all stories, and so can stand the test, during trial, and during times of suffering when the end cannot yet be seen; yet that faith is not “blind” nor “mindless,” but has a God-given grounding in history, in God’s actions for Israel and the world, as well as in a Person, in the character of the creating and resurrecting Lord of all.

Prayer

Wonderful God, in you we find our confidence and hope. In this advent season we thank you that you have plunged into our world and you now dwell among us through the Spirit. Only through you do we find joy even in the midst of suffering, and faith in the dark night. Rejoice! Emmanuel! Alleluia! Amen.

A reading from page 33 of *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times*, by Andrew Purves and Charles Partee, faculty emeriti

Many people think that being Christian and being religious are the same thing. According to them religion is the general category and Christianity is a specific example of it. This outlook would be accurate if religion were correctly defined as the human effort to encounter God and Christianity were understood as one of the possible manifestations of that quest, a particular illustration of the genus “religion.” At many levels Christianity does look and act like a religion, but in its essential reality the Christian faith is not a human effort to encounter God. Rather the Christian faith is the result of God’s effort revealed in Jesus Christ to encounter the human.

Prayer

Gracious and Loving God, we give you thanks for this season of the year. We thank you for the time over these past days spent with family and friends. Most of all we thank you for Jesus Christ, who doesn’t wait for us to find him, but rather encounters us so that we might know you. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

A reading from page 248 of the *New International Biblical Commentary on Ezekiel*, by Steven Tuell, faculty emeritus

*In nineteenth century Europe, when optimism about human nature and ability was at its height, scholars such as Ernest Renan produced biographies of Jesus as a champion of moral progress. The kingdom of God about which Jesus had preached was thought to be just around the corner, the inevitable result of human advancement. But in 1863, the same year that Renan’s *Vie de Jesus* (*Life of Jesus*) was published in France, fifty thousand men died at the battle of Gettysburg. The American Civil War, still the bloodiest conflict in the history of the United States, demonstrated that human ingenuity and technological progress could lead to heightened savagery rather than to peace and enlightenment. Then, at the dawn of the twentieth century, World War I shattered the last vestiges of that naïve optimism. Today, looking back over the century now past, we see it as a century of genocide: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Darfur— the roll call of mass death and destruction goes on and on, a brutal and final rebuke to the shallow, optimistic trust in human progress. But does that mean that the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed is a hollow dream? Surely the problem lies rather in our forgetting that*

it is God's kingdom, nor ours. We cannot, by our own willing and doing, accomplish God's dream of justice and peace. But the point, for Jesus or for Ezekiel, is not surrender to quietism. One is able to act in the world because of the confidence that, ultimately, the victory belongs to the Lord. So Ezekiel can at the same time call upon his community to repent and affirm that God's deliverance is not dependent upon their repentance. He can refer to the new heart and new spirit as both gift (11:19; 36:26) and goal (18:31). This inescapable, irreducible paradox is a common feature of the life of faith.

Prayer

O Holy God, this advent season reminds us that we live in uncertain times. Help us to greet each new day and labor on, always faithfully waiting for your challenge and guidance. Create new hearts in us, that we might worship and serve Christ with our whole lives. Amen.

A reading from pages 19-20 of *Journey through the Word: Exploring Biblical Themes*, by James Davison '69, retired adjunct faculty, and Sara Covin Juengst

It is not easy to speak of hope in today's world. Our minds are filled with pictures of terrorism, starvation, violence, and the threat of nuclear war. Our lives so quickly become pits of depression and frustration and emptiness. When everything seems to be working against us and against the values in which we believe, it is easy to turn aside from the covenant demands, as the Israelites did, or to turn them into burdensome yokes of legalism in a desperate search for security. But we are a covenant people. And we have a covenant God. And God's promise to us is that in spite of our sin and disobedience and discouragement the covenant stands firm. Because of God's real love for us, written in blazing letters not on tablets of stone but in our hearts, we have hope (see Jer. 31:31-34). And because we have hope, we rejoice in the covenant promises as did the psalmist.

Prayer

Our prayer for today is the one referenced in this reading, found in Psalm 111: "The Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; He is ever mindful of his covenant. The works of his hands are faithful and just; All his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, To be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; He has commanded his covenant forever." This is the word of the Lord. Amen.

A reading from pages 102-103 of *Pastoral Genetics: Theology and Care at the Beginning of Life*, by Ron Cole-Turner, faculty emeritus, and Brent Waters

. . . in the crucified healer we see how healing can flow from weakness. We are accustomed to seeing healing as a form of power, as action that overrides circumstances and directs outcomes, which we then measure and take to be the mark of success for physicians or hospitals. What the healer on the cross shows us is how healing flows finally from weakness and vulnerability and not from power. Although Christ did use power to heal, in the event of the cross it is not finally power but weakness that heals. The healing weakness of Christ on the cross is a weakness that is freely chosen for the sake of others, a weakness that comes after power. It is recognition of the essential limits of power, not merely the technological limits of our medicine but the inherent limits even of God's power to heal. Power heals but only in a limited or provisional way. For while power—our own or God's—can override circumstances and direct outcomes and thus can truly heal, power overrides or directs only at the risk of negating the selfhood or personhood of the other or at the risk of doing violence to the full circumstances in which the other suffers. The essence of healing is in the weakness that is after power, and the cross shows us how

this weakness can be mightier than power alone in bringing true healing. The weakness that comes after power is truly able to heal not because it gets rid of the pain, but because it is willing to transfer the pain from the one who is sick to the one who heals.

Prayer

Loving God, in this advent season we remember and give thanks that you entered into our lives in seeming weakness, as a baby born in Bethlehem. In Christ's birth, life, and death on the cross your power was made perfect in weakness. Through Christ you take on our pain and sin and offer us healing and hope. It is more than we can comprehend, but even in our weakness we offer you our grateful praise. Alleluia. Amen.

A reading from page 37 of the Interpretation Bible Studies Series on *Psalms*, by Jerome Creach, faculty
The shepherd image appears not only as part of the Old Testament but as a vital part of the New Testament as well. For Christians, Psalm 23 foretells the words of Jesus, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), and the writer of 1 Peter who declares that Jesus is the "shepherd and guardian" of souls who leads believers when they are "going astray like sheep" (2:25). Jesus is indeed the "chief shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4) for the church. As Mays appropriately notes (119), seeing Jesus as the supreme shepherd calls Christians to look to God's guidance for the future, as well as the present. In the age to come, the Lamb of God will become king and shepherd, and in that day, the redeemed will discover in their hearts the full meaning of the phrase, "I shall not want" (see Rev. 7:15-17).

Prayer

As we pray together today, let us pray from these words of the 23rd Psalm: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long."

A reading from page 141 of *Reclaiming the Old Testament from the Christian Pulpit*, by Donald Gowan, faculty emeritus

I'd like to tell you about the quietest Christmas I ever spent. Then I'll explain why I'm telling you this. It was 1951, my first year out of college. I was working in Richland, WA, at one of the Atomic Energy Commission plants run by the General Electric Company. The plant and the town we lived in had been built by the army during the war and in 1951 the only housing available for single employees was in dormitories, so I lived in one room on the second floor in a dorm across the street from the plant where I worked. As Christmas approached some of my friends planned a trip into the mountains and asked if I would like to go along, but for some reason which I don't remember I decided not to. Perhaps it was because I was in the choir at church and they were giving a concert on Christmas Eve. At any rate I went to that midnight service and to refreshments for the choir afterwards, then back to my room to open the presents my folks had sent from Iowa. Next morning I got up late and walked down to a nearby restaurant for dinner, ate supper at the same place, and spent the rest of the day in my room. There was no one around the dorm, as most people who had anywhere at all to go had cleared out. By evening I realized that I had gone through an entire Christmas day without seeing one person that I knew. But it was not a bad Christmas. I remember doing two things: writing a letter home, and spending a lot of time

thinking about what Christmas really meant to me. I didn't know any theology then and not very much about the Bible, but I did know that a Christian is never really alone, anywhere or anytime, and I was fully convinced that day that a Christian especially cannot feel alone on Christmas day. Now, why tell you this story? To make you feel sorry for me? Not at all, for there was nothing to be sorry for. I tell it as a small illustration of what Matthew says is the meaning of Christmas: that with the coming of Jesus, God was with us, in human flesh. I consider this sentence to be the Bible's best promise: God is with us. It is a promise which God has repeated consistently through the history of his dealings with humanity. God is with us.

Prayer

Amazing God, you have astounded the world once again by coming to us in the form of a human baby. Help us to comprehend the great love that you have for us that compelled you to enter our lives to be here among us. Let us live with bold joy and faith knowing that we are not alone. On this Christmas Day and every day, may we praise you without ceasing. Amen.

A reading from pages 33-34 of *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*, by Andrew Purves, faculty emeritus

God's grace is the key signature of the gospel, the message of the coming of God in the flesh into the world specifically in and as Jesus for a saving purpose. Grace means Jesus; grace is Jesus. He is Emmanuel, for he is God with us. But more, he is also "Yeshua, meaning Yahweh-Saviour, for "he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Thus the incarnation directly implies the atonement, and there is no atonement without the incarnation; otherwise God has not come among and dealt with us, and done so precisely in and as this man. Thus Jesus is worshiped as Jesus Kyrios, Jesus Lord. Grace has no Christian meaning apart from this confession.

Prayer

O Come, O Come Emmanuel! You are our grace and our salvation. Because you have entered into our lives and have become one with us, we find our hope. We worship and adore you, Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

A reading from page 75 of *To Everything a Season: A Spirituality of Time*, by Bonnie Thurston, retired faculty

Nothing I "do" ultimately assures my value. My value as a human being is already secured by God as the source of my creation and by Jesus Christ as the source of my salvation. I may choose to engage in "good works" – benevolence, charity, whatever – as a grateful response to those gifts, but there is absolutely nothing I could do to earn them. The bottom line is I don't have to do anything: I just have to be, that is, to accept God's gift of life and to respond by grateful living. Why is it that this Christian ontology is so hard to accept? Could it be because the nature of God is so foreign to us? We do not deeply, existentially, understand that God is Love, that God loves us because that is God's nature, not because we are smart or pretty or productive or "worthy" of such love. Because human love so rarely comes to us unconditionally, many of us have decided that God's love never could either. We are wrong in this assumption, as the cross of Jesus Christ so clearly demonstrates.

Prayer

Loving God, how difficult it is for us to comprehend or believe your love for us! May Emmanuel descend to us once again, we pray, casting out all doubt and sin so that we can stand firm and confident in the knowledge and assurance of your love. Come Lord Jesus! Amen.

A reading from pages 365-66 of “To Know Nothing Except Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified’: Supralapsarian Christology and a Theology of the Cross,” by Edwin Christian van Driel, faculty (in *The Wisdom and Foolishness of God*, by Christoph Chalamet)

The theologically important point about conceiving of God’s relating to humanity as a form of friendship is friendship’s motivational structure. Friendship is motivated by a delight in and love for the other. It enjoys the other’s goodness and the goodness the relationship with the other embodies. Of course, friendship can be disrupted, disregarded, betrayed. All of these can motivate friends to seek forgiveness, reconciliation, healing of their relationship. The friendship itself is not based on the episode of disruption and reconciliation, but on a deeper sense of love and delight. Therefore, when God calls Abraham, Moses, and the people of Israel God’s friends, and when Jesus addresses his disciples as friends, not slaves, this defines these relationships as motivated not only by human sin and need for reconciliation, but by a deeper, preordinate sense of love. All of them are tainted by human failure and betrayal. The narratives of Abraham, Moses, and Israel are full of stories of distrust, disobedience, and unbelief. Jesus calls his disciples friends in the context of a conversation about his imminent death: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). But while the death is motivated by the friendship, the friendship is not motivated by death. Jesus becomes his disciples’ savior because he is their friend; not the other way around.

Prayer

Holy God, in this advent season we thank you for being our friend. In friendship and perfect love you reach out to us in Jesus Christ inviting us to reconciliation and peace. Because of this, life is full of promise. For this we give you our thanks and praise. Amen.

A reading from page 96 of *Why Scripture Matters*, by John Burgess, faculty

Scripture’s compelling power is not primarily a matter of ecstatic experience. It does not require us to relinquish our critical faculties. If Scripture is indeed best understood as commentary on the risen Christ, then we will wish to investigate the social and historical conditions that both shaped and limited human response to God, as recorded in Scripture. Careful historical-critical work can save us from our innate tendency to read Scripture in ways that too conveniently ensure our own privilege and comfort. But Scripture will ultimately matter to us not because we have successfully investigated the biblical authors of the tradition’s great commentators, but because we have discovered its compelling power for ourselves. The answer to our doubts about Scripture as a sacramental word is finally a trust that God alone gives, but to which the community of faith invites us every time it gathers for worship. It is in worship that the community of faith testifies to the trustworthiness of these texts. Worship is the most profound commentary on Scripture, and other forms of commentary will ultimately find their focus there.

Prayer

Holy God, we rejoice that you come to us through your Word in Scripture, and through the Word, Jesus Christ. In this advent season, help us to read, hear, and see with open hearts, eyes, and ears. Fill us with a receptive watchfulness as we worship you. Amen.