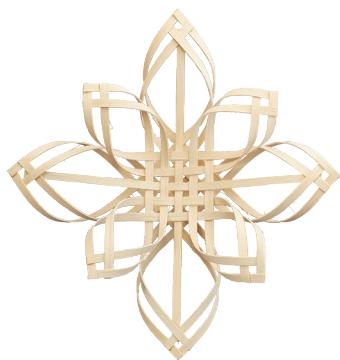


Finding Christ
at the
center of our
Advent
journey



AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

You are holding in your hands a gift from our community of faith to you. Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary is devoted to preparing outstanding leaders for Christ's church. One of the ways we nurture leaders is by building a loving community of faith and extending God's grace to others. In this season of anticipation, we extend God's grace to you and invite you to explore this book of Advent devotions. Through this collection, please join us as we prepare to receive God's greatest gift—the birth of Jesus Christ.



The woven star ornament on the cover of this devotional was handcrafted by artisan John Wald. See more of his work on the Facebook page for The Wald Studios; photo courtesy of The Old Salem Museum and Gardens which offers these ornaments for sale.

I'm writing these words on 21 August 2017, around 1:00 p.m., and the "Great American Eclipse" has begun. Already the moon-bitten solar disc is making its transit from west to east across the country, while millions of people witness Jesus's words take on an unanticipated truth: the sun will indeed be darkened, even if only for two minutes. A week or so ago, in the wee hours of 11, 12, and 13 August, if your dog woke you up to go outside, you witnessed the Perseid meteor shower and saw "the stars falling from heaven." A few days later we all got a good shaking as the powers of evil and hate staked their claim on heaven from the base of the Robert E Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia. You might be forgiven for wondering, in the back of your mind, if the apocalypse has already begun.

Of course, by the time you read these words, we will all know better, even if in the moment we weren't so sure. It's just an eclipse, and on 22 August the sun rose just fine. They're just meteorites, overgrown bits of space dust that had the misfortune to burn up in our atmosphere for our midnight entertainment. It's not the powers of heaven, just a bunch of racist neo-Nazis. It's not the Kingdom. It's not the end.

Or is it? Advent reminds us that, though the sun rises and the world turns and the stars whirl about on their celestial axis, things are not always what they seem. One day, Jesus says, the sun will be darkened and the stars will fall and powers from the roof of heaven to the sub-basement of earth will be rocked to their foundations. One day the Son of Man will come and the Kingdom will arrive.

Who's to say that day is not today? For after Advent comes Christmas when the stars sing their *glorias*, and then Good Friday when heaven and earth shake, and finally Easter after which nothing is the same. Christ has come. The Kingdom has begun. The powers of evil, hate, racism, and death—however potent they seem—cannot slow its progress. Perhaps the real lesson of this eclipse is not astronomical but theological. Like the path of totality, God's reign travels inexorably through the world. There is good news in that. And just in time.

Come, Lord Jesus. Quickly come.

Paul Hooker

*Associate Dean for Ministerial Formation
and Advanced Studies*

I often wish God would show up in more obvious ways. If God would make a couple of Bible-style appearances, maybe our spiritual journeys would be less hit-or-miss. It would be great to receive instructions through a sky-full of stars, a burning bush, or an angel named Gabriel. We would know, more clearly, what it is we are to do and who it is we are to be. Also: if God put Godself “out there,” everyone would see that what we believe is true. We wouldn’t have to work so hard, in a world full of natural disasters and sin-driven violence, trying to convince others that God is somehow around.

Tear open the heavens and come down, O God! Light the kindling under the fire! Do something awesome that no one is expecting! Please, God—we need you to come through for us.

Isaiah wonders, as we do, if God’s seeming absence has something to do with sin. But here’s the twist, if you look at v. 5b, Isaiah suggests God has pulled back from us because of our sin, but also that we sin *because God has pulled back*. “Because you hid yourself we transgressed,” the NRSV translates.

Well. It seems pretty audacious of Isaiah to insist God take some responsibility for the world’s sufferings. And he continues in this vein, trying to persuade God to step up, regardless of our sin. God is the one who forms us, after all. We, the clay, can only be lumps apart from the attention of the Potter.

At Christmas, God will respond to Isaiah’s request. God will come, again, in a very particular, definitive, way. The mountains won’t quake, but a baby will cry. Adversaries won’t change, but shepherds will come, amazed. And wise ones will somehow pick the one star to follow out of an entire sky-full. God’s awesome deeds will heal the world in ways we hadn’t thought to ask for and would never expect.

Awesome God, help us to discern your presence new again this Advent. Act in unexpected ways that invite us to righteousness. Amen.

Cynthia L. Rigby

The W.C. Brown Professor of Theology

As I am writing, the Caribbean is being ravaged by the fifth in a line of devastating hurricanes that have wreaked havoc on the Caribbean and Southern USA. In many ways, these people have been fed with the “bread of tears” and been given “tears to drink in full measure.” God’s people are crying out for salvation; their homes have been ravaged and lives have been lost. Where are they to find hope?

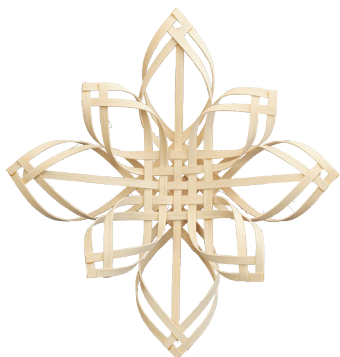
In this psalm, we find the essence of Advent, the miraculous paradox of the already and not yet. We hold together the longing for the coming of Christ, whether in the form of an infant or in the reconciling second coming, side by side with the knowledge that Christ is already with us. We mourn, we long, we wait, but in that waiting is the trust that Christ will come and that Christ has come and that Christ is come.

The Shepherd of Israel listens to our prayers and brings us closer to God. In Christ, we are reminded that God conquered the waters of the deep, creating the heavens and the earth. That God carried Noah and his family through the flood. That God delivered the Israelites through the Red Sea in the Exodus. God continues to renew us through the waters of baptism and never lets us go. God will continue to do so until Christ comes again. We will cry out to God with all our joys and our sorrows, and God will answer our prayers just as God has already answered our prayers.

O God, you are the light and we long for you. Restore us,
O LORD God of Hosts; let your face shine, that we may
be saved. Amen.

Erica Nelson

Senior student from North Ogden, Utah



The word is: community is threatened, fellowship seems broken, and many have turned on one another. How do we talk to one another in the midst of painful division? The question of how we face this challenge seems timely during this season of penitence and expectation we call Advent. It is no small thing to bring authentic greetings, to begin a conversation in the midst of deep and painful divisions that rent a community asunder. What can we say? Where do we start? So much is at stake! Yet that is the weight Paul's salutation was to bear and still bears as we tune our ears to the distant and present yearning for restored community. The tenor of this greeting sets the tone for the most important issue that needs to be addressed for dissension to cease. The issue was: they didn't think they had a problem. They, in fact, thought they had it going on (as we used to say back home in the Bronx). With an ironic over-emphasis on how "they" have "in every way" and of "every kind" really got it made in the department of spiritual gifts, Paul will then immediately proceed to an exhortation about the terrible divisions among them. Which, of course, are the occasions giving rise to this epistle. The bold pivot of this carefully crafted greeting is the declaration, "God is faithful." In the face of our unspoken and often unacknowledged failures to maintain fellowship: God is faithful. And these words beckon us as a fresh clarion call of hope. The community is divided, there are those who think they have already become spiritual giants and have all the answers. But they don't. And, of course, we don't either. In the face of our own broken communities, in this season of penitence and expectation, we struggle to begin conversations that may lead to healing and restoration. It is wise to reflect on how resistant we are to believing that we desperately need to know this. Even so, God is faithful and it is God who calls us to the fellowship of Christ. More than any other gift, this is the one with the greatest value of all. May we be able to deepen our relationship with our God who is ever faithful, and allow ourselves to be called into the healing and reconciling work of the Kingdom of God.

Merciful Lord: This Advent, may the deepening knowledge that God is faithful become the center of our discourse. May we find courage to address the great divisions among us, as we watch and yearn for the Prince of Peace to be born in us again, and again. Grant us strength to follow your call to begin conversations that restore fellowship and overcome division. In the name of our calling Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Remember that old Christmas story about Ebenezer Scrooge, who cares about nothing except monetary wealth? We view this cautionary tale and say to ourselves, Not me, I would never do something like that. Perhaps the Israelites of Amos's world would have said the same thing. Like us, they maintain their innocence as they present themselves at their religious celebrations without realizing that they are missing the bigger picture.

In today's reading, Israel has turned a blind eye to the oppression and disparity around them. The poor are being trampled on, and the needy are being crushed, yet they continue to offer their tithes, sacrifices, and freewill offerings in celebration. In the midst of drought, locusts, and death, the Israelites remain steadfast in their religious obligations, all the while missing the invitation to return. The God of the poor and the needy invites them to return—not to a temple or a place of worship but to a friendship that has been broken. Their abundance and indulgence has taken them to a place of estrangement from God and their neighbor.

As we embark on this Advent journey we also receive this invitation to return from our place of estrangement. In a similar fashion, the cultural expectations of busyness and indulgence in the holiday season have caused us to be estranged from those who continue to be trampled on and crushed. Perhaps we appease our religious impulses by dropping an extra \$20 in the offering plate next Sunday, or by dropping a \$5 bill in that familiar red kettle outside the shopping mall. Is it enough? Is the God who forms the mountains and creates the wind inviting us to such feeble religious attempts, or are we called to something more?

Creator God, give us the courage to accept your invitation to friendship with you and with our neighbor. May this season of Advent be more than just a series of religious obligations. May it be a time where our eyes are opened to those who are being trampled and crushed. May we be the ones who extend the hand of friendship, just as you extended your hand to us in the form of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Jeff Sanchez

Student from Round Rock, Texas

We live in a world today that teaches its inhabitants to fend for themselves. Sacrifice in the name of growth and prosperity runs abundant, and there is little regard given to self-reflection, love for others, or even love for the earth that we live on. There are those who live among us who despise others based on class, culture, race, or sexual orientation. They hate the love that God has taught us to show one another without regard. Some among us even hide behind the name of Jesus Christ as they perform these acts of hate—even with the knowledge that Christ brought love to us and not hate. Jude warns those who have stealthily joined Christ's church with hopes to infect it with the hate of the world. We must stand fast with the Spirit and hold true to the love that Christ has shown us. We are called by Christ to bring God's Kingdom of grace and mercy.

As we embark on this task, we must remember that we are emissaries of love for Christ and not carriers of hate and injustice. As we move closer to Christ's birth, we contemplate the rejoicing that must have occurred at the birth of a savior who would not come to conquer, but to lay down His life for the love of humanity. Jesus did not come for a select few but for all—race, creed, gender, or orientation were not “part of the entrance exam” for Jesus's “party.” As He came to serve and eventually sacrifice for all, we should do the same. Love is the greatest commandment.

Lord, I come to you knowing that I am not always as I should be.

I am led astray by the world, as I neglect the guidance of your Spirit.

Forgive me for this straying,

And guide me back onto the path that leads to Your glory

And is paved with Your love.

Open my eyes and heart to others around me,

And allow me to be an instrument of Your Will, of your Love.

For it is in the name of Christ Jesus that I pray, Amen.

Derrick Ouellette

Student from San Marcos, Texas

EZEKIEL 36:24-28

To comprehend the significance of God's promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36:24-28, we have to understand real disappointment. Disappointment that makes you question everything that you know. Disappointment that is so mind-blowing, unexpected, and world-altering that it makes you feel as if you will never hope again. Disappointment that feels like death. It is to this kind of disappointment, to this feeling of utter darkness and depression, that God speaks.

Israel, at this point, was destroyed. Its places of worship and system of government were no longer, and its people were exiled to a foreign country, living under the thumb of an oppressive regime. Everything that the Israelites had known was gone. To this horror, God promises miraculous transformation. God declares that he will gather and return the Israelites to their homeland; that he will purify them and remodel them from the inside out. God states that he will give the Israelites a new heart and place in them a new spirit (v. 26). The heart in the biblical text was not just the seat of emotions and feelings, but also that of the mind and intellect. Spirit meanwhile frequently referred to that part of a human being which was divine and gave the person life (Num. 27:16; Job 27:3, 33:4).

To a nation that seems dead, God thus promises resurrection and revival. Though it feels and looks dead, though its heart has stopped working and is stone (v. 26), Israel, God declares, will come back to life. Its heart will beat once again and become flesh (v. 26). Indeed, it is only by going through the painful evolution from despondency to hope, from death to life, that Israel will learn to recognize and understand its life-giving and life-affirming God. And when it does, God promises, "you will become my people, and I will become your God."

Gracious God, it feels at points as if we are in a downward spiral, headed towards death, despondency, and darkness. As you promised in Ezekiel, revive your people. Remind us that you are the God of life, resurrection, and hope. Amen.

Suzie Park

Associate Professor of Old Testament

What's your first reaction when you hear good news? Do you smile? Is your heart filled with joy? Do you want to share it with someone? If so, with whom?

Mark's gospel opens with these words, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God ..." God prepared the way for this good news to be heard just as the prophets foretold. The messenger was a strikingly unique figure named John the Baptist. His clothes were made of camel's hair and he ate bugs. (I love the way God empowers unique and interesting people.) John's message was one of confession and repentance—turning away from selfish pursuits and incomplete pictures of the work of God.

I must admit that I am a bit of a sap when it comes to the season of Advent. The music, the décor, the symbols, and the spirit all move me. Each year, I confess and repent of my satisfaction with sentimentality as I look upon the brokenness of our world and see the work that needs to be done. I am reminded to heed John's message by looking to Jesus and to follow John's lead by pointing to Jesus—the embodiment of the good news—who came to reconcile and restore the creation to its Creator.

In this text, John mentions two baptisms: his baptism in water and Jesus's baptism in the Holy Spirit. As humble recipients of the good news who have been baptized in the waters of repentance, how will we, like John, faithfully point to Jesus? As empowered and enabled recipients of Jesus's baptism in the Holy Spirit, how will we bear witness to this good news? As the Spirit enabled those faithful followers on the Day of Pentecost, may we also be empowered to proclaim this good news in fresh and unique ways that can be understood, participating with God in this reconciling and restorative work.

You are the God who sends and embodies the good news. May we, like John the Baptist, faithfully point to Jesus the Messiah. As we are baptized in your Holy Spirit, enable us to embody the good news with our words and deeds as you send us.

Curt Davis

Student from Austin, Texas

ISAIAH 40:1-11

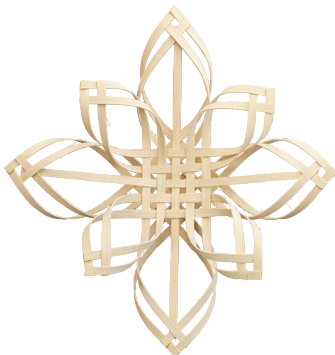
Comfort, comfort ye my people. In this Advent season, we are desperately searching for comfort. Chaos has wreaked havoc on our world from hurricanes in southeast Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean; to earthquakes in Mexico; from flooding in Sierra Leone and South Asia; to famine in Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Yemen. Where is God in these natural disasters? How can we proclaim God's glory in the face of such loss?

In this time of anxious expectation, we still hear the prophet's words crying out to prepare the way of the Lord. Who will make straight the highway in the dry desert parched of life? Who will lift up the valleys of mud that have swallowed up people? Who will make low the mountains of rubble? In the midst of disaster and destruction, humanity has the power to show up, to level the uneven ground, and to make the rough places plain. By coming together to support communities devastated by chaos, we can see the glory of God as it is revealed. When we provide food to our neighbors, the shepherd feeds his flock. When we listen to the pain of others, God carries the lambs close to her chest. Through the practice of showing up, we prepare our hearts and the world for the coming of the Christ.

God of chaos and of hope, we remain hopeful in our work as we eagerly await your coming as the infant Messiah, the comforter, so that your glory may be revealed to all people in times of abundance and in times of uncertainty. Amen.

Angela Williams

Student from Rock Hill, South Carolina



The psalms were created to be sung! Before reading today's devotion, you are invited to take a moment to read aloud or sing today's psalm.

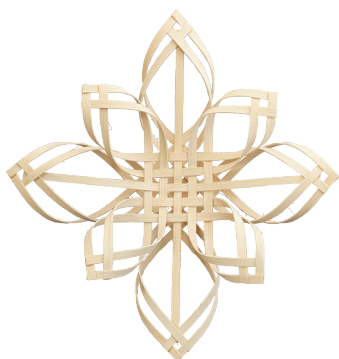
In this scripture, we hear the Israelites reflecting on what God has done in Israel's past. God has pardoned and forgiven. God has restored Jacob's fortune. God has shown favor on the land. These good times stand in contrast to the Israelites' present situation. We are not told what is happening, but the psalm is clear—the Israelites are in a time of pain and struggle.

The psalm anticipates a return to better circumstances, and there is no "maybe" here. Because of what God has done in the past, there is no doubt about what God will do now—God *will* speak to God's people. God *will* give what is good. Love and faith will meet, and righteousness will create a path. It is a psalm about hope—a hope that confidently expects, even demands, that God will do something.

In this Season of Advent, as we remember what God has done in the birth of Jesus Christ, what kind of hope do we have? My hope is often a "maybe" hope, a polite hope that asks God for what our world needs, a modest hope that does not expect or ask for too much. In the Season of Advent, God pushes us to something different, to a bold kind of hope that expects nothing less than God made flesh, a hope which demands that our lives and world be healed, reconciled, and made whole.

God, speak to us! Embolden our hope through the stories of your abundant mercy and love. Hear our prayers, O God, and bring peace to our world. Amen.

April Long
Student from Austin, Texas



2 PETER 3:8-15A

In Advent, we live in expectant waiting, seeking God's intended justice and hoping beyond our own time frame. The passage emphasizes that one day with God is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day (vs. 8). Driving through the national parks of the West this summer, our family noted the dramatic upheavals of rock that created mountain ranges that rose suddenly from the plains. The fact that these upheavals occurred hundreds of millions of years ago means that we have arrived fairly recently on the scene. Believing that God played a role shaping the dynamics of the universe helps us sustain a hopeful wonder at how God's time frame is different from our own. Nonetheless, our evolutionary arrival on the scene matters, since God chooses to cooperate with us to bring about God's purposes.

God is in control of time, even using natural events that take a long time to show God's care. Despite adversity, trials, and natural disasters, God's mercy works in ways to help sustain faithful communities.

The central theme of this passage is patience, and thus it is perfect for a season in which we ask God to bring our world more into line with God's hopes for the world. Patience, a seldom-lauded theological virtue, is a combination of wisdom and fortitude, and fostering patience is easier when we tune in to God's long-range time. Pastoral care requires patience, since people's complex problems do not respond to simplistic formulas.

Martin Luther King Jr. quoted the abolitionist Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." This means that we must be active rather than passive even as we work with patience.

Peter's community was influenced by Jewish thought and echoes the ancient Israelite notion of a community set apart by God. As a community with separatist tendencies, they sought to understand what it means to be faithful to God in trying times. Peter's community invites us to act with engaged patience, not waiting for the world's perfection but rather trusting in the promises of God. Again, the emphasis in this passage is in God's merciful action, in which salvation will be extended to many, if not all. Because of God's patience, Peter's community is invited to bring together wisdom and fortitude to act with advent hope in the midst of a world that seems far from God's purposes.

God, we ask for the wisdom and fortitude to be patient, trusting in your mercy while cooperating in your will.

Phil Browning Helsel
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” – Revelation 2:11a

What comes to mind when someone says, “Advent”? Christmas carols, good tidings to shepherds, lighting candles, perhaps. Probably not two-edged swords, affliction, or conquering.

This vivid imagery pressed the communities who first received this letter with an intense sense of urgency. They lived in a violent, chaotic world, and they needed to know that God wasn’t complacent.

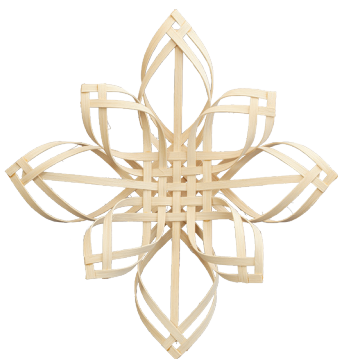
These images press on us today, too. Sometimes we may feel too tired to face a darkness that feels too big. Yet now as then, Christ calls his people to step forward in faith—and he isn’t asking politely. Sometimes, abruptness is what it takes.

Christ’s words may be demanding, but they are also replete with reassurances. Even though the road ahead is rough, we will be all right in the end. This passage invites us to consider what it means to take risks and to challenge the complacency that may go unnoticed in our own communities. And Christ assures us that when we risk, we will “come out victorious.”

In our troubled times, the season of Advent invites us to step into uncertainty, to pray without ceasing, and to trust Christ’s reassurance as we embrace the challenge of discipleship.

Creator God, you call us to step out of our comfort zones, to risk and move courageously in a world that continually threatens us for being faithful to your call. May we persevere in this Advent journey, paying attention to the ways your Spirit beckons from us a response. Amen.

Hierald Osorto
Student from Washington, D.C.



Have you ever bargained with God? When you desperately wanted something, have you made promises, hoping that God would strike a deal with you? This passage from Haggai tells the story of the human response to God's goodness. For years the Judeans have been in Babylonian exile, but finally they are allowed back home. They get back to work quickly, building their homes, plowing fields, building up industries. But somehow, in the midst of this answered promise—a return home—they have forgotten to build God's temple. Haggai's job is to remind the Judeans that their lives won't be fully blessed, their fields won't be fully ripe, their tables will not have plenty, until they build a Temple for God.

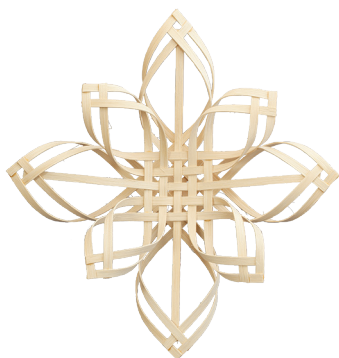
For many in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Caribbean, this year has become a year of unexpected exile—homes flooded, streets filled with rubble. As we help one another move forward into the future; rebuilding homes, dealing with trauma, imagining new futures; how do we keep God's house in mind? When God lives no longer in a Temple, but in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit, what does it mean to honor God, to worship God in our context?

Whenever we rebuild our lives, whether the need arises after a crisis or an opportunity, we have the chance to reflect deeply on how our lives live out God's values. Is there time in our lives to pray? Is there space in the budget to give our wealth back to God or to others? Have we placed blessing others as a priority? Rebuilding can be more than functional, it can transform our lives.

Almighty God, who sustains us through every transition, grant us the discipline to think first always of you, so that we may bless others as you have blessed us. Amen.

Sarah Gaventa

Interim Vice President for Student Affairs and Vocation



Matthew 24: 4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you.

Over the past few years, I have developed a love for watching high-stakes poker. Admittedly, I am not a gambler but will splurge a dollar or two playing Mega-Millions after it reaches an astronomical amount. I enjoy watching professional poker players engage in psychological warfare. The best players learn and master the art of deception. Among their extensive arsenal, bluffing remains their primary weapon. These professional tricksters live by George Costanza's famous words to Jerry Seinfeld, "It's not a lie if you believe it."

In perilous times, like today, a lackadaisical Christian life is at extreme risk of being deceived. I confess there are times when I become so comfortable crafting excuses to avoid spiritual practices that I deceive myself. I always find time for family, career, and responsibilities, but not for seeking the Truth. I am sure faithful Christians were a part of the Jonestown, Branch Dividian, and Zion Ranch communities; unfortunately, somewhere along the way they were deceived.

Jesus challenges us to pay attention by expecting rumors of war, waxed hearts, and forthcoming persecution. Amazingly, under any other circumstance, panic and anxiety would be appropriate, but Jesus instructs us not to worry. After all, the moment the heavenly trumpet sounds and the sky cracks open, the Eternal Dealer will command all to show their cards, causing Satan to crumble like a coward. For the world will finally know that Satan's true power, though deceiving many, was merely a bluff.

Almighty God, grant thy servant the ability to see beyond the false prophet. Quicken my ears to hear the Shepherd's voice. Nourish my heart with the courage that flows from the authority of scripture, so I might stand boldly against the wiles of evil. In Jesus name, Amen.

William West (MDiv'16)

Admissions Associate for Campus and Community Partnerships

When I chose these verses, I did so just at a glance, knowing I like Luke. I had forgotten they were about the Virgin Mary and the song she prayed while visiting Elizabeth—the song about the joy of having a baby growing inside her. Though I chose seemingly randomly, I am reminded that there is never a coincidence.

I have been supporting women in birth, either by their sides or catching their babies, since 2006. I have always loved Mother Mary, who held a prominent place in my grandmother's home, and whose glory stayed with me in my training as a midwife. Mary is always close to midwives, as we are in praise of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, and see it as divine. Midwives see birthing women as sacred vessels, as conduits; clear channels through which children are born, children that reflect God's greatness. And we acknowledge that our children are not ours, they are God's children. They belong to the Universe.

And, yet, we are all birthing something, just by virtue of being alive on earth. When we fulfill our purpose, we fulfill our true selves; we have birthed something to feel proud of, reflecting God's gifts in us.

But how can we know we are fulfilling God's purpose for us on Earth?

I think of Mother Mary not only when I think of my grandmother or of my midwifery practice, but in the Beatles song most of us know and love, "Let it Be." We can only be vessels for God's purpose when we find peace in our hearts. We cannot do it in anger, fear, hate, or grief. We have to let those be.

For me, everything is a birth metaphor: from the mystery of the first trimester all the way to the pains of labor. We have a conception stage, a creation stage, a birth phase, even a blissful postpartum. When we continue to trust ourselves and follow the gentle nudges that make up who we are, we continue to trust in God, fulfilling every promise ever created for us to birth into the world. Our lives are not random, though they may seem that way at times. This is the female receptive mode. It is the *be*, not the *do*. In this way, we can birth what we came here on earth so determined to birth.

God, the eternal midwife who births us into being with the spark of Divine Love, in your tender mercy, open our hearts to see the Divine in all. Amen.

Margaret Burns
Student from Panama City, Florida

As a newly transplanted east coast native, I am cognizant of the stark differences I found moving to Austin. The visual difference is what I noticed first. The architecture is different and the vegetation is not what I am accustomed to. The oak tree has long been a symbol of strength. Its hard wood carries it to great heights and old age. The Red and White Oaks of the southeast are considerably different looking than the Escarpment Live Oak that is so abundant in Texas. The former are deciduous as opposed to the evergreen live oak. In the fall, the red oaks and white oaks add beautiful color to the foliage. The various species of oaks present in the holy land are also known for their strong and hard wood, their ability to grow to great heights, and their age.

“They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the Lord to glorify himself.” The message in Isaiah is one of encouragement in a time of living in a world dominated by superpowers. The joyful news is meant to reassure the suffering and oppressed that they are remembered and favored by God. There will be a time of freedom, peace, and abundance. Today, the global social crisis is one in which growing levels of poverty, hunger, and unemployment are primarily a result of northern privilege. The majority of the global population remains in severe poverty and dominated by current superpowers. Meditating on this, I hope we are more mindful of the suffering and devastation brought by war and imperialist policies that destroy homes, peoples, and ways of life.

O God, let us hear the good news you send to the poor. Heal us as you heal the brokenhearted. Liberate us as you release the prisoners. May we be the Oaks of Righteousness, well rooted and firm, and bring forth fruit to ever glorify you. Amen.

Heather Zdancewicz

Vice President for Finance and Administration

The church to whom this letter was written believed that Christ was soon to return, much as we do today. We are called to live in full expectancy of Christ's return. This expectation is what keeps the church busy and ready. When the church prepares for the Advent season, there is excitement in the air as we await God's gift to the world. Or is there? Are we truly expecting the coming of Jesus or has it become just another activity to get through? If it has become a mere ritual for us, we are quenching the Spirit and are not bringing any vitality to the season.

Paul is giving us instructions to keep us from quenching the Spirit. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances ... do not quench the Spirit ... hold on to what is good." We are to rejoice and give thanks even when we do not feel that we can. We are to pray without ceasing, because a life of seeking to please and honor God and doing God's will means constantly giving thanks, regardless of our situation. We are not to quench the Spirit, but we must be able to recognize the signs of the Spirit in all matters, not just in the four walls that we call "church."

What difference does the kind (traditional or contemporary) of worship we have make when there are people in our communities living in poverty or in fear of being deported to their home countries; when treatments for illness are so costly that some do not get treatment; when the homeless are increasing in numbers and more of them are families with children? How do our preparations for Advent include them? When we quench the Spirit, we stop sharing the Good News of Christ's birth, death, resurrection, and return. We become mute, like Zecharias when he didn't believe that Elizabeth would bear a son. When John was born, Zecharias's tongue was loosed and he blessed the Lord God of Israel. We, the church, face a world that so desperately needs to hear of the mercies of God proclaimed during Advent, and always we need to loosen our tongues so God can use them.

Merciful God, keep us from quenching the Spirit and use us to share the news of the coming of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Estela Sifuentes

Student from San Antonio, Texas

Television trial lawyer Perry Mason would pull the real story out of a witness with the climactic question, “Isn’t it true that ...?” But in John 1, the chief witness is elusive, giving a kind of anti-testimony. Asked if he is Messiah, or Elijah, or prophet, John responds only with, “I am not,” and flashes an ID: “Photo not available—see Isaiah.” He affirms who he isn’t so as to affirm who Jesus is. His answer: There stands among us One whom we do not know, the Coming One whose worth eclipses all else. A short chorus by John Bell of the Iona Community sings it this way:

*There is One among us whom we do not know:
Host of highest heaven, present here below.*

Who or what aren’t we? The self-appointed goal of No Mistakes, the self-anointed role of Responsible—these come all too easily. At one point I was worried about considering a call while working in a transition period—would my leaving create problems? My former boss told me, “You have responsibilities at the church, but you are not responsible *for* the church.” Yes, we are needed. A close friend and colleague describes our relationship to God: “We are deeply loved and desperately needed.” The love and the need both emanate from God, who was in the beginning before all things, without whom not one thing could have been made.

In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle sings (comically but truthfully), “Without your pulling it, the tide comes in. Without your twirling it, the earth can spin. Without your pushing them, the clouds roll by.” Closer to earth—present here below—we all too often assume importance and impressiveness. Present here below, there is One among us who sets our hearts at liberty.

Maybe, in this year’s episode of Advent, we will be able to hear the Coming One, the Host of highest heaven, ask us, “Isn’t it true that you don’t need to have every answer? Isn’t it true that you aren’t responsible for everything? Isn’t it true that you aren’t God?” And placing our hand on the Bible that contains John’s gospel, we may be able to answer, “We long to receive you, to believe in your name, to receive power to become children of God.”

Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast. Let us all in thee inherit; let us find the promised rest. Take away the love of sinning; Alpha and Omega be. End of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty. (Charles Wesley – “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”)

Eric Wall

Assistant Professor of Sacred Music and Dean of the Chapel

When God answers prayers, it feels natural to offer up praise in response. When there is no answer, but instead an undesirable situation stays the same or even worsens, it is increasingly difficult to keep on praying with great hope. Think of the people of Puerto Rico. Hurricane Irma seemed to spare the impoverished country, but Hurricane Maria showed up mere weeks later and devastated the area. “Irma gave us a break, but Maria destroyed us,” said Edwin Serrano, a construction worker in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico.

That is similar to what is happening in this psalm of ascent.

First, the freed people of Jerusalem are celebrating their release from decades of captivity in what is believed to be Babylon. Then, the exultation is dulled by the final lines, which are begging for more of the same restoration to be delivered to those still held captive.

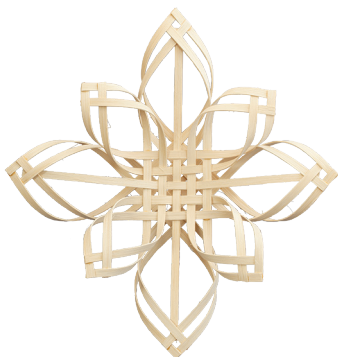
It’s as if someone told you most of your drowning family members can get on the rescue boat, but not all of them. So, the pleading continues. Puerto Rico may have been spared by one hurricane this season, but another one ravaged the country. With this psalm, we are reminded it is good to be grateful for the mercy that has been received, all the while yearning for and believing in the grace and depth of saving that will hopefully come to be.

Dear Lord,

Please help us to remember to praise You in our many and varied storms of this life. May our prayers of hope strengthen our relationship with You and also help steady and ground us for the storms that are, will be, and those that will eventually pass. In Jesus’s name, Amen.

Paige Alam

Student from Austin, Texas



“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.” These are the words the Apostle Paul uses to sum up all that he has written to Titus thus far. Titus was tasked with oversight of ministries on the island of Crete, during which time certain Christians began to argue that certain ritual acts and bodily signs, circumcision in this case (1:10), were required to be invited into the body of Christ. Paul reminds Titus that adherence to religious codes and social regulations can never be the criteria for one’s status as believer.

Unlike the (religious) laws of the land, the grace of God offers salvation to all. This core conviction prompts Paul to admonish Titus to act as an overseer in God’s household, whose primary task is extending hospitality to all as a sign of God’s gracious character (1:7-8).

Even today, God exhorts us to assume this basic existential posture; theologian Jay Emerson Johnson argues that our “peculiar faith” calls us to assist in the divine work of home-building and inviting everyone in for homecoming. This way of being is a reflection of God, the Divine Home Economist, “who longs to see all members of the household thriving and flourishing” (Johnson, *A Peculiar Faith*).

In a time when even Christian morality has become more about obeying moral laws than about love, the call to be householders is all the greater. In both private and public worlds, all should thrive, flourish, and experience a sense of belonging in the Body of Christ. Our Christian faith thus calls us to be at home among others, at home in our bodies, and at home with God, all at the same time. And as the old saying goes, “housework is never done.”

Lord, you said in your word that you went to prepare a place for us. Let the labor of our hands and bodies on this side of heaven be a reflection of your labors in the hereafter. And with such efforts, may we birth new bodies, ones more reflective of your love for all creation. Amen.

Asante Todd (MDiv’06)
Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics

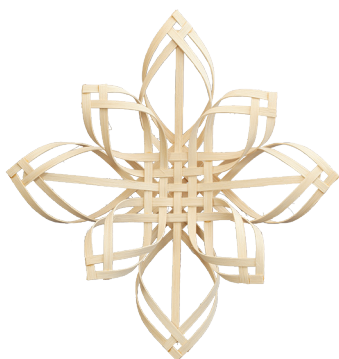
Advent is nearing an end. As we finally approach Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, it is easy to look forward to the “already” and to prematurely let go of the “not yet.” But the Apostle Paul concludes his letter to the Romans with a sending into the world that provides praise to the same God of the ages. The church in Rome is called to the faith that is necessary to thrive in the tension of remembering Christ has come, while awaiting the Christ who will come.

Although we find ourselves in the busiest days of the year, let us first remember that we light the love not only as we “countdown” to the celebrations, but also because we remember the love of God throughout all the ages, and we look forward to God’s return in the fullness of time.

Just like the Romans whom Paul was sending into the world with the conclusion of his letter, we live into the familiar ache of anticipation that Christians have felt since Christ’s ascension. Let’s not get too caught up in the hustle and bustle to give praise to the God who is and was and is to come.

Loving God, We give you praise for your mighty and merciful acts of the ages past. We give you praise for your acts still to come. Help us to live, intentionally, into the beautiful mystery of the time to which you have called us as your people. In Jesus’s name, Amen.

Chelsea McCutchin
Student from Lakeland, Florida



Names of people and places saturate this familiar story, reminding us that the details of time and place are significant to understanding who Jesus is. Jesus's birth occurs during the reign of a particular emperor and governor. His parents, who hailed from Nazareth, had to journey to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home. Born to an unwed couple, in a manger meant for livestock rather than babies, Jesus comes into the world at a pivotal time—when Roman power is exerting its force throughout the Mediterranean world—in a vulnerable state, when his parents can find no room in the inn. The names in this story remind us that Jesus, the Son of God, does not hover above history, lording over it without being affected by it, but enters into history, moved by the events of his time even as he changes them. Jesus, the Lord of all creation and time, has a particular story.

Each of us has a unique story as well: a story traced by struggle and pain, joy and laughter, intimacy and alienation, sickness and health, homecoming and exile, life and death. Jesus enters history and takes our unique stories as his own, incorporating them into his story. On this holy night, we celebrate not only the birth of the Savior of the world, but also how he comes to know our stories better than we know them ourselves. Jesus comes in the flesh, to a particular time in history and thus makes us able to understand *our* stories in the context of *his*. His is the story that gives life to the world. The great Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, in *Christmas Eve: A Dialogue*, writes, “Each one of us beholds in the birth of Christ his own higher birth.” Jesus comes to the world so that the radical reach of divine love might emerge anew in each one of us. Right here. Right now. Whatever the contours of our story, whatever chapters have been written, no matter how many remain, we find fulfillment in the story that takes place on this night: in Bethlehem and Boston; in a manger and in a refugee camp; in the midst of a storm and in the calm of a cloudless night. May the story begin anew. May we find a home in this ancient story where there is room for all.

Holy God, on this night of all nights, we give thanks for the way that the story of your Son incorporates each chapter of our stories, how you cherish each one of us in the overarching story of your love. Conform us more closely to that story, so that we might reflect some of that love in the world, tonight and in the days ahead. Amen.

David H. Jensen

Academic Dean And Professor in The Clarence N. and Betty B. Frierson Distinguished Chair of Reformed Theology

I hope, as you read these words, that there is joyful Christmas music in the background. Maybe something on the sound system—instrumental versions of the beloved carols of the season, or some Austin-themed soundtrack setting those carols to fiddles and squeeze-boxes and harmonicas, or maybe Willie Nelson crooning “Silent Night, Holy Night!” Or perhaps, there is still ringing in your ears some amazing anthem that your church choir performed just last night during midnight Communion. I hope there is music as you read these words.

After all, when Christmas comes it reminds us that the gospel of this God Who draws near to us in Jesus Christ is finally so joyfully and incomprehensibly delightful—so much so that our best theological constructs, our best arguments for the Incarnation, begin to melt away and can hardly be grasped unless we sing them. So it was that John the gospel-writer wrote what I believe is, at its root, a hymn: “In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being ... In him was life and the life was the light of all people

... The light shines in

the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth.” That’s not just scripture, not just theology. That’s music!

The Jesus born into our midst today invites us, over and over again, to take part in what God is restoring.

How can we not sing at Christmas—or, for that matter, in any season of the year—when, whatever our circumstances, we are in touch with some evidence of God’s breathtaking initiative to come and dwell with us? Whatever our circumstances!

Back in September, I watched a video on my *New York Times* app. Just a few minutes long, it followed a man—his hair all akimbo, his pants stained with dirt, his tee-shirt drenched in sweat—as he walked around his yard and his home on one of the Florida Keys. In the background were overturned cars, ponds of sea-water covering what had been his yard, and so much more of the evidence of Hurricane Irma. The man was narrating tearfully as he walked. “In this garage [its walls were blown away] I kept an antique chest-of-drawers that once was my grandmother’s. It had held a number of

keepsakes I wanted my children to have someday. Now it's all gone. There is nothing. But I'll stay here; this is still home."

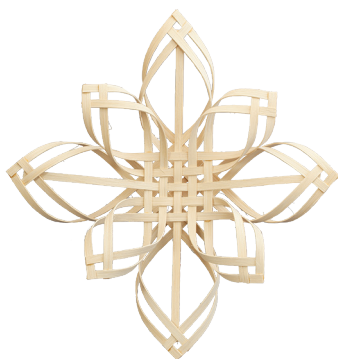
"This is still home," he said. A ruinous landscape, but he's not leaving. On this day, God is drawing near to him, too. God is breaking into the middle of his circumstances, just as God is drawing near to us, and the light shines once more into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!

The Jesus born into our midst today invites us, over and over again, to take part in what God is restoring. He invites us to believe that the world is headed somewhere good, and that we're being born into a story that is still being written. Long-awaited, He is here now to companion us as we seek to follow Him. He is the One, as Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "Who is made out of the same stuff we are, and Who is made out of the same stuff God is, and Who will not let either of us go."

This is news that we can forever applaud, and believe, and sing.

Holy Christ, draw near to us today and uphold us in every circumstance that we may sing with the angels of your glory and your mercy. Amen.

Theodore J. Wardlaw
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Thank you for making this journey with our students, faculty, and staff. We hope that you are preparing the way for the Lord in your life as you read these meditations and prayers. And, we hope this Advent season is a meaningful one for you.

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