Advent:

What will you discover along your journey toward Christmas?
You are holding in your hands a gift from our community of faith to you. We at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary are devoted to preparing outstanding leaders for Christ’s church. One of the ways that 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.

It’s what we are all waiting for ...
We are called to see the world through the frosted windowpanes of nostalgia and memory. It is, after all, a “wonderful life,” isn’t it? Turn away from the broken systems, broken cities, and broken lives around us. It’s Christmas. Lighten up.

Advent is made of sterner stuff. Like the prophet Jeremiah of today’s reading, the season of Advent calls us to reality. For Jeremiah, the reality was impending destruction, the razing of Jerusalem. We, too, must see the world as it is. Like Jeremiah, we must name those places where, as Yeats once wrote, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”

But facing reality does not lead to despair, for Advent is built on hope, hope in God and hope in God’s promises. Only in light of that hope can Jeremiah face a city about to be pillaged and prophesy that God will once again establish a just ruler in Jerusalem. Only with a hope stronger than nostalgia and “Christmas Spirit” can Jeremiah declare that, one day, the Holy City will be justified by the Creator of heaven and earth.

As Christians, we claim the fulfillment of God’s promise in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. But, we claim even more. Looking soberly at the world through Advent-colored eyes, we claim our own sturdy hope. We hope in a God of restoration, a God who once more will break into this world and bring justice, like a branch stubbornly rising from an old stump. Advent calls us to stand in the midst of a broken world, with hope on our lips, proclaiming “the days are surely coming, says the Lord …”

Inbreaking God, draw us away from frosted window panes. Call us to pay attention to a hurting and broken world that you so love. Fill our lips with the proclamation that you will restore all of creation through Jesus Christ, your branch and our hope. In his name we pray, Amen.

Margaret Aymer
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT
Over the past four years, I have experienced monumental awakenings due to two births. The first delivery occurred when Tammara, my wife, and I celebrated the birth of our twin boys, Clay and Toby. The other, not a physical birth but a spiritual one, has been the unexpected gifts as a result of my attending Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Interestingly, both pregnancies could measure the step-by-step developmental process of the child or children being carried; doctors referred to the trimester process; while administrators reviewed semesters. Both systems gave detailed information about the rate of growth, parental safety, and expected delivery date. Similarly, these prolific labors of love, learning, and understanding included joy and pain. Whether receiving news that one child has a hole in his heart or the constant agony of self-doubt, I am learning success also includes both joy and pain.

As one analyzing the content of David’s Psalm 25, I see that David pleaded for the Lord to forget his past reckless and selfish lifestyle as a youth and to renew his view of the new person David had become. He asks God to judge his life according to mercy. I, too, have asked for this blessing. David demonstrates his trust by waiting on the Lord. As a result, David’s heart and soul bring forth a life indicative of faith.

It is critical that we reflect on the continuous struggle humanity faces daily in a world where happiness, success, and victory reside, yet, at a moment’s notice, tragedy or disaster can occur. Because of our faith and relationship with the Lord, Christians anticipate great results from prayer. I want to encourage you this Advent season to put your hope in the Lord, like David. Regardless of age or circumstance, embrace David’s words, “On thee do I wait all the day.” These simple words, lived out, allowed David’s heart to experience a new beginning.

In like manner, if you believe that the Hope of the world was born in a manger, these powerful words will do the same for you.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for new beginnings. Thank you for Jesus Christ and the hope He brings. Help me understand that hope is not a thing but a person. Father, clean my heart of selfish thoughts and hidden agendas, and create a desire to be filled with divine potential in order to bring forth a new beginning. Amen.

William West Sr.
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN
A few years ago, I attempted to make a commitment to write letters to old friends, acquaintances, and mentors as part of a Lenten discipline. Remembering the mysterious ways these relationships have touched and shaped my life created an urge in me to reach out those I loved in this personal way. I wrote only a handful of cards and actually mailed out even fewer. While I loved receiving handwritten letters and cards out of the blue, I could hardly muster the words or the energy to give the gift that I so loved receiving. With the abundance of technological tools I now have at hand, emailing, texting, or even “liking” a Facebook status have become sufficient substitutions for communicating with others.

Yet, it seems for Paul that even a letter was an insufficient way of conveying his love and care for the Thessalonians. Paul feels he and his colleagues “were made orphans by being separated” from the Thessalonians, and he longs “with great eagerness too see you face to face” (1:17). Paul is fully aware of the interconnectedness of their lives. The Thessalonians have come to know the love of Jesus Christ because of Paul’s ministry, and the Thessalonian’s faithfulness have inspired Paul to continue in his labor.

Do the faith and faith journeys of other people inspire us to increase our love for God and for one another? How can we let people know that they have touched our lives in some way? Filled with a deep and profound sense of compassion for his companions and fellow Christ followers, Paul offers his words when he would rather offer his presence.

Through his words, Paul speaks what commentators often call a “prayer-wish,” a prayer embedded with the desire that the words spoken would become a reality. When it seems a personal encounter is not possible, and when the words of a letter cannot fully convey or contain what you long to share with loved ones, perhaps the next best thing is to pray. Pray passionately, earnestly, and without holding back any of the wishes you have for those who have impacted the way you notice God’s presence in your life today.

O God, who intimately weaves our lives together, increase our love for one another. O Lord Jesus Christ, abide with us, bearing witness to the joys and sorrows endured in this life. O Holy Spirit, fill us with abundant grace, healing, soothing, and strengthening our bodies for the glory of our Creator. Amen.

Kathy Lee
MDIV / MSSW STUDENT FROM NEW ORLEANS
The baby in the manger. It’s what we are all waiting for. The adorable nativity scene with Mary and Joseph standing in the barn, the sheep and camels hanging out with the wise men, the star twinkling in the sky that showed everyone that the world was about to turn. It’s awesome. It’s amazing. It’s a miracle. But. It’s not here yet. And so we wait.

Waiting is an anxious time, filled with anticipation of what’s to come. We can fear the unknown or we can embrace it straight on. In these passages we are reminded that Jesus’s words will never pass away, and that we should be on watch.

As we enter this stressful holiday season, let us take time to remember what we are waiting for—Immanuel, God with us. Jesus told his disciples to look at the fig tree in order to be reminded of that the Kingdom of God is near. As we take time to dig out the artificial Christmas tree from our basements or get jostled in the crowd while trying to pick out the perfect live tree, may we remember that the Kingdom of God is near to us. Let us remember it while making lists, visiting family, and shopping for the perfect gift. For we know that among the chaos there is peace that can be found. We know that the Kingdom of God is near to us. We know that the Almighty God will never leave or forsake us. We know that the birth of Jesus Christ is worth the wait.

Almighty God,
As we await with anticipation the birth of your Son
Remind us that the Kingdom of God is near
Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Amanda Mackey
MDIV STUDENT FROM SHAWNEE, KANSAS
In the midst of graphic imagery and harsh correctional tools, we meet an aggressive God in this fourth chapter of Amos. This God is determined to be recognized, resolute to be heard and returned to, and willing to take drastic measures to ensure a reunion with Israel. Amos speaks to the Israelites not in exile, but in economic prosperity; for God’s people are distracted by tranquility and have forgotten to take care of the poor and destitute. It is not crisis but societal stability that is at the heart of this turning away from God’s will. God is crying, “Wake up! Wake up!” to a people who have drifted away in pride and self-aggrandizement.

This holy season of Advent is the time when our grace-giving God still cries, “Wake up!” And yet, we continue to sleep. Wake up! This is a season of confession: for our overwhelming obsession with consumerism, for our participation in unjust systems of oppression and racism, for our failure to treat others as children of God, for the havoc we have wreaked on creation. Wake up! This is a season of reflection and thanksgiving: for a God of love who does not leave us alone, for a world that is constantly re-creating, for forgiveness and renewal, for looking toward incarnation.

The incarnation that we wait for and anticipate is longed for by all people. Waiting in the darkness of this broken world, asleep to the cries of our God, our neighbors, and our world, let us hope and pray for a wake-up call. As a child of God who lives and breathes on this earth, how might you wake up to hear God calling to you? As a nation with great economic privilege, how might we wake up to the inequality and systemic sin inherent in the globalized world? As a church shaken by division and conflict, how might we wake up to the way forward in unity? Do not be distracted, for God is crying out, and it is time to awaken.

God who speaks, whether through a still, small voice or a clamoring shout to arise and follow, you find a way to speak in our lives. In this season of anticipation, wake us up to your vision, your will, and your kin-dom. Amen.

Jessie Light
MDIV STUDENT FROM MISSION, KANSAS
In this advent season of preparation and self-reflection it is challenging to read such a passage from the book of Jude. Jude lays it out and tells with stark honesty the sins that surround us, ones we often find ourselves engrossed in. How do we rectify this account and use it to prepare for the coming of the Messiah? Many choose to ignore the book of Jude because of its bombastic speech. Yet Jude is worth reading and has something to say.

Jude quotes the prophet Enoch, reminding us, “See, the Lord is coming…”

Focus on the word “See” in this text.

Gaze around you and observe a world filled with slander, licentiousness, immorality, and grumbling. From the grocery store to the highway to the news; our world is not a pleasant place. In fact, it is all too easy to get sucked into the despair of society's darkness, pain, and suffering. From church shootings to cities in total disarray over inequalities, this is the society we live in. Jude's message is still relevant today! See.

In this Advent season we have been called to take notice of this “ungodliness” and prepare the way, contend for the faith. But how might we even fathom to do such a thing? Jude states in his salutation: may mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance (v. 2). Perhaps this is the answer! This is how we, as God’s beloved, can prepare the way. Jude and Enoch have opened our eyes to see! In this season of preparation focus on how you can be courageous, bold, and fervent like Jude. Think of ways in which you might show mercy, peace, and love to this dark world. For we are abundantly rich and can illustrate to this world that our faith can and will prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

Loving God, you have taught us to not look blindly on the issues of the world, but to see and work towards change. Help us to do your will, fill us to the brim with your mercy, peace, and love. We are eager for the coming of your beloved Son. Use us to prepare the way. Amen.

Meagan Findeiss

MDIV STUDENT FROM ORANGE PARK, FLORIDA
December 5

Matthew 22:15-22

It seems like a pretty simple instruction, doesn’t it? Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s. Totally straightforward. Caesar’s face is on the coin, after all—what could be more obviously his?

But, then again, “the earth and everything in it—the world and all who live in it—belong to the Holy One.” (Psalm 24:1) Surely a coin falls into the category of “everything on the earth!” It does seem like a simple instruction but (like most things with Jesus) things are not simple nor are they as they appear. Caesar might claim dominion over certain aspects of his citizens’ lives, but Jesus is (maybe with just a hint of sarcasm) reminding us that, ultimately, our loyalty is not to the empire.

We live lives in which the Caesars of our day demand more and more of our loyalty. The imperial forces of the 21st century—white supremacy, dehumanizing consumerism, patriarchy, nationalism—attempt at every turn to lure us into a life of alienation from God and our neighbor. We are tricked into giving our attention, our energy, and our sympathy, not to that which feeds life and love, but to powers of death and destruction.

This Advent, as we prepare for the coming of the our sibling and savior Christ, let us examine our lives for the ways in which we have given our allegiance to the powers of empire. Let us re-commit ourselves to be citizens of the commonwealth of God.

Eternal Friend,
who with love and grace invites our allegiance,
strengthen us to resist empire and all its powers,
so that we might live abundant lives in solidarity with all your beloved children,
we pray in the name of the One Who Was and Is and Is to Come,
Amen.

Daniel Williams
MDIV STUDENT FROM ALBUQUERQUE
& PRESIDENT OF THE STUDENT BODY
Advent is a time of preparation for the birth of the Christ child. The Gospel of Luke says that John went into the region around Jordan preparing the way for Jesus and preaching so that “all people will see God’s salvation” Luke 3:6.

Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus who was to come after him, so are we invited to prepare the way for others. Have you ever made preparations for a special guest in your home? Did you clean or decorate? As part of the preparations for Advent we decorate our house with a wreath, lights, and a Christmas tree in anticipation of the Messiah. While I have done this ritual since I was a child, at no time did this preparation take on more meaning than when we were missionaries in Cuba.

Under Cuba’s socialist government in the 1990s, Christmas was not a recognized holiday. When we decorated our home for Advent, all the neighbors stared at us. At the time Christmas was not a recognized holiday. We didn’t even have a Christmas Eve service at church because everyone had work or school the next day. Looking back, our decorations were rather modest, but we must have appeared to our neighbors like Danny DeVito in Deck the Halls. Nevertheless we felt that it was important to witness to our faith and keep our kids home from school on December 25th to read the Christmas story. I’m sure they didn’t mind—especially if it was to open gifts!

Since leaving Cuba we have stayed in touch with former parishioners and heard reports of the amazing church growth. The year after we returned to the States, the Cuban government recognized Christmas as an official holiday. We don’t know if decorating our home and celebrating Christmas as a family made a difference or if our house was anything more than a spectacle to our neighbors. More than our house, I’d like to think that our witness and our lifestyle invited people to want to know more about Christianity.

Just as we decorate our homes for Advent, and prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ-child, during this season of preparation I invite you to live your life in a way—just as John the Baptist—that all people can see God’s salvation.

Dear God, may our life and witness prepare the way so that others may know salvation in Christ Jesus.

Philip Wingeier-Rayo
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EVANGELISM, MISSION, AND METHODIST STUDIES
Psalm 126

One of a collection of poems—Songs of Ascent—perhaps used by the faithful on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Psalm 126 weaves together themes of restoration, rejoicing, and praise.

References to the “fortunes of Zion” that the “Lord restored” evoke the return from Babylonian exile, though many post-exilic texts of economic hardship and disunity paint anything but a picture of joyous return. The opening idiom, suggesting a restoration or bringing back of an earlier situation, causes interpretive problems—any number of “restorations” are implied.

As this year winds down we are reminded of the many ways in which we long to be restored—the many ways daily images of economic hardship and disunity wear us down, the many ways we have become captive to the world, the many ways we have lost hope.

The promise of Advent restores us as we continue our pilgrimage and reminds us of our heritage—we are the heirs of a people of faith. We inherit the faith of those who looked past the appearances of the arid conditions in the Negeb, knowing that its “watercourses” would overflow immediately following the rains. As a people of faith we affirm, despite appearances, that the light does shine in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

We hear the call of the psalmist this Advent season, the call to remember our heritage and be like dreamers—those whose lives are shaped not by outward appearances, but by the hidden reality of the life that is the light of all people. Advent reminds us that the birth of Jesus Christ attests to this reality—God’s world and ways—entering into our lives, “filling our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy.” We rejoice knowing “those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.” We reaffirm that “the Lord has done great things” for us.

Eternal God of all of us: Restore us this Advent to new life in you. As we remember the great things you have done for us and celebrate the wonder of this season, may we be the ones who dream, whose mouths are filled with laughter and whose tongues shout with joy. Amen.

Linda Whiteside
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN
Some folks may question why a reading from the Book of Revelation is included in an Advent devotional. “Isn’t John’s Revelation about the end of the world? What does that have to do with Christmas?” Two points to be made here: 1) Yes, the book of Revelation is about the future—but it is also about the here and now. 2) This apocalyptic writing has everything to do with how we experience the God who comes to us at Christmas.

In today’s reading, the prologue and initial vision, John uses one particular phrase twice. Whenever that happens we recognize it as a clue worth paying attention to. John uses the phrase “Him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1.4 and 1:8) as a threefold name for God. Obviously this is a reference back to Exodus 3:14 where we read about God revealing the divine name to Moses as “the one who is.” This threefold name for God is repeated several other places in the Book of Revelation, thus emphasizing its importance for the understanding of the reader. We are being told that this revelatory vision is about the God who was with us back then, is still with us today, and shall be with us in the future; the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

During this season of Advent, as we prepare our hearts and homes for the annual celebration of Christmas, we recognize that Advent is a time for looking back at the past, being fully present in the here and now, even as we anticipate with longing hearts a fuller and more joyful tomorrow. Our God is “Emmanuel,” and our celebration of Christmas testifies to our belief that God was with us, is with us, and shall be with us forever and ever.

O Lord, Our God, we confess that you are the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of all. As we reminisce about days gone by, even while preparing to once again celebrate the birth of your Son, help us to be faithful in our remembering, celebrating, and anticipating your presence amongst us. Amen.

Al Krummenacher
DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE
In this text, Zechariah joyfully sings a song of praise to the Lord, God of Israel. Why is Zechariah filled with such joy? Let us examine his circumstances. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were old in age. Elizabeth had been barren for years. Despite their hardships, they were careful to obey God’s laws in spirit, as well as in letter. They prayed for a miracle and God answered their prayers at the appointed time. Zechariah received a visitation from an angel of the Lord, telling him that Elizabeth would have a son. But, Zechariah failed to believe the message.

How often do we respond with disbelief when God informs us that our breakthrough is on the way? At times it might be difficult for us, especially when we operate in our human nature, to receive a prophetic message from the Lord. Regardless of our circumstances, God is able to activate miracles with our name on it. Once activated, it will reach us in due season! Because of disbelief, Zechariah suffered from a judgement of muteness for a season, but soon he would rejoice. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sang a song of praise, thanking God for answered prayers and divine revelation. Praises flowed from Zechariah’s mouth like rivers of water. Zechariah praised God for being a covenant keeper, a protector from their enemies, and for his child. Zechariah ended his song of praise magnifying God’s Sunrise, the One who illuminates each day with light from above. Jesus Christ is The Sunrise.

As we journey in life, we may encounter challenges that seem unbearable—chronic health conditions, dead-end situations, difficult relationships, financial pressures or even social prejudices, but don’t give up—pray without ceasing. No matter how dark the situation, look to The Sunrise, Jesus Christ our Savior.

During this season of Advent, let us be mindful to praise our loving God, who is sovereignly answering our prayers. With hearts filled with gratitude, let our songs of praise be lifted high as we anticipate the return of our Savior, Jesus Christ—who is The Sunrise, The Light of the world, our Horn of Salvation, and our Redeemer.

Come Holy Spirit, rain on us. Come Holy Spirit; fill us until we want no more. Let us repent and prepare the way of the Lord so that humankind can be saved through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Cheryl Wilson
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN
Year after year, decade after decade, we are still waiting. For what or whom do we wait? Yes, we know Jesus has already come into the world and that the Holy Spirit is God’s presence in our midst. But why does God seem so distant every now and then when we despair of what goes on in the world, in the church, and in our lives? Malachi’s times may not be that different from ours. Malachi is announcing the coming judgment of the Lord that will burn away all that is evil like a “refiner’s fire” and that will cleanse all that is impure like a “fullers’ soap.”

Malachi’s prophecy will finally be fulfilled when God’s Covenant with God’s people and all Creation is fully restored. Everyone will enjoy income equality. Human relationships will be respected and honored. The migrant, the refugee, and the marginalized will be welcomed and treated with dignity. The entire Creation will flourish because we will have learned to fear the Lord and to offer what is pleasing before God.

How much are we loved by God that God’s judgment is our salvation, that we are not consumed by the fires of suffering and affliction but we are being refined and reassured of the everlasting Covenant.

May we constantly and faithfully commit to be instruments of God’s peace that bring humanity back to a right relationship with God, with one another, with all Creation. How much longer? Let us return to God now so that God may return to us. The “Messenger” has already prepared the way.

God of mercy and love, “your judgments are true and just.” Give us the patience to continue waiting and the courage to persevere in our work and service so that “your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Lemuel García (MDiv’95)
DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI AND CHURCH RELATIONS
When reading through the epistles of the New Testament, it can sometimes be tempting to skip over the greetings and farewells. At first glance, they may seem of little consequence or importance, even comparable to the genealogies of the Old Testament. Perhaps they had some significance for the people mentioned therein, but they don’t have much relevance to us now. After all, they are specifically addressed to other people.

However, there is something profound in these greetings and farewells, something often overlooked: the fact that they show these epistles are personal letters. Oftentimes it is too easy to reduce the epistles to long lists of instructions, rules, rebukes, and theological arguments. The point of the matter is that Paul was not simply writing to his business partners or inferiors in Philippi; he was writing to his beloved friends with whom he shared the great difficulties and blessings of living the Christian life.

Since its very inception, Christianity has been about relationship and community. God has given us friends, families, and communities with whom we will always find love, belonging, and encouragement. Though it might not always feel this way, we must never be deceived. This life is not meant to be lived alone, so we mustn’t think it is or try to make it so. The grace of friendship and community is always to be found in the love of God.

So, as we live this Christian life, and especially in this season of Advent as we wait in patient expectation of the coming of our Lord, may we always remember that we do not do so alone. Indeed, we are found in a great company of friends, the family of God, the bride of Christ, with all the saints and angels, for whom our Savior will come again. Thanks be to God.

Gracious God, Giver of every good and perfect gift, from whom all blessings flow:

We thank you and praise you for the gift of friendship, the love of family, and the blessings of community. Fill our hearts with thanksgiving as we remember all those who have so blessed us; may they know how much we love them and appreciate their presence in our lives. Yes, fill our hearts to overflow, so the whole world might know your love and grace.

In the name of God who is love, God who is grace, and God who is peace: Amen.

Jesse Lee
MDIV STUDENT FROM ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN
Confusion. It happens often during Advent and the Christmas season: I’m glad you got the kids to the Christmas pageant rehearsal. Was it my turn?!? I think our kids are still at the after-school program. I will be right back. (Zooming to get the kids).

Confusion around who is picking up the in-laws from the airport or who’s coming to Christmas dinner might soon look like a scene from the family gathering in Home Alone.

Confusion happens for those who are gathered to celebrate with Elizabeth and Zechariah, too. Elizabeth was barren but now has given birth to a boy. Not just any boy, but the one who will prepare the way for the Lord. Yet, we spend our time with Luke discussing what name he shall bear. Surely the name of Zechariah, the family name, but instead we get a name from the Lord. He shall be called John. John? Not Zechariah?!

Holy confusion, if you will, takes place over a name for those gathered and for us during Advent. For God is doing new things and we are unaware of God’s movement as we hurry and bustle from one thing to the next, forgetting the importance of God preparing the way for the incarnation to change our lives once again this Advent season.

May we be ever mindful of God’s movement through the Advent season. A holy pause with Elizabeth, Zechariah, and those gathered to remember what is in a name especially when it comes from the Lord.

Holy God, the One who knows us by name, make us ever mindful of your presence this Advent season through John, the one who prepares the way for the Lord. May we celebrate even in confusion at the way you enter our lives. Amen.

Lisa Juica (MDiv’11)
ADMISSIONS ASSOCIATE FOR ECCLESIAL PARTNERSHIPS
I don’t think I want to “friend” John the Baptist, even if some people do think he might be the awaited Messiah. The “good news” sounds horribly onerous.

It must be said that, in answer to the multitudes, and the soldiers and tax collectors among them, his instructions are manageable and righteous. I can do those works, at least some of the time.

What struck me this time when I read through this passage and carried it around with me for a few days, was the phrase “the axe is laid to the root.” I imagine digging away at the base of the tree, exposing roots thick and tough stretching out into the surrounding soil, rooting out the rocks that dull the blade, and swinging away.

This is quite a bit more than being fair in our tax collections and sharing our coats. Those are the things that we must do, but down in the roots, down deep in the loam —this has to do with our essential being, our way in the world, not just our acts in the world.

In these days when we are hearing so much about racial inequality, income inequity, fear of immigrants and Muslims, and other issues of seemingly vast proportions, we know that sharing our coats and being honest in our money exchanges is not enough. There is something much deeper afoot here, something in the roots, in the darkness beneath the sod, among the roots that feed everything above. When we hear, as we all do, the blaming—j’accuse!—most of us are hard-pressed to know what to do. This little meditation is not going to answer that question—sorry. I’m still hunting myself (in both senses). But I hear John the Baptist. He tells the multitudes what to do, but then points to the roots, the seed. All the people question in their hearts, but they are questioning the wrong thing. They are wondering who he is when they should be wondering who they are.

John the Baptist is indeed preaching the good news, but I’m still not going to “friend” him.

Oh God, light in the darkness, shine and shadow, lead me deep, deep into the depths from which all life comes, all thoughts arise, all passions burst forth, and all love ignites. Shine your lamp in the cave of treasures that is my soul, for there are the right questions for which my life is the answer.

Whitney Bodman
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION
The season of Advent is one of joy and gladness for Christians all over the world. It is a time when we look with hopeful anticipation to the coming of Jesus Christ, our redeemer and sustainer. It is a reenactment of the anticipation that Mary and Joseph felt more than two thousand years ago as they awaited the birth of their first child, a child who would bring about amazing change in the world.

Perhaps what is even more amazing is that we are still celebrating this event more than two thousand years later. Despite the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms, the changing languages of the people, the continuous wars and destruction, and the loss of the majority of the scrolls and books from that time, we still come together every winter to tell the story of how God came to be one of us for a short time.

The reason we still tell this story is because we have seen, time and again, the power that God has had in our lives and the lives of believers who have come before us. As the Psalmist said, “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.” It is our desire to praise and celebrate the goodness and glory of God that leads us back to the Advent story.

It is sometimes difficult for us to remember in our consumer culture that we still tell the Advent story because each generation has made time to share the story, and with it the works and mighty acts of God, with the next generation. Many of us are blessed during this season with family, food, and gifts, but we must also remember the psalmist’s call to praise God’s name forever and ever, especially with our families and those whom we love.

O LORD, I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name. Great are you, O LORD, and greatly to be praised; your greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.

Amen.

Andrew Young
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN
I consider myself a woman of faith. However, it wasn't until one day when I was sitting in church did I realize that my faith was a bit shaky. I figured out that I wasn't truly trusting God. I discovered this when I got in the challenging position of praying then worrying, and again praying then worrying some more. On this particular day, I had some heavy burdens. During prayer time I realized that I would pray and pretend that I was giving my concerns over to the Lord, only to pick those concerns back up and carry them out the door with me and into my week. I was so worried and anxious about the potential outcome of my troubles that I got in God's way after making my requests known. Have you ever done that? It's as if I didn't think God heard me!

Philippians 4:4-7 speaks to this very challenging position we can sometimes put ourselves in. Not only do we have the opportunity to rejoice in the Lord always, but we should find comfort in the fact that we can make our requests known to God and therefore we don't have to be anxious and worried about our burdens. It is the opportunity for us to not just rejoice in the idea of God but truly embrace the reality and magnificence of God.

God, when we are anxious and worried, help us to remember you are at hand, ordering our steps and working the plan you have for our lives. Remind us to rejoice in your presence and the peace you extend to us.

Pam Owens
MDIV STUDENT FROM PFLUGERVILLE, TEXAS
We live our lives in the day-to-day. There are dishes to wash and laundry to fold, dogs to feed and children to get to school; there are phone calls to make and quotas to meet and ornery colleagues to contend with. We are advised by the work ethic of our day to keep our heads down, our eyes straight ahead, and our noses to the grindstone. That, we tell ourselves, is reality.

In the context of that reality, this text from John’s apocalypse explodes like a bomb. Amid a grey flannel world, John shows us the throne room of God, lit with an emerald aura, and seated there is One who glows with the green of polished jasper and blood red carnelian. Amongst the strangers on the bus, John gives us the twenty-four white-robed elders, one for each tribe of Israel and each disciple of Jesus, all casting their crowns into the glassy sea at the foot of the throne, in tribute to the One King seated there. Above the row of grackles perched on a power line and silhouetted against the morning sun swarm the angelic creatures, who chorus “day and night without ceasing” the sacred Trisagion: “Holy, holy, holy …”

There is a story about these creatures. Born of the sacred fires burning beneath the divine throne, the angelic creatures—elsewhere called seraphim, “the burning ones”—are no sooner alive than they are overcome with the wonder of God’s presence. Even as they cry out “Holy!” they are consumed by the sacred flames that gave them birth, returning beneath the throne to issue forth in holy conflagration yet again. So it is that the God of the universe is forever surrounded by a holocaust of holiness.

Part of the meaning of Advent is that it invites us to see another reality, one beneath and behind our quotidian existence. Advent opens our eyes to a universe of wonder around and beyond us, and bears witness that over it all reigns a Creator whose presence is so rarefied that even the angels detonate as they enter it. That is the God whose kingdom we anticipate this time of year. That is the God born to a peasant girl in the back of a barn on a mid-winter Palestinian night. That’s reality.

Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. Amen.

Paul Hooker
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR MINISTERIAL FORMATION AND ADVANCED STUDIES
There is almost a contagious excitement in the days right before Christmas. Most people are busy making last minute plans. Whether it be for travel, shopping, or dinner-making, everyone is on one accord, heading to the big day. I remember when I was a child being so excited for Christmas morning to arrive, I could barely contain my joy. I think I walked around with a permanent grin on my face, waiting for Christmas morning and all those nice shiny presents that would magically appear under the tree!

Sure enough, the morning would come and the presents were under the tree, as I had been assured they would be. My joy was uncontainable and I heaped praises and thanks upon my parents, who at that moment, were the best people in the entire world! There was always an unexpected present, something my parents knew I needed or wanted but had not asked for. That gift became my most treasured gift. I could not wait to tell my friends all the wonderful things I had received.

As I grew older and my faith walk with God became stronger, I began to understand that there was much more to Christmas then colorful Christmas trees and the shiny presents that lay beneath it. A Savior is coming. A Savior is coming and bringing my assured salvation, something I didn’t know I even wanted or needed. As I trusted in my parents when they said my gifts would be there, I could trust in my God that the promise of Jesus would be fulfilled.

Isaiah prophesied to the people that one day Jesus would come. On that day, the people would sing praises to God for their salvation. God’s name would then be known throughout the nations for all the glorious gift that God has done for them. There would be shouting and singing for the people would be filled with Joy, for salvation had come at last.

As we draw nearer to the time of Christ coming into the world as God has promised, let’s remember to look beyond the shiny things and sing praises to God for our Salvation and all God has done for us!

God of all nations, we praise your name. We give you thanks for fulfilling your promise to us and sending Christ into the world as a precious baby. A baby that would bring us salvation and a complete relationship with you. In this season of joy and merriment, help us to keep our eyes fixed on you. In Jesus’s name we pray, Amen.

Stephanie Butler
MDIV STUDENT FROM CIBOLO, TEXAS
One of my favorite activities during this time of year is driving around town looking at the Christmas lights that illuminate otherwise dark yards. My family tradition is to pack up mugs of hot cocoa and set off on our adventure looking for the lights with a sense of awe and wonder. There is darkness but we anticipate the lights. Sometimes we find a solitary spiral tree in a lawn and other times we find a few neighbors joining together to illuminate the block. Always the light shines in the darkness and brings smiles to our faces and joy to our hearts.

This time of year, as we approach the winter solstice, the days are short and the darkness of long nights seem to overtake the light. The solstice is the turning point, the point when there starts to be more light as the days become longer. At sunrise, we can see the sun rays bursting forth from the recesses of the darkness, painting the sky in a colorful spread of pink and orange and purple. The colors and lights of a sunrise always make the most elaborate of Christmas lights seem faint.

Sometimes, in our world we see overwhelming darkness. We see darkness in the business of the season, excessive spending, and expectations that don’t match our reality. We see darkness in the evil that separates us from the love of God. When we concentrate on the darkness, we forget that there is light. God’s gift given in love has brought light into our world. It is not like the light of a simple strand of Christmas lights. It is the overpowering, darkness-busting light of the Christ child bursting forth pushing out all darkness.

This Advent season, where are we expecting to see the light? Are we only looking for the light in the small acts of kindness like the tiny touches of an illuminated spiral tree? Are we expecting the light of community that can be found as we gather together? Or do we have that sense of awe and wonder as we expect the light of God to burst forth on the horizon, pushing out all darkness, and painting the recesses of our world? God’s gift of love is that brilliant type of light.

God of Light, we give you thanks for the ways that your gift of love illumines the dark places of our lives. Help us to have a sense of awe and wonder and we rest in the anticipation of your dawn. Amen.

Adrienne Zermano
MDIV STUDENT FROM BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS
As we approach the final days counting down to Christmas, we are bombarded with the message that bigger is better. The gift-giving bug of “Commercialized Christmas” has been biting, and it has left behind an infectious message: small and insignificant does not matter.

This could not be further from the truth.

We often sing a familiar holiday hymn during this time of year whose title describes the littleness of Bethlehem. At times we forget that the little Bethlehems we encounter are exactly what God can use to bring forth the prophetic narratives that are our spiritual walk. It is through the small and insignificant that life-shaping and -shifting miracles occur.

Bethlehem was a significant place. It is a city in the hill country of Judah, a place where Jacob’s wife, Rachel, died and was buried. Bethlehem was the birthplace of David and was also the place of his anointing as king by Samuel. In Micah 2:2-5 it was distinguished above every other city as the birthplace of the God-promised Messiah.

As we move through this season, let us be mindful that we are never too small or insignificant; all of our lives matter and we can make a huge difference. It is through our faith in Christ our Redeemer that we can spread Love, Hope, and Joy, as well the Good News of Christ Jesus to those who are feeling small and insignificant during this particular time of year.

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the paths of your only begotten Son: that we may worthily serve you with hearts purified by His coming: Come quickly, Lord Jesus, who lives and reigns with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Matt Edison
MDIV STUDENT FROM HOUSTON
In those days”—this passage begins just after we read about Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, that she is to bear God’s son into the world.

Can you imagine just what “those days” must have felt like for Mary? Probably more than a little hectic and stressful, not to mention all the crazy ways her body must have been changing in the early stages of her pregnancy. “In those days Mary set out and went with haste.” I can imagine her running to her relative Elizabeth’s house, hurrying, but not knowing why. Perhaps Mary was going in haste because she wanted reassurance from Elizabeth that what was happening to her body was normal, and that this message from an angel that told her she would be carrying God’s child was actually a good thing (even if not normal). Who knows why Mary went with haste, but we can relate to that sense of rush, particularly during the Christmas season.

But what does Elizabeth tell Mary? “Blessed are you!” Mary was declared to be a blessing, and that part of that blessing came from believing “that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

As we hurry through our lives, I hope you can take a moment to still your body and to lift up your heart to God, to trust that the promises God has spoken will be fulfilled. In Advent, we prepare our hearts for Christ and for his coming again, and we put our trust in God that the promises of new life and peace on earth will be fulfilled, for it is in believing that this fulfillment will take place that we share in Mary’s blessing, and that we help give birth to Christ’s presence in the world.

Gracious God, still our anxious hearts. As we rush around during this holiday season, remind us that this is not all there is, that you will come again to bring to fulfillment the promises you have made most visibly in the Gift of Jesus Christ. Bless us as you did your servant Mary, helping us to believe that what you have spoken to us will come to fulfillment. Amen.

Carolyn Browning Helsel
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS
At this time of year we are preparing ourselves for the birth of Christ into a broken and imperfect world. Not as a king or mighty warrior, but as an innocent child. This story leads us on a journey where people from all over the known world are being counted. This is no easy task, much less with Mary being pregnant and still not married to her fiancé. They find themselves unworthy and unable to stay in any suitable place, for the birth of their child is a very near thing. Yet, behold, there is a stable in which they can reside for the time. With this birth we find that the world will never be the same as it was before. Although coming into the world as an infant, Jesus is greeted by people ranging from shepherds to kings, each one traveling many miles just to see the child.

Fast-forward two millennia. We see that our world is once again not in a great place for peace or understanding. We find that people are fighting and moving all around the world to search for refuge and freedom. Meanwhile, back home, our televisions are filled with news of devastation and destruction, both on our home front and in foreign lands. Much like the writer of this passage, we find ourselves calling for help to God, who may seem to be angry at times. But, the good news is that we are sent a son who has come into this world to deliver us and bring us into a new life. Not as a powerful and mighty leader but through the act of teaching us to love and live as a united people. God has and continues to make us new again by continually showing us favor through Jesus Christ. Much like those from the text, we see people from all walks of life being called to seek out and meet a Lord who is waiting for them. With this reaching out we are given a chance to truly become new again.

Gracious God, as we await the birth of the Christ, we do so with the anxiousness about the world around us and the reality of our broken state. Let your face smile on us with favor so that the light of Christ may usher in a new life through Him, who reigns forever. Amen.

Treighton Haddon
MDIV STUDENT FROM BRUNSWICK, GEORGIA
We’ve made it to this year’s winter solstice. It is the longest night of the year in the western hemisphere. For Christians living in this part of the globe, any seasonal merrymaking tonight takes place at midwinter. In fact all the things we do this season that are associated with bright lights (shopping) or even candlelight and softer lights (parties, tree lighting) are set against the backdrop of longer nights. For us in this hemisphere the old Roman midwinter festival’s name, the Unconquerable Sun, Sol Invictus, has a resonance. Because, even though now the earth is in hibernation, we know what is coming: this planet will turn to face the Sol, the largest star in our solar system, in due time and our ground will produce crops because we will tilt towards the sun once again.

Advent is our Christian tilting. It is our turning again to the promises of the One Who is Coming. Some church traditions have special music set aside for this last week of Advent. Some of us have been marking off the scriptural names that came to be associated with these last days before the Nativity – finding in Old Testament titles words that hold meaning for the promise and nature of our Lord Jesus the Christ: O Wisdom!; O Lord!; O Root of Jesse!; O Key of David!; O Dayspring!; O King of the nations!; O God who is with us! (The hymn O Come, O Come, Emmanuel is a sung setting for these names for God). And today we hear the words from the letter to the Hebrews: “(And) it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” What do we tilt towards? Not just longer days or the sun’s heat or the fertility of the earth. We tilt, we lean toward the One who was in the beginning and who will come again and who, by his sanctifying death, perfects us.

O King of the nations! Your rule is justice and righteousness. By your good will bring peace to the nations. And make us sure of your presence that we may be provoked to love and good deeds even as we wait for the fullness of your reign.

Jennifer L. Lord

THE DOROTHY B. VICKERY PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS AND LITURGICAL STUDIES
These beautiful verses—the Magnificat—comprise one of my most cherished passages from the Gospel of Luke. Many generations of our families have come to know the Magnificat through participation in Christian worship and music over the years. When I read this canticle or hear the words set to music, I can palpably feel Mary’s gladness as if she were the neighbor in the pew beside me at church, telling me of the joy that awaits her through the faithfulness of God. This joy is twofold; it is the joy of new life within her at the same time that it is the joy of a promise fulfilled.

Insofar as Mary’s words reflect on her present circumstances, quality time with Elizabeth and the promise of the child in her womb, they are also prophetic. As one Luke commentator observes of the Magnificat, “so sure is the singer that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as accomplished fact.” Indeed, “to speak of what God has done is to announce what God will do.” Mary’s celebration of God’s mercy, provision, and justice towards the oppressed is our celebration. The salvation in store for Mary is our salvation, and we discover, as she did, that it comes in the form of a baby who is nurtured with human love. Our salvation lies in a humble child who will advocate for every one of God’s people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best when he wrote, “The infinite mercy of the almighty God comes to us, descends to us in the form of a child, His Son. That this child is born for us, this son is given to us, that this human child and Son of God belongs to me, that I know him, have him, love him, that I am his and he is mine—on this alone my life now depends. A child has our life in his hands.” We rejoice with Mary that this Son given to us has filled us with good things that we in turn will give to others.

Light of the world, whose coming filled Mary’s spirit with gladness, shine on in our hearts during this joyful Christmas season. May we, like mother Mary, proclaim the greatness of God as we share your light with others!

Meg Vail
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN
The middle of this passage, one of the most memorable of the Advent season, heralds the birth of a child. Children’s births are momentous events. They sometimes offer an answer to prayer; they often are accompanied by hope; they always bring about significant change. Parents, grandparents, siblings, and caregivers can attest to sleepless nights, radically shifted priorities, and a change in the pace of life—all because of an infant. Children change the world of those who care for them.

And sometimes a birth changes the world. Jesus’s birth occurred like countless births that happen every day around the globe. Far from home, an unwed teenage mother cannot find refuge in an inn and must give birth in comparative filth. One of the first questions that must have popped into her mind was, How will I feed and provide for him? a question that reverberates in mothers’ heads each day, whether in Austin or Afghanistan. In the midst of this worry, Mary also expressed hope, just like the hopes of other mothers throughout the ages. Perhaps she hoped that her child would have a life better than her own.

Yet the hope of this passage is for more than one mother’s child; it is hope that the child will be the change that the world desperately needs. His name will be Prince of Peace, a Wonderful Counselor who will establish endless peace. The birth of Jesus calls our attention to countless children throughout the world who are born into hopeless situations at the same time that it gives birth to hope.

Jesus comes to the world to bring peace—a peace that is not yet fully present among us. Jesus’ birth does not mean that all war and suffering are magically erased, but it does mean that war and suffering do not hold the final word. To witness the birth of Jesus is to witness peace born amid hopelessness and turmoil, to welcome the promise that one day peace will reign throughout all creation. This ordinary birth in an out of the way place is something truly extraordinary.

Gracious God, in Jesus Christ you have given peace to the world. Cure our madness and equip us to live as agents of peace in a world that still suffers the ravages of war. Amen.

David H. Jensen
ACADEMIC DEAN
The Nativity of Jesus Christ

“And [Mary] gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

This is the sentence from Luke’s version of the Christmas story that leaps out at me this year. And I’m taken specifically with these words, “no place.” There was no place for them in the inn. No Place.

When God decided to come down and be born into the world, and thus give us a clear picture of what Godness looks like, God got it all started by making a place out of what was essentially No Place. Or at least No Place Special. God got it all started by coming to people who were “displaced.” God bypassed all the expected points of entry and came instead to a truly forgotten corner of the world, and thus turned No Place into My Place.

This may be why Madeline L’Engle once wrote that her biggest problem with Christmas is God. “Cribb’d, cabined, and confined within the contours of a human infant. The infinite defined by the finite? The Creator of all life thirsty and abandoned? Why would God do such a thing?” she asked.

Why indeed, if not because of God’s outrageous, irrational, holy preoccupation with this place? This place—Bethlehem, a barn, a manger, some peasants—which is no place special … unless there is a God! This place—your town, your street, your living room, your tree, your family, your joys, your passions, your sorrows—not at all special or important … unless there is a God, who delights in making a dwelling there with you.

Once, years ago now, very close to Christmas Day, a plane crashed in the Andes mountains near Cali, Colombia. It had veered off course and had struck the top of a mountain and had burst into flames. It was assumed that nobody could have survived the crash. But one man there at the airport, waiting for his nineteen-year-old brother who was arriving on that flight, managed to hitch a ride with rescue workers traveling the forty miles to the crash site. Once there, he told the workers, “Look for a man who looks like me.” Moments later, they found the brother—banged up pretty badly, but alive, one of the few who survived.

I think of that story here at Christmas. “Look for someone who looks like me.” At Christmas, we celebrate what happens when God goes looking for a host of someones who bear a divine resemblance. Which is all of us, of course.

And what God finds—in a place that is no place, really—is Mary singing lullabies to none other than the Son of God, none other than the Resurrection and the Life.
Until a whole lot of nobodies in a whole bunch of nowheres become placed in the mind and heart of God.

So Merry Christmas to you, in your place. For God has business there. Today we kneel at the manger and offer our worship, because our salvation has come. The hope of all the world lies wrapped in bands of cloth, in No Place Special. Rejoice and be glad, for God dwells here, too—in this terrible, wonderful, hair-raising, frightening, miraculous, tragic, painful, glorious, risky, redemptive Place.

O little Child of Bethlehem, dwell with and within us today and always. Make us useful in joining your holy purposes to ours in this very place. Amen.

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

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