In this Season

Reflections on Advent from the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary Community
Sunday, December 2
Jeremiah 33:14-16

Under royal surveillance, the imprisoned prophet Jeremiah lies in wait for a word of hope. The word from the Lord that Jeremiah receives moves him to see a world beyond the walls of his prison to one filled with the divine promise of a Redeemer. Indeed, in our observance of Advent, the spiritual practice of waiting is a significant part of our relationship with God. Like Jeremiah, we are waiting expectantly for the promised Redeemer.

For many of us, the place wherein we practice our Advent waiting may not be prison walls and the sounds of despair outside them. The warmth of family and friends that accompanies our Advent waiting should, therefore, move us to a second important spiritual Advent practice of thanksgiving. We are thankful that God has planted in the ground of tomorrow the seed of a Davidic promise that is, indeed, soon to sprout amid this busy season. The fruits of this sprouting “righteous Branch” include executed “justice and righteousness.”

Although we may be stretched in many different ways during Christmas, the prophet’s words invite us to be mentally and spiritually present in the precious moments we have with family and friends. In this hope of the Messiah, we also believe that imprisonments will be transformed into places of safety, peace, and liberation.

As we celebrate Advent, may these prophetic words not only transport us to a future promise but also ground us in a message of hope and thanksgiving. As Jesus proclaimed to his disciples, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Blessed are You, Lord our God, who gives us breath.
We gather today to offer you songs of praise and thanksgiving.
For you have comforted us with the falling rain
And have shown us compassion in our suffering.
May we feel from this momentary encounter the warmth of your eternal grace.
May the joy of our salvation move us closer to your love.
Heal our troubled hearts with your healing touch
Allow your Holy Spirit to render our egos powerless.
We pray this in Christ’s name, Amen.

Gregory Lee Cuéllar, PhD
Assistant Professor of Old Testament
As I read this psalm out loud, I imagine Mary sitting across the room, listening. She twists and turns. She can’t seem to get comfortable. The baby is lying on her sciatic nerve and pain is shooting down her left leg. She tries to get him to move by turning on her side and pushing on the little body. Please make this pain go away, she pleads. Please get this over with, she begs. But her mother has told her: All in good time. God’s time. You can’t make it happen. You wait and pray for some relief.

Psalm 90 puts words to this human experience of time. Like Mary, waiting for something to change her condition, we are bound to life measured day by day by relentless day of toil and trouble. For God, on the other hand, a thousand years go by as if they were a dream in a single night. In our life span, we hardly have a chance to make an impression on God. In fact, Moses suspects, what impression we do make is by our sins, sins that evoke the wrath of God.

Unlike most psalms of lament, which this one surely is, Moses’ poem does not make a final turn to thanking God for saving us. No. Moses leaves us waiting and praying for relief. He ends with a plea: Please make our work prosper! Please make our lives count for something!

Like Mary, sometimes we just sit and wait. But we know what Moses did not, that Mary’s baby—when he comes and when he comes again—will change our plight. God will see us differently through the glory of Jesus Christ.

Everlasting God,
This day we wait. It may be a day full of toil and trouble. It may be a day we prosper. I ask that your presence within me, whatever this day brings, remind me of the hope of Jesus Christ for me and also for all the people with whom I share this day. May I see them reflecting glory. Amen.

Melissa Wiginton
Vice President for Education Beyond the Walls at Austin Seminary

December 4
II Samuel 7:18-29

King David and God are in a really good place. God has just blessed David with victory over the Philistines. David has joined the people in expressing gratitude and joy, “dancing before the Lord with all his might.” Settling back in at home after the festivities, his continued exuberance spills over and into a desire to do something more to honor God. David decides he will build God a house—a house that will endure not only for a lifetime, not only for generations, but forever and ever.

But God rejects David’s idea. When has God ever needed a house? Instead of David building a house for God, God will build a house for David: a house that will be his home not only for this lifetime, but for generations to come.

How can it be that the God who does so much for us has promised even more? With David we are humbled; with David we are hopeful. We know we are unworthy, that this is pure grace. We ask for what has already been promised, exercising our invited audacity.

The One who promises to come is the Promised One who has no home. No room in the inn. No tomb but a stranger’s. No place to lay his head. He moves from womb to manger, from table to cross, from garden to lakeshore. He has no home but makes a home for us. He knows our need for space and care, and so prepares a place—a mansion. Many mansions. And he will come, and take us to himself. And we will be home—with him—forever.

Bounteous God,
Fill us, on this day, with the joy that comes when we recognize your blessings. Lead us to dance, and praise, and make excessive offerings even as you offer excessive gifts. Remind us that our home is in you even as we await your coming. Keep your promises, and give us the courage to claim them. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Cynthia L. Rigby
The W. C. Brown Professor of Theology
December 5
*Isaiah 1:24-31*

Recently I was staring at a picture of my children. There they were, three faces staring back at me, frozen in time. I began to wonder how and when they got to be so big and so independent. As I continued to stare at the picture I began to reflect back on our lives together and over our incredible journey we have shared thus far. As we prepare for the coming of the precious Christ child, Isaiah calls all of God’s people to likewise take a picture of their faith. We are called to stare at a picture of who we have become, and where we are now, as children of God.

We are also called to be reminded of who it is that created us and sent us on our way. It is in these moments, as we stare at ourselves, that we can identify how we have stayed the course, or where we find ourselves veering far off in one direction or the other. It is only in these sometimes difficult moments of reflection when we can truly ask God to purge our lives of the meaningless pursuits that become all-consuming.

Here in these snapshot moments we can once again ask of the Almighty, the One who is bigger than all of the faults and foolishness we see in ourselves, to purify us and again call us back to our created selves. We are reminded that Christ is coming, and with him comes the promise that no matter how far we wander, or where we find ourselves at that particular moment, God will scour and redirect us. Only then are we set free to continue our journey once again being called children of God.

*Holy One, we come to you now where we are in our lives; broken, lost, misguided. We come to you now where we are in our lives; full of love, faithfulness, and joy. We ask that you separate us from all that would lead us astray and purify us so that we may indeed be called your children. Amen.*

Lisa Rush
*Senior MDiv student from San Antonio, Texas*

December 6
*Malachi 3:5-12*

Today, December 6th, is the day we remember a great saint of the church. Many know this saint by his shorthand name, Santa Claus. But the name Santa Claus is related to an older name, St. Nicholas. And even though, at the mention of this name, our thoughts probably turn to images of reindeer and chimneys and a sack of gifts, there are other things to know about St. Nicholas.

Different stories about this saint tell us that indeed he was always a gift-giver. These accounts tell us that as early as the fourth century, this Bishop of Myra (southern Asia Minor) had the reputation of compassion for all the people within his jurisdiction of the church, especially for the needy. Old prayers of the church tell us that St. Nicholas was considered an exemplar of the faith because he provided care for orphans and widows, he fed the hungry and the poor, and he freed captives.

On this mid-week day in Advent we read the strong words of the prophet Malachi. The prophet pronounces God’s judgment against any who do not pay right wages to workers, who oppress the widow and orphan, or who cast aside the alien (v. 5).

Strong words indeed. We do well, in this time of preparing for the arrival of God on earth, to reflect on the fact that not only in modern times do we care for issues of justice and the well-being of all people, especially those on the edges of economy, security, and societal norms. Malachi, a prophet of God, said life in God looks like this. St. Nicholas, old saint of the church, lived exemplified such a life in God. Those witnesses stand before us today.

*In your mercy, Holy God, make us your land of delight through our actions on behalf of all the needy ones, that we may serve you all the days of our lives. In the name of the One whose arrival we await. Amen.*

Jennifer L. Lord
*The Dorothy B. Vickery Associate Professor of Homiletics and Liturgical Studies*
December 7
Philippians 1:18b-26

Leading into today’s passage, Paul speaks from prison to the early church with words that sound all too modern: “Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love ... the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives” Paul then says an amazing thing: “whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.” He even says it twice in case the readers/hearers can’t believe their ears. Yes, Paul rejoices even when Christ is proclaimed for the wrong reasons!

Can we, should we, rejoice when someone is using Christ and his birthday to market goods? Can we, should we, rejoice when someone we politically disagree with is touting Christ to support their agenda? Can Paul possibly mean such a thing? What better time than Advent to think about the use or misuse of the gospel message?

Paul has learned that God uses circumstances that seem like defeat to achieve greater success than we finite humans can understand. Paul’s point is central to the Christmas story. A baby born in poverty changes the world. A homeless man preaches a message that changes millions of lives. A man who experiences capital punishment is the savior of the world. No matter how “counterintuitive” the message, it is in God’s hands. In this season, we can proclaim, no matter how bad things look, that God has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ, to be present with us and to work God’s purpose out. These are tidings of great joy!

Oh God, who has expressed your great love for us by coming among us, grant us the firm and certain knowledge of your love for us in Christ, that we might know in our minds and in our hearts that we are yours, and all will be well. For it is in the name of Emanuel, God with us, we pray. Amen.

Gordon Blackmon
Middler MDiv student from Shreveport, Louisiana

December 8
Luke 9:1-6

In our Advent text today, Jesus sends out the disciples to go and do miraculous things. The twelve are sent out fully humbled, as Jesus has instructed them to take no possessions with them; he has stripped them of all security. They have no staff for walking or protecting themselves from wild animals, no travel bag with changes of clothes, no bread to eat, and no money to spend. They are without any basic needs, instead they are given the ability to do miraculous things and “proclaim the kingdom of God.”

In our churches and in our own lives, we sometimes get stuck because we don’t think we have what we need to do God’s work in the world. We are constrained by budgets and lack of resources to do this miraculous work of Jesus Christ.

This Advent season, let us ponder what is hindering or blocking us from “proclaiming the kingdom.” We all have human boundaries that protect us from doing crazy things like leaving all necessities of food, shelter, and safety behind. However, in the gift of this miraculous birth of God as a human, we are no longer constrained to earthly means. God has given all of us gifts to do miraculous things in the world.

What is your gift and how is it manifested in miraculous ways? How do you proclaim the kingdom and honor the infant babe, who changed the world forever?

Great Light of the world,
We thank you for your gift of the infant Jesus, the gift that is beyond exceptional.

Grant us the courage, Great God, to proclaim the kingdom, to do good works in your world in faith and not fear.

Thank you for this time of Advent to reflect on the many gifts you have given us and to remember our role in your mission to the world. Allow us to be a part of that mission in bold ways.

We pray this in the name of your son, Emmanuel, God with us. For we know that you are with us through the Holy Spirit and the person of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Kimberly Rogers
Senior MDiv student from Pipe Creek, Texas
Sunday, December 9

Luke 1:68-79

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.”

After months of being rendered mute, Zechariah, an old man who has finally been blessed with a child, can once again speak. And the first words out of his mouth—are a blessing to God! He didn’t begin by berating God for taking away his ability to speak. He didn’t even begin by cooing to his newborn child or talking to his wife. Nor did he spew out an eruption of everything he had not been able to say for so many months. No, Zechariah’s first words were words of praise for God, the Creator. Zechariah had his priorities in order. First, he blessed (praised and thanked) God.

Following months of muteness, when his ability to speak returned, Zechariah first praised God, then told his newborn child what that child’s role in God’s ongoing creation was to be. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, had an important job in his religious community. And John the Baptist came into this world with a special, important task before him. “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76-77, NRSV).

God has mercy (forgiveness) for each of us—just as God has always promised. Because God forgives people in all times and places, people in every generation continue to share that good news.

Thanks be to God for God's continually unfolding creation, and for each generation’s—each person’s—role in the unfolding of that creation!

Lord God, move in the hearts of each of us so that we all may know first of all how much you love us; and then, what you would have us be and do as a part of your magnificent creation. Amen.

Karen Cotton
Senior MDiv student from Albuquerque, New Mexico

December 10

Psalm 126

O ur psalm for today was written at a time when Israel painfully felt the difference between current problems and the good old days when God brought the captives home from exile in Babylon. By comparison, the present was a time of tears. It is very easy for us to remember golden days when life was simpler, more people had a rhythm of worship and service, and we were joyfully optimistic. We can forget that the good old days of the church were often not so good for women and persons of color and the poor. To be sure, these days, life feels more complex. Many congregations now struggle when they used to be thriving centers for witness and service. I pray like the psalmist that God will restore our fortunes and give us joy. I am confident that God is God, despite our stumbles and triumph.

I wonder how much of our Advent waiting this year should be Advent searching. What if God is calling us not to return to ancient Zion but to go forward into countries unknown? What will we sow and reap? What does forward-leaning faith look like?

O Lord God, who has called us your servants to sow the Gospel even in tears, give us faith to bear witness to your divine love, not clinging to the past, but confident that your Gospel will bear fruit in the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Timothy D. Lincoln
Associate Dean for Seminary Effectiveness
Director of the Library
December 11
2 Peter 1:3

“[Jesus’] divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness.”

We spend much of the Advent season focusing on “needs.” We focus on what we “need” from others, what others “need” from us, and what we “need” to do to ensure that we enjoy the Advent and Christmas seasons. Personally, I always “need” some good-old-fashioned cash. I “need” to spend quality time with family members I hardly see anymore. I “need” to preside over vibrant worship services at the small congregation I serve in rural central Texas.

Occasionally, this season reminds us that many people throughout the world do not have a loving and supportive family. Many people also do not possess the material possessions to provide for their basic needs, let alone exchange gifts. Those of us who have these privileges occasionally give at least a small portion of what we have so that others may also experience the joy of the Advent and Christmas seasons.

While one should practice generosity to loved ones and strangers, focusing on material needs misses the point of the Advent and Christmas seasons. Second Peter 1:3 reminds us that Jesus Christ gives us all we need “for life and godliness.” During Advent, we celebrate Christ’s birth and wait for Jesus Christ to come again, since it is Jesus Christ who points us to the path of new life, to a lasting relationship with the one true God who creates, redeems, and sustains us and all of creation. When this letter was first written, many Christians had very few, if any, possessions to speak of, much like many modern Christians throughout the world today. Yet as they longed for the day when Christ would return, they knew that above all they needed a relationship with the living God, which Jesus Christ offers each of us. We would do well to take a break from fulfilling our various Advent and Christmas “needs,” and to remember that all our deepest needs get fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the one who was and is and is to come.

God of all creation, we thank you for providing for our deepest needs by coming into the world through your Son, Jesus Christ. Remind us, through your Holy Spirit, of our need to follow Jesus Christ, so that we may go out into the world and spread the good news of Jesus Christ through our words and deeds. Amen.

Joe Tognetti
Senior MDiv student from San Antonio, Texas

December 12
Isaiah 35:3-7

The thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah is one of the most glorious in all of scripture. It has been set to music innumerable times, most famously by Handel, but by others as well.

So whose idea was it to select only these five verses out of seventeen? We are left with less than a third of this celebrated chapter for our reflections today. By focusing only here, we are forced to do without the rejoicing desert, the glad wilderness, and the Holy Way in which the redeemed shall walk. I long for the ransomed to return with singing, and for sorrow and sighing to flee away! But it is not to be, at least for this day.

On this day, we have what we have. Even so, these verses are remarkable. Hear this: strengthen yourselves, and strengthen others, to prepare for the glorious return of God. Because when God does return, everything you thought was, will not be. Cunning jackals will be out of luck. Everything else will be brought to lush fruition. Healing, refreshment, and fullness of life will rule the day. Sounds like God, doesn’t it?

It’s notable that this same passage is used by our Roman Catholic kindred to mark Quinquagesima, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. It is also cited by a fair number of “end time preachers” whose work graces the World Wide Web.

Interesting, isn’t it, that Isaiah provides for us yet one more occasion for the eschatological to encounter the secular. During the season of Advent, we are tempted to rush to the manger and focus merely on the birth of a sweet child. Our society tempts us to rush to our favorite retailer and focus on the glories of consumption. And yet, once again, scripture draws us once again to pause and consider God’s grand design: the defeat of anything which would harm, and the restoration of every good gift to its intended fullness. Come, Lord Jesus!

O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery. Amen.

Sallie Sampsell Watson (MDiv’87)
Regional Presbyter, Presbyteries of Santa Fe and Sierra Blanca, and Austin Seminary Trustee
A few years ago a pastor from Kenya came to Alabama to thank churches in our region for mission efforts conducted over the past several years. One Wednesday night he came to the church where I worked and discussed his life of Christian service. He lived in a rural part of Kenya and amazed many of us when he shared that he served not one, not two, but six villages, spanning 100 miles at their farthest points. After he finished his reflections, the group was allowed to ask questions. It was at that point I naively asked, “You have a car, don’t you? There is no way you continuously walk from village to village.” The pastor paused, a sly smile began to form on his face, and then he bluntly replied, “Oh no, I walk.”

It is this type of devotion and passion that fuels the Advent expectation. The belief in the coming of the Christ child that fulfills the covenant ordained by God to the Israelites provides us the opportunity to long for something more than we know. Amos represents the belief in that covenant. He represents a fervor and commitment to a God tossed aside by a society which embraces decadence and selfishness. Amos’ Kenyan counterpart, on the other hand, has seen the ultimate act of divine providence, the coming of the Christ child. He represents the fulfillment of what has already come, and for that which we continue to yearn and seek. I think that is why he walked back and forth between those villages. He walked because he knew the birth of Jesus bestows a gift of grace, love, and presence to all.

This Advent season may we find comfort in the knowledge that God’s commitment and covenant to us is fulfilled through that which has occurred and that which we continuously walk toward. Amen.

Gracious God, as we continue this journey through Advent, may we be blessed by the fervor of your Word. The Word that tells us you are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Barrett Abernethy
Senior MDiv student from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and President of the Student Body

Giving is interesting. It is interesting because it is such a powerful act to give to others and such a powerful act to accept a gift. Giving and receiving embodies a relationship in which all involved are enriched for the better.

Take time and re-read 2 Corinthians 9:1-15 aloud. Then name all the meaningful times in your life when you have both given and received. When you are finished, sit in silence for five minutes and reflect on the impact that has made in your life.

This holiday season reminds us that God’s gift to all creation is Jesus. Christ teaches humankind how to live through the constant giving and outpouring of love in the form of donating time, resources, listening, and living out the life that the Bible calls us to live. When manifested in pure love, giving is a spiritual discipline that results in new life. It brings joy, hope, and happiness. This holiday season, continue to practice the spiritual discipline of giving and receiving. It is indeed an “indescribable gift.”

Giver of all life and beacon of hope in the darkness. Please allow us this holiday season, as we give to others and receive from others, to remember Jesus Christ as your gift to all creation and that we may be more disciplined in our faith. In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and Sustainer of all life, Amen.

Annanda Barclay
Middler MDiv student from Palm Coast, Florida
December 15  
*Luke 1:57-66*

Our text begins with the birth of John the Baptist and with rejoicing, but then there is a sense of conflict when it comes to naming this son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth states that his name will be John; however, neighbors and relatives challenge this name and seek a second opinion. Yet, Zechariah confirms the name “John.” Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Zechariah is instructed by the angel Gabriel to name the child “John,” and, even though Zechariah initially has doubts about this news of a child, these naming instructions are followed.

How often do we, like Zechariah, doubt what God is capable of doing? How often are we, like Elizabeth, bombarded with other voices and messages that challenge our understanding of what we feel called to do? For us today, perhaps the doubt or outside voices are not in regard to the birth or naming of a child, but instead could be related to other matters such as vocation or finances. There are many messages in the world that seek to draw us away from the ways of God. During this Advent season may we listen for the voice of God. May we be reminded that God is faithful through the ages.

The long-yearned-for child of Elizabeth and Zechariah has arrived. The words of the angel Gabriel were fulfilled. As we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist, who is to prepare the way of the Lord, may we also rejoice that we are drawing nearer to the birth of the One who is Savior of the world.

*Eternal God, you are ever faithful and steadfast. Help us to listen to your voice amidst the hustle and bustle. Fill us with wonder and joy as we await the birth of your Son. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.*

Katie Frederick  
*Senior MDiv student from Austin, Texas*

Sunday, December 16  
*Isaiah 12:2-6*

A quick reading of these verses seems to imply that the prophet Isaiah has complete, unfailing reliance on the Lord. However, the text, when examined more closely, conveys a more relatable faith. The prophet is not saying that he is unafraid or that he trusts God completely or that God has already rescued him from his plight. Rather, he gives thanks with the hope that God *will* rescue him, that God *will* give him a reason to praise. Indeed, to remind God of his capacity to save, the prophet reuses words from the Song of the Sea (Exod 15)—the glorious song of triumph that the Israelites' sing after God split open the sea during the Exodus. By reminding God, the prophet hopes that he can entice God to do for him what he did for the Israelites in the past. His prayer, in other words, is a prayer of hope, of a wish, of faith.

And in so doing, the prophet expresses something that is utterly relatable. All of us have asked or wished for God to fix certain problems and answer certain prayers. We relate to the words of this prophet not because we have experienced an affirmative answer to all our prayers and wishes, but because in so doing, in calling out, we share in the process of hope. We relate to him not because life is always good or because God answers us at all turns, but because our faith and tradition tells us to call out and to hope for something more.

*God of graciousness and hope, may we be reminded this season of your marvelous acts, both in the past and in the time to come. May we remember your deeds and take hope in your promises. May we give you praise. Amen.*

Suzie Park  
*Assistant Professor of Old Testament*
December 17
Numbers 16:1-19

Advent is a time of waiting for long-expected salvation. Sometimes waiting a long time can make us impatient and irritable, especially when something else is bothering us. The cast of characters in this passage were no strangers to the frustration of waiting. For years the Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness; displaced from the only permanent homes they’ve ever known. Their leader, Moses, is technically a Levite by birth, the tribe designated by God to prepare and maintain the tent of meeting, but not to lead the people in their religious rite and ceremony, as were the priests. The story’s antagonist, Korah, a prominent leader from the tribe of Levi, is likely upset by the apparent mix-up in Israel’s leadership. He does not believe that Moses should be leading like a priest. This angers him so much that Korah rallies over 250 well-known community leaders against Moses and stands up to him saying, “You’ve gone too far ... why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?”

Moses tries to convey that a person’s holiness is neither based on the family she is born into, nor qualified by his position in the religious establishment. Moses reminds Korah that a person belongs to God because God chooses to be in relationship with them. And so, the story concludes tragically for Korah and his assembly.

While the overarching theme arising from this narrative is of pride and self-assertion under the influence of unbelief and, I would contend, the weariness of traveling through the wilderness for several years, the nugget of wisdom is that we are reminded of our place in relationship to God and God’s people.

Sometimes it may be hard for us to accept the decisions God makes, especially when they don’t make sense to us. But if we allow our faith to seek understanding rather than lash out in unbelief, we will be drawn into better relationship with each other as we mutually discern the direction in which God is calling us.

Creator God, maker of heaven and earth, we thank you for reminding us of our place in our relationship to you. Gather us together like a mother gathers her children. Remind us what is truly important to you. Amen.

Stephen Cottingham
Middler student from Garland, Texas

December 18
Acts 28:23-31

The ending of Acts might seem a strange text for an Advent meditation. After all, the story is about Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, not about Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. What are we doing at the end of Acts, when we should be at the beginning of the Gospels?

The answer is in Paul’s proclamation. In Acts 28:23, and again in v.31, Paul “testifies” to the “kingdom of God.” That testimony, of course, is the central message of the Christian faith: that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that his coming into the world is not merely the story of a birth of a little baby in a manger. It is the news that God enters the world to remake creation and all creatures in it according to God’s design. Jesus is the kingdom in our midst. In Jesus, we see the kingdom. Followers of Jesus know what Paul knew: that things-as-they-are are not things-as-they-will-be, because we have seen Jesus.

Just as it was in Paul’s day, so it is in ours. The kingdom is a hard sell to people whose world is filled with evil and frustration. Some people never hear the news of the kingdom. Some hear, but cannot trust that the news is true. But just as Paul went on “testifying” even as Acts draws to a close, so we go on believing, hoping, and testifying—living today on the strength of the promised dawn of God’s tomorrow. “Thy kingdom come.” Come, Lord Jesus.

Advent is the moment in the Christian calendar when we gather up all the hopes for change God’s people have been nursing, through all the centuries of hurt and heartache, and lay them at God’s feet in prayer and yearning. The prayer of Advent is the lament of the people: “How long, O Lord?” And God’s answer is: “Not long.” We hear that answer in the cry of an infant in a manger, and we have been echoing it ever since.

How long? Not long.

God of Advent, grant us strength to testify to your kingdom, even as we look for its birth in Jesus. Amen.

Paul K. Hooker
Director of Ministerial Formation and Advanced Studies
December 20
Psalm 80:1-7

Have you ever asked a room full of grade-schoolers in a Sunday Bible school class to name the New Testament books in the Bible? Frequently some bright child will say the book of Psalms. An understandable response if you have just read Psalm 80. It has many New Testament-sounding words, like shepherd, Joseph, bread, vine, restore, and saved. But no, our bright child is incorrect since our Psalm is squarely in the Old Testament context. However, our bright child may have learned something about prayer.

Psalms are dear to our hearts because they instruct us how to pray. We see this in Psalm 80. It shows a community in prayer, much as I hope you are doing right now with friends and family. They address God as their shepherd, the one who leads and protects them. God gives them blessings and He saves them. Common to most prayers, the people are petitioning God. They are bold. Twice they ask for God to restore them. They want to return to and rest in God. Life has been hard for these folks; they feel God's absence. Instead of the bounty and nourishment of bread and life, they have tears and sorrow. They desire to feel the warmth and comfort of God's face shining upon them. They confess the need for God's saving presence.

What is the faith being expressed in this prayer? It is that our whole existence is in the hands of God. God claims us and sends us all blessings and gifts. God is the actor, the one who will restore us. Is that your faith? The faith in this psalm points to our encounter with God. When we feel God's absence, we plead for restoration, and we wait. Yet we pray in confidence, knowing that God will bring His work to completion by bringing us to Him through His gift, Christ, the Messiah.

Holy God, fill your children with a new soul this season. Sweep away our anxieties in a tide of hopeful laughter. Give us the courage to revel in love, entering a free and generous friendship with you and the world. Amen.

Lord, hear our prayer. Restore us. May we see and hear your saving light. Hallelujah!

Laureen Suba
Middler MDiv student from Houston, Texas

December 19
Micah 4:8-13

Advent is a season of boldness, a time to accomplish the impossible. As we begin to feel the first crispness in the air, or smell the first tinges of apples and cinnamon in our kitchens, a sense of anticipation fills us. Like the ancient Israelites, we are waiting for a divine spark that will change our lives forever, bringing us into a closer relationship with God and each other.

The prophet Micah was trying to light just such a spark in his discouraged nation. The ancient Israelites were under the thumb of the fearsome Babylonian empire, and many people were genuinely afraid that God had given up on them. Micah wasn't about to let fear get the best of them. He assures the Israelites that all the strength of an empire is nothing compared to the strength of a fledgling nation who holds on to hope.

Over thousands of years, Micah's words resonate with us, especially in the holiday season. We tend to get overwhelmed in the winter. There's so much to do as the year winds down; children leaving school, family visiting, last-minute stress at work. It's important to remember, as winter draws closer with the sights, smells, and songs of Advent, that we can use this time to make bold strides in our lives, safe in the knowledge that we are loved. We can get out from under our worries by acting with a spirit of hope in the world.

This doesn't mean we have to re-invent our entire lives. Boldness can take many forms. We can welcome a stranger to our table. We can lavish love on our friends, our children, our partners, and, yes, ourselves. We can reach out to a world in need by feeding and clothing our neighbors. With a restored and inviting spirit, the possibilities are endless.

Holy God, fill your children with a new soul this season. Sweep away our anxieties in a tide of hopeful laughter. Give us the courage to revel in love, entering a free and generous friendship with you and the world. Amen.

Jessica Espinoza
Middler MDiv student from Buda, Texas
December 22

Here we are, a few days away from celebrating Jesus’s birth, and yet here we read how a king wants Jesus’ death.

The Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod, the most powerful figure in the land, wants him dead. Instead of fleeing in terror like any rational person would, Jesus does not recognize this human power, however immense, as having any chance of derailing God’s work. Jesus essentially brushes them off, saying, “Not now, I’m busy.” Jesus is busy with the work of healing, and he will return to Jerusalem to face his death not on any human’s time, but on His own time, in fulfillment of the scriptures.

We have a lot of demands put upon us during this Christmas time—we have presents to buy, travel to arrange, and family members to enjoy (or endure). Traffic gets worse, money gets tight, and schedules fill up. It’s a very busy time.

What can we do this Christmas season to be more like Christ in this story? TVs and shopping malls barrage us with demands and warnings: “You have to buy lots of things!” they scream. In Christmas season it’s very easy to be very busy, but in between the parties and presents, the cookies and candy canes, let’s make sure to know when to say, “Sorry, I’m busy. I have to do God’s work.”

Let’s enjoy this Christmas season, but let us recognize when our human customs prevent us from being a healing force in this world. What can you do to be a healing force in the world? Could you gather blankets for the homeless or gather non-perishables for the food pantry? As we write wish lists for ourselves, can we also find time to pray for others? Let us have the confidence, in the face of all the demands at Christmas time, to be like Christ.

Everlasting Protector, who came into this world knowing poverty and pain, who came to teach us the radical love of the other, give us the strength to be a healing force in the world, and wisdom not to reject your loving embrace. And when the foxes of the world threaten to lead us astray, give us the courage to say, “Sorry, I’m busy doing God’s work.”

In your loving name we pray, Amen.

Stephen Robinson
Middler MDiv student from Austin, Texas
At all times, but especially at this Christmas time, we should remember the difference between God’s sacrifice and ours.

When we think of God’s sacrifice, we—rightly—think of the cross. But we should not forget that Jesus’ entire life was a sacrifice. Paul calls this an “emptying” (Phil. 2:7), and commends it to us as a model. To have the mind of Christ is to be an obedient, self-emptied servant.

This passage in Hebrews emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ’s sacrifice. The long and bloody history of sacrificing animals as a remedy for sin accomplished nothing. Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice accomplished everything.

Jesus Christ sanctified human life simply by living it. The unnamed author of Hebrews characterizes this life as a life of obedience: “I have come to do your will.” Christ’s birth, his life, his suffering and death, and his resurrection were not accidents or chance events. They were the means by which fallen humanity could be returned to holiness. This has been accomplished. It is done. We are not participants in this work; we are the recipients of it. Christ’s obedience was for our benefit. Christ’s obedience was our salvation.

Our obedience is not his. Our obedience is a response to his. Our obedience depends on his. The paradox of our obedience is this: Our obedience is freedom. To be bound by sin is to be a slave: a slave to the values of the world, a slave to our own vanity and selfishness, a slave to an understanding of human life that sees others as the competition, the rival—the enemy. To be freed from sin is to be free to express God’s love and mercy everywhere in the world, to be free from self-obsession, to be free to see others as beloved children of God.

Even in his birth, even in the manger, Jesus is the expression of the obedience that gives us freedom. Our challenge is to receive this freedom in obedience, so that God’s love may abound.

Gracious Lord, teach us to see our freedom in the light of your grace. Help us to see the infant in the manger as the expression of your love, present with us always, but far beyond us always. Make us vessels of hope and light to the world. Amen.

David Johnson
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Christmas Eve
Titus 2:11-14

Throughout the ages, preachers and poets, sculptors and songsters, painters and playwrights have sought to convey what Christmas means. Through various creative forms and distinct perspectives they have expressed the relevance, wonder, and significance of this season. Look no farther than to Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol,” Handel’s “Messiah,” or Dr. Seuss’ “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” to see takes on the season that may inform our understandings of what Christmas means.

Christmas brings a heightened awareness of God’s power, God’s love, and our own limitations. Christmas prompts us to realize the magnitude of God’s grace and our compelling need to receive and share that grace. The birth of the Christ Child confronts us with the reality of God’s love—that the Almighty willfully entered into history as one of us in a manner that we cannot fully understand and did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So, Christmas is a time for reflection on the God who has graciously appeared and saved us.

It is also a time for intentional responses to what God has offered. This passage from Titus draws our attention to these responses. It urges us to renounce what does not honor God and to embrace values, behaviors, relationships, and expectations that do. This passage beckons us to be zealous givers of the good deeds that God desires, which spring from our gratitude for God’s grace and redemption in Christ Jesus.

Holy God, giver of grace, provide us with a sense of your power, love, and goodness this Christmas Eve, even as you stir within us deeper desires for giving to you and others what is holy, gracious, and faithful.

Allan Hugh Cole Jr.
Academic Dean and Professor in the The Nancy Taylor Williamson Distinguished Chair of Pastoral Care
Christmas
John 1:1-14

For many of us, something began with a word.
A relationship between two lifelong friends—one that has gone on now for decades—may have begun in elementary school... with a word.
“Wanna share my sandwich?” or “Are you new in town; so am I!”
A word was spoken, and a friendship begun.
Maybe you remember meeting your spouse—where you were, what you were wearing, what that other person said.
“Excuse me, is this seat taken?”
It was a word, and that word marked a beginning.
Some people can recall the word that began a new relationship with the faith.
“Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.” More than once, someone has wandered into church, as if by accident, and that word of forgiveness, uttered as the happy ending of the Confession of Sin, is the very word that has ushered that person into the Christian life.
For many of us, something began with a word. And, in the Gospel of John, in which John the Evangelist’s theological memory stretches farther back than his own life, all the way back to the beginning of time, that word was the Word, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” That Word was life, was light so bright that the darkness did not overcome it.
That Word was in the world, and John the Evangelist describes that Word as a person not known by the world, not accepted even by his own people.

“But,” John goes on, “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of human will, but of God.”
Something began with that Word.
“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”
Good News began with that Word. And on this Christmas Day, that Word is here to save us and to begin—or begin again—a relationship with us! He is the Word made flesh and dwelling among us! He is the One, as Barbara 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.”
All praise today—all over the earth and in the heights of Heaven—for the Word spoken into our lives, the Word that began, and begins again, our journey of faith!

You began it all with a Word, O God, and we know that Word as Jesus Christ—born into our lives today! Thank you for beginning it all with a Word. Amen.

Theodore J. Wardlaw
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