Advent: Prepare the Way
“Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

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.

“Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all the people shall see it together.”
“We are all withering like leaves, and our iniquities, like wind, carry us off.” Isaiah 64:5b

These words from the prophet Isaiah remind us just what is at stake in the season of Advent. Light breaks into our darkness. Death is conquered by life. The world is in a mess, and so are we. Our most existential fear is voiced by the prophet: “And can we be saved?” God’s answer is born again in our heart, our home, and Christ’s church.

Advent may be one of the most counter-cultural things that we Christians do. For the prophetic word comes to remind us that the values of this world are not God’s values. And that we are too much of this world. Meanwhile, Santa Claus rides in at the end of the Thanksgiving Day parade, distorting our deepest longing with endless distraction. Oh, how we need our Savior. This need can never be fulfilled by the manufactured array of wants and needs soon to bombard us.

My adult daughter’s greatest pet peeve is the playing of Christmas carols on the radio and in stores before Christmas. If she can, she snaps the offending source off. I imagine that her response was formed long ago, as a wiggling Christmas angel, back in the congregation where I served as pastor. The Christmas pageant bristled with the Holy Family, wiggling angels, mischievous shepherds, and stalwart kings. It invariably ended with a special entry: a young teen would come down the center aisle with a crown of tinsel and a heavy wooden cross on his back, reciting the words of a poem: “Christmas leads to Easter.” Together, with some sense of sorrow, and the weight of our iniquities, we’d accept again the gift of God’s wondrous love, and finally sing: Joy to the World!

Welcome to the journey of Advent.

Eternal God: Advent is that season of life when we rouse ourselves to cling to you. No matter how much or many we have lost, Advent is our time to begin again with you, our living God, who does wonders we dare not even hope for. We ask—in our self-disgust, despair, depression, and grief—“Can we be saved?” Now we wait, longing for the angel’s promise: with God, all things are possible. Amen.

Rose Niles
DEVELOPMENT OFFICER
The National Multicultural Conference of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was held this past summer in Fort Worth, Texas. People representing various cultures, languages, traditions, and nations came together to celebrate the diversity with which the church is blessed. During our mutual sharing and learning from one another, we were gathered in unity around the Word and Sacrament as members of the one body of Christ, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” (Eph. 4:5). The worship experience at the conference felt as a foreshadowing of the fulfillment of the times when all nations will come together as one people to praise and glorify the Lord of lords as mentioned in the book of Revelation.

The hymn of the Lamb in today’s reading echoes the praise and adoration to the Creator and Savior found throughout the book of Revelation. Heaven and earth are full of God’s glory and the entire creation awaits the coming of the Lord, the “King of the nations.”

In the midst of life’s seasons of tribulation, warfare, famine, and disease, God’s people are assured that the day is coming when all the nations will come and worship before the “Lord God the Almighty.” It is a day when all things will be made new.

As we journey through the Advent season and may face sorrow and suffering, we would do well to continue placing our trust in God, “who lives for ever and ever.” Let us join in worship with the whole church in heaven and on earth praising and glorifying God in anticipation of the day when death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more.

Today we lift our hearts and voices in joyful worship to you our Lord, for you alone are worthy of all glory and honor. We worship you in the company of all God’s faithful people from every nation and every time and every place who forever sing to the glory of your name. We pray together with them: “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Lemuel García-Arroyo
DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI AND CHURCH RELATIONS
This short passage communicates a sense of hope to a people who have suffered the hardship of exile. The Israelites were captured by the Assyrians, which means they no longer had a home. All the familiar things that make a home were taken away. The invasion and exile were probably violent: loved ones died and everything was foreign and threatening. The prophet Micah spoke words of hope to these displaced people, a people who had lost sight of God’s potential to restore them to safety. In fact, the despair was so great that Micah even prophecied revenge against the neighboring nations (v. 13).

While we acknowledge that “beating many people into pieces” is never the will of God, we have compassion for the suffering that must have given rise to this cry of anguish. Furthermore, we stand in solidarity with all our brothers and sisters today who have been displaced from their homes, and who have lost sight of God’s potential to restore them safely to their land. We think particularly of refugees and immigrants from Central America.

It can be hard to understand the desperation that comes with exile, especially if we’ve always had a safe place to live. But when we read accounts from the Bible or stories from people in exile today, we develop a sense of compassion, recognizing that all humans need a home, need safety, and need hope.

Merciful God, restore us to safety. Awaken compassion in our hearts for all who have lost a safe place to call home. Kindle the fire of hope within us, so that we might always anticipate your action in our lives and in this world, with every passing moment.

Travis Gould
MIDDLE MDiv STUDENT
is the season of frantic shopping, rushed cleaning, and hurrying to the next thing we have lined up for the holidays. Whether it’s visiting family or fighting airport and mall crowds, we are all easily stretched in this season. Everyone at every stage has several functions to attend. How overwhelmed can we be? How stressed can we make ourselves in this season of “celebration”? Did I get something for Uncle Joe or did I remember to lock the back door? There is a sentiment that only the “Home Alone” movies can so clearly portray for this frenetic life of the Christmas season.

Jesus was always moving too, being sought for help, healing, and teachings by everyone. Yet, he makes us take pause. Our status of Alert should not simply be focused on the rush of the season, but also the rush of the Spirit in our lives. Are we alert and paying attention to what we are listening to as we rush to and fro? Are we aware of our brothers and sisters who are always rushing because they are under tremendous burdens? Are we alert to the hurt and needs around us? Or are we simply trying to maintain a guarded stance of needing to get things done?

Be Alert! This is a mentality that we all too often carry with us but in a mindset that often bears negativity towards our neighbors. Be alert that you don’t get robbed, taken advantage of, or have something bad happen to you. In this passage, Jesus is inviting us to be alert to the here and now of the Kingdom of God. In fellowship, sharing meals, and worshiping together, we are seeing and living the Kingdom of God. And, most importantly, we are to be alert in prayer. We are to slow down and focus. And yet we must guard our hearts and never be apathetic to the work of the Living God among us. We are practicing the holy act of seeing Christ in our midst and point to God’s reign becoming incarnate all around us.

Lord we often forget to stop and pray. Receive now our silence, as an offering to you, as a pause to the busy lives we live. [Pause for a moment and reflect: How have we seen God move this year, season, this day? How have we been thankful for all the blessings we have been given? How will we be alert to God’s movement this next year?] Keep us alert to your movements Lord. Let us not focus on us or our works, but you and your works. All thanks and praise to you Almighty God. Amen.

J.D. Herrera
SENIOR MDIV STUDENT
Where the light dawns to a morning mist, there is found a quiet peace. The grass and flowers are bathed in the soft whiteness of the resting fog. Thin and even moisture teases the earth, refusing to satisfy the thirsty land. We drink our morning coffee and gaze out at this seductive transience, but we fear no lasting impact: the sun will inevitably rise higher. It will burn off the milky haze. We will, in an hour’s time, hop into our cars and look with clear vision up the road ahead.

God’s love is the sun rising up; never failing. Our love is the mist, first here, and then gone. God’s love is a steady rain, reliable and enlivening. Our love is the dew, suggestive but disappointing.

It is amazing that God keeps hoping for more from us; that God continues to ask for a better love. Why hasn’t God lowered God’s expectations, by now – rolling God’s eyes at our immaturity and loving us, anyway? Why doesn’t God accept our apologies and simply move on? But apologies are not what God wants - not penances or sorrows; not flowers or candy. God is apparently not satisfied with loving us “anyway” or “despite.” God is holding out for us to love God the way God loves us.

But can we love God like God loves us? Can we love like the steady sun; can we love like the determined rain? May we, on this day, rise up out of the morning fog and allow ourselves to be bathed in the light of the One whose love is sure. In the strength of that light, we can live before God. In the clarity of that light, we can know God a little better. In the promise of that light, God’s steadfast love will hold our love firm.

Steadfast God, We confess that our love is mist, and yours is sun. Thank you for loving us, anyway. Strengthen our love; help us press on to know you better. Fill us with your Spirit so that we live in your presence each moment of this day, rejoicing in your faithfulness. Amen.

Cynthia L. Rigby
THE W.C. BROWN PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY
As children, we are handed a piece of paper with the phrase: “When I grow up, I want to be ________.” Oh, how our imaginations go crazy at the sight of that blank. Our minds begin to wonder off on extraordinary adventures as astronauts, firemen, scientists, wizards, and even superheroes with cool powers and fancy capes that blow in the wind as we swoop in to save the day. There is no limit to what we could be at that age. This is so true that we change our answer to that ambiguous blank almost daily!

As we grow up, we continue to hold on to such dreams and passions of such adventures, but our hearts begin to feel drawn in fewer directions over time. As our focus narrows down to that one direction of which we feel we are called by God to take, the responsibility that comes with this call starts to overwhelm us. When we are still young, most of us take Jeremiah’s approach and respond with “God, I think you got this all wrong, for I am only a child.” As we get older and still hold on to this doubt, we only wish we can use the same excuse but must settle with the excuse that we are not prepared for such a call.

Jeremiah is not the only one with such a call story. There was Moses, whose excuses were ignored and who was sent out with Aaron to speak for him. And, we cannot forget Jonah for whom it took a giant fish to push him in the right direction. Despite their doubt and excuses, all of them accomplished their God-given calls. Through Jeremiah’s story, God bluntly calls us out on our lack of confidence in ourselves and our lack of faith in God. However, God follows such bluntness with a good dose of hope by reassuring us that God is there to guide us with our calls and will provide what we need to fulfill them.

Our loving God who knew us before birth, please fill our hearts with the strength and hope needed to accept Your call for us. Allow our mouths to proclaim Your words and our actions to fulfill Your will. Amen.

Jean-Paul Marshall
MIDDLE MDIV STUDENT
We might be able to relate, at least a little, to Mark’s chief priests, scribes, and elders. We arrange, plan, and try to control our lives, especially our religious lives, by our rules, calendars, schedules, books, politics ... We think we have things in pretty good order. And then we meet Jesus walking down the street a day after he has turned over tables and cleared out our temple courts. By what authority did he come into our temple, bust up the place, turn what we know upside down, and then show up again (as if he owned it)? And what will Jesus do the next time he comes around?

We know that the chief priests, scribes, and elders in this passage choose their own religious authority over the Authority that could save them from themselves, yet are we any more ready than they were to have our own worlds shaken? Are we ready to hear how we are wrong?

As we wait for the babe in the manger, let us consider the presence of our Lord here and now. When we come before him and we hear “answer me” (11:30), what will we say? I suspect the chief priests, scribes, and elders knew the right answer. But somehow they felt too much was riding on things remaining the same. “We do not know.” “Go away and let us live as we are accustomed to live.” “Let us be.” As we read the story of their fumbling, let us remember the cost of their trying to protect what they had. Spending their time trying to live as if Jesus were not who he is, they lived in precarious lies. These lies are the kind of lies that cost us ourselves. And cost Jesus the cross.

Our king is coming and has come. Let us let him into our lives and show us our foolishness. Let us let him save us.

Dearest Lord, clean our hearts so that we may more and more see who you are.

Kris Brown
SENIOR MDIV STUDENT
The Christians in the first century to whom Peter wrote his letter had a lot to be frustrated about. There was so much hope for a messiah, and when he came and died and rose again, they knew they finally had the solution to all their problems. This meant the prophesies were being fulfilled! Everlasting peace, freedom from oppression, the death of death itself! Then something strange happened. Jesus ascended into heaven. He said he would be right back, but years and years went by and the lives of individual Christians only seemed to be getting harder and harder. What is he waiting for?

The same thing can happen to us sometimes. When we pray we want to see our prayer answered, preferably by the time we say “amen.” When we serve others we want to see their problems solved. We get frustrated with problems that only improve slowly and incrementally. When we are in pain we want the pain to end. It sometimes doesn’t end for years.

Here Peter reminds us that God does not think about time the way we do. God isn’t worried that if something does not happen in the next eighty years it will never be. God is patient. The promises that were made will be fulfilled. The day of the Lord is coming when everything wrong will be set right. It is just not going to come while we hold our breath.

There is something truly wonderful about “Waiting according to the promise” as it is described here. It invites us to think from an eternal perspective. We know that the return of Christ will not happen on our command, but eventually, and in the fullness of time. We can look at our smaller hopes that way, too. Patiently, confidently waiting, with the knowledge that maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not in our natural lifetime, but eventually, God will make it all work out.

Lord God, help me to receive the comfort of your eternal perspective. Help me to wait according to the promise, knowing that you love me, and you desire every good thing for me. Grant me forgiveness for the times I become impatient for you, my Lord.

Ryan Gaffney
MIDDLE MDIV STUDENT
At first glance, this passage seems a bit out of place. Pentecost? What’s the story of Pentecost doing in an Advent devotional?

In our joyous anticipation of Jesus’ birth, we often overlook the meaning of Jesus’ life. The Christmas season far outshines Easter in our consumer economy. We love the precious infant but remain curious, even uncertain, about the teacher. This story reminds us that Jesus’ birth heralds the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus comes to redeem the world through his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can continue his ministry. These promises of God, Peter says, are “for you, for your children,” and for “everyone whom the Lord our God calls.”

This story also tells us how we are to respond to God’s promises. Like the first Christians in Acts, we are called to teach others and be in fellowship together. We are called to break bread and pray with those who are both near and far away—indeed, “everyone” God calls.

As we continue our Advent journey, may we live more fully into the promises God fulfills in Jesus, and may we share that joyous message with others through what we say and do.

God of Promise, draw us ever closer to you as we journey together toward the birth of your Son. Bring us joy in the fulfillment of your promises in Jesus, and empower us by the Holy Spirit to share our hope with others. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Mark B. Horner
SENIOR MDIV STUDENT
Don’t you just love David? Apparently God did. In 1 Samuel 13:14 we read that David was “a man after God’s own heart.” As the composer of Psalm 27 one moment David celebrates God’s favor, protection and deliverance almost to the point of braggadocio; the next he is far less certain of his standing, seeking a God who has somehow become distant to him, plaintively imploring God to act on his behalf.

What does not waver in these verses is David’s confidence in God. Whether near or far he recognizes the Lord’s power and preeminence. Even more remarkably he seems to assume a compelling and intimate relationship with God whether or not he can see, hear, or feel God’s presence. He simply lifts his song of praise or lament, trusting that he will be heard and heeded by the Almighty.

In Psalm 27 and throughout Hebrew Scripture we taste and see the goodness of a Lord who walks with his people, who comes close to protect, to save, to lead his chosen into abundant life. In Psalm 27 we also witness a human being participating whole-heartedly in a lively relationship with God. Is it any wonder that from such a lineage as this the God-Man should be born, incarnating in his very body the life-blood of this mutual relationship? The fully human and the fully divine have been seeking one another for an eternity, and that mystery reaches its fulfillment in the birth of Jesus, the Christ. What might Christ’s second coming bring? *Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! In times of plenty, times of want and this unique time of far too many distractions, we seek your face. Do not hide your face from us, but in your mercy hear and answer our hearts’ deepest longing which is always and forever for your fresh, newly born life within and among us. Amen.

Christine Wagner
MIDDLE MDIV STUDENT
ike many of the prophets who lived during this “Post-Exilic” time in Israel’s history, Malachi is concerned about the people’s devotion to foreign idols and their unfaithfulness to God. The language that Malachi uses to describe the people’s broken relationship with God is that of another broken relationship, a husband’s infidelity to his wife. Malachi passionately calls out to the people saying, “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?” (vs. 10) The people have forgotten their promises to God and to one another; they have lost their way and have strayed from the covenantal relationship with God. True to prophetic form, Malachi’s condemnation comes with a glimmer a hope, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming says the Lord of hosts.” (3:1).

In Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist evokes this marriage language in a different context, alluding to the coming Bridegroom—Christ. We celebrate John the Baptist as that messenger who came to prepare the way of the Lord, who prepared for Christ’s coming into this world. In this season where we, too, prepare for Christ’s coming and anticipate the Kingdom of God, we remember that even in our own unfaithfulness, God continually comes to us and continues to be faithful. We sacrifice our lives to the idols of busyness, wealth, and status, and we sacrifice our relationships to the idols of fear, pride, and being right. Christ’s coming shows us that our God is faithful still and will never abandon us despite our shortcomings and unfaithfulness.

So as we continue this Advent journey together, how can you choose to live your life in ways that honor God and God’s covenant? How can we live more faithful lives, as individuals and as a community?

Loving God, we are unfaithful people, and yet you continue to love us in all our hurting and broken places. Help us to have faith as we anticipate with hope the joy of your Kingdom. Bind us together in your love and in covenant relationship, so that we may faithfully show your love and mercy to others. In Jesus Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Sarah Chancellor-Watson
MIDDLE MDIV / MSSW STUDENT
The season of Christmas brings out some of the best of humanity. We seem to wake up and realize the suffering that occurs around us daily in a newly mindful way. Suddenly we are compelled to feed, clothe, and gift people that we have ignored for the rest of the year, except with the occasional extra dollar or two in the offering basket. Yet once we come to this season of giving, this time when the birth of the Christ child reminds us of the claim on our lives, this ever-present suffering of the disenfranchised becomes urgent. We heed the call and seek out ways to help and ways to give in very real and tangible ways. Then we head into the New Year when our blinders once again become fixed, and the cycle perpetrates itself again.

We are the people of this child who is our Savior daily. We should keep that vision before us this season, yes, but not only this season. As we wait upon the vision of what the world will be, let us work toward a better world now. Seek out ways to spend this time of waiting in fruitful purpose, ways that humble us, and ways that renew our faith, not just a select time of year but all year long. The claim is ever present, the urge to answer the call is not meant to be a seasonal commitment we dust off and hang up like the wreaths on our doors.

Heed the vision every day and learn to live a Christmas faith daily.

Oh God who claims and calls us.
  Grant us eyes, ears, and hearts that work for you, so that we may truly learn to serve all of your people in every season we are given.
  Through Christ our Lord who humbled himself to save us.

Randi Havlak
MIDDLE MDIV STUDENT
In a dresser drawer, I keep a small box full of odd stuff that means something to me. The box has a tie clip that my father-in-law, who died in 2012, gave to me. In the box I keep a cross from a church meeting that I attended in Hungary in 1984. And the box itself? A friend that I went to school with brought it back from a trip to Ethiopia. Looking at those souvenirs can instantly spark fond memories. Thinking about the past can give us comfort and make us feel thankful for God’s blessings.

Sometimes, however, thinking about the past can keep us from seeing what God is doing right now. In our reading from Philippians, Paul strains forward to what God has in mind for today and tomorrow: life in Christ Jesus that is not limited by death. The apostle Paul points his focus forward to this goal because he trusts that God in Christ has already redeemed him. In Advent, we count up the Sundays until we reach the fourth one. Then we know that we are close to the goal of this part of the church year: the celebration of Jesus’ birth. But the season of Advent also asks us to look forward, to sharpen our senses to see what God is about to do in our lives. God’s promise to be with us endures despite the highs and lows of our income and the pains of illness.

Like Paul, we are not content to take it easy on the grounds that we have already shown our faithfulness by giving time to our church and community. The story of our faith is not done yet. Like runners leaning forward to cross the finish line first, Paul encourages us to press on with acts of faithfulness. What will faithfulness look like for you?

Let us pray: Lead us on, Lord Jesus. Make us unable to rest on past accomplishments. Push us forward to serve others in your name, confident that your love will always support us. Amen.

Timothy Lincoln
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR SEMINARY EFFECTIVENESS AND DIRECTOR, STITT LIBRARY
In this parable Jesus compares the father to God and his sons to two types of people: those who repent and those who do not care for their father’s wishes. These would seem to be the only characters, but it is the vineyard that is most ignored. The vineyard is a character as well. It is alive and in need of love and care.

The vineyard is our relationship with God. One son said he would care for it and yet did not; he would have let the plants go untended and die. The other son said he would not care for the plants, but went out and cared for them as asked. God lets us choose whether or not to tend to our vineyards. God is always there with us, reaching out to us. When we do God’s will, we in turn reach for God and we connect.

Often in our lives we may feel a tug to do something we may not have chosen to do. We sense a calling from a force we cannot always see. Yet somehow we know that it is God. Sometimes through that flickering thought in the corner of our minds, God calls, and other times God shouts to us over all the noise. God calls each of us to tend to our vineyards in different ways. Though we may not always be ready or willing to dive into the call, God awaits us with hands outstretched, waiting for us to take them.

Words are only a faint whispering compared to the resounding roar of action. Jesus teaches us to live in love toward one another. God calls us to act out of love and care. How do we answer God each day? How do our vineyards fare?

Gracious God, whose love never fails to find us. Help us to sense your spirit within the sanctums of our souls, calling us to you every day. Give us the strength to reach out to you as you reach for us so that we may answer your calling with all that we are. In your everlasting name we pray, Amen.

Emily Béghin
SENIOR MDIV STUDENT
Paul encourages us in these times to remember the continuing call of Jesus. These days are not only the days of expecting the celebrated arrival of the baby Jesus but also the time of waiting for Jesus' return.

What exactly are we to be doing in these days? What is Jesus continually calling us to do?

In this meanwhile, we are to 1) Rejoice always. 2) Pray without ceasing. 3) Give thanks in all circumstances (for that is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you). 4) We are not to quench or put out the flames of the Spirit but rather to fan the flames of the Spirit. 5) We are not to despise the words of the prophets but to treasure the words of prophets. 6) Test everything. 7) Hold fast to what is good. 8) Abstain from every evil.

Rejoicing seems easy, for the most part, during Advent and at Christmas with Jesus in the manger and all things right with life. The list becomes more challenging on other days when life bears down upon us and we realize that we are to be thankful even though we do not feel like it. It is daunting when life threatens; we question, and we sharply react by attempting to extinguish the Spirit's fire. We forget the Word, forget to test, lean away from good.

When we are frightened, unsure, or lost, it is right to pray without ceasing. When bad days greet us, we are exhorted to rejoice. Rejoice? Rejoice! When we do not like what is before us, we are to give thanks, clinging to Scripture and testing against it. We are to keep doing good; abstaining from evil; praising God.

The text includes a blessing. May the God of peace sanctify you entirely. May your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Look! He is descending from heaven and is in the clouds!

What are we to do while expecting Christ's return? 1) Rejoice always. 2) Pray without ceasing. 3) Give thanks ...
It is easy to get discouraged and cynical—to let the small things shake us. First Kings 19:1-18 tells of such a moment. The great prophet Elijah, immediately after his triumph over the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel, flees to the wilderness after being threatened by Jezebel. Elijah, who just moments before had witnessed the overwhelming, potent power of God on Mt. Carmel, cowers and runs when faced with a threat from a defiant queen! And yet the story turns this moment of Elijah’s failure into a poignant lesson about the faithful, perpetual presence of God. God does not scold Elijah for being weary or for being disappointed or even for running away. Rather, God strengthens Elijah with food and water, even sending an angel to wake Elijah so that he can eat. God takes care of Elijah. He soothes his servant, and tells him he understands his weariness. God acknowledges that Elijah’s journey is indeed too much for him.

We have all felt like Elijah at some point in our lives. Like the prophet, we have all cried aloud or thought silently to ourselves: “I have had enough, Lord...” This passage reminds us that God understands such moments of weariness. More importantly, it tells us that God is present in such moments. It is in these points of disappointment, this passage reminds us, that the nature of God is revealed. God is found not in the moments of triumph or power or loud victory. Rather, 1 Kings 19 tells us that God’s true presence and faithfulness is elucidated and found in the silences, pauses, and sighs that occur during a period of disappointment and tiredness.

Strengthen us when we are weary. Remind us of your faithful presence, and let us look for you and hear you in the still silence. Amen.

Song (Suzie) Park
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT
A teenage girl, not much older than a child, really, is walking on the side of the highway. Not only is she young, but she is very pregnant. Her baby could come at any time, even before she gets to the next town. How dangerous! Her fiancé walks beside her, taking care of her as best he can. The couple is from Nazareth, and they are heading to Bethlehem, which is about as far as from San Antonio to Austin. Why are they out here on the side of the road? Well, Caesar is wont to lay tax on Israel, but to do so he must count the people. And so we find this young expectant mother out here on the side of the highway, groaning with the burden that calls the House of David home.

When she arrives in Bethlehem she will have no doctor, no health insurance, nor even a bed to lie in. Yet above her many worries she will lift her voice to sing. The Lord has promised to be with her, and the Lord abides within her. The proud will be scattered in the thoughts of their hearts, and the mighty will fall from their thrones, but the Lord lifts up the lowly. They who look to the Lord for deliverance will be delivered a baby, a little child to lead them. Our anxiety will be wrapped up in his cries and will find silence in a rapt and tender gaze and the warmth of loving arms. Comfort, O comfort my people! This child is our protection. More than walls or swords or ships or standing armies, this child will keep the gate against those who wish us harm. Can you believe it? Could it be? Zion draws near as our faith peaks over the horizon, and the very mountains gather ’round in loving embrace to keep us through the night.

May the scepter of wickedness and the temptation to despair depart from your people, O Lord. May your blessings flourish in the light of your Son, in whom the hope of righteousness and restoration cannot be moved, but abides forever.

John Harrison
SENIOR MDIV STUDENT
In this Advent text, Jesus is coming down the mountain following the Transfiguration accompanied by Peter, James, and John. Jesus orders these disciples to tell no one what they have seen. They obey, but they also question what Jesus means about rising from the dead. Throughout Mark's gospel, but also in Matthew and Luke, Jesus repeatedly tells his followers not to tell others that He is the Messiah.

In first-century Palestine, the people expected the Messiah in the form of a victorious political leader who would rebuild the temple and reign in an era of peace and freedom. They would not have understood that the Messiah could “go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt.” Nor would they have understood his death on a Roman cross. Jesus knew that it was only after his death, burial, and resurrection that his followers and the rest of us who would come after them would understand the true meaning of Messiah, the true meaning that we have come to know in our hearts means Savior. It is the cross and the resurrection that define this victorious Jesus the Messiah.

We live on the other side of the resurrection. We are a resurrection people. We know of the suffering and contempt Jesus experienced. We may never fully appreciate the depth of his suffering and the high cost of the cross. But, we can renew our appreciation of the resurrection. We must never forget what came before the resurrection. But, as resurrection people, we should live in the confidence we have that morning came after the long dark night.

During this Advent season when our focus is on the coming birth of the Messiah, we should also focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus as a defining moment of his Messiahship. Unlike Peter, James, and John, we need not ask “what this rising from the dead could mean.” Rather, we should ask what the reality of the resurrection means and what difference it makes in our lives today.

Gracious God, as we await the birth of the Messiah, we do so with the reality of his coming death but in the certainty of accomplished resurrection. Renew in us the spirit of a resurrection people, walking in the light of the Messiah’s triumph over sin and death. Amen.

Kevin Henderson
MIDDLE MDIV STUDENT
One can hardly keep from recoiling in horror at this story. After all, Uzzah was just doing what any of us would have done, if we'd seen the Christ candle wobbling in its stand, or the memorial flower vase edging its way off the table. He reached out to steady the Ark, the vessel that bore the Commandments, the base atop which sat the Mercy Seat. The sacred symbol of God's presence with Israel had only recently been recovered from its Philistine captivity. It wouldn't do to have Israel's God tumbled over in Israel's dirt, would it? What sort of God strikes God's helpers dead? No wonder David hesitated to bring the Ark home.

The temptation of this tale is to think of what Uzzah did, rather than the reason he did it. I suspect that Uzzah was confusing the Ark with the God whose presence the Ark symbolized. Somehow, I can’t help wondering if, in a cognitive flash faster than light itself, Uzzah didn’t see the wobbling Ark and conclude that his God—and not just a symbol of God—was about to fall, and that his intervention was needed to avert a divine catastrophe. I wonder if Uzzah thought, perhaps without really thinking it, that God needed his help.

One of the great heresies affecting the church is the domestication of God, the idea that God's purposes can't be accomplished without human agency. “God has no hands but our hands,” we teach our children. We mean well. But God is not safely brought under our roof. God’s kingdom is coming, God’s purposes are working themselves out, God’s will is in process, whether we offer our assistance or not. God never needs our aid. Rather, God invites our participation. Among the lessons of Advent is that God does not need our help to draw God’s creation to its consummation. Among the lessons of the Incarnation is that, in Christ, we are invited to be heralds of the hope for that consummation.

Out-breaking, unconfined God, remind us that your reign drives inexorably forward toward its day of fulfillment, and that we are invited along for the ride. Amen.

Paul Hooker
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR MINISTERIAL FORMATION & ADVANCED STUDIES
This passage from Hebrews is one of the epistle readings assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary for Christmas Eve/Christmas Day. As we move through these waning, last days of Advent, moving ever closer to Christmas, we hear the words of this letter as it extols the exalted position of Jesus Christ. In the first verses of Hebrews, the author declares that Christ is above the prophets of the Old Testament; now a similar portrait is painted of a Jesus who is even above the angels in heaven. This is the eternal Christ who was present in the creation and who is eternal even beyond the end of history—whose “years will never end.” This Advent passage reaches so high that it might be better sung than read!

At first glance this may seem to be a strange message, as the author reaches back toward the prophets and upward toward the angels. However, those angels are all about us in the Advent season, aren’t they? They blow their trumpets on sparkling Christmas cards, they top our Christmas trees, and they are “heard on high” in many of the carols we sing. This season is full of angels! Sometimes, as lovely as the angels are, they threaten to eclipse the Babe whose birth they hail.

Come to think of it, many of the things that might draw our attention away from the Christ child are quite lovely in themselves, including many of the most beloved of our Christmas traditions. As much as we love the angels, the carols, the Christmas traditions of hearth and home— as much as we may dream of white Christmases, wondering shepherds and wandering magi—none of these lovely things must eclipse the One born in Bethlehem, who was there in the first, pristine booms of creation itself.

Jesus Christ, who was born higher than the angels for those created only a little lower than the angels: we praise you—for “you are the same, and your years will never end.” Amen.

Blair R. Monie
PROFESSOR IN THE LOUIS H. AND KATHERINE S. ZBINDEN DISTINGUISHED CHAIR OF PASTORAL MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP
Judges is a book about God’s chosen people in a time of messy transition into a downward spiral. No sooner had they crossed over into the Promised Land than things begin to fall apart. They still faced external enemies, but even worse, the twelve tribes fought each other. Time and time again, the people do evil in the sight of the Lord, and time and again they suffer the consequences by being taken into the hands of the enemy. The Israelites are under the rule of the dreaded Philistines when we join the story in Chapter 13. There, as so many times before and despite their fickleness, pig-headedness, and false pride, God sends them a deliverer. They have a covenant, after all, and God will not be the one to break it.

I can’t read the first two verses about Manoah’s unnamed and barren wife being visited by an angel and told she would conceive and bear a son without wiggling with a little smile. I know this story. I know the barren Sarah before her and Hannah and then Elizabeth who will follow. These women are my ancestors. They remind me to trust what I know to be true even when people close to me need more proof. Manoah’s wife, like Hannah and Elizabeth, knew what was true because it was awe-inspiring. She held onto that knowing, even though it made no logical sense and even though her husband doubted. She did not break trust.

Samson, however, did break trust. You can read up on the dramatic ways in which he failed as a deliverer in later chapters. For today though, I invite you to have a day out of Samson’s mother’s life. Sit with a little wiggly smile on your face, knowing for sure that you have been called to bear life in a time of messy transition, even if you don’t know whether the life you bear will bring deliverance. God will come again.

God of Promises, thank you for coming to us over and over again through places that we only see as dry and empty. Help us to be where we are and to be awe-inspired to do what you are asking us to do. Bless us, we pray, with a spirit of trust in your mysterious, steadfast work as we wait for you to come again. In the name of Jesus who fulfills all promises, Amen.

Melissa Wiginton
VICE PRESIDENT FOR EDUCATION BEYOND THE WALLS AND RESEARCH PROFESSOR IN METHODIST STUDIES
As December approaches every year, my oldest son waits with indescribable anticipation for the 24-hour non-stop showing of “A Christmas Story.” We, his family, shake our heads because it is the same story every year ... Ralphie wants a Red Rider BB gun and his mother is worried he will shoot his eye out, his dad wins a leg lamp, the next door neighbors’ dogs eat the Christmas Day dinner. The plot doesn’t change from year to year.

And the same holds true for this passage. Here we are listening to the same story again. We know how it is going to come out. The plot doesn’t vary. Yet, no matter how predictable, we lean forward with anticipation because somehow, some way, the details of God’s story are about us. So what if the angel’s message to Mary, “Greetings, you who are highly favored,” is God’s message to us?

P.T. Forsyth wrote, “Faith is not something we possess, but something that possesses us.” It is easy for us to reduce Mary to a plastic figure gazing at a manger and taken out of a box of ornaments for a few days a year. It is this passage in Luke that lets Mary stand out as flesh and blood, life-size, and invites us, like Mary, to step out in faith as we discover for ourselves that we are favored and blessed by God. Only then do we begin to haltingly, trust in the One who created and loved us before we were even aware. Faith is not an act; faith is a process. It is committing all we know of ourselves to all we know of God in Jesus Christ. And as we grow more in who we are in Christ, there is more to invest in a God who comes to us and says, “Fear not.” May we have faith that God is with us as intimately and personally as he was with Mary long ago, and may we trust that God continues to come to life in our world today.

Loving God, grant us such courage and trust like Mary. May your favor and blessings remind us always just who we are. And as we know that as Christ first came to earth bringing peace and joy long ago, let us always wait with excited anticipation knowing that he will come again. We ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Dawn Baird
SENIOR MDIV STUDENT
Christmas is a time for gifts. We give and we receive and we find joy in both giving and receiving. Hannah prayed with all her heart to God that he would grant her the gift of a son. Hers was not a selfish prayer for a gift that would make her life better. True, she wanted to find respect in the eyes of others and a son would give this to her. But she promised to take her son, and her joy at giving birth to him, and return those gifts to God and to the world. Ultimately, her son, Samuel, “became a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.” Hannah’s gift to God made the world a wiser and a better place.

We speak about our strengths and abilities as our gifts, the things we do well, that give us great pleasure and satisfaction. When we use these gifts wisely and well, they bring beautiful gifts to others. A dancer delights an audience with her grace and technique. A musician moves people to tears with his interpretation of great works. A sportsperson inspires and lifts the spirits of others. If we use our gifts wisely they multiply and make life better for others. Surely, though, some Christmas gifts are purely for amusement and are not designed to make the world a better place—or are they? Is not the joy in a child’s eyes when she receives a longed-for toy a gift in itself to a loving parent or grandparent? Gifts of food and clothing offer satisfaction and warmth. It is good to bring gifts to the ones we love, and to provide gifts for those who have little in this world. God’s gifts to us are so many and so rich—what better way can we serve God than to give whatever gifts we can provide to touch the lives of those close to us, and even to those for whom we care from a distance.

Generous God, give us hearts that are always open and that recognize the many gifts you have given to us. Truly our cup runneth over. Fill us with your generosity, so that we may offer back to your people and to your earth a little of the great bounty we are privileged to receive. In your gracious and holy name we pray. Amen.

Ruth Elswood
MIDDLE MDIV STUDENT
In this passage, God promises to “establish a new covenant with the house of Israel” and to “place my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.” This intimacy with God’s law will mean that “I shall be their God, and they shall be my people.” People will no longer need to teach others about God because “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

These beautiful promises emerge from Hebrew’s complicated meditations on sin, forgiveness, and temple holiness. Human sin creates distance between God and humans. The purpose of the temple, priests, and sacrifices was to overcome this distance. God is holy and merciful, but people cannot access God’s holiness and forgiveness directly. It must be mediated to them. We need temples and priests.

This passage insists that the days of mediation are over because Jesus is an eternal high priest. There is no longer any need for temples since in Christ humans have an eternal intimacy with God’s holiness and God’s mercy. No sin can undo this intimacy.

We may not have instincts for returning to the liturgies of the Jerusalem temple. But we do know the power of sin to separate, divide, and isolate. Sin breaks relationships, with other people, with God, and with ourselves.

This passage promises that Jesus, our high priest, has broken the power of sin to break us. Jesus eternally and perpetually overcomes the power of sin to kill and divide. God’s mercy and grace are inscribed on the heart of every child of God. And sin cannot erase it.

We may on occasion say to each other, “God forgives you,” but we are not mediating thereby any forgiveness. Forgiveness is written on the heart of every child around the table. We are announcing. Reminding. God’s forgiveness is engraved on everyone’s heart. We each in the hearing know it is true.

God of grace and mercy, we remember this day the power of Jesus Christ to overcome any separation between you and your people. You are our God, and we are your people, forever. Amen.

Lewie Donelson
THE RUTH A. CAMPBELL PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT
This is a puzzling text for Christmas Eve. It contains no explicit mention of Christ, no allusion to prophecy or anticipation of the Day of the Lord. Instead, the reading waxes philosophical, ruminating on time and the varied seasons, travails and joys within time. Why read such a text on the cusp of the Savior’s birth?

We read it to be reminded that Jesus Christ entered our time, our history and was subject to the time that we experience: entering the world as a vulnerable infant, growing, as Luke expresses it, “in wisdom and years,” experiencing rejection and affirmation, eventually dying at the hands of a powerful Empire. The time that Jesus entered—distant as it now is from us—was remarkably like our own. A powerful nation exerted its economic and military domination throughout much of the known world; culture and custom more often set people against one another than united them; as poverty extended its insidious grasp, many awaited a better life and a more humane time. Yet this Jesus who entered our time is also the Lord of all time, the foundation of the world, the alpha and omega, the fulfillment of God’s covenant with humanity, the One who makes all things new.

In his letter from Birmingham City Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. writes to white clergy who had encouraged King to wait patiently because the time for equality was not yet ripe. King responds to this advice by reminding these pastors that time is not neutral. It can be used to build up or to tear down, to enslave or to free. Jesus Christ enters our time to show us the Way beyond the violence, hatred, and division that wracks us over time. He enters our time to proclaim that this new time is now.

Holy God, on this day we give thanks that your Son entered time as subject and Lord. We know there is nothing that we experience in time that Christ has not taken as his own. Show us the ways that reflect his life during the time that we have. Amen.

David H. Jensen
ACADEMIC DEAN AND PROFESSOR IN THE CLARENCE N. AND BETTY B. FRIERSON DISTINGUISHED CHAIR OF REFORMED THEOLOGY
One of my favorite artists is Carroll Cloar, an Arkansan whose paintings were often illustrated fables set against the backdrops of Southern landscapes. Cloar left his native Crittenden County, Arkansas, to get his education at Rhodes College, and stayed there in Memphis for much of his life. He became perhaps the city’s most famous artist. When I think of his work, I think particularly of his painting, “The Night They Heard the Heavenly Music.” It’s based on his childhood memory of walking home one Sunday evening from the humble Pentecostal church to which his mother was devoted. Dressed in the best they have, the painting captures a rural scene and Cloar and his mother pausing to look up at something. They have heard music, and they search for its source through the leafless tree branches and amidst the twinkling stars across a night sky.

Has the music come from somewhere way up and above them? Their faces, cocked intently toward the heavens, make it clear that this is no ordinary night, and what they’re hearing is no ordinary music. Instead, this is a moment of great mystery and wonder.

I think of this well-known painting as I imagine those shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night.” They are interrupted by an angel who announces to them—that a Savior has been born in Bethlehem. A humble child wrapped in bands of cloth is lying in a manger; and the angel’s news is hardly out before the most beautiful heavenly music starts up for them, too. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

The shepherds run until they find that child, and they tell Mary and Joseph about the heavenly music. And, who knows? It may be this news about the music that Mary treasures the most—pondering it in her heart long after the shepherds have returned to their flocks. On their way back, by the way, Luke tells us that they, too, form their own impromptu choir—“glorifying and praising God for all they have heard and seen.”

What is it about this birth, this baby, this Gospel, that invites such heavenly music into our lives and hearts? Even today, it’s a safe bet that, as you read these words, your sound system is rejoicing with Bach and Handel and Amy Grant and Bobby McFerrin. How can we not sing when we get the news that he is born?

Across the days and months ahead, as this baby grows up, we will be following him—as he challenges us,
inspires us, even disturbs us. We will follow him, as best we can, to a world in need, and to a cross, and finally to the life everlasting. But, in each moment of the mystery and wonder of the Christian life, we will never be without a soundtrack. In every season of his life, and of ours, it will all be set to music—sweet, majestic, hymnic, redemptive, heavenly music.

“My life flows on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation.
I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”*

Theodore J. Wardlaw
PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS

*from *Glory to God*, Hymn 821
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 devotionals and prayers. And, we hope this Advent season was a meaningful one for you.

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In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.
Isaiah 11:1–2

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Mark 1:3