Advent
Matthew 24:36-44

This is a troubling passage. It reads as a warning, even a threat. The return of Jesus as Son of Man (or Son of Humanity) is described not as a day of comfort but as a day of destruction. This is not what we want to think about Jesus.

Jesus’s arrival is compared to Noah’s flood. The imagery is distressing. People were living their normal lives, “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.” They were unaware of any impending danger, when in the midst of their lives “the flood came and swept them all away.” Normal human communities will also be undone. Two are in the field; one is taken; one is left. The same violence comes upon two women grinding meal together. These are hard images. We will be swept away without warning, and our communities will be broken apart.

This coming destruction cannot be anticipated. Jesus declares that not even he, the son, knows when this will happen. Thus, the advice is to “keep awake” and “be ready.” We must be ready for this arrival always. “The Son of Humanity is coming at an unexpected hour.”

What do we do with a warning like this?

First, we must understand what it means to “keep awake” and to “be ready.” It does not mean that we should not go to sleep or that we should constantly scan the skies for Jesus. The following passage gives a hint. The good servant prepares for the return of the Lord by being kind to others. In fact, in Matthew, to be ready to face Jesus means to obey the Sermon on the Mount. There we read, we must love each other; we must even love our enemies.

We get ready by loving each other.

We do this even as the world outside teems with violence and uncertainty. We do not know what is going to happen. We do not know what kind of flood might arrive at our door. There is no safety from human or theological history. But, even in the midst of all this, we can and must love each other.

God of grace and love and power, we live in violent and uncertain times. Save us from the floods of human history. Enable us, in the midst of these hard times, to love and care for one another. Amen.

Lewis Donelson
THE RUTH A. CAMPBELL PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES
He prophet Isaiah shares a vision of peace. A peace between nations, forging their weapons into instruments of agriculture. This prophetic image contrasts the reality of its audience, the nation of Judah. Isaiah shares this vision during a time of war and national distress. After the death of King Uzziah, the Syro-Ephraimite alliance threatens impending invasion. As the nation is preparing its military defense, Isaiah presents a divine vision of nations that, while retaining their unique identities, settle their disputes and work together toward an economy of abundance. This divine expectation of peace is at tension with the present realities of violent conflict.

The remaining verses of this very chapter, Isaiah 2:6-22, describe a people who have been abandoned by God because of their obsession with different forms of wealth and displays of status. Those who center their lives around accruing wealth and status will be humbled by the Lord. Philosophical and economic ideologies, often rooted in the religious imagination and concerned with self-elevation, generate the very conflicts addressed by the Word of the God from Jerusalem. The Word which declares the end to war.

While science fiction envisions a reality beyond our present technological progress, prophecy acts as social-fiction by projecting a reality beyond not only our current social structures and institutions but the underlying assumptions that inform the operations of these social structures. This peaceful vision is a seed of hope for justice that transcends and incorporates all nations, creeds, and camps. As the listeners, we become pregnant with anticipation for a world that feels impossibly out of reach. Fueled by this anticipation of the holy imagination, we prepare the fires of our forges, taking actions that meld our weapons into tools of peace and abundance.

Through Isaiah’s vision, God calls all of creation to hope and work for a world where even nations operate from love, joy, and peace. This hope does not ignore the dangers and threats of reality, but it courageously opposes the forces of oppression by refusing to participate in the cycle of violence. Let us walk in the light of the God of Leah and of Rachel and of Jacob.

God, fill us with your vision for the future. Inspire your people to pursue peace beyond our present realities. Melt our weapons, be they physical, emotional, or social, into tools of creating and sharing abundance. Amen.

Austin Young
MDIV STUDENT FROM CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

Alumnus Shane Webb and several members of his congregation are students in our Certificado en Ministerio (CEM) program. For an English translation of this devotion, go to:

www.austinseminary.edu/Advent16

Hay mucho estrés y mucha ansiedad durante las semanas antes de la navidad. Comprar regalos, hacer las decoraciones, preparar la comida y participar en las actividades de la escuela, la comunidad y la iglesia, le deja a uno bien cansado. Aún más todavía, si uno se encuentra en una cultura e idioma de los cuales uno no es nativo.

Para mí, la temporada de adviento es un tiempo para prepararme espiritualmente para la venida de Cristo, pero muchas veces se siente como un tiempo de estrés. El profeta Zacarías de cierto modo hace lo mismo. Zacarías espera al Mesías que vendrá del linaje del Rey David señalado en este pasaje por el Retoño (también en Jer. 23:5). No sólo será realeza, sino también será un sacerdote. O sea, el Mesías tiene autoridad espiritual tanto como poder en la tierra.

En este tiempo, había mucha tensión entre los líderes de Israel después de tantos años en exilio. Por eso, fue necesario que los sacerdotes y los reyes trabajaran juntos para establecer el templo de nuevo y la comunidad judía como antes.

El futuro depende de la paz y la armonía entre los líderes gobernantes y los líderes espirituales. La esperanza en las palabras de Zacarías, viene en la forma de la restauración y redención del pueblo de Dios. Como cristianos, proclamamos que el Príncipe de Paz reina en nuestras vidas. Tenemos paz en la venida de Cristo, porque él quita las tensiones y nos da consuelo en las experiencias difíciles como exilio (o la inmigración).

Dios Viviente, en ti tenemos la promesa de una paz profunda. Apóyanos, Señor, para que podamos sentir tu restauración y redención en este tiempo de adviento. Toma la tensión y el estrés que hay en la vida para que descansemos en la paz de Cristo. Pedimos el apoyo del Espíritu Santo para concentrarnos en la celebración de Dios en la Encarnación. En el nombre de Jesucristo oramos. Amen.

Shane Webb (MDiv’11)
CEM STUDENT & PASTOR, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MT. PLEASANT, TEXAS
Titus 2:11-14

“When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter. Away to the window I flew like a flash, Tore open the shutters, and threw up the sash. The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow, Gave the luster of mid-day to objects below; When, what to my wondering eyes should appear, But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer, With a little old driver, so lively and quick, I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick.”

Haggai 2:6-9

Have you started your Christmas shopping? Personally, I would rather not think about it. Underneath the cheerful music and the bright lights, I can hear the buzzing of a familiar anxiety. It hums: Christmas presents are how you tell someone how much they mean to you. If you love someone, you spend money on them. But don’t spend too much or else you’ll have nothing left!

The prophet Haggai, for whom the little book sandwiched between Zephaniah and Zechariah is named, spoke to a similar anxiety among the people of conquered Judah:

“You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes” (1:6).

Haggai calls the people to a vision much bigger than barely scraping by: rebuild God’s temple. A new temple not only serves as a reminder of the relationship they have with God, but will also be an international event! God will shake up the whole world “so that the treasure of all nations shall come” to the temple (2:7)—all will pay their respects to the God of Judah.

Advent, too, invites us to a wider vision. Will we let our finances determine our sense of worth? Or, will the worth we have as children of God determine how our money supports the hope, peace, joy, and love we embrace this season?

Regardless of what we buy or don’t, regardless of whether we are stressed or calm, Advent invites us to pause and remember: God loves us beyond price, and so we are worth more than money can express.

Holy One, who shakes up heaven and earth, shake up our Christmas anxieties and expectations. O come, Desire of Nations, and bind our hearts in the love and worthiness you show us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Tyler Henderson
MDIV STUDENT FROM WICHITA FALLS, TEXAS

Ben Masters
MDIV STUDENT FROM MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA
One of the proverbs in Zambia, “Kuona maso a nkhonon’kudekha” which literally means “To see the snail’s eyes, you need patience,” depicts the marvel of Advent: to patiently wait for the arrival of the promised prophet who would reveal God’s will for God’s people. Isn’t this marvelous?

Before his imminent death, Moses assures the Israelites about God’s promise to raise another prophet like Moses from among themselves, who would proclaim God’s “words” to them as commanded by God. The Israelites’ role was to patiently wait for the promised prophet. At that time, a prophet of God was expected to declare God’s intention for the people. Such a prophet played the role of God’s mouthpiece; divinely mandated to speak God’s will to God’s people on behalf of God.

This prophetic role is ultimately fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the promised prophet of God for whom we patiently and joyfully await during advent and to be manifested on Christmas Day. Jesus reveals God’s will for each of us, our families, the church, and the world today. This is so because Jesus knows God’s suitable will for us which is visibly portrayed by Jesus’s birth.

What a marvel worth listening to!

Gracious God, we thank you for your promise of Jesus as our prophet for whom we always anticipate to reveal your will for us. Help us to listen to him as we once again patiently and joyfully receive this promised marvelous gift. In Jesus’s name, Amen.

Lameck Banda (MAT'S’03)
VISITING PROFESSOR IN AFRICAN THEOLOGY
FROM LUSAKA, ZAMBIA

It is eerie how closely this passage echoes the events of the world today. It’s almost as if Jesus is in the room with us, reading the newspaper or our Facebook feeds, overhearing our anxious and hushed conversations. Wars. Earthquakes. Famines and plagues. Unjust arrests, persecutions, and killings. These are not forthcoming signs, they are reality.

Could this really be the end of days? Only the triune God knows the time of the in-breaking. In fact, these consequences of human depravity are not unique to our age, but sadly are an ongoing result of our inability to love one another as God loves us.

And so we have a choice, in the midst of this fearful reality. We can withdraw from the world to seek security and survival, should the end really be near, or we can testify to the love and hope of Jesus that we experience each and every day. This testimony is a courageous counter to the fatalistic surrender to fear, a response to the gift of grace.

Although the world is often scary and insecure and unstable, there is hope in thinking that one day, not a stone will be left upon another. In other words, everything about this world is transitory, is changing and shifting, is destroying and recreating itself. Every system of power that threatens the innocent and oppressed, every sinful systematic human construction will be brought down, every by-product of greed and hatred destroyed.

For though we pride ourselves as humans on our ability to construct and formulate and build, we also know that the things we create are the very things that imprison us, that reinforce the sinfulness of this world. We are bound by that which we establish. So it may initially sound pessimistic, but thinking through the inevitability of the end of human domination gives way to realizing God’s steadfastness and eternal nature. That amidst all of the unsteadiness of the world, God is steadily present.

Re-creating God, thank you for your steadfast presence in this battered and fearful world. Remind us of your immanent presence amidst our suffering and anxiety, and breathe hope into our hearts. Give us the courage to counter fear by witnessing to love, and help us to build more equitable and faithful systems while dismantling those that bind and oppress. Hold us in grace and mercy. Amen.

Jessie Light
MDIV STUDENT FROM MISSION, KANSAS
Matthew 3:1-12

John knows how to draw a crowd. He doesn’t use coffee bars, kids’ programming, accessible parking, or trained musicians to win people’s hearts. Instead, he goes right for the spiritual jugular. “Repent,” he says. “Get ready. The Kingdom of God is on its way.”

“The people of Jerusalem and all Judea” come, as do folks from “all the region along the Jordan.” They come to be baptized by John. The riverbanks are as crowded as Target on Black Friday morning; as packed as the candlelight service on Christmas Eve.

And somewhere among this menagerie of the dusty and dripping are the Pharisees and Sadducees. “Many” Pharisees and Sadducees, Matthew notes.

You would think these religious leaders could blend in with the crowds. What are they doing that makes it so easy for John to recognize them? Are they ceremoniously stripping off their brocaded robes and handing them to servants, making a bombastic fuss all the while about how, because they are “Abraham’s children,” not a single drop of river water must be allowed to mar the delicate fabric?

Or perhaps they are working too hard to look like the others, forcing false expressions of penitence that trigger John’s prophetic awareness. “I’m concerned about your lack of transparency,” we might tactfully tell them, in our context—but only after the baptism, in a more private space.

John calls them out, right then and there. “You brood of vipers!” he yells, in between dunks. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” The background singing ceases. The people freeze, for a moment, abandoning the gentle nudgings meant to move them forward. John is serious about this judgment he keeps talking about.

When fields are set on fire to burn away dead crops, nesting snakes become unsettled. They slither away, terrified, desperate to escape the flames.

Unsettled by what is coming, we join the Pharisees and Sadducees in seeking new places to hide. But Christian identity, signified by baptism, is no cover for sin. It promises healing, not protection. And healing comes with moving out of hiding and into that precarious space where all coverings are removed and we are buried, repenting, awaiting garments of new life. In the coldness of this space there is no entitlement; there is only hope against hope.

Judging God, burn away our hypocrisy that we might truly be your children. Replace our fear with the courage to be changed. Draw us out from hiding and toward the glory of your kingdom.

Cynthia Rigby
THE W.C. BROWN PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. It is a prayer for justice as God sees it, not as the sovereign sees it. James Montgomery’s hymn, “All Hail to God’s Anointed,” imagines Jesus as the psalm’s focus:

All hail to God’s anointed, great David’s greater Son!
All hail in time appointed, your reign on earth begun.*

But the psalm’s prayer for an earthly ruler is potent in these days. What if king were president? At this writing, on this side of the election, it is a “not yet” prayer. This devotion book will be in our hands, however, on the “already” side: the leader, the prayer unchanged.

You shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth;
and love, joy, hope, like flowers, spring in your path to birth.

Advent is a tension of already and not yet—what is glimpsed and what is awaited. The second line above points us to the tension. The path before us does not always seem to bloom but to choke. The despairingly recurrent deception, clutter, aggression, and waste that clog our screens and our souls. Who will be our refuge and strength? The psalm may extol the king in many ways, but it places trust in the work of God alone. The already-not yet is captured in a shorter song lyric—this refrain from an African American spiritual:

Done made my vow to the Lord and I won’t turn back:
I will go, I shall go, to see what the end will be.

The vow is made “to the Lord,” not to one another. It is God’s vision of justice and righteousness that sustains when our own vision, our own seemingly clear agendas, our own human strength fail, as they inevitably will.

To you shall prayer unceasing and daily vows ascend.
Your rule is still increasing; your rule is without end.

The psalm ends, as it begins, with its sights set firmly on God’s work: “Blessed be the Lord ... who alone does wondrous things.” That vision becomes almost ecstatic at the psalm’s conclusion: “Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth.” Montgomery’s hymn, in one deft line of poetry, captures this: your [already established] rule is [because not yet fully accomplished] still increasing. What is our part in that increasing? To whom is our vow made?

Gracious God, to you alone belong all glory and power. Set our sights and watchfulness on you. May our trust be in you alone, so that our prayers and actions will point to you, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Eric Wall
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SACRED MUSIC

* Hear the Austin Seminary choir sing this hymn: AustinSeminary.edu/Advent16
Isaiah 11:1-10

Isaiah writes in a time when political leadership has failed. A succession of disappointing rulers has failed to deliver the social justice and peace of God’s promise. But Isaiah doesn’t despair, rather he gives us a vision of a world that doesn’t merely settle for the least bad option.

This vision reveals God’s radical plan for the world—where the status quo is turned upside down and inside out. We may think that the world is full of unchangeable binaries: a world locked into endless competition for survival, full of rivals and enemies, predator and prey. But in God’s plan such divisions are reconciled in a peaceful unity. This hard-to-imagine feat is led not by a great warrior with huge armies or billions of dollars, but by a child—the symbol of the meek and powerless.

We hear this passage in our Advent season proclaiming again that the world is about to turn. In the bleakest of times we dare to hope. When we feel caught in systems of oppression and start to despair that there will ever be change, we can claim these visions that seem impossible. For ourselves and the world, we practice Hope. Hope that defies the things that have tried to cut down our faith in a just and righteous God. Hope that emerges like the defiant shoot from that stump—a new beginning out of the wreckage of violence. Hope that defies death with new life and sees in it the promise of the olive branch of peace.

This is the hope and the promise we proclaim in Christ Jesus: God incarnate in a little child, who will usher in a reign of peace so radical that it defies even our most fundamental beliefs about what is possible.

O Lord, we long for a world that is filled with your righteousness and peace. In the times when we despair, help us to remember the hope you give us in Christ. Amen.

Jenny Saperstein
MDIV Student from Greely, Colorado

Romans 15:4-13

One of my students in my previous teaching post served a Hausa tribe church in Nigeria even though he was an Ibo. He said that sometimes his ministry was rejected. The challenge of diversity was extreme: in his small town more than thirty-two languages were represented.

Today we are reading Romans in the context of the Advent season, and we find the ethnic diversity of the ancient world no less complex. Paul lived in a time when the unity of the Christian church was in question. In the Roman church, it seems that some of the Gentiles had a hard time seeing the particular roles that the Jews continued to play in God’s plan. As a response, Paul calls them to welcome one another.

The diversity of our own times is part of the gift of the gospel. The Advent season calls together people from across the social spectrum. Kings and shepherds, wise men who emigrated from another country to see Jesus, all gather to glorify Jesus. Of course, it’s difficult to recognize those we disagree with or those from whom we think we are quite different.

Paul suggests in verse six that we are meant to glorify God in one voice, and for some reason I picture this happening through singing. Gathered for a midnight Christmas service, many of us light candles and sing hymns against the cold. When we sing, our voices don’t exactly blend, but they belong together. We sing in shared space rather than in territory we have to defend.

The fulfillment of Christian life only comes as we recognize the diversity of God’s plan—God using Jews and Gentiles despite what we thought possible. Let us open our eyes to those around us whom we are called to build up, until we realize that we were meant to be together in the life of Christ. Like my Nigerian student, this may mean difficult seasons in church life within communities where it can be hard to recognize each others’ gifts. Advent is a season of expecting God might still be at work despite the paucity of the results we see around us.

God, we confess that we sometimes defend our territory rather than welcome one another. Help us to love you by recognizing your gifts in one another even in the midst of challenges in church life. Amen.

Phil Browning Helsel
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care
C
ook the turkey. Host the family. Place the candles and greenery and Chrismons. Prepare the Advent and Christmas Eve liturgies. If you are like me, there might be a little part of you that thinks, “Maybe if I do all of these things just right, it will be Christmas.” And maybe that is true. The author of Titus also believes that what people do is important. The letter’s first two chapters are filled with admonitions and rules for Jesus—followers living in Roman society.

“But …” today’s scripture begins. According to the author of Titus, Christ enters into the world’s story not because of what we do or do not do, but because of God’s abundant mercy. What a relief! It’s not all up to us. It will be Christmas—no matter what. Christ is coming, even if the turkey is overcooked, or the family doesn’t get along, or the greenery falls down, or the church service doesn’t go quite right. Christ is coming even though our world is wounded, even though we hurt one another, even though God has every reason not to join this messy story. Christ is with us, always and everywhere, and because of this we have reason to believe, like the author of Titus, that “we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” We have reason to hope that through God’s merciful gift, our hurting and suffering world might become instead a world of justice and peace.

So cook the holiday meal, gather with family and friends, hang decorations, and prepare liturgies. In God’s great mercy, Christ will be in all of it, leading us to more, leading us to become a people of hope and mercy in a world of great need.

God our Savior, thank you for your gifts of mercy and grace. In every moment, help us to recognize you in our stories and in the lives of all your children. Lead us to hope, and make us bearers of hope for our world. Amen.

April Long
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS

R
here are times along this long journey with Christ that I find myself impatient and struggling, instead of trusting that my journey is based in God’s time. When I struggle, I return to prayer and pray for deeper faith. I pray to be given the faith of Ruth, who is a striking example of God’s fidelity as well as God’s love. Advent helps us remember how very connected we all are, and Ruth’s story connects us to the walk of faith that we all should undertake.

Ruth was loved by God. And not only was she loved by God, but Ruth trusted that love in every part of her life. Ruth had deep faith and did not let the difficulty or many losses in her life prevent her from her walk with God. Ruth was willing to leave all that she knew and come into a new land. Her journey is one of the soul, one that encourages us to choose the harder journey if it means it will deepen our faith.

No matter what the journey, if it is one that God calls us to, we know that God is with us. God will not abandon us; God knows better than we do what it is we are meant to do. God is not only with us, but is constantly mapping our way ahead as God did with Ruth. From Ruth we can see how in her taking the journey in faith, God was pleased with her and renewed her life in ways she could have never foreseen.

God’s map for our lives is far greater than we can imagine, it is only up to us to take each step in faith, in the same way that Ruth did all of her life. Let us, as well, embrace God’s map.

God, for today, let me trust you on this journey. Let me deepen my faith through each step of my journey. Help me know you are with me on this path and your wish for me is to simply walk forth and listen to your direction. Amen.

Nettie Reynolds
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS

Nettie contributes to our student blog and plans to be a hospital chaplain after graduation this May. To read her additional thoughts on how she believes Advent plays a role in chaplaincy, visit the blog page:

www.austinseminary.edu/studentblog
David’s prayer marks a new era for his lineage, but most importantly, for the people of Israel. This prayer, loaded with humility, joy, and devout affection for God, takes us back to the crucial moment when God first announced God’s sovereign providence to humankind. The prophet Nathan had received a gracious oracle from God regarding David’s dynasty. That revelation needed to be communicated promptly to David. The Lord had declared the security of Israel and the “house” of David unconditionally and in perpetuity. Such magnificent words provided a new hope to the people of Israel. It provides a new hope for us.

The God of Abraham sustained the promise of “having descendants as numerous as the stars.” God continued to show faithfulness and kindness to God’s own beloved creation. This covenant with David became part of the larger design of salvation for humanity, for you and me. David and his lineage had been chosen as the family through which the Messiah, the Word made flesh, would come to our world. David was perplexed! There was nothing he could do to deserve such Divine gift. It was only God’s abundant grace and God’s infinite love that looked upon him with favor. Therefore, his response is quite simple: “What more can David say to you?”

What more can we say to God? The Creator of the universe has given us a sublime gift: salvation. That is our reason to celebrate, to elevate our prayers with a joyful noise! However, when words fail to express our gratitude, let us lift our hearts, our minds, and our souls by acting with reverence and awe with one another.

Everlasting God, we are grateful that you have given us the sublime gift of salvation. May our words express humility, sincerity, and truth to one another. If our words fail, lead our actions so that they may show love and respect. We humbly ask all these things, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.

Jasiel Hernandez
MDIV STUDENT FROM KERRVILLE, TEXAS

In today’s Gospel passage, we encounter a wondering and waiting John the Baptist, who seems to be in his own private wilderness. In his imprisonment, John has surely had the time to question the identity of Jesus, the Jesus he recognized and baptized earlier in Matthew’s text. It’s hard to blame John for his doubts. How can the messenger do his job from prison? Why has Jesus not rescued him from his present circumstances? By asking the disciples to inquire of Jesus, “Are we to wait for another,” John appears to not be wearing his prophet hat, and appears instead to be speaking for his people as one among them. Although he’s a public figure, here we may have a glimpse of private John. As one preparing the way, John must have had a lot of time to imagine what the “coming one” would be like.

Perhaps John truly doubted Jesus for a moment, or perhaps he sent word through the disciples for their own benefit and confirmation of Jesus’s identity. For me, the heart of John’s question is, What kind of Messiah are we waiting for? What is the Messiah’s character? We can intuit from the response of Jesus, who paraphrases Isaiah in today’s passage, that it is one who is concerned with the oppressed and downtrodden. It is the same one who instructs his disciples in Matthew 10 to champion the “little ones,” or mikros, the vulnerable people in his world. Jesus is toppling messianic expectations at that time!

Although Advent is a traditional time of anticipation and expectation from year to year in the life of the church, a joy that we may celebrate on this Gaudete Sunday is that the One we await, though we remember His coming, is nonetheless a profoundly surprising and unexpected Savior. If we expect anything, may it be that the coming one will surprise us and cast a vision for the Kingdom of God that challenges our own vision. As we await the arrival of the newborn King, may we welcome disruptions in our routines, traditions, and assumptions, and encounter Jesus again and for the first time.

Precious God, your Son was born among us, announcing the news of your love to all of Creation. In the joy of this Advent season, may we be touched by the light of Christ in unexpected and surprising ways, so that we may creatively love and compassionately serve Your Kingdom. Amen.

Meg Vail
MDIV STUDENT FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS & PRESIDENT OF THE STUDENT BODY
Thank you for making this journey with our students, faculty, and staff. We hope that you are preparing the way for the Lord in your life as you read these meditations and prayers. And, we hope this Advent season is a meaningful one for you.

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Read more about their seminary journey from students Nettie Reynolds (December 9) and Caroline Barnett (December 14) here:

www.AustinSeminary.edu/StudentBlog
Isaiah 35

Isaiah is doing his job as a prophet, reminding the Hebrews that being held captive in a foreign country is not the end of their story. He describes what is coming next with incredibly vivid images (burning sand shall become a pool), dramatic reversals (the lame shall leap like deer), and heroic interventions (He will come with terrible recompense). This is an action/adventure story with deserts blooming like crazy and water popping up from dry ground as if with Pixar animation. Isaiah goes over the top trying to get their attention. Maybe the Hebrew people were at a low ebb, emotionally, psychologically, physically. Maybe they wanted to forget about who they were, throw in with the Babylonians, and call it a day. Isaiah offers an alternate narrative. Will they hear it and rest into their identity as the children of God?

This strikes me as an excellent question with only thirteen shopping days left until Christmas. We are captives too, you know. Our Babylonian captors are the expectations of the season. In Babylon, we will go into debt to make our surroundings beautiful, our families jolly, our food delicious, and our gifts extravagant. And that’s the short list. That list doesn’t include programs, parties, plays, and projects for the needy. My guess is that right about now, you are at low ebb. Listen to Isaiah. He is trying to tell us: Only the coming of God can transform the distorted expectations of the season into true life abundant. We cannot make this happen—even with a Platinum American Express card. We have to wait. This is what the Advent season reminds us. We wait, and in due time, we notice that the jackal has abandoned his haunts, the lions have gone elsewhere to eat, the threats of unfulfilled expectations are dissipating. We wait, and in the stillness see the outline of a path up ahead. We wait and come to know that this is the Holy Way, where former captives like us—God’s people—sing and dance with joy upon their heads. That is our story.

God of Glory, we can be so foolish. Forgive us when we are captured by expectations that drive us to be busy, distracted, anxious, and exhausted. Help us to remember that we wait for your life in the world, coming in the baby Jesus. Teach us to watch and wait for the story, as told by Isaiah, to unfold. Thank you that sorrow flees and joy comes. Amen.

Melissa Wiginton
Vice President for Education Beyond the Walls
& Research Professor in Methodist Studies

Micah 5:2-3

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah.”

Several years ago, my family moved from New Jersey to a small town in Pennsylvania called Bethlehem. It was the middle of my sophomore year of high school, and Bethlehem was not where I wanted to be. I was new, no friends, in a town that seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. Shortly after our move, I made a calendar counting the days until graduation anticipating the future, resisting the reality that I now lived in Bethlehem not New Jersey. Funny enough after high school, I ended up in a small town in Central Pennsylvania at a school called Messiah College.

God has a funny sense of humor with these things, especially when we think we know what our future is. Back then, I didn’t have the foresight to think how Bethlehem may have just been that liminal space of transition that I needed. I wanted everything to remain the same; I wanted to feel like I belonged. Memories of the past that had sustained me were slowly leaving me, and I did not want to let go of the familiar. Many years later, I realized that this little town called Bethlehem did play a significant role in my formation and that I had to reconfigure my understanding of home.

In our passage today, we are invited to draw out those moments where we experience Bethlehem beyond “one of the little clans of Judah” and live into the future promise of return. In this passage, we get a hopeful glimpse of what will be and a reminder of what was. Those hearing this text were in exile and most likely needed the reassurance of a future promise, like we all do when things change or when the future is bleak. Advent is a season in which we are invited to wait in that in-betweenness. As a young high school student I didn’t know what the future would hold, I knew something was in store but not in Bethlehem. Advent gives us the gift to hold onto those moments of waiting, to experience the transition zones in our lives as welcomed moments where God is still moving in and with us. It is in those liminal spaces where God reminds us that we are beloved. May this season be a welcomed time of liminal space, where we live at the crux of in-between in our own little towns of Bethlehem.

Creator God, who ushers us into a future and reminds us of our hopeful past in our moments of transition: Grant us the patience to be present and to wander in the hopefulness of the liminal spaces of our lives. Holy Spirit, breathe into us new life, renewal, and hope. Amen.

Herald Osorno
MDIV Student from Washington, D.C.
In this passage from James we find an exhortation to be patient until the coming of the Lord. Perfect for Advent, right? Amidst the hustle and bustle, we are reminded to take a seat and enjoy the season. Yet by having patience during Advent, we are struck by the disarming paradox that Jesus is at once one we wait on—but also among us already.

Like a farmer who has just planted her crop, we are waiting and waiting for something to appear. And like the farmer, we have faith in the seeds planted in the soil. We know the hope of what’s to come is already there—sometimes it just exists below the surface.

It reminds me of the moment on Christmas Eve when we momentarily live in the gap between waiting and arriving. There is no more planning to be done, no more Advent candles left to light. But it is not quite Christmas; we are not yet in bells and whistles celebration.

This scripture talks of patience, a virtue we are especially aware of during the month of December. But let us think of patience not just as passive anticipation for December 25th and all that it entails, but also as a way to find the little Christmas Eves every day. Let us think of patience as having the eyes to see the moments in which we are both looking toward the future and perfectly content with the present. And just maybe, we’ll find Jesus already among us.

Holy God, be with us in our waiting and our patience. Grant us the eyes to see your work among us already and trust in the hope for what is to come. Amen.

Caroline Barnett
MDIV STUDENT FROM PRAIRIE VILLAGE, KANSAS

Caroline writes for our student blog. To read how she sees Advent playing a role in her future ministry, visit our blog page:

www.austinseminary.edu/studentblog

This time of year, I often think about Mary. As a young mother, it is not difficult for me to find her relatable. I think about how she must have been afraid, even though the angel told her not to be. I think about her courage in the face of fear to accept what God was calling her to do. Accepting any call from God takes a great deal of courage, but her call seems impossible: bring the Son of God into the world. Even with today’s modern advancements, pregnancy can be a scary time for a young woman; I often think about the challenges of giving birth in first-century Palestine.

Yet, she did find the courage to answer the call. She must have been afraid, yet she gave herself over to the strength of God. And here, in these verses, we find that she knew the greatness of this call, not only for herself, but also for Israel and the world. She saw herself as a lowly servant, yet was still blessed by God. She trusted that God had not forgotten her or her people. She trusted God would continue to lift up the lowly and, through the Son, bring joy to the world.

Now, as we rush through the madness of the Christmas season, let us take a moment to rejoice with Mary. God does continue to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. God continues to call us all to do great works in the world. We may be afraid, even though we have been told not to be. But God will give us the strength we need to answer the call to continue to bless the world. Even in the modern times we live in, we will face challenges. But let us have courage and let our spirit rejoice in God our Savior.

Holy God, you came to such a young woman long ago and called her to bear your Son. You continue to come to those whom the world casts as the least, and call them to greatness. Help us, who may be afraid, answer the call you have given to our lives so that we may serve you in this world, and bring the joy of the Son to all. Amen.

Rebekah Tucker-Motley
MDIV STUDENT FROM WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA
We have just emerged from an election cycle during which we’ve been pummeled, at all levels of elective office, with a parade of horribles ahead if “that other candidate” is elected, but assured of good times, security, prosperity, and other blessings ahead if the speaker wins. By some accounts, this has been one of the most divisive elections ever held. Some political descriptions of the American condition paint us virtually as economically and socially captive and threatened in our own land. If the candidates’ words are taken seriously, we may wonder how we can emerge from such difficult times, put worries over the current condition as we’ve heard it described aside, turn toward heaven, and welcome the birth of the Christ child.

Jeremiah was a captive. But God wouldn’t leave him alone to suffer and wonder what the people of Judah would face under the reign of the Babylonians. God spoke at length to Jeremiah, here foreshadowing the birth of a savior. God reminds Jeremiah of what He promised before—a descendant of David will be born to bring justice and righteousness to Israel and Judah ... and the world. He won’t be known as a politician or soldier or mere prophet. He will be called—and will in fact be—our Lord and Righteous Savior.

From the depths of captivity, Jeremiah heard the uplifting promise of a coming new reign, not born of politics or war, but of God’s fulfillment of his Word. Jeremiah was sustained in his ministry by this promise. We listen today for that same promise in celebration of the birth of Christ—the Lord our Righteous Savior—just as Jeremiah heard.

Loving God, we give you thanks for your promise of new beginnings in Jesus’s birth, come to love, teach, heal, and save. We turn to you for the hope only a Savior can bring. Let our hearts open now in celebration of your promise fulfilled.

Dean Pickett (CIM’16)
CERTIFICATE OF MINISTRY GRADUATE FROM LITTLETON, COLORADO

Beloved, the season of Advent is the beginning of our liturgical calendar, so let us take a moment this season to pause, to refocus our lives on Christ, and to make our “New Year’s” resolutions. Today, in the midst of our “New Year,” we turn to Jude and receive a troubling warning of scoffers—“worldly people, devoid of the Spirit”—who are causing divisions and obscuring the truth. Our modern scoffers and schisms have produced damaging fallout that has seeped into our spiritual, political, and emotional consciousness, so let us seize this opportunity to make a resolution to heal these wounds of division with love and mercy.

In this handful of verses that end Jude’s letter, mercy is mentioned three times, which is not insignificant. Although we are undeserving of God’s grace and love, the wonder of God’s mercy is that we are nonetheless recipients of that divine gift, called to share that mercy and the hope of Christ with the world. Therefore, beloved, if we are to be successful in our resolution, we must extend mercy even to the scoffers causing divisions. We must love them and attempt to understand them. What motivates them to divide and to hurt others? Are they broken or hurt themselves? From what pain and suffering might they need relief?

Let us also not hesitate to understand and extend mercy to ourselves. How many of us have sown division this year? How many of us are broken and in need of mercy and the hope of Christ’s advent to strengthen our faith and soothe our wounds? Aware of our own sinfulness, it is often difficult for us to see ourselves as does God. Mercy can be uncomfortable and frightening. It has never been easy for me, but I have begun to learn that when we lean into discomfort and fear, we are truly relying on God to lead us. So in this season of preparation, let us resolve to be merciful with one another, to seek the uncomfortable, beautiful truth revealed in Christ, and to prepare the wide-open way within ourselves for Christ’s advent.

God of mercy and grace, fill us with your Spirit so we may make room for the suffering of this world. Call even the furthest of us back to the flock, and keep watch with us as we await the day when you will come again. Amen.

Andrew Frazier
MDIV STUDENT FROM KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI
To my ear, this passage is one of the most mystical, and most beautiful, in all the Gospels. Moving at the speed of light, John whirls us back through time to before there even was time. He spins us through the creation of the world and then drops us off again—huddled in the darkness, watching, waiting, looking for the light.

At this time of year, it’s the darkness that seems pervasive. So many things seem to fall into the category of “not enough.” Time, money, and patience are in limited supply, topped off by nature’s cruel joke of shortened daylight hours. We feel their paucity, and what little light we try to grab on to is still not enough to bring us out of our funk. And here this passage tells us that all things, including this darkness, came into being through the Word with God. We wonder if this year, the darkness might really overcome us. At best, perhaps God is playing, even taunting us, testing how much we can withstand.

But with each passing week, we light another candle. Even as we watch and wait, the light grows brighter. John assures us, the light is coming, the Savior is on his way. As we remain steadfast in our belief, the timeless Jesus, the Light of the World, is preparing once again to shine through the darkness. As we hold on in our faith, the timeless Jesus, the Word with God, will again bring all things into being. Soon, the infant Christ child will return into the world, and the darkness, as promised, will be banished. Hallelujah.

God who loves us beyond all measure, we watch and wait as the light of Christ moves toward us through this Advent season. Let the light rekindle in us our everlasting relationship with you, and may its warmth help us to love one another here on Earth as you boundlessly love us from heaven. As we await this joyous birth, grant us your peace, brought to fruition by the life and work of your son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Janine Zabriskie
MDIV STUDENT FROM CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

We are always at our best when our focus is on God’s reign in light of the passage of time toward “the end,” when all things will make sense in Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” This “end,” (the telos in Greek) is the goal and destination of history. We are going somewhere. We are not wanderers, we are pilgrims, because our journey has a destination.

This “end,” however, is often shrouded with mystery and seen only dimly. What gives this destination its power, however, is that it has been promised by God. Our story is that of a journey—sometimes mysterious, often challenging—that leads ultimately to the reign of God, not yet fully seen but already accomplished—a reign of peace, justice, and love. As a friend of mine likes to put it, “I haven’t read the whole story, but I peeked at the last chapter, and it turns out great.”

For us as Christians, this vision of the end informs how we view the past, the present, and the future. It’s a vision that gives hope for the world. The good news is that we have more than small glimpses of the nature of history’s destination, because God has revealed God’s self to us in Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews writes, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” This long-expected Jesus is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being …” In other words, in this Advent season we behold the light of One who is both “God with us” and “the long-expected Jesus” who holds the future securely in his hands. We can move boldly toward the reign of God.

O Thou Long-Expected Jesus, may the glimpses of your coming glory remind us that the future is in your hands. May your coming reign give us power to live hopefully and boldly. Amen.

Blair Monie
PROFESSOR IN THE LOUIS H. AND KATHERINE S. ZBINDEN DISTINGUISHED CHAIR OF PASTORAL MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP
Student Ezequiel Herrera is originally from the Dominican Republic and Spanish is his first language. Austin Seminary’s Strategic Plan 2020 welcomes people of diverse identities and heritages who come to be educated for Christian leadership and service. Toward that vision, we have some courses designed in Spanish so that students may best learn how to shepherd a growing number of Latino congregations.

For an English translation of this devotion, go to: www.austinseminary.edu/Advent16

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E l período del rey Acaz, de Judá fue uno marcado por el culto pagano, sacrificios humanos, humillación y una total desconexión con el Dios verdadero, el Dios que había escogido a los descendientes de Abraham como pueblo escogido de Dios. El rey, en vez de confiar y caminar con Dios, decidió adorar a otros dioses, incluyendo dar en sacrificio sus propios hijos en un ritual al idolo Moloch, adoptando la costumbre abominable de los fenicios. El Reino de Judá estaba sumido en el caos y desorden; dos ejércitos enemigos (Israel y Siria) avanzaban en su invasión a Judá. Dios por medio del profeta Isaías, prometió al rey protección y salvación. En medio de este estado de desesperanza, el profeta Isaías trajo palabras de Dios al rey, “Por tanto, el Señor mismo os dará señal: He aquí que la virgen concebirá, y dará a luz un hijo, y llamará su nombre Emanuel.”

El rey Acaz, en lugar de confiar en el Dios de sus antepasados, decidió hacer alianza con el rey de Asiria. El resultado final fue desastroso. Él confió en la protección de un rey idolatra, en lugar de confiar en el Dios verdadero. Estamos llamados a confiar en Dios y su liberación. No copiar lo que hizo el rey Acaz, ni hacer ninguna lealtad, especialmente si esa lealtad implica la negación de Dios, devoción y adoración hacia ídolos.

Amado Dios, en este tiempo de Advenimiento, renueva nuestras expectativas y reaviva nuestra fe en el Mesías, (Emmanuel, Dios con Nosotros) que fue prometido a la humanidad para traer salvación y reconciliación del mundo contigo, en Jesús oramos, Amen.

Ezequiel Herrera
MDIV STUDENT FROM BRYN MAWR PARK, NEW YORK

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Psalm 96

A t summer camp, when I was a girl, we sang a song based on this psalm. It was a pump-up, feel-good song we sang at the top of our lungs during morning worship, standing around our guitar-playing counselors. There was a dance move that went with the line “greatly to be praised” and we danced and sang the morning in with great enthusiasm. As an adult—and a seminarian—I suspect that while our exuberance and joy would have pleased the psalmist, our complete omission of God’s incipient judgment might have seemed more than a little lacking.

But it’s Advent! It’s a time of light, of a bright star and a baby in a manger, of dreams and hopes and the incarnation of God. What place has judgment here? We don’t want judgment—we’re about to get to the best part and it will be light and joy and peace! And yet here stands the psalmist, reminding us that the joy and exuberance of the psalm is a lead-up to God coming and judging the peoples of the earth—and that the earth will rejoice.

Isn’t that tension between the joy in a new song and the coming judgment what Advent is about? The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light! But light is blinding after darkness, and our eyes are slow to adjust. The familiar hymns of Advent live in this tension, but not all of them capture the fierce joy of the psalmist. In Advent, judgment looks and sounds more like God’s righteousness and truth sweeping over the earth and its peoples, while creation rejoices. God’s people lift up their voices in trust and in joy and in the certainty of God’s love, singing of the marvelous works of God. This Advent season, remember as we wait in the darkness: the light is coming. It brings with it truth and righteousness—how can we keep from singing?

God of all songs, we bless your name and rejoice in your works. Help us to recognize your judgment as the place where you break into our lives with truth and righteousness. Create in us new songs to sing in joy and in sorrow, in darkness and in light. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ, who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Madeline Hart-Anderson
MDIV STUDENT FROM MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA
Every time I read this passage, with its description of the city of God and the river of the water of life flowing "through the middle of the street of the city," I think of Beth She'an.

I visited Beth She'an on a tour of Israel/Palestine as a graduate student writing a dissertation in Old Testament. Beth She'an was the place where the victorious Philistines hung the headless body of the slain Israelite King Saul from the city walls after the battle at Mt. Gilboa (1 Sam 31:10). Renamed "Scythopolis" by the Greeks and later rebuilt by the Romans as part of the Decapolis, it became a prototypical Roman town, with colonnaded streets and classical architecture. The thing I remember about Beth She'an was the way the roads were paved: great rectangular stones laid on the bias, pointing angularly toward a central ridge of hipped stone that ran the length of the thoroughfare. Beneath the center stones, our guide told us, the Romans laid the city sewer, so that water carrying refuse and human waste literally ran down the center of the street. The center ridge kept horse and foot traffic out of the sewer and also controlled the stench. We visited several Roman towns while on that trip, and everywhere the old Roman streets were preserved, there, too, was the central sewer.

It's common knowledge that John's image in Revelation 22 of the river of life running through the middle of the street harks back to the image of the river that flows from Eden in Genesis 2:10. But I often wonder if John isn't also deliberately referring to the sewer that ran down the main street of every town in the Roman world of his day. I wonder if John isn't saying metaphorically that, in the New Creation whose coming we anticipate in Advent, God transforms the least and least likely into the sources of life and hope. The last become the first. Mustard seeds become huge bushes. Sewers become streams of mercy. A baby born in a stable becomes Messiah and Lord.

Shall we gather at the river?

God of transformation and surprise, teach us to perceive the unexpected architecture of your grace so that, looking around us as it is, we might peer through to the world as you intend it to be.

Paul Hooker
ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR MINISTERIAL FORMATION AND ADVANCED STUDIES
The first words announcing Jesus's birth are not “behold, a child is born,” not “peace be with you,” but “Do not be afraid.” Jesus's birth occurred amid multiple fears. The shepherds, undoubtedly, were afraid of the sudden appearance of angels and the glory of the Lord that surrounded them. Then, as now, such heavenly sightings were not everyday events. But there was much more to be feared in this era than angels. Many feared Emperor Augustus and the authority of the Roman Empire. Galilee and Judea, like other Roman colonies, may have feared the census that represented Roman dominion over the Mediterranean world. Others feared for their lives, wondering when they would eat their next meal. Still others feared for their families, despairing over the future and whether children would have full lives.

Most of these fears have not been erased in our day. Countless people still struggle for daily bread; we worry about our children and their safety; we fear the unknown. In many cases, these fears have only intensified in the two thousand years since Jesus's birth. The past decade has revealed a host of founded and unfounded fears in the American psyche: terrorism, immigration, economic insecurity, climate change. Our public discourse mirrors those fears, often degenerating into hysterical warnings and callous dismissals of others. We still have much to fear.

Fear, in many cases, is a natural and necessary instinct. Jesus comes to the world not to eliminate fear, but to enable a more life-giving response to fear. I imagine that the shepherd’s fears didn’t disappear when they heard the angel say, “Do not be afraid.” But these shepherds, after hearing these words, do not flee the scene and hide; instead, they hasten to Mary, Joseph, and the baby, and tell others what they have heard.

What are your fears? How might you respond to them not only with “fight or flight,” but with love? As we herald the birth of the Prince of Peace, we also proclaim that fear does not have the final word. The angel’s words still abide.

Holy and living God, you know our fears more intimately than we know them ourselves. On this holy night, illumine our fears by the light of your Son’s love, allowing us to embrace the life you give to the world in Christ our Lord. Amen.

David H. Jensen

ACADEMIC DEAN & PROFESSOR IN THE CLARENCE N. AND BETTY B. FRIERSON DISTINGUISHED CHAIR OF REFORMED THEOLOGY
on the other side of the tree, at its darkest, sparest point, something else is going on—a moment earlier than the moment of Incarnation. People are discussing the affairs of the day—but now, they have paused and cocked their heads.

What have they heard? I think it’s an angel, addressing them in their meantime. A voice that brings hope and liberation, but a voice that starts—as the Gospel always starts—by meeting us in our darkness and addressing our fear.

It was enough for Joseph. Is it enough for us? For the angel comes here, too, to stand among us. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel. “I am with you, so, for God’s sake, do not be afraid.”

O Child of the manger and King of our hearts: dwell with us today, and we will not fear anything! Amen.

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