



# **Big Book of Advent Devotionals – Year 2**

## **Based on the Daily Lectionary of the *Book of Common Worship***

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's "Big Book of Advent Devotionals – Year 2" gives you a valuable resource for personal and corporate Spiritual formation during the Advent season. From Day 1 through Day 29 (Christmas), each section includes multiple biblical passages from the daily lectionary, reflections based on those passages, and accompanying prayers based on each reflection. Seminary alumnae/i, faculty, staff, Board members, and students since 2008 have contributed to this resource as a means of blessing you not only in this Advent season but also in those to come!



## Year 2, Day 1

### **A reading from page 141 of Reclaiming the Old Testament from the Christian Pulpit, by Don Gowan, faculty emeritus**

*I'd like to tell you about the quietist Christmas I ever spent. Then I'll explain why I'm telling you this. It was 1951, my first year out of college. I was working in Richland, WA, at one of the Atomic Energy Commission plants run by the General Electric Company. The plant and the town we lived in had been built by the army during the war and in 1951 the only housing available for single employees was in dormitories, so I lived in one room on the second floor in a dorm across the street from the plant where I worked. As Christmas approached some of my friends planned a trip into the mountains and asked if I would like to go along, but for some reason which I don't remember I decided not to. Perhaps it was because I was in the choir at church and they were giving a concert on Christmas eve. At any rate I went to that midnight service and to refreshment for the choir afterwards, then back to my room to open the presents my folks had sent from Iowa. Next morning I got up late and walked down to a nearby restaurant for dinner, ate supper at the same place, and spent the rest of the day in my room. There was no one around the dorm, as most people who had anywhere at all to go had cleared out. By evening I realized that I had gone through an entire Christmas day without seeing one person that I knew. But it was not a bad Christmas. I remember doing two things: writing a letter home, and spending a lot of time thinking about what Christmas really meant to me. I didn't know any theology then and not very much about the Bible, but I did know that a Christian is never really alone, anywhere or anytime, and I was fully convinced that day that a Christian especially cannot feel alone on Christmas day. Now, why tell you this story? To make you feel sorry for me? Not at all, for there was nothing to be sorry for. I tell it as a small illustration of what Matthew says is the meaning of Christmas: that with the coming of Jesus, God was with us, in human flesh. I consider this sentence to be the Bible's best promise: God is with us. It is a promise which God has repeated consistently through the history of his dealings with humanity. God is with us.*

### **Prayer**

Amazing God, you have astounded the world once again by coming to us in the form of a human baby. Help us to comprehend the great love that you have for us that compelled you to enter our lives to be here among us. Let us live with bold joy and faith knowing that we are not alone. On this Christmas Day and every day, may we praise you without ceasing. Amen.

### **Amos 1:1-5, 1:13-2:8**

*1:1 The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake. 2 And he said: The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up. 3 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. 4 So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. 5 I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Aram shall go into exile to Kir, says the LORD. . . . 13 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory. 14 So I will kindle a fire against the wall of Rabbah, fire that shall devour its strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a storm on the day of the whirlwind; 15 then*

*their king shall go into exile, he and his officials together, says the LORD. 2:1 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. 2 So I will send a fire on Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; 3 I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its officials with him, says the LORD. 4 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. 5 So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem. 6 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; 8 they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.*

### **Steve Tuell, faculty**

A masterful piece of street theater opens the book of Amos: imagine the crowds, cheering the prophet on as he condemns Israel's enemies and competitors! But then, Amos turns his attention to Israel, unexpectedly identified as just like its neighbors, and condemned as are they for injustice, cruelty, and false worship. It is Israel that turns out to be the true target of Amos' prophecy, and of the Lord's wrath. If what we expect in this season of expectancy is the deliverance of those like us, and the expulsion of the outsiders, then this will be an empty season of smug self-congratulation. May the unexpected twist of Amos' prophecy call us instead to a holy Advent of self-examination, and renew our commitment to justice for and the inclusion of those on the margins.

### **Prayer**

O Lord, forgive our easy embrace of those like us, and our suspicion of the stranger. Empower us to participate in your ministry. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

### **Luke 21:5-19**

*5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." 7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" 8 And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them." 9 "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." 10 Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 12 "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls."*

### **Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13**

I write this devotion on a beautiful mid-October day. The season is obviously changing as we experience shorter day light, chilly nights, cool mornings, and sunny or rainy afternoons. In the marketplace, the aisles of Halloween items are all but depleted, Thanksgiving supplies are on display, and Christmas decorations and paraphernalia are being placed on the shelves. These are the world's signs that Christmas is on the way.

Most are not ready to rush into Christmas celebrations, gift buying, and over indulgence; for Christmas is much more than the worldly signs, conspicuous consumption. This season is a time of expectant anticipation and preparation for the coming Messiah, Emmanuel, Prince of Peace, Comforter, and King. In the Luke passage discussion of the signs of the time, Jesus shares when we experience or hear of nations against nations, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, and plagues, these do not denote the end is at hand. Instead, these signs provide opportunities for believers to testify to all they have experienced, and to witness to the kingdom of God being among us.

The Advent signs of the season are: darkness cannot overcome light, poverty cannot overcome provision, ignorance cannot overcome wisdom, sadness cannot overcome joy, and hopelessness cannot overcome the hope we have received in Christ Jesus, who is and is to come.

#### ***Prayer***

Gracious and loving God, as we continue in this time of Advent, we pray for a faith that does not require signs of the time, but a faith that rest in the assurance that God's Son has come that we might live this day as the called of God; witnessing to God's goodness, grace and mercy manifest in the gift of God's son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### ***Psalm 24***

*1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; 2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. 3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. 5 They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. 6 Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. 7 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.*

#### **Deborah Smith, M.Div. Student**

Advent is a unique time of transformation. We bring out special family recipes, get creative with appetizers, and try so many different kinds of cookies. The air is filled with cinnamon and pine. We hear songs about shepherds, angels, and joy as well as Frosty and Grandma's unfortunate reindeer mishap. We bring trees inside and take lights outside. We don special clothes—some sparkly, others whimsical. We watch *Rudolph, It's a Wonderful Life*, and *A Christmas Carol*. We spend time with people we haven't seen in a while. During Advent, there is a transformation in what we see, smell, hear, eat, and do as we prepare to welcome Emmanuel. 'God with us' brings about an extraordinary transformation that lasts beyond the season. Here on this first day of Advent, let us lift up our heads and open wide the gates of our hearts that the King of Glory may come in.

### **Prayer**

King of Glory, come abide in our hearts and continuously transform us. Give us pure hearts to love you fully and clean hands to serve our neighbors with love. In the precious name of Emmanuel, Amen.

### **Psalm 150**

*1 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

### **Dieuner Joseph, D.Min. Christian Spirituality Focus**

As Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ during the Advent season, we should be intentional about giving extravagant praise to the Christ who became flesh to dwell among us. Christ should be the object of our praise and the subject of our exaltation. Psalm 150 provides a model for the best way we should praise the incarnate Christ.

Psalm 150 is a song of praise designed to shine light on the majesty of the God of Israel. The psalmist uses the word “praise” 13 times. This word as used in the Psalm comes from the Hebrew *halal*, which can be translated “to shine,” “to be boastful,” and “to be made praiseworthy.”

During the Advent season, followers of Jesus Christ should let the light of Christ in their heart shine so the world can be captivated by his majesty. Let the light of our hope and faith in our risen Savior shine in our social networks and in our circles of influence. We should boast about the love of Jesus, our redeemer, who died so we can live.

The praises of God should be all encompassing and comprehensive. The psalmist entreats the people of God to praise him everywhere and with everything. When believers give Christ extravagant praise, he will draw the world to himself and the lost will be saved. Then everything that has breath will praise the Lord!

### **Prayer**

Holy Father, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your son, may we endeavor to give you extravagant praise through our testimony and our service to your kingdom.

## Day 2

### **A reading from pages 33-34 of *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*, by Andrew Purves, faculty emeritus**

*God's grace is the key signature of the gospel, the message of the coming of God in the flesh into the world specifically in and as Jesus for a saving purpose. Grace means Jesus; grace is Jesus. He is Emmanuel, for he is God with us. But more, he is also "Yeshua, meaning Yahweh-Saviour, for "he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Thus the incarnation directly implies the atonement, and there is no atonement without the incarnation; otherwise God has not come among and dealt with us, and done so precisely in and as this man. Thus Jesus is worshiped as Jesus Kyrios, Jesus Lord. Grace has no Christian meaning apart from this confession.*

#### **Prayer**

O Come, O Come Emmanuel! You are our grace and our salvation. Because you have entered into our lives and have become one with us, we find our hope. We worship and adore you, Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

### **Amos 2:6-16**

*6 Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; 8 they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. 9 Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of cedars, and who was as strong as oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath. 10 Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. 11 And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? says the LORD. 12 But you made the nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy." 13 So, I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves. 14 Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives; 15 those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride horses save their lives; 16 and those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, says the LORD.*

### **Karen Bowden Cooper '98**

Advent is a season of hope and expectancy but also a time to reflect on the darkness and suffering that Jesus came to confront. Through Amos, God delivers an impassioned condemnation of eighth century Israel that anticipates themes of Jesus' ministry and that resonates today. In the verses that precede this passage, Amos pronounces God's judgment against Judah for its faithlessness and against the nations, each for a single brutal crime against its enemies. At 2:6, the prophet turns abruptly to the Israelites to condemn seven day-to-day abuses of the powerless - practices that deprive the Israelite poor of the most basic necessities to enrich those who have no need. These abuses are not the overt as the sins of the nations, but they inflict suffering, tear at the fabric of Israelite society and defy the requirement for justice at the heart of the Sinai covenant.

#### **Prayer**

Gracious God, we thank you for this season of reflection. As we prepare to welcome your Son, open our minds and hearts to your yearning for justice. Amen.

### **Matthew 21:1-11**

*1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

### **Will Scott '12**

Hidden behind Jesus' dramatic fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy is a more mundane miracle. Jesus tells the disciples exactly where to go, exactly what they will find, and exactly what needs to be done. Go to the village, find a donkey and a colt, and bring them to me. Having known Jesus long enough not to ask too many questions, the disciples go and do just that.

Jesus needs both the donkey and the colt to fulfill the prophecy. Does he need to ride both? Why two animals? Some speculate that Jesus sat on a cloak rigged between the two animals. Others do not venture a guess. The answer is irrelevant. The prophetic sign remains.

The minor miracle accompanies the great one, like a colt with a donkey, just as we anticipate the once and for all incarnation every year.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, give us eyes to see who we are in light of the one who is coming, even now. Amen.

### **Taylor Barner '16**

HOSANNA! Hosanna in the highest! It is an event that is seared into our minds, an event etched on our hearts—the triumphal entry of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem. What a sight to behold! There were people lining the road, spreading their cloaks, welcoming this prophet from Nazareth like He's in the Macy's parade. And we remember this event with joyful praise and the waving of palm branches. But what of Christ? What does our Lord see before him? What does he feel? With such joy He is welcomed in, but amidst the praise and joy there is the somber knowledge of what is to come in the next few days. The poor carpenter's son, welcomed as a king, the One True King, come to die so that we may live. So come, spread your cloak upon the road and wave that palm branch. Shout hosanna! For the King has come!

### **Prayer**

Triumphant Lord, we praise you with shouts of “Hosanna!” May our hearts receive you with loud thanksgiving. Forgive us, O God, and turn us back toward your Son, that we may spread our cloaks and prepare for his coming. In Christ’s great name we pray this prayer and all the hidden prayers of our hearts. Amen.

## **2 Peter 1:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: <sup>2</sup>May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup>His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup>Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. <sup>5</sup>For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, <sup>7</sup>and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. <sup>8</sup>For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. <sup>11</sup>For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

### **Tega Swann, D.Min. Missional Leadership Focus**

The apostle here reminds us of the tension of the “already, but not yet” of our salvation story. Even while celebrating the indescribable gift of salvation, he reminds us that we currently experience only a foretaste of what is to come, and that we also have an active responsibility in working toward what is “to come.”

Peter reminds us that although God, according to His faithful character of holy love, initiated salvation and entrance into His kingdom through Jesus Christ, those saved by His grace must bear witness to their citizenship with *visible qualities and characteristics of personal and corporate nature*. And as long as these virtues are present in us, we declare our positive “Yes, I will attend” RSVP to participate fully in what is yet to come.

Peter’s charge discourages us as Christians from developing a sense of complacency born from the fact that salvation is solely effected by God in Jesus Christ and apart from our works. Instead, Peter reminds us that once we have said “yes” to God’s salvation in Christ, we must maintain that “yes” with a visible commitment to the pursuit of goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love in our personal and corporate lives.

May we add to our prayers this Advent season not only the petition, “Come, Lord Jesus come,” but also the determination to maintain our response to his invitation with good works borne out of commitment to the Kingdom that is to come.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, help us to remember that your invitation is one that requires a constant, living response from us. Grant us daily grace and power to say “yes” to You by our willingness to press



into to the more of Your life that we see revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

**Psalm 67**

*1 May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, 2 that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. 3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. 5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. 6 The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. 7 May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.*

**William (B.T.) Gilligan '11**

When we read Psalm 67 we read a Psalm of great joy and a desire to see the whole world praise God. Have you ever wondered what it would like to see all the people thank God? Can you imagine the scene of the whole world praising God at the same time? What a sight that would be!

Sometimes, in the midst of this season we can find ourselves so tired and worn out that we don't even have the strength to praise God. How can we expect the whole world to praise God when we can't even find the strength to praise God?

If, in the midst of this busy season, we find ourselves tired, worn out, and struggling to find the strength to praise God, may our prayer be the prayer in verse 1. May God grant us peace and bless us and shine on us. Maybe we pray that prayer every day, or even every hour, but maybe in praying that prayer we can find grace and blessing and the strength to praise God.

**Prayer**

Sovereign God, be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Amen.

### Day 3

**A reading from page 33 of Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times, by Andrew Purves and Charles Partee, faculty emeriti**

*Many people think that being Christian and being religious are the same thing. According to them religion is the general category and Christianity is a specific example of it. This outlook would be accurate if religion were correctly defined as the human effort to encounter God and Christianity were understood as one of the possible manifestations of that quest, a particular illustration of the genus "religion." At many levels Christianity does look and act like a religion, but in its essential reality the Christian faith is not a human effort to encounter God. Rather the Christian faith is the result of God's effort revealed in Jesus Christ to encounter the human.*

**Prayer**

Gracious and Loving God, we give you thanks for this season of the year. We thank you for the time over these past days spent with family and friends. Most of all we thank you for Jesus Christ, who doesn't wait for us to find him, but rather encounters us so that we might know you. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

**Matthew 21:12-22**

*12 Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." 14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry 16 and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" 17 He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. 18 In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. 19 And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. 20 When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" 21 Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. 22 Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."*

**Steve Tuell, faculty**

In today's gospel, Jesus twice quotes from Scripture. While driving from the temple those who buy and sell, Jesus says, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer' [Isa 56:7]; but you are making it a den of robbers [Jer 7:11]" (Mt 21:13). In contrast to those who would restrict worship to those able to pay, Jesus welcomes all comers, healing the sick and even accepting the happy songs of children. When criticized, he again quotes from Scripture: "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" (Mt 21:16; cf. Ps 8:2). The first quotation places Jesus among the prophets; the second affirms him as God! In this Advent season, may we prepare for the coming of Christ's kingdom through true worship, joining our praises to the songs of children and of outcasts.

**Prayer**

Holy Lord, may your Spirit set our hearts ablaze with your prophetic zeal for justice. When we are tempted to act as gatekeepers and brokers, remind us that your presence is not a commodity that we control, but a power that transforms our lives and our world. *Maranatha—Come Lord Jesus! Amen.*

### **2 Peter 1:12-21**

*12 Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, 14 since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. 15 And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. 16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. 19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, 21 because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

### **Jim Davison ’69**

The author of 2 Peter says that he plans to remind his readers regularly to remain firm in the faith. Then as now, challenges and weaknesses can easily lead us away from faith. One challenge can be the creeping doubt that, perhaps, this whole story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is just that...a story. Our author cautions us not to be misled into thinking that these truths are only “cleverly devised myths.” Rather, referring to the Transfiguration, he reminds us that the disciples were eyewitnesses of the “power and coming” of Jesus Christ. They heard God himself declare that Jesus is the “beloved Son.” Christ’s glory isn’t all that obvious in this Advent season, for Jesus comes hidden in the humble form of a baby. But this story isn’t just a “story.” It’s the start of a Life that will bring new life to Israel, and through them, to all the world . . . and to us.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, that you have taken on human form in Jesus Christ is more than we can comprehend, and sometimes it seems beyond belief. Grant that, during this Advent season, we will see signs of his glory, so that our faith may be firm and our hearts pure. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you, and in your glorious Son. Amen.

### **Kathy Dain ’11**

Sometimes in the cold concrete dawn of December, when the morning sky changes little from dawn to dusk, when our fields lie dormant and our hearts are still, when the autumn color of fall has faded and the first snowfall is still at hand. Sometimes in these wee hours of darkness it is hard to remember the excitement of that Easter morn, when the fresh dew of faith first awakened our eyes, or of the holy mountaintop set ablaze by Christ’s resplendent glory. It is in these days when the world is shrouded in darkness we remember that the light of Christ still smolders in the coldest of hearts invoking the beauty of transfiguration—not of Christ, for his glory is ageless, but for us—for who we have become in Christ. Advent is the season of watchful remembrance and unsurpassing hope of who we are becoming in him.

### **Prayer**

Gracious and loving God, awaken our hearts and renew our Spirits to the light of Christ so that he may be reflected in all we do and say. Amen.

### **Psalm 33:20-22**

*20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. 21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. 22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.*

### **Susan Moudry '10**

Advent is a time of waiting and hoping, as the end of our morning psalm reminds us. Recently, though, I've found myself very aware that waiting does not always bring hope; it does not always bring excitement. Sometimes waiting is anxiety ridden and even pain filled. A professor and mentor of mine spent the last several weeks with this kind of waiting. Waiting to hear if the cancer has returned, waiting to hear if it has spread and waiting to hear what all this means. The emotional turmoil is very real and I imagine that most people can relate in their own ways, with their own stories of waiting.

So, this year I find this psalm speaking to me in new ways. It is into this world of waiting with our anxieties and pains that God speaks. He reminds us with this season of Advent that hope is on the way, and that our waiting will one day turn to great joy. I am grateful for these reminders, spoken into our midst. For all those waiting, Christ is on the way.

### **Prayer**

God, be with us as we wait expectantly for you. Give us renewed hope. Remind us that you are never far away. Amen.

### **Psalm 146**

*1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! 2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. 3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. 5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, 6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; 7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. 9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. 10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!*

### **Nnachette Maximos, D.Min. Eastern Christian Focus**

"Praise the LORD, O my soul!" Unfortunately, the word "praise" seems nonexistent in the lives of many people today. Our lives have become tainted with complaints and supplications that betray an all-about-what-I-want attitude. But the psalmist calls our minds back to the need to be grateful regardless of our circumstances. After all, Christ's love for us never wavered, despite what He endured—and not for His own sake but for our good.

The psalmist also encourages us to lift our eyes above our day-to-day troubles, difficulties, and challenges and up to the infinite realm of God. Of course, troubles will always remain, but God's people will be better equipped to move forward in the midst of this chaos when we gather as a community to sing praises to God, for doing so leads us to strength and sustenance. Thus the psalmist issues a definite call to return to the early Christian practice of *koinonia*—fellowship.

Further, the psalmist admonishes us not to “trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” We moderns continue to rely on ourselves. We put much of our confidence in science and technology, despite their constantly failing and disappointing us, instead of putting our trust in God, who never has and will never fail us regardless of our betrayals. “But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Let us followers of Christ remember this amazing, wonderful truth in our daily lives during Advent and beyond. Praise the LORD!

***Prayer***

Heavenly and almighty God, give us the grace to be thankful every day of our lives, regardless of the difficult challenges facing us each day—the gratitude to appreciate your infinite mercy and love, despite our betrayal and disappointment of you. Let your Holy Spirit enlighten our hearts so that we constantly put our trust in you in the knowledge that you will never fail us, even if we do fail you. May the words of praise never depart from our lips, and may the thoughts of our hearts be pure and spotless in thanksgiving to you unto the ages of ages. Amen.

## Day 4

### **Matthew 21:23-32**

*23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." 28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."*

### **Andrew Purves, faculty emeritus**

"By what authority are you doing these things?" The question put to Jesus is ultimately concerning power and its proper exercise. In response to the challenge to Jesus' authority put by the chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus poses a riddle concerning John the Baptist, which they cannot answer. Because they have been found duplicitous in their questioning, Jesus will not answer their question. In theology we put our questions to God. In doing so we try to probe into the mystery of God's self-presentation, first to Israel, then in, through, and as Jesus of Nazareth. But we must do our questioning in a manner appropriate to our subject of enquiry. We bring our questions honestly and reverentially, even prayerfully. We bring our questions as expressions of faith, within the framework of grace, seeking to know God more faithfully. In such manner, then, our questions of God are open to God. When that happens we too will be surprised by joy when we discover that God speaks to us.

### **Prayer**

Lord, may our questions be honest and open. May our ears be receptive to your Word. May our minds be conformed to your truth. And may our hearts be warmed by your presence. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **2 Peter 3:1-10**

*1 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you 2 that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. 3 First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts 4 and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" 5 They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, 6 through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. 8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand*

*years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.*

### **Katie Crowe, D.Min. Christian Spirituality Focus**

There are two ways in which we often speak about time. *Chronos* references linear, chronological time—human time as it were, marked by hours and minutes, days, weeks and years. *Kairos*, however, references the fullness of time. It is God’s time, in a sense, whose accounting exists in the realm of the eternal.

Grounding the reader in the ancient landscape of creation and the promise of Christ’s future return, the author of 2 Peter calls us to *kairos* living in a *chronos*-obsessed world. We are charged to set aside our impatience for the unfolding of all that is to come and instead be fully present, with “sincere intention,” to the gifts of today.

As we dip below the surface of the bustle of these days, we find all creation waiting with baited breath for the coming of the Lord. As we surrender the need to control where we are going in our lives and the speed with which we get there, we awaken to the art of living with sincere intention for Christ today. We become conditioned to the ambiguities of the *kairos* in a way that suspends us in a state of Advent expectancy, and we are baptized into a resistance movement against the tyranny of the *chronos* in our overlooked lives in a way that serves God’s redemptive purposes in the world in real time.

May God bless us with sincere intention each day of this Advent season as we wait with baited breath for Emmanuel.

#### **Prayer**

In the fullness of time, Lord Jesus, you became flesh and lived among us that we might be free from the fears of our timeworn lives. Grow our trust in you sufficient to stage a rebellion against hurry, that we might be fully present to the gift of these days. Amen.

#### **Psalm 17**

*1 Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. 2 From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right. 3 If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. 4 As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. 5 My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped. 6 I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. 7 Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand. 8 Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, 9 from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me. 10 They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly. 11 They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground. 12 They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush. 13 Rise up, O LORD, confront them, overthrow them! By your sword deliver my life from the wicked, 14 from mortals—by your hand, O LORD—from mortals whose portion in life is in this world. May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them; may their children have more than enough; may they leave something over to their little ones. 15 As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.*

### **Danielle Graham '14**

This psalm is an interesting bedtime prayer. As opposed to the sweet prayer we teach or were taught to recite as children “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep . . .,” we find David offering a desperate prayer of protection and revenge and vindication. David is practically begging God to pay attention to his prayer and request for help. Protect me from these evil people who seek to destroy me. But what if the evil, the callous hearts, the mouths that speak arrogance and the ferocious lions seeking to devour your joy, peace, progress, and faithfulness are coming from within? What if your own mind, your own unforgiving heart, your own fears, your own self-loathing or self-hatred are your biggest enemies? Advent is a time of introspection as we wait in anticipation for the proof of the promise of our Savior. Christ came to save us even from ourselves.

#### ***Prayer***

Gracious God, I pray that during this Advent season you will help make us mindful and aware of the things within that seek to destroy us. Help us to pray just as desperately that you protect us and avenge us from thoughts of self-hatred, callous and bitter hearts, depression, grief, unforgiveness, shame, isolation, stagnation, and all the dark lioness things that often grip your people during the holiday season. I pray that you give to all of us peace and renewed joy and a glimmer of hope during this time. Let us be satisfied with seeing Your likeness, for we were all made in Your image and after Your likeness. We wait in anticipation and with expectation and gratitude of what You will do in our lives and in this season. We pray all these things in Your precious Son, Jesus', name. Amen.

#### ***Psalm 147:1-11***

*1 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. 3 He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. 6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre. 8 He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. 9 He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. 10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; 11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

### **Sarah Ott '10**

Advent calls us to prepare for the arrival of our Savior Jesus Christ, yet often times our preparation is filled with the stress of planning. We wake up on a wintry day in December to face a to-do list of shopping, cooking, wrapping, and working so that we can enjoy the birth of God's son.

Admittedly, our preparation has the wrong focus and the wrong feeling. Psalm 147 encourages us to pause in the midst of our preparation and consider the question, “Who am I preparing for?” Are we preparing for Jesus Christ or for the world's expectations of Christmas?

I hope today we choose to prepare for Jesus! When we do, our preparations are less about doing and more about being. We begin to prepare with praise to God for God's provisions and care for His children. We wake up each day with less attention on what needs done during Advent and more attention on what's been done through God's power.



***Prayer***

Holy God, today we offer our praises for all that you have done, will do, and continue to do. Help us to prepare for the things that matter and ignore the demands of this Advent season that pull us away from you. We pray this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Day 5

**A reading from page 37 of the Interpretation Bible Studies Series on Psalms, by Jerome Creach, faculty**  
*The shepherd image appears not only as part of the Old Testament but as a vital part of the New Testament as well. For Christians, Psalm 23 foretells the words of Jesus, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), and the writer of 1 Peter who declares that Jesus is the “shepherd and guardian” of souls who leads believers when they are “going astray like sheep” (2:25). Jesus is indeed the “chief shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4) for the church. As Mays appropriately notes (119), seeing Jesus as the supreme shepherd calls Christians to look to God’s guidance for the future, as well as the present. In the age to come, the Lamb of God will become king and shepherd, and in that day, the redeemed will discover in their hearts the full meaning of the phrase, “I shall not want” (see Rev. 7:15-17).*

### **Prayer**

As we pray together today, let us pray from these words of the 23rd Psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.”

### **Amos 4:6-13**

*6 I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 7 And I also withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would be rained upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; 8 so two or three towns wandered to one town to drink water, and were not satisfied; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 9 I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 10 I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword; I carried away your horses; and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 11 I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a brand snatched from the fire; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD. 12 Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! 13 For I, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!*

### **John Burgess, faculty**

During Advent, we sing, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!” And when the Church proclaims the birth of Jesus, other lovely refrains will resound: “Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the new-born King!’” “O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore him, O come, O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!” “Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel.”

But we hear from the prophet Amos a very different refrain: “Yet you did not return to me.” Despite all the Lord’s efforts to get Israel’s attention—“I gave you no bread, I withheld the rain, I struck you with blight and mildew, I sent pestilence”—they did not return. Therefore, declares Amos, “Prepare, O Israel, to meet your God!”

Have we paid attention? The God whom we will meet in the Christ child longs for us to return to Him.

**Prayer**

Lord, You form the mountains, create the wind, and reveal Your thoughts to mortal human beings. Prepare us to return us to you through Jesus Christ. Amen.

**2 Peter 3:11-18**

*11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.*

**Chip Blackshear '09**

The one thing that most of us have to deal with in our lives is the fear of the unknown. We want to know what the future holds. Since the beginning of time people have tried to predict the future. As we approach a new year, people try to make predictions about what is to come.

One of the benefits of trusting the Lord Jesus and reading the Bible is that we already know what the future holds. Not that we know every detail, but we know how things turn out in the end. We know that the Christ will return and make things right, bringing the “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” That’s the focus of Advent. God came here in person and He’s coming back. But we also learn from Peter that we are not to just wait around for Jesus to return. We are to “be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.” We are to live “lives of holiness and goodness.” And we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as we anxiously await the Advent of the Savior, help us to commit our daily lives to holiness and goodness, seeking out those places where our thoughts and actions do not align with your Word, and bringing every thought captive to you. Amen.

**Psalm 18:1-20**

*1 I love you, O LORD, my strength. 2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. 3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies. 4 The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; 5 the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. 6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. 7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of*

*the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. 14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. 16 He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the LORD was my support. 19 He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. 20 The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.*

### **Bill Myers '67**

Beset by adversaries, Psalm 18's author offers testimony. When God was called upon for help, God delivered. The psalmist's enemies were defeated and peace fills the land. Because the psalmist knows, in his bones, that God pulled him out of the entangling cords of those who would kill him, the psalmist extravagantly sings praises to God. It's not enough to sing about God's healing the brokenhearted and binding their wounds; the psalmist wants us to fear God's hailstones, coals of fire, and well-shot arrows, all directed at the enemies of the psalmist. This God is a powerful God, angered by those who oppose him. This anger is made visible: God's nostrils are filled with smoke; his mouth contains a devouring fire. All who experience such mighty acts join the psalmist in this hymn of praise to God.

#### **Prayer**

Creator God, you who calmed the storm and who stand with us even as we tremble, be with us when we are beaten down and desolate. Hear us when we call for help. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### **Psalm 62**

*1 For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. 2 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. 3 How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence? 4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse. 5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. 8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. 9 Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. 10 Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. 11 Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, 12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.*

### **Graeme Wilson, D.Min. Reformed Focus**

The all-consuming bustle and noise of the Christmas season jostles our senses at this time of year. Presents to buy, cards to write, parties and functions to attend, Christmas holiday plans to be made. In this season of frenetic clamor, what does it mean for our souls to wait in silence? In whom, or in what, should we trust?

So often, too often, we place our trust in something less than God. We place our trust in busyness, in things, in politicians, in institutions, and in ourselves. We do so time after time, year upon year, and we wonder why it never satisfies.

The Psalmist rests content in God alone. The material things and the preoccupations of this age are “lighter than a breath”—of no consequence—compared to the unshakeable strength of God, the rock and fortress of our salvation.

In this Advent season of waiting and preparing we once again place our trust in the God who came among us, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. God is the dependable presence in whom we can trust, the source of our hope and our salvation.

For God alone our souls wait in silence.

We wait and we pray, “*Maranatha*. Come, Lord Jesus come.”

***Prayer***

Gracious and eternal God, whenever the busyness and clamor of this season take us over, remind us once again to place our trust in you. For you alone are our rock and our fortress, our hope and our salvation. We wait in silent expectation for the light in the darkness, the hope of the world, the Word made flesh. Amen.

## Day 6

### **Amos 5:1-17**

*1 Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: 2 Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up. 3 For thus says the Lord GOD: The city that marched out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which marched out a hundred shall have ten left. 4 For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; 5 but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. 6 Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. 7 Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! 8 The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name, 9 who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. 10 They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. 11 Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. 12 For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. 13 Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. 14 Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. 15 Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. 16 Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, “Alas! alas!” They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; 17 in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the LORD.*

### **Susan Blank '15**

Recently a short home video went viral. A father was questioning his toddler daughter about why she had painted her Barbie doll (and the carpet!) with blue nail polish. The little girl claimed that Barbie told her to do it, and she tried so hard to resist. But Barbie “said ‘yes,’ one hundred times, Barbie said ‘yes!’” This video reminded me of the many voices clamoring for our attention—especially at this time of year. “Buy this; you need it.” “Give this to make them happy.” “It’s expensive, but you’re worth it.” “The biggest sale of the season!” Spend your way to a joyous Christmas. The voices say “yes,” 100 times they say “yes!” It can be hard to resist.

The prophet Amos warns of the destructive powers of consumerism and self-interest that cause us to “push aside the needy in the gate.” But Jesus has moved into the neighborhood, and we can no longer pretend that the only voice we hear is Barbie’s.

### **Prayer**

Gracious and loving God, Jesus has shown us the way of service to the least and the lost. Quiet the clamor around us that we might attend to those long-silenced and “establish justice in the gate.” Amen.

### **Matthew 22:1-14**

*1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to*

*the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'* 5 *But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'* 10 *Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* 14 *For many are called, but few are chosen."*

### **Joel Montgomery '13**

The person wasn't wearing a wedding garment. Doesn't it seem a bit harsh of the king, after extending this vast invitation? What if this person didn't have a wedding garment and just came as s/he was to the last-minute invitation? Is that fair?

Then we realize it's not about the clothes. Not really. The person didn't even try. S/He wasn't prepared and didn't appreciate the invitation s/he'd been given. The king could have provided a robe if s/he'd only asked, but the person just stood speechless.

As we celebrate the Advent season, we remember that we, too, have been invited and called. And that call is a serious one—it changes our very world. God calls us as we are, but also clothes us in Christ so that we, too, are made worthy through Christ to celebrate at the feast. Are you “dressed” this Advent?

### **Prayer**

Emmanuel, God with us, you have invited us to your banquet. You have invited us in our ratty jeans and rag-man shirts to come and dine with you. Accept the offering we give of the tatters of ourselves, Lord, and re-clothe us in Christ that we who have been called may also be chosen. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 16**

*1 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. 2 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." 3 As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. 4 Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. 5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. 6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. 7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. 8 I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. 10 For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. 11 You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

### **Rebecca Kahnt, D.Min. Christian Spirituality Focus**

I think I underestimated the importance of presence in life until I became a mom. When I became a mom, I quickly learned that every activity I did in the house became a “team sport.” And if I would dare

to go into another room by myself and have enough nerve to close the door behind me, it would mean the end of the world had arrived, with screams and gnashing of teeth coming from the other side of the door until I would open it again and I would be reunited with my family.

In many ways, I treasure that my children find my mere presence a place of rest and security. I also hope and pray it can point the way to the One who is the place in this crazy world where “my heart is glad, my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure” (Psalm 16:9).

In this season of Advent, as we remember the birth of Jesus to bring hope and light to a world filled with hopelessness and darkness, and in this season of Advent as we look forward to the day when we are all brought together in the heavenly kingdom when death is gone and pain has ceased, may we heed these words from Psalm 16 as we “keep the Lord always before (us).” May the awareness of the presence of the Lord with us through this Advent season bring us a daily source of abiding hope, joy, peace, and love.

### **Prayer**

Gracious God whose presence shows us the path to life, fill us with your Spirit so we may feel your real presence with us always as you love us into being this Advent Season. In your holy, precious and powerful name we pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 102**

*1 Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. 2 Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. 3 For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. 4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. 5 Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. 6 I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. 7 I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. 8 All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. 9 For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink, 10 because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. 11 My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. 12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations. 13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favor it; the appointed time has come. 14 For your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity on its dust. 15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth your glory. 16 For the LORD will build up Zion; he will appear in his glory. 17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer. 18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD: 19 that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, 20 to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die; 21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, 22 when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD. 23 He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. 24 “O my God,” I say, “do not take me away at the mid-point of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations.” 25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 26 They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away; 27 but you are the same, and your years have no end. 28 The children of your servants shall live secure; their offspring shall be established in your presence.*

**Steve Werth '09**



One of my most vivid memories of childhood is stepping outside in the early evening one December and finding the world in pitch darkness. I can't remember why I found it so shocking, or even where we had been. But I very distinctly remember stepping off the curb, looking up, and being in complete disbelief at the dense darkness of a moonless night. I've always found it strange that the things that we sometimes recall most clearly aren't the monumental moments of life, but moments of still, silent, disbelief. It's in those moments that the words of the psalmist speak into our lives. "Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you." And we wait. We wait with patience and we wait with hope to know and to see the presence of God with us. Still, silent, nights give way to vibrant new mornings. Still, silent, disbelief gives way to the clear presence of God who has heard us, and has set us free to new life in this moment.

***Prayer***

God of joy, in the stillness of this morning open our eyes to see your presence here. We know that we are no longer prisoners, but you have set us free to new life. As the long, dark nights break and give way to longer days and new mornings, Lord, make us instruments of your mercy. Help us to use each day and each morning to proclaim boldly that your love, your justice, and your presence are in this place. Amen.

## Day 7

### **A reading from page 96 of Why Scripture Matters, by John Burgess, faculty**

*Scripture's compelling power is not primarily a matter of ecstatic experience. It does not require us to relinquish our critical faculties. If Scripture is indeed best understood as commentary on the risen Christ, then we will wish to investigate the social and historical conditions that both shaped and limited human response to God, as recorded in Scripture. Careful historical-critical work can save us from our innate tendency to read Scripture in ways that too conveniently ensure our own privilege and comfort. But Scripture will ultimately matter to us not because we have successfully investigated the biblical authors of the tradition's great commentators, but because we have discovered its compelling power for ourselves. The answer to our doubts about Scripture as a sacramental word is finally a trust that God alone gives, but to which the community of faith invites us every time it gathers for worship. It is in worship that the community of faith testifies to the trustworthiness of these texts. Worship is the most profound commentary on Scripture, and other forms of commentary will ultimately find their focus there.*

### **Prayer**

Holy God, we rejoice that you come to us through your Word in Scripture, and through the Word, Jesus Christ. In this advent season, help us to read, hear, and see with open hearts, eyes, and ears. Fill us with a receptive watchfulness as we worship you. Amen.

### **Amos 5:18-24**

*18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; 19 as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. 20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? 21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

### **Nancy Lowmaster '11**

The countryside around Kibbutz Gal'on in the Shephelah region of central Israel is crisscrossed by seasonal streams called wadis. These wadis overswell during the early autumn rains in October and the late spring rains in April. But throughout the long summer months, the wadis become as parched as the land that surrounds them.

Amos speaks the words of the LORD to the wayward nation of Israel, where the wealthy enjoyed ease and privilege while the poor they oppressed thirsted for justice and righteousness: “. . . let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing wadi.” It's a paradoxical image: wadis are, by their very definition not permanent. Imagine the relief – the impossible dream – of having a dependable, never-ending source of water in an arid land. Imagine the joy – and profound blessing – of unending justice throughout a society, especially for the most powerless and vulnerable.

Thus the words delivered by the prophet serve as a double command. The LORD commands the powerful – of ancient days and of today – to be extravagant in their generosity and prodigal in their care for their brothers and sisters: such is the worship that delights the LORD. But it is ultimately God who acts to bring the deep justice and the righteousness that truly satisfies. And with the coming of the day

of the LORD comes the loving, gracious, awesome, and holy judgment of our sovereign God, who commands and transforms creation in order to bring God's redemption to all humankind. It is God who acts, through the coming of God's promised Messiah, to establish God's eternal kingdom of righteousness for which we all search and thirst.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, by your Spirit, fill me to overflowing with Christ's righteousness, that as your redeemed child I may today accomplish one deed or speak one word that demonstrates the justice that marks your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, the One whose coming we await. Amen.

### **Jude 17-25**

*17 But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; 18 for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts." 19 It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. 20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

### **Derek Marotta, D.Min. Missional Leadership Focus**

Few days exist in the church when the reality and presence of division and strife are not present and noticed. It was true in Jesus' day as it is true in our day now. The "ungodly" actions we witness each day on the part of co-workers and family members can, and often do, harm our willingness to share the good news of Christ's soon-to-be-celebrated birth with those who need to hear God's story. We know that we participate in an active faith, a living faith that leads to the production of fruit but also requires a strong posture of discipleship which combats the divisions and strife we witness in our culture.

This text from Jude contains strong, affirmative words designed to encourage and inspire the church to live out our faith actively before the world and our communities. Followers of Christ are told to "build themselves up" and to "pray in the Spirit" because choosing to enact these practices helps unify Christ's body, the church—us. Because we understand the importance of making those choices, we are told to look forward to "the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ."

With that in mind, I wonder: Right now, in what places is God showing you to display mercy on those who are wavering in their faith? In what places is God showing you people you can help "snatch ... out of the fire" by living out this passage?

If we are going to continue to live and work as the church that is called and sustained by God, then even as we wait for the coming Messiah, we do so in a posture of active ministry. It is our calling—and it is our joy to participate in it.

### **Prayer**

Most Holy God, as we continue our Advent journey, we are aware of our role in your evangelizing of the world as we are aware of the places and people you are sending us to—

places where there are people who need your grace and mercy. Give us strength to work energetically as we actively share your message. In Christ's name, Amen.

### **Psalm 90**

*1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. 7 For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. 10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. 11 Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. 12 So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. 13 Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. 15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. 16 Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. 17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!*

### **Joseph Hedden Jr. '97**

Is there any time in American culture more thinly sentimental than "the holiday season"? There is an expectation, even in the church, that we must be happy in December surrounding ourselves with plastic and neon trinkets which shout "GLAD TIDINGS!" One almost feels morally inferior for admitting any nuanced emotion beside a shallow cheer.

How refreshing, then, this Advent to turn to Psalm 90! Psalm 90 is a realist's view of the tough moments in life. No tinsel and hot cocoa here. Rather, the Psalmist truthfully reports the alienation of humanity, being bound as we are by mortality and sin. Alongside our human experiences of dead-ends and bramble bushes, fears and anger, we discover the source of true joy: God and God's works. God's revelation pierces human struggle and a deep and authentic joy emerges (verse 14). May we all experience such joy this Advent.

### **Prayer**

O God, you have been our dwelling place throughout the ages. As we reflect back on our lives, we can see your hands at work, molding us and shaping us. May we encounter you deeply today and may we be joyful in your unending love and grace. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

## Day 8

### ***A reading from page 248 of the New International Biblical Commentary on Ezekiel, by Steve Tuell, faculty***

*In nineteenth century Europe, when optimism about human nature and ability was at its height, scholars such as Ernest Renan produced biographies of Jesus as a champion of moral progress. The kingdom of God about which Jesus had preached was thought to be just around the corner, the inevitable result of human advancement. But in 1863, the same year that Renan's *Vie de Jesus* (Life of Jesus) was published in France, fifty thousand men died at the battle of Gettysburg. The American Civil War, still the bloodiest conflict in the history of the United States, demonstrated that human ingenuity and technological progress could lead to heightened savagery rather than to peace and enlightenment. Then, at the dawn of the twentieth century, World War I shattered the last vestiges of that naïve optimism. Today, looking back over the century now past, we see it as a century of genocide: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Cambodia, Rwanda, BosniaHerzegovina, and Darfur—the roll call of mass death and destruction goes on and on, a brutal and final rebuke to the shallow, optimistic trust in human progress. But does that mean that the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed is a hollow dream? Surely the problem lies rather in our forgetting that it is God's kingdom, nor ours. We cannot, by our own willing and doing, accomplish God's dream of justice and peace. But the point, for Jesus or for Ezekiel, is not surrender to quietism. One is able to act in the world because of the confidence that, ultimately, the victory belongs to the Lord. So Ezekiel can at the same time call upon his community to repent and affirm that God's deliverance is not dependent upon their repentance. He can refer to the new heart and new spirit as both gift (11:19; 36:26) and goal (18:31). This inescapable, irreducible paradox is a common feature of the life of faith.*

### **Prayer**

O Holy God, this advent season reminds us that we live in uncertain times. Help us to greet each new day and labor on, always faithfully waiting for your challenge and guidance. Create new hearts in us, that we might worship and serve Christ with our whole lives. Amen.

### **2 Thessalonians 1:5-12**

*5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. 6 For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. 11 To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, 12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

### **Jon Chillinsky, M.Div. student**

“God is just . . .” (2 Thess 1:6a), yet is often proclaimed to be unjust. How can God truly be just if he commands whole people groups to be killed or condemns people to “everlasting destruction” for simply not knowing or obeying the gospel?

Sometimes it is the starting point of our thinking that determines the outcome. Choosing to start with the fact that God is just and then trying to understand how this is so in relation to the seemingly contrary ends with Paul's conclusion, a prayer. A prayer that glorifies Jesus in believers and vice versa. And in this Advent season, when we proceed in memory toward the birth of our Lord, we pray in the same way Paul did.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father we come before you, through Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, with reverent hearts. Spirit guide our choices and soften our hearts so we can do good by faith. Help us understand your justice in this unjust world and make sense of where you want us to be. We thank you Lord Jesus. Amen.

**Psalm 24**

*1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; 2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. 3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. 5 They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. 6 Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. 7 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.*

**Psalm 150**

*1 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

**Kathy Shirey '12**

By today, we have all but forgotten this year's Black Friday, Deer Widow, and Cyber Monday sales. Retailers are digging deep to find new ways to entice us to spend more than we had planned in search of just the right present for everyone on our list. If you haven't started gathering together the items that will become brightly wrapped packages, you might be starting to feel the edge of nervous anticipation, fearing stores will be sold out of "just" what you wanted.

Gratefully, we pause in today's morning Psalms to remember that the commercialism of Christmas and the rush which obscures our view of the patient waiting of Advent don't win – unless we let them! Let's take some time today, and each day, to shout praise to our Creator! Let's put our world in God's order, not the world's! Praise the Lord!

**Prayer**

Almighty God, we rejoice that this world is yours and so are we! Help us to pause and take time to savor the waiting, allowing time to praise you! You are the King of Glory and we bring you our worship! Through Christ's mighty name we pray. Amen!

## **Psalm 25**

*1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. 2 O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. 3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. 4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! 8 Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. 9 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. 10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. 11 For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. 12 Who are they that fear the LORD? He will teach them the way that they should choose. 13 They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. 14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. 15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. 16 Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. 17 Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. 18 Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. 19 Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. 20 O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. 21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you. 22 Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles.*

### **Tim Dooner, D.Min. Missional Leadership Focus**

In the 25<sup>th</sup> Psalm, the psalmist affirms that living within the streams of God's loving intentions for us always leads to good and true life. Living within the rhythms of God's good and eternal will for humanity safeguards us from shame, relieves the troubles and fears of our hearts, and rescues us from the trappings and troubles that result from our imperfection and our propensity to live according to our own will and desires. We join the psalmist in longing for God's guidance for the sake of life that is good and true, and we cry out, "Make us to know your ways, O Lord! Teach us your paths! Lead us in your truth!" God's guidance is always lovingly offered to us, and if we discern and implement it, we are carried forward in the stream of life to places of goodness and integrity. But how do we truly know what that guidance is?

As we journey together through this season of Advent, we consider that God has answered the prayers of the Psalmist most powerfully and clearly in the Christmas incarnation. We are imperfect people who long to be shown the way. We long to live with integrity in ways that are truly prosperous, upright, and powerful for God's sake. In the incarnation of God in Christ, our longings are met. God's love, instruction, guidance, and redemption are ours in Christ. God help us to accept this long-awaited gift that comes to us freely by God's grace!

### **Prayer**

Eternal God and creator of all life, when we find ourselves waiting and longing for your guidance, protection, rescue, and healing, point our focus to Jesus. Reveal your grace and intentions through his witness, and bring us redemption through the Christ-like attitudes and actions of the people. Amen.

## Day 9

### ***A reading from “A Meditation on Matthew 2:1-12,” by Martha Robbins, faculty emerita***

*So often we think of having a Christian faith as having a set of beliefs or truths given to us by Scripture which guide our lives as Christians. We forget that faith is also a journey encompassing moments of rupture, transition, insight or revelation, and repatterning. The inbreaking of God in our lives through events and persons, as well as in worship, sometimes dislodges us from our familiar ways of seeing things and our habitual ways of responding to others and to God. Such events may be occasioned by a joyful or painful disruption of the ways our lives have been organized, such as a birth of a child, or a separation from loved ones through divorce, death, or geographic relocation (events which disrupt our daily routines, our economic responsibilities, our way of organizing our futures). There is yet another way in which our lives may be disrupted. We may one day glimpse a star on the horizon and have a moment of truth when the deep inner stirrings of our beings are moved by a glimmer of the “more” of what we can be. The promise of God forever calls us to “more being.” Often these insights, intuitions, rumblings, awakened in us by the Holy Spirit, mediated through certain events (personal, social or historical), come when we least expect them. They may even come when it feels downright inconvenient to us.*

### **Prayer**

Holy God, in this Advent season, we pray that we would be open to your interruption in our lives. Awaken us with your Holy Spirit. Surprise us with your presence. Wake us up to the new life and new opportunities that you place in our paths – sometimes found in joy and sometimes found in challenge. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

### **Amos 7:1-9**

*1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king’s mowings). 2 When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, “O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” 3 The LORD relented concerning this; “It shall not be,” said the LORD. 4 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. 5 Then I said, “O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” 6 The LORD relented concerning this; “This also shall not be,” said the Lord GOD. 7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; 9 the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”*

### **Connie Weaver, D.Min. Missional Leadership Focus**

One of the very first sermons I ever wrote and preached was from the Old Testament prophecy of Amos. It came at a time when I was extremely busy, and as occasionally happens despite the best of intentions, I found myself wrestling with Amos in the wee hours of the morning. It was less than ideal, to be sure, but the fatigue I felt in those moments opened me to the intensity of the prophet’s words.

Drawn from his life as “a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees,” Amos was called to the most difficult task of delivering bad news in good times. Never had Israel been more prosperous or safe than under the long reign of Jeroboam II in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Yet in the midst of their military might and economic prosperity, there was great social injustice and immorality. In a theme echoed throughout the



words of the Old Testament prophets, God tires of such injustice and declares that it will no longer be tolerated. God uses the image of a plumb line, an old-fashioned tool that showed when the lines of a building or wall were straight and true, and when they were crooked, or “off.”

As we look anew to the coming of our Lord into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, where do you think a “plumb line” needs to be dropped in your own life, or in the life of your community of faith, to show what is “off” and what is “true?”

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of this day, for its blessings and its challenges. As we navigate this life that you have granted to us, help us to see its beauty and to feel its goodness. Show us where we stray from your “plumb line” of perfect love and justice. In Christ’s name, Amen.

**Revelation 1:1-8**

*1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. 4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

**Jim Durlleser ’78/’80**

“Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him” (Rev 1:7a). As we read Revelation 1:7, we can imagine John pointing to the sky and exhorting us, “Look! Look! He is coming! He is coming with the clouds!” (See also Daniel 7:13; Mark 13:26; 14:62.) Sometimes, though, our only response is, “Where? Where? I don’t see him.” It isn’t always easy to look and see the Messiah’s coming. Sometimes the busyness of the Advent season makes it difficult to look and see the Messiah’s coming. Sometimes it is difficult to see the Messiah’s coming when the hopelessness, hatred, sadness, and conflict in the world threaten to extinguish the Advent candles of hope, love, joy, and peace that should be burning brightly in our lives. Sometimes we are so beaten down that it is hard to look up and see the Messiah coming with the clouds. In the coming days of Advent, may God help us as a seminary community to truly, “Look! [For] He is coming with the clouds.”

**Prayer**

Gracious God of hope, love, joy, and peace, in the coming days of Advent, may we be able to look and truly see the coming of the Messiah. Amen.

**Nathan Leslie ’10**

These opening lines from Revelation serve as a powerful reminder that Jesus Christ is Lord of all creation, and that he is coming again to set everything right. This is good news, because we constantly face forces like injustice, suffering, evil, sin, and death, which prove that this world is not as it should be.

Yet because Jesus remains Lord, we know that He is the one who has acted, is acting, and will act to restore our broken world. He has acted to defeat these forces by his life, death, and resurrection, so that when He comes again in glory, he will act to bring about their ultimate end. In the meantime, Jesus is also acting on our behalf. Because of his work, the Holy Spirit brings about the defeat of these forces in our lives so that we inherit freedom, healing and restoration. He confronts these forces in our world as the Gospel is proclaimed and the world is called under the reign of God.

So while our world is not yet what it shall be and we look for the day when all things are made new, may we find hope and peace in the victory of the One who was and is and is to come.

### **Prayer**

God who was, who is, and who is coming: We thank you that in Jesus Christ, you have begun your loving purpose to restore us and all creation. Reveal in us the truth of your promise and help us to see you at work in and around us as we await the day of Christ's coming. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

### **Psalm 40**

*1 I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. 2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. 3 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. 4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. 5 You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. 6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. 7 Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. 8 I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." 9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. 10 I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. 11 Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever. 12 For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me. 13 Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me. 14 Let all those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt. 15 Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, Aha!" 16 But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the LORD!" 17 As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.*

### **Rebecca DePoe '16**

The poem "Yesterday's Pain," by Ann Weems, explains our need for deliverance during Advent:

Some of us walk into Advent  
tethered to our unresolved yesterdays  
the pain still stabbing  
the hurt still throbbing.

It's not that we don't know better;  
it's just that we can't stand up anymore by ourselves.  
On the way to Bethlehem,  
will you give us a hand?

Amid the hustle and bustle of Advent, it's easy to forget why we need a Savior. We need a Savior because we cannot deliver ourselves from yesterday's pain.

But our deliverance is best embodied in Christian community. The Psalmist writes, "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips . . . I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation."

On your journey to Bethlehem this Advent, I encourage you to reflect on the role Christian community plays in your deliverance from yesterday's pain. Yes, we need a Savior to deliver us from yesterday's pain, but we also need a community of faith to remind us that our identity comes from our deliverance, not from yesterday's pain.

***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, we look with anticipation for the birth of your Son to deliver us from yesterday's pain. We pray this Advent that you would provide us with great congregations to give us a hand when we can't stand up by ourselves anymore. We ask this in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

## Day 10

### **Matthew 22:34-46**

*34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." 41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42 "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? 45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" 46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.*

### **Heather Runser '14**

Love. It is a simple word, and yet it is complex in its simplicity. As people of faith, and especially as persons who are called to serve in some kind of public ministry, we think we know how to love. Loving God appears to come as easily to us as breathing, and we have loving others down to a science. We pray with strangers, help the poor, feed the hungry, and visit those who are in prison. But how well do we love ourselves? How are we with self-care? What if we loved ourselves as we do our neighbors? How would that transform your ministry? Advent is often the busiest season, and it is easy to forget to love and take care of ourselves. Practice what you preach. Spend time in the Word and in prayer. Do something you love. Love yourself this season, and watch God transform you!

#### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, this Advent season is one of the most joyous and yet stressful times of the year. As we rush about getting everything ready for Christmas, let us not forget to prepare our hearts. Help us to keep our focus on you and not lose ourselves in the process. We ask all this in your precious, holy name. Amen.

### **Laura Strauss '09**

The greatest commandment and the commandment which compliments it function best in unity. Perhaps, we are tempted to believe that it is easy to love God. We study God's Word, gather for worship, and pray. However, we deceive ourselves when we believe that this alone demonstrates love. The love that our Lord requires found in the devotions listed above, and in the way we love those God has placed along our path. The frustrations of life lived in the midst of fallen humanity tempts the Christian to hide in the solace of God's embrace. Yet, the call upon the believer is to love God through moving from God's embrace into the messy confines of our called communities. This is more than Bible study, worship, and prayer. But with the Spirit at work in our devotions, we learn to love the difficult as a means to love God.

#### **Prayer**

Loving God, you have called us to love a world that is often challenging in our eyes. Soften our hearts toward your people that we may love them as you, in your mercy, have loved us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 33**

*1 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. 2 Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. 3 Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. 4 For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. 7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. 9 For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. 10 The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. 12 Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage. 13 The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. 14 From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth — 15 he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. 16 A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. 17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. 18 Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, 19 to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. 21 Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. 22 Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.*

### **Mark Basily, D.Min. Eastern Christian Focus**

One of the most painful feelings in life is the feeling of loneliness—the feeling that no one is there, no one is interested in my life, and no one even cares. The solution offered to us in Psalm 33 is simple—look up, because there is One who looks down! In fact, the psalm repeats this truth three times: “The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind”; “From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth”; and “Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him.”

God looks down at us because He loves us, because He is interested in us, and because He wants to protect us. Knowing that our heavenly Father is watching us gives us the comforting feeling that we are not alone, and it inspires us to live a godly and pure life. So throughout your busy day, take a moment to stop and look up at the compassionate eyes that are gazing down upon you.

### **Prayer**

Thank You Heavenly Father for Your love and protection. It gives me tremendous joy to know You are watching me and encouraging me through my life’s journey. I confess that all too often I am occupied with the affairs of this world. Never turn Your eye away from me, but rather, remind me to turn my eyes up to You, my Savior and my God.

## Day 11

**A reading from pages 365-66 of “To Know Nothing Except Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified’: Supralapsarian Christology and a Theology of the Cross,” by Edwin Christian van Driel, faculty (in The Wisdom and Foolishness of God, by Christoph Chalamet)**

*The theologically important point about conceiving of God’s relating to humanity as a form of friendship is friendship’s motivational structure. Friendship is motivated by a delight in and love for the other. It enjoys the other’s goodness and the goodness the relationship with the other embodies. Of course, friendship can be disrupted, disregarded, betrayed. All of these can motivate friends to seek forgiveness, reconciliation, healing of their relationship. The friendship itself is not based on the episode of disruption and reconciliation, but on a deeper sense of love and delight. Therefore, when God calls Abraham, Moses, and the people of Israel God’s friends, and when Jesus addresses his disciples as friends, not slaves, this defines these relationships as motivated not only by human sin and need for reconciliation, but by a deeper, preordained sense of love. All of them are tainted by human failure and betrayal. The narratives of Abraham, Moses, and Israel are full of stories of distrust, disobedience, and unbelief. Jesus calls his disciples friends in the context of a conversation about his imminent death: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). But while the death is motivated by the friendship, the friendship is not motivated by death. Jesus becomes his disciples’ savior because he is their friend; not the other way around.*

### **Prayer**

Holy God, in this advent season we thank you for being our friend. In friendship and perfect love you reach out to us in Jesus Christ inviting us to reconciliation and peace. Because of this, life is full of promise. For this we give you our thanks and praise. Amen.

### **Amos 8:1-14**

*1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. 2 He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. 3 The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!" 4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, 5 saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, 6 buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." 7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. 8 Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? 9 On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. 10 I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. 11 The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. 13 In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst. 14 Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, "As your god lives, O Dan," and, "As the way of Beer-sheba lives" —they shall fall, and never rise again.*

**Philomena Ofori-Nipaah, D.Min. Christian Spirituality Focus**

“Stop, look, and listen!” Amos’s message addresses a complex issue faced by a people whose harvest is plentiful and business is booming, yet the poor are neglected. As the prophet delivers a message warning of the need for change—for the coming of the Lord—so it is for us today.

Upon hearing Christmas whistles and bells, we busy ourselves with looking for the best gifts to give. Amos’s message sounds like a train approaching with a full head of steam, its whistles and bells making us pause to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN. As a warning sign from a train causes us to pay attention, so are we to pay attention to Amos during the season of Advent. The words of warning are spoken about the coming of Christ the Lord and the need to be transformed. “The days are coming ... not a famine of food ... but hearing the words of the Lord” (verse 11).

Amos blows the whistle to get us to stop and be refreshed in God’s grace while looking at our surroundings to help the poor and the needy around us, to take time to look for guidance and comfort, to ask forgiveness from God, and to share the joy of Christ’s love with each other as we search for joy in the material gifts we give and receive. Advent is a time to listen for the mercy of God in meditation.

Christ whistles grace and love to us in the season of Advent. Let us prepare to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN, as we examine ourselves.

#### **Prayer**

Almighty God, help us to look and find your peace in all our Advent busyness. Make us people of truth, obedience, and sharers of your love so that, through our lives, you may be revealed to others. Lord, may we learn to listen more and speak less as you give us courage to trust in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

#### **Matthew 23:1-12**

*1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

#### **Elaine Loggi ’13**

Jesus has a pointed message in this passage for leaders who use their positions to gain recognition and self-glorification. If we’re honest, we all find ourselves guilty of such actions at times. The busyness of this season can become a competition or an opportunity to bring attention to ourselves and our own efforts: Do I have the best cookies on the table? Can I find the perfect present in the midst of all the others he’ll receive? Am I sure my house is cleaner than hers? How can I make my sermon more memorable than those others? My liturgy more creative? My devotional more thoughtful?

Jesus reminds us that we are called instead to use whatever spotlight or leadership role we find ourselves in to humbly point back to Christ, our only instructor and leader. In this season of watching, waiting, and hoping for Christ's coming that so often gets swallowed up in shopping, cooking, cleaning, and preparing, Jesus' message reminds us of who we are and of the humility and resulting joy in which we are called to live, during this Advent season and always.

**Prayer**

Holy God, we give you thanks for this season of watching, waiting, and hoping, and the opportunity it gives us to turn back to you. Refocus our lives, so that all our words and deeds may always point to your great acts and your amazing love and bring glory to your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Psalm 147:1-11**

*1 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. 3 He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. 6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre. 8 He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. 9 He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. 10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; 11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

**Chelsea Leitcher '13**

Each day I drive through the strawberry fields on my way to work. Working in the fields is dangerous, backbreaking, and demoralizing work. An expensive sports car briefly parts the haze of dust, manure, and pesticides whizzing toward a coastal vacation home. And the agricultural workers continue for hours either fully bent over picking strawberries or being made to take their heavy loads at a run to the trucks that keep us fed. Psalm 147 reminds us of the tension between God's intention for the created order and the current reality in which we live. It presents a model for how the world ought to be, in stark contrast to the reality in which we live. It gives us hope that, in this Advent season of waiting, the injustices and separations that plague us today will not last.

**Prayer**

Lord of all, help me to see those I would rather ignore. Help me to listen in a tongue I did not originally speak. Grant me the compassion and love to see all in my community as my neighbor and friend. Amen.



## Day 12

### **Matthew 23:13-26**

13 *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. 16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.’ 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, ‘Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.’ 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; 21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; 22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it. 23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! 25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.*

### **Sue Washburn ’12**

Woe to you, blind guides! Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You blind fools! Jesus, the healer of so many blind people, is frustrated at the blindness he so clearly sees in the scribes and Pharisees—a blindness that is a willful act of not seeing rather than a physical impairment that prevents sight. The scribes and Pharisees are blind because they are focusing on the wrong things in their religious practice—the gold, the gifts, and the outside of the cup. The justice, mercy, and faith that should be clearly visible are hardly a noticeable blur in the background.

As Christmas approaches we spend a lot of time polishing the outside of our cups—mailing cards and invitations, decorating sanctuaries, and producing pageants. Meanwhile the sacred gift of Jesus Christ remains unnoticed in a remote corner. Too often, we exhaust ourselves with the lesser things and forget that which is greater. Perhaps this is the year to unwrap the gift of Christ’s justice, mercy, and faith first.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, gives us clarity of vision this Advent and Christmas. Allow us to focus on the greater gift of Christ, your Word as flesh among us. Open our eyes so that we may see opportunities for justice, mercy, and faith during the holidays and every day. In Christ’s name. Amen.

### **Nancy Hammond, staff**

The season of Advent is an extremely busy time within most families. The shopping, the wrapping, the decorating, the baking, the cooking, the cleaning can be overwhelming! For me, it’s easy to become totally consumed with making the house look “just right” before the friends and the family arrive to celebrate Christmas. I don’t know about you, but I am always glad that my Christmas guests will NOT be looking inside my closets and cupboards when they come to visit. Even though I make sure that the house is clean and nicely decorated, I don’t usually find the time or make it a priority to clean behind the closed doors of the cabinets! This passage from Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that our spiritual lives suffer from this same confusion. We focus on the exterior appearances in our own lives, in the lives of

others, and in our preparations for Christmas, while neglecting the inside matters of the heart. We are surprised by these words from Matthew's gospel: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean." Before we focus on the outside and the wrongs of others, we have to focus on the inside and clean our hearts for the Advent journey. My hope for this Christmas season is that we will make the time to attend to the "inside of the cup" and focus on the fruits of the Spirit which will lead to a Christmas season that is meaningful and joyful.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, thank you for the time of preparation that Advent provides for us. Help us to focus our attention on the inside of the cup, preparing our hearts and lives once again for the blessing of Christ's birth. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

### **Psalm 18:1-20**

*1 I love you, O LORD, my strength. 2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. 3 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies. 4 The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; 5 the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. 6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. 7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. 14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. 16 He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the LORD was my support. 19 He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. 20 The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.*

### **Paul Fanous, D.Min. Eastern Christian Focus**

We live in a world where power is given to those who are strong, rich, influential, or charismatic. But there is a power that has long been forgotten. And that is the power of God working with humanity, or with each of us specifically.

David the Psalmist in Psalm 18 sings of the power of God, His power over death and Sheol, His power over nature, and His power over our circumstances. But by far the most important aspect of God's power is that He has made it accessible to "me." He has given us the power, that our prayers would be heard and answered by Him: "In my distress I called upon the Lord, And cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, And my cry came before Him, even to His ears" (Psalm 18:6). This is real power—that the Hand which can make the "earth (shake) and tremble," and the One who can make the

“foundations of the world ... uncovered” by his “rebuke,” would bend down his ear, hear my voice, and allow Himself to be moved by my prayers.

When we feel weak, and powerless in this world, let us try to remember the true power that is made available to us.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, it is a wonderful gift that you would hear my voice from your dwelling place, that you would regard my prayers. Thank you for this tremendous power you have bestowed on me. I request that you would never let me stray far from this strength that you have shared with us, your children. Amen.

**Psalm 147:12-20**

*12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! 13 For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. 14 He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat. 15 He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. 16 He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. 17 He hurls down hail like crumbs—who can stand before his cold? 18 He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow. 19 He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. 20 He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the Lord!*

**William (B.T.) Gilligan '11**

Securing gates, blessing children, establishing borders, giving the best wheat, commanding the earth, spreading snow, scattering frost, and proclaiming words to people. So many things God is doing—how does God possibly balance all of them? How does God keep all those plates spinning at the same time? The simple answer is that God is the most supreme being ever. While that answer is correct, it also leaves out one of the more personal aspects of God.

The whole reason God is working this hard and is this dedicated is because God is playing favorites. God is biased toward those whom God created. The God of the universe is insanely in love with humanity, not just humanity as a whole, but you. The God of the universe who commands the earth is madly in love with you. You are loved so much that the same God who commands the earth was born of a virgin and lived among us as Jesus. In the midst of all that we have going on this time of year it can be very easy to forget about the reason why we do these things. Just as we keep all the plates spinning for those we love, the God of the universe keeps all the plates spinning because of a great love for us that was exemplified in Jesus.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, with so many plates to keep spinning remind us that you keep all the plates spinning and keep it all going because of your great love for us. Amen.

## Day 13

### **Haggai 1:1-15**

*1 In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2 Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: 4 Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. 6 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. 7 Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. 8 Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. 9 You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. 10 Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 11 And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors. 12 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the LORD their God had sent him; and the people feared the LORD. 13 Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, saying, I am with you, says the LORD. 14 And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, 15 on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.*

### **Derek Davenport '05**

We don't often read Haggai, especially during Advent. During Advent, we often spend our energy on things that are familiar. We read passages from the Gospels and Isaiah. We focus on traditions, family, and things that feel like "home." We spend the entire season trying to capture this sense of "home." That's where Haggai comes in. Haggai speaks to a people trying to recreate "home." They're trying, but not always successful. In the midst of that confusion, Haggai tells the people that the word of the Lord is "I am with you." That's the message of Christmas. God with us. Immanuel. The traditions, the familiarity, the sense of "home" are all wonderful parts of the season, but Haggai reminds us that the word of the Lord is much more simple. "I am with you."

### **Prayer**

Lord, in the midst of this season filled with tradition, remind us that regardless of the confusion, the traditions, or the chaos, You are with us. Please remind us of Your love and presence this very day. Amen.

### **Matthew 23:27-39**

*27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, 30 and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not*

*have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. 33 You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, 35 so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. 37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you, desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

### **Dave Dack ’11**

“Woe to you!” Jesus says. It seems an odd text for Advent. As church choirs begin to sing *Joy To the World*, the second half of the Advent season begins with Jesus shouting, “Woe to the Pharisees! Woe to the religiously serious!”

Pharisees were wonderful people, but they had forgotten how to wait expectantly on God. Maybe like the Pharisees it has been so long since you felt God’s presence in your life that you have settled for religion instead of hope. You have taken the ancient biblical promises that you learned in Sunday school and buried them in tombs carefully decorated with your religious trophies. But no matter how beautifully you decorate a tomb, you will never find life there.

In bursts Jesus with shouts that call us out of our dark tombs and into the marvelous light of Immanuel, God with us, who resurrects the hopes and fears of all the years that have gone unmet for so long. This is Advent, when Christ shall come to gather his children at last.

### **Prayer**

Lord, invade our tombs and wash our souls clean. Cast out our fear with your perfect love, so that along with the prophets of old we can once again pray the Advent prayer, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Amen.

### **Psalm 102**

*1 Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. 2 Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. 3 For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. 4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. 5 Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. 6 I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. 7 I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. 8 All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. 9 For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink, 10 because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. 11 My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. 12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations. 13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favor it; the appointed time has come. 14 For your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity on its dust. 15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth your glory. 16 For the LORD will build up Zion; he will appear in his glory. 17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer. 18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD: 19 that he looked down from his holy height,*

*from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, 20 to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die; 21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, 22 when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD. 23 He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. 24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away at the mid-point of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations." 25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 26 They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away; 27 but you are the same, and your years have no end. 28 The children of your servants shall live secure; their offspring shall be established in your presence.*

### **Lezley Stewart, D.Min. Reformed Focus**

In the dark days of winter and in the midst of everyday life there can be difficult and brooding days—days when one might feel like a *lonely bird on a housetop*. In the midst of the Psalmist's longing and despair, there is also a glimmer of hope as he calls to mind the faithfulness of God from generation to generation.

Sometimes in darkness it is hard to discern the light, but gradually and slowly the merest glimmer can spread warmth and hope, pointing to a new beginning. It is often in calling to mind the past that we find the strength to live in the present and future.

The season of Advent takes us on that journey from past to future, darkness to light, and along the way we begin to see the transforming light of Christ reshaping our future and direction. We become part of what he the Psalmist described as the generation to come— a people yet unborn who praise the Lord.

#### **Prayer**

Open our eyes to your wonder,  
Open our hearts to your warmth,  
Open our lives to your embrace,  
As we hope in the Eternal One. Amen.

### **Psalm 130**

*1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. 8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*

### **Diane Flynn, M.Div. Student**

For Christians, the Advent season is a time to celebrate the expectancy of our savior Jesus Christ—the one God promised would take away the sin of the world. But for some, Advent can be a time of inward spiritual torment. Sin has a way of separating us from God, from a faithful relationship which had once been our delight and joy. Like the psalmist, we cry out to our creator in the depths of despair. While there is no one without sin, the promise of God is forgiveness. Faith has come, and with it we see that God's forgiveness can ensure that state of reverence which God desires to see in all of us. As we celebrate with expectancy the coming of our savior, we are reminded of God's redeeming love. Our guilt

is washed away by the blessed assurance of forgiveness and restoration in the hope of God's unbreakable Word.

***Prayer***

Holy God, we thank you that as surely as the morning comes after the night, so surely will your promise of forgiveness and mercy restore our hearts to a deeper faith in you. As we celebrate with great expectation the coming of our savior, help us to remember with confidence that we will not seek or wait in vain. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## Day 14

### ***A reading from page 75 of To Everything a Season: A Spirituality of Time, by Bonnie Thurston, faculty (retired)***

*Nothing I “do” ultimately assures my value. My value as a human being is already secured by God as the source of my creation and by Jesus Christ as the source of my salvation. I may choose to engage in “good works” – benevolence, charity, whatever – as a grateful response to those gifts, but there is absolutely nothing I could do to earn them. The bottom line is I don’t have to do anything: I just have to be, that is, to accept God’s gift of life and to respond by grateful living. Why is it that this Christian ontology is so hard to accept? Could it be because the nature of God is so foreign to us? We do not deeply, existentially, understand that God is Love, that God loves us because that is God’s nature, not because we are smart or pretty or productive or “worthy” of such love. Because human love so rarely comes to us unconditionally, many of us have decided that God’s love never could either. We are wrong in this assumption, as the cross of Jesus Christ so clearly demonstrates.*

### **Prayer**

Loving God, how difficult it is for us to comprehend or believe your love for us! May Emmanuel descend to us once again, we pray, casting out all doubt and sin so that we can stand firm and confident in the knowledge and assurance of your love. Come Lord Jesus! Amen.

### **Haggai 2:1-9**

*1 In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: 2 Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, 3 Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? 4 Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, 5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. 6 For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; 7 and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. 8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. 9 The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.*

### **Andrew Wirt '10**

In our Old Testament lesson, we hear that the people rebuilding the temple are discouraged because they remember the former glory of Solomon’s Temple. The new temple seems like it could never compare to their memory of the past. But God promises, as He does repeatedly throughout Scripture, that everything will be ok, because He will be with them.

Advent is a season of preparation – preparation for Christmas, for the Second Coming, for a new church year. It can be a time of great joy and anticipation, as long as we don’t let our memories of the past prevent us from experiencing and enjoying the present. We might think “It won’t be the same this year without Mom,” or “I don’t know how we’ll make it through after the layoff.” But remember that God is always by our side. This year may be different, or more difficult, but do not fear, for the Lord your God is with you. “‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”



### **Prayer**

Eternal God, be with us this holiday season. Especially be with those who have suffered great loss this past year. Even when it seems nothing will ever be joyful again, remind us that hope is found in You. In the midst of the chaos of this world, Your love for us is steadfast. Amen.

### **Karen Baughman '06**

The people of Israel had returned from exile just a few years before. They came back to a place that was home and yet not home. They had to live alongside with the unfamiliar 'remnant' in the land. They had to rebuild homes and businesses. They suffered through drought. Most of all, they had to rebuild the Temple and reconcile the faith they kept in exile with the faith they now needed to sustain them in the future. Their lives were unsettled and uncertain, full of unease and anxiety. In the midst of their struggle, the Lord encourages the people to be strong, to be courageous, to keep on, to move forward, to not let the past become the definition of the future. "It will be all right," says the Lord, "for I am with you." Today, we, too, live in uncertainty and unease. Some of us wonder whether we can make it through tough economic times, or whether we will have a job tomorrow or next year. We fear the terrorist from another shore and the thief down the street. Even our familiar ways of faith are unsettled. Yet in this season, God reminds us in a most amazing way, with the birth of a child, that God is still with us and will bring us Shalom, wholeness, peace, and rest.

### **Prayer**

Oh, God, thank you for reminding us that you are with us in all our struggles and uncertainties. We take courage from your presence in the world and with us. Help us to live in the hope of your presence always. Amen.

### **Matthew 24:1-14, 32-44**

*1 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. 9 "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10 Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. . . . 32 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 34 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39*

*and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

### **Carolyn Cranston '99**

During the season of Advent, we often become distracted by the preparations for Christmas Day. Shopping, Christmas cards, baking, parties; the list is long and the time is short. There is little time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child, let alone the Second Coming. We put off prayer, meditation and the reading of Scripture because there is always tomorrow. Or, is there? We have no idea when Christ will return to gather his own, yet we live as though we have all the tomorrows in the world. Biblical witness makes it clear that the Son of Man will return to judge the world by the way we have treated those in need, the most vulnerable among us. God expects us to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial love and obedience, upholding Christian standards. Don't wait until tomorrow; it may never come. Stay alert, watch, and be prepared!

#### ***Prayer***

Holy and most merciful God, remove from our path anything that would distract or separate us from you. Fill us with your Holy Spirit and guide us to love our neighbor, recognizing you in our midst. Help us to stay awake, to watch, and to prepare ourselves – body, mind, and soul - for your coming. In the name of Jesus the Christ we pray, Amen.

### **LaNita Butler, D.Min. Urban Change Focus**

At first glance, this pericope previews an end-times, apocalyptic world ripe for judgment. Similarly, our world today appears to be plagued with moral degradation, injustice, and waning reverence for God and neighbor. Yet there is "hope." Hope happens when believers stand amid chaos and insert God's possibility. Here in Matthew, Jesus makes the remedy to desolation available to us:

1. Beware, don't fear, don't waver ...
2. "And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a 'testimony' to all the nations; and then the end will come" (v. 14).

A testimony is a firsthand authentication of a fact—the evidence, the outward sign, the witness of what the "power of God" can do and has done to transform our lives and circumstances.

It is God who heals, delivers, transforms, restores, and makes free. He is The Way, The Truth and The Life! He gives wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and direction. "Anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord – *will be saved*" (Acts 2:21). "So, if *anyone* is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Hope in chaos – The Good News!

#### ***Prayer***

God of all nations, you overflow with love, mercy, and grace. You are the source of life, light, and all that is good and true. You have already told us what is good in your sight: To do justice,

love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Lord, recapture our hearts, indulge yourself in our lives, and by your Holy Spirit help us put into action all that you have instructed. Amen.

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

*1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 4 Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. 6 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."*

### **Matthew Morris '16**

Every year during Advent, I find myself listening to the same song at least once: "Rebel Jesus," performed by the Chieftains and Jackson Browne. It's certainly a unique Christmas song. Rather than celebrating Christ's glorious destiny and humble birth, it is all about His message, particularly His concern for the least of us. It's an important reminder for me, just like this passage, that as much as I might want to "take Advent off," using it as a time for rest, reconnecting, and maybe a dash of introspection and prayer, preparing the way for Christ involves much more. It means opening my eyes and heart to the suffering and lonely and extending Christ's message of healing to them in turn. It's not easy, especially when the world seems so dark, as it has this year, but it's in the darkest times that Christ calls us to be light.

### **Prayer**

Christ our Savior and Guide, wash us clean this Advent, that our lives may be light in the cold, dark places of our world. Lead us, we pray, in your name. Amen.

### **Psalms 90**

*1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. 7 For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. 10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. 11 Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. 12 So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. 13 Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. 15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. 16 Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to*

*their children. 17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!*

**Connie Gundry Tappy, staff**

“We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.” What an odd choice for an Advent meditation! Isn’t divine anger the last thing on our minds at Christmastime? On Christmas Eve, who’s thinking about her secret sins being lighted up before God? Far from it—we’re lighting up the Christmas tree! We’re celebrating—singing carols, wrapping presents, kissing under the mistletoe. We’re going all-out for the birth of baby Jesus. His was a marvelous birth, to be sure—marvelous for us human beings, if not for him—so it’s well worth our celebrating. And even in the midst of the hectic holiday pace, we’re truly sincere in our gratitude for God’s gift to us in Jesus. I wonder, then, why, after the party’s over, we often feel just . . . empty. Let down. Deflated. Even if all our Christmas wishes came true. Could it be because we’ve failed to appreciate just how great a contrast in our relationship with God the birth of Christ made possible? Could it be that we ill-deserving sinners aren’t joyfully “consumed” by God’s favor toward us because we haven’t recognized the justified intensity of God’s anger and indignation at our sin? Could it be that in envisioning the baby Jesus set by God before shepherds and sages in the light of Bethlehem’s star, we have ignored what that completely innocent infant would forever hide from God’s sight—our wrath-provoking “secret sins”? Hide them forever? Now that is truly something to celebrate—every day of every year!

***Prayer***

All-gracious and holy Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your sinless son, our Lord and Savior Jesus, to shine in the light of your presence on behalf of us sinners and eternally reconcile us to you. May your Holy Spirit keep us always mindful of your unfathomable grace and endless love. And in grateful response, may we lead our lives in ways that only please you. Amen.

## Day 15

### **A reading from page 5 of After Baptism, by John Burgess, faculty**

*Every time the church baptizes a baby, it testifies to a God who knows how to bring life out of death, strength out of weakness, and something out of nothing: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:10) Like Israel and the first followers of Christ, we too would be nothing, a people without a name, home, or identity, had not God bestowed a new life and a new identity on us. We do not first have to create an identity and ask God to approve it, nor do we have to earn an identity and ask God to deliver it to us as our just wages. In Jesus Christ, God has already placed his seal of approval on us, before we could do anything about it. From the beginning, God has known us better than we will ever know ourselves: "It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Ps. 139:13). God has claimed us and identified us as his own.*

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, we rejoice when you come to us. We give you thanks, Emmanuel, for loving us and choosing us. May we find mercy in the living of our days and courage for following you. As we are loved, so let us love one another, in this season and always. Amen.

### **Amos 9:11-15**

*11 On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; 12 in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this. 13 The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. 14 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. 15 I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God.*

### **Ron Cole-Turner, faculty**

Ours is not the first generation to live through an economic crisis. But for all those who work without job security or health benefits or fair wages—and for those with no work at all—the past is no consolation. Winter threatens, and for too many this year Christmas brings something new and painful: The sorrow of not being able to buy gifts for one's own children. Especially this year, as Americans protest in our cities and politicians throw blame at each other, we need more than ever to hear the word of the Lord, the word of our faithful God, spoken afresh to God's chosen: "I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit" (Amos 9:14).

### **Prayer**

O God, strengthen us by your promises and sustain us by your steadfast love, through Jesus Christ our Savior; Amen.

### **Revelation 3:7-13**

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens: 8 “I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. 11 I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

### **Dave Morse, adjunct faculty**

During the Advent Season we celebrate the coming of Christ. Various texts in the New Testament celebrate aspects of His coming to be received by us and remembered during this season. The message of the risen Christ to the church of Philadelphia proclaims some features of Christ’s coming that are worth remembering this season. In this text the risen Christ declares that His presence with His church means that we have access to God. He has opened that door through his death and resurrection and no one can ever shut that door. His presence means that even though we might be weak, we have power. We have the power to be faithful to His word. This means that we also have victory in any time of trial. Our access to God provides power that enables us to conquer both sin and death and share in Christ’s victory.

#### **Prayer**

We thank you, O God, for the victory we have in Jesus Christ. May we walk in the power of that gift, Amen.

### **Anthony Hita ’13**

From an increased attendance in churches, to the general attitude of giving and cheer, the Christmas season is a time when doors open that are seldom open other times. Rather than focusing on how the door may be shut throughout the year, bemoaning those who come only at Easter and Christmas, we have an opportunity in the season to show the grace and love that God has already made known to us in Christ—a love that is available to everyone all year around. Somewhere out there this Yuletide, a door is open that was previously closed, and Christ is being born as if for the first time in someone’s heart. For those of us who claim the name of Jesus, let us pick up our gifts and go in perseverance, and see what doors Christ is opening in our midst today.

#### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, to whom all hearts are known: The doors you open cannot be shut, and the doors you close cannot be opened. Grant us this day the grace to not throw ourselves against closed doors, and the wisdom to find the doors you are opening. May we who claim your name have open hearts, open minds, and open doors to proclaim your love and light into all the darkness of this world. Amen.

### **Psalm 24**

*1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; 2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. 3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. 5 They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. 6 Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. 7 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.*

**Jennifer Young-Thompson, D.Min. Parish Ministry Focus**

Since the Industrial revolution humankind has sought to “subdue” the earth. Driven by greed, we have allowed the destruction of the planet in the name of progress and material gain. We have forgotten that all of God’s Creation is the Lord’s, and it is held in our keeping until the next generation becomes its caretakers. In our desire to master the physical realm we have, perhaps purposely, misunderstood our true calling.

Psalm 24 reminds us that the real work in our lives is the growth of our souls by the subjugation of our ego, our pride, and our selfishness. It is our choice, once we have given our hearts to our Lord Jesus Christ, whether we will allow the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us, thus enabling us to live out the grace of God gifted to us—to live it out humbly, with clean hands, pure hearts, and unsoiled tongues.

Those who live their lives striving to subdue their inner world by following in the footsteps of Jesus are the “generation that seek God.” It is only after this godly work that the gates and doors which stop the Holy Spirit from entering our souls can be lifted up and the King of Glory come in. Just as the Temple attendants physically labored to lift up the everlasting doors so the faithful might come to worship the Lord, so also let us be about our work to subdue our world within and welcome God into our hearts and our lives once again!

***Prayer***

Glorious Lord, we live in this material world and often don’t see the wonder of its beauty. We stress over our bills and our health, we worry about our family and our friends. In a world filled with noise it is hard, so hard, to be quiet and know—no matter the misfortune or catastrophe—that You are God. Help us in the varied distractions and disasters of our lives to seek Your face—to find our strength, our peace, and our place within Your loving, faithful, heart. In Jesus’ Holy Name we pray. Amen.

***Psalm 150***

*1 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

**Betty Angelini ’09**

Ten more days to go! How are your preparations coming along? Are your cards sent? Are your presents bought? Are your cookies baked?

Music at Christmas time abounds. Every artist-contemporary, jazz, country western, rap, rock-has their rendition of a Christmas album/CD. They are singing about snow and cozy fires and even reindeers playing all kinds of games. This music is fun, and sentimental, and perhaps even memory making. But, is this music preparing our hearts for the Incarnation-one of the most central events in our salvation history?

In Psalm 150, the whole orchestra is making music to Praise the Lord. Praising the Lord-for our triune God cares for us so much that God's mighty works and unequalled greatness are demonstrated by the Lord's loving gift of sending God's son, Jesus, in the flesh to us. Now that is something to sing about! Let's praise the Lord by singing a joyful noise together as we prepare our hearts and wait for Emmanuel! Ten days left to prepare. Is your heart singing *Joy to the World*? Are you praising the Lord this Advent? This year? With your life?

***Prayer***

Lord God, as we await the arrival of Emmanuel may we sing with joy with all of heart to your glory for all the blessings you have showered upon us, especially the birth of your son! As we praise you Lord, may our gratitude for all of your blessings be evident. Thank you for all the gifts we have received, especially the gift of Jesus in a manger. Amen.



## Day 16

### **A reading from pages 102-103 of Pastoral Genetics: Theology and Care at the Beginning of Life, by Ron Cole-Turner, faculty, and Brent Waters, former staff**

*“. . . in the crucified healer we see how healing can flow from weakness. We are accustomed to seeing healing as a form of power, as action that overrides circumstances and directs outcomes, which we then measure and take to be the mark of success for physicians or hospitals. What the healer on the cross shows us is how healing flows finally from weakness and vulnerability and not from power. Although Christ did use power to heal, in the event of the cross it is not finally power but weakness that heals. The healing weakness of Christ on the cross is a weakness that is freely chosen for the sake of others, a weakness that comes after power. It is recognition of the essential limits of power, not merely the technological limits of our medicine but the inherent limits even of God's power to heal. Power heals but only in a limited or provisional way. For while power – our own or God's – can override circumstances and direct outcomes and thus can truly heal, power overrides or directs only at the risk of negating the selfhood or personhood of the other or at the risk of doing violence to the full circumstances in which the other suffers. The essence of healing is in the weakness that is after power, and the cross shows us how this weakness can be mightier than power alone in bringing true healing. The weakness that comes after power is truly able to heal not because it gets rid of the pain, but because it is willing to transfer the pain from the one who is sick to the one who heals.”*

#### **Prayer**

Loving God, in this advent season we remember and give thanks that you entered into our lives in seeming weakness, as a baby born in Bethlehem. In Christ's birth, life, and death on the cross your power was made perfect in weakness. Through Christ you take on our pain and sin and offer us healing and hope. It is more than we can comprehend, but even in our weakness we offer you our grateful praise. Alleluia. Amen.

#### **Genesis 3:8-15**

*8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."*

#### **John Wilson, faculty emeritus**

Paul Tillich interprets the fall of the first humans as an event that occurs for every human being, as he or she emerges from the simplicity of early life into adolescence and adulthood. Accordingly the shame and fear of Adam and Eve hiding belongs to everyone's story. In a certain sense the attitude of sinful human being is always one of concealment, even double concealment, as in the tale of the stolen apples: God knows but he doesn't tell. But in concealment judgment is despised and hated, and the darkness of sin clouds over all thought and doing. The light of Christ shines in the darkness, the light of love, of

acceptance, of the justification of the sinner. In Christ we know the end and purpose of God's judgments, which is not that we must obey, but that we may and even can obey, so that we may and can live in truth.

**Prayer**

Lord, may your light shine anew, may truth dawn brightly, may your love heal the sickness of all shame and fear. Amen.

**John 3:16-21**

*16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."*

**Jason Clapper '11**

Some claim to find tension in the views of God that are portrayed in the Old Testament versus the New Testament, but our passages today reminds us that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Hebrews 13:8). God is and always has been a God of grace. In the passage in Genesis, Adam and Eve have just sinned against God. It is clear that God is not happy. Yet, when we look deeper, we find a glimpse of the grace of Jesus Christ. Despite dispensing judgment, God also offers a promise. His final words to his people are not a no, but a yes: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." Some have called this verse the "*protoevangelium*" or "The first Gospel," a promise of Jesus who is to come. When we are faced with our own sin in the light of God's righteousness, let us remember that God walked with us in the cool of the garden, witnessing to the incarnate Jesus, the baby that we are awaiting this Advent season, who came to walk among us once again.

**Prayer**

God of the garden, You are the same yesterday, today, and forever; You have created us to be with you. Thank you for your grace which makes this possible despite ourselves. Amen.

**Alina Kanaski '16**

Jesus was sent into the world—not just sent, but born, born into a human body to save humanity. The eternal light, the Word, was born into flesh. We celebrate that miracle even as we mourn what we know is coming. Death comes out of life, life of death. A circle, broken by Jesus' death and resurrection—a break started by a simple moment where a mother looked down at her newborn son.

Her newborn son—the light of the world. The promised Messiah. Light come to drive out darkness, and all for love. A love greater than a mother's for her child, greater than a husband's for his wife, or a wife's for her husband, greater than their love of their God in whom they placed their faith by agreeing to be together despite it all. A love greater than we can imagine and greater than we can comprehend. A love that encompasses the whole world.

That is what this child is born out of. That is the kind of love that Jesus is, the kind of love that drives out darkness and the kind of love that wants to save far more than it wants to condemn. It is the kind of love that leads to total sacrifice.

**Prayer**

God of light, we bask in Your light and Your love this Advent, reminded of the manifestation of Your love. Give us the courage to come into the light and believe in the name of Your son.  
Amen.

**Psalm 40**

*1 I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. 2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. 3 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. 4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. 5 You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. 6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. 7 Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. 8 I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." 9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. 10 I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. 11 Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever. 12 For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me. 13 Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me. 14 Let all those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt. 15 Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, Aha!" 16 But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the LORD!" 17 As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.*

**Anthony Hita '13**

Christmas is a time when we celebrate and remember the deliverance that came in Christ so long ago. But in the midst of the holiday season, it can be easy to forget God is still a God of deliverance and hope. The Psalmist writes of the LORD drawing the writer up from a desolate pit. We might be tempted to stop there; after all, most of us probably recall a time that God has delivered us. But the Psalmist doesn't stop there. They go on to say that they will not hide the news of their deliverance; they will tell others of God's great faithfulness. This Christmas there will be so much to draw our attention. But in the midst of the celebrating, don't forget that this world still has many seeking to be drawn up from deep pits. Don't hide the message of deliverance—proclaim it and live it out for the benefit of others.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord of deliverance, open my eyes this season to see those who are in need that I may proclaim your steadfast love and faithfulness in word and in deed, that all who seek You may rejoice and be glad in Your salvation. Amen.

## **Psalm 122**

*1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" 2 Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. 3 Jerusalem — built as a city that is bound firmly together. 4 To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD. 5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. 7 Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." 8 For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you." 9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.*

### **Lou Nyiri, D.Min. Reformed Focus**

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"

These words resonate within me, for they are the words my Presbyterian pastor father-in-law often used as he began worship when our family would visit on vacation. Hearing these words signaled it was time to calm our inner conversations that we might be open to an encounter with God's gracious and gratitude-inducing presence in our midst. It was a signal to be open to God's peace.

Psalm 122 was originally sung by pilgrims on the way to celebrate one of Jerusalem's major festivals. Thereafter, it was used as a song of praise for the city and a prayer for the city's well-being. We could use a song like this one today....

As I write these devotional words, the news of late has been riddled with bad events. Shootings, hurricanes, nefarious behaviors by power players, racism, and sexism are often the lead stories on our news outlets. We could use a song of peace like Psalm 122 today...

Peace of the city...,  
Peace within your walls...,  
Peace within [us]....

What a blessing to remember during the Advent season that the one whom we prepare to meet is also the one in whom we rejoice, for this One is the very One who will "fill the whole world with heaven's peace." *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

### **Prayer**

Ever-loving and ever-giving God, we thank you for your peace, which broke into this world in the cry of a tiny babe. We pray that your peace will be known once again, and as the song goes, "may it begin with us." In the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.

## Day 17

### **Zephaniah 3:14-20**

*14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. 19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.*

### **Eric McIntosh '12**

What time is it? It is time to claim our identity. We are the daughter of Zion. For us, it is a time to rejoice. It is a time to sing aloud! It is time to do it with all our hearts! But we live in a time of war. Our service men and women are in the middle of Middle East uprisings. But our government is more divided than ever before. But the state of our economy is such that millions are fighting for their financial lives! The soul of America is lost some say. Even though we have an African American President, we seem to be no closer to a post racial society than we were 50 years ago, when Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed a dream that was heard and shared around the world. But the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. How then is it time to sing, and rejoice and exult with all hearts?

Now is the time! America is groaning, longing for us to sing. All of creation is groaning and longing to see the manifestation of the the sons of God. What time is it? It is time for the Daughter of Zion rejoice! It is time for the redeemed of the Lord to say so! Say what, indeed what should we say? We should sing the reality of Advent! It is Advent time! It is time to celebrate the coming of the Lord. Even more it is time to celebrate that in the power of the Holy Spirit, he is here right now!

What time is it? It is time to sing! Sing, because Immanuel, God with us, forgives us. Rejoice, because while in the middle of war, God with us, will clear away our enemy. Why exult? Because God will rejoice over us, in our midst, and gather the outcast, and save the lame, and deal with our oppressors! It is time! Advent is a time to know that Immanuel, God with us is not only coming, he is already here and his presence will transform the world!

So what time is it? It's time to sing, rejoice, and exult with all our heart and the world needs to see it, hear it, from us if it is going to be transformed!

### **Prayer**

O Lord, the world around us is falling apart. But you O Lord are with us. Cause us to be bold enough to sing, and rejoice right now, in the midst of turmoil, confusion, and strife. Cause us to remember what you have done, to discern and feel the power of your presence right now, and to sing the world unto discipleship, unto salvation! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Rebecca Dix '15**

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. And no, it is not because of the snow. It's not because of the Christmas lights or the aisles of ornaments or tubes of brightly decorated wrapping paper. It's not because of bell ringers wrapped in Santa Claus guises or the halls being decked. And it's not because of persons piously carving time to be proper stewards of Advent. It's not because of the songs we sing or the foods we eat or the number of relatives we tolerate.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Because there is something in the air. It clings, it hovers with wings of feathers and rests gently on the soul. Threads woven through the spaces we inhabit, as we enter and as we leave. Most days traces of it may be thin, some days it may be harder to see than other days, but it is there. It is here. It is hope. Hope has come and is coming again.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, Sustainer and Creator, grant us the sight to see you in our midst so that we can rejoice aloud with all our hearts as daughter Zion. We have nothing more to fear for our King has come, in whose precious name we lift up this prayer, Amen.

### **Luke 1:1-25**

*1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. 5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. 8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." 21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."*

**Andrew Pomerville, D.Min. Reformed Focus**

“... so that you may know the truth ...”

As a father to pre-teens, I find myself explaining things more than I would like. I used to get away with guiding the children to do, say, or be a certain way, and they trusted my motivation, expertise, and general parental vibe to put them on the right path. Somewhere along the way, my son and daughter lost that naïve ability to accept and now need an explanation.

I can't really blame them. This is what their mother and I have wanted all along. We hope and pray our children will grow into thoughtful, considerate, compassionate individuals who will ask questions as they strive to become the adults God has called them to be. The problem is knowing how to share all that they might need to understand, believe, and become. How do I impart a lifetime of experiences that have influenced my faith, hope, and love? The task is daunting but it is oh so rewarding.

The author of Luke/Acts sets out on a similar journey—one of wanting the reader to believe in the truth of Jesus. And so, in a decent and orderly way, the author puts pen to paper and creates an account of Jesus that is meant to help the reader grow in faith, just as he/she experiences God anew and afresh with each morning.

Let us think this Advent about how we share what we know about Jesus Christ. What stories, experiences, and moments are necessary for another to hear so that they might have a similar theophany with our Lord? Share your worries, wonder, and doubts as much as you offer your trust, hope, and faith. And in sharing the message, see the story unfold anew.

**Prayer**

Gracious and ever creating God, help us partner with you in the creative storytelling that helps us grow, learn, and love through your Holy Spirit. Open our minds to find new ways to live in the narrative of your life, death, resurrection and ascension as we further become the members of your Kingdom that you have created us to be. Amen.

**Psalm 146**

*1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! 2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. 3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. 5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, 6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; 7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. 9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. 10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!*

**Mike Haddox '12**

Christmas is a time of anticipation. For some of us, it is a desired present, visits and dinners with family, or that long awaited winter holiday. For those of us in the church, we celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ, and eagerly anticipate his second coming. However, for many of us, the preparation is only for a season. As January rolls around, it will be back to our regular routines.

The Psalmist reminds us to praise the LORD, not just for what God did or will do, but for what God is doing, made known through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through the power of the spirit, Jesus is still active today.

To prepare for Christmas is to abandon our plans and bear witness to Jesus, not just as a baby, or one who will come again, but to the man Jesus who reigns for us.

***Prayer***

Father, open our eyes, that we may see the presence of Jesus in our midst, and have the courage to faithfully and continually reflect his love and grace to those around us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



## Day 18

### **1 Samuel 2:1b-10**

*1b "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. 2 "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. 6 The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. 7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. 8 He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. 9 "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. 10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."*

### **Kimberly Greway, D.Min. Parish Ministry Focus**

"My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." The Song of Hannah is Hannah's song of praise to God for her good fortune. After a long and difficult time of waiting, she will finally be a mother and will give birth to Samuel. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Song of Hannah sets the stage for a major theme of the Book of Samuel: the "power and willingness of Yahweh to intrude, intervene, and invert."

Many have noticed the numerous parallels between the Song of Hannah and the Magnificat of Mary. Some posit that Luke used the Song of Hannah as a framework for the Magnificat: the themes and wording are very similar. The songs of both women rejoice in God's greatness and in God's reversing the fortunes of various groups—the proud and arrogant are humbled, the mighty are knocked off their thrones, the hungry eat their fill, the barren bare children.

In praying and singing with Hannah and Mary, who are anticipating the birth of their children, we join in the waiting that infuses Advent. Each soon-to-be mother praises God not only for her coming child, but also for the radical ways God breaks into the world and overturns our human systems.

In this Advent season, let us break forth into song and prayer not only for the good gifts given to us by God, but also for the shocking ways in which God radically transforms the world.

### **Prayer**

Inbreaking God, who  
Overturns expectations,  
Makes the barren fertile,  
Raises up the poor from the dust,  
Guards the feet of the faithful—  
Intrude in our lives,  
Intervene in our hearts,  
Invert our expectations,  
All to lead us into your kingdom;  
Through your son, Jesus the Christ, for whom we anxiously wait, Amen.

**Luke 1:26-38**

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

**Dave Keys, staff**

God makes the impossible, possible. A young virgin woman, Mary, pledged to be married, is about to get a message from an unlikely source that she will literally bring the good news into the world. Mary questions Gabriel about God's message, indicating that she is struggling to make sense of what God has planned for her life. The angel's words, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." make no sense in this young woman's mind. Mary finally lets go and trusts God to make the impossible, possible. Then Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary's YES changed the world, not only because of the son she bore, but because of the example she sets for Christians everywhere. Saying YES when God's plan sounds crazy is, indeed, the foundation of faith. In this season of profound love, take time to say YES to God's plan for you.

**Prayer**

This Advent season, as the world continues to prepare for Jesus' birth, let all believers, like Mary, be open to God's invitation, be brave enough to question and struggle, and be faithful enough to say YES to all that is possible in God. Amen.

**Psalms 147:1-11**

1 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. 3 He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. 4 He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. 6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre. 8 He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. 9 He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. 10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; 11 but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

**Mary Buckley '00/'05**

The Psalmist in the text reminds us of how important it is for us to praise the Lord. Praise should be a continual act of sacrifice that we offer to the Lord daily. While we are praising God we are placing our entire focus on God. We forget for a moment about ourselves. This Psalm reminds me of how omniscient God is and how God's love for me is seen in nature I reminder how I felt when I saw snow for the first time.

***Prayer***

We thank you Lord for sharing your creative powers with us. We give thanks to God because you have included us in your master plan. We thank you God for receiving our songs of praise. We thank you God for allowing our hearts to burst and swell because you are our God. Amen.

**Ellen Dawson '09**

December 25, 2004, is a day I will never forget. I was serving as a PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer in the small town of Tiquisate, Guatemala. I had barely slept that not-so-silent-night, due to the roosters crowing, the constant fireworks, the laughter and singing.

I had been expecting a solemn Christmas Eve filled with candlelight, peaceful prayers, and hymns. But what I experienced at *La Iglesia Primitiva* was a rollicking birthday party for Jesus. And Christmas Day wasn't any less rowdy. It was truly a celebration of the birth of Christ! That Christmas, I came to see that praise was indeed fitting! As Psalm 147 reminds us, we are to praise our God. Praise the Lord who is so great and powerful, so loving and gracious, that he would send His Son for us. What fun it is to show our gratitude for the incarnation of our Lord and Savior!

***Prayer***

Loving God, I praise you and thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, the ultimate gift of love. This day, I will strive to give you praise in all I do and all I say. Amen.

## Day 19

### ***A reading from pages 74-75 of Ecstasy and Intimacy: When the Holy Spirit Meets the Human Spirit, by Edith Humphrey, faculty***

*In the light of what God has done in Christ, there is no need for us to go far afield to find ultimate reality. We need neither to ascend to the realms of heaven nor trek down to the abyss (Romans 10:5-7), nor need we search feverishly for methods, spiritual techniques, and unseen power. For this One who is the very active Word of God is near us; indeed he has visited us, has plunged into the matter of this world, rescued us from the darkest regions, and now dwells intimately with us through the Spirit. It is due to his questing, his agony, and his victory that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13). Faith, then, does not mean believing “in spite of the evidence.” Faith is not a human accomplishment or work. Human trust, or faith, simply responds to the faithful work of the God who creates out of nothing, and gives life to the dead. Our confidence in God responds to this story of all stories, and so can stand the test, during trial, and during times of suffering when the end cannot yet be seen; yet that faith is not “blind” nor “mindless,” but has a God-given grounding in history, in God’s actions for Israel and the world, as well as in a Person, in the character of the creating and resurrecting Lord of all.*

#### **Prayer**

Wonderful God, in you we find our confidence and hope. In this advent season we thank you that you have plunged into our world and you now dwell among us through the Spirit. Only through you do we find joy even in the midst of suffering, and faith in the dark night. Rejoice! Emmanuel! Alleluia! Amen.

### **2 Samuel 7:1-17**

*1 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” 3 Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.” 4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 Your house*

*and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever. 17 In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.*

### **Laura Blank '13**

Every Sunday growing up, I looked at a quilt that hung in the sanctuary of my 200-year-old home church. Depicting the congregation's history, it traced the story from a frontier congregation meeting in a tent, to a growing assembly worshipping in a log cabin, to a church housed in a succession of brick buildings. The story was one of growth and God's faithfulness. However, the Church in America today has much in common with those that gathered in tents in the woods. There is uncertainty and a wide open horizon, but God's promises remain. Because God was never really satisfied with just hanging around in stone buildings. God is always on the move. God will not sit still. And God continues to invite us to look beyond the houses of cedar or brick or stone where we worship, recognizing that we were and always will be sent as a pilgrim people.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, you are always on the move. Prevent us from being satisfied with sitting still. Embolden us with pilgrim hearts to follow you on this Advent journey. Amen.

### **Luke 1:39-56**

*39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

### **Alan Olson '14**

Advent is a time of watching and waiting. It is about patience and it is about the hope for something new. It is winter. The crops have all been harvested and there is no work to be done, all we can do is wait for a new season.

In this passage, we meet Mary and Elizabeth. Both are pregnant; both are filled with joy. Their pregnancies are visible signs of hope—everyone knows that something new is coming, but nobody knows exactly what that something will be. Mary and Elizabeth don't know what God is up to. Mary doesn't know that she is carrying the Word of God in her womb. She knows that God has been faithful and will continue to be faithful.

And God will continue to be faithful to us! No, church doesn't look like it used to look. There are fewer people in the pews. There aren't as many young people. But God is faithful and God isn't done with us. In this season of waiting, be patient and look for what God is doing in your church and in your life. Like Mary, we don't know what's coming next. Let us approach the new season with hope and joy!

**Prayer**

Eternal God, we know that you have always been faithful to us. We know that you will always be faithful to us. Your love is from everlasting to everlasting. You are the alpha and the omega. Help us to remember your faithfulness during this time of waiting. Help us to live into the hope and the joy of Mary and Elizabeth. Thanks be to God. Amen!

**Titus 2:11-3:8a**

*2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. 15 Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you. 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8a The saying is sure.*

**John Magnuson '13**

This passage is the perfect reminder during Advent of what we celebrate and where we are in life; between the first and second coming of Jesus. Along with Paul we rejoice that God has appeared in Jesus, bringing salvation to all (2:11). This is our celebration of the birth of Jesus, full of festive love and joy. We sing *Away in a Manger* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

And yet, Paul continues in saying that we also wait for manifestation of the glory of our God and savior Jesus Christ (2:13). In this verse we find the hope and peace of Advent. We wait in hope for the coming peace manifested in the reign of Jesus as Lord over all. In this waiting period we sing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* and *Joy to the World*.

And so may your Advent season this year be full of Love, Joy, Peace, and Hope; for Jesus has come and we await his coming again.

**Prayer**

Loving God, we give you thanks for sending your Son our Lord Jesus into this world, bringing with him love and joy. We thank you for the salvation which we have received through your grace. In busy times, may we not forget and not lose hope that Jesus is coming again to manifest the reign of his peace throughout the whole world. As we sing this Christmas season may we join our voices with countless others in hope of new life that is given through you. Amen.

## **Psalm 126**

*1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. 5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. 6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

### **Wayland Coe, D.Min. Eastern Christian Focus**

Think of a time when an enormous burden was lifted from you. Call to mind the feelings of relief, joy, and rest. Now think about the Israelites being delivered from bondage in Babylon. Having spent decades under the oppressive rule of Nebuchadnezzar, they were finally freed by the decree of King Cyrus.

Psalm 126, a song of ascent, describes that joy of the dream come true. Mouths filled with laughter and tongues with joy as they rejoiced in the great things God had done for them. With the incarnation of the second person of the blessed Trinity, Jesus, God has done even greater things for us. In and through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God has delivered us from bondage to sin and delivered us from the powers of death.

Like Israel, our mouths are filled with joy as we rejoice in the great works Jesus has done for us in his incarnation. The promise of God's long-awaited Messiah has come to pass, and we are the recipients of his great mercy and love. In his commentary on Psalm 126, St. Augustine wrote, "They have done ill with themselves, for they have sold themselves under sin [as we also have done]. The Redeemer came, and did good things for them." And also for us.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, you have done great things for us in sending your Son, our Lord, to redeem us from the bondage of sin and death. Fill our mouths with praises of joy and thanksgiving for the wonderful incarnation of your Son, and grant that we might tell abroad the wonderful works of God. These things we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## Day 20

### ***A reading from pages 19-20 of Journey through the Word: Exploring Biblical Themes, by Jim Davison '69 and Sara Covin Juengst***

*It is not easy to speak of hope in today's world. Our minds are filled with pictures of terrorism, starvation, violence, and the threat of nuclear war. Our lives so quickly become pits of depression and frustration and emptiness. When everything seems to be working against us and against the values in which we believe, it is easy to turn aside from the covenant demands, as the Israelites did, or to turn them into burdensome yokes of legalism in a desperate search for security. But we are a covenant people. And we have a covenant God. And God's promise to us is that in spite of our sin and disobedience and discouragement the covenant stands firm. Because of God's real love for us, written in blazing letters not on tablets of stone but in our hearts, we have hope (see Jer. 31:31-34). And because we have hope, we rejoice in the covenant promises as did the psalmist.*

#### ***Prayer***

Our prayer for today is the one referenced in this reading, found in Psalm 111: "The Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; He is ever mindful of his covenant. The works of his hands are faithful and just; All his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, To be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; He has commanded his covenant forever." This is the word of the Lord. Amen.

#### ***Luke 1:57-66***

*57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." 61 They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." 62 Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.*

#### ***Anna Parkinson '07***

While long desired, Elizabeth's pregnancy seems to have been a bit much for Zechariah to embrace. Fortunately, he had nine months to try to wrap his head around the miracle of a son being born in his old age. It seems that is how our lives unfold. We trust God to provide for us and that the Holy Spirit will help us discern God's will. Yet, it can be shocking to get a glimpse of what God is up to, and perhaps challenging to embrace the strange ways in which God provides.

Just as the nine months of pregnancy allow us to wrap our heads around the idea of a new baby, the four weeks of Advent give us time to, once again, prepare for the spectacular gift of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. What gifts might God be calling you to name and embrace in this season?

#### ***Prayer***



Generous and gracious God, help us in this season to embrace the incredible nature of your gifts. Restore in us the sense of shock and awe as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Draw our minds to the seemingly ridiculous ways you are at work in our lives, and help us to name them. Amen.

### **Galatians 3:1-14**

*1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. 5 Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6 Just as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” 7 so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. 10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” 12 But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

### **Edwin Chr. van Driel, faculty**

The Lectionary makes the interesting choice of leading us through some parts of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians these last days before Christmas. In Galatians, Paul battles some “teachers” who have come from Jerusalem and preach in Galatia “a different gospel” (1:6) than what Paul had been preaching. At stake is, in one sentence, “What time do you believe it is on God’s watch?” Both Paul and the teachers believe that at some point God is going to radically interrupt the life of this world and re-create it. For the teachers, this is still in the future. For Paul, this is now (6:15). In this passage he gives one of his arguments. When God were to re-create the world, both Paul and the teachers believed, God would send God’s Spirit—the mighty Spirit, which once hovered over the waters of the chaos and called creation out of nothing, would once again call new life out of chaos. Well, says Paul, when I preached the gospel, did you receive the Spirit or not? What do you believe that Christmas is? Another chapter in the life of the world, or the radical invasion of God, the beginning of the new creation?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, bless your name for not wanting to be relevant to my life but making my life relevant to yours. Amen.

### **Psalm 130**

*1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who*

*watch for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. 8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*

**James Kirk, D.Min. Parish Ministry Focus**

Most of us who read the Psalms recognize that these words written by David touch and connect to whatever emotions we experience daily or seasonally. It seems that every Advent season is a time of waiting and a time of hope, as these two themes surround us. I have always had more trouble with the waiting than with the hope!

As children, I think most of us had trouble waiting for things: the end of the school year, the summer vacation trip, birthday parties, or the end of this season, Christmas. As adults, I think most of us still have trouble waiting, even though we have improved that skill. The fact that we have lived in an instant-reward, fast-food, IM world for some time hasn't helped! In fact, this impatience has filtered into our faith lives so much that somehow, someday, we might realize we are missing God's purpose for the wait.

In Psalm 130, David reminds us of the wait, the hope, and why we should be patient. The truth is that we wait for the divine redemption from the only One who can provide it. What if that redemption is already beginning during the wait? I discovered this quote:

"The secret of patience is to do something else in the meantime." -Anonymous

"Meantime" during this Advent season, take your mind off the wait and do those other things that David refers to: the crying out to the Lord and the dwelling in His word.

***Prayer***

Lord God, waiting for you can be so difficult for us. We have waited and are waiting to be prepared to receive you in your Word. Help us to cry out to you, out of whatever depths we find ourselves, as we wait. Every day, even now, remind us of your hope in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Day 21

### **Matthew 1:1-17**

*1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. 12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. 17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*

### **Jason Freyer '16**

Admit it, you almost fell asleep reading this morning's Gospel lesson, didn't you? It is one of those sections of Scripture that at first glance seems boring beyond repair, a simple listing of names of folks who are long dead. But take a look again. This is no simple list. This is the record of the mishaps, shortcomings, false starts, and outsiders that make up the family tree of the Savior. We're reminded of the disappointing (Rehoboam) and the scandalous ("the wife of Uriah") and the just plain weird (Tamar) stories of Israel. But they are the stories of Christ's history all the same.

If you're like me, sometimes you want to run from the stories of your history. But as we creep ever closer to the celebration of God's incarnation in Christ, we are reminded that he brings all things under himself: the good, the bad, and the insanely weird.

#### **Prayer**

So Lord of Grace, help us today to recall our history. Help us remember that through it all you continue to be in us and allow us to live and move and have our being. And as we celebrate this Advent season, we look forward to your returning, to the fulfillment of your Kingdom. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

### **Galatians 3:15-22**

*15 Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, "And to offsprings," as of many; but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. 17 My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no*

*longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise. 19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*

### **C. Mark Scott, D.Min. Parish Ministry Focus**

The right word often escapes me! I can think of a similar word, but it is not the word I really want to say because it is not precise. I stir around in my mental files and I ask my wife. The exact word comes to my rescue!

We are having a fence installed around our backyard so we won't have to worry about Rio, our dog, wandering loose. We told the fence-installer that we had ordered "quikrete" online and asked him if we should do the same with the fencing. But he felt better about going to the store personally and picking it out so that if any mistake was made, it would be his.

Specificity is so important. With the Galatians Paul gets specific. A will says exactly what it means, he reminds them. The inheritance is to Abraham and to his "descendant" (not descendants). The Law was added "430 years" after the Promise of inheritance, so the Promise holds precedence over the Law.

Advent is a time, I think, to be specific about our faith: Who exactly is this One to Whom Mary gives birth? Why is He born in such a way? Why to these parents? Why was Jesus born when He was? This Advent season, make specificity your spiritual discipline.

#### **Prayer**

Lord of Advent, Your coming into the world changed everything! Help us to focus on what the Scriptures tell us about who You are. Help us to continue to learn about our salvation and grow in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ. To You be all Glory!

#### **Psalm 90**

*1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. 7 For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. 10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. 11 Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. 12 So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. 13 Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. 15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. 16 Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to*

*their children. 17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!*

**Erin Davenport '05**

Psalm 90 reminds us of the Lord's GREATNESS and our itchy, bitsy tininess. In this midst of the craziness of classes, holiday plans, Field Ed, and family it is easy to think that the world revolves around us. Psalm 90 reminds us yet again, that the Lord is our dwelling place. The Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, our days just pass away. With the Psalmist we say, "Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on thy servants!" And with mercy the Christ Child is born. The Lord, who is from everlasting to everlasting, has come to earth to be with us. With mercy the favor of the Lord is upon us. With mercy we are reminded that the world does not revolve around us. Thankfully, God is GREAT, and mercifully this God has favor upon us.

***Prayer***

Thank you, Lord for your greatness and your mercy. Thank you, Lord that you are from everlasting to everlasting. Help us, your finite creatures to serve you this day in a way that is pleasing. Amen.

## Day 22

### **Isaiah 60:1-6**

*1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.*

### **John Pickles, D.Min. Reformed Focus**

In these deepest nights of the year, it is marvellous to consider God's hallowing of darkness. God does not destroy darkness. Instead it becomes the canvas upon which God's illumination is made brilliant. The light of light, the Christ-child, arrives in darkness to bring enlightenment to the world. Yet God resides in darkness, and we see as in a mirror dimly. We cannot comprehend the light.

Only at the end of days will we truly see face to face, when the dawn of Christ returns in glory. No more hidden motives, fear, secrets, or grudges, all will be drawn into the light. We will be seen, as Oliver Cromwell once boldly asked to be painted, "warts and all!"

Darkness is God's gift to us. It hides our shame and covers our nakedness. But for God the night is a bright as day. God sees our totality, loves us, and by grace covers us so we may prepare to receive the light.

God comes to us in Jesus so as not to put us to shame like a faint candle in the night, which is easily snuffed out. But one day he will come in full radiance as the King of kings ushering an untameable blaze of joy.

### **Prayer**

O Light Eternal, to whose dawning humanity lifts its darkened face, shine on us gathered who wait for you. Pierce the shadows that hide us from you and illumine our gloom of unbelief. May everyone who watches with us see the Son of Righteousness arise, with healing in his wings.

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

*18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, "which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord*

*commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

### **Ryan Pixton '10**

Advent is a time of preparation and reflection for the coming birth of our Savior. Many times, however, it seems like Advent is a stress filled and exceptionally busy time of the year. Everywhere you look, people are running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Many activities during Advent can become attempts to earn favor from others and God. These words from the Gospel of Matthew are truly good news to us. They remind us that Love comes down at Christmas. Our Savior is Emmanuel - God with us. Today we are reminded that we can sit at Jesus' feet and don't need to run around tirelessly trying to earn God's love. Like hearing that an angel appeared to your virgin wife who is now pregnant, Emmanuel gently reminds us that we can face any amount of craziness because God is with us now and to the end of the age.

#### **Prayer**

Dear God, Give me eyes to see where Jesus is working in my life and give me peace this Advent reassuring me that the Holy Spirit will always be with me no matter what. In Christ's Name, Amen.

### **John 1:1-14**

*1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

### **Charissa Howe '14**

Today will be a full day for many of us. Between the rush of Christmas Eve services last night and the flurry of wrapping paper and dirty dishes this morning, it can be quite easy to lose our spiritual mooring on such a physically busy day. But it is also not entirely appropriate to forgo the flurry of physical activity and life for the sake of pious reflection. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Today is a remembrance of the day that God crashed down into history as a human person right here on this planet in order to be with us. God did not separate the spiritual from the physical when joining us here on Earth. Today as you enjoy good meals and embrace your family, let those things be a reminder of the very earthly, physical presence of the Word in our midst—Jesus Christ the one we celebrate on this holiest of days.

#### **Prayer**

Almighty God, to you we give all the glory. Help us to see your Word today in all that surrounds us. Let the celebrations today be not a distraction but a reminder of the tangible way you have entered our lives. Amen.

### **Psalm 24**

*1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; 2 for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. 3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. 5 They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. 6 Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. 7 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.*

### **Sally Henry '12**

Ever since my friend and fellow Seminary student Shea Cole '12 wrote a song to this Psalm, it has consistently brought me to a place of worship every time I listen to the song or read the Psalm. Its words lead me to recognize again and again God's kingship in all aspects of life. He brings order in chaos. He brings provision in need. He brings power in weakness. He is my king. And amazingly enough, despite my continued lack of total righteous living, he still pursues me, comes to me, and bids me to let him in, even more, to every recess of my life . . . .

Lift up your heads, O you gates! Look! The King of glory wants to abide in you, LIVE in you! Be reminded this Advent season that we have a King in Jesus Christ. May all we do be worship to our King!

### **Prayer**

O Lord you are our King. Even in this world where the idea of kingship is foreign, we can claim you as King – because you are not of this world. You pursue us, you love us, and yet we don't always welcome you into every corner of our lives. Forgive us, O God. Help us to "lift up our heads." Help us to open our eyes and our hearts and to welcome you, our King of glory, to enter in – in all your fullness and glory – and take up permanent residence. Help us to use this season of Advent as an opportunity to welcome and worship you even more fully in our lives. We give you all thanks and praise, in Jesus' name. Amen.



## Day 23 – Merry Christmas from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

### **Luke 2:1-20**

*1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

### **Jane Esterline, PCUSA Teaching Elder**

The Child is born, angels proclaim to shepherds and kings as alike in creation as they are opposite in society. New Light in our lives is rarely overpowering. God's Light is often revealed slowly and recognized in hindsight. Imagine the Light as an abiding presence that walks beside us as Jesus, the stranger, accompanied the two on the road to Emmaus. Didn't their hearts burn within them after Jesus, the stranger, left? Sir Edward Burnes-Jones' painting "The King and the Shepherd" hangs in the Carnegie Museum of Art; go see it. The angels take the hands of the shepherd and the king, leading them, not shouting at them. The king and shepherd walk to the Light of Christ without even recognizing the divine leading. Didn't their hearts burn within them? On this Eve of Christ's coming may your hearts burn within you, knowing Christ has provided the means of Light and Grace.

### **Prayer**

Light of the World, lead and guide in my life as you so led the shepherds and kings. Remain with us all, Lord Jesus, that we may celebrate your Light with all whom we meet. Amen.

### **Psalms 2**

*1 Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed, saying, 3 "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's*

vessel.” 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling 12 kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him.

### **Scott Hagley, faculty**

Psalm 2 moves from asking “Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain?” to presenting nations and kings foolishly conspiring against God and God’s purposes for creation. Scholars call the Psalm a “divine enthronement Psalm” because it celebrates the placement of God’s anointed king in Zion in the midst of global turmoil. When Joseph and his pregnant fiancé left for Bethlehem, this psalm must have been far from their minds. The nations did rage, and Roman occupiers made their sovereignty crystal clear. Augustus counts—and thus controls—his colonized subjects. But in the midst of soldiers and census takers, imperial decrees and forced migrations, and among farm animals a child is born who will be called “Beloved Son” by the Father and “Lord” by future generations. The One the Lord enthroned does not colonize or manage subjects, but rather comes near, invites, and calls; God comes near in a child, invites us to the table, and calls us by and for love. Augustus did not endure, nor Rome. But we know who does.

### **Prayer**

Move us, Lord, by the subversive power of this story. Remind us not only *that* You rule, but also *how* You rule creation. Impress us with the awareness that, though the nations do rage and the kings of the earth do take their stand, they cannot do so with the finality that only You may claim.

### **Psalm 96**

*1 O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. 3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. 5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. 6 Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. 9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. 10 Say among the nations, “The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” 11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; 12 let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy 13 before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.*

### **Graham McWilliams, D.Min. Reformed Focus**

Having come to this glorious day of Christmas, I’m sure that many of us have, through the time of Advent, sung our hearts out in praise celebrating the promise of God in Jesus, our Lord. And it is right that we have done so, for, as the psalmist affirms, God has accomplished “marvellous works among all the people” and our response must be to share this good news with those in whom we come into contact. We need to remember, however, that God’s actions are worldwide as God brings forward His great plan for all creation, because most of what God is achieving we don’t hear about.

Bad news sells newspapers, Good News doesn’t. So let us not be dismayed by the reports of terror, violence, and crime—the rise in what we may consider ungodliness. These incidents are the local signs

of our troubled times and the opportunities that lie at the heart of Christ's mission for us, today. Only when we are confident in proclaiming that "The Lord is King" will those who are caught up in these acts of aggression come to realize that there is more to life than personal gain—and turn to God for life's fulfillment.

Celebrating the birth of Christ gives humanity a new beginning, a renewed hope for the future. Today we may faithfully encounter many challenges, but at His return the bounties of our faith will overflow and the glory of the Lord will uplift us beyond our understanding. Rejoice. Amen.

**Prayer**

Faithful God, fulfiller of promises, open our eyes to Your goodness and lift our hearts beyond the immediate that we may experience a taste of Your eternal Kingdom. May our voices continue to sing of Your greatness and our lives reflect Your love of us today and in the year to come. Amen.

**Psalm 98**

*1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory. 2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. 3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. 4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. 5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. 6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD. 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. 8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy 9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.*

**Jen Haddox '06**

As we gather for worship on this Christmas morning, many will sing, "Joy to the World!" This wonderful hymn based on Psalm 98 celebrates the joyful coming of Jesus into the world as King. There is no greater joy than the reality of Immanuel, God with us. The wonderful thing about the joy of Jesus' coming is that it is a gift to us and to the whole world. The Incarnation is the joy of God's love made manifest. If you are feeling blue this day, or struggling with heartache and loss, may you open your heart to receive the gift of joy. Prepare your heart, make room for the joy of Jesus. Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room, And heaven and nature sing, And heaven and nature sing, And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

**Prayer**

We give joyful thanks this day for the coming of Jesus into our world and into our lives. Thank you, O LORD, for the gift of your love given as a babe in a manger. As we celebrate this day, prepare our hearts to receive you once again. Help us to make room in our lives for your presence in all the days to come. Amen.