

The PTS Big Book of Advent Devotionals – Year 1

This compendium of devotionals follows the Daily Lectionary readings for Advent Year 1. In this resource, you will find one or more devotionals and accompanying prayers on each of the passages listed, *except for those passages highlighted in red.*

The devotionals in this compendium are grouped into sections, which appear in the following order:

Morning and Evening Readings: Psalms
First Readings: Old Testament Law and Prophets
Second Readings: New Testament Epistles
Gospel Readings

Click on the link to a given passage to navigate quickly to the text, followed by the related devotional(s) and prayer(s).

Day 1 – December 1

- Morning Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 1:1-9](#)
- Second Reading [2 Peter 3:1-10](#)
- Gospel Reading [Matthew 25:1-13](#)
- Evening Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 2 – December 2

- Morning Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 1:10-20](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 20:1-8](#)
- Evening Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 3 – December 3

- Morning Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 1:21-31](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 2:1-12](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 20:9-18](#)
- Evening Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Day 4 – December 4

- Morning Psalms [50](#); [147:1-11](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 2:1-4](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 2:13-20](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 20:19-26](#)
- Evening Psalms [53](#); [17](#)

Day 5 – December 5

- Morning Psalms [18:1-20](#); [147:12-20](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 2:5-22](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 3:1-13](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 20:27-40](#)
- Evening Psalms [126](#); [62](#)

Day 6 – December 6

- Morning Psalms [102](#); [148](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 3:1-4:1](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 4:1-12](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 20:41-21:4](#)
- Evening Psalms [130](#); [16](#)

Day 7 – December 7

- Morning Psalms [90](#); [149](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 4:2-6](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 21:5-19](#)
- Evening Psalms [80](#); [72](#)

Day 8 – December 8

- Morning Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 5:1-7](#)
- Second Reading [2 Peter 3:11-18](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 7:28-35](#)
- Evening Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 9 – December 5

- Morning Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 5:8-17](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 21:20-28](#)
- Evening Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 10 – December 10

- Morning Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 5:18-25](#)
- Second Reading [1 Thessalonians 5:12-28](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 21:29-38](#)
- Evening Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Day 11 – December 11

- Morning Psalms [50](#); [147:1-11](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 6:1-13](#)
- Second Reading [2 Thessalonians 1:1-12](#)
- Gospel Reading [John 7:53-8:11](#)
- Evening Psalms [53](#); [17](#)

Day 12 – December 12

- Morning Psalms [18:1-20](#); [147:12-20](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 7:1-9](#)
- Second Reading [2 Thessalonians 2:1-12](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 22:1-13](#)
- Evening Psalms [126](#); [62](#)

Day 13 – December 13

- Morning Psalms [102](#); [148](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 7:10-25](#)
- Second Reading [2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 22:14-30](#)
- Evening Psalms [130](#); [16](#)

Day 14 – December 14

- Morning Psalms [90](#); [149](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 8:1-15](#)
- Second Reading [2 Thessalonians 3:6-18](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 22:31-38](#)
- Evening Psalms [80](#); [72](#)

Day 15 – December 15

- Morning Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 13:1-13](#)
- Second Reading [Hebrews 12:18-29](#)
- Gospel Reading [John 3:22-30](#)
- Evening Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 16 – December 16

- Morning Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 8:16-9:1](#)
- Second Reading [2 Peter 1:1-11](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 22:39-53](#)
- Evening Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 17 – December 17

- Morning Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 9:2-7](#)
- Second Reading [2 Peter 1:12-21](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 22:54-69](#)
- Evening Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Day 18 – December 18

- Morning Psalms [50](#); [147:1-11](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 11:1-9](#)
- Second Reading [Ephesians 6:10-20](#)
- Gospel Reading [John 3:16-21](#)
- Evening Psalms [53](#); [17](#)

Day 19 – December 19

- Morning Psalms [18:1-20](#); [147:12-20](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 11:10-16](#)
- Second Reading [Revelation 20:1-10](#)
- Gospel Reading [John 5:30-47](#)
- Evening Psalms [126](#); [62](#)

Day 20 – December 20

- Morning Psalms [102](#); [148](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 28:9-22](#)
- Second Reading [Revelation 20:11-21:8](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 1:5-25](#)
- Evening Psalms [130](#); [16](#)

Day 21 – December 21

- Morning Psalms [90](#); [149](#)
- First Reading [Isaiah 29:9-24](#)
- Second Reading [Revelation 21:9-21](#)
- Gospel Reading [Luke 1:26-38](#)
- Evening Psalms [80](#); [72](#)

Day 22 – December 22

- **Morning** Psalms [24](#); [150](#)
- **First Reading** [Isaiah 31:1-9](#)
- **Second Reading** [Revelation 21:22-22:5](#)
- **Gospel Reading** [Luke 1:39-48a \(48b-56\)](#)
- **Evening** Psalms [25](#); [110](#)

Day 23 – December 23

- **Morning** Psalms [122](#); [145](#)
- **First Reading** [Isaiah 33:17-22](#)
- **Second Reading** [Revelation 22:6-11, 18-20](#)
- **Gospel Reading** [Luke 1:57-68](#)
- **Evening** Psalms [40](#); [67](#)

Day 24 – December 24

- **Morning** Psalms [33](#); [146](#)
- **First Reading** [Isaiah 35:1-10](#)
- **Second Reading** [Revelation 22:12-17, 21](#)
- **Gospel Reading** [Luke 1:67-80](#)
- **Christmas Eve Psalm** **Psalms 132**
- **Christmas Eve Psalm** **Psalms 114**
- **Christmas Eve Reading** **Isaiah 59:15b-21**
- **Christmas Eve Reading** [Phil. 2:5-11](#)
- **Evening** Psalms [85](#); [94](#)

Christmas Day – December 25

- **Morning** Psalms [2](#); [147:1-11](#)
- **First Reading** [Zechariah 2:10-13](#)
- **Second Reading** [1 John 4:7-16](#)
- **Gospel Reading** [John 3:31-36](#)
- **Evening** Psalms [98](#); [96](#)

Morning and Evening Readings: Psalms

Psalm 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.

Jermaine McKinley '98/'00/'05

I wonder how many awake expecting the unexpected. No, not a gift you would not like, but the second coming of Jesus Christ. Commercialization of Christmas suggest "the reason for the season" is to stimulate the economy; using the power of money to show we care for others; family, friends, and those in need. Various legal challenges to Christmas—to ensure inclusion, avoidance of religious alienation, and separation of "church and state"—offer us the political correctness of "happy holiday." The love of God reflected in the first coming of Jesus Christ is sometimes juxtaposed with adoption of a cynical practice of airing grievances against another as suggested by the Seinfeld episode that introduced "happy festivity, a holiday for the rest of us." Yet, at Christmas we should remember the birth of Christ and consider our personal preparation, living expecting the promised unexpected glorious return of the one in whom we should be placing our hope.

For two millennia many have looked at prophecies, the heavens, and the world for signs of the return of Jesus Christ. Advent prayers and songs like *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* speak of the one truly able to instill hope, offer relief, and bring change in the midst of a human experience replete with suffering,

turmoil, unrest, and chaos. There seems to be a global desire for one who has universal and ultimate power to lead the way toward reconciliation, bringing peace in the midst of warring nations and communities experiencing intentional or random acts of violence. I believe no “ordinary” national or world leader can bring about the kind of everlasting change, relief, or fulfillment of hope we truly need. What we need can only originate with God. Thanks be to God for our Creator’s plan. The salvation of humanity, redemption and reconciliation, are embraced in the one who has known the truth of God through divine intimacy in and since the beginning. We are saved by the shed blood of the one crucified for no sins of His own. Christian tradition identifies this as Jesus Christ, conceived under the power of the Holy Spirit to a virgin named Mary.

Jesus of Nazareth is the one who provided fulfillment of the expected Messiah of the Old Testament. He brought joy to an Almighty God who loved humanity so much He gave us His only begotten Son. Through Christ, we are called to the common ground of faith in God, a demonstrated love of God and love of neighbor. We are to love God for all of the qualities associated with being the all-powerful, all-knowing Creator for Divinity’s own sake. We are to love neighbor for the sake of God as an act of discipleship, reflecting an unselfish agape love that leads toward peace and justice. God has blessed us once through the gift of Jesus. This Christmas, I pray we each prepare ourselves for the Second Coming of Christ, loving God and neighbor. If we do less, we should expect the unexpected.

Prayer

Lord, help me recognize the meaning of Christmas. Open my eyes, ears, and mind that I might perceive the magnitude of the gift You gave the world by sending Your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Help me to respond to detractors seeking to diminish this holy season. Continuously show me the best way to express and share Your love within my community and in the world. Hear my prayer in the name of Jesus.

Lord, I thank You for sending Your Only Son. Help me live expecting the unexpected. Lead and guide me to be prepared for His glorious return. Show me the best way to reflect Your Divine love to my neighbors, especially those who do not know You and the gift of everlasting salvation available through Christ. I pray You will make me an instrument of Your peace and Your justice in the name of Jesus. 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.

Tucker Ferda, faculty

There are several terms in this Psalm that also fill advertisements this time of year: “Delight,” “gladness,” “rejoicing,” “joy,” “pleasures.” These ads call us to adopt these attitudes in the same way we would purchase products and thus are ultimately about our own gratification and enjoyment of the

holiday season. The psalmist offers a different picture, and one with deepened significance in the light of the incarnation of Jesus Christ: “Delight,” “gladness,” “rejoicing,” “joy,” “pleasures” are due to God’s character and God’s nearness to us. We affirm, with the psalmist, that our hearts are “glad” and our souls “rejoice” because God is “always before” us and has come near to us in Christ. We are “secure” because of that gift, and “shall not be moved.”

Prayer

Gracious God, enable us to sing “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” Be our delight, portion, and cup this day, as we wait for what only you can provide and have in fact provided. Let us sing this psalm with lives that delight to take refuge in you. Amen.

Betty Voigt ’85

The writer of Psalm 16 reminds us of God’s desire and longing for creation: *a path of life that leads to fullness of joy*. Let us choose this desire for ourselves and our world.

Turn off your electronic devices for a while. Fast from the continual doomsday, fear-mongering news. This is Advent. Seek the Holy. Hold a baby or the hand of a dying one. Spend time giving thanks for everything! Turn on some beautiful music and let it fill your soul. Offer a small gesture of kindness and support to a stranger. Open your heart to receive the ordinary goodness around you. Be silent. Go within. Touch into the deeper truths that we call God, right here and now. Breathe in this incredible Mystery in us, with us, and all around us.

Prayer

O Beloved One, “my chosen portion and my cup,” I often wander away from the true path of life you hold before me. My thoughts, heart, and actions get captured by inane distractions and fear. I run away from your presence. Keep wooing me back to yourself, and hold me in your heart of Love.

Rebecca Kahnt ’19

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.

Ellen Little, retired staff

If you've ever played peek-a-boo with a baby or small child, you know that babies cover their heads with a blanket or their hands and seem to think they are invisible...safe. As we mature, however, the world becomes more complex, filled with problems and struggles and simply hiding our faces doesn't help.

Thankfully, God doesn't change. This Psalm reminds us that He is our refuge. He provides our portion and our security. If we watch for Him, He will instruct us and show us the path and He will not abandon us. So hold on tightly to Him and to that assurance!

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, that You don't change; that You are with us and guiding us and will not abandon us. And thank you most of all for the gift of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Mark Russell, staff

On any given day, I could easily find dozens of things to worry about, and often do, whether it is falling behind at work, or the weird noise my car is making, or the increasing amount of money I need to spend to buy groceries. Sometimes the worrying itself creates more issues, and I "multiply my sorrows," as the psalmist would say.

However, these anxieties are usually quieted, if not eliminated, by the mantra, "Everything is going to be okay." Sometimes I have to say it to myself, and sometimes I need to hear it from someone else. God is present in that comforting reassurance, and in Psalm 16 we are enthusiastically assured that if we put our trust in God, everything will, in fact, turn out okay.

Better than okay, actually, as the phrases "fullness of joy," and "pleasures forevermore" would indicate. While we may not ever occupy the magnificent metaphorical real estate where the psalmist resides, we can still aspire to a life in which we encounter the good more than the bad, and we can experience glad hearts, rejoicing souls, and secure bodies. In the light of Advent, these hopes seem all the more possible.

Prayer

God of life, keeper of our trust, we give thanks for your protection and comfort. With you as our hope and refuge, the challenges of our lives are more manageable, and the joys of your creation are more attainable. 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.

William Boyd Grove '78 (deceased)

Do you ever cry out to God to protect you, to save you? Are you crying now? There are many powers that threaten us, both without and within. I write this on Veteran's Day. How many young men and women, far from home at Christmas time, living in the midst of battle, afraid for their lives cry out in anguish", "Hear a just cause O Lord, attend to my cry?" How many children facing bullying in school, terrified to leave home in the morning, cry out in the deepest places in their hearts "...hide me in the shelter of your wings." How many victims of family abuse hide in the closet in terror crying out, "hear a just cause of Lord, and attend to my cry." How many persons fighting addictions of all kinds, desperate for release from their bondage, whisper in the darkness of the night "guard me as the apple of your eye. Hide me in the shelter of your wings."

Jesus, in the prayer he gave to us, taught us to pray for our safety, our spiritual and moral safety. "Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. So, as the great Festival of Christmas draws near, we pray for safety and deliverance for all who are in any danger, physical moral, and spiritual.

Prayer

Let us pray: Loving God, during these Advent Days, as we anticipate the coming of the Star Child, we pray for safety for ourselves and for those whom we love and for all your children everywhere. Keep us, we pray, as the apple of your eye, safe in the shadow of your wings. In Christ, Amen.

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.

Emily Cooper '19 and Mikayla Kovacik Doepker '19

During Advent we wait for the light of Jesus to enter the world. It is a time where we remember who we were before Christ came. It is a time where we hustle around, picking up perfect packages and rushing off to the post office so that we don't have to pay extra postage. It is a time when we laugh with others and smile at strangers.

We also feel the weight of the year pulling our shoulders a bit lower as the burdens bulk to a boulder. We remember we ought to be rejoicing, but instead we are weary. It's been a long few years. Advent reminds us of the relationships that have been wounded, severed, perhaps beyond repair.

Reading Psalm 17 might not ease any of those tensions. After all, the psalmist starts by describing how they have done everything right. They have no wickedness in them. I have wickedness in me, more than I'm ready to admit. Their mouth does not transgress. My mouth can be quite sassy. The psalmist is confident in God's protection and care. What about us, the imperfect sassy folks? Well, even the imperfect sassy folks are offered salvation. Even in seasons of heaviness we are met by the Divine. As verse 6 reminds us, when we call on God we are answered.

Prayer

Ever present God, guide us so we behold your face in righteousness. Satisfy us each day. Remind us that you are the source of true joy this and every season. 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.

Kay Day '97

The paradox of the incarnation never ceases to amaze me. The image we carry at this time of year of “God with us” is of the babe in the manger—tiny, helpless, completely dependent, as any infant is. The image of Jesus as our redeemer is of him meekly hanging on a cross in our place. These are valid images of God with us.

Yet from Psalm 18 we get a totally different image of God. The psalmist labels him a rock and fortress, a deliverer and refuge, a shield and stronghold. When he pictures God as coming to his defense he says, “Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked.” The psalmist continues to describe how God saved him from his distress and delivered him from his enemies. He affirms the reason for his redemption by saying, “[H]e delivered me, because he delighted in me.” God saved him because he loved him. That is the very reason he came to us at Christmas as a baby and died on the cross for our sins.

We know the proclamation in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world . . .” It resolves any paradox we might see. All that God has done and is doing is because God loves us. God is great enough, powerful enough, resourceful enough to come to us in whatever way is needed to reach us and redeem us, because the God of the universe, the one of power and might, loves us.

Prayer

All powerful God, we are humbled by the ways you use to express your love for us. Help us to see them with fresh eyes this Advent season. Come to us as you know we need you to. Amen.

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.

Paul Fanous '20

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 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.

LindaJo McKim '77

In Handel's Messiah "Lift up your Heads, O ye gates" is based on Psalm 24. The chorus is reminiscent of an ancient antiphon where a question is posed by a voice standing outside the temple door and answered by a voice inside. Voices command the temple gates to open so the King of Glory may come in. Those inside ask, "Who is this King of glory?" The response by the outsiders is "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

The ancients believed God was in a constant battle against forces that would throw the creation into utter chaos. They believed God had heavenly armies aiding favored nations during war. We may not be comfortable picturing God as head of an army. But today God is at war with physical and spiritual enemies that rob life of all it was meant to be. This advent season we prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus Christ the King of Glory to enter.

Prayer

Creator God, Renew my spirit as I open the gates of my heart to receive the coming Christ.
Amen.

Jason Freyer '16/'21

There's nothing like a little self-esteem to start your morning, is there? When you read something like Psalm 24, particularly verses 3 and 4, you realize that you're in deep. A pure heart? Hardly. Do I from time to time place more trust in my cash than in my God, thus making the Almighty Dollar an idol? You bet. As a red-blooded American boy, I can't even go two minutes with hands devoid of mud or dirt. If you read Psalm 24 in the wrong light, you can get awfully depressed before you've even finished your bowl of Raisin Bran.

Then again, we could look at it another way. We could be reminded of the one who was worthy to ascend the mountain of the Lord, the one who is to come. We could be reminded that Jesus Christ came to us, even in the form of an infant in Bethlehem to do what we could not. He came to be what we are not. In our faith, we celebrate that God comes to us, not the other way around.

Prayer

Gracious Lord our God, thank you for doing what we could not, for the promise we look forward to in Christ Jesus. Thank you for coming to us, for being what we could not be, for doing what we could not do. Help us to remember this day to let our view of ourselves be grounded in your love for us. Amen.

Myles MacDonald '55

Psalms 22, 23, and 24 form a trilogy, all attributed to King David. In all probability, these three psalms were among the scripture passages interpreted by Jesus to those two disciples on the Emmaus Road on the first Easter evening. How we wish we could have been present with Cleopas, & that other disciple, to hear such an authoritative and informative exposition of scripture.

The phrase “the King of Glory” is mentioned no less than five times in the last four verses of Psalm 24. And it is significant that Matthew’s gospel, at the outset, asks, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2) The answer to that question is found near the end of Matthew’s gospel with a sign above the cross, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.” (Matt. 27:37)

With David, we ask, “Who is the King of Glory ?” And we respond, “The Babe of Bethlehem, He is the King of Glory.” We ask again, “Who is the King of Glory ?” , and answer, “The Christ of Calvary, He is the King of Glory.” We ask once more, “Who is this King of Glory ?, and affirm, “The Risen and Living Lord, He is the King of Glory.”

In this Advent season, along with the angels from the realms of glory, we worship and adore the newborn King, the King of Glory.

Prayer

We thank you, Lord, that Jesus is the King of Glory. He alone has made our hands clean and our hearts pure, so that we may worship in spirit and in truth. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13/'24

Psalm 24 declares the sovereignty of God—Creator God, to whom all the world belongs, including humanity and God, the King of Glory, to whom all honor, majesty and worship belong. We can almost hear this song of praise and adoration being sung as worshipers entered into temple to worship Yahweh. We are told that only those who are “guiltless vessels” with clear, sincere, and pure souls, hearts, and minds—those who have not, nor will not, be carried away or influenced by evil or falsehoods—shall receive blessing and vindication from the God of salvation. It is almost paradoxical that only by the grace of God, through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, are we thus prepared to receive God’s gifts. In this season, may we look ever to the “hill of the LORD,” from whence comes our help, our salvation, our redemptive holiness, and worship the only sovereign God, who is the King of Glory.

Prayer

Majestic and sovereign God, you alone are worthy of praise and honor. Lord, we confess that there are times when we enter into your presence distracted by the cares of life and do not give you the honor and presence of mind you are worthy of. As we contemplate the coming Christ child, direct our thoughts and create in us clean hands and pure hearts, that we might be found worthy of your love and the sacrifice of Jesus, for you are the King of glory, majesty and honor. Amen.

Erin Davenport '05

"Comfort one another with these words" (1 Thes 4:18)? Apocalyptic passages like these seem anything but comforting. Indeed, end-time visions are often used like bogeymen, to frighten people into the kingdom: "These are the last days! The Rapture could happen at any moment! Are *you* ready?"

The apocalyptic perspective on the future is not optimistic, but hard-headedly realistic, grounded in the experience of human cruelty (see Luke 21:5-19). Yet, ultimately, the future is not in the hands of emperors, or generals, or oligarchs. The future is God's, and God will bring in God's reign. Therefore Paul is certain that the "dead in Christ" will not be forgotten. They, together with those "who are alive," will be caught up in a joyful throng, meeting Christ in the air to welcome him as he returns to reign. This Advent, may we like Paul claim this promise, and "comfort one another with these words."

Prayer

O Lord of past, present, and future, in your love no one is forgotten, and nothing beautiful is lost. May we then confidently entrust into your hands our own lives, and the lives of those whom we love. Grant us the assurance that those who have gone before us, and our children and grandchildren after us, are alike held securely in your love. Challenge us to live in the present with the confident assurance that your kingdom is coming—and is, indeed, already in our midst. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Jennifer Stroud '04/'18

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.

Deborah Smith '18

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.

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!

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.

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.

Ginny Mazarella '90

At this time of year, merriment and joy swirl all around us. Busyness is the order of the day. But in anticipation of the One who is to come, this season can be a time of quiet contemplation as well.

Advent can be a time to remember the ways of the Lord. It can be a time to strive to follow the One whose paths are steadfast love and faithfulness. Most importantly, it can be a time to connect with the One who loves us enough to send a Savior into our midst.

When we remember God's paths and seek them out, we quiet the hustle and bustle around us and truly center our hearts on the most important thing: the coming of the Christ Child.

Prayer

Loving God, in this season the world seems to move at a frantic pace. Help us in the midst of all the busyness around us to focus on you. May we train our hearts and minds to hear your voice above all else, so that we will be truly ready to welcome our Savior.

Tim Dooner, DMin student

In the 25th 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.

Kimberly Gonxhe '07

Put one foot in front of the other. Follow God's voice. Trust God's voice. Although fear may creep up as self-doubt, naysayers and circumstances show themselves, remember the last thing God told you, and do that.

This life is full of doubters, dream stealers, people who mean you harm, but God is immensely greater than the culmination of them all. No matter where you are and whatever the circumstance, the Lord is there with you. You can soar in a prison cell. You can have peace while possessing no possessions. You can thrive in spite of tremendous opposition.

As we surrender our lives to Christ, Christ leads us out of dire places which seem to have no exit door. As we yield and let go, rough places become smooth and crooked places are made straight. As we obey God's instruction, people who mean us harm will be silenced and dealt with. As we do those things which are possible, God then does the impossible. So wait on the Lord. The excellency is of God and not of you. You'll make it to the other side successfully; just keep your hand in God's hand and put one foot in front of the other.

Prayer

Lord, I know there are people who mean me no good and situations that seem so insurmountable, but I put my trust in you. Help me to walk in righteousness and not succumb to the temptations of doubt or fear. I put my hope in you and rest knowing that you always take good care of me and will continue to do so. Amen.

Antonio Lawrence, DMin student

I appreciate when the season of Advent comes around each year. It is that time where we anticipate the coming of Christ into a world desperately needing a savior. Advent is a time where we need the reminder that we have a God that is with us, even in the mess that we have created. Advent is a time when communities of faith can reflect and remember. We take the opportunity to reflect on where God has brought us from. We also embrace the opportunity to remember the God who has been consistent in the journey. As we sit with Psalm 25 today it is a necessary reminder to continue to keep our trust in God. We approach this passage of scripture not knowing exactly when this psalm has been crafted, yet we know there is trouble present. Over the last few years, we do not know when the trouble would come, or where the trouble would come from in our lives. It was just an understanding that trouble would always be present. This passage of scripture reminds us that even with trouble being present, we can trust that our God is present with us. Psalm 25 shows us the power of repetition in the life of a believer. The ability to repeat the certain words or phrases is what continues to ground our faith no matter the season we are in. Psalm 25 gives us an image of hope to mature us spiritually along the journey of life. It reminds us that no matter how difficult the situation is before us there is someone who will have our back during it all. Is that not good news for the believer today? My hope today is that no matter what we face as life happens, we develop the ability to trust God no matter the transitions around us.

Prayer

God of grace and mercy, we thank you for the ability to guide us through life. Help us to learn how to trust you on a deeper level. Help us to reimagine a future that helps us model what faith, hope, and love looks like in public. In Jesus' name. 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.

Jeffrey Conn '00

Psalm 33 celebrates the power of God as our creator and redeemer: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle" (vv. 6-7a). Since God created these vast arrays of matter and energy, surely he can help us with our problems.

"The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing" (v. 10a), yet "the counsel of the LORD stands forever" (v. 11a). There is no end of disagreement about how to handle the affairs of state. How can we align ourselves with God's counsel? "Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD" (v. 12a).

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7). When we do this, "our heart is glad in him because we trust in his holy name" (Ps. 33:21).

Prayer

Thank you, God, that your power to save is not limited by our weakness. Your love for us is not limited by our sinfulness. May we find your presence as close as our breath and the ground beneath our feet. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

W. Terry Schoener '63

I saw the green flash! No, silly, not a superhero. It is a rare natural occurrence when the light of the setting sun is bent through the atmosphere in such a way that for an instant only the green of the spectrum reaches your eye. Google it. Jules Verne mentions it saying that "if one were to peer into the light of the green flash they would gain the power to read the very souls of other people they meet."

A life-long sailor, I have met mariners who tell me of seeing the green flash. I have waited a lifetime to see it—have sat at anchor half a thousand sunsets watching for it—to no avail. Then last February, while in Barbados with sailing friends, we gathered to view the Caribbean sunset. Someone said, "Maybe we will see the green flash," and by God we did! Eyes wide, mouths grinning, we received what couldn't be demanded.

As a pastor for 50 years I have experienced the waiting, "my soul waiting for the Lord," waiting for infrequent flashes of God-sightings. Faith is mostly Advent and just enough epiphanies to hold it together. Congregants gather regularly hoping for Epiphany-dazzle, but each day the sun sets and no flash, only Advent-wait. Yet, while making nice at the church door, it's not unusual for someone to say, "Pastor, I had the most amazing thing happen!" Never pooh-pooh these stories. I find they awaken thoughts of my own infrequent holy flashes of God sighting, and my eyes widen and my heart grins afresh. In the afterglow of the God-flash everything is seen with renewed lucidness. It was worth the wait. The waiting gave the flash value. See, "My soul waits" is a gift too, reminding that the flash is something that can't be demanded, but is gifted.

"Our soul waits for the Lord, He is our help and shield."

Prayer

Holy One, I wait—now with less impatience than before. With hands in my lap, open with palms turned upward, as if expecting to receive. Advent yourself to me in your own good time. I trust your timing; I trust your being; I trust your purposes; I trust your gifts of waiting and watching. So, I wait for you to cause your bright morning star to rise over us once more. Amen and amen.

Michelle Keane Domeisen '12/'16

Yes, our lives are busy, and during this holiday season they seem to reel even more out of control. God's power and dominion loom so much larger in our lives than any chore we have to do at Christmas. During this season of anticipation, we take time to stand in awe of God as we wait in joyful hope for the Incarnation. God's about to do a new thing this season, and we must stand in attention.

The psalmist points to God's omnipotence while also saying that His word is perfect. He speaks and it happens. Knowing this, our souls wait for Him because we need Him, we trust Him, we can't live without Him. Without His word and love, we have no hope. We immerse ourselves in the expectation of His inbreaking because the life-giving breath of God is about to be birthed in us. And that is the best gift we could receive this Christmas.

Prayer

Precious Lord, it is with great humility that we turn our attention from the demands of this season to focus on you. We need you, we trust you, we hope in you. Let your steadfast love be upon us. It is in your most holy name that we pray these words. You, the Alpha and the Omega, from ages unto ages.

Don McKim '74

Advent is for anticipation. God's promised Messiah is coming. God's promises are being fulfilled.

There is no better Advent action than praising God's greatness and goodness, God's help for the world and us. Psalms 33 and 146 provide language for this praise, exalting God for who God is and what God has done.

Climactically the psalmist proclaims: "The Lord will reign forever" (Ps. 146:10). This God loves "righteousness and justice." The earth is "full of the steadfast love of the Lord" (Ps. 33:5). This God is our "help and our shield" (Ps. 33:20). No wonder "our heart is glad" in God because we "trust" in God's "holy name" (Ps. 33:21)! As Calvin said, "whether living or dying, we shall be safe under the keeping of a king who reigns expressly for our salvation" (Comm. Ps. 146:10).

Prayer

O God, in Jesus Christ, your promises come true. We praise, we trust, we rejoice! Amen.

Mark Basily '20

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.

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.

Derek Davenport '05/'17

“. . . those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.” How strange—to hope in what we fear. We don't like to talk about “fearing” the Lord. Yet, we can only hope in the Lord if the Lord is worth fearing.

A god weaker than our weapons or no stronger than our soldiers is worthless. A god who fears famine or dreads death cannot deliver us. A god we cannot fear is hopeless. Our hope is in the Lord.

The Lord destroys defenses, mightier than an army; stronger than a warhorse. The Lord defeats our deepest fears, the dread of death and the horror of hunger. The Lord conquers the tangible—soldiers and stallions, and the intangible—fatality and famine. The Lord is to be feared.

This almighty God, with power to destroy and defeat, comes to us . . . as an infant. The Lord comes to us not as a soldier on a warhorse, but as our help and shield. God comes to us able to defeat death, able to vanquish famine. God chooses to use this infinite power to deliver us, to keep us, to save us.

God is to be feared. Thus we can hope in God's steadfast love.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you that you are mightier than we are. We thank you that you are stronger than our fears. We thank you that you come to us not as an overpowering enemy, but as our help and our shield. Help us to place our hope in you this Christmas season in particular. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Ted Kalsbeek '51

As a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth, Advent features music which is preparatory, such as "Come, Though Long Expected Jesus." There is eager anticipation of more celebratory music as we move from preparation to celebration in spirit and in song, joining the heavenly host saying "Glory to God in the Highest." All the stops were pulled out in that celestial crescendo of angelic praise. The beauty and power of Advent lies in preparation for the moment when the God of the Psalms would step into human history as our Savior and Lord.

Christmas and Advent have personal meaning with profound implications relevant for life now and eternity. The splendor and power of God's revealed glory in history and in human hearts now, is but a foretaste of what is to come. In a sense, all of life is an "advent" in preparation for the ultimate revealing of God's glory. Advent allows for a diversity of praise to be given to God. It recognizes the divine participation of God in the world and in our lives. It also declares the promises of God to whom we should gratefully give all glory and honor.

Let us, then, echo with triumphant joy that which the heavenly host sent reverberating over Judean hills, not in seasonal superficial happiness, but with the inner joy of salvation, peace and hope, enabling us to sing praises to God even in sorrow, to glorify God in grief, and to be grateful even in loss. Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God, we are grateful that in your sovereign grace and power, the birth of Jesus Christ became a reality after long preparation. As we anticipate and then celebrate the Incarnation, we join the host of heaven in lifting our glorias in praise and thanksgiving. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Doris Calian, McMillan Society member

As we prepare to greet and celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, let us approach each day with our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to finding glimpses of Christ in all our daily encounters. Let us start each day observing and appreciating each member of our household. Move on to those we meet regularly at our work and study places. Remember to observe those who serve us by bringing mail, tending our stores, repairing our roads. Keep in mind many whom we do not see who are suffering from infirmities, lost or fighting in desperate situations, some even oblivious to their surroundings. These souls are all children of God, and Christ looks to us to be one with them as we expectantly approach the gift of the Holy Babe in Bethlehem.

Prayer

Dear Lord, guide and lead us as we seek each day to recognize your presence in our midst. Help us to be sensitized to your love for all humanity and humbly accept all people of your creation as our sisters and brothers. 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.

Alyssa Bell '11

"Do not delay, O my God" (v. 17). With a sense of urgency and trust, the psalmist petitions the Lord. This same immediacy drives our souls to sing Advent hymns such as "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" and "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." These sweet melodies carry lyrics of longing and desperation, and with them we join all the saints across time and miles in crying out, "Do not delay, O my God."

As we enter this season of waiting, may we be encouraged to cry out to God with this kind of candor. We can be this direct with God, who knows the chaos of our hearts and of our world, for in Psalm 40 we are promised God's listening ear—an ear that does not turn from our cries and frustration. "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (v. 3).

And so we wait, and while we ask God not to tarry, we give God our whole selves in worship! We raise our voices in adoration because God is faithful in raising us up from the pit and giving us stability. The psalms model for us patterns of praise even in times of trouble and uncertainty. May we give honor to the God who beckons us near, whose love knows no bounds.

Our God invites us to postures of both urgent longing and exuberant praise. God welcomes our exhaustion and our gratitude. Let Psalm 40 be our prayer this Advent as it gives voice to the tensions we feel as we approach this season of expectation.

Prayer

Lord, do not delay your coming. We need you in our midst to change our hearts and our world. We praise you, our God of strength and tender care, who listens to our longings with love. Draw us near to yourself as we wait. Amen.

Brian Lays '15/'16

If the spiritual life can be summed up in one word that word might be “wait.” Nothing is more fundamental to the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers, who repeatedly urge their pupils to “wait in your cell, and it will teach you what you need to know.” If we are to mature in faith, we must become masters of waiting, masters of the long hall.

Yet few things are more counter-intuitive to the culture in which we find ourselves. When we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, we quickly seek to move on. The psalmist acknowledges that after waiting patiently for the Lord, rescue from the slimy pit finally came. But waiting came first. The slimy pit was the psalmist’s cell; the desert fathers would have urged the psalmist to wait and learn what the cell had to teach. If you find yourself in a pit of mud and mire, your first impulse might be to search for an emergency exit. Perhaps the only option will be to wait. Rescue will come; God will put a new song in your mouth. But first, see what the pit has to teach you. Don’t waste the wait.

Prayer

O God, none can compare with you for great are the things you have done. In this Advent season, grant to us boldness in our waiting, courage in our desolation, and strength to sing a new song. Give us eyes to see what you would have us learn and help us to reside in your love and faithfulness to which we are called as witnesses. In Your Son’s name we pray, Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith '12/'13, staff

“Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away, never dies away.” This text of a song comes to us from the Taizé community in France. Generally, songs end with a stable harmonic resolution, with the final chord offering a sense of arrival, of completion. But this particular song ends with a chord that feels unresolved. Even as the song ends and our voices fall silent, this unresolved chord hangs in the air, thus filling us with the sense that there is something more to come. Advent is the time when we are filled with hope and expectation for that something more.

The psalmist is in the pit. He is crying out for God’s mercy in much the same way that we cry out in the midst of racial injustice and natural disasters and refugee crises. But the psalmist has been pulled out of the pit before and trusts that the God who has been faithful in the past will again bring deliverance. This is our Advent hope. Remembering that God’s Kingdom came into our midst long ago, we cast our gaze forward in assurance of something more to come—the fullness of that Kingdom. And so, God has put a new song in our mouths—a song of trust and hope, a song sung even (or perhaps especially) in our darkest nights.

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, may your Spirit kindle a light in our darkness. Give us hope in times when your Kingdom seems too distant. Even as we long for something more than this broken world, put a new song in our mouths that we may proclaim your steadfast love and faithfulness. Amen.

Lisa Heckman '98

Whenever I read Psalm 40, the song that sings through my head is not an Advent hymn or a Christmas carol, but a spiritual from an old 1970s book of praise songs. As much as I love, love, love Christmas music, the nostalgia of perfect Christmases past or images of a clean, sweet-smelling stable with fluffy sheep and silent nights is contrary to the messy world into which God came.

Real life has us stuck in miry bogs of loneliness, stress, or life-the-way-it's-always-been that are not healthy. We battle evils of apathy, entitlement, and pervading public meanness. And we constantly confront those who want to snatch away our lives with too many holiday responsibilities, expectations of perfection, or all we "should" be, think, and do.

Immanuel, God-with-us, became flesh in Jesus to move into our messy neighborhoods, right where we are—and with us as *who* we are. Jesus came to lead us out of the bogs, fight evil with the strength of love, and deliver us from the snatchers of life. God is present right now, in this moment of living, whether we're in a muddy pit or standing on solid rock. The Incarnation didn't begin and end 2000+ years ago, nor is it only the means of gaining a seat in heaven someday. Jesus is with us now, in *our* neighborhoods, neighbors, family, friends, . . . even enemies.

In thanksgiving we sing songs to tell the world of God's enduring, unconditional love and faithfulness. May we not restrain our lips or hide from proclaiming what we've learned about God. Those are songs the world needs to hear more than the carols that play on endless loop this season. So . . .

"You can tell the world about this! You can tell the nations you're blessed. Tell them that Jesus makes you whole and he brings the joy, joy to your soul!" (Traditional spiritual [alt.])

Prayer

Yahweh of the low places, high places, and all the places in between, may we seek you in times of trouble. May we declare your marvelous deeds in times of triumph. May we walk with you every ordinary day, knowing that life is better—and we can be better ourselves—when we share our days with you. Put new songs in our mouths to sing praise to you each and every day so the world can know you and the nations hear how greatly you have blessed us. Amen.

Rebecca DePoe '16/'20

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.

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.

Mark Winters, DMin student

Unless you're an angsty middle schooler, you may have trouble finding a reference for this kind of material. But what happens when instead of thinking about external "others" as our enemy, we turn inward? What is it like to deal with those internal voices which seem to pick apart every decision or thought, making us question every move, lose confidence, or maybe even give up before we start?

If you suffer from this predicament, you know the voices I'm talking about, telling you things like, "That's a terrible idea", "No one wants to hear what you have to say", or "Of course you're late again. Can't you ever be on time?"

If any of this sounds familiar, Psalm 40 is your prayer, my friend. With the psalmist, we can pray for God to deliver us, make haste to help us. We can pray for God to put those voices to shame who seek to snatch away our life, turn them back, and make the finger-waggers in our mind be put to shame. Because the Lord will draw us up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set our feet upon a rock.

God can put a new song in our mouths, a song of praise, a song which harmonizes with God's own voice, reminding us over and over again that we are worthy, we are beautiful, and we are loved.

Prayer

Block out the critical, belittling voices, O God, the voices that make us feel like we are anything less than you created us to be. Show us how to rejoice in ourselves, as you do. Amen.

Psalm 50

1 The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. 2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. 3 Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. 4 He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: 5 "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" 6 The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. 7 "Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. 8 Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. 9 I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. 10 For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. 12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. 13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? 14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. 15 Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." 16 But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? 17 For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. 18 You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. 19 "You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. 20 You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother's child. 21 These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one just like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you. 22 "Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver. 23 Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God."

Caitlin Werth '10

I invite you, after reading the scripture above, to sit for a moment, close your eyes, and take a deep breath. This is a tough passage for the Advent season! It doesn't exactly paint a picture of hope, peace, joy, or love, at least not in the way we like to imagine while listening to Christmas music, walking past holiday lights, or drinking hot cocoa.

But the first Advent was a tough season. It didn't have the same aura we work hard to create in our culture and time. Advent, at its core, is meant to be a time of eager and recklessly hopeful waiting. It first came at a time when salvation felt greatly needed. A time when God was about to do a new, amazing, miraculous thing that no one could have expected.

We now know what Advent brings, but the celebration that comes from that realization would be better suited for the Christmas season (starting on December 25).

What if, instead, we spent the season of Advent as a time of true listening for God's voice?

Psalm 50 reminds us that God speaking is action—a creative force. God spoke this world into being and continues to speak love. God is calling for us to hear that voice and respond in kind. God is not interested in what they already have, but instead, asks for thanksgiving. I don't believe God wants gratitude in the way we do (as affirmation) but as a way to bring us deeper into connection with our Creator. Our awareness and gratitude for all that God has done draws us close to the Heart of Love and sends us out to share God's mercy.

So instead of focusing on trying to cultivate the "perfect season" this Advent, let's instead use it as a faithful preparation for the day when God broke into the world that she birthed. Instead of opening advent calendars filled with chocolates or Legos, let's look around each day at the gifts we have already been given and lift up our praise: in hope, peace, joy, and love.

Prayer

Listen to God's voice now. Center yourself and become aware of God's presence within and around you. Sit in silence or meditate on these words: "O God, you surround me and fill me." As you feel God's presence, lift up your thanksgivings, and when you are ready, share your "Amen."

Erin Davenport '05

During Advent we prepare for the coming of God to earth. These Psalms remind us that God comes to us and does not keep silent. The miracle of Advent is God coming to earth, the reality is that God comes but does not keep silent. God comes and speaks to us in the stillness of a moment. God comes and shouts at us through our children. God comes and comforts us through our friends. God comes and directs us through our pastors. God comes and helps us through our parents. God comes and tells us that we are not faithful. God comes and declares that we are forgiven. God comes to us and does not keep silent. And we are thankful and give praise!

Prayer

Lord, thank you for coming to us and not keeping silent. Help us to hear your voice today. Amen.

Catherine Mallick Gillis '90

In Psalm 50 I see the Temple of Zion—God's beacon of light shining for all to see. The Temple is high and therefore receives the light of the sun in the morning, as well as the evening's setting sun. Day and night, God is a welcoming beacon of hope for all who go *up* to worship God. For God's presence is in his Temple.

Like the ancient Hebrews, today God judges his people, but not like the Gentiles, who do not know God because they are not in a covenantal relationship. God judges his people—judges *us*—because we hate his discipline. Judgment comes upon God's people who have ignored his teaching and whose lives do not glorify God. The psalmist specifically mentions that it is our mouths which condemn us; it is our own deceit and slander that diminishes the God who demands single-minded obedience.

Now we are rebuked because we have forsaken the sacrifice of thanksgiving for falsehoods. At this time of preparation, as *always*, we are to choose the way of thanksgiving. We are to call out to God during these days of trouble. In each one of our own hearts, we are to turn away from disobedience and trust God to deliver us to his goodness. We are to walk God's pathway so as to give all glory to God—not to humans, not to institutions, but only to God, who alone is worthy of praise.

Prayer

O God, as I prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus, remove all falsehood from my heart. Fill me by your mercy with a heart of truth and thankfulness. Then your light will shine, day and night, for all to see, so that all the world will acknowledge your truth and glory by the witness of your eternal truth and light in the lives of your covenantal people. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen.

Psalm 53

1 Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good. 2 God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. 3 They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one. 4 Have they no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up my people as they eat bread,

and do not call upon God? 5 There they shall be in great terror, in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly; they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them. 6 O that for Israel would come from Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

Don McKim '74

Psalm 53 (cf. Psalm 14) presents a dismal picture of humankind: “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’” and “there is no one who does good no, not one.” Fools are “corrupt” and “perverse” (vv. 1, 3). They are “practical atheists,” living without reckoning with God in any dimension of existence. God does not matter.

But “fools” run a risk—certain jeopardy of God’s judgment. They will live “in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly” and “they will be put to shame” (v. 5).

What can change? Help can come from only one source: God. The prayer is for “deliverance” (“salvation”)—that “God restores the fortunes of his people” (v. 6).

This need is humankind’s greatest—the need for “salvation,” deliverance from our sin and from disregard for God. In Advent we anticipate God’s deliverer to come: Jesus Christ! In him true help is ours!

Prayer

O God, we live as fools, denying your presence and power. We prefer our own ways, apart from you. O God, deliver us. Save us. Help us. As we anticipate our Savior Jesus Christ this Advent season, make our hearts full of the knowledge of you. May we rejoice! Amen.

Mat Meyer, MDiv student

Reading Psalm 53, I can’t help but remember a certain orange VHS tape we owned—Rugrats: The Santa Experience. In it, Angelica tricks Phil and Lil into trading her their favorite toys for gifts for one another. Phil gives Angelica his Reptar doll for a box of crayons, and Lil her coloring book for a Reptar space helmet. When Angelica learns that Santa gives lumps of coal to bad kids, she tries to make things right. Angelica returns their toys. On Christmas morning, Angelica receives the Cynthia deluxe playhouse she wanted. But as she looks closely, Angelica spies a small piece of coal in the playhouse garage.

It's more than she deserves.

There is no one who does good, no not one.

Psalm 53 offers a scathing indictment of humanity in its sinful condition. Much like how Santa sees you when you’re sleeping and knows when you’re awake, God looks down from heaven. And according to the psalmist, what God sees is appalling—abominable acts, perversity, devouring the poor! The psalmist promises terror, scattered bones, shame, and rejection.

Yet for all these terrifying words, the psalm ends with words of longing and of hope—deliverance from Zion. Rejoicing for Jacob. Gladness for Israel.

In Advent we look toward deliverance with the same longing and hope of the psalmist. As we anticipate Christ's return, we rejoice in God's promises. For Christ comes to set us free from our bondage to this sinful condition.

It's more than we deserve. Rejoice.

Prayer

Merciful God, we confess that we do not seek after you, yet we long for your undeserved grace. Deliver us, O Lord, from our abominable acts, from our perversity, and from our devouring the poor. Deliver us, O Lord, that like Jacob we may rejoice and that like Israel we may be glad; through Christ our Lord. 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.

Michelle Spomer, faculty

It is both amazing and discouraging that some things just don't change when it comes to human nature. Slander? Lies? Extortion? Greed? All these vices existed hundreds and hundreds of years ago just as they exist today. While this note may sound a bit dire, be assured that there has always been another constant—God's presence in our lives.

Throughout Psalm 62, the descriptions of humanity's shortcomings are surrounded by affirmations of God's strength, shelter, and trustworthiness. The trick is to be deliberate about recognizing God's presence and what God wants to be for us in our day-to-day struggles.

Take refuge in God. Try carving out some time for your soul to "wait in silence." Create space so that you can "pour out your heart" before God. There are no better ways to anticipate and prepare for Christ's coming this Advent season.

Prayer

Lord, my soul waits in silence. You alone are my rock, my salvation, my fortress. My refuge is in you, and I trust in your power and steadfast love. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

Karen Baughman '06

We Christians are admonished to pray constantly. So we do. We almost besiege God with our constant prayers. It's kind of like the scene in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, where Jim Carrey's character is so overwhelmed by all the prayer requests coming in that he nearly goes crazy. We pray for ourselves. We

pray for others. We pray for healing and strength and help and peace and food and shelter. We might even remember to give God thanks for the things that God has blessed us with. And it's all good. But sometimes we're so busy telling God what we want that we forget to listen for God's answer. Just as we wait for God's in-breaking into the world during this Advent season of waiting, let us begin to practice the silence of listening and wait for God's in-breaking into our hearts and lives, into our very souls.

Prayer

Acknowledging O God that all I am is a gift from you, I ask that you help me to live today fully and completely for you. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13/'24

I am a fixer by nature. A significant part of the ministry God has entrusted to me is to help others, to make sure they are secure spiritually, emotionally, and financially. Over time I have come to realize that my desire or need to fix things for others often gets ahead of what God is doing. I've learned that it is better to wait on God than to wish later that I had.

Our ability to wait on God and lean not to our own understanding is difficult, especially when there are so many issues in the world that we are moved to address, try to mitigate, or hope to fix—inequities, injustices, inequalities, maltreatment of people based on a wide range of unjustified factors. Yet the psalmist reminds us to wait in silence and assurance, for God is our rock, salvation, and refuge.

Waiting on God is not a passive act, but a peaceful stillness that manifests when we yield our fears, anxieties, and insecurities to God out of faithful trust and hope-filled living. In the letter to the Philippians Paul writes: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7). During this season of Advent, may our minds, hearts, and spirits be at peace as we wait with assurance for Jesus Christ, the ultimate "fixer" of all things, and trust that God has not relinquished control of this world, but is working everything out for our ultimate good. As the psalmist concludes, so shall we: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord."

Prayer

Gracious, loving, and all-powerful God, quiet our hearts, increase our faith, and help us always to look to you, the one and only God, who is able to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond anything we might imagine and think. Although the world seems out of control, teach us to wait on you, our hope, and to trust you with every aspect of our individual and corporate lives. For you are our rock, our salvation, and our refuge. Amen.

Graeme Wilson '18

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.

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.

Lisa J. Lyon '92

In seven verses, the Psalmist uses “us” four times, “peoples” five times, “nations” three times, “all” four times, combined into “all the nations”, “all the peoples” and “all the ends of the earth.” When a Hebrew word or phrase is repeated, we need to pay attention. This message is important to our understanding of God and ourselves.

In Psalm 67, God’s saving power is for all nations. God’s blessing is for all peoples. God judges the peoples, guides the nations. In response to God’s inclusive love and care, all peoples and all nations are invited to praise God together. Perfect peace!

If God’s graciousness, blessing, salvation, judgment and guidance are all-inclusive, why are peoples and nations so exclusive? In America, Native Americans were excluded from their land. Others were excluded from our country, our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, and our laws. From 1875 on, immigration law limited or banned Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Polish, Russian, Asian Pacific, Latin American, African and Southeast European peoples. Also at times Jews, Muslims, Arabs, and women traveling alone. African Americans and women were excluded from voting, education, jobs, property ownership. Cities and towns were divided by ethnicity, national origin, religion, class.

Such exclusiveness once gave way to the Christmas spirit. It wasn’t peace, but a temporary cease-fire—a tenuous truce as people put aside their differences in an outburst of civility, charity, friendliness. At least until December 26.

I worry that the Christmas spirit will not be manifest at all this year. How can we welcome the Christ Child who came for all if we exclude members of “the other” political party, the LGBTQ community, refugees, immigrants, authors, naturalized citizens—anyone whose ideas, faith or politics are different from ours?

We can't.

Sisters and brothers, let us repent, and embrace and share God's all-inclusive love!

Prayer

God who created all people in your image and likeness, God who loves everyone everywhere: thank you. You sent your Son, the embodiment of your all-inclusive love. As we welcome baby Jesus, so may we welcome people you send our way with open minds, open hearts, and open hands. Amen.

Rob Weingartner '82

Psalm 67 is a beautiful reminder of our dependence upon God and of how God's faithfulness in our lives can make known to others God's saving power. Too often, in our consumer-driven culture in which even religion can function as a kind of marketplace, we imagine that life and faith are primarily about us, about getting ourselves saved, about getting our needs met. I love the opening line of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*: “It's not about you.”

How different a self-centered approach is from the truest spirit of Advent. We prepare anew to celebrate the birth of One who offered himself for the sake of the world, One who promised to return, the One in whom God is gathering up all things.

When we follow Jesus, he leads us out into the broken world to display his glory and grace—that all the peoples might sing for joy.

Prayer

Gracious God, in this season of watching and waiting deepen our trust in you. And help us to see how we can make your mercy and power real in the lives of those around us. Amen.

Jen Haddox '06

I'm reminded this season that the reason we give gifts at Christmas is because God gave us a gift. But in the hustle and bustle of shopping for gifts, I tend to overlook the scope of this gift God gave to us! I forget the global nature of this gift! Jesus was given as a gift to all nations. Jesus is “. . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles” as foretold by Simeon in the temple (Luke 2:32).

Psalm 67 is a call to worship, but not just a call for those who have received God's blessing or even for those who are near and dear to us. It is a call for all the nations to worship. “May the peoples praise you, O God!”

As God shines his face of blessing on us this Advent season, may we also live in this call of Psalm 67. May we share the blessing we have received by giving to others, so that God might be made known in the world!

Prayer

Gracious God, we do seek your face and pray for your blessing. As we receive your blessing, give us clear opportunities and generous spirits this Advent season, that we might share your light and love with the world. Amen.

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.

Michele Ellison, DMin student

Praising God has an emotionally and spiritually uplifting quality that can alter one's mood and perspective.

It is not just a matter of giving thanks for perceived blessings, but praising God for being God, no matter what our circumstances. We praise God in the midst of the sunshine and the rain. Whether there is drought or flood, God is present with us in spirit, as well as through other people.

We praise the Lord for God's presence among us—moving around and through us, bringing us shalom. In this Advent season, we praise and thank God for the sending of Jesus the Christ. We praise God for forgiving our sins, and the grace that abounds toward us. We praise God for the grace we experience daily, and our communion with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Such a gracious God moves throughout the universe.

Prayer

O Lord God, we praise you. We glorify you. There is none like you. We thank you for being with us. May you be praised through the earth. I lift up my hands, sing and dance before you. Praise you, O Lord. Thank you for your love. Amen.

Psalm 72

1 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. 2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. 3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. 5 May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the

earth. 7 In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. 8 May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. 9 May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust. 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. 11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. 12 For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. 13 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. 14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. 15 Long may he live! May gold of Sheba be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all day long. 16 May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field. 17 May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all nations be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy. 18 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. 19 Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen. 20 The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.

John Stewart '59 (deceased)

Arguably, three interpretative avenues lead into the province of this “royal” Psalm 72. One way understands it as David’s prayer for the flourishing of his son Solomon’s reign. Many commentators remember that Psalm 72 is recited at the coronation of the kings and queens of England. According to another way of interpretation, some Jews and many Christians interpret this psalm as messianic. Early on, Christians understood Psalm 72 as forecasting Jesus, David’s heir, as Messiah whose coming reign will endure like the sun and moon. Peace and righteousness will abound. Lesser powers will bow to his wisdom. Even people living in cities will blossom. Most significantly, however, this Messiah will be an advocate for justice, not just a vague, generic justice, but justice for the poor and for “those who have no helper.” Might there be a third way into and out of Psalm 72? Is it not an edict to any person in any position of authority—teachers, parents, union stewards, CEOs, judges, stock brokers, civil servants, pastors, coaches, presidents—to “give deliverance to the needy” even while overseeing the “prosperity of the people”?

Prayer

We await your coming again, Lord Jesus. While we wait, give us an unwavering passion for your Kingdom’s agenda to “seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly” with you. Amen.

Alina Kanaski '16

This king is perfect: righteous, just, long-lived, well-loved, and with a huge kingdom. He provides peace to his kingdom, protection and justice for his people, and prosperity for all. He thinks of the poor and the oppressed and offers them his help. He is such an incredible king that the psalmist prays that he will live “as long as the moon, throughout all generations.”

This psalm was probably written to celebrate the coronation of Israel’s kings and sung at each coronation. No king could live up to its impossibly high standards, though, at least until Jesus was born. Now, thanks to Him, we can look forward to the fulfillment of these words: of a future kingdom full of justice, righteousness, and prosperity for all. We can look forward to that beautiful kingdom through Jesus, the true perfect king! Praise be to God!

Prayer

Thank You, God, for Your Son, the perfect king. Help us to prepare for His coming this Christmas and His final coming. Amen.

Jane Holtzclaw, DMin student

During recent travels, I fell “victim” to airline drama: a canceled flight likely to cause me to miss the event that was the purpose of my journey. The agent, in a position of power, easily could have thwarted my ability to make my destination. He chose, however, to address my predicament in a meaningful manner.

Psalm 72, felt to be a prayer or hymn sung at the coronation of a king, speaks to the powerful relationship of a king to his people and of the king to God. Many scholars also find it to be messianic. It is interesting to note that the focus is not on the king’s power in terms of authority, wealth, or military strength. Rather, the king is charged with being the hands and feet of God—caring for his people, God’s people, by providing for the poor and the oppressed according to the will of God: “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor” (v. 4).

We all live in community with one another and in that community we each have a place of power in relationships—a type of kingship. This psalm serves as a call to action. In our relationship with others it is our duty to act in accordance with that which God desires. And God provides what we need to do just that: “rain that falls on the mown grass . . . showers that water the earth” (v. 6). We are not in this alone, and for that we can rejoice and be grateful.

Prayer

Gracious God, as we travel on our journey through Advent, open our eyes to see what you want us to see, open our ears to hear what you want us to hear, so that we may more fully live into that which you created us to be—bringing righteousness to the poor and justice to the oppressed. Amen.

Psalm 80

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! 3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. 6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; 11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. 12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. 14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right hand planted. 16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. 17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. 18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. 19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Lexi Joachim Scoggin ’09

Despite the mounting joy and excitement that accompanies the season of Advent, Christmas can also be a time of immense sorrow for those who look back on the past year and remember the tragedies, losses, and moments of despair that they have felt. For those who have lost a loved one, it is especially a time of bittersweet nostalgia. Or maybe just bitterness, because things are not as they were a year ago.

Although no one close to me died this past year, I can think of other people who lost a friend or family member unexpectedly. At the church where I was doing my field education, a 12-year-old girl in the youth group was killed by a teenage drunk driver in April. A 21-year-old boy from a youth group I formerly led died in September from a drug overdose. The man who was to become the choir director at my father's church committed suicide in March on the same day he was hired. I'm certain there are countless more stories of tragedies like these.

Those of us touched by that person who died are now faced with the harsh fact that they are gone from this life for good, and no holiday or event in our life will ever be the same. Nor will the pain of that loss ever completely fade away. Even though we do our best to enjoy the Christmas season and embrace the excitement of the Messiah's entrance into the world as the infant Jesus, there is still perhaps deeply-rooted anger or frustrated perplexity that this all-powerful, holy God we worship did not save that person from death.

And then we are "trapped" by people all around us who are joyfully spending time with their loved ones as we inwardly mourn for the person(s) who aren't with us to celebrate this Christmas. But are we really "trapped"? Have we forgotten the promises that came with Jesus' birth and God's saving acts on behalf of Israel?

When God chose Israel as a "vine out of Egypt," he saved them from wilting under oppression. Thus, Israel has witnessed the saving power of God firsthand, and now they implore Him to shine His face upon them once again, so that they may be saved from scorn, despair and feeling abandoned by their Shepherd. All has not been lost. Behind the psalmist's words of desperate pleading to God for restoration and salvation, there is hope.

Therefore, let us not lose hope in this season of Joy. No matter what has happened, God has promised to us through His son, Jesus Christ, an offer of salvation, forgiveness of sins, and restoration in this life and the one to come. This is the greatest gift we could ever receive—May you accept it with faithfulness.

Prayer

Dearest Lord, May your face shine upon those who are feeling more sorrow than joy this Christmas season. By your scriptures and the Holy Spirit, may you mend their hearts, bodies and lives with the hope-filled promise that You always remain true to Your Word. Guide us to be a compassionate presence and to lovingly embrace those who need your restoration. We praise your name forever and ever, our King and Savior. Amen.

Nathan Carlson '11

Within this Psalm we find imagery that provides theological depth for our Christian faith. From the psalm's opening with the image of a shepherd and its calling on God for the restoration of Israel—not only the restoration of a people but also of a "vine" out of Egypt—we clearly see contained herein messianic imagery associated with Jesus. The great Shepherd, Redeemer, and Restorer of life in this passage understands the trials of the day-to-day living we face.

During the season of Advent, each loss, each pain, and each sorrow we experience feels weightier. An unexpected illness, death, betrayal, or bill introduces that much more unease to our souls. The God described in Psalm 80 has seen it all before—on both a personal and a national scale.

When the vine from Egypt was “broken down,” “plucked,” and “ravaged,” the psalmist turned for revival to the God of hope. This passage does not end in defeat, but instead in new life, as the God of hosts restores the people of God. Psalm 80 reassures us that whatever “scorn” we face, “tears” we shed, and rebuke we bear, our God has gone with us through all of it.

Prayer

Redeemer and Restorer of life, before we know what we need, you are at work in our lives. During this Advent season, when trials and pains may feel particularly acute, be with us to guide and lead us through these valleys. As you restore us to life, may we remember to praise your name continually. Amen.

AnneMarie Mingo, faculty

“Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps. 80:7).

In our daily realities we face compounding political, racial, health, environmental, and other struggles in societies around the world, and we often hear the times we find ourselves living in described as unprecedented. If we reflect on our roles, the difficulties we face are seemingly a result of humanity’s ability to either act with love and justice at the center of our choices, or not. As people of faith, there are times when we look at what is going on around us and wonder if God has turned away from us, thus permitting the ongoing injustices we see and experience personally. We feel vulnerable and unsure of how to prevent those who may take advantage.

At other times we are appalled by the realization that the injustices are orchestrated and sanctioned by persons who also profess to be followers of Christ. Yet, scripture shows that when we do not challenge injustice it creates silence between our requests of God, becoming a stark reminder that God requires us to do the work of justice consistently. In this psalm we see that although these times feel unprecedented for us, our hope is strengthened knowing that nothing is new for God. During this season of Advent, we seek and await God’s presence in the midst of troubling times; we pray that God will restore us into loving relationship with God and our neighbor and illuminate our way forward to co-create a more just society for all—even in the midst of trials.

Prayer

God, sometimes we feel distant from the love you have shown in previous times as we see policies and practices create pain for those not closely connected to power. We repent for the injustices we see that are a result of our actions, and ask you to give us courage to change and restore our relationships for your glory. Amen.

Psalm 85

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. 2 You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. 3 You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. 4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. 5 Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? 6 Will you not revive us again,

so that your people may rejoice in you? 7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. 8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. 9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. 11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. 12 The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. 13 Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

Roger Owens, faculty

Old Testament scholar James May points out a striking feature of Psalm 85: The psalm begins by testifying to God's already finished saving work; it sings of a *fait accompli*—God's salvation is a done deal. Then the situation changes: "Restore us again," the psalmist pleads. "Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?" God's salvation is a done deal, and yet the people are still awaiting it.

Christians reading this psalm in Advent can relate. We look back to God's accomplished salvation in Christ—it's a done deal. And yet we look around and see a world still broken—sin has not been vanquished, shalom does not yet prevail. In Advent, we look forward to the time when God will make clear and complete what is already finished in Christ, when "faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from on high"—in other words, when God's kingdom of peace will fill all.

Prayer

Loving God, who through your Son Jesus Christ brought your kingdom to earth, in this season of Advent give us patience as we wait for your often-hidden kingdom to burst forth from the ground and rain down from the sky, until righteousness and peace fill all things. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Kathy Dain '11

There's been a lot of talk about change recently. Politicians proclaim it; advertisers' gleefully tell us their product is NEW and IMPROVED. Change is good! But I think what most people are looking for is a return to a simpler time, when life was much easier than it is today. The way things used to be, carefully shaped and softened by our memories; it is what we like to refer to as "the good old days."

Change requires us to move forward, not backward. But true change means stepping outside our comfort zone, replacing the familiar with something not so familiar, or perhaps looking at the familiar in a new light. Change can be very uncomfortable. For many, our present days appear very dim, and the promise of hope a distant memory. I recall a September morning not too long ago when darkness covered the sky, or more recently watching our financial markets collapse. We look overseas at senseless acts of violence filled with hatred. Sometimes you wonder what this world is coming to as we cry for restoration. But as dark as the day may seem, eventually morning comes. Monday is replaced by Tuesday and the promise of a better day.

Sometimes it is only through the darkness that we can truly see God's light. It is the steadfast love of our LORD, our salvation through Jesus Christ and the promise of The Holy Spirit guiding our steps through the darkness. There is no darkness that can conceal God's light.

The psalmist reminds us that true restoration begins first with a change of heart. As the promise of spring lies beneath this blanket of snow, God's assurance of restoration is at hand.

In this season of Advent, Expect the Unexpected. Many years ago our people cried for a savior and God responded in a most unexpected way. All the knowledge and wisdom of the universe safely harbored within an infant child--the promise of hope, the assurance of salvation.

Beyond the tinsel and the holiday lights let us look above with wonder. Christ the Lord has come. Christ, the King will come again.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for we know your Word is faithful and true. Above the cosmos, beyond the outer limits of our imagination, you sit enthroned between the Cherubim—the creator of all things, whose love for us is so great that you gave us the promise of hope and restoration through Jesus Christ. Teach us, O' Lord, to walk in your ways. Give us hearts without boundaries; selflessness instead of self-righteousness. Darkness is waning; a new day is on the horizon, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

John Shaver '98

The psalmist reminds us that God throughout history continues to provide us with great gifts: “steadfast love,” “peace,” restoration—“The Lord will give what is good.”

Recently, I read a story about a missionary who was serving as a teacher in Africa. During one lesson, he took some time to share about the significance of Christmas. Later in the year, one of the students presented the missionary with an incredibly beautiful seashell before Christmas break. The missionary recognized that this shell could only be found a considerable distance from the school. When he was presented with the gift, he said, “What a beautiful shell. Thank you for traveling so far to get me such a lovely gift.” The student replied, “The long journey was part of the gift.”

As we walk through Advent, I hope you'll join me by remembering and reflecting on God's journey to us in Jesus Christ—the One who *brings* us “what is good.” For God's journey in Jesus isn't just an ordinary journey or an ordinary gift. Remember the message of the angels as they journeyed to the shepherds: “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11)—the epitome of “what is good.”

During our individual walks through Advent, may each one of us reflect on the ways in which we can share with others Christ's gifts of “steadfast love,” “peace,” restoration, and “great joy”—in this season and the seasons to come.

Prayer

O God, this journey of Advent stirs great excitement in us. In this season, we see anew all the good gifts you continue to bring to us through your journey to and abiding presence with us—gifts that remind us of your great love for each one of us. Please grant that in all we do and say, we will reflect your great gift of Christ our Lord to everyone we meet as we walk with you each day. Amen.

Gary Angleberger, McMillan Society member (deceased)

Psalm 85 begins where many hymns and prayers begin: the psalmist lists the many favors God has bestowed on his people. We, in our own prayers, can easily identify with the psalmist's gratitude. The writer speaks of God's favor in the granting of the home-land and the establishment of a people who have been blessed in spite of their shortcomings and failures. This God is a forgiving God, so the psalmist acknowledges the many times in the past when God has forgiven his people—and is still willing to grant forgiveness. In the light of God's many past mercies, the psalmist pleads that the people of his day will hear the story of their failures and turn to their loving, forgiving God.

I wonder whether, in the midst of the political debating of our day, anyone can “lift our eyes” to where we, as a people, have come from—when we have failed and been unfair to the “poor and the stranger in our midst”—yet remind us that the call is greater than our failures. The call is to follow humbly in the path of “the Peace-maker” and trust that serving the needs of our neighbors and striving for justice may be a better path to peace than building walls and greater arsenals. Is this a vain hope? Advent begins with a hope—that if God comes among us, we will see and understand and follow. Today, will we allow the hope of Advent to be vain?

Prayer

We wait for your coming, O Lord, when “our salvation is at hand,” when “You speak peace to your people,” when “steadfast love and faithfulness will meet” and “righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” Instruct us through your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, how to wait—not passively, not with resignation—but to wait claiming the power of your word of hope in our Lord, and to live abundantly in his 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!

Martha Murchison '09

Advent means coming. Its focus is on a long-held and long-expected hope that has not lost its light. The difficulty is that we not only wait for that light in our very dark world but that we wait during the darkest and longest days of winter. Time can seem unending on those days which begin slowly and end early. The dark nights can be stifling. We wait and hope for the promises we've read about in scripture—

deserts breaking into bloom, swords beaten into plows, food and housing for everyone—we wait and hope for the promises to come, but it is dark outside. It is difficult to imagine that anything might change. How can we find a light for our wee bit of hope?

The psalmist gently broadens our vision beyond the dark December sky. He calls us to look back over the entirety of history to trace the hand of God upon our story. Before the mountains were—God was. Before the mess that is part of our world—the wars, the hatred, the degradation of the planet—God was. God was before it all. God has been dwelling with humanity through the arc of history, and God will be with us “from everlasting to everlasting.”

It is in the memory of that presence that we can find light for our hope. It is by the story of what has been that we can envision what can be. It is in a tale that is larger than each of us but that is written about each of us that we can find a way to make those promises a reality. It is in the waiting and in the dark that we can imagine the ways toward peace and the steps toward life. It is then that we can join in the prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Prayer

Remind us, dear Lord, of your presence throughout history. Remind us that you have been with us and will be with us and offer us a new direction. Open our eyes to see beyond the worries of our present moment. Help us find light in the darkness. Lead us to share our light so that others might find light also. Amen.

Christopher Brown '08

“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!” (v. 17). I remember sitting in the reference room of the Barbour Library at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and praying this psalm as I began work on the last of my ordination exams. Psalm 90 happened to be the psalm for that morning in the Daily Lectionary, and it felt like a providentially timed word from God. “Yes Lord, please prosper the work of my hands,” I thought, as I began to parse and translate the Greek passage assigned for the exegesis exam. But there’s a deeper longing behind this Psalm than the simple desire to pass a test.

The psalmist’s plea for success arises after a meditation on the relatively brief and inconsequential lives we live. We last only a moment before God turns us back to dust (vv. 3-4). Wisdom, it seems, consists in recognizing that our days are few (v. 12). So the psalmist pleads for the Lord to show compassion by confirming, establishing, and prospering the work we do during these short lives. One could paraphrase this plea by saying, “Lord, I know I won’t last forever, so please let something I’ve done outlive me.”

The good news is that in Jesus Christ, whose advent we both remember and await in this season, God has answered the psalmist’s plea for our lives to be more than grass that fades and withers (v. 6). The Son of God came so we might receive the life that is “from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 2). This is why, after meditating on the mysteries of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul could instruct the Corinthian Christians to “Be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). In that hope, may we direct all our longing for meaning and success to the One who satisfies us with his steadfast love: Jesus.

Prayer (from Psalm 90:14-17)

O Lord, “satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. . . . Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their

children. 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!”

Darryl Lockie '17

As a child, I always loved those dollar-store Advent calendars. Indeed, my excitement grew every day we opened another panel, as each window held a piece of chocolate for another successful day of waiting. Looking back, it's curious to think how excited I became about a little chocolate that had the same consistency as candle wax (and though I've never tried candle wax, perhaps the same taste too). Nonetheless, those little Advent calendars helped me to number my days and better understand the importance of time and waiting.

We hear something similar in our morning's Psalm. Psalm 90:12 exhorts us to “count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” But the context in this passage is slightly different from my childhood penchant for cheap paraffin chocolate. The verses preceding verse 12 contemplate the brevity of our lives, especially when contrasted with the Lord's eternal nature. The author laments just how many of these days are spent in “toil and trouble” (v. 10). Here, however, in admonishing us to “count our days” the psalmist begins to pivot. The author asks that the Lord “turn” and “satisfy . . . with your steadfast love” (v. 13). With the Lord's presence, this limited time on earth will indeed be glad—though even here there seems to be a keen interest in time, for verses 14 and 15 make reference to the poet's “days” and “years.” One wonders, Why the focus on the calendar?

Perhaps it is because through it we gain a proper perspective on our lives. Our existence on earth might be ephemeral, but hope and purpose are found in seeking the Lord's steadfast love—both as we expect it in our own lives and as we extend it to others. Though many of our days may be spent in “toil,” they needn't be meaningless when contemplating God's presence within them.

Hence, this Advent season I am again counting my days, just as I did in childhood, but for different reasons. Instead of expecting poor-quality chocolates, I'm now expecting to find more ways to connect with God's “steadfast love” and then extend it others.

Prayer

Dear Lord, teach us to count our days so that we might gain wisdom. May that wisdom be found in contemplating, experiencing, expecting, and even practicing your “steadfast love.” We recognize how brief our lives are, so please grant us meaning and purpose as we seek your presence and await your coming. Amen.

Ben Graves '09

Our Scripture passages for today deal with hope. The psalmist hopes in the Lord, that He will turn from His anger and once again be a shelter for His people. Isaiah hopes in the day of the Lord when He will cleanse Zion from its stains of blood and will once again make Jerusalem a refuge. Paul hopes in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that even those who have died have life in Him and a future in the Kingdom. Jesus tells his disciples to have hope when the world is crashing around them for it is at that time that they will proclaim the gospel with power.

Notice that these are not examples of the hope that the world offers. The world hopes for a bright future, for a better tomorrow, brought about by human hands and human goodness. The world puts its hope in education, in the economy, in charismatic leaders. The people in Luke's gospel put their hope in the Temple. The Israelites had put their hope in the strength and wisdom of their own armies and kings.

And the early church, using the wisdom of the world, could not find its hope when confronted with the continuing reality of death.

The Christian, however, knows that tomorrow is filled with the same worries, pains, and sorrows that fill today because sin and death will still rule tomorrow. The Christian knows that human leaders, institutions, and man-made things are tainted with sin. Even though these things are good and necessary, we do not put our hope in them, for they have no power to save us. The Temple would fall, Israel would go into exile, and Christians will be persecuted by this generation. Nations will fall, economies will fail, and those on whom we depend will not live up to our expectations; because these things are not Jesus.

No, as Christians, we put our hope in Jesus Christ. He will be our guide through trials and hardships. He is our hope of life to fullest. It is he who will cleanse Mt. Zion. It is he who intercedes for us in our day of trouble. He is our hope and refuge today, tomorrow, and for all time. In this advent season, we remember the waiting and the hoping of ages past. And we too wait and hope for the coming of our Lord. And until that day, we live and work in this world, proclaiming the hope that we have, the real hope, for our hope is founded on the promises of God. And though we too will fail, we will also be lifted up in Christ.

Prayer

O Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You have sent your Son for us, that we may have hope. You have sent your Spirit that we may walk through this world with your guidance. You have promised us eternal life in Christ. And for all these things, we thank you. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

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.

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.

Psalm 94

1 O LORD, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! 2 Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve! 3 O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? 4 They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. 5 They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. 6 They kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan, 7 and they say, "The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive." 8 Understand, O dullest of the people; fools, when will you be wise? 9 He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? 10 He who disciplines the nations, he who teaches knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise? 11 The LORD knows our thoughts, that they are but an empty breath. 12 Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, 13 giving them respite from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. 14 For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; 15 for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it. 16 Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers? 17 If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. 18 When I thought, "My foot is slipping," your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. 19 When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. 20 Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who contrive mischief by statute? 21 They band together against the life of the righteous, and condemn the innocent to death. 22 But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. 23 He will repay them for their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out.

Mary Grey Emmett '89

Who were they who first thought to shape the Christian year in such a way as to give us Advent? This gift that "keeps on giving" stirs the memory, prompting us to feel its rhythms, to hear its poetry. It is the time of extraordinary promise and hope that shower us with grace upon grace. We reflect on God's eternal vision, God's forever dream of us.

Who was the ancient one who first sang, "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for God will speak peace to his people?" Who was that one who sang of steadfast love and faithfulness, of righteousness and peace both surrounding and holding us? Let us hear, O God.

I do not think God is waiting for peace to come among us. I do think God continues to speak peace in a million, million ways.

Last year on Christmas Eve our time of Advent waiting merged with our daughter's pregnancy. Her contractions began as we arrived at their curb in Philadelphia. We shared in the long night of watching and waiting, of rubbing her back, of taking turns with our son-in-law as we timed the contractions. They left for the birthing center before dawn, and the baby was born on Christmas Day in the morning. We

spent hours helping to tend mother and child. The prophet's words, "A child has been born," blessed my memory over and over again.

Pain, fatigue, laughter, tears. New life, new hope, new promise. God speaking peace once again.

Prayer

A Celtic Benediction: Deep peace of the running wave to you . . . Deep peace of the flowing air to you. Deep peace of the quiet earth to you . . . Deep peace of the shining stars to you. Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

Katherine Davoli '23

Vengeance. It sounds like something the Prince of Peace should not desire. And yet as Christians we confess that that One is the same as the One this cry went up to in ancient times, and to whom it still goes today.

I want to imagine that peace is possible. I look to the themes of the other Advent candles (hope, love, joy) to get us there, but Jesus knows what we're up against. The cares of my heart are many because evil systems and wicked leaders ordain that it be so. I can reconcile with my co-worker who said a nasty thing to me about my appearance yesterday. But those who contrive mischief by statute? Who condemn innocent people to death row? The privileged proud who exult in their wickedness? All of these are systems. And hallmarks of white supremacy and Christian nationalism. Against these, the psalmist believes, God is—as God should be—furious.

Which is exactly why I pray the Psalms. The comfort of knowing that I am not alone in my experience on the hurting end of injustices in the world, and the shared unshakeable faith that God does not want things to be this way.

In Christ, repentance for the individual is always graciously offered. But there is no wicked system that survives God's judgment. Nothing evil that we have built makes it to the Kingdom intact. Thank God.

Prayer

Show up, O God. As you have done in our history: ancestral and personal. Protecting. Saving. Rescuing. Helping. We need that now as much as we ever have. And make it so that no more such prayers need be sent. Bring down with your almighty hand every wicked system that harms, crushes, and exploits. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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.

Kimberly Gonxhe '07

Our God reigns!!! On this day we celebrate the divine one who became flesh out of sheer love, even for a fallen humanity. On the day of Christ's human birth, hope arrived. Hope. It rings in our hearts. Hope. For this fragile baby would go on to change the course of history forever. The world would be "firmly established" and the peoples would be judged "with equity." Through Christ all people would become valued and the marginalized would be seen through the lens of dignity. The first would become last and the last first. The design of God's reign in heaven would be the blueprint for earth. Through Christ's birth we all have hope. So take courage on this day from knowing that God loves justice and God loves you. No situation is too dark for the light of God's love to enter. No circumstance is too far gone for the hand of God to permeate. Come behold the one who is our Savior! Come experience the love of God! Come embrace hope!

Prayer

Lord, we pause to remember that you are God: mighty, holy, supreme, and just. Thank you for always taking care of us. Thank you for being concerned with what concerns us. Thank you for loving us. Help us on this day and always to be ever grateful for all that we have. Help us to follow your example to leverage our privilege in behalf of those without it. Help us to recognize the disparities in this world and be agents of change for your glory. Amen.

Graham McWilliams '18

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.

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.

Jerome Creach, faculty

Advent is a time to anticipate the coming of God's kingdom that we have seen already in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is a time for reflection, for turning to God in prayer, to confess our sins and to petition God for the deepest needs of our hearts.

Given this description of Advent, Psalm 102 is a marvelous passage for the season. The heading of the psalm identifies the kind of person who might pray its words: "a prayer for one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the LORD." Perhaps being "afflicted" is the main requirement for celebrating Advent. "Afflicted" translates the Hebrew term *ani*, which may also be rendered "poor" or "needy." The Psalms suggest this description is a key self-identification of anyone who seeks God's salvation (Psalm 40:17). But being "poor" or "needy" does not suggest we should be self-effacing or that we should deny the abilities God has given us. Rather, the expression of need is the first and necessary step in opening ourselves to God's grace. Psalm 102 has been identified traditionally as a penitential psalm. Read this way, the psalm is particularly appropriate: our greatest sign of need, that which causes our spirits to wither (v. 4), is our sinful turning away from the God who loves us.

Prayer

O God, You "are enthroned forever, and your name endures to all generations." But our days are "like an evening shadow." So we lay before you our every weakness. The brevity of our lives are but signs of our failure to live as your people. We trust ourselves to you, O God, and we pray that by your grace we might live securely in your presence, now and forevermore. Amen.

Lezley Stewart '18

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.

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.

Psalm 110

1 The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." 2 The LORD sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes. 3 Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you. 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." 5 The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. 6 He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth. 7 He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore he will lift up his head.

Carolyn Cranston '99, staff, DMin student

As I read this psalm several times, the words of "I Love to Tell the Story" by Ian Eskelin keep ringing in my head. Beginning with the words, "The Lord says to my lord," God tells us the story of the Messiah, revealing Jesus the Christ to us. We find the prophetic voice of Psalm 110, more than any other ancient scripture, alluded to or quoted in the New Testament. Even Jesus quotes this passage when he is discussing who the Messiah is with the Pharisees in Matthew 22:41-46. God's promises assure us that Jesus, the Messiah, is exalted and sits at God's right hand. Christ will have the ultimate victory over his enemies; all power and authority belong to him. He is a priest from the line of Melchizedek, a priest of peace, not descended from Aaron. Jesus, the Messiah as priest, prays for us without ceasing. Regardless of the burden we are carrying, the grace, love, and prayers of Jesus cover us. We are able to hold fast to our hope in the midst of any challenge to our faith. What an amazing reality. As his people, we have a responsibility to willingly serve Jesus and proclaim the message of the Gospel to everyone. As we prepare for Advent and the celebration of Jesus' birth, let us remember that Christ will come again. Make your heart ready.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the grace, love, and prayers that you pour over us, for you alone quench our hunger and thirst. By the guidance of the Holy Spirit may we be faithful to your calling, living as true disciples of Jesus. It is in the name of Jesus we pray. 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.

KJ Norris '14

Images flood our minds of the sorrows of this world. Where is peace? Where is true shalom—peace that is not just absence from violence but holistic rest—encompassing internal and external peace with God and neighbor and earth and self?

Advent, the season of waiting for Christ to come, is a time to remember how very good it is to go to the house of the Lord. We go to the house of the Lord not to forget the troubles of the world, not to hide our eyes from the suffering, but to acknowledge them. For we remember that God does not stand far off, does not ignore suffering and sin, but God enters in. God took on human flesh, felt hunger and thirst and pain. Our Lord Jesus Christ defeated sin and death. So we await Christ's coming again when True Shalom will reign. We do not hide from sorrow, but we confess our sins, what we have done and what we have left undone, our individual sins and our collective sins. And we pray for peace while believing in the one who was and is and is to come, our Prince of Peace.

Prayer

Almighty God, it is truly good to spend time in your house praising your name. We give you thanks that you do not stand far off, but that you enter into our suffering. Teach us to be advocates for peace in this restless world, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lou Nyiri '96/'24

"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.

Jane Alexander Carl, McMillan Society member

Memories of childhood. Opening exercises of Sunday School. Call to worship there or in “big” church. We were reminded by this verse to be “glad” to go to the house of the Lord. Life centered on church activities if we weren’t in school. Someone in our family made it a priority to get us to church.

If such was not the case for you “back then,” hopefully you are reminded now that peace in our hearts often starts in the house of the Lord, where we worship in community and remember that all good things come from the Lord, who seeks *our* good.

Advent calls us to active remembering as we prepare to enter into the presence of God, who was before us, is now with us, and will be with us forever. May we share that remembrance often with others as we gladly go to the house of the Lord.

Prayer

We come to you, Lord, in anticipation of receiving you in our hearts and lives so that we may do your will, grateful for your loving care now and forever. Amen.

Paul Yanchek '23

Words can bring gladness. Words can cause pain. I am quite sure we have all experienced both. In Psalm 122, the psalmist discovers deep gladness upon the invitation to go to the house of the Lord. Oh, that all would discover deep joy and gladness to gather with the people of God. This Psalm includes a prayer for the city of Jerusalem, God’s holy city, that it would be a place of peace. A place of shalom, of well-being. It is a prayer that Jerusalem would be a place of security, or quietness and ease, for those within its walls. Just like words, the invitation to the house of God can evoke feelings of gladness, but many find them to be words that cause pain and sorrow.

In this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world, can we, the New Covenant dwelling place of God, be people and congregations that are a reason for gladness for all who come across our paths? A bright spot in an otherwise dark world. Can we be a people and congregations where all people can find shalom—genuine well-being? Not abusive words or looks of judgment. Can we be a people and congregations where all people can find security, quietness, and ease? Not condemnation and anxiety. Let the love, grace, healing, and peace of the people of God cause those around to find a source of gladness!

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, let your love and your light shine in and through your people. Make us a people of grace and healing to a hurting world. May we build-up, not tear down. May we be a people of reconciliation and justice. May we see the people around us with your eyes and love them with your heart. For the sake of your kingdom, let this work be done in me. 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.

Jelty Ochotan '11

In the world we live in, nothing comes easily. National independence is not achieved without enduring struggles, sacrifices of time, separation from family and friends, bloodshed, death, and the tears of fighters. Similarly, no student earns an A+ without hard work—sacrificing time for reading, doing homework, field studies, extracurricular activities, volunteering, and maintaining punctuality in class. Every endeavor requires full effort to attain the desired results.

The journey of the Israelites during the exile, marked by alternating hardships and blessings, illustrates that even in times of hunger, the people were provided for, demonstrating God's continuous care, which brought them joy. However, facing difficulties such as hunger and thirst in the hot desert was a test of their faithfulness to the Lord. During such trials, they often felt abandoned by God, leading to grumbling and rebellion.

This life process teaches us that spiritual maturity is not achieved easily. One must possess strong faith in God's help. The psalmist's imagery of sowing with tears symbolizes hard effort and deep trust in God's help. Tears represent profound sorrow and the inability to overcome challenges without surrendering to God's help and love. The ability to work hard is seen as a divine gift, leading to the joyful reaping of the fruits of one's labor. This joyful return follows a period of sorrow and hardship.

If people rely solely on their own abilities without depending on God, they will miss the true meaning of life and the profound joy found in God. Amen.

Prayer

God who gives joy and peace, we thank you for allowing us to experience sadness, suffering, and sacrifice. Through these trials, we understand that true joy and peace come from facing suffering with faith. We are grateful for the strength You provide in times of difficulty, enabling us to attain perfect salvation in You. Amen.

Carol Pitts '89

For the first time in her life, beloved Alisha is spending the Advent season in a memory care facility. Alisha is physically healthy, but Alzheimer's disease has ravaged her brain, leaving her unable to care for herself. She has become too difficult for her children to manage as they provide for their own children. Despite daily visits from her children, Alisha feels abandoned and alone. Her children feel guilty. It is a time of sadness with no hope of recovery, at least not in Alisha's lifetime. Still, in the midst of this disease, there are good times. In moments of lucidity, Alisha expresses her love for her children in a way she never has before. We must take the bitter with the sweet. But the psalmist reminds us that bitter is never the end. "Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy." The Christ is coming!

Prayer

God of all things, give us patience to deal with the trials in life. Grant us patience to wait with you until we see the Light. Amen.

Karen Baughman '06

We Christians are admonished to pray constantly. So we do. We almost besiege God with our constant prayers. It's kind of like the scene in the movie Bruce Almighty, where Jim Carrey's character is so overwhelmed by all the prayer requests coming in that he nearly goes crazy. We pray for ourselves. We pray for others. We pray for healing and strength and help and peace and food and shelter. We might even remember to give God thanks for the things that God has blessed us with. And it's all good. But sometimes we're so busy telling God what we want that we forget to listen for God's answer. Just as we wait for God's in-breaking into the world during this Advent season of waiting, let us begin to practice the silence of listening and wait for God's in-breaking into our hearts and lives, into our very souls.

Prayer

Acknowledging O God that all I am is a gift from you, I ask that you help me to live today fully and completely for you. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Wayland Coe '21

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.

Mike Haddox '12/'24

"I'm painting an elephant, daddy, I'm painting an elephant." I looked across the table at my 3 year old, totally consumed in his work, filled with joy, painting his favorite animal.

Later, when the painting dried, the joy quickly faded. He came over to look at his elephant and was disappointed and confused. In his initial excitement, he was certain he was painting an elephant. Now

the colors had drained into a giant pile of brown and the excitement gone. He wanted to know where the elephant went.

"Elephant?"

"It's right there!"

Without saying a word, he brought me a paintbrush. He trusted his dad to do something with the paint brush that he couldn't. As I began to fill in some lines and details, the excitement grew. He started to see his elephant. In moments his imagination picked right back up, and the joy returned, as his "Elephant?" became "Elephant!"

In the course of a lifetime, we will have moments where our masterpiece gets lost in the messiness of life. Israel finds themselves there in Psalm 126. However, they remember who God is, and what God can do when God is in control. So in anticipation, they hand that control over to God, and look forward to their mess becoming God's masterpiece.

The world is messy, and we often feel that chaos in our life. As we prepare this Advent season, may we recognize God's control and eagerly anticipate the working of a divine masterpiece in our life.

Prayer

Almighty God, we remember the blessing of your Word becoming flesh, and the blessing of creation through the life of Jesus. May we look not to ourselves, but to you, as the one who faithfully provides all that we need. 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.

Rob Marrow '97

Eugene Peterson translates verse one of Psalm 130 this way: "Help God, the bottom has fallen out of my life! Master, hear my cry for help!" Unfortunately, hopelessness is an all too common human cry. Have you ever gone through a period in your life when you felt that the words that you intended for God's ear were pouring out of your mouth, yet you thought that God was not listening? Yes, you say? Well, you are not alone. We all have times like this.

Fortunately, Psalm 130 speaks to us during these difficult times. The psalmist provides us with helpful words while we wait, words that help us to find hope!

"O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord, there is steadfast love." (Psalm 130:7) As we light the candle of "Hope" during the first week of advent, find your hope in the Lord!

Prayer

Dear God, during this season of Advent, teach us where to find our hope. Thank you for the hope that is found in Jesus!

Matt Williams '15

Last October I preached on Reformation Sunday from Psalm 130. It seemed to be an appropriate passage that demonstrated God's faithfulness to the Church throughout history, as well as continuity to the Lord's work. However, this scripture communicates something in a different light as we now encounter the season of Advent. As a prayer of lamentation and an address that is ordered out of abysmal circumstances, the text narratives hope to those drowning in the tumultuous waves of life. Advent can often feel like we are just naively whistling in the dark, while the sea consumes us. But just as the psalmist waits and anticipates God's promise, Advent teaches us the extraordinary thing that when everything seems to reel in the undercurrent of the waters, Resurrection and Life come piercing through the storm, or perhaps just in the form of baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Prayer

Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and grace, and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Savior and give us the strength to grow in grace, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Fred Graham '55 *(deceased)*

Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day: I remember being called in from play on a dismal winter Sunday afternoon. Japanese planes had attacked our naval yards at Pearl Harbor and air facilities nearby wreaking incredible damage and killing many on the ground and on our ships. We listened as President Roosevelt pronounced this "a day that would live in infamy." We cannot know what events had plunged the psalmist into the depths where he despaired of life and begged God's ear to hear his lament. (Or she: Huldah the prophetess must have felt unappreciated much of the time, and perhaps the psalm is her lament?) Many a believer has felt abandoned, lost in personal failure or beaten down by exterior forces. R.A. Dickey, knuckleball hurler, was devastated by his failure to stay in the major leagues; and even more by his personal failures as husband and father. Although a Christian, unexplored childhood abuse surfaced in harsh and unfaithful behavior. His wife Anne, an insistent and persistent believer, struggled with him and showed that "there is forgiveness with God." Freed from the demons of his past Dickey put 16 years in the minor leagues behind him and fellow players voted him the most valuable pitcher in the National League this year.

Prayer

Dear Lord, let your ears be attentive to my prayers as well. I try to do your will and (as one of your saints said) believe that you honor my attempt even if my discernment of your will is in error. Guide me today; may I see my Lord in every human face. Amen.

James Kirk '08/'20

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.

Diane Flynn '17

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.

Melanie Kim Hamill '12

It's late. It's dark in my house with only the faint glow of my digital clock, which reads 2:40 a.m. It might as well say 7:00 a.m. because sleep eludes me. I can't get out of my head. My stomach is in knots. I'm so worried. I'm fraught. There is no way out. I feel so alone. I will be found out.

Have you ever found yourself in over your head? Out of your depth? Sometimes, despite our best intentions we can find ourselves overcome with self-doubt and driven by self-preservation at any cost. This plight is especially the case when we have messed up and left the trustworthy, narrow path to find our own way. In turn, we are led to a place of deep anxiety, fear, and isolation. Taking up residence in this place of darkness is our undoing. The psalmist knows this place—intimately. However, the psalmist also knows that God is the only sure thing. God is relentless in God's pursuit of us. With pure love, grace, mercy, power, and strength, God rescues us, redeems us, and sustains us through God's own son. We have a way out and a way through in Christ. Christ is our assurance that we are in fact never alone and

always welcome, even if we have gone rogue. As we wait, we hope. We hope because we are lavishly loved.

Prayer

We wait upon you, Christ our Lord
for you come in love,
you come in peace,
and you come for us.

Grant us courage oh long expected One,
for you are the fulfillment of our hoping.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer, Amen.

Maryjane Peck '24

Advent is a time of longing and waiting. There is a collective remembrance of what was and a desire for more. The need for divine connection permeates throughout this season. During the years before Christ's coming, change (some good and some bad) continued to happen to God's people as it does today. Life is not stagnant; rather it is always full of movement. Throughout all the lifetimes and changes, hope prevailed. God's promise was of redemption: "a light will shine out of darkness." Advent reminds us that in the dark of this season, Christ's light will shine.

Today, we still long for God to be near to us. We ask for God's grace to surround us as we cope with day to day living. In our anxiety and fears, we call out to God in prayer. God hears our cries. Even in our darkest hours, God hears us. Knowing that we are never alone or far from God's love provides comfort and healing. As Christmas approaches, it is a reminder of God's promise that was fulfilled. We can rejoice because God continues to love us beyond our imagining. Today Christ's light will shine around, in, and through us as we share in the love of God in our daily lives.

Prayer

O God, as the ancient prophets cried to you, hear my prayer. I search for the same star that guided the wise ones to guide me to you. Let me follow your path of truth, no matter what temptations, discouragements, or false idols are put in my way. God, you are my hope and salvation. Let me feel your presence always. Amen.

Psalm 145

1 I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable. 4 One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, 12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. 14 The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. 16 You open

your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. 17 The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. 18 The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. 19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. 20 The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. 21 My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Roger Owens, faculty

Descartes said, "I think therefore, I am." A Christian might say, "I desire, therefore I am." Human beings are creatures of desire. Growing in the Christian life is about learning to have our desires reordered. My children had a friend over a few weeks ago. They were looking together at Christmas toy catalogue. One of my kids said to the friend's mom, "You should buy this for her; it would make her day." She replied, "We hope she might find satisfaction in other things besides toys." In other words: We are trying to help her desire the right things.

Psalm 145:16 says of God, "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." This doesn't mean God satisfies all of our shallow, fleeting desires. Rather, God knows our deepest desire is to rest in God. *That's* the desire only God can satisfy.

May God give us, this Advent, the stillness we need to discover this deepest desire for God, and then joy when we see the fulfillment of this desire in the face of a Child.

Prayer

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set they people free;
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Dave Throop '71

In the Old Testament, the word "Lord" is a reference to God. However, for followers of Christ, the word "Lord" in the Old Testament often implies Christ. While Psalm 145 is an Old Testament reading, we who are followers of Christ understand it as a psalm which clearly speaks of our Lord Jesus: "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise!" "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love." "The Lord is righteous in all his ways . . . and is near to all who call on him." Don't these descriptions also proclaim what we truly believe about Christ? Christmas is all about Incarnation—God taking on human form in order that what was foretold might be fulfilled in Christ for each one of us!

Prayer

Gracious Lord God, during this Advent season, thank You for the gift of Jesus, truly the culmination and perfection of Your grace, compassion, and love. In his strong name we pray. Amen.

Joan Hogge '04 and Allen Hogge '08

"God is good, God is great." How many times did you pray that prayer as a child? Did you ever ponder what it means to say that God is both good and great? Or, like most of us, did you just repeat it as part of table grace, never really thinking about what the words meant? These simple six words in a childhood prayer tell us a great deal about the nature of the God who came to dwell among us as Jesus of Nazareth.

The writer of Psalm 145 paints a picture of both the greatness and goodness of God. God has done mighty acts and awesome works. God's mighty deeds are known to all people. But for some of us the image of a mighty and powerful God instills fear—fear of a vengeful and judging God. The psalmist, however, sees a God whose greatness and goodness are completely intertwined. This God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in love. God is good to all God's creation, and "his compassion is over all he has made." This powerful God who created the universe manifests that power in gracious and compassionate love toward that creation. The psalmist reminds us that God gives us our food, satisfies our desires, and is just in all his ways. God is near to all who call on him.

God is great and God is good! God's very nature is love. In that knowledge we can have no greater joy. "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised."

Prayer

Holy God, like the psalmist, we too praise your name for your greatness, goodness, and mercy to each one of us. We give you thanks for your abundant blessings, which come to us each day. Your mercy is there to greet us and to guide our steps throughout the day. Most of all we thank you for your great love given to each one of us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Corinne Cameron '23

Christmas evokes many different memories. These include decorating our homes, singing beautiful music, and enjoying family time with favourite treats. However, not all memories are filled with joy. We also have some memories that are tinged with both sadness and joy.

One example of a both/and memory is when I visited my dying grandma who suffered from dementia. It was the beginning of December, and I quickly ran out of things to say. I turned to my aunt who suggested I sing Christmas carols to Grandma. As I sang, my grandma joined in and we sang together for over an hour. This was the last time I spent with her. It is a Christmas memory that is filled with both joy and sadness.

In our psalm for today, we read how the psalmist remembers the wonderful deeds of God (v. 6). We also read of sorrow as the Lord promises to raise those who are bowed down (v. 14). In both these joy-filled and sorrow-filled memories, we read that the Lord is present. The Psalm invites us to remember that the Lord is near (v.18) and believe that the Lord hears our cries (v. 19).

This year, as we make new memories, let us invite God into all of our memories.

Prayer

Memory-making God, we thank you for your presence in our lives. Today we give to you our both/and memories as we draw near to you and listen to your voice. 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!

Richard W. Wingfield '02/'13

The psalm is the first of five Hallel psalms. Here, the psalmist vows his praise to God and hope in God for his entire life because of God's character, care, and concern for the most vulnerable of society.

In this broken and polarized world with its volatile rhetoric, many powerful voices are clamoring for our attention claiming to be for us. In many cases, we have lent our voices to this rhetorical fray, declaring our support for them. Yet, this psalm is a reminder not to place our trust in those who possess power, prestige, position, or prosperity. Their lives are temporary, their plans finite, and they have no control over their destiny, let alone the lives of others.

Psalm 146 is a call to orient our praise and hope toward the everlasting and sovereign God of all creation. It is God who will see to it that the most vulnerable and marginalized, of whom Howard Thurman declared, "whose backs are against the wall" are cared for. Governments and armies have their place, but human power pales in comparison in the world where God reigns.

Yes, we are to sing the praises of our God. But the vocality of our praise must never be a substitute for our vocation of service to others. For the quality of the faith is judged by the quality of the justice in the land, i.e., how the least members of society are treated. My father often declared that we are the hands and feet of God. It is God who gives us the ability to extend the heart of God.

This psalm is God's letter of recommendation for the powerless. Notice them. Help them. Become one of them. Walk with them as the beloved community. It was Dr. James Forbes who once stated, "No one gets into heaven without a letter of recommendation from the poor."

And as we extend our hand, the voice of the Master says, "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me." This is indeed a life that's blessed.

Prayer

Dear God, in a world that constantly calls for our allegiance, help us to trust you in all things. Help us to work out what you are working in us. Give us a heart like yours and help us to be an extension of your love. In Christ's name, amen.

Mary (Jo) Ramsey '99

Every December, our church's children present an ambitious Christmas pageant. Last year, we began our first practice by reading Luke's version of the Christmas story. Little Jack drew close, his eyes wide with anticipation, but as the teacher started to read, Jack frowned. He crossed his arms. He began to pout and flick a fuzz on the carpet.

"What's wrong?" I asked when the story ended.

"It's the same old story from last year!" Jack grumbled. "I already know that one!"

Everyone chuckled. "Yep," I said. "That's true. We tell the same old story every year--but in the pageant we try to tell it in a fresh, fun way."

It is the challenge and beauty of Christmas—that we tell the same old story every year: The Christ Child was born in a lowly stable surrounded by singing angels, sleepy shepherds, and kneeling kings. God’s love became flesh and dwelt among us. We know the story by heart.

How can something so familiar still overwhelm us with joy and fill us with hope? By connecting us with a Love that transcends time and place. Yes, Jesus entered human history at a specific moment and location, but the Spirit of Christmas itself is timeless.

Today’s reading features many time-related words, including lifelong, eternity, and generations. The psalmist sketches the long view of God’s amazing, ongoing activity in the world. Like Mary’s Magnificat, it celebrates God’s abundant, surprising mercy, reminding us that God has saved, is saving, and will save.

There is nothing old or stale about this Good News! God is always doing a new thing! In that is our hope! While every morning may be a little Easter, so every midnight can be a little Christmas. Poet Ann Weems put it this way:

The Christmas Spirit is that hope
which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful
and announces in the face of any Herod, the world can produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God all things are possible,
that even now
unto us a Child is born!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you are the Alpha and Omega. We praise You for Your saving acts throughout time and space. We give thanks for the “same old stories” which reveal who You are and whose we are. Bless us as we prepare our hearts for Christmas. May we cling to the promise and possibility of Christmas Hope! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Leanna Fuller, faculty

Although the psalms are read all throughout the church year, Psalm 146 takes on special significance when we read it during Advent. I am particularly struck by the language of verse 3: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” The princes and mortals of the world tell us that right now, we should be striving to accumulate more things and to show our love through material gifts. They tell us that Advent is nothing more than a set of shopping days.

But we know better: Advent is about preparing to welcome the birth of God’s son into our lives. And Psalm 146 reminds us of just what Christ’s coming calls us to do: to join God in the work of seeking justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, setting the prisoners free, and upholding the orphan and widow. These are the things to which we’re called to commit ourselves. This Advent season, as we consider what our priorities should be, let us look not to the princes and mortals in our midst, but to God and to the kingdom God is bringing into being all around us.

Prayer

Gracious God, during this season when the world overwhelms us with demands, remind us of what our true priorities should be. Help us to keep our eyes on you, and to focus our energies on bringing about justice and peace, which are signs of your kingdom here on earth. Amen.

Jeffrey Conn '00

In Psalm 146 the writer tells us, “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help. When their breath departs they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish” (vv. 3-4). On whom can we depend? “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God . . . who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry” (vv. 5, 7a).

Jesus told a parable about a “judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people” yet helped a widow: “‘I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ And the Lord said ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you he will quickly grant justice to them,’” (Luke 18:2, 5-7). The writer of Psalm 146 reminds us that “The LORD will reign forever”—so we should “Praise the LORD!” (v. 10).

Prayer

Thank you, God, that your power to save is not limited by our weakness. Your love for us is not limited by our sinfulness. Hear the cries of our heart and grant us justice. May we find your presence as close as our breath and the ground beneath our feet. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Don McKim '74

Advent is for anticipation. God’s promised Messiah is coming. God’s promises are being fulfilled.

There is no better Advent action than praising God’s greatness and goodness, God’s help for the world and us. Psalms 33 and 146 provide language for this praise, exalting God for who God is and what God has done.

Climactically the psalmist proclaims: “The Lord will reign forever” (Ps. 146:10). This God loves “righteousness and justice.” The earth is “full of the steadfast love of the Lord” (Ps. 33:5). This God is our “help and our shield” (Ps. 33:20). No wonder “our heart is glad” in God because we “trust” in God’s “holy name” (Ps. 33:21)! As Calvin said, “whether living or dying, we shall be safe under the keeping of a king who reigns expressly for our salvation” (Comm. Ps. 146:10).

Prayer

O God, in Jesus Christ, your promises come true. We praise, we trust, we rejoice! Amen.

Kevin Onyebuchi Nnachette '21

“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.

Mike Haddox '12/'24

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.

Doris Calian, McMillan Society member

As we prepare to greet and celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, let us approach each day with our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to finding glimpses of Christ in all our daily encounters. Let us start each day observing and appreciating each member of our household. Move on to those we meet regularly at our work and study places. Remember to observe those who serve us by bringing mail, tending our stores, repairing our roads. Keep in mind many whom we do not see who are suffering from infirmities, lost or fighting in desperate situations, some even oblivious to their surroundings. These

souls are all children of God, and Christ looks to us to be one with them as we expectantly approach the gift of the Holy Babe in Bethlehem.

Prayer

Dear Lord, guide and lead us as we seek each day to recognize your presence in our midst. Help us to be sensitized to your love for all humanity and humbly accept all people of your creation as our sisters and brothers. 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.

Emily Cooper '19

There is one week left until Christmas Day. If you are like me, you might not be filled with overwhelming joy, but instead filled with anxiety about how everything will get done. Are all the cookies baked? Even the special ones that the kids like to leave for Santa? Have you finished wrapping the presents? Have you started? Have you bought the presents yet? Did you mail the things being shipped out of state? There is so much happening in this final countdown to Christmas!

The season of Advent is one of preparation. Over the past several weeks, we have been preparing our hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus, our Savior. We may have also been creating a giant to-do list to make it to the big day. It is easy to get lost in the busyness of the season. Our joy can be overtaken by our quest for the perfect holiday. We can lose ourselves this time of year.

Today, as you think about all that is left on your to do list, I encourage you to stop and breathe. Read Psalm 147:1-11, then slowly read it again. God is gracious. The Christmas carols we hear everywhere we go are praising the Divine. No matter how we feel today, no matter what our list may look like, God is with us, tending to us. God heals the brokenhearted and is understanding beyond measure. God lifts us up. There is a reason to be filled with joy! God's steadfast love is with us always, giving us what we need each and every day. So, if the chaos of the season is overpowering the peaceful preparation you'd planned on experiencing, know that you are not alone. Take a moment to allow yourself to feel the joy offered in knowing that no matter what you are experiencing, God is with you, and Emmanuel is coming once again on Christmas morning.

Prayer

God of all seasons, thank you for today. Thank you for days filled to the brim with things needing to be done. Thank you for quiet, calm days. Thank you for seasons of life that are full beyond measure, and thank you for the days when we long for just one thing to do. Kindle your Divine joy in our hearts, so that we may share it with others as we go through our day. In Jesus' holy name we pray, amen.

Dawn Sherwood '15

“Let me thy inner presence feel; Thy grace and love in me reveal” (“Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gate”, stanza 3, Georg Weisell, 1642; Trans. Catherine Winkworth, 1855).

When reflecting on this psalm in relation to this Advent season, I am struck by the hope that lies within the words of the Lord gathering the outcasts, healing the brokenhearted, and binding up their wounds. Although God is great and powerful without measure, the Lord continues to be present for us even when we are at our weakest. God has promised His steadfast love and is delighted when we recognize this and are in awe of Him. We have the opportunity during this Advent season to share this hope to those who are at their weakest. For true HOPE rests in the faith of the Lord’s abounding grace and never-ending love.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this day and this season of hope. You promise your steadfast love to those who are weary, brokenhearted, and outcaste. We ask that your Holy Spirit guide us to people who feel this way, so that we reflect your love and grace to them, and thereby becoming instruments of the hope that lies in the faith in you. It is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.

Ed Newberry '71

The 147th is the second of the last five Hallelujah Psalms. Praise the Lord is the marvelous refrain. Old Testament scholar, James L. Mays writes “Psalm 147 begins with praise of praise itself.” But true praise is for the Holy One of power and compassion. Sovereignty is expressed not just with creation, but also God’s care for the outcasts, brokenhearted, downtrodden of Israel. Being counted among the needy blessed by God, we cry Hallelujah.

Reformed theologian Cornelius Plantinga reminds us that “Advent is a time when Christians draw alongside the Hebrews of the Old Testament. We share the longing of the people of God for the anointed one.” We join the great refrain of praise in Advent. We sing gladly because we trust God and entrust ourselves to divine grace. We rejoice with hope in God’s steadfast love witnessed in God’s visitation to this earthly realm in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Prayer

Gracious God, along with our ancestors in the faith we pray fervently, “O come, O come Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” With amazing grace, free us from our captivities and restore the glad hope we can have because Christ comes to us and to the world. May our hearts and minds receive your gift of Jesus. Amen.

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.

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.

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.

Dorothy Densmore '04

Many, many years ago, my cousin, a photography hobbyist, introduced me to the wonders of the newly developed macro lens. He focused in on a small spider making its way across a thin, white strand. As I gazed upon the scene, my world exploded with new insight and wonder. This tiny spider had very hairy legs! And that thin, white strand was in fact a strong cord woven from three, fine filaments.

As both microscopes and telescopes improved over the years, new worlds of wonder have emerged for all humanity. God's creation is so much more intricate, more interwoven, and more expansive than we had ever imagined. The creation we could see and touch was just the most obvious of the circles of systems that grow ever larger—and ever smaller. Join one human being with others and you have a family system. Join families together and you have tribes and nations—over continents. Conversely, reduce a human body to its component parts and you have bodily systems, then organs, then cells in a myriad of forms and functions.

Our knowledge of God's creation in this way is limited only by our technological ability—these concentric circles go on and on. What beauty, what wonders are yet to be discovered! "Praise the Lord!" the psalmist cries. Indeed, how can we not desire to spend our lives in fear, awe, and worship of our gracious Lord and his wondrous ability!

Prayer

How amazing, O Lord, is your creation! From the smallest of microbes to the grandest of mountains, from the seeking light of a firefly to the brilliance of the night sky, you never cease to proclaim your power and glory to a world in search of your sovereignty. May we be as children, forever excited by new discoveries of your creative power joined by an ever-deepening desire to protect it and share it with the world. Amen.

Walter Canter '24

The choir director at my childhood church had a large collection of neon colored hula hoops. He would spread them around the floor in haphazard patterns and have his elementary school aged singers run in and sit inside a hula hoop. I believe it was primarily a plot to keep us from poking one another, but my favorite use of the hula hoops (aside from actual hula hooping) was to sing "Allelu! Allelu! Allelu! Alleluia! Praise Ye The LORD!" (When I use the verb 'sing' here, I mean something more along the lines of 'rhythmically scream at the top of our adolescent lungs.')

When we 'sang' the Allelus, we were allowed to jump into another adjacent hula hoop. It was glorious mayhem, especially when one of us would get too excited and jump into the next hoop on "Praise Ye The Lord!" instead of "Alleluia!" The result was full contact children's choir—and it was glorious.

Psalm 147 is all about the joy of returning home, rebuilding, and reconciling wrongs, and like the Psalms that surround it, it begins and ends with "Hallelujah!" which means "Praise the Lord!" but, in the middle there's a hail storm (v.17). As you rejoice your way through Advent remember that sometimes songs of praise are messy and chaotic (especially in the middle). Embrace the beauty of God in these messy songs and know that God is gracious, and your song of praise, however it sounds, however it looks today, is fitting.

Prayer

Awesome God!

Let me praise you today.

Allelu! <insert your own dance move of prayer>

Allelu! <insert the same dance move of prayer>

Allelu! <insert the same dance move of prayer>

Alleluia! <amp; it up by switching up your move and going all out>

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!

Danielle Estelle Ramsay '16

When the psalmist calls Jerusalem to praise the Lord,
we are reminded of the honor we have been given,
the honor of being God's chosen people.

The season of Advent is one of preparation,
preparation for the great gift our Lord has given us.

We wait, we remember, we remain, we praise.

We who are blessed among humanity to have seen the Lord.

And all of the great things he has done for us:

He fills us with fine wheat, with provision, with food and shelter and family.

He has given us a savior to rescue us, in our weakness.

He has not dealt in this way with any other nation.

We who are blessed among humanity, who have the peace of the Lord in our hearts.

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!

While we wait for his return,

with Zion,

we take up the great and beautiful task of praising our God!

Prayer

Lord, as we linger in this season of anticipation, help us to truly live in remembrance of you,
coming together as the One Body to praise your name. Amen.

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.

James Golla '16, DMin student

How does one rejoice as the cold of winter is upon us? As the weather gets colder and the nights longer, one can find themselves with a case of the winter blues. The effect of the snow and the frost can become overwhelming. The psalmist reminds us that the sovereign God is the one who has control over the elements; like snow, frost, and hail. In response to the chilling angst that has overcome us, God sends God's word as the wind blows. Wind, in Hebrew, carries the connotation of not only the power, but the presence of God. The wind carries God's word throughout the world.

As we approach Christmas, we have the image of God's Word (John 1) wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger (Luke 2). The wind, or rather the presence of God, is made known through God's Word—Jesus Christ the Son. The presence of God is made known in the midst of our cold and blue winter days. A presence that is melting away at the anxiety and fear that we carry. A presence that is melting away at the injustices and oppression in our world. A presence that can help us rejoice, because God is truly with us.

Prayer

Sovereign God, as seasons of our lives change your Word remains constant. As we look toward the birth of Jesus, let our cold hearts be melted by the warmth of your love. Help us to encounter your presence and love in one another. Praise the Lord! Amen.

Psalm 148

1 Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! 3 Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! 4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 5 Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. 6 He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. 7 Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, 8 fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! 9 Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! 10 Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! 12 Young men and women alike, old and young together! 13 Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and

heaven. 14 He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Angela Dienhart Hancock, faculty

There's a legend about Christmas Eve immortalized in Thomas Hardy's poem *The Oxen*. Go out to a stable or pasture or sheepfold at midnight on Christmas Eve, the legend says, and you will see the farm animals kneel in worship of God. A haunting idea: the descendants of the first witnesses to the incarnation bear witness still. Psalm 148 shares this vision—praise is the work of all creation, not just the humans. Sun, moon, stars, water, snow, mountains, wind, things with feathers, things with fur, things that crawl—even sea monsters have a part in creation's love song to the Lord of all. How would it change our relationship to the life all around us if we saw this menagerie as a congregation at worship, bearing witness to Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all creation?

Last month a new species of frog was discovered in Los Angeles, Calif. Los Angeles! Amazing. Surely there could be sea monsters out there somewhere, who knows? Wouldn't you love to hear them praise the Lord? And if someone invites you out to the barnyard to see the animals on their knees this Christmas Eve, go gladly into the gloom, hoping, with Hardy, that it might be so.

Prayer

Lord of all things, Thank you for planting us in the midst of the congregation that is creation. As we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Firstborn, may your Spirit open us to the song of praise all around us, that we might contribute a verse. In the strong name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Larry Homitsky, former Board member

I don't feel like getting ready for Christmas at all!!!! Both my mother and my mother-in-law are in the final stages of life with severe memory loss and day-to-day needs that we continue to drop everything to attend to. My workload seems so over extended that every week I am physically worn out and not even able to squeeze in the "together time" my family so richly deserves. And at 6:00 p.m. today—the day I'm writing this Advent devotional—we will put our beloved rescue dog to sleep, because cancer and a stroke have already taken away her spirit. I feel like I should be writing on a text from Job! Have you ever felt like that?

But I'm writing from Psalm 148—one of the lectionary text for today. And it's placed in the midst of a whole section of writings that specifically celebrates the vast glory of God manifested in the world—all around, in everything we see and are nurtured by, and everything within that can provide meaning and purpose for life itself. I believe these writings exist just for these Job moments—writings to assist us in keeping perspective and faith!

I carry a beach stone in my pocket all the time—a stone found during one of my many beach walks. When I hold it up really close to my eyes, it throws everything else out of focus. But when I pull it away to where it belongs, everything else immediately comes back into proper perspective. I have so much to be thankful for. In fact, the loss I feel so close to right now is only because of the many years of great gain I have been blessed with. Psalm 148, thanks for reminding me. Merry Christmas!

Prayer

Oh Lord, hear our prayers of gratitude for all the glorious gifts we receive daily. Then help us keep life's many challenges in the appropriate perspective necessary for true health of body,

mind, and spirit. And when the burdens of life coming knocking at our door, may the room they enter always be large enough to place them in the corners, where they truly belong, thus enabling our faith-filled celebrations to hold center place among all our experiences now and forever. Amen.

Psalm 149

1 Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. 2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. 3 Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. 4 For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory. 5 Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. 6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, 7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, 8 to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, 9 to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord!

Lexi Joachim Scoggin '09

If we were able to look at the entire span of our life from God's eternal perspective, it would be like a pinprick on a spectrum that stretches infinitely in both (or many) directions. If we magnified that pinprick, we would observe that of all the messages that God was trying to instill in us, year after year our whole life through, the two outstanding would be those of Christmas and Easter. What did God want to drive home in these about Himself and our relationship to God?

- Trust only in the arms of the Father, just as a child understands no truer love, protection or comfort apart from its own mother and father.
- Admit your helplessness, your inability to survive without constant nurture, just as that which an attentive parent gives a newborn infant.
- Give up your cross—that is, yourself—which you cannot carry alone in your weakness, and rely on the strength, love and everlasting grace that is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the Advent season, let us experience these messages yet again—with the newness that they bring to our life this day—and let us turn our eyes to the manger and to the cross in humbleness and awe.

Prayer

Dear Everlasting Father, help us to approach you with the longing of an infant for its mother, the meekness of a child who wants only to be held in love, and the repentance of a man or woman who knows our limits. Thank you for your grace that reaches into eternity. 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!

Leanna Fuller, faculty

Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. It is a time of watching and waiting as we prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts and lives anew. This perspective sounds very different from what we see

each December in our culture, which encourages us to set our minds on what we *want* or hope to receive as gifts. Psalm 150 reminds us that during this Advent season (and all year round) we are called first to praise God for God's mighty deeds and according to God's surpassing greatness. Without God's grace and love, we would not exist. This realization should move us to praise God in every way we can think of, rather than focusing on what we want God to give us or do for us. This Advent, let's turn away from the constant "I want" messages of our consumer culture and, instead, lift our praises to God in a spirit of gratitude and awe. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Prayer

Gracious God, we praise you for the gift of life, and for your grace and love. As we journey through this season of Advent, help us shift our focus from the many things that we want to the opportunities we have to praise you in our lives and in our communities. Amen.

Candace Veon-Nyiri '96

LET EVERYTHING WITH BREATH PRAISE THE LORD!

Psalm 150 reminds me of an invitation to a party! It gives us the who, what, where, why, and how of throwing a celebration in God's honor. All that have life and breath are invited to fulfill their very purpose for existence by praising the Creator, who gives us breath.

In a few days a celebration will be taking place and all people of this world are included to join in the crescendo of praise for our good and great and glorious God! For many of us, this most joyful celebration of God gets buried under the burdens and stress of everyday living. We forget our call to praise and worship! Let us refocus and remember that God has done great things for us. Let us celebrate with abandonment and enthusiasm the amazing fact that God came to earth as a child, the long awaited Messiah...and that child lived and breathed and grew to be the man who died and rose again so that we might have the gift of eternal life. It is time for a party.

LET EVERYTHING WITH BREATH PRAISE THE LORD!

Prayer

Gracious God, as we approach Christmas, may we join in the celebration like the heavenly hosts and angels, shepherds, wise men, and people of all times and places praising and saying: "Glory to God in the Highest"! May we be open and attuned to the wonder of celebrating the One who Christmas is all about. With grateful hearts we thank you, God!

Brendan Ashley '16

What an appropriate text for the Advent season. The Psalm mentions the word praise 13 times. It demands that we praise in the sanctuary. It demands that we get ready to meet the incarnate God, our king, through dancing, singing, and playing instruments. It demands praise from everything that breathes; everything that lives.

During this Advent season remember that there are many ways to praise our Lord, and this Psalm is a great example of that. Let us give praise to our Lord Jesus who came on our behalf so that we might know God in the most intimate way. The Lord came and found us in our wandering and complacency. Jesus came for the hungry, the oppressed, and the sick. Our Lord continues to reveal himself to us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope that Advent can draw us ever closer to the movement of the Holy Spirit, so that we can continue to praise God in different ways and places each day.

Prayer

Lord God, creator of the universe, thank you for the life you have breathed into your beautifully diverse creation. Thank you for finding us in our wandering, for meeting us wherever it is our feet take us. I pray that we join in the celebration, praising you with our whole selves. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

Dieuner Joseph '19

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.

Betty Angelini '09

Christmas day is on the way! 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!

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.

First Readings: Old Testament Law and Prophets

Isaiah 1:1-9

1 The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. 2 Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. 3 The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. 4 Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged! 5 Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6 From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil. 7 Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. 8 And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. 9 If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

Allison Bauer '05

Isaiah, son of Amoz, describes a desolate scene: people rebelling with eyes that cannot see, forsaking and despising the Holy One of Israel. "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint" (v. 5).

Things haven't changed much, have they? Still we rebel; still we forsake the Holy One. It is the human condition, this being mired in a pit of sin. But the hope of salvation persists.

As the Israelites waited for the Messiah to descend, we eagerly anticipate the return of the Messiah who will deliver us from evil. Now we sing "Love came down at Christmas/ Love all lovely, Love Divine." But then we shall sing "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (Rev. 5:12). The hope of salvation persists.

Living with one foot in heaven and one on earth is demanding. And frustrating. We pray for the "already" while living in the "not yet" of Christ's reign. But we persist because the hope of salvation, "Love Incarnate, Love Divine," came down at Christmas—and, we believe, will come again.

Prayer

Gracious God, strengthen us in our waiting so that our rebellion will cease. Hold always before us the hope of salvation as we await the day when Love will come down again. In Love's name we pray, Amen.

Kate Mauch '24

When I was little, I got a picture book from the library about the people of Israel. Even as a kid, I noticed a pattern. There would be a picture of the people celebrating that God had saved them, and then a picture of the people rebelling against God and being attacked by invaders. Rinse and repeat. As a kid, the solution seemed so obvious. Just stop!

Of course, things aren't that simple. We can probably all think of people we know who can't seem to break a destructive cycle, or are stuck in toxic patterns, or who can't seem to break free from addiction. Maybe we are the very person who comes to mind.

From outside, it can seem so simple. Just stop! But as we all know, it's not that easy. Just like the people of Israel, we can struggle to break destructive cycles and patterns even when we know the pain they cause.

We have reason to rejoice, however. God saw the painful cycle of the people of Israel and took it upon Godself to end it. When the people of Israel could not break the cycle, God broke it for them, by offering them redemption that depended not on themselves, but on God's abounding grace and love.

If you, too, are caught in a cycle you wish to break, dear reader, may you remember that God's redemption, love and grace are already yours. May you find reason to rejoice this season.

Prayer

God of freedom, too often we do the things we know we shouldn't, and fail to do the things we know we should. Help us to break free of harmful patterns and to embrace the freedom you offer with joyful hearts. In your name we pray. Amen.

Isaiah 1:10-20

10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. 12 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; 13 bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. 14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. 18 Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Ben Beres '10

Last night at dinner, my son was singing one of my favorite Christmas carols, the Little Drummer Boy. I think there is something beautiful about seeing the smallest, meager talents bring a smile to Jesus' face. As my son sings this song to himself, it's sweet and touching and not at all what he's supposed to be doing. He's singing this song I love, but what I really want him to be doing is eating his dinner. He's not confused about where we are or what we're supposed to be doing, he's just choosing to do something else.

It's a lot like Israel during Isaiah's work there. The people have a multitude of sacrifices they're bringing. They have offerings, festivals, and feasts. All of these are good things in their own right. They just aren't what God has called Israel to be doing. In fact, because of this, God calls these activities sin; He can't even look at them when they pray!

As sweet as it is for my son to sing this song, after telling them several times that he needs to be eating his dinner, I start to get angry. I've told, encouraged, and now I threaten. Unless he eats his dinner, we

won't be going to the bookstore. His face gets sad, his eyes get big, his chin trembles. And he picks up his fork. I have no desire to cause my son pain, but as his father, I have a responsibility to take care of him, even when it means correcting him so that he does what he ought to instead of what he wants to. I want my son to sing. I love to hear him sing. But I want more than that for him.

In much the same way, God does not enjoy causing pain, but neither will he let his people live for what they want to do (even "good" things) without doing what they ought. They ought to "learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow". These are where their focus should be. This is what God has called them to.

My son ate his dinner. He didn't eat everything off the plate and I didn't need him to. I needed him to eat the food to give him the nutrition so that he can continue to grow, learn, and experience life. God also has hopes for us, reasons why he wants us to live one way over another, His own way over our own. He wants to cleanse us, to make us holy. He wants us to be able to "eat the best from the land". But such things only come from obediently being his people. Expect the unexpected. God will judge us, not to destroy us, but for our redemption.

Prayer

Giving God, help us to live as we ought, not as we want. Helps us to remember the fatherless and the widow this Advent, to love them as we love ourselves. Reveal yourself to us that we may understand better how to live for and love you in the places we find ourselves. May we live so faithfully that when we do sing, it brings a smile to your face. Amen.

Paula Cooper '10/'13

Okay, God is piqued! In this passage of Isaiah, God sounds pretty annoyed with the leaders and people of Judah for their vain offerings and lack of obedience in the assemblies. God unequivocally says, "[T]hey have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them." But to me, it is liberating to know that even though God is piqued or weary at their (our) "fake" obedience and worship or liturgy styles, God ALWAYS provides opportunities—as often as necessary—for our behaviors and bad habits to be transformed into obedient actions that are pleasing to God. In verses 16-18, God provides step-by-step instructions.

In addition, God invites us in to an argument (One scholar says, "God deigns to argue the case with us, that all may see the just, nay, loving principle of His dealings with men"); and God still offers an option, a choice, between redemption and destruction. What gracefulness—because no matter what decision we make, God will be God! I, myself, choose the opportunity of redemption! Will you? Jesus came so that we "may have life and have life more abundantly."

Prayer

Dear Lord, during this Advent season we prepare ourselves for the Second Coming of Jesus, the Christ. May we open our minds and hearts to follow the instructions that lead to the opportunity of redemption so that we may be transformed into obedient, faithful, and truthful worshipers who present ourselves as "living sacrifices pleasing unto God" now and forever. Amen!

Isaiah 1:21-31

21 How the faithful city has become a harlot!
It was full of justice;
Righteousness lodged in it,
But now murderers.
22 Your silver has become dross,
Your wine mixed with water.
23 Your princes are rebellious,
And companions of thieves;
Everyone loves bribes,
And follows after rewards.
They do not defend the fatherless,
Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.
24 Therefore the Lord says,
The Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel,
“Ah, I will rid Myself of My adversaries,
And take vengeance on My enemies.
25 I will turn My hand against you,
And thoroughly purge away your dross,
And take away all your alloy.
26 I will restore your judges as at the first,
And your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”
27 Zion shall be redeemed with justice,
And her penitents with righteousness.
28 The destruction of transgressors and of sinners shall be together,
And those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.
29 For they shall be ashamed of the terebinth trees
Which you have desired;
And you shall be embarrassed because of the gardens
Which you have chosen.
30 For you shall be as a terebinth whose leaf fades,
And as a garden that has no water.
31 The strong shall be as tinder,
And the work of it as a spark;
Both will burn together,
And no one shall quench them.

Peter Sutton '24

This passage from Isaiah talks about transformation by virtue of having changed your ways. Transformation and change are both classic themes of this advent season. The key outcome is to be found in verse 26: “Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”

But to be this new city, the city of Zion, it will require its people to be on watch and alert to the coming of Christ. Many advent carol services start with this great verse:

“The Watchmen raise their voices, and together shout for joy, for with their own eyes they see the Lord return to Zion.” (Isaiah 52:8)

This advent season, if we too are to experience the joy and the hope of the incarnation, we too must be prepared to be on watch. For surely the coming of a saviour might catch us unawares and, if it does, we will have missed being part of the greatest story ever told.

My church—St. Cuthbert's, The Mother Kirk of Edinburgh—lies at the foot of the Castle Rock, and there is a great sense of both Castle and Church being alert and ready to welcome visitors to this great city. So it is with the words of the prayer of St. Cuthbert that we too are now encouraged to help welcome the Christ Child once more into our world.

Prayer

“Open our eyes, Lord to see your glory. Open our ears Lord, to hear your call. Open our lips, Lord, to sing your praises. Then guide us on our pilgrimage of faith, that with the memory of Cuthbert in our minds, and the spirit of Cuthbert in our hearts, may we walk with him who is the way, the truth, and the life, and find our freedom in his service; even our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Isaiah 2:1-4

1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Ron Cole-Turner, faculty emeritus

Deafened as we are by all the noise that clamors for our attention, sometimes we wish that One Voice would rise above the rest as the highest mountain towers over foothills, that everyone else would just be silent, and that the whole world would hear the message of peace echoing from the mouth of God. We know that is not likely to happen soon.

Disheartened as we are by violence so sickening that it makes us want to shut our eyes, sometimes we wish that One Judge would right our wrongs and bring such peace that weapons are refashioned as farm tools. Not much chance of that, either.

And yet we hope. Despite the evidence, the long wait, the rage, or the bombs. We hope because above it all we hear a voice, not a booming voice from the highest mountain, but in the cry of a child in the night. For thus it is that Peace is born.

Prayer

Come, Holy Savior, Jesus Christ, God with us. How we need you! If our night is dark, shine all the more with the radiance of your light. Amen.

Drew Smith, faculty

Isaiah's prophecy outlines a time "in the last days" that will be characterized by widespread conflict, but also by a systematic seeking of *higher ground*. According to the passage, many people in their seeking

will look specifically to expressions of religious life for that higher ground. “God’s temple,” says Isaiah, will be “the highest of the mountains . . . exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.”

An expanded appeal to faith realms that transcend socially-bounded identities and worldviews seems almost counter-intuitive within a contemporary context characterized by cultural captivity and political cooptation of religious life. Yet Isaiah’s prophecy anticipates God’s temple as a primary source and site of leadership within just such a world.

But what is also clear in the text is that this breakthrough of spiritual awakening will come to pass through God’s doing, and not ours. Isaiah says that God will teach us the pathways to walk, and God’s word and judgment will transform swords and spears into instruments of peace and livelihood.

Rising above our inherent social antagonisms and hostilities will require God-sized solutions. Isaiah assures us of God’s leading—and that in seeking God’s face we will find promised deliverance (cf. Ps 27:8; Matt 7:7).

Prayer

Lord, by your grace,
May we press on the upward way
New heights to gain with every day,
And praying as we onward bound,
Lord plant our feet on higher ground.

(Derived from a hymn by Johnson Oatman, Jr.)

PJ Pfeuffer ’12

We normally revere seasons such as Advent and Lent with a view that we do not necessarily hold for the remainder of the Christian calendar. These moments may be considered “mountaintop moments” and why shouldn’t they be? They lead, after all, to the highest peaks in history. In a time in which we look backward in history, we must take time to look *forward*. The Lord becomes enthroned for all eternity—and not one thing will remain the same! “Beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks” reminds us that the Christ child is born into a world that was created and called good, but has been blemished by the actions and inactions of humanity. These—anger, violence, and hatred—are not the final words. Learning God’s ways—embracing the light of the Christ who bids us forgive, forgive, forgive—*these* are the final words.

Prayer

Lord God, Allow us to cast off any turmoil—inner or outer—and to embrace the peace you offer us. Your way sounds too easy and a cynic may call it naïve, but break us of our stubbornness and our cycles and let us look forward—to love, to grace, to peace. Amen.

Isaiah 2:5-22

5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! 6 For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob. Indeed they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines, and they clasp hands with foreigners. 7 Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. 8 Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. 9 And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low—do not forgive them! 10 Enter into the rock, and

hide in the dust from the terror of the LORD, and from the glory of his majesty. 11 The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone shall be humbled; and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. 12 For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; 13 against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; 14 against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills; 15 against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; 16 against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. 17 The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day. 18 The idols shall utterly pass away. 19 Enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from the terror of the LORD, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth. 20 On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, 21 to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags, from the terror of the LORD, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth. 22 Turn away from mortals, who have only breath in their nostrils, for of what account are they?

John Welch '02

"You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years
And get pats on the back as you pass
But your final reward will be heartache and tears
If you've cheated the man in the glass."

These words are an excerpt from Peter Wimbrew's 1934 poem "The Man in the Glass." It's by God's mercy that blind judgment is not dispensed, for God reveals the wrongs upon which judgment is warranted. Clearly, the ostentatious, self-indulging behavior of Judah provoked God, for this behavior evidenced the distortion of the image in which humankind was created. If we overlaid on our nation these allegations, leveled against Judah, what would be the result? We are also rich and prideful, yet the poor and marginalized are also victimized more than ever in our nation's history. When we look in the mirror, we should see the bloodstained image of Christ who came into a world suffering from the sin fruit of injustice. His image should challenge our self-made images.

Prayer

Lord God, the well waters of poverty are rising around us while a select few sit on the perimeters with full water buckets in their hands, poised to add to the misery of others. Grant relief to the suffering and the hearts of those inflicting pain. Remind us all of why it was that You came. Amen.

Isaiah 3:1-4:1

1 For now the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and staff—all support of bread, and all support of water—2 warrior and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, 3 captain of fifty and dignitary, counselor and skillful magician and expert enchanter. 4 And I will make boys their princes, and babes shall rule over them. 5 The people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the base to the honorable. 6 Someone will even seize a relative, a member of the clan, saying, "You have a cloak; you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule." 7 But the other will cry out on that day, saying, "I will not be a healer; in my house there is neither bread nor cloak; you shall not make me leader of the people." 8 For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence. 9 The look on their faces bears witness

against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves. 10 Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labors. 11 Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them. 12 My people—children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths. 13 The LORD rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. 14 The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. 15 What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord GOD of hosts. 16 The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet; 17 the Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will lay bare their secret parts. 18 In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; 19 the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs 20 the headdresses, the armbands, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; 21 the signet rings and nose rings; 22 the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; 23 the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. 24 Instead of perfume there will be a stench; and instead of a sash, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame. 25 Your men shall fall by the sword and your warriors in battle. 26 And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground. 4:1 Seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, "We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes; just let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace."

Janet Duggins '90

The word of the Lord in this passage is neither comforting nor comfortable. The prophet paints a bleak picture of what the people of God can expect to face in their near future: the loss of supports and structures, resources and luxuries they have come to expect as their due; people oppressing one another; an absence of leadership; men falling victim to violence; women desperate.

Why does God intend to upend the lives of God's people in this way? Because they have stopped even pretending to be just or trying to hide their wrongdoing. They have no interest in God's ways, but they are proud of their greed and conspicuous consumption. They have become a society in which the powerful crush the people and grind the faces of the poor in the dust. Living in this way will bring on consequences, and those consequences will not be pretty.

There is only one tiny, tiny hint of relief, at the very beginning. "For now," the prophet says, God will remove all these things the people have come to count on. For now—suggesting that perhaps the story will not end with the predicted social disintegration and suffering. But anything more in the way of words of hope will have to wait. Through the next several chapters of Isaiah, promises of restoration will only appear little by little.

This particular text doesn't bring us there yet. Its focus is on the reckoning that has to come. It's not comforting or comfortable, but it might not be a bad thing to sit with it a while. It seems appropriate in a year marked by a global pandemic, hundreds of thousands of deaths, widespread unemployment, the upending of structures and routines, failed leadership, confrontation with the discrimination entrenched in our systems and psyches, deep societal divisions, increased pressure on the most vulnerable, and ostensibly a worsening climate crisis. We can certainly find ourselves in this third chapter of Isaiah. We, too, are a society little concerned with God's priorities; our way of life is unsustainable on many fronts. There has to be a reckoning. Of course, we want to find the Advent hope—skip ahead to it, even. But as

always, the prophet offers better wisdom: before new hope can emerge, there has to be a reckoning. For now, we can ponder that truth.

Prayer

Sovereign God, when the present is difficult and the future is uncertain, we long to hear a word of hope from you. But for now, give us the grace to be patient, we pray. Give us the willingness to hear, first, your word of truth, your demand for justice, your call to repentance. Give us the courage for the reckoning that can allow renewed hope to blossom. Amen.

Isaiah 4:2-6

2 On that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. 3 Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, 4 once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. 5 Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. 6 It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Margaret Heidenreich '24

The Advent season is often called a season of anticipation. During this season, we are imagining what it might have been like to be waiting for our savior. We can only imagine it because we've already had the ending spoiled for us. This season is also one that is often marked by busyness. If you are working for a church, it's a season for worship services, bulletins, and special events. If you are a student, it's often a season of exams and final papers. Along with all of the other responsibilities of daily life come the extra responsibilities. Suddenly, on top of work, you're asked to attend the holiday party for your office. Suddenly, on top of work, you want to join a bible study. Suddenly, on top of work, you are trying to buy gifts for your family and decorate to host your friends for a Christmas party. In the chaos of life, the hope of the season can suddenly be lost completely.

This passage points us back to God's provision for Israel during the Exodus, reminding us that God is present even when it seems that there is no sense of God. The world is scary and lonely at times. Yet God invites us into this season of hope. Some people say that hope is an intrinsic force that is within each of us and that hope cannot be lost but will simply change as life changes. We can put hope and trust in God whose salvific work will heal all nations. If we hope in the never-changing God who has been a canopy of shelter and shade over us from the very beginning, we have no reason to feel hopeless. Perhaps this season, like this passage, is a reminder of God's faithfulness that we can put our hope in. God is a refuge when we feel afraid. God is a refuge when we feel helpless. Hopeless. God continues to be faithful even in our waiting. While everything around us changes, God remains constant and faithful.

During this season of Advent that is busy and stressful, be reminded that God is faithful, and place your hope in God's provision over your life.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, in this season of anticipation, help me to set aside a moment to be reminded of the hope of this season. Help me to honor this season with joy—joy which I know in

your salvation and love over my life. Help me to bring that joy and hope with me into every moment, that I might feel you present within the busyness of this season. Amen.

Derek Davenport '05/'17

Embedded within this passage we find cause for both hope and for fear. Isaiah speaks of burning and cleansing, but also of refuge and shelter. So often, we have difficulty embracing both of these aspects of our faith. We tend to focus either on God as judge or God as protector, yet here Isaiah unites both actions. It is only by "washing" Zion that God can make it safe.

As we celebrate Advent, the coming of Christ can be equally complex. Christ makes intense demands of his followers, yet also gives his life for them. He is both infant and lord, both God and human.

In the coming weeks, let us pay attention to the ways we portray the birth of Jesus and try to hold on to the complexity of a God who both cleanses and protects.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the wonder of this season. We thank you that you are our refuge and strength, and we ask you to help us follow you even when it is difficult. Amen.

Isaiah 5:1-7

1 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Ron Cole-Turner, faculty emeritus

God's love for us is like the love of one who plants a vineyard on a gentle hillside, clears the stones, protects it with a fence, builds a watchtower and a winepress, all simple pictures of what God has done and is doing even now reclaim and to safeguard our lives.

But when the one who loves the vineyard, who cleared it and planted it and protected it patiently year after year comes in due time to harvest the choice grapes, only wild grapes are growing. Again, a simple picture of how so often our lives do not go as God wills or even as we promise. The bitter taste of wild grapes, too bitter to eat, too bitter for wine. God looks for justice and finds bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry.

Now at this point in the story, we want God to try longer, just be patient, maybe let the vines have another year to mature. If the California vintner will sell no wine before its time, surely God should not be in such a rush.

The truth is that as much as God is patient, even more God is righteous. God will not wait forever. God will not go on forever tolerating sin or stubbornness or the wild grapes of our willfulness. As much as God is gracious, even more God is just.

Tucked into the text is a simple lament on God's part: "What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done it?" It is as if God is speaking directly to you and me: What more can I do for you? How long must I wait for you?

Of course we must read scripture forward and backward. Read forward, this text doesn't look good for us. We have worn out God's patience, and the breaking down of our institutions, our economy, our health, and our lives is just what we deserve.

Read backwards, however, we see that, yes, there is one more thing God can and does do for the vineyard. From the very heart of God comes one who is God in our midst, born into a world of injustice, in a season of bloodshed, a time filled with the cries of the desolate, one whose life is broken to mend the brokenness of our lives and whose very blood is shed to become the wine that redeems the vineyard.

Prayer

We praise you, O God, that you do not abandon us to our own brokenness but that you take our plight upon yourself through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

Isaiah 5:8-17

8 Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! 9 The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. 10 For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah. 11 Ah, you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine, 12 whose feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine, but who do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands! 13 Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge; their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst. 14 Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure; the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down, her throng and all who exult in her. 15 People are bowed down, everyone is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are humbled. 16 But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness. 17 Then the lambs shall graze as in their pasture, fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins.

Derek Davenport '05/'17

This passage is not particularly Christmas-y. At least, not at first glance.

So often, when we get ready for Christmas, we want tender moments and sweet babies. We want Jesus to be happy, gentle, and peaceful. We want *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger* along with hot chocolate and warm blankets.

Those aspects of Christmas are appropriate, but they're just one side of our celebrations. We sometimes forget how radical and revolutionary Christmas really is. This passage from Isaiah reminds us of how shocking God can be. The haughty are humbled and lambs feed among ruins. As strange as these images

are, their very strangeness makes them appropriate for Christmas—for the celebration of the infinite born an infant, reality redeemed through resurrection.

As you prepare for Christmas this year, as you hear your favorite songs and see those nativity sets, remember the words of Isaiah. Remember how revolutionary Christmas truly is.

Prayer

God of reversal and resurrection, we thank you for this season. We thank you for the ways you surprise us. We ask you to open our eyes to your work around us where we least expect it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Isaiah 5:18-25

18 Ah, you who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood, who drag sin along as with cart ropes, 19 who say, "Let him make haste, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment, that we may know it!" 20 Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight! 22 Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, 23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights! 24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. 25 Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

Linda Sue Boehmer '09

Today, as we continue preparing to wrap our hearts and minds around the Incarnation, we hear the best news possible: God shows covenant love for us by reaching out to us again and again, in many ways and circumstances, to draw us into closer relationship. Our psalms for today weave together the other three texts to guide us along the way to renewal and revival for God's people. What could be more unexpected when times are uncertain than to be reminded that our hope and future are in Jesus Christ, who is the way?

In Isaiah we read some of the reasons that God understandably gets angry with us: *5:20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!*

Today's psalms express confidence that God will forgive and restore and deliver us, as the history of God's people shows. In the midst of end times discussions in Luke's Gospel, Jesus unexpectedly shows confidence in our common sense: *29 And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; 30 as soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*

Our psalms anchor our wisdom in listening to God's word(s). In a chapter that begins eschatologically, the apostle Paul offers Trinitarian encouragement, but also shares practical advice: *21 but test everything; hold fast what is good, 22 abstain from every form of evil.*

Our psalms ground us in God's timeless character and timely provision for our sanctification. We love to wrestle with complexity, to unravel mystery, to clarify and codify all the "-ologies"—and there is a time and place for that. But sometimes we make things more difficult than they need to be. These passages make life unexpectedly simple in the midst of all the confusion around us. God expects us to have the wisdom to know the difference between good and evil.

We seek the spiritual strength to choose light over darkness. We pray for the faith to trust God's covenant faithfulness in our journey. We can expect God to revive and renew us in unexpected ways.

Prayer

Spirit of the living God, revive us again that we may rejoice in you! LORD, guide us in your way. Help us trust in your righteousness to bring us peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

Luke 21:29-38

29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 34 "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." 37 Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. 38 And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

Lisa J. Lyon '92

Watch out! Pay attention! Jesus says, "[W]hen you see *these things* taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near." What are "these things"? In Luke 21:5-17, Jesus lists them as the destruction of the temple, false prophets, wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, portents and signs in the heavens, arrests and persecutions, betrayal, hatred, and executions. At this writing, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests after the killing of George Floyd by a police officer. One can't escape the feeling that Jesus is right here, right now, talking to us.

Christians live in the tension between the already and the not yet: Jesus came and established God's kingdom on earth, but not until his coming again will that kingdom be fulfilled. Rather than anticipating the end of the world "when [we] see these things taking place," we should remember that, nevertheless, "*the kingdom of God is near.*" That's the hope we cling to in the midst of chaos.

Jesus calls us to be on guard and never give in to the fears and worries of our daily life by falling into dissipation and drunkenness. He urges us to be alert and watch for the signs—not merely signs of "the end," but signs of the kingdom of God. Fred Rogers said, "Look for the helpers"; Jesus says, "*Be the helpers.*" And we must pray—pray for the strength to escape the pitfalls of self-centeredness, anger, and despair. If we do that, when Jesus returns we will be able to stand before the Son of Man having made the most of every moment, every opportunity, to make the kingdom of God on earth visible—to bring the kingdom of God to fruition by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

Prayer

Gracious God, the signs of your kingdom on earth are obscured by sin. Please change our focus. Sharpen our perception of others' suffering. Remove the blinders of "isms" that divide us. Excise the cataracts that distort the image of God in each person. Clarify our vision of hope. Thank you! Amen.

Isaiah 6:1-13

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" 9 And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' 10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." 11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.

Brandon Anthony Shaw '19

Holy. God is H-O-L-Y. What does this mean?

A ThM graduate of Pittsburgh Seminary and a DMin student at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary (Chicago), I also study theology at the University of Notre Dame to learn what the Roman Catholic Church can teach me about our Savior, Jesus Christ. During my first week of class there this summer (2020), Dr. Anthony Pagliarini spoke to us about the holiness of God through an analogy concerning his wife's goodness. Anthony sees his dear wife as good, like God; but God is not like Katie in his goodness. God is supereminently good. In other words, God is beyond any kind of goodness we can comprehend. He is in a class by himself. When we speak of God as "holy" we must think of him as above anything we may conjure in our minds as we dwell on his righteous attributes. Doing so honors him and causes us to reflect on him in reverential awe.

This Christmas season, we can praise Jesus that his eternal holiness sets him apart from us and is the ground for our salvation. Praise him this Advent for his holy nature!

Prayer

Dear Holy Father, thank you that you are not like us and that your ways are transcendently higher than our ways. Thank you for sending your beloved and holy Son to come dwell among us. Thank you that he lived the perfect life of righteousness on our behalf, died in our place, rose for our justification, now reigns over the cosmos for our good and your everlasting glory, and

will return to bring eternal shalom to all things unto your unending praise. Pour out your saving grace in abundance this season for the sake of your global renown. In Jesus' name, amen!

Eric McIntosh '12, DMin student

At first glance, I am captured by the wonder. Can you imagine seeing the Lord sitting on His throne? Can you imagine setting your eyes on the glory of the hem of His robe. That just the hem of it fills the temple is amazing. Creatures with three pairs of wings flying in attendance to God anticipating His next command testifying to how holy God is to one another. I am struck with awe trying to see in my mind what Isaiah saw. What a privilege and honor to be given such a moment, gift, vision; at least at first glance.

Instead of honor and privilege, self-reflection, self-loathing, recognition and an overwhelming feeling of self-degradation was invoked in the mind, heart and deep recesses of Isaiah's soul. Being in the presence of God and His holiness required of Isaiah a posture of unworthiness because he was unclean. Isaiah understood that he did not belong there.

But it is just like God to look beyond Isaiah's faults and provide a cleansing. At first glance, you could think that God cleansed him to make him feel at home. However, this too was not an honor as much as it was a necessity to send Isaiah back to do His will. Israel was unclean and in fact no longer worthy to be called God's people. Did God disown them or did Israel disown God? What is true, God was not pleased and His answer to their condition was to devastate them and render their land desolate.

But, if we give a closer look there is still hope. Isaiah sees it too. Isaiah cannot believe that this judgment on Israel is eternal and asks, "How long will this last?" God gives him hope that there is a remnant and that answer is in the holy seed. I see from this story that salvation while a gift is not an honor that I deserve but a necessity to gain access to God. I also see that it is impossible to do God's will without it. His will is to tell a dying world that it is dying but there is hope. At first glance the advent season is one of wonder. The bright lights illuminate trees, houses and cities. The glory of the season is amazing. How do we forget that the reason Christ came was because we were unclean, dead, and in need of a savior to come and die for us?

We do not need to open our eye very wide to see the devastation and desolation today. God says, "Who will go for us?" Who will tell the world that Advent is still about Jesus and not the lights of the trees but the Light of the World? I will go! Will you? I bet if more of us go we could expect the unexpected! I bet we would see the world light up with Jesus. I bet we would see hope grow from a stump to a forest. Ah and when we all get to heaven...! Faith says expect the unexpected! Go with me because faith also says you haven't seen anything yet.

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, help us, to enter into your courts with thanksgiving and praise because your Son has made us clean. Strengthen our faith that we may light up the world. Help us to value our salvation so much that we respond to advent with the expectation that the world around us will turn to you! Grant us all visions of your glory and hope for your Kingdom in Jesus, holy and righteous name! Amen.

Erin Davenport '05

Isaiah tells us in verse 5 that he sees the King, the Lord of hosts, *before* he is clean. That is grace, isn't it? The revelation of the love of God for us is not dependent upon our cleanliness, our goodness, our worth; it is dependent upon the King, the Lord of hosts alone. We prepare in this time of Advent for the coming

of the Christ child, but we cannot adequately prepare ourselves. We certainly try. And we certainly fail. God, through the love of Jesus Christ, is the only one who can prepare us. So in this time of preparation, take time to depend upon the God who gives us grace. Not because of what we do or who we are, but because it is God's power at work in our lives. Let us give thanks to our gracious and good God. Praise the Lord of hosts!

Prayer

Lord of hosts, we give thanks this day for your grace, which amazes, astounds and humbles us. We give thanks for your great and abundant power. We give thanks for your understanding that is beyond measure. Amen.

Isaiah 7:1-9

1 In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it. 2 When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. 3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, 4 and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. 5 Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, 6 Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; 7 therefore thus says the Lord GOD: It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. 8 For the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. (Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.) 9 The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.

Christopher Brown '08

The king of Judah was anxious. He had just survived an attack on Jerusalem, but the threat was not gone. The enemy had merely changed tactics. Knowing these things, the "heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." And to this fearful king, the Lord sent the prophet with an exhortation to have faith: "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all."

Faith. It seems that like Ahaz and all of God's people, we are deficient in faith. But we are in good company. In Luke 17:5, we read, "The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'" The original apostles acknowledged to Jesus their own lack of faith. But they did so with a request made in faith to the only One who can increase our faith.

Ahaz placed his faith elsewhere, calling for help from the king of Assyria (2 Kings 16:7). This season, despite its joy and celebration, many are in the position of Ahaz. We do not face literal war, but the holidays can create feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and stress. Contrary to the lies of the world, consumerism and gluttony do not relieve such feelings. The enemy uses different tactics against us now, but the temptation is still the same: to seek peace and security through worldly means, rather than trusting in the Lord. This Advent, will we respond as Ahaz did, or as the apostles?

Prayer

Lord, increase our faith! Amen.

Isaiah 7:10-25

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. 17 The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria." 18 On that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. 19 And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the pastures. 20 On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River - with the king of Assyria - the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well. 21 On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, 22 and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey. 23 On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. 24 With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; 25 and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.

Sonya-Marie Morley '20 (deceased)

The word "Immanuel" in Isaiah's prophecy explains why Advent is the season of solidarity. Just as we share time and space during Advent season by reading familiar narratives of Jesus' birth, singing carols and hymns about the baby Jesus, breaking bread together and buying each other gifts to commemorate the greatest of gifts to the world, so the Divine, being poured into human flesh, shared time and space with us by living "among us." Christ joined in radical solidarity with us: in service, supper, supplication, suffering, sin, sanctification, salvation and Spirit. It is this same sense that the psalmist uses as an invitation and imperative for all creation to join together to praise the One who created all and who relentlessly loves and seeks to reconcile all. Advent reminds us that Christ continues to join in solidarity with us, in each breath through the Holy Spirit, for God's good, merciful, just, gracious, and redemptive purposes.

Prayer

As we seek you, God, and wait expectantly to celebrate with great joy the anniversary of Christ's birth, help us to hear how we are being called during Advent and always to stand in solidarity with those experiencing injustice and oppression, knowing that you shows your face in unexpected ways and places—like the finite and fragile face of a babe in a manger all those years ago. Amen.

Isaiah 8:1-15

1 Then the LORD said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, "Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz," 2 and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah. 3 And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; 4 for before the child knows how to call 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria." 5 The LORD spoke to me again: 6 "Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that

flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; 7 therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; 8 it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel. 9 Band together, you peoples, and be dismayed; listen, all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed! 10 Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.” 11 For the LORD spoke thus to me while his hand was strong upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: 12 “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. 13 But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. 14 He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”

Erin Davenport '05

Isaiah is warning the people of the two Kingdoms of Israel that the Southern Kingdom will fall to the Assyrians in less than a year (less time than it takes for a child to learn to speak). Isaiah and the Israelites are living in a time of political chaos that feels like it has dramatic and lasting historical significance. He is living and speaking in a time of split kingdoms, split narratives, split alliances—and *everyone* is full of dread. The Lord speaks to Isaiah and says in verses 12 and 13, “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears or be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.”

Like Isaiah, our hope is not in the kingdoms and powers of this world, but in Immanuel, God with us. Our hope, security, and future are found in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Lord, give me the voice of a prophet today. Help me to speak hope into the midst of chaos, love into the midst of hate, and joy into the midst of sorrow. Thank you for reminding me again and again that you are God, and even when it seems that everything is splitting apart, you remain steadfast and holy. Amen.

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. 3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Drew Himes '13

Days of sorrow, destruction, gnashing teeth, and rending garments. These were the days of Isaiah 9. These were the days of Assyrian domination spoken of in the book of Judges (6 and 7). These were dark

days of hopeless prayers not uttered and gloomy, tear-streaked faces as all eyes watched the invading Assyrians lay waste to people, plant, and animal, scouring the land with death, annihilation, and distress.

But right there . . . right in the midst of this unimaginable fear and grief . . . God does a new thing. God calls out to the people through the voice of the prophet and offers them something that seems not only improbable but also impossible: A new king; a new day; a new chance; freedom; liberation. I wonder how many of the hearers of this good news at first scoffed.

In the midst of our lives, we too face an onslaught of uncontrollable forces: illness and death; separation and break ups; loss of jobs, physical ability, economic plight, and even the loss of our human dignity.

But into these moments, God shines light. And as Isaiah tells us, it's the light of none other than God's own kavod, God's presence.

While this passage has nothing to do with the coming of Jesus Christ, it does teach us something about God and God's ways. It shows us that desperation, oppression, and hurt cause God to show up in a big way and reveal our liberation. This passage should not put us in mind of Christ's coming but instead of a pattern of God's doing: God freed the people many times before (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon) and God is doing it again in our Savior.

That which harms us and keeps us separated from God and one another has been torn asunder in the advent of our Christ, and the blood-stained clothing of our broken world is being thrown onto the fire to fuel the redemptive consummation that God is breaking forth.

This was good news for Isaiah's people. And it's good news for us too.

Prayer

Liberating and loving God: Come. Enter into our world of sadness and hurt, pain and grief, and bring forth your light once again. Shine into all the dark places and illuminate them with your goodness and mercy. Come, Lord. Come. Amen.

Drew Himes '13

As the Advent season dawns on us, we in the Northern hemisphere also enter a season of darkness: long nights and short days. For many, life also seems to enter a time of darkness as the year winds down. We look back over the year, when we lost so many and so many others are still without food or healthcare or adequate shelter. We see that so many are still mistreated because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. We think back on opportunities missed and opportunities not taken, and our hearts are plunged into even greater darkness. We wonder about the justice of God and wonder when it will come to fulfillment.

Yet in the midst of this physical and mental darkness, the prophet Isaiah assures us of the coming of a great light: the light of a Savior, the light of a child, the birth of God with us. Our hope, we find out, is not built on human actions or human institutions. Instead, it is grounded in our God, who ventured to earth so many years ago to rescue us from every season of darkness: sin, death, separation, and sadness. Our God who overcame time and space to live with us as one of us brings great hope and joy even in these dark days of the year.

For the Israelite faithful, who also wondered when justice would be done to all those who had perverted God's reign, the coming of God's light into their midst would be an occasion of great rejoicing. The dark

days of idol worship, selling out to foreign kings, and neglecting the voice of the God of Abraham, Miriam, David, and Ruth had to be a depressing state of affairs. But it was directly into the midst of that darkness that God's fullness entered and saved the people. It is right into the messiness of human affairs that God sends a sign of God's providential hope.

And so we cry out to our God: "Save us, save us from ourselves!" And it is directly into this darkness that the Christ child enters.

Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, incarnate in the flesh of our Christ, you bring hope to those who walk in great darkness and offer new life to all those who follow the beauty of your radiance. Grant us your presence in this season of dismal dark days, and move us forward with you to allow Christ to be born, once again, into us. Amen.

Erin Kobs, DMin student

This familiar text from the book of Isaiah, often read on Christmas Eve, reminds us of the joyful anticipation of Christ's coming into the world. The people, who have been through so much, are eager for the entrance of light amid the darkness. There will be great rejoicing when Emmanuel, God-with-us, arrives to bring about the coming of God's kingdom.

When our world feels so overwhelming—full of division and distrust, violence and war, suffering and pain—it is hard to see beyond the darkness. But we can rejoice in knowing that God is indeed with us, sending God's own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be a beacon of light in the world. Even beyond that, we can place our trust in Emmanuel, the one who teaches us how to become beacons of light, shining into the darkest places of our world.

During this season of great anticipation, let us remember it is God who will lift the burdens from us. It is through God's Son, the Prince of Peace, who will shine upon us, enabling us to in turn, shine light onto others.

Prayer

Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God, you are indeed shining light into the dark places of the world. We wait with eager anticipation for the coming of your Son this Advent season. Let us find moments to rejoice in knowing that we are not alone. You indeed lift our burdens and allow us to continue to shine your light into this world. Amen.

Isaiah 9:18-10:4

*18 For wickedness burned like a fire,
consuming briars and thorns;
it kindled the thickets of the forest,
and they swirled upward in a column of smoke.
19 Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts
the land was burned,
and the people became like fuel for the fire;
no one spared another.
20 They gorged on the right but still were hungry,
and they devoured on the left but were not satisfied;*

*they devoured the flesh of their own kindred;
21 Manasseh devoured Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh,
and together they were against Judah.
For all this his anger has not turned away;
his hand is stretched out still.
10 Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
2 to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
to make widows their spoil
and to plunder orphans!
3 What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the calamity that will come from far away?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth,
4 so as not to crouch among the prisoners
or fall among the slain?
For all this his anger has not turned away;
his hand is stretched out still.*

Jelty Ochotan '11

This contemplation cannot be separated from the initial reading in Isaiah 9:1-17 and the reading after, because there is a very strong and deep connection about God's mighty omnipotence to punish wickedness as a sign of his love for his chosen people. God does not absolve any of his people from wickedness, because wickedness is not the identity of God. The picture of wickedness is like a person who is hungry and is never content. Everything is eaten up but nothing is satisfying. How many wicked ways have destroyed us today? Racism in all forms, school shootings, worsening of environmental pollution. Nothing can be rejoiced in these matters.

Are there still unfair decisions between us? A despicable decision? The weak do not get justice, the rights of the poor are being seized, stolen properties, being orphans?

The way of wickedness must be destroyed so that it will not destroy God's people in the slightest. Wickedness can be ceased through the judgment of God's love in various ways. The annihilation of wickedness and condemnation of the wicked are signs of God's judgment for the ungodly and his love that liberates his people. This year's Advent celebration delivers a profound message that the coming of Jesus frees his people from the path of wickedness and leads them to the path of salvation.

Prayer

O Jesus, your coming frees your people from the ways of wickedness. Help us to understand which is the way of wickedness and which is your way of salvation. We are often blind to the path that leads us into judgment. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Isaiah 11:1-9

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not

judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Norma Prina Murphy '93

Out of the multitude of ways to go in considering this text, here in this brief meditation I would focus our attention on verse 1: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." On one side of my in-laws' property there was once a row of Scots pines along the street. There were at least 15 of those trees, possibly as many as 25, closely spaced. The pines were at least 30 feet tall by the time my high school boyfriend (and later husband) and I began seeing each other. But then a blight hit and the pines died. My father-in-law cut them all down, leaving 3-foot stumps.

Imagine that row of stumps! As beautiful as they had been to drive by before, that was how awfully dead and barren they looked now. No shoots ever came forth from them. Over time they rotted and years later were pulled down.

The stump of Jesse that Isaiah speaks of is just as awfully dead and barren as those Scots-pine stumps. In fact, it was worse: the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had fallen, and God's Spirit was AWOL. Only in the voices of the prophets was God's Spirit evident. And they were largely ignored.

But there is a promise here as well—and hope! Hope today for countries laid waste by war or drought or famine. Hope for people laid waste by greed or pandemics or racial bias. Hope for the world that there will be, someday, the fullness of the reign of that shoot, which did indeed come forth as Isaiah prophesied.

Where is your life, or your congregation's life, now barren, laid waste, like a thoroughly dead stump? Can you possibly imagine new life, or at least be willing to see God's image of new life for you? Not the same life ever again, but something transformed and new, coming out of it? That is the promise of God in Christ Jesus, and it is even now in the process of being fulfilled. Can you find hope that it will be fulfilled in you as well?

Prayer

"Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!" We pray to you, good and gracious God, to bring forth the Christ in such blooming flowers, both in us and through us. We pray in the name of the Son of Jesse's son David—Jesus—and in the power of Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bob Koschik '76

Imagine if you heard music coming from down the street, looked out the window and parading in front of your home were animals who were natural enemies, but they marched as one, reoriented and transformed and led, by of all things, a little child. Yet, as astonishing as that seems, is that not what we kind of sense in Isaiah 11. Animals who were the oldest of opponents: wolf-lamb, leopard-kid, calf-lion, cow-bear, lion-ox are made friends. Does that not hint at where the consummation of history is leading

us—to reconciliation and peace and it is all GOD’S DOING, God’s gift. No wonder, Advent is a time to repent of all mortal strategies and scheming that peace comes from worldly security or status and to prepare ourselves to receive anew the little child whose birth we await and who is our peace.

Prayer

Let us pray . . . Lord Jesus, you alone are our heart’s desire, you alone are our peace and security, you alone are the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings and longings. In our successes and failures, help us to sense where you are calling us anew to yourself this day. Accept even our hearts as mangers, to your glory and honor. Amen.

Carolyn Jones ’77/’89

Looking back on the wearisome season of political campaigning so recently ended, it’s tempting to imagine how different things might have been if the agenda for our elections had been guided by Isaiah’s description of the ideal ruler, rather than by partisan politics. The trouble is that, since Isaiah 11 is most often read as part of our observance of Advent/Christmas, we tend to associate the prophet’s words only with Jesus—not with all who govern.

As unlikely as it is that any of us will ever be a king, we probably will be called upon to exercise leadership in our family, community, place of business, or church. According to Isaiah (11:2), the Spirit blesses those set apart for leadership with intellectual qualities and practical skills which are grounded in the “knowledge and fear of the Lord.” The judgments of such leaders are marked by justice and righteousness—themes which appear in all of this day’s readings, describing the character of God and/or the hope of God’s people.

That hope is renewed each year at Christmas as we celebrate the faithfulness of God who, in Jesus, opened the door to a Peaceable Kingdom in which the peoples of the world live in harmony with one another and with the created order. And to that end, God is working still . . .

Prayer

Guide your people, O God, as we seek to make connections between the witness of Scripture and our own calls to discipleship. May the prophecy of Isaiah rekindle our hope, and the life of your Son be our inspiration, as we offer our prayer in his name. Amen.

Isaiah 11:10-16

10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. 11 On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. 12 He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. 13 The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim. 14 But they shall swoop down on the backs of the Philistines in the west, together they shall plunder the people of the east. They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites shall obey them. 15 And the LORD will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt; and will wave his hand over the River with his scorching wind; and will split it into seven channels, and make a way to cross on foot; 16 so there shall be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt.

Bill LaVelle '89

Some things might seem impossible. Some traumas are just too hard to even think about the possibility of reconciliation. Family members die broken, unwilling to even express sympathy to one another. Such has been my family, from generation to generation.

When I graduated from seminary, my father told me he was ashamed of me. My niece just died from a final stroke at the age of 56, after living as a ward of the County Home for years. Her life, and her brother's life, were filled to the brim with tragedy. There wasn't even an obituary in the newspaper. It's as if her life didn't matter. But she mattered to her brother. And to me. And to the woman who raised her after my sister left. And best of all, Tracy mattered to God.

"On that Day," . . . it will be glorious! "On that Day, the Lord will extend his hand . . . to recover the remnant that is left of his people . . . He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts" . . . On that Day, Tracy will be there! And all will be glorious Joy!

I hold this promise of Joy On that Day deep, deep in my heart as tears for her most painful sojourn still bring me grief. But in the midst of my grief, there is also trust in my heart that Tracy will be among that throng of outcasts, all those nobodies, who are near and dear to the heart of the Lord. I trust that "On that Day," Tracy and I will walk together on that ". . . highway for the remnant that is left of His people."

Prayer

O most gracious God, protector of the helpless, defender of the outcast, hope of the poor: bring love and hope and the promise of eternal Joy to all who are so badly broken. We place our trust in you, Lord, for only you can make it come to pass. We do truly believe that "On that Day," the Holy Spirit will suddenly sweep into our world and make all things new. "On that Day," there will be true, lasting Joy! Amen.

Sonya-Marie Morley '20 (deceased)

The title of Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again* became a household phrase after its posthumous publication in 1940. Indeed, that concept seems like an apostasy during the season of Advent, when, for better or for worse, we often find ourselves immersed in complicated family systems that can, in fact, evoke a sense of home. But the notion of home for the original audience of today's devotional text was a luxury that was as foreign to some of them as their own surroundings were. After all, the United Monarchy of Israel had split into two kingdoms, and the ravages of war had left hundreds of thousands of Israelites displaced, much like Joseph and Mary at the time of Jesus' birth.

As hearers of today's text, we are invited to imagine a future when the Lord will "acquire," "gather," and "collect" those who have been dispersed. We are encouraged to envision a destiny in which a babe born in a lowly manger is "lift[ed] as a signal flag for the nations" and, in the process, "draws all people to" himself (John 12:32). We are inspired to hope for a "road" that is "the way, and the truth and the life" for all of us (John 14:6). This road leads us out of the exile of sin and death and assembles us together, here, at the foot of the manger, where we wait for the coming Messiah. Waiting reminds us that Christ in our world changes our reality: those who were dispersed are reassembled, reunited, restored, and adopted into the family of God through Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for loving us so much that you created a forever home for us in the Christ babe. As we gather with family and friends to wait, fill our hearts with the hope, peace, joy, and love that are the hallmarks of the Advent season. Amen.

Isaiah 13:1-13

1 The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw. 2 On a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. 3 I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones, to execute my anger. 4 Listen, a tumult on the mountains as of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The LORD of hosts is mustering an army for battle. 5 They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the LORD and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole earth. 6 Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! 7 Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt, 8 and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame. 9 See, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. 10 For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. 11 I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants. 12 I will make mortals more rare than fine gold, and humans than the gold of Ophir. 13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

Steve Allman '09/'24

Today's passage from Isaiah isn't one that we'd expect to read during advent. We like the suffering servant, or the way of the Lord being made straight, better. The day of the Lord coming to make the land desolate seems too ominous, and even contradictory to the stand message of this season. But as Hebrews reminds us, God is so holy that his presence is cause for fear and trembling; even Moses approached him with awe.

Yet Hebrews also tells us that "you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." How is it that a mere mortal who must be stoned for even setting foot on God's mountain can come into the assembly of God himself? John the Baptist knew the answer. John says of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). Jesus himself came from heaven so that we would no longer need to be separated from God. When we were unable to approach the Lord, he approached us instead.

John's statement didn't apply only to himself. Jesus must become greater, and we all must become less. Trying to make ourselves greater is the basis of all the sin that separates us from God. As Jesus becomes greater in our lives, we begin to grow into the life that God wants us to have, and which will continue in God's presence in the world to come.

This is what was really unexpected about Jesus' message. It was believed that a hero was coming to overthrow the Roman government and vindicate Israel as a state. What God provided instead was a man who could live in our hearts and teach us how to become less, in order that we could become closer to God than we could think possible. How often do we reflect on this? It's more popular to take the message of Christmas as a story about a God who loves us and came to live among us, redeem us

from our sins, and then go back to heaven, leaving us once again to our own devices. But that's not what the Bible offers us. Instead, we are told of a God who, because he became human, reestablished contact with us so that we could become like him. But for that to happen, we must come to God on our knees and become less, so that, through Jesus, we can become what God means us to be.

Prayer

Dear Lord, we come to you on our knees, thanking you for coming to us when we were unworthy to approach you. We ask that you help us to lay aside our egos and learn to love you with our whole hearts, so that we may give them more fully to you. Amen.

Isaiah 28:9-22

9 "Whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from milk, taken from the breast? 10 For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, upon line, line upon line, a little, there a little." 11 Truly, with stammering lip with alien tongue he will speak to this people, 12 to whom he has said, "This is rest; rest to the weary; and this is repose"; they would not hear. 13 Therefore the word of the LORD will be to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little," in order that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. 14 Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem. 15 Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter"; 16 therefore thus says the Lord GOD, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not panic." 17 And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet; hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. 18 Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overwhelming scourge passes through you will be beaten down by it. 19 As often as it passes through, it will take you; for morning by morning it will pass through, by day and by night; and it will be sheer terror to understand the message. 20 For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it. 21 For the LORD will rise up as on Mount Perazim, he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon; to do his deed—strange is his deed! and to work his work—alien is his work! 22 Now therefore do not scoff, or your bonds will be made stronger; for I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord GOD of hosts upon the whole land.

Felix Rivera-Merced '19

It's a bit hackneyed to say we live in confusing and complicated times. Yet what I find striking in this passage is that it is exactly this sentiment that the people of God are using as an excuse: "Whom will he teach knowledge . . . Those who are weaned from milk?" That is, is the prophet speaking to babies? Does Isaiah not realize the problems we're facing—and all he says is, "One who trusts will not panic"? If there is to be a tomorrow, let alone a good one, we must act and make difficult choices.

Yet Isaiah here lays out for Judah God's "alien" plan: God will go against God's people—against those who "have made a covenant with death." God is going against them *so that* a new foundation stone, trust in God, can be laid and justice and righteousness made the standards of this new building.

Advent reminds us of God's alien work that breaks us: In the midst of oppression, God came down as a babe. God lived life as a babe, a toddler, a teenager, then as an adult for a bit. God's alien work took

some time—for even through the story of Acts we see that the church lived in the midst of an oppressive empire, in an oppressive world.

The cornerstone upon which justice and righteousness are laid? Trust in a little peasant boy.

Prayer

Lord, as we wait for Christmas, bring us to Holy Saturday, bring us to today. Teach us to wait for your coming. Let it break us, that whether we sit or act, eat or fast, we might hope for it to be in the holiness of your love and justice, of your kingdom. Amen.

Isaiah 29:9-24

9 Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor, blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not from wine; stagger, but not from strong drink! 10 For the LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers. 11 The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, "Read this," they say, "We cannot, for it is sealed." 12 And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, "Read this," they say, "We cannot read." 13 The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; 14 so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden. 15 Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the LORD, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" 16 You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, "He has no understanding"? 17 Shall not Lebanon in a very little while become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest? 18 On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. 19 The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. 20 For the tyrant shall be no more, and the scoffer shall cease to be; all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—21 those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit, who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right. 22 Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: No longer shall Jacob be ashamed, no longer shall his face grow pale. 23 For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. 24 And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction.

Edwin van Driel, faculty

We are taught to experience life's events as a predictable chain of cause and effect. The stock market goes up and we rejoice, we lose an election and we feel depressed, we see empty pews and we feel deflated.

Today's readings offer a completely different take on history. Eyes are closed or opened, ears are covered or made to see, the meek are lifted up and tyrants are no more—not by the inevitable forces of history, but by the surprising, contingent, sovereign acts of God.

That's what Advent wants to prepare us for. Babies are born out of virgins, salvation comes from crucifixion, and the resurrecting One breaks open the grave. "You turn things upside down!" says the prophet (v. 16) in an amazement that echoes through the ages (see Acts 17:6!).

So fear not, for nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

Prayer

Lord our God,
You who cast down and lift up, you who close and open
according to your sovereign will,
help us to rest safely
in the assurance that only you
are history's Lord,
leading us to the glory and peace
of your Kingdom.
Amen.

Kelcey Bailey '20

The prophets and seers are stumped. The human visions and plans constructed for our future are lost. And time and time again, the people of Israel come to worship God in rote rhythms dictated by human dogma. How often do we so easily seize the opportunities to make good! To prosper! To be victorious in our lives! But as the prophet cries to us, we're doing it all wrong when we believe ourselves to be the makers and creators in charge. We can at times so easily forget to turn to God as the potter and remember ourselves as the clay. Though our human power and arrogant wisdom can so easily turn things upside-down and in the wrong direction, there is grace in to be found, brothers and sisters: No matter how many times we try to root ourselves in our own plans rather than God's, God promises to do amazing things with God's people—AGAIN.

Prayer

Dear God, in this season of preparation, prepare our hearts and minds to be open to your amazing reversal of the world's darkness. Help us loosen our tight grip on our plans and understandings and instead rest in your promise of fresh joy and light. Amen.

Isaiah 31:1-9

1 Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD! 2 Yet he too is wise and brings disaster; he does not call back his words, but will rise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. 3 The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall, and they will all perish together. 4 For thus the LORD said to me, As a lion or a young lion growls over its prey, and—when a band of shepherds is called out against it—is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so the LORD of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill. 5 Like birds hovering overhead, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it. 6 Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. 7 For on that day all of you shall throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you. 8 “Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals; and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him; he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labor. 9 His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic,” says the LORD, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

Helen Kester '06

Here we are in the 21st century. We are so much more sophisticated than those uneducated folks in Isaiah's time. We know that statues of gold and silver or wood carvings have no power. We cannot be deceived by people who have big horses and heavy body armor and the most troops to fight. We would never worship a person thinking that they are a god.

We are sure that we have come so far from those ancient Israelites that we convince ourselves that we are not tempted by the same sins that lead to the downfall of their nation. But just listen to the conversations around us. Parents bemoan the fact that they cannot buy the latest electronic devices for their children and that they are letting their child down. I have yet to hear a parent bemoan the fact that they have not taken their child to worship and to learn values that will lead to the real source of being lifted up. We will spend exorbitant amounts of money to see our favorite group or sports team, or gamble, but cry in outrage that the church dared to ask for a pledge or increase in giving that will lead to a discipline in our lives that will bring us true joy. We look at the criminal behavior around us and instead of falling on our knees in prayer we buy a hand gun.

We deceive ourselves, if we truly believe that we have left the sins of Israel behind us. The Good News for us is that Jesus comes to seek and to save as much today as he did 2000 years ago.

Prayer

God of might and power, call us back from following after false power and idols to the only true source of strength and protection. Help us to engage in activities and worship that will draw us closer to you. In Jesus' Name through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Darrell Yeaney '56 (deceased)

Perhaps the greatest challenge to people of faith is to live courageously, as Jesus did each day, in a world that rejects the compassionate rule of God and replaces it with the competitive standards of a win-lose culture. Advent is the Christian season that emphasizes active waiting. Isaiah the Prophet spoke of the folly of nations relying on military might and fragile alliances to make themselves powerful conquerors over others (Isaiah 31:1-9).

Generations later, God chose a young girl, not only to bear the messianic Prince of Peace, but to inspire her to sing God's revolutionary message: —The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. God drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in place of power. God gives the hungry good things to eat and send the rich away with nothing.|| (Luke 1: 51-53)

God call us to the challenge of active waiting in the midst of a culture of violence, a culture we are called to resist in the power of God.

Prayer

Compassionate God, awaken us once again from our distracted preoccupation with the culture of glitter, glamor, guns and glory and be reborn in us today. Save and empower us by your love. Amen.

Nancy Hammond, retired staff

Hmmm! Just a couple of days before Christmas. Again!

I've begun to see quite a few Christmases in my life, and this year, like most all years before, the background to Christmas is war. No, not war as in last minute shopping trips to the mall. War, as in war. I've lived Christmas with WWII in the background, the Korean conflict, the Vietnam war, Grenada, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, ISIL....Oh Dear Holy Lord God, forgive us.

Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong. Oh Dear Holy Lord God, forgive us.

Prayer

Please let this be my last Christmas with war in the background. Help us turn back to Him who we have so deeply and continually betrayed. Let this be the year that we throw away our idols of silver and gold. Come this Christmas, Oh Dear Holy Lord God. Amen.

Isaiah 33:17-22

17 Your eyes will see the king in his beauty; they will behold a land that stretches far away. 18 Your mind will muse on the terror: "Where is the one who counted? Where is the one who weighed the tribute? Where is the one who counted the towers?" 19 No longer will you see the insolent people, the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend, stammering in a language that you cannot understand. 20 Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up, and none of whose ropes will be broken. 21 But there the LORD in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass. 22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

Jennifer Christmas '11

Are you feeling besieged!? Are you overwhelmed by To-Do lists, activities and commitments to family, friends, or at church? Are you feeling under attack spiritually or being threatened physically? Are you facing discrimination, exploitation, or oppression? Are you engulfed by grief? Is your heart especially burdened for others experiencing any of the above?

As we near the end of Advent, a season that for many of us is a flurry of activity, and approach that day when we celebrate the first coming of our Lord, you are invited to pause . . . Pause. Breathe. Look up and behold the King in his beauty, the majesty of our Lord!

Many scholars place today's Scripture reading in the context of the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians in 701 BC, during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. Jerusalem was able to withstand the threat, in part due to the foresight of Hezekiah to make sure the city was provided with a reliable source of water. This detail is actually supported by both Scripture and archaeology, with the find of the Siloam Tunnel Inscription.

In this passage of Scripture, however, we see more than a single spring as the source of water. Instead, "there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams," where no other powers that might threaten or harm us can come near. In fact, those previously under siege are invited to "muse" over the terror that is now gone: those who sought to extort, demand, oppress, and attack—insolent people, voices bragging or speaking nonsense. Further, we are invited to "Look on Zion," a place of gathering and celebration, to "see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation." It is a place of refuge, "an

immovable tent," a strong covering, indestructible, a place of tranquility, with our Lord at its center. "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; He will save us"!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for being with us when we are worn, weary, and besieged. As we prepare to celebrate your first coming, may we also be reminded of the peace, joy, and healing in fullness ahead, in your presence, when you come again. Amen.

Isaiah 35:1-10

*1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus
2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.
3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

Rebecca L. Dix '15/'17

I struggle when wilderness is used as a metaphor to describe being lost, hopeless, or in despair. Living amid an arid climate, I witness the abundance of life within the wilderness. The dry and desert places hold the beauty of such a complex and diverse ecosystem. However, I had to learn to see it. I had to let go of what I thought thriving and life was supposed to look like. I had to let go of the preconceptions carried from where I had been before in order to see things anew in the place I am now.

This is the same invitation, the call, the beckoning we receive on Christmas Eve. To see the world anew. To see Love in abundance when it may appear there is none. To see anew when at first all we may see is dry and empty land. For Love is there, is here, is coming. For Love is born to us this day. A Love whose name is Emmanuel.

Prayer

Lord, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, give us eyes that see you in this season. Open our blind hearts so we may be a faithful people who rejoice and hope in Love. Amen.

Rebecca Dix '15/'17

There have been days
I've gone down to the river to pray
But the river bed has been empty for days
A lingering, barren ravine
Where I'd expected a mercy filled stream

Canyon carved stretch marks of a belly
Once with such life within
Leaving only sand to be baptized in
And a parchment tongue
Desiccated from praises it's forgotten how to sing
Yet tomorrow, I will return again
Eyes piercing the sky in anticipation
For flood waters anointing,
Poured out, pores soaked
Washed in the words of the greatest Love story
Whose torrents push and move and remake what has been
Saturate my sin filled body
With grace like rain

Prayer

Healer and Sustainer, pour out your flood waters to saturate our dryness and break through our dams and roadblocks that keep us from holy communion with you and with our brothers and sisters. Strengthen us with the hope of Emmanuel as we await his arrival. Amen.

Zechariah 2:10-13

10 Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the LORD. 11 Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. 12 The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. 13 Be silent, all people, before the LORD; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

Nathan Carlson '11

Every year, our family pulls out an antique, handcrafted nativity set to put up on Christmas morning. The scene still fills our children's hearts with joy as I tell the story. Just prior to placing the infant Jesus in the manger, we share stories about what it means that Jesus came to earth as a human child. We hear echoes of this meaning found early in the Scriptures, such as this one from Zechariah 2. In verses 10-13 we hear the promise that the Lord "will come and dwell in your midst." Every year, one or another of our children has a personal epiphany that the greatest present received on Christmas morning came long ago in the birth of this Christ child.

During the placement of the pieces of the crèche, one of my favorite moments involves talking about the magi from the East—the ones who show up much later in the biblical story. We discuss how, even at Jesus' birth, people from other nations have already recognized this child's coming as something special. The birth we remember today drew some most unexpected "others" forward to pay homage to the newborn king. These magi embody Zechariah's prophecy in verse 11: "many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people." Their presence reminds us that this first Christmas Day was truly for all people, in every nation and across every land. That Christmas Day is *still* for everyone should ring out from our celebrations.

As I write today, I find the last verse of Zechariah to be the most striking. As we contemplate the infant Jesus lying in the manger, in whatever form our contemplation takes in this year's Christmas celebrations, let us consider this deep mystery in our hearts: "Be silent . . . for he has roused himself

from his holy dwelling.” What does it mean for us that the Lord of heaven and earth lay in a manger? What does it mean for each one of us that Jesus “roused himself” from his holy dwelling place to take up residence among us in the form of a sleeping infant? Take a moment to think of the power and wonder of this mystery. Unlike the noisy activities that fill much of Christmas Day, take some time to sit in silence in the presence of such deep and abiding divine love.

Prayer

Almighty God and Lord of hosts, we gather in our hearts around your first, humble, earthly throne. Fill us with joy—overwhelm us with the mysterious grace of your dwelling among us. In a day that often overwhelms us, prepare for us a silent time of contemplation that we might kneel by your cradle and meditate on your presence. As we delight in you, remind us that you have come for all people, that you have chosen to reside with us, and that you desire nothing but our unfettered love in response. Amen.

Second Readings: New Testament Epistles

Ephesians 6:10-20

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Dave Keys, staff

What if this Christmas you found a simply wrapped box under your tree? You excitedly rip off the wrapping and take off the lid. You find a simple note which reads: "This is the Armor of God." You notice that attached to each article is a note. The *Belt of Truth* indicates to wrap this around your waist to protect yourself from deception and wickedness. The *Breastplate of Righteousness* is present to protect your heart and spirit from those who wish to hurt you. The *Shield of Faith* defends you from evil's powerful bolts of immoral energy. The *Helmet of Salvation* is to help you focus your thoughts on love and compassion and safeguard you from your sinful ways. And finally, it tells you to lift the *Sword of the Spirit* high above your head and proclaim the victory which is born this Christmas day.

After you unbox the contents, you notice on the bottom of the box is simply written, "Be Strong. You are not alone."

In this season of profound love, please cherish these gifts from God. You have been empowered to use them to further the kingdom of God and stand firm against the evil and chaos in this world.

Prayer

We thank you, Father that you have not left us defenseless. Rather, you have called us to the battleground of prayer and have fully equipped us for the task. Now strengthen us each day to carry forward the gospel of Christ as we wage war against the evil one. Teach us to preach, to pray, and to persevere; and as the dust settles after each victory, may we be found standing our ground, prepared for the next foray into battle. Amen.

Philippians 2:5-11

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in

heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Gordon Tait '51

It was November 1951 and I was a new graduate student at the University of Edinburgh looking for Christmas cards to send to family and friends in the U.S., inexpensive and appropriate cards that said much more than just —Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.||

Surely it was grace that directed me to one small, plain white card. On the cover there was a simple dark line from a star in the upper left corner down to a small manger in the right bottom corner—an unpromising design, I thought.

However, when I opened this small card the simple message grabbed me hard: AND GOD STOOPED DOWN SO LOW. Despite the anthropomorphic cast, the truth of the Incarnation in that simple line was stunning. That surely is why one of the Christmas Eve scriptures is Philippians 2:5-11, where we read, “though [Jesus] was in the form of God, . . . he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.||

That’s it. And God stooped down so low.||

Prayer

Sacred Infant, all Divine
What a tender love is Thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this! Amen.

(Edward Caswall, 1814-1878)

Wendy Keys '00 (deceased)

Jesus emptied himself of his divinity in order to come to us in humble human form. What could be more humble than a baby born in a stable laid in feeding trough? Paul is urging the church in Philippi and us today to be imitators of Christ. We need to learn how to be servants and not the ones being served. That we need to learn to love each other hour by hour and day by day. It is that basic. When Paul urged the Philippians to be of the same mind as Christ, to imitate him in humility and obedience, he was saying, kneel down and empty out. We must purge ourselves of our pride and self-confidence in order to be filled with the divine love that Christ offers us.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ to teach us what true humility is and that we should be examples of it to the world. For it is in Jesus name we pray all things. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and

steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Christopher Brown '08

The Apostle Paul begins his first letter to the Thessalonians with thanksgiving for the way they responded to the Gospel. After the Word of God came to them “in power and in the Holy Spirit,” the Thessalonians responded with such joy and faithfulness that they were an example to fellow believers throughout all of Greece. Particularly exemplary were their *repentance*—“turning from idols to serve a true and living God”—and their *hope*—“waiting for God’s Son from heaven . . . Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”

This Advent, *how is the Lord inviting you to live with exemplary repentance and hope?* From what idols does he invite you to turn, so that you may set your hope fully upon the Living God, and so bear witness to Christ?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us. Turn our hearts from idolatry. May our repentant and hopeful response to your Gospel bear true witness to the glory of your eternal kingdom. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

1 You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. 3 For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5 As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6 nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. 9 You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. 11 As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, 12 urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Ellen Dawson '09

As the apostle Paul was writing this letter to the Thessalonians, I bet he was feeling pretty surprised. He had sent Timothy to follow up on the visit they had made. Instead of returning with negative news, Timothy returned with an encouraging report, telling Paul that the people of Thessalonica had turned from idols to praise God! In fact, the Thessalonians, in spite of persecution and suffering, had become “a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” The report that Timothy gave Paul that day was probably the last thing Paul expected to hear!

In this time of Advent, we also can—and we should—be surprised by the power of the Gospel. Advent is a time when people’s minds, ears, and hearts are possibly a little more open. People are longing to hear more about the baby born in Bethlehem or how the star led the magi to the manger. Hearts are being filled with a commercialized holiday when they really want to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. As we hear the story of the nativity, read the Song of Mary, or sing “Silent Night,” we can believe that the story of the Gospel is penetrating people’s hearts in ways we cannot explain. But it is up to us to help people know, understand, and grasp on to the love of Jesus Christ.

Just as Paul dared to go and tell the Good News to the people of Thessalonica, we too are called to the “daring task” of evangelism. Advent gives us an awesome opening to tell friends, family, and co-workers about the love of God that came to us in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. So, let’s encourage one another in this task. Let’s also encourage one another to expect people to hear and know the true Reason for the Season! This holiday, I invite and encourage you to remember this passage as a challenge and calling to spread the Good News of the Gospel as Paul and the apostles did. Dare to tell friends and family about Jesus Christ. Remember you too are entrusted with the story of Jesus Christ. Delight to share the Gospel. Encourage one another to live in the light of this Advent season.

But most of all, I hope that all of us will approach the task with expectation and anticipation. Don’t be surprised if your efforts result in someone coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior!

Prayer

Lord God, Thank you for the words of your servant Paul, who reminds us of our task to tell others of the Good News of Jesus Christ! This Advent season, help us to be daring, to be faithful, and most of all to remember the power of the Holy Spirit at work in all of us! We pray to You, Lord, as we delight in the coming birth of the King, Your Son, Jesus! Amen.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, 3 so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain. 6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. 8 For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see

you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. 11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Robin Sharp '18

In this earliest of his letters, Paul is overjoyed to learn of the faith and love that continues to thrive in this Thessalonian community of Christ's followers. Having to flee the city after preaching only three Sabbaths, this apostle was anxious to know if his teachings had taken root in such a short time. Was the soil fertile enough to allow the seed to grow? Were the souls of the people open to Jesus Christ and his Good News? Was this fledgling community of faith keen to hear the truth in Christ's teachings, turning their lives around to love the Lord their God and to love their neighbor as themselves?

They were. Timothy's visit to Thessalonica on behalf of Paul established that Christianity had taken root in this European city. The words and ministry were spreading. Verse eight—"For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord"—is not simply about Paul and Timothy being satisfied with the results of their mission. It is much deeper. The "we" points to all people following Jesus everywhere and at every time, enriching others in Christ's love. It demonstrates a living and growing faith. And "standing firm in the Lord" offers a glimpse of being strong enough to overcome the bondage of "living in the world."

This is the hope for those who fear that the reign of Christ is in peril. When standing "firm in the Lord," the world is assured Christ lives.

Prayer

Ever-living Christ,

What can be said that will make a difference in the life of another? Will a gentle prayer together help them know Christ? Will holding their hand while they face conflict and despair tell them Jesus does care? Does preaching a bold sermon on loving the Messiah introduce them to a new way of life?

Today we are reminded, Lord: when we stand firm in your name, you do the work, and we are your instruments. That is what makes the difference. Amen.

Lori Liller Arnold, retired staff

Imagine a day when the sky is gray (easy to do in a Pittsburgh winter), it's chilly, and you are feeling downhearted about things happening in your life. Everyone has a day like this occasionally—a day when it seems that nothing is going well. Then . . . you get a text message, an email, or perhaps *even* a letter with wonderful news! Immediately your heart is lightened, your face is smiling, and you may do a little dance because of the happiness flooding your body. Paul describes such a feeling after Timothy's return with news that the church in Thessalonica was remaining faithful. Paul writes about being encouraged in the midst of his persecutions and, furthermore, states that he "now live(s)" because of the Thessalonians' steadfastness. This happiness is the same kind of joy we can carry in our hearts today because we already know the Good News and we don't need to wait for the arrival of a text, email, or letter. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Dear Creator, thank you for the abundant joy we can feel in the midst of our daily trials. Help us to remember that standing firm in the Lord is a source of life now and forevermore. In your name we pray. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

1 Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; 4 that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you. 9 Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; 10 and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, 11 to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, 12 so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Richard Wingfield '02/'13

Encouraging words can go a long way. Well-chosen words can inspire even the most challenging person to do even more to accomplish any goal. For sure, there were times when you needed that kind word to motivate you to do more than what you're doing. You knew your assignment, yet you wondered whether it was worth all the trouble. You were facing so many obstacles and so much opposition. Frustration had set in and you were ready to resign from everything. But someone came along side you at the right moment, placed a hand on your shoulder, and encouraged you to 'keep on keepin' on' despite the difficulties.

Today's passage challenges us to continue to do more and more in pleasing God. Paul encourages these young believers in Thessalonica, "You've come a long way. Great job! You're doing well. But there is always room for improvement. I need you to abound more and more in those areas."

Life in Christ is never static. It's a continual process of growth. There are areas where you have flourished—great job! But there are also areas, personally and communally, where you can improve. Be careful never to allow complacency in your walk with Christ, for that's your biggest enemy. Spiritual complacency denies a believer's verbal confession. Though you've made progress, there are still areas where your life can be strengthened.

Everyone lives to please someone, whether your spouse, your parents, your children, your boss, even your friends. To do that, you work harder. You do the extra things, the little things, to please that someone.

Our task is ultimately to please God. You're doing good things. You've made great strides. Keep doing more and more. Stay the course. "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).

Prayer

Dear God, help us to please you in every aspect of our lives. Help us to speak an encouraging word to someone, even as we recognize our own need of that same word at times. Help us never to become so complacent or inwardly focused that we lose sight of our ultimate purpose, to please you.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Steve Tuell, faculty emeritus

"Comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18)? Apocalyptic passages like these seem anything but comforting. Indeed, end-time visions are often used like bogeymen, to frighten people into the kingdom: "These are the last days! The Rapture could happen at any moment! Are you ready?"

The apocalyptic perspective on the future is not optimistic, but hard-headedly realistic, grounded in the experience of human cruelty (see Luke 21:5-19). Yet, ultimately, the future is not in the hands of emperors, or generals, or oligarchs. The future is God's, and God will bring in God's reign. Therefore Paul is certain that the "dead in Christ" will not be forgotten. They, together with those "who are alive," will be caught up in a joyful throng, meeting Christ in the air to welcome him as he returns to reign. This Advent, may we like Paul claim this promise, and "comfort one another with these words."

Prayer

O Lord of past, present, and future, in your love no one is forgotten, and nothing beautiful is lost. May we then confidently entrust into your hands our own lives, and the lives of those whom we love. Grant us the assurance that those who have gone before us, and our children and grandchildren after us, are alike held securely in your love. Challenge us to live in the present with the confident assurance that your kingdom is coming—and is, indeed, already in our midst. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a

helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

James Estes '10

Do you lock your doors at night? That's the habit at my house. Of course, if someone really wanted in they would find a way; the night's dark silence would be disrupted with breaking glass. It's troubling to imagine, yet it's also how we are to anticipate the coming of the day of the Lord: like a thief in the night. In fact the prophets remind us the Day of the Lord is not light at all, but rather great darkness; the Day of the Lord is night itself. The great and terrible Day of the Lord will come as a thief, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and there is no escape.

What shall we do then? Well, we have a contingency plan for this at my house, and I'll bet you do too. When out of town we employ a small army of dial-timers to switch lights on and off at all hours of the night, and not just lights to be seen, but also radios and televisions to be heard. Why? Because we hope would-be thieves will move on to one of those "not a creature was stirring" homes. If we are not awake, we at least don't want the thief to know it.

But, of course, Jesus is not a thief coming to plunder. The Day of the Lord is His day! Jesus is the rightful King returning to claim His day, coming suddenly with judgment for all days. Let's not think that Jesus will not come back simply because He has not done so yet. He is not slow as we consider such things, but is patient, and His patience means salvation. This is the flame atop the candle of hope, that we are His people. What fear of darkness is there for those who are light in the Lord?

Beloved, there is no eternal night for us. We are children of the day, the heritage of light and so we set aside the habits of night people. We don't live any longer for fading night-pleasures with no thought for tomorrow.

What are the children of light to do? We remember and we wait together. We remember the lowly manger, the garden tears, the cruel cross, and we remember the empty tomb; we remember that just as he did not wait overlong in that tomb, so He will not sit overlong at the right hand of power. We remember, waiting through the night watches, we gaze forward, giving Him no rest until righteousness shines like a lamp, waiting we whisper together into the darkness, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Prayer

Lord, help us to encourage one another and build each other up, because Jesus is coming—suddenly. Hallelujah!

Laura Strauss '09/'23

In two weeks Clinton United Presbyterian Church will welcome two international students into its faith community for the Christmas holiday. As the church has corresponded with these young women, a certain question has been repeated: "What will Christmas be like?" These Asian students do not know what to expect from an American Christmas celebration.

As those with significant experience of the Advent season, there's much that we have learned to expect. From carols to candlelight services, we know what is coming. Yet, 1 Thessalonians reminds us that in this season of expectedness the unexpected remains. We are reminded this Advent that we cannot expect when Jesus will return. However thoroughly we may study the Scriptures, Christ's return remains

unpredictable. There is a distinct presence of the unexpected in the midst of all that we may expect from the Advent season.

Prayer

God, there is much that we've come to expect from Advent. Remind us of the unexpected time of Christ's coming. Send your Holy Spirit amongst us as we grow closer to you in preparation for that glorious day. Amen.

Sue Montgomery '77

Some congregations celebrate advent with a look towards Easter. Their Christmas tree is chosen for its beauty and trunk. On Jan. 1st, the trunk is saved and formed into the cross for Lent and Easter. The wood of the birth of Jesus, the Christmas manger becomes the cross, the symbol of death, the empty cross the symbol of resurrection. Thessalonians reminds us of these powerful opposites as we seek to live in darkness and light, despair and hope, life and death. Our faith is a transformative faith that moves us through times of darkness and suffering and surprises us with resurrection promises and grace. God's good gifts come to us for we are the named, blessed, children of light. We don't belong to the darkness. Faith comes alive in the relationships we have with God, in Christ and in the communion of believers who encourage and build one another up in the Spirit of grace and love.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for enabling us to serve you while being embraced by your love, strengthened by the support of our families, upheld through the communion of neighbors, and rejuvenated by the birth of hope in your grace. Thank you for trusting us to be your children of light as we bear witness to the peace and security you give us in Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. May we move through this advent season giving thanks knowing that in life and in death we belong to you. With the angels we sing, alleluia! Amen.

Darren Rogers '17

It is difficult to be an encourager and look outside our private world when the integrity of society is breaking apart before our very eyes and institutions that seemed rock-solid are crumbling like brittle soil on a hot summer day! We are relentlessly bombarded with reports of mass shootings and divisive and inflammatory rhetoric from elected leaders entrusted to proclaim and protect "liberty and justice for all." The challenge to stay positive when faced with tragedy, illness, and loss is overwhelming—especially during Advent, when peace and goodwill are heralded from the mountaintops while so many are hopelessly struggling though the darkness of the valley.

Our quick fix is to insulate our minds from the distress and to blame others for our condition. We can deep-dive into work, serving, or pleasure-seeking, but the pain is still present when we come up for air. These kinds of solutions only drive us farther away from the One who can reassemble and illuminate this complicated puzzle we call life!

Jesus Christ entered our world of pain and sorrow to give his life for all to become God's children through Christ—God's *children*, "who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13), thus giving us the power and clarity to encourage and strengthen one another.

The birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ enables and entitles us to put on the breastplate of faith and love, along with the helmet of the hope of salvation! By the grace of God we are

given new life and light to navigate through the darkness, confusion, and pain that blinds humanity! “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day . . .” (vv. 4-5a). “So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober . . . since we belong to the day” (vv. 6, 8a).

Prayer

Father, thank you for the grace given through Jesus Christ, who through love alone sacrificed his life for all! Lord, help us look away from darkness and focus our eyes on you. We pray that your light will guide our steps and fill our hearts with hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. 4 Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. 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 '18

“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.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

1 As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. 4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? 6 And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, 10 and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, 12 so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

Scott Hagley, faculty

This past spring, I went to Home Depot to pick up some cedar boards for a garden box. It was only after digging up the front yard and assembling the raised bed that I recognized the risk involved with a front-yard garden. While the sun-saturated site was ideal from a gardening perspective, the very publicness of the garden made me uneasy, for gardening is something over which we have marginal control. This summer we prepared the soil, we planted the seed, we watered the ground, but mostly we waited and watched in a very public sort of way as neighbors and strangers passed by with advice, judgment, and comments.

Our New Testament texts wrestle with this very Advent-like dance between preparation, anticipation, waiting, and the ways this dance can go wrong. As Passover nears, Judas takes drastic action to force change in the status quo and betrays Jesus. Paul cautions the Thessalonians to avoid jumpy and anxious conclusions regarding Christ's second coming. The fulfillment of God's promise, the coming of Christ, can be received, anticipated, and prepared for, but not produced. This Advent, may we learn to cultivate soil and prepare, may we learn to anticipate and wait. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel.

Prayer

Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!

Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,
And be yourself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!
Amen.

Paula Cooper '10/'13

After reading this passage, one may propose that Saint Paul's letter to the church of Thessalonica is still relevant in the 21st century. As were the Thessalonians, we too are saturated and influenced by voices and teachings of various persuasions. These persuasions come to us through media such as the television, the radio, the internet, the newspapers, our families, our friends, and, yes, even from unbelievers. Some of the voices are so intense and persuasive that they tend to permeate into our own thoughts and lead us into questioning our own beliefs. We may begin to ask that, oh, so famous question of the infamous Pontius Pilate: What is truth?

Paul's letter attempts to be the voice of truth to his congregation. They had many concerns. One of the concerns was teachings that proclaimed that the Lord had come. To assure them of the truth, he told them that before the Lord comes a rebellion will take place, the man of lawlessness will be revealed, and the breath of the Lord and His coming will slay the man of lawlessness. This man of lawlessness and others who are apparently working Satan's activities will perish.

The unbelievers who had chosen to believe the false teachings and did not accept the love of Truth that would save them would perish. They rejected Paul's teachings, so God gave them a delusion and they believed the lies and the unrighteousness. We cannot be fooled by the voices of untruth; we cannot allow ourselves to be deceived by false teachings. Jesus Christ is the love of Truth. The believer must be careful when one's survival depends on believing or declining the Truth. One does not want God to give delusions that has one believing in lies or in unrighteousness.

The delusions will have one believe that one's survive through unexpected economic crises depend on higher returns on stocks; foreclosures decreasing tremendously; or the employment rate reaching an all-time high. What a delusion!! Do not be fooled!! It is only in one's belief in the Truth that one is assured of survival. His Truth will save us from receiving delusions from God. We need to listen to the voices and teachings that will draw us into deeper relationships with the Expected One, Jesus Christ. God's faithfulness and love for us is no delusion. We can depend in God during times of uncertainties!!

It is in times of uncertainties that we are tried by false expectations! Put your expectations in the Truth! Our survival is in the One whom is Expected to come. We must shut-out the voices and false teachings and rest in the love of His Truth. In Him we will find Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. But most of all, we can expect the unexpected in Jesus Christ!!

Prayer

Lord, may we not only expect Your coming during this Advent Season but may we expect Your reign in our lives forevermore! This, we pray in the Name of the Expected One, Jesus Christ, Amen!

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

13 But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. 16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, 17 comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. 3:1 Finally,

brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, 2 and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. 4 And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Dave Peters '07

We seem to have a yearning for the familiar and the simple. In a world where political issues are complex and empathy is sometimes challenging, we seek understanding. In a world of gadgets and gizmos that only seem to make conversations more difficult, we seek familiar voices and words. In many ways, Advent calls us back to the familiar—to someone we know.

Here in Thessalonians Paul seems to be calling believers back to the familiar as well. In the chaos and constant danger surrounding the early church and the Apostle's life, Paul reminds the believers of the "steadfastness of Christ" (3:5) and exhorts them to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions" (2:15). He calls them—and us—back to the familiar. In saying "God chose you as the first fruits of salvation" (2:13), Paul reminds them—and us—of our calling to live out a life that glorifies God. In the midst of all the problems the early church was having with constant adversity and misinterpretation of the message of the gospel, Paul takes believers back to basics – the "proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

During Advent, we are asked to come out of the complexity and chaos of the world around us and get back to basics—our calling to proclaim what God has done for us. Our yearning for the familiar is fulfilled if we focus on what God has done. Our world makes sense when we focus on God's promise, not on other things that only cloud our judgment. This calling is not to ignore the challenges of our world; rather, it's a call to make sense of the world in the light of a promise God made through his Son—a promise God is still fulfilling during each moment of every day.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, it is difficult for us to listen to you in the midst of our busy and complex world. We get mixed up and hung up on things that cause us to lose focus. We take our attention away from you. Help us to heed your calling back to the familiar—the love you showed through your Son. Still our hearts to help us focus on what is important: praising you and telling others about your love. Through Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Hebrews 12:18-29

18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20 (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.") 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. 25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26 At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised,

“Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Karen Bowden Cooper '98, retired staff

At Mount Sinai, Israelites retreated before the overwhelming power of God, experienced as fire, darkness, storm, and a shattering voice. The full power of God was more than humankind could bear, and in its necessary retreat from God’s immediate presence, Israel struggled.

The life and death of Jesus bring a new covenant—a new understanding of God’s will for humankind and an invitation to approach God at another mountain, Zion. Here the power of the living God transforms—purifies, orders, and unites. Here God is as a consuming fire.

Service to this live God is rooted in faith and in hearkening to the voice of Jesus, whose life and teaching are evoked in the exhortation that follows in Chapter 13: “Let brotherly love continue . . . Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers . . . Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated. Let marriage be held in honor among you” (Heb 13:1-4). As we await the transformation, the consuming fire is reflected where there is love.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for this season’s promise of new life. Strengthen us to do your will and sustain us in faith in things to come. Amen.

Lisa Dormire '86

True confession. I’m a TLC, History, and Discovery Channel junkie. Please don’t judge. Recently in flipping channels, I’ve often stumbled on shows prophesying the end of the world as we know it on December 21, 2012. Thanks to the Mayans they say. While I’m more than a little skeptical on the theories, those who have eyes to see and ears to hear know that we are living in concerning and complicated days. Financial fears, natural disasters, war... does it get much darker? Once again in this season of Advent and Expectation, we find ourselves with much to fear. How good is the word for us this day then from Hebrews 12. While it may appear that we stand at the mountain of fear and fire, we have come to Mount Zion: the city of the living God. Yes, the world may shake, but we are receiving a kingdom that CANNOT BE SHAKEN! Nevertheless the shaking that surrounds us, we come to the mountain of joy. We watch. We wait. We pray for a better world and we work for a better world. Our trust is firmly placed in the living God who came to us in Jesus Christ. As we read in this passage, “Let us be thankful.” Alleluia.

Prayer

Holy God, though the earth shakes, we need not fear. In you we find our confidence and hope. Thank you for this season of joyful expectation. We place our trust in you. Amen.

2 Peter 1:1-11

1 Simeon 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: 2 May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 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. 4 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. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 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. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

Mary Catherine (Kay) Day '97

The Advent season brings a bustle of activities, especially finding the right gift for each person on our list. Some start to shop early while others rush at the last minute. We try to give according to the interest and desire of the recipient. Most of the gifts we give, while appreciated, are soon or eventually discarded. If we are honest, the same thing happens with the gifts we receive.

This is not the case with the gifts that God gives us. Peter says that God's divine power has given us everything we need. These are gifts that grow with time and use. With them come His promises, His guarantee, that these will lead us closer to Christ and to eternal life. These include faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, and kindness (fruits of the Spirit). As we grow in our faith, these gifts grow in value. They become a part of our lives, treasured and preserved.

God's gifts can't be bought for any price. They can't be wrapped and put under a tree. They can't be held in our hands. They won't go out of style or break and be cast away. They are more costly than anything we could ever purchase. They are the perfect size, fitted just for us. They multiply in value as we use them. More than that, they prepare us for God's use here on earth and for His glory in all eternity. These are the only gifts we can take with us into eternity. Everything else will be left behind.

This season, I invite you to make use of the gifts God has given you as you search for the gifts you will give to others. Where can you give goodness, knowledge, self-control, and all the rest of God's magnificent gifts?

Prayer

Gracious God, you have given us all we need to love you and serve you. You are the most generous gift-giver. Help us this season to give gifts that will last beyond the season, that will be gifts that share the divine perspective of the perfect gifts for those in our lives. Amen.

Tega Swann, DMin student

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.

Stephanie Boddie, Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

A few years ago, I was worshipping at Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in Philadelphia and heard the song *Heaven’s Christmas Tree*. I later learned the pastor that penned the song also wrote a sermon with the same title. In the sermon, the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933) asked, is “Christ really a tree? . . . And if so, are there packages in this tree?” He answered, “Yes, a package with your name on it is hanging on the limb of Heaven’s great Christmas Tree.” Tindley suggested that Christ bears a package of rare blessings for every human being throughout the world.

According to these verses from 2 Peter, through Christ we have been given a precious faith and the precious promises of God. Our needs have already been anticipated and met. We have been given all we need for life and godliness. The gift of faith help us to claim these other gifts—moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and above all, love. Having received these gifts, we will live into our new life and our new identity. We will become partakers in the very nature of God.

Like the expectant child on Christmas morning, we must come and receive these gifts. We must not toss them aside after the excitement of Christmas is over.

Keep reaching up with all your heart, soul, and strength to receive from Heaven’s Christmas Tree!

Prayer

Loving God through your goodness and glory you have given us rare blessings in your son, Jesus Christ, and everything we need for life and godliness. Fill our hearts with peace as we share in your divine nature and grow in faith, adding courage, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, kindness, and above all, love.

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, retired adjunct faculty

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.

2 Peter 2:1-10a

1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. 2 Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. 3 And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 4 For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment; 5 and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly; 6 and if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly; 7 and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless 8 (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment 10 —especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority.

David Quel '11

Perseverance! One of the biggest challenges we all face in life, day in and day out. There always seems to be something else around the corner that will challenge us. We survive High School and must start all over again in college. We survive college, and then we think, hah, I've finally made it! We realize we must start fresh again. The challenges continue with new jobs, maybe marriage, maybe children, there are always more challenges! Perseverance is not always easy through all of this we must face. We want an easier way. We want the short cut to the top so we will not have to work as hard any more. We work so hard all of our life, just to get by and it seems life has passed us by.

The Bible tells us, don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself; easier said than done! We naturally worry, hoping we can reach our goals, dreams, and aspirations. We especially worry if we are trying to do the same for our children. My friends, this is not the way God wants us to live! We are told in the scriptures only a righteous man, a godly man will prosper. There are no shortcuts! There is no ladder that will allow us to bypass everything and reach the top. There are no shortcuts, but there is a loving God who will save us from our trails and punishment when we stray from Him.

Christmas time is a time of joy! A time of hope! A time to start afresh and renew our trust in God. Put the past and your mistakes behind you! This Christmas, let Him take hold of your heart and your soul and show you a life beyond compare! Let Him help you through each day for we cannot do it on our own. Perseverance happens only one way; through God carrying you through your trials and circumstances and walking before you day by day as you face life's challenges!

Prayer

Father, grant us the strength and wisdom to know right from wrong. Teach us to seek only what is pleasing to you, and only to you. Guide us as we surrender ourselves; body mind and soul to you as our ultimate authority. May we sit at your feet Lord Jesus and surrender to you. Surrender to the one who loves us beyond comparison and whose love knows no bounds! Precious Lord Jesus, we give ourselves to you each and every day from now into eternity. Amen.

2 Peter 2:10b-16

10b Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious ones, 11 whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not bring against them a slanderous judgment from the Lord. 12 These people, however, are like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed. They slander what they do not understand, and when those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed, 13 suffering the penalty for doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you. 14 They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! 15 They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, 16 but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Robert Jones '14

John the Baptist is one of the central characters in the Advent drama. His proclamation in the wilderness reminds us that preparing ourselves for Christ's coming involves repentance. Today's reading from 2 Peter is troubling. It is directed toward opponents of the church and contains some rather harsh rhetoric. But as I spent time reflecting on its significance, I was struck by a line in verse 12: "They slander what they do not understand." Does this line resonate with you the way it resonates with me?

So much of the conflict in our church, in our country, and in our world appears to be rooted in an impulse to slander what we do not understand. And if I am honest, this impulse exists in my own heart as well. The work of understanding is hard, and it can often unsettle and disturb our comfortable view of reality—even our comfortable view of ourselves.

This Advent, let us take seriously the call of John the Baptist to repent. Let us identify those ways we have slandered what we do not understand. Understanding can be uncomfortable, even painful. Slandering what we do not understand can function as a defense mechanism. It can allow us to preserve our comfortable view of ourselves, of the world, and of our place in it. But Jesus does not call us to self-preservation. Jesus calls us to understanding. And to repentance.

Prayer

Gracious God, you have called us to this season of preparation and repentance. Give us the courage to seek understanding, even when doing so is uncomfortable and painful. Help us to be committed more to the truth than to our comfortable view of ourselves. 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.

Alan D. Olson '14/'24

The author of 2 Peter states that he is trying to arouse our “sincere attention” to remember the words of the prophets, the apostles, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Does he know that this is Advent?

Does he know how busy we are?

I have it easy. I'm 53 and I don't have kids; I don't have a lot of shopping to do. Yes, I'm a pastor, so I'm busy at this time of year, but all of the planning is done. All I have left to do is show up and follow the plans that we've made.

You, dear reader, are probably much busier—between Christmas shopping and holiday parties—to think about the second coming of the Lord, or how God marks time. You are busy managing the expectations (and perhaps the anxieties) of a family for a merry Christmas. You have to get all the right gifts, the right food for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. You have sooooo much to think about, sooooo much planning to do. It's overwhelming!

We spend so much time and energy chasing material things. Lots and lots of money, too!

Why do we do this to ourselves?

Perhaps we focus on the material things because we're attempting to see the wonder in the eyes of our children or grandchildren. Perhaps we wish to recapture that sense of wonder we felt when we were younger. Perhaps it's harder to live as these scriptures call us to do, when year after year, we wait for Jesus' return.

Wonder is a holy and sacred thing!

Don't beat yourself up for not getting the perfect gift for someone else. Also, do not beat yourself up for not being a “perfect Christian” during Advent. Or any other season. Study the scriptures as you can and remember that the Lord is patient with us (1 Peter 3:9).

Breathe.

Remember that God is merciful.

The coming of the Christ is a reminder of that mercy.

Remember that God loves you—all of us—so much that God entered the world in the person of Jesus, so that we would all know God's love and mercy. I hope that inspires some awe.

Prayer

Lord, in this time of watching and waiting, please restore our sense of wonder. Take away our cynicism and our sense of having seen it all before. Give us new eyes and ears and hearts that we may see you, that we may see your coming and your return in all the people that we meet. Help us to share the gift of your love everywhere and to everyone. Amen.

Brian Sandell '12

I'm a dad of three amazing kids. My kids live life to the fullest—they play hard and laugh often. They dump Legos on the floor, scatter toy cars across the ground, and get other toys out that they won't even play with. Our basement is often hit hardest by our children's playing. It takes only about 30 minutes to turn a pristine, immaculate basement into a complete mess.

Interestingly enough, sometimes it takes even less time than that to turn our own lives into a complete mess. For Adam and Eve it only took one bite. The great news from our text today is that we can turn our lives *away* from the mess of sin and into the restorative life that only Christ offers. Our text outlines how we can do so as we begin this Advent's journey.

First, remember the words spoken by the holy prophets (v. 2). The words of Scripture are life giving, transformative, and applicable for all moments of life. The writer of Hebrews describes the Word of God as alive and active, sharper than any two-edged sword and able to judge thoughts and the intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). God's word is something we are called to remember, internalize, and put into practice. Let's take this Advent season and be intentional about remembering the words of God and the prophetic voices of the past and present.

Second, trust that God will fulfill his promises (2 Pet. 3:3). It can be very easy to doubt God's promises when the world we live in seems to get crazier by the minute. Trust God anyway. When brokenness is all you have known for so long, it is easy to see the mess. Trust God anyway. This Advent season let us not be scoffers (as in v. 3). Instead, let us be people who unconditionally trust that the promises of God will come true.

And third, be patient as you await God's timing (v. 8). At the time of writing of this text, it was widely thought that many followers of Jesus believed his return was imminent. Here we are, 2,000 years later, still waiting. We need to be patient. I must confess that I don't do well with patience. I want things to happen *now*, but that's not how God works. God works patiently, deliberately, in his timing to bring about his glory, and to transform us into the likeness of Christ. In obedient response, we are patiently to await God's timing. If and when we do, we'll be amazed at how we experienced the promised restoration found only in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you that your promises always come true. Help us during this Advent season to be patient, to be hopeful, and to trust you unconditionally, no matter the circumstances going on in our lives. Fix our eyes and hearts on the Christ Child in the manger this Advent. Amen.

Katie Crowe '19

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.

2 Peter 3:11-18

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading 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 ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless 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. Amen.

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.

Karen Rohrer '24

“. . . we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. . . .”

When I think about the Christmas story, the story where God made God’s home in our midst, where for a moment righteousness was at home in this troubled world, and new heavens and a new earth peeked in at us, for just 33 years, I am filled with longing. What would it be like if this world were not the kind of place that sent righteousness to a cross? Can we imagine a world where parents in war-torn countries weren’t clutching their children and running for their lives, only to find borders closed in their faces? Can we imagine a world without the Herods who murder children as pawns in their grabbing for power? A world where the innocent rest safely and the righteous are safe in homes, not under threat of tyranny, violence, or cruelty? To whatever degree we can imagine that, how can we ever be patient with the patience of our Lord? The more I learn about trauma, the more it seems to me that human suffering can be so deep and destructive that it cannot be quantified—yet we are to accept the patience of a God that carries to come to the aid of children. How?

I can’t pretend to answer that question—but I am struck by the command to “regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.” What is being saved by this patience in a world that seems bent on growing destruction? That command is a hard word as we wait for Christmas, as we wait starving for the inbreaking of the kind of Messiah who will rule over powers and principalities, overthrow the ugliness of unjust governing powers, and rule the nations with an iron fist. But, friends, *that* Messiah isn’t coming. What-ever it does or doesn’t mean, if the text is to be trusted our Messiah doesn’t save with an iron fist—our Messiah saves with patience. We do not get to choose our salvation. No doubt we, like the disciples and the crowds of Palm Sunday, would choose differently. Instead, as we wait for righteousness to make its home in our midst, we must be patient. We must be patient and love patience, because our slow and patient God is coming to us again as a baby, saving us again, over the course of 33 years and the course of human history, with the slow vulnerability of the very children we would defend. We may rail against the pace, but salvation is the slow patient work of God over our whole lives. This Christmas, may we find a way to be content to watch again over the baby Jesus—and over all the children of the human family —and to wait with hope, knowing that the salvation of our God always comes and stays with those who wait.

Prayer

Patient God, in the midst of the world’s grief and pain, give us the strength to stand with the vulnerable as we await the slow work of all our salvation together. In our watching and waiting, teach us to trust your ways, so that we might not lose heart. And, loving God, please don’t delay coming again to us. We and those we love are frightened, broken, and hard pressed on every side. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

1 John 4:7-16

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that

we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Elayne Arrington '21

The catholic epistles have not been among my favorite New Testament scriptures. Yet in considering this season in which we anticipate the arrival or advent of the Christ—when we are especially cognizant of the love shown to us by the Father sending his Son and the Son coming to live among us and to give that earthly life for our benefit—I have been especially drawn to the words of 1 John 4:12: “if we love one another . . . his love is perfected in us.” This resonating text is a proclamation that even a love so great as that of the Father and the Son is not complete. We can complete or perfect it by loving one another. I can perfect it by loving my fellow humans. I can complete the love of God by seeing all of us as lovable, by considering our faults as imperfections that are fixable or of no real consequence. One of my favorite scriptures on love has been 1 Corinthians 13. But I now see that familiar text as giving the characteristics of our love for one another and this resonating text as giving the purpose of that love. During this season when our concentration is on gifts, this resonating text is a proclamation that the proper response to the celebratory gift of love incarnate by the Father and the Son is our gift of mutual love for one another.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for opening my mind and heart to a new perspective and an appreciation of more of your word. I pray that you will guide us that we may fully receive and give the gift of love.

Bill Paul '59

The meaning of Christmas is made abundantly clear in this passage. Christmas is the announcement that in the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem God was giving the world a Savior. To celebrate it is to receive the love and life that the Holy One intends for all. John writes: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” Christmas is the divine signal that the Eternal One has come to us in human flesh. It is the call to celebrate that the Word became flesh and lived among us. It is the life changing message that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. It is that, but more.

It is also an invitation to action, to share God’s love in words and deeds. “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” It is to become a bearer of God’s love to others. That’s the test of genuine faith and the incontrovertible sign that God abides in us.

Prayer

Dear God, having received your saving gift through the Babe of Bethlehem, now empower us to be instruments of your love. May your grace pass through us and bring healing and peace to a troubled and hurting world. Amen.

Don McKim '74

In Sunday school, I remember learning the verse: “Let us love one another, because love is from God” (1 John 4:7). This verse captures the nature of Christmas. Today we celebrate the greatest message in the world: “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (v. 9). As John Calvin

said, “Christ is such a shining and remarkable proof of the divine love toward us that, whenever we look to Him, He clearly confirms to us the doctrine that God is love” (Comm. 1 John 4:9). As the Christmas carol puts it: “Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love Divine.”

This message impacts our lives. God’s initiative to enact a radical love in Christ for us sinners orients us now to “live through him.” Our new life in Christ propels us to a radical love for others. Today is Christmas. Let’s embrace God’s love; and love others!

Prayer

O God, may we love others because you first loved us. Amen.

Rebecca Dix ’15/’17

It can be deceiving to look at the pile of presents built up at the base of the tree or the decorations streamed from wall to wall or the half consumed dinner whose remnants can be witnessed in the bulging of bellies or the smeared, crumb stained faces, and think: *And so this is Christmas.*

I’m not saying those things cannot contribute to the joy and festivities, because they do, but when the ripped wrapping paper is gathered and the leftovers put away, does the joy remain? Or do we pack away the Nativity with the tinsel and the snow globe collection? Beloved, the true joy of the season is in this revelation of God’s love for us, a love so whole and perfect, a love that “sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” It is in this Love we have joy, and we are called to live our lives as a litany of this hope, this joy, this love, witnessing to the Kingdom, so that we may all remember and in seeing these reminders that point us to the true hope and love, we all can say: *And so this is Christmas.*

Prayer

Today Christ is born, O God, and your love is revealed among us. In Jesus Christ your light shines in our darkness. Fill us with the mystery of your Word made flesh, until our hearts overflow with praise and joy so that we, your church, may be a sign of your hope and love. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Michael Gehrling ’08

It’s Christmas, and I am exchanging gifts. Gifts express love. Receiving a gift can also change us. The gift may be as mundane as socks, changing the recipient’s wardrobe ever so slightly, or as profound as an engagement ring, changing the course of the recipient’s life forever.

In his letter, John tells of God’s two most profound gifts—Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. These gifts show God’s love. They have also changed every person who has ever received them. Just consider Mary, or the apostles, or any of the thousands who have opened these gifts.

It’s Christmas day, and I’m also grieving. This is the first Christmas I’m celebrating without my mother, who died this year. In grieving, God has convicted me that God is not going to bring back the past, but God will give new gifts to me that are good. Put another way, God has something new in front of me, and it’s going to be good.

This Christmas, be open to God’s doing something new in your life. It may be unfamiliar, but it will certainly be good.

Prayer

God, what new gift are you giving to me today? Jesus, to what, or to whom, are you calling me? Holy Spirit, what new thing do you desire to do in me? Even if it changes me forever, I'll open your gift, because You are good.

Revelation 20:1-10

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while. 4 Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. 5 (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. 7 When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. 9 They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. 10 And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Steve Tuell, faculty emeritus

One of my favorite plays is "The Fantasticks," a two-act musical fairy tale. In the first act, two best friends, pretending to be bitter enemies, forbid their children (a son and a daughter) to see one another. Sure enough, just as the friends had planned, the boy and girl fall in love! Next, the fathers stage a phony kidnapping, with the boy "rescuing" the girl and so winning her father's "grudging" approval. As the first act curtain closes, the cast is frozen in a smiling, hugging tableau: happy ending! In fact, when I first saw this play, I turned to my wife Wendy and asked, "What could possibly happen now?" Act two begins with the characters still frozen in their happy-ending poses. But they can't hold the pose for long. Soon the group hug breaks apart. The best friends discover, now that they are in-laws, a dozen little things they can't stand about one another. The boy and the girl lose their infatuation, and break up. In short, "The Fantasticks" turns out to be about what happens after the happy ending—just like today's text from Revelation.

John's vision describes what certainly looks like a happy ending for our world: Jesus has returned, Satan has been bound, and a thousand years of peace on earth ensue. But then, as the vision unwinds, the enemy is released. Why? Perhaps because, even after a millennium of kingdom rule, the enemy can still find a multitude ready and willing to turn on God in rebellion: a vast host, "as numerous as the sands of the sea" (Rev 20:8), assemble behind Gog and Magog.

On a personal level, this vision addresses a universal experience: everyone knows what it's like to be blindsided by failure or tragedy at the very moment when everything seems to be under control. Life doesn't have closing-act curtains: the action continues, for better or for worse, and we must deal with whatever comes. The rise of Gog and Magog, even after a thousand years of Christ's reign, underlines

the power, pervasiveness and perversity of sin. Perhaps one lesson of John's vision, then, is simply, "Don't get cocky!" Overconfidence is a dangerous error, for even the best of us fail. Then again, in John's vision, the enemy is not destroyed by human effort, but by "fire. . . from heaven" (Rev 20:9). Ultimately our salvation depends, not on our success or failure, but on the Lord's faithfulness. Now that's a real happy ending!

Prayer

Lord, sometimes we think we have it made. Remind us that the play is not over: keep us attentive, and responsive, and obedient to you. Then again, sometimes we think that we are finished. Remind us that the end of the play is in your hands, not ours, and teach us to trust you to bring about our happy ending. In the name of your son Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, Amen.

Revelation 20:11-21:8

11 Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. 13 And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; 15 and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Michael Gerhling '08

"Behold, I am making everything new," says the one seated on the throne. Reading these words in Revelation always make me pause in gratitude. I can think of so many areas in my life where I long for a fresh start. Relationships with loved ones lost to death. Words and deeds that have made others weep. A life of prayer that, at times, feels barren and without hope.

But God's new creation in Christ brings much hope. An elderly priest offers incense, and sees an angel. A barren woman gives birth to a prophet of God. Tear-filled eyes are wiped clean by the caring hands of God himself. Death dies. Mourning, crying, and pain meet their demise. Thirsty people drink free water from the spring of life.

Everyone gets a fresh start in Christ. I know I can use one.

Prayer

O God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the splendor of creation and the beauty of human life. Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us, to share your blessings with our sisters and brothers, and to experience the joy of life in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord and Savior, Amen.

Jodie Eckenrod '20, MTS student

Revelation might not be the most likely book Christians are reading during this joyful season, yet this book is the culmination of the entire message of scripture and of God's plan for creation. And in it is a real reason to celebrate.

Human beings love stories. There's nothing more satisfying than a three act play or the latest Star Wars trilogy. The Bible tells us an amazing story that is still unfolding; a story that involves God and involves us. We read in scripture about God's creative activity and desire to relate to creation. God came to dwell among creation, coming to us in the form of an innocent baby.

The passage from Revelation shows us that the Creator God who spun the universe into existence will bring heaven and earth together and will dwell among us again. We celebrate the humble beginnings of this process during this season of hope and anticipation.

The Son of God has lived among us and will dwell among us once again. Surely that is good news!

Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you and we praise you—we rejoice that you are working in history to join heaven and earth. We rejoice that you have come to us, and you will live with us again, remaking humanity. We rejoice that we can trust in your promises and that you, oh mighty God, wish to dwell among your creation. Amen.

Revelation 21:9-21

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

Timothy Goodman '11

Our passage of Scripture provides a stunning glimpse into the fulfillment of God's Kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" during this Advent season. There are many Old and New Testament colors—particularly found in Ezekiel—that can be seen in this vision. We are reminded that God's mission to redeem a people for God's covenant love and joy, to overcome evil in all its sinister forms, and to save the world has happened with Jesus' first coming, happens now through his Spirit's work, and will happen at his final coming.

It is astonishing to allow our whole hearts to consider, feel, and imagine how the Lord, who was laid in a humble manger in what could be a common family's living room, will one day establish the throne of God on earth as the Lamb. That the One who laid aside his glory by emptying himself of all but love will one day bring the ransomed church into the fullness of God's glory. The glory of who we are meant to be will be revealed and the groans of our lives and creation will be satisfied. The Word that became flesh will one day completely fulfill God's covenant word to turn sinners and prodigals into the radiant bride of the Lamb.

What would it take to allow the Holy Spirit to sort out our hearts before the Lord? Is there something that is preventing us from experiencing the comfort of God's kept promise? How will we invite awe into our lives during this season?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, awaken our lives to the radiant hope that has found us, claimed us, redeemed us, and keeps us in Jesus. Stir our imaginations to see our lives and world according to God's mission. Pour your love and truth into our hearts so that we become a reflection and representative of Christ, the Lamb of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Revelation 21:22-22:5

22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Nathan Carlson '11

The Gospel of John introduces Jesus as "The light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5, NRSVA) In the Apocalypse of John, the apostle sees Jesus, now the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lamb of God, for who and what He truly is—the Light of the new world. This light illuminates the new creation, revealing its true, full purpose in God's presence. The uncorrupted,

undefiled, eternal nature of all things steps out from the shadows to be revealed as fully part of God's reigning kingdom.

Trudging through Advent year after year only to arrive at the same manger scene, it becomes increasingly easy for us to lose sight of the immaculate in the mundane and routine. We recite words of power from rote memory. Scenes of God breaking through into humanity get wrapped in tattered cloths. The infinite becomes seasonal and disposable. How are we tempted to dust off previous year's sermon jackets, provide a touchup, and distribute the same words to the same people? After all, isn't this message eternal and in need of no refreshing?

And yet, the nature of light itself, of vision, should prohibit this from occurring in our own lives. Light illuminates the present nature of things. Stepping outside after a fresh snowfall changes the contour of one's own backyard, so that a child's imagination can see it as a new wonderland of possibilities not present yesterday. So too does the eternal light of God's Kingdom, come in the Lamb of God, shine forth from eternity always on fresh changes in our own lives and the world around us. The ongoing, transformative work that this God with us has been doing in our own lives since last we approached this season certainly means God's light falls upon new ground. Until John's vision of the New Jerusalem becomes real for us in eternity, the question each Advent season should be: what is this light hitting in us this year that has changed? What darkness and decay has this Lamb of God overcome since last we saw His sign?

Prayer

Lamb of God, shine your light into our lives illuminating the work you have done among us this year. Show us where darkness and decay remain, that we may invite you in again. Let us find ourselves filled with wonder at your work as we approach your day, Emmanuel. Amen.

Mikayla Kovacik Doepker '19

I remember that, as a child, for weeks leading up to Christmas I thought and dreamt of what might await me under the tree on Christmas morning. I also remember the tingle that welled inside me when I thought about the possibility of that big gift—the one I'd "forever" been asking for—being proudly displayed next to the tree. Yes, that big gift would catch my eye as I came down the stairs, and the rest of the day would fade into the background of my joy and excitement.

We always say and hear that Advent is a season of waiting, of anticipation, of hopeful expectation. But what are we really waiting for? What are we really expecting? What are we really hoping for at the culmination of this season?

Throughout the season of Advent, we wait. We wait and prepare to welcome Immanuel, God with us, once again. Yet this passage from Revelation reminds us that, in our time of waiting, we are not merely commemorating the first coming of Jesus—we are waiting, preparing, anticipating, and expecting in hope the *second* coming of Christ. This passage paints a picture for us of what life will look like when God's throne, once again, moves from heaven to earth. In place of the tender whispers of a mother's lullaby and the delicate breaths of a newborn will be a river of the water of life, trees bearing twelve kinds of fruit, and leaves that heal the nations.

This vision from Revelation reminds us that Jesus, God incarnate, has come to reconcile the whole of creation, restore our life, and renew our hope. So this Advent, may we celebrate and wait with hopeful expectation and anticipation of the hope, joy, love, and peace that both has and is yet to come.

Prayer

God of light and love, we thank you for the gift of Immanuel, God with us. Help us to prepare our hearts, our lives, our homes, and our churches for you once again. In all things, teach us to wait with hopeful expectation of what will be. Amen.

Revelation 22:6-11, 18-20

6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." 7 "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." 8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" 10 And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evil-doer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." . . . 18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; 19 if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Drew Smith, faculty

When grappling with situations in life that seem entrenched or irredeemable, the selected scripture readings provide important reminders about God's interventionary power. In the Psalter passages here (33, 85, 94, 146), the psalmist celebrates God as majestic Creator who spoke the world and its inhabitants into being. The Isaiah (33:17-22) and Revelation passages point to God's intervention as the sovereign Lord whose promises are sure to be fulfilled and whose judgments are enforced. And the Luke passage extols God's intervention as the incarnate Savior whose advent is heralded through the birth and life of the especially anointed prophet, John the Baptist.

God indeed intervenes in our lives and in our world, and those interventions are assuredly transformative. For some, God's interventions might seem unremarkable at the time, or they may even go unnoticed. But remember—a baby born in a Bethlehem stable might have seemed inconsequential. Those who've learned how important that was, however, rejoice.

Prayer

God, we seek your presence, for we need transformation in our lives and in our world. Let your loving kindness be upon us, according as we have hoped in you. Amen.

Revelation 22:12-17, 21

12 "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 16 "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." 17 The Spirit and the bride say,

"Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Mary Robin Craig '10

As Advent draws to a close, we stand on the cusp between the end and the beginning. The church year is coming to an end. In the Northern Hemisphere, the agricultural season has wound down. The secular calendar is near its end.

And here is Jesus, saying not, "I am the end and the beginning," but "I am the beginning and the end." He is pushing us toward a new beginning. He is not lingering in the late hours of the night, but traversing time and space toward his appearance as the morning star.

If your life has been marred by sleepless nights, then you have looked up toward Venus, the planet traditionally called the morning star. Venus appears in the sky a few hours after sunset or a few hours before dawn. Venus is the light-bearer, the dawn-bringer.

Whether you are an outcast in the late-night fields of physical labor, an individual of prominence and wealth seeking something more in the light leading you onward, a young mother working through the waves of the final hours of pregnancy, whether you are anyone at all who feels an unsettled longing and a deep thirst for a new future, the morning star shimmers for you.

The darkness is filled with sorrows and travails. The winter winds of want and need blow cold. But tonight we wait in hope for the star which heralds the breaking forth of the dawn.

Prayer

Light of the World, soft and gentle, radiant and bright, we pray on this Christmas Eve that you break into our world tomorrow with the insistence of the cry of a newborn and the power of ruler of the universe. May we rejoice as the end becomes the beginning and the least becomes the greatest! Amen.

Gospel Readings

Matthew 3:1-12

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” 4 Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Martha Robbins, faculty emerita

Christmas is only ten days away. “Are you ready for it?” friends and relatives may ask? Some may have all the externals ready or “under control” for the holiday celebrations. Others may feel chronically unprepared and overwhelmed by the hectic pace of our lives triggered by the enormity of the issues we face, such as new presidential leadership, the speed of technological innovations, unprecedented moral questions, ecological disasters, and unrelenting acts of violence and threats of terror. Still others have a sense of dis-ease and are searching for a sense of purpose and meaning for their lives, much less the meaning of Christmas that appears as tinsel to them.

So how can we really hear the words of John the Baptist proclaiming that the reign of God *has* come near? Are we ready for it—for the coming of the One who “baptizes (us) with the Holy Spirit and fire” and thus effects the reign of God in our midst? How do we prepare to receive this ever coming One within our hearts and in our midst? John is clear in his guidance: “Repent!” This word may evoke a sense of shame that automatically turns in on itself with some inner judgment, such as, “I’m not good enough.” The true sense of repentance, however, is born in relationship, in the faith-filled experience of being loved into being at every moment by God who “words” us forth in and through Christ, who became flesh to dwell with us, bear our sins unto death, and send us His very Spirit of Love. The Spirit, source of life, holiness, and wisdom, enlightens and kindles our hearts with love of God, human beings, and all creation—the world God so loved. Thus, whenever we are truly convicted by the Spirit that we have not loved God, others, and ourselves *as* we have been so loved, we are gifted to feel and express sincere regret or remorse about our offending action or omission. Genuine repentance leads to confession and acceptance of forgiveness, fills us with gratitude and peace, and brings us back to our true selves-in-Christ in relation to God, others, and creation.

Prayer

Most gracious and loving God, send forth your Holy Spirit to search, purify, consume, and make holy all that is in me (especially _____) that prevents me from perceiving and welcoming the Risen Christ among us, inviting us to co-labor with him in his mission of building the reign of God in our midst.

Carolyn Jones '77/'89

When surrounded by desert, we tend to focus almost exclusively on looking for a way out of the wilderness. We listen for voices which assure us that we are not alone in our grief, our discouragement, or our failing health. We look for signs which point to life beyond our economic distress, our political polarization, our ecclesiastical wrangling. And then John the Baptist helps us remember that, for the people of God, the wilderness has always been a time and place of preparation and formation, for God is with us in the wilderness.

The Gospel lesson for today reminds us of the two-fold message of Advent. As we await again the birth of love in the form of a baby who will rule as King, we dare not let the wonder of his humble birth allow us to forget Advent's focus on the second coming of Christ as judge of those who would resist love's demands. As someone has noted, it is only God's coming to us that makes it possible for us to come to God—and repentance clears the way.

Prayer

Eternal God, as we wait for love to be born among us once again, show us how we may help to "prepare the way of the Lord" in the wildernesses of our world—today—for Christ's sake. Amen.

Matthew 11:2-15

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

11 "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came, 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 Let anyone with ears listen!"

Shawn Malarkey, DMin student

Advent has always been billed as a season of dual expectations. We are asked to suspend our rootedness in the present moment as we travel thousands of years backward in time to vicariously await the first coming of Jesus. We are then encouraged to hurl our consciousness forward in time to some hazy future point where our long-awaited Savior returns again in power to establish the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. What if for a moment though, we pull our thoughts back from the past and future and rest fully in our personal and God-touched present?

Our Gospel passage today is all about John the Baptist: John's followers, popular thoughts about John, Jesus' take on John, John's elevation as the last prophet, and perhaps an implied narrative about how early Christians were interacting with those who still considered themselves to be John's disciples. For

all that, what then about John? Not past or future, but presently sitting in a dark jail cell, hungry and cold, waiting with eyes wide and heart open for messengers to return with news, his grime-covered hands shaking with anticipation as he hears a door open.

What then about you? Take a moment to separate yourself from past and future anxieties, and rest easier today. What was true for John in his present is true in your present as well. Rejoice, for messengers have already arrived, and the news they bring is better than you ever imagined in your wildest dreams.

Prayer

Gracious God, you know the regrets of our past and the distractions of our future. By the power of your love, hold us tenderly in our flitting and fleeting now, and enable us to live ever more fully in your present, where you live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 25:1-13

1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Lisa Dormire '86

The theme for this year's Advent Devotionals from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is "Expect the Unexpected." The Scripture reading from the 25th Chapter of Matthew presents us with a very good start.

This is a story about a wedding. In these days the bridesmaids carried little oil lamps as part of the procession. These were festive lamps meant to lead the way for the bride and groom. They were also necessary illumination in a time when there was no electricity. You could not have a wedding reception without lamps and the oil to fuel them. In this case the bridal party consisted of ten young women, half of whom Jesus describes as wise, the other half are called foolish. As we all know, the wise are the ones who had not just their lamps but extra oil just in case. For reasons that aren't made clear, the bridegroom is late for the wedding. And after waiting and being bored, the bridesmaids nod off to sleep.

Sometime later they are awakened by the cry, "They're coming, and they're coming." Great—the wedding can begin. But while they have been asleep, the lamps have run out of oil. The wise women refused to share with the foolish, sending the foolish scurrying off to the seven-eleven to buy more oil. They get their oil, rush back to the house, and furiously knock on the door. The groom opens it a crack as he peers out overtop the little security chain. "I'm sorry," he says, "do I know you?" And then the door slams shut. It sends a chill down the spine, doesn't it?

I think that this story is meant to send a chill down our spine. Jesus really wants us to be prepared. None of these bridesmaids were bad people. Half of them simply were unprepared. Jesus tells his disciples to keep watch. You never know when the bridegroom is going to arrive—so be ready.

In our day to day lives and in our faith lives, we tend to get sloppy. At least I do. Getting by seems good enough. Just keeping my head above water seems good enough. I don't usually think to carry extra oil. Literal or spiritual. But in this parable, Jesus calls us to a higher level of consciousness. Think ahead. Read Scripture. Pray. Take time for feeding the spirit. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Keep your oil reserves full—and then watch, wait, live expectantly. Don't shuffle through life unaware—Look up—and be surprised once again by Christ among us. Expect the unexpected. Come Lord Jesus, Come!

Prayer

O living Christ—you were—you are—you come. Fill our lamps that we may be prepared for the feast of your reign. Keep us wakeful that our lamps may ever burn. Give us sight that we may recognize you among us. Give us strength to stand in your presence. So may all these things be, through your gracious spirit. Amen.

Hetz Marsh '68

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins was used by Jesus to respond to a question about the arrival of God's Kingdom on earth, and the final victory on earth of God's Son. In this parable and in many other teachings, Jesus tips God's hand. He tells us how the end will be. He doesn't tell us when he will return, or how he will achieve his final triumph, but he leaves no doubt that it will happen.

Usually when someone writes a novel he or she does not let the readers know how it ends. The end of the salvation story is sure and under God's complete control. God does not leave us in suspense. God wants us to know.

We don't know how, we don't know when, but God wants us to know that someday God will be victorious. We need not worry about the outcome. Our human drama will not end with a dark cloud and stench of defeat. I will end in light and glory.

Bertolt Brecht wrote, "A ship will sink—that's what we must resign ourselves to." Pascal had another view. He said, "life is like a voyage on a ship which may be tossed by storms and waves, but a ship which we know will reach its harbor safe and warm."

Jesus reveals a view of life that confirms Pascal. Storms and waves are allowed in our lives but God will work the final victory, of that we can be certain. Someday there will be a shout and the bridegroom will arrive. And then we will see how humankind is finally led not to a funeral but to a wedding.

Have an alert, expectant Advent.

Prayer

Holy and loving God, thank you for the Advent Hope in Christ. Awaken us this Blessed Season. Amen.

Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Susan Moudry '10

Songs echo through my head as I read the first line of the Gospel passage today. Maybe you'll recognize them, "Ain't that good news..."; "No one mourns the wicked. Good News!..." ; "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start...". And while the music isn't all scripturally inspired, I'm reminded of the importance of hearing the gospel message. Our eyes and ears help us to remember and internalize it.

The good news of Jesus Christ didn't begin as the latest best seller. It began at the dawn of creation, was continued by the prophets and proclaimed by the disciples as a living and active word. It traveled by word of mouth and song.

So, how did you first hear about Jesus Christ, Son of God? This Advent season remember whatever your beginnings were—how you first heard the good news—and then consider what you've done with it. The good news is meant to be seen and heard, preached and sung, witnessed and treasured. It began a long time ago, and continues with us today.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for giving us the good news of Jesus Christ. Thank you for making it more than a story for us to read. Help us live lives that proclaim it. 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.”

Martha Murchison '09

As Christmas nears, we hope. We hope for family to gather. We hope for limited chaos during our children's Christmas program. We hope for song and joy and a baby to be born. We hope for wonderful things. In that hope, we are not unlike Zechariah. Zechariah hoped in God. Throughout his long life he served faithfully in the temple. Like us, he was ready and prepared.

Yet when the angel appeared to him and told him the amazing news that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, Zechariah's imagination failed him. He was too old. She was too old. Such things simply could not happen, he told the angel. There was no way the news could be true.

If we used the words of divine visions for our greeting cards and prayers— words such as *Death will be no more*, and *Mourning and crying and pain will be no more*—we might respond in the same manner as Zechariah. There is simply no way mourning and crying and pain will end. We have tried and failed to stop violence. We are weary with seeking an end to suffering. Our imaginations simply fail us. We cannot get them to take us beyond God's beautiful words to our very real and hurting world. We are too old. Such things, we say to the angel, cannot happen.

Yet the angel bends down to us as surely as the angel bent down to Zechariah. He stopped Zechariah's voice from voicing impossibility. The angel whispers to us to stop denying God's vision. The angel urges us to open our eyes and imagine. He asks us to imagine God's vision in our very real world.

The work of Christmas is imagination. The work of Christmas is to make our imagination real.

Prayer

Lord God, please open our eyes, our hearts, and our imaginations, we pray, that we might better see an image of God's Kingdom in our mind's eye, and from seeing, begin the hard work of helping to make our vision reality. Amen.

Andrew Pomerville '18

“. . . 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.

Jean Henderson '68

Advent—twenty-one centuries ago—a time of juxtapositions:

Gabriel talking to an old man about a baby;

Gabriel talking to a young girl about a baby.

Gabriel punishing the old man for his unbelief;

Gabriel praising the young girl for her belief.

A baby born to the old man and Elizabeth, named John;

A baby born to the young girl and Joseph, named Jesus.

John, preparing the Way, and dying—his head on a platter;

Jesus, the Way, dying—his body on a cross.

Advent—now—a time of juxtapositions:

Tears of sorrow for war-scarred earth and innocent dead;

Tears of joy for reunions and signs of resurrection.

The garden of Creation where sin dimmed the flowers;

The garden of Resurrection where death will be no more.

And all because God became one of us—

The ultimate juxtaposition!

Prayer

God, Alpha and Omega, make wide our minds, make deep our hearts, to absorb your love for us. Amen.

Luke 1:5-25

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."

Timothy Goodman '11

Silence can be a holy gift.

Obviously, not every form of silence is good, gracious, or godly. A silent response to prayer can be difficult to weather, for example. In our most honest moments, we will likely admit we are afraid of silence for what it might reveal about ourselves and reality. However, there are times when silence is not only needed but required of us in the wake of something good, beautiful, and true. For Zechariah, he needed silence after the angel Gabriel told him that his wife Elizabeth would finally conceive a son who would operate in the spirit of a revivalist. He needed silence because of his unbelief. It is easy to imagine that Zechariah had a way with words as a trained priest of Israel. Yet, Zechariah's words were getting in the way of a faith that held onto God's Word. So, God in wisdom and mercy brought Zechariah into a season of silence until John the Baptist was born. Then, Zechariah's silence broke into praise and faith by grace. What would it look like for us to enter moments and spaces of silence as we wait upon and hope again in the Son of God, the Word made flesh?

Prayer

May the Trinity, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teach, strengthen, and change us as we enter the holy gift of silence.

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.

Norma Prina Murphy '93

I remember when I first sensed a call to go to seminary. I had no idea whether I was to earn an M.A., which would enhance my B.S. in Music Ed. and pave the way for a full-time church musician position, or an M.Div., which would lead to something I'd never imagined.

Honestly, my first reaction was one of disbelief—who, me, God? Go to seminary, God? That's for smart people, wise people, deeply faithful people. And you're calling ME?

Then came the objections—but I have a family to care for, and four choirs to direct, not to mention my 45 private students! How will my family manage if I add classes to that schedule? And where will the money to pay for it come from? Thin air?

But it didn't take long for me to get on board with the notion. The more I considered it, the more I actually got excited about it, because if God is willing it, then a way forward would be made clear, right?

That was not the first 'Mary moment' I have had in my life, nor the last one, either. There have been many during my life, but that moment was the clearest and most parallel to Mary's that I can recall.

So, what was your most memorable 'Mary moment'? When has God laid a path before you and invited you to travel it? An invitation that has caused you to react with disbelief, maybe objections, and finally with more than acceptance—with anticipation and joy?

And what is more to the point: what invitation is God yet laying before you today? That is definitely something to ponder carefully in the next few days—because God is indeed still at work in us. Even now.

Prayer

God of the impossible, you have called us to a life that we could never imagine. But it is the life that leads to joy. Bless the ending of our Advent journey and coming celebration of Christmas anew. In the name of your Word-made-flesh. Amen.

Andrew Purves, faculty emeritus

The angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, a virgin, and told her that God would come upon her. She would become pregnant with a boy, whose name was to be Jesus. He would be the son of God.

I cannot improve upon the story. No example will illustrate it. It tells of something unlike anything else that ever happened. If you don't believe it, Christianity is more or less a lie. If you do, Jesus is God and Savior.

God breaks open the bounds of the possible. Can such a thing happen—an angel announcing a non-sexual conception? The Bible is not interested in that question.

So Gabriel appears to Mary and greets her with words of gracious announcement: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you." God has chosen her to be the mother of Jesus, who is God. That the Lord is with her is a statement of fact that prepares Mary for a service that is the most remarkable God-getting-involved-with-us event since the creation itself. History is about to turn on what Gabriel announces to Mary.

Mary was confused and afraid. The angel calms her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Now the announcement that surely could never have been anticipated: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." The God-given name of the child means 'the LORD saves.' And the angel gives the divinely conceived child the most remarkable title: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High." His identity is established. He is not to be a holy man who aspires to godliness. He is not to be a great religious leader. Rather he is one in being with God.

He is God with us, God for us, the very sign and actuality of God's truth and purpose. The birth of Jesus as God means that God is revealed concretely and specifically in and as the child whose conception is here told. The child of this conception is the hinge on which all other truth will turn, the beginning and the end. He will sit on "the throne of his father David;" "and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Biology meets its boundary in the face of biology's creator. "How can this be?" Mary asks. Adam is reborn. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you"—the angel's words echo the story of creation when the Holy Spirit moved upon the formless void. This is now no longer the old creation continuing, but a new creation. Nature's God acts upon creation in sovereign freedom to do a new thing.

Old creation, creation apart from Christ, cannot understand what has happened. The law of the old order has been opened up beyond what was and is possible for nature. God who created reproductive biology is not himself subject to reproductive biology. If creation is the first act of God on his own terms, the second creation, the conception and birth of Jesus, his son, is the second. A new creation and therefore a new future is announced and made actual. The story means what it says: God entered into the world and took our birth in order to be our way home to God.

Prayer

Our Father in heaven, as you sent the Holy Spirit to come upon Mary, that she would conceive and give birth to Jesus, we pray that we too may be bearers of your Spirit. Let us, with Mary, be willing and faithful servants of the Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Susan Vande Kappelle '95

I recently participated in the birthing of my daughter's son. Although I have given birth to two children and now witnessed one directly, I have no idea how a baby is born. And I certainly cannot imagine that God could somehow be born into this world.

We talk easily of the glory of God, and yet it is beyond description or understanding. Like Mary we are overshadowed. It is beyond us, incomprehensible; yet we receive it. The Son of God was born of a woman like each one of us. And God's glory is present in this dark and hurting world.

All we can do in our stupor is say "yes" as Mary did and sit in awe and wonder. And perhaps sometimes cry or sing for joy.

Prayer

God of wonder and grace, forgive our blindness and deafness when it comes to our comprehension of your work among us. Give us new insights this holy season. And help us to share your glory with someone today. Amen.

Steve Crocco '78

In a few short verses Mary goes from asking how she will conceive the Son of the Most High in her virgin womb to "Here am I. . . let it be with me according to your word." Millions have speculated about how Mary came to grips with such momentous yet difficult news. The truth is we simply don't know what went through Mary's mind. None of us will ever be in a situation as weighty as Mary's. But when we are surprised by God's will, particularly when any way forward will be difficult, we find ourselves in a position similar to Mary's. "Really God? You want me to do what? It's impossible." As God's people, we are invited to take comfort in the angel Gabriel's words to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God," before we get to "Here I am."

Prayer

Almighty God I stand in wonder that you have called me to be your child. Your words to Mary, "do not be afraid," are also your words to me as I face life in a broken world. Let me see afresh how Mary trusted you and how you used her to bring redemption to your world. When your will crashes down on me, let my response be, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

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.

Lucinda Isaacs, DMin student

Who knows how many Gabriels there are in our world? God can use whomever God pleases as a messenger. Do sleep disruptions, dreams, or apparent happenstances constitute anything more than an overactive imagination? When Mary is confronted by Gabriel, Luke tells us that she is perplexed. I like to imagine that she was shaken to her core. Mary was trying to make sense of this peculiar moment. Was she worried about projecting her wishes? Did she think that she was making all this up? Faithfulness perplexes us at times, and we are invited to ponder the wonders of God. These moments are difficult to comprehend, especially if we are tempted to jump to answers or look for easy confirmation. What if, instead, we allow ourselves to be shaken to our core? In the shaking, we begin to ponder things we assume are impossible. The shaking is holy. The stirring is sacred. The trembling shakes loose shame and fear. The wonder creates a world larger than the one we fashioned with our doubts and perceived unlovability. Nothing will be impossible with God. Mary shows us that one way to rejoice is to be perplexed. When we are perplexed, do not be afraid. Rejoice in the shaking. Ponder the stirring.

Prayer

Gracious God, shake us now. Perplex us. Help us to not always seek answers when we encounter your mystery, but shake loose in us everything that makes your grace feel impossible. This way we can ponder the world you'd have us create. 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/'24

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!

Danielle Kendig '24

When I began my motherhood journey, I would meet a group of other mothers each week at our local library. Sitting in this large room, we would watch our little ones play while we shared early-stage motherhood stories.

I have carried one of these special moments in my heart for the last nine years. A fellow mom pointed out my oldest, two at the time, sitting on top of a slide. He was gripping the sides of the slide, unsure and peeking around to see if anyone was watching. Nervous, he let go of the sides and slid down with full force. At the bottom, he was grinning ear to ear with pride! Jumping for joy, he made eye contact with me. Knowing his accomplishment, he beamed with innocent self-satisfaction. The fellow mom said, "What a moment to witness! That sweet glimpse of self-satisfaction." She continued, "At what point in life do we lose this?" She was right. As adults we struggle to allow ourselves the right to grin with pride and jump for joy.

Upon reading the Luke passage, I found my mind back in that library, asking this same question. The innocence of the child in the womb, "leaping for joy"—what a sentiment! There are moments in our lives that we are blessed with something so wonderful that it allows for rejoicing. Passing the exams, fellowship with classmates, embracing the Holy Spirit in chapel; all are moments that warrant jumping for joy and rejoicing with the Lord!

Prayer

Gracious Father, we thank you for the moments in our lives where you sneak in the gift of joy. May we continually be encouraged to remember that we deserve to celebrate these moments with you, just as Mary and Elizabeth did those many years ago. We rejoice in the joy that this season brings! Praise and glory be unto you, In Christ's name. Amen!

Luke 1:57-68

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. 67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

Andrew Tennant '12

The birth story of John the Baptist typically plays second fiddle to the story of the birth of Christ, but the story of and prophecy of John the Baptist is a vital part of the story of God's love made into flesh through his one and only son, Jesus the Christ. When the women present at the birth of John questioned his name and witnessed Zechariah's voice return, they were amazed and wondered what God had in store for this child.

For years, Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children of their own, but their love for one another never wavered. Their love for God, and their prayers for a child, never wavered. Though when the angel appeared to Zechariah to give him the news of the coming birth of his son, he was filled with some doubt, his love and faith never wavered, and his belief in what to call his son and in his son's role never faded. John the Baptist would become a Prophet of the Most High, and he would prepare the way of the Lord. John's life and ministry were birthed out of the love his parents had for each other, the love that God had for his parents, and the path that God had for him.

Advent is a season of preparation for Christ's coming. John the Baptist spent his life preparing the people of Israel for the Messiah's coming. It was the love of God that set the meaning of the entire reason for Christmas in motion.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we enter the pinnacle of this season, we remember how your love set things in motion which would alter the course of human history through the birth of your mighty prophet John the Baptist and through the birth of your son, Jesus Christ, who would show the world the ultimate gift of his love through the sacrifice he willingly made for all of humanity. We pray all these things in the blessed name of Jesus Christ. Amen!

Scott Dennis '13

Do you like your name? Do you take pleasure in remembering why that name was chosen for you? Do you enjoy the sight of your signature? Do you see your name as a good reflection of who you are? Names are often expected either to carry a message or serve as a memorial beyond their primary task of identification. Whatever Shakespeare would have us believe, there's no denying that names are indeed significant things and that what we call a "rose" would, by no other name, smell quite as sweet.

Three names in our Gospel reading invite us to consider how the entire operation of God's plan of redemption unfolds. First, the name Zechariah is Hebrew for "God remembers His promise." Throughout the Old Testament, God made and reaffirmed the promise that the Messiah would someday come and make everything right. The second name, Elizabeth, is a Greek variation of the Hebrew name Elisheba, which means "God is the absolute faithful one." Time and again throughout Scripture, God is

remembered as the absolutely faithful One who keeps his promises. The third name, John, means “God is gracious.”

But there is a final, unwritten name that is necessary to give meaning to John’s ministry and that guides the coming course of events after our Advent journey comes to completion: that name is Jesus, which means “God saves.” Thus, in these four names, we behold anew and afresh unfolding before our very eyes the whole gracious purpose of our Lord Jesus’ birth: God remembers his promises; God is absolutely faithful; God is gracious; and God saves.

As we finish this year’s Advent journey, therefore, let us do so not by drawing attention to ourselves and to *our* names. Rather, let us bear witness to the Holy, Triune One who grounds the meaning of these four names and thus of our own—the One who has brought us to where we are, who journeys with us, and who rejoices with us as we greet joyfully the Christ child on Christmas morning.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, O Name above all names, with only two more sleeps before Christmas we find ourselves nearing the end of this year’s Advent journey. As we prepare to welcome you afresh, sustain us in the peace that is your never-ending love, so that we may share the great joy of your birth with all we meet. This we ask for your name’s sake. Amen.

Nancy Lowmaster ’11/’21

The Gospel writer reports that when Elizabeth gave birth, the villagers—family and neighbors alike—rejoiced. A delivery safe for both mother and child was not guaranteed, so a celebration was indeed warranted. And Elizabeth and Zechariah were each well beyond the time in life when babies are usually conceived. This miraculous child was special cause for joy.

The people assumed that this baby boy would be named “Zechariah,” like his father. Take a moment to be a little surprised at that assumption: of course—“Zechariah” was the name of the infant’s father. It is a name with deep Hebrew roots—it means “the LORD has remembered.”

But “Zechariah” is a name that casts its eyes backward—toward what *has been*. God, however, was looking forward. Listen again to Gabriel’s announcement to this baby’s father inside the incense-filled Holy of Holies: “You *will* have a son,” “he *will* be great,” “he *will* be filled with the Holy Spirit,” “he *will* turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God,” “he will . . .,” “he will . . .” Would these villagers who gathered to celebrate fully recognize and eagerly embrace the new thing that God was doing (see Isa. 43:18-19)? Do we?

“John” is the name that God has pre-selected for this child. “John” is a name that lives in the present and looks forward into the future—it means, “the LORD is gracious.” And it is this John—himself a product of a miracle—who would proclaim the wonder of God’s new, loving act of salvation as he points to Christ Jesus, God-with-us.

Prayer

God of all-powerful love, grant us the grace both to remember your blessings of the past with thanks and to eagerly anticipate the new ways you are working in us and in creation this day. Grow our trust in you, so that we can confidently, peacefully, and joyfully rest in your care. Through Christ Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray. Amen.

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.

Andrew Tennant '12, DMin student

The season of Advent offers us two birth narratives: the more celebrated being Jesus, and the often less celebrated of John the Baptist. However, John's story plays a vital part to not only the birth narrative of Jesus but also to the shaping and beginning of Jesus' public ministry. As the Messiah's coming was prophesied in throughout the prophets so too was the coming of the mighty prophet that would be a voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord, and that prophet would become John the Baptist.

As faith leaders, we are called to be a voice out in the wilderness not only in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, but also to prepare the way for Christ's second coming. As we draw closer to our celebrations and remembrance of Jesus' birth, let us also remember the birth of the prophet who came before him, John the Baptist. Like John, we too were given a name. Let us live into the names we have been given, and let us live into who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. May God bless you all in the name of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Merry Christmas!

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, allow us to recognize this season the two births that create the nativity story. Give us the strength and courage to step out and be voices out in the wilderness, like that of John the Baptist, as we continue our own faith journeys and as we lead others to the wellspring of life that is Jesus Christ! Amen.

Luke 1:67-80

67 Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: 68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. 69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, 71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit

in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” 80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Ken Woo, faculty

We anticipate. We prepare. We dream. But what do we really expect? And when is the waiting worth it? Zechariah was accustomed to waiting. He waited for a son. Then he waited to get his voice back. And when he did, it was worth it. He who had expected so little of God now dares us to expect too much! God’s promise spans generations, overcomes resistance, endures forgetfulness, and—in Zechariah’s case and our experience—transforms doubts. This Christmas Eve, may Zechariah’s song deepen our anticipation, guide our preparations, inspire our dreams: Dawn has broken from on high! By the light of Emmanuel those who sat in darkness and walk in death’s shadow can serve God without fear in the way of peace. Whether in joy or in the sorrow of sin, injustice, and despair, let us hope in God’s tender mercy in Christ and learn to expect nothing less.

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, fill our hearts with the hope of Zechariah as we celebrate this eve of Christ’s arrival. Guide our feet into the way of peace, that we might walk without fear to reflect and extend the light of Emmanuel, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Michelle Wahila ’05

Zechariah’s blessing, traditionally called the Benedictus, recounts God’s promises through the retelling of salvation history. A reminder that the hand of God has rescued God’s people, Zechariah’s blessing speaks of God’s mercy and holy covenant through generations of the Lord’s servants.

Though God’s redemption comes about by no action of our own, God’s people are invited to participate in the covenant, that they might “serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness, all of [their] days.” Zechariah proclaims his own son’s role in this work—preparing the way for the heavenly king and deliverer.

Have we listened to the prophet and prepared room in our lives for a mighty savior this Advent season? Our answer comes by way of our response: grateful worship and serving the Lord, all of our days.

Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have raised up a mighty savior to deliver us! We pray that as we welcome Christ the babe, we might prepare a place for him in our lives, on this Christmas Eve and always. Amen.

Luke 7:28-35

28 I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." 29 (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. 30 But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

31 "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' 33 For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; 34 the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' 35 Nevertheless, wisdom

is vindicated by all her children."

Carolyn Cranston '99, staff, DMin Student

Has Jesus lived up to your expectations recently?

There is a great deal of truth in the statement by Voltaire: "If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favor."

Do you worship the God of creation or the God you created? We lead busy lives and map out our days to accomplish what is necessary. It is frustrating when our plan is not God's plan. Sometimes, in anguish, we question if Jesus is really the Messiah. Is our Trinitarian God even listening? We have a perfect plan, and God fails to follow our instructions. This is nothing new.

Luke tells us that the people in Jesus' day expected someone different. They hoped for a warrior to ride in on a mighty horse and free the Israelites from Roman oppression. Instead, they got Jesus, who was healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead.

This especially did not sit well with the experts in the law. The Messiah did not fit the Messiah of their creation. In fact, they claimed John the Baptist had a "demon" and Jesus was a "glutton and a drunkard."

Jesus described them as "children in the marketplace." Cranky children at that. Children complaining that John and Jesus weren't dancing to the tune they were playing. Sometimes, we are those children. Have you ever been frustrated when Jesus got the steps wrong to the dance you created?

How much easier our lives would be if we would let go of the reins we so firmly grasp and invite God to take over our lives—heart, mind, body, and soul. When we give up control, we find true peace.

This Advent season, I would invite all of us to give ourselves to Jesus. Obedient to death on a cross, Jesus already covered us with grace and secured our salvation. We can trust Jesus to care for us. Take time to read Scripture, meditate, and pray. As children of God, we are safe in God's care.

Prayer

Gracious, loving, creator God, keep us from trying to remake you in our image. We put our faith and trust in you, knowing that you provide far more than we could hope for or imagine. Thank you for the gift of your son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Luke 20:1-8

1 One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders 2 and said to him, "Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?" 3 He answered them, "I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: 4 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" 5 They discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' 6 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet." 7 So they answered that they did not know where it came from. 8 Then Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Eric McIntosh '12, DMin Student

By now we have a new president. Whether our new president is the one you voted for or not, the Triune

God is never dethroned. God is still God, and Jesus still has all power, in heaven and earth, in his hands. I find myself seized by the questions asked of Jesus. I find that their questions are telling. They inquire about the source of Jesus' authority, or can I say, power. They ask what kind of power it is. It is indicative of a very intriguing fact: those asking these questions know neither his power nor its author.

We also face contestations of Jesus' identity today. The "American Jesus" permits us to hate one another. That is not the real Jesus. The "American Jesus" permits us to be content with division, individuality, privilege, notions of supremacy—all of which are not of Jesus. His authority does not earn us rights over others.

After Jesus returned questions with questions, the leaders' reply was that they "did not know." We today must not allow forces that "do not know" Jesus to shape our faith. Allowing partisanship to shape our faith instead of our faith shaping our partisanship is a travesty. Will we ever actually and collectively walk in the power and authority of Jesus? I reply: I do not know. Will we ever realize Beloved Community? I do not know.

God is love! Love drives Jesus! In our refusal of him, Jesus invites us to get to know him. I hear him saying: You don't know...but you can! You are divided but you don't have to be! Restoration and revival are love-inches away! The power and authority of Jesus are in his love.

Let us not permit the forces that do not know God to define who God is or how he ought to be. Let us instead get to know God better, draw closer to him, and be fashioned to be like Jesus, and walk this journey with authority in love!

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, fall fresh upon us with a fresh wind and a fresh anointing, that we may consider and imagine what love can do. Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Tom Moore '07

As we come to the Gospel reading from Luke we quickly discover that it occurs toward the end of Jesus' ministry rather than the beginning. Why are we reading from those passages that lead up to Jesus' crucifixion? What is the significance to hearing these passages at a time when we are called to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord and Savior?

In the midst of our reading, we're reminded that Jesus is more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a performer of great and mighty deeds: Jesus is the Lord our God enfleshed, the one who rescues us from the power of darkness and transfers us into his kingdom. In our reading, Jesus proclaims the good news of salvation and does so with authority.

As we journey through Advent, it's important to remember that authority and the power of the Lord our God made known to us in and through Jesus Christ our Savior. It is upon his authority that we cast our lives, for in Advent, we not only celebrate the fact that Jesus was born, we also celebrate the greater reality that he will come again to call all things to himself for the glory of his name.

Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, Word and revelation of the Eternal Father, come, we pray Thee, take possession of our hearts, and reign where Thou hast right to reign. So fill our minds with the thought and our imaginations with the picture of Thy love, that there may be in us no room for any desire that is discordant with Thy holy will. Cleanse us, we pray Thee, from all that may make us deaf to Thy call or slow to obey it, Who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, art one God, blessed forever (William Temple, 1881-1944).

Luke 20:9-18

9 He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. 10 When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 11 Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. 12 And he sent still a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. 13 Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' 14 But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' 15 So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Heaven forbid!" 17 But he looked at them and said, "What then does this text mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? 18 Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

Randy Bush, Former Metro-Urban Institute Advisory Council

When confronted by one of Jesus' parables, a common tendency is to jump to explaining the metaphors contained in the text. But what happens if you let the unsettling reality described in the parable simply unfold as described? The parable of the vineyard appears in all three Synoptic gospels, usually after the cleansing of the temple scene. But before leaping to a deeper message about the Passion of Christ, take a moment to consider this parable as a lesson in faith and morality.

It opens with a description of a contract between an owner and tenants—a contract that is unjustly broken when the rightful compensation is refused to be paid. When a second attempt is made, this servant is insulted, thus breaking not only the business arrangement but also a fundamental trust between the workers and the owner. When a third servant is sent, this person is literally wounded and thrown out—a clear affront against common standards of human decency. Finally, when the owner's son is sent, the ungrateful vineyard leaseholders literally plot to kill and then act on their violent plans. Far beyond seeing a broken contract, broken trust, and broken social values, now we are told about broken humanity itself through the willingness to kill an innocent man for no just cause.

Bad thoughts and actions can escalate into terrible deeds of violence and pain. The slippery slope of unjust behavior is sadly a pathway human beings choose out of fear, out of pride, and out of sin. If we truly seek to live into God's righteousness and Christ's justice, we honor our contracts; we don't betray trusts; we respect common standards of human decency; we work to repair the world, not add to its brokenness and pain. Christ's "cornerstone" perspective truly is something upon which a beloved community (or a righteously operated vineyard) can be established to the glory of God.

Prayer

Open our eyes, living God, to the ways we distance ourselves from you and denigrate your understanding of covenant, trust, and righteousness. Shine with your Advent light into our places of darkness so that owners and workers alike may dwell in mutual peace and lasting justice. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Luke 20:19-26

19 When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. 20 So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. 21 So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. 22 Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 23 But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 24 "Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." 25 He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

Carol Divens Roth '85

No matter what he looked like in real life, Tiberius Caesar was probably depicted as a handsome fellow on the denarius, which bore his image. If you were the metalsmith in charge, would you risk insulting the emperor? The people who trade in the coin of the realm bear the imprint of Rome. The government—its laws, its culture, its morality—is in charge, as represented on the money they use.

Jesus knows that fact and offers a different currency—a currency that bears the image of the one true God. This currency comprises the people stamped by the Creator on the sixth day to live in true shalom—to love God and neighbor, to be stewards of the earth, to do justice, and to show lovingkindness.

We are God's spending money, meant to be used to show what is of real value in the commonwealth of heaven on earth. What's in *your* wallet?

Prayer

Arriving God, in a season when we focus on giving and receiving, spend us. Let our love and service reflect your beauty to each and all in the world you have made, and let us see you in them too. Amen.

Karen Baughman '06

Expect the unexpected. What does that mean, exactly? It seems like a contradiction of terms. How can we expect, anticipate, prepare for something that we have no idea about, don't know it will happen, that's not even on our radar screen?

In the scripture for today, Jesus is preaching and teaching to a crowd of people. This story takes place toward the end of Jesus' ministry on earth. Like any good teacher or preacher, I imagine that he had certain things that he wanted to say to the gathered throng, an outline of sorts. After all, time was

running short for him and he probably felt the pressure to tell his followers everything that they would need to know once he was gone. Imagine Jesus' surprise when, in the midst of his teaching, someone interrupted with a question---a question meant to trap Jesus into saying something incriminating. The unexpected broke in to change the course of the conversation.

When we think about it, the unexpected happens all the time. It can be an event that happens in the blink of an eye and is gone or one that consumes us for the foreseeable future; it can be something simple or something complex; it can be something good or bad. For example, we drive around a curve in the road and there in the sky in front of us is a rainbow in all its glory. We open our email and receive a message from an old friend. We hear of the sudden death of an acquaintance. We slip on a wet leaf and spend the next two years in recovery. We are surprised to learn of the anticipated birth of a child. The unexpected breaks in to our lives and changes us in ways we could never anticipate.

When Jesus was interrupted that day, he didn't exclaim how rude the person was or become befuddled when he lost his train of thought. He didn't bemoan the interruption. He simply "went with the flow" and answered the question. He expected the unexpected to happen and let it become a moment of grace for his followers.

Things break in to our lives unexpectedly every day. They may be large or small, joyous or tragic, funny or serious. But they will happen. We should expect them to happen. Those unexpected events can break into our lives and can become moments of grace for us, moments when God breaks into our lives in new ways to teach us new things or remind of us old ones. May we always live in expectation of the unexpected.

Prayer

Living Christ, As we prepare our hearts to celebrate your breaking into the world in an unexpected way, may we always live to expect the surprises of life and to let them bring grace to us in new ways. Amen.

Lance Chapman '85

". . . and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25b). Their trap was slick, should we pay taxes to Caesar? Answering "yes", could turn the oppressed crowds against Jesus, saying "no" would be reported to Rome as promoting rebellion. Jesus asks for a coin. Isn't it interesting that those who posed the question had the coin in their pocket. "Whose picture's on it?" "Caesar." "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

The power of these words isn't in Jesus telling us to pay our taxes; it is in his call to give to God what is God's. You and I, made in God's image, belong exclusively to God. While we often want to "pigeon hole" our faith, there is not an area of life that is exempt from God's authority, no area outside his control.

As I write this the City of Pittsburgh is preparing to celebrate "Light Up Night." The official kickoff of the "Holiday Season," a commercial longing to use this time of the year to turn a profit, to grow and economy, to sell us the "stuff" we have been convinced we need.

Advent is different. It is about longing for the living Jesus to be alive in us. It is about giving to God, fully and completely, all that we are and all that we hope to be. It is about welcoming the Messiah into every nook and cranny of our being. It is about giving "to God what is God's."

Prayer

Acknowledging O God that all I am is a gift from you, I ask that you help me to live today fully and completely for you. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Luke 20:27-40

27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 28 and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. 29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; 30 then the second 31 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. 32 Finally the woman also died. 33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." 34 Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 35 but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. 36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 37 And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. 38 Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." 39 Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." 40 For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Richard Wingfield '02/'13

Have you ever been drawn into a useless conversation? You saw where the conversation was headed and had no intention to get involved, yet you were put on the spot and forced to reply. And you knew you needed to be clear in responding lest your words be misconstrued and used against you.

Jesus shows the importance of seeing past people's clever but narrow logical and cultural limits. The Sadducees, because of their dogmata, used a fictitious plot within the levirate marriage system of the Law to draw Jesus into a theological debate about the resurrection. Indeed, it was important to them. Their small arguments and literal interpretation of the Law kept their world in order. Nevertheless, their thoughts revealed assumptions that limited God's power and denied God's word.

Ironically, Jesus uses their own argument to debunk their logic. He lifts them from the human web of their theological concepts to a cosmic vision. Don't think of heaven in terms of earthly limits. What's really important is not a specific ideology but a living reality. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living, for to Him all are alive.

How often do we pigeonhole and confine God to a narrow construct? We see every day how God is used to justify certain social, political, and theological positions. We easily develop our private hypotheses regarding the world or the church. We major on minor things, minor on the major things, and miss the important, needful thing.

It's easy to waste time on petty debates that cause needless divisions, whether at a family get together or on a social media platform. Biblical witness warns against this (2 Tim. 2:23). Besides, God is beyond all that. We are invited to imagine God. Imagine God beyond our finite imaginations. Imagine God beyond our often-faulty assumptions. Imagine God who is beyond what even our minds can possibly conceive (Isa. 55:8-9). Imagine the God who will bring life, energy, meaning, and substance to the reality we find ourselves in.

God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living.

Prayer

God, help us to move beyond our selfish thinking and petty arguments so we can gain a heavenly perspective. Help us to seek those things which are above, not things of the earth. Plant our feet on higher ground. Amen.

Luke 20:41-21:4

41 Then he said to them, "How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? 42 For David himself says in the book of Psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, 43 until I make your enemies your footstool.'" 44 David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" 45 In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, 46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." 21:1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

Scott Dennis '13

We like familiarity, because it's comfortable. Within the church, we like to be familiar with our liturgy and our worship, our holidays and our calendars, and, naturally, we like our Bible stories to be familiar too. There's a comfortableness with the familiar. Yet, we have short stories from Scripture, like The Widow's Offering, which, although familiar, are certainly not comfortable. Our familiar, annual Advent-tide journey is here again, complete with its blue liturgical color, wreath, and decorations which direct us to look forward in hope and in our comfortable anticipation that Christmas is coming! Yet what is familiar and comfortable can be taken away from us and gone in an instant. Remember that 83 years ago today, December 6, 1941, our country was comfortable with the familiarity that the far-off war would not touch us or disrupt the ordinary lives of everyday Americans. That all changed the next day.

The widow in our gospel story was probably familiar with her poverty, but that does not mean she was comfortable with it. She could have taken comfort in continuing as she was, knowing that her life would likely not improve. Out of her poverty, she gave her offering of two small coins, which even then, would not buy very much. If anything, she opened herself to even more misery and worsened her plight. So where is the hope in this story?

The widow, by willingly giving out of her poverty, gave more than those who gave out of their abundance. Her offering did more to change her familiarity and comfort than the larger offerings. During this Advent season of hope, let us take time to give beyond what's comfortable and familiar. Researchers have found that being generous is good for our brains, makes us happier, helps us live longer, and counters depression. With verse four as our Advent challenge for today, may we all give charitably out of the great abundance with which God has blessed us that we may be a blessing to others. Who knows what was the greater blessing: the widow's meager offering, or her generous spirit?

Prayer

Dearest Lord Jesus, aid us this Advent-tide. Fill us with the same generous spirit that inspired a poor widow to donate the last of her wealth for others. Take our spiritual poverty, that we may

be transformed by the riches of Your grace, love, and charity which we show one another. This we ask for Your Name's sake. Amen.

Sarah Ott '10

In Jesus' time tithes were collected in a building beside the synagogue, much like a bank. Sounds of a trumpet were often used to alert crowds that a wealthy individual was preparing to place a gift in the treasury. These individuals wanted attention drawn to them as they gave. They gave to gain respect and honor for their contribution. Jesus looks over at the people flinging their offering into the baskets, intent on announcing to the crowd their generosity. Then a poor widow approaches the basket with an attitude of complete surrender and offers her two coins. How refreshing it must have been for Jesus to see someone so recklessly generous!

At Christmastime we often think a lot about money. We worry when the news reports a decrease in the stock market. We calculate the tax incentive we will receive if we make a monetary donation to a charitable organization by the end of the year. We worry about having enough money to buy just the right gifts and when we spend beyond our budget, we justify our action with the excuse that "The holidays are a time to give." Yet, when provided the opportunity to give back a portion of our wealth to God, we hesitate to offer our remaining money.

W. Graham Scroggie once said, "There are two ways in which a Christian may view his money--"How much of my money shall I use for God?" or "How much of God's money shall I use for myself?" In Luke we are reminded, by the example set by a poor widow, that we are called to give all we have, trusting that God will meet our needs." It wasn't hard for the wealthy individuals to drop a small portion of their wealth in the basket, but it was painfully hard for the widow to offer two copper coins. Yet, she does it without fanfare or attention.

William Barclay points out in his commentary of Luke that, "Giving does not begin to be real giving until it hurts." The ultimate gift from God, the birth of Jesus, shows the magnificent love God has for his people. God sent his son into the world with the full knowledge that he would be crucified on a cross for the sins of the world. Despite the hurt of knowing his son would die, he gave graciously and abundantly, so that we may have eternal life with him.

As people of God we are called to give abundantly of our money just as the poor widow did. In a season where financial uncertainty surrounds us we are challenged to give all that we have with reckless abandonment. As we abandon our worry over money and faithfully trust God, we can expect that the unexpected will be fulfilled through his son, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O Abundant God, you have blessed us beyond our imagination through the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. In this season of giving, we pray that you would ignite our hearts to surrender our financial anxiety and embrace a life of reckless generosity. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we ask that you would mold us into people who act more like the faithful widow and less like the wealthy individuals who seek fame and recognition. We seek to return all that is yours, trusting that in our reckless abandonment, you will meet our every need. 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.

Carolyn Cranston '99, staff, DMin Student

Jesus startled the disciples when he foretold the destruction of the Temple. Was it possible? What were the signs? Jesus told them not to be deceived or follow false teachers. For his disciples, life would be difficult. They might be persecuted, perhaps put to death, in Jesus' name. But, all that truly mattered was their relationship with Christ. He said, "Stand firm, and you will win life."

The same holds true for us. We look for signs while trying to control our own destiny. Let's submit our lives to the outstretched arms of God. Don't look for signs, look for Jesus. We need to spend our time as faithful witnesses, building a relationship with Christ.

With our lives totally grounded in Jesus, we can celebrate God's gift of each day, knowing that one day we will stand in the presence of our Lord and Savior. At the coming of the Second Advent, there will be no need for fear and uncertainty. It will be a time of encouragement and hope—a hope that cannot be destroyed! By the grace of God, we will receive our hope through the life, love, and blood of Jesus the Christ. Amen!

Prayer

Holy and Loving God, Thank you for blessing us with the gift of your Son, Jesus the Christ, the only sign we will ever need. Lord, may we be ever faithful in our witness and service to you. Amen.

Kendra Buckwalter Smith '12/'13, staff

If we read this passage as a prediction of final judgment, we'd be hard pressed *not* to think that we're currently facing the end times. Fighting between and within nations, refugee crises, ecological crises, natural disasters that strip people of their homes and loved ones, stories of abuse and of corrupt leadership, and ongoing persecution, oppression, and injustice all prompt panic and fear. And these words of warning from Luke's Gospel might tempt us to interpret all these realities accordingly. Yet Jesus says, "do not be terrified." Jesus invites us to trust that he remains present in our lives and faithful to his promises, even when we face the most challenging of circumstances.

Rather than offering a prediction of future judgment, Jesus is describing the truth of the world in the present. It is a lamentable truth in that the world is not yet as God desires it to be. But it is also a hopeful and comforting truth in that God's desires for the world are coming to be through Jesus' present work. And we are invited to participate in this work as, in the midst of all the brokenness, Jesus gives us "words and a wisdom that none of [our] opponents will be able to withstand or contradict" (verse 15).

And so it is that we discover that Jesus' words here are not words of warning, but words of assurance. In the midst of a broken, divided, quarreling, uncertain world, Christ is at work—gathering, baptizing, communing, healing—and thereby making visible God's inbreaking Kingdom. It is a message of comfort and hope in Jesus' abiding presence and active reign even in the midst of the inevitable calamities and injustices we face.

In this time of Advent expectation, we are again reminded that we live betwixt and between. We cannot deny that we experience a world of destruction and pain. Yet God has chosen to bend down into that experience; therefore, let us fix our gaze on our coming Lord's present work, and let us trust that he is giving us the words and a wisdom to testify to that work in a hurting world that God so loves.

Prayer

Gracious God, there is so much in this world that causes us to cry out in fear and sorrow. Help us to trust in your promise to wipe away every tear in the time when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. In the meantime, train our eyes to see Christ's loving and transforming presence in our midst. And give us boldness to testify to that presence. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Patrice Fowler-Searcy '13/'24

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 overindulgence; 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.

Luke 21:20-28

20 "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; 22 for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. 23 Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; 24 they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. 25 There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Samuel McCann '19

What a distressing passage. Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem. He also promises to return—something we might cheerfully cling to—but even it is dressed in foreboding language. As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ as a baby—a story that often evokes serene images of the holy family—we might ask “Why this text? And why now?”

Despite all the horrific imagery, this passage ends by insisting it is good news. “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Jesus is communicating to his disciples that he knows the coming afflictions and trials they will face. He is saying that he knows the suffering that will be visited upon the people of Jerusalem. His knowledge of this suffering yet to come is intended to assure the disciples that even the sinfulness of this world cannot frustrate his plans to redeem it. The disciples are called to trust the Lord during difficult circumstances.

In turn, we are called to trust Christ as the disciples trusted him. Our faith is not grounded in escapism. We are not drawn into a story that makes us forget the world for a while; rather, the gospel confronts our sinfulness. And integral to the coming judgment is the promise that Christ will shake the very foundations that allow sin and suffering to persist.

This judgment might not always be easy and cheerful, but it is grounded in the hope that the One who judges us is intimately aware of the ways we are plagued by the brokenness of this world. We can trust, then, that the world’s shaking constitutes the last gasp of rebellion, the failed attempt of sin and death ultimately to rule our lives. It is in the midst of the shaking that Christ is building the kingdom to come, where we may behold him in all his glory.

Prayer

Lord, knowing that you know our struggles, we entrust our lives to you. Knowing that you will redeem us from the pitfalls and snares that trap and entangle us, we entrust our lives to you. Knowing that you shake the foundations of the world to redeem us, we entrust our lives to you. Amen.

Luke 22:1-13

1 Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. 2 The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. 3 Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; 4 he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. 5 They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. 6 So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. 7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." 9 They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" 10 "Listen," he said to them, "when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters 11 and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"'" 12 He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." 13 So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

W. Hulitt Gloer '75

There are always at least two possible responses to the coming of Jesus. Nowhere is this any clearer than in today's gospel reading. On the one hand, in Luke 22: 1-6, we learn that Jesus' way of teaching and acting has become a such threat to the ways of the "chief priests and scribes"(i.e. the comfort of the status quo) that they hatch a conspiracy to kill him. Jesus was/is always a threat to "the powers that be" even in diapers! On the other hand, Luke 22: 7-13 tell us that someone is prepared to welcome Jesus and provide a place for he and his disciples to meet and break bread together. So there you have it. Hostility or hospitality: two possible responses to the coming of Jesus.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, even when you challenge our ways of thinking or acting and the comfort of the status quo, help us always to welcome you with hospitality.

Jen Haddox '06

In the gospel of Luke, we read about the preparation of the Passover meal in the shadow of Judas Iscariot's impending betrayal. Jesus sends out Peter and John to make the necessary preparations for the Passover. All the while, the plot to kill Jesus is underway. Surely, Peter and John and the others were well aware of the danger they faced in the city, and so they follow Jesus' instructions to find this mysterious Upper Room by way of a servant carrying water.

As we prepare for Christmas gatherings and celebrations this season, we do so not just under the bright star of Bethlehem. We prepare under the shadow of the cross. For this shadow casts God's grace over our lives and opens the way for us to truly celebrate the eternal gift of Emmanuel. Our holiday preparations can be full of joy and light because we have seen God's judgment pass over us at the cross.

Prayer

Lord God, as we make ourselves busy preparing for family gatherings in this season, cast your light of salvation upon us again. Make us ready to welcome you, not only as a baby in a manger, but as the Passover lamb. And as we wait, make us ready to receive you when you come again in glory. Amen.

Rebecca DePoe '16/'20

For Jesus, meals have a sacramental quality. How we eat together matters, regardless of Judas's pending betrayal of Jesus. Jesus instructs the disciples to prepare the Passover meal in a stranger's guest house. The disciples are to rely on the hospitality of others even as they prepare for one of the most important meals of the year.

I believe Jesus' insistence on relying on a stranger's hospitality is what allows him, a few verses later, to feed his betrayer. Part of the disciples' preparation for Passover is to learn from Jesus how to receive and give hospitality. Part of our preparation for Advent is learning how to rely on the hospitality of others. We prepare to be with others as we prepare for the birth of Jesus—our Savior, who chose to be with us. When we talk about preparing our hearts for Christmas, we're talking about preparing ourselves to receive the hospitality of Jesus so that we can share that hospitality with the world.

Prayer

Loving God we thank you for creating us so that we have to depend on you, and each other, for our daily sustenance. We pray that that in giving of our time, our talents, and our resources you would strengthen our faith in you and our bonds to our communities. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Luke 22:14-30

14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15 He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. 21 But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. 22 For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" 23 Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this. 24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 28 "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Sarah Betzig '21, staff

I have always thought of the commandment "the greatest among you must become like the least, and the leader like one who serves" as a call to "servant leadership" as the proper way to wield power. Like Jesus, each Christian ought to seek to be a servant of others - most especially those in leadership. I wonder what would happen, though, if we flipped the equivalence in this commandment.

I recently learned of the Silent Parade, a peaceful protest in which 10,000 African Americans marched silently along New York City's Fifth Avenue in 1917 as part of an anti-lynching movement. In addition to

the silence of the marchers, something notable about this particular protest is that the children led the way in the march, while men brought up the rear. That is, those with the least power were the leaders, even among this marginalized group.

It's easy to dwell on the part of this passage that promises exultation - the "I confer on you a kingdom" part, the "you will sit on thrones judging others" part. Focusing on these, I might think, "I am to be elevated to a place of power, so long as I am Christ-like enough to wield it responsibly. And, well, of course I will be, with God's help." But that, to me, sounds a lot like the disciples' arguing about who among them will be the greatest - which is precisely the thing Jesus is pushing back against.

What if instead of Jesus outlining a program for how to get into power (or how not to be jerks with the power we have), the Lord is helping us to know where to look for direction as we seek to follow him. Not "the leader should become least" but "the least should become leader." What if, like in the Silent Parade, we took our cue for the direction of our efforts for peace on earth from the little ones, from the "least of these," from the powerless. As the great magi turned their course in the direction of an infant child, perhaps the "least of these" among us can best help us, the Church, discern where God is calling us to go next. Perhaps the little ones best know the way to shalom, after all.

Prayer

God, in your infinite love and wisdom, you chose to live among us as a little child. As we prepare to welcome you anew, give us eyes to see your leading in the least among us. Give us humility and wisdom to lay down our "greatness" at your feet. Teach us ever to follow you, and open our eyes, ears, and hearts to your call to wholeness – that is, peace – on earth. In your name we pray, amen.

Beth Arnold Creekpaum '10

Often as adults, there is a sense of repetition when it comes to Christmas. It is easy to get caught up in all that has to be done. Our to do lists get long and often overwhelming. And what is worse, all that we have done we must do again. It does not matter that we sent out 150 Christmas cards and baked 12 dozen cookies last year. We must do it again. In this repetition we often get stuck in the task rather than remembering the season. We begin to think we know what is happening and what needs to happen.

We have very specific expectations regarding our Christmas season. In this text, the disciples must have felt the same as we do. They gathered in the upper room expecting the same Passover that they had experienced from their youth. It must have been an utter surprise to hear Jesus take the words of the ancient Passover and make them his own. "This is my body..." I wonder what these disciples must have had running through their heads when their expectations were not only unmet radically altered. I would imagine they were confused, maybe even shocked. "What is this guy doing?" they must have thought.

I would imagine this confusion became even greater when Jesus stated within their celebration of the Passover that they must be like children. I would guess that the disciples were thinking something like this: "Children, the greatest in the kingdom of God? But we have worked so hard and given up so much, Jesus!"

Jesus would say the same to us in our Christmas celebration. We must also be like children. Think about the children in your life. Think about a son or daughter, a niece or nephew, a grandchild, a neighbor, or a Sunday school kid. Everything is new. The repetition is not old, but exciting. They inherently trust that this season of Advent and Christmas is something exciting and beyond themselves. Not only does Jesus

want us to be like children in our attitudes of humility and innocence, but also in our attitudes of joy and wonder. This is true all of the time, but we must be reminded, especially in this season.

Having these qualities of wonder, innocence, humility and joy is often against our human nature. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can do this. And what a great time it is for us to ask for an attitude of a child now. This is a time when as children of the most high God, we can wait for something new and expect the unexpected. And in this comes great joy! Jesus came! Jesus comes! Jesus will come again! Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you that You desire to do a new thing this season and in us. We ask today for You to give us the heart of a child, Your child. Help us to see Your work in each day specifically in this season. Thank you for Your work in our lives and the world around us. Open our eyes to see it. Help us to not only expect the unexpected, but to seek it and praise You for it. Amen.

Peggy Shannon '09

How dare the events that lead to Jesus' death distract us from the joy of advent preparations? We do not want our anticipation of the sweet scent of hope and hay from the manger to be jarred by the sour smell of wine and betrayal from the Table.

But is that not how we people of God live? Paradox. We humans have a hard time holding both ends of it together and understanding how it mingles together. Blessing and curse. Judgment and salvation. Promises and reneging. Life and death. The last who will be first.

The good news is that Jesus holds onto both ends with his arms outstretched and is always on the right side of the paradox. Always on the side of life, promises, salvation, blessing. The baby who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords is also the one who sits as host of the table and stoops to serve. First and last.

Prayer

O God, if we could truly comprehend what you have done in your coming and your going, perhaps our preparations would be different. Jar us from our expectations. Amen.

Jo Ann Griffith '59

In its essence, Advent insists that we humans focus on the Son of God humbling himself to become the Son of Man. All he had ever experienced was life in the presence of his Heavenly Father as a Royal Heir. Then, in God's timing, this Son came to earth as a baby, living a short life of unprecedented sacrificial love. On the last night of his life on earth, this Jesus is found in an upper room surrounded by the twelve apostles, his closest friends, before he is led away to be crucified.

Today, just now, shall we his 21st c. disciples sit figuratively with him there? We hear him say, "You've no idea how much I looked forward to eating this Passover Meal with you before entering my suffering" (v. 14). Then within minutes of this close congeniality, there's an interruption caused by their not uncommon, self-centered bickering over "greatness." And in response, Jesus directs them to his common theme of servanthood (v. 27), one he exemplified perfectly, followed by verse 30, "Now I confer on you the royal authority my Father conferred on me, to eat and drink at my table . . . and be strengthened as you take up responsibilities among the congregations of God's people."

In such times as these, with upheavals of cataclysmic proportions, are we disciples not highly favored and blessed to serve The King, alongside the very one who trod this path of 'serving others' to His very death?

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father. Teach us how to serve, rather than be served, in a world where position is so admired and enjoyed. Have mercy upon us and our congregations for we often ignore those who need Christ's healing power the most. Amen.

Eric McIntosh '12, DMin student

Given our current political climate, the racial divide, the increase of the non-religious in the U.S. and the Me Too movement, I cannot help but think the church is headed for greater persecution in America. Reflecting on the aforementioned realities, I am ever focused on these words of Christ: "Take this and divide it among yourselves . . ." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said this!

Given our current state, I cannot look at this cup and ignore the cup Christ mentions in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked that this cup be taken away but succumbed to the will of God the Father. Neither can I ignore what Christ said on the cross: "I thirst!" I imagine that in those words, "I thirst," he was saying to God and the world, "Give me the cup!" So how might that statement relate to the words here at the Passover table when Jesus refers to the cup: "divide it among yourselves"? I believe Jesus was inviting all of us to take, intentionally, the mantle of sacrifice he was offering—to share in his cup! Jesus said to the disciples at his resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Perhaps he was suggesting that we, too, have to face our cup of persecution and to follow his lead for how to do so.

During Advent we reflect on Jesus' coming. Is the cross why he came? Is that why we have come and been sent? I hope that persecution is not coming to the church in America, but if it is, such reflection is worth considering.

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, prepare us for tomorrow even though it is not promised. Equip the saints for what comes as we prepare once again for the coming of Christ. This Advent, make us fully aware of your call and sending of us into the world. Make us aware of your desire for our imitating Christ. Remind us that we all have a cup and we all have a cross to bear. Give us the courage and strength to pick it up and to say, intentionally and boldly, "Give it to me!" May we be your witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth! For the sake of Jesus Christ your son our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Luke 22:31-38

31 "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." 33 And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" 34 Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me." 35 He said to them, "When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "No, not a thing." 36 He said to them, "But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. 37 For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled." 38 They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

Jo Ramsey '99

Bethlehem was a long way away from Nazareth. It was an inopportune time to travel for the young couple, and they had no place to stay. Mary was nearly due to deliver her first child. I wonder what they took along.

Several years ago, the children of our church imagined Mary and Joseph's packing list and retraced their steps on the road to Bethlehem. Each child received a saddlebag fashioned from a paper grocery bag. With much excitement, they imaginatively stopped by Joseph's parents' home, where they were given several coins. Next, they visited the house of Mary's parents, where each one received a fleece bedroll. Then they visited the travel agent for a roadmap. On their way out of town, they ducked into the market to buy a granola bar and bottle of water. A quick stop at the synagogue for a blessing, and they were on their way. As the children added each item to their saddlebags, their anticipation grew. They couldn't wait to hit the road! They loved accruing and carrying their gear. Don't we all—especially at Christmastime?!

Today's lectionary text doesn't read like lyrics from a Christmas carol, but it makes a surprising connection to Jesus' birth. When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, there is no room at the inn, the *kataluma* (Luke 2:7). Luke uses this word only one other time . . . to describe the room where Jesus and the disciples have gathered for the Passover Meal, the Last Supper (22:11). But this time, there *is* room.

In this *kataluma*, Jesus reminds his disciples that twice before he has instructed them to bring nothing for the journey. No sandals, money belt, no tunic. God will provide all they need through those whom they serve. But times are changing. No longer can they rely on others. They must provide for and protect themselves.

Each one of us takes our own journey. Like Mary and Joseph on the way to the manger (Bethlehem) and the disciples on the way to the cross (Golgotha), we do not know what the future holds. Do we need a money belt or swaddling clothes, a sword or gifts for the newborn king?

What do you need to procure for your journey right now? Peaceful quiet? Inspiring prayer? Meaningful conversation? Engaging service? How can you prepare yourself to trek through the holidays and into the new year ahead? Make a spiritual shopping list today, and commit to acquiring what you need to walk with God.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we look to you during this Advent journey. We trust that you will provide for and protect us, sometimes in unexpected ways. Help us to recognize, rely on, and appreciate your goodness. May we also take responsibility for ourselves, tending to and safeguarding our faith so that we are ready for all the new year brings. In the name of Jesus, our newborn King. Amen.

Luke 22:39-53

39 He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. 40 When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." 41 Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 42 "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." 43 Then an angel from heaven

appeared to him and gave him strength. 44 In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. 45 When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, 46 and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." 47 While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; 48 but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" 49 When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" 50 Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. 51 But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. 52 Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? 53 When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

Patricia Sharbaugh '99

Images of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane evoke feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is an aspect of every person's life. All of us are born alone, all of us die alone, and all of us visit many lonely spaces and places along the way. Loneliness is an ingredient in so many experiences of life. We may be able to repress our feelings of loneliness. We may find ways to run from these feelings for a time, but ultimately, a time will come when we cannot escape our inherent loneliness.

If we are willing to listen closely enough, loneliness offers us many gifts. The most important gift loneliness offers is awareness of the deep emptiness that lies within us—an emptiness we cannot fill, an emptiness that urges us to reach beyond ourselves, to cry out to God, to pray.

In the Christian spiritual tradition, the word solitude recognizes our solitary lives before God. The experience of solitude can be an experience of profound loneliness; yet, paradoxically, in solitude one can also experience deep moments of grace, moments of awakening to the awareness of the gift of God's loving presence. The journey from loneliness to communion with God's loving presence is made through prayer.

Images of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane awaken us to the awareness of the deep communion between our loneliness and the loneliness of Jesus. Jesus is acquainted with loneliness. We do not have to find a way to escape our loneliness in order to find God; rather, God is with us in our moments of loneliness. Deeper and wider than our feelings of loneliness lies the truth that nothing can separate us from the love of God, who came into the world to be with us in all the lonely places of life.

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, give us the courage to remain in the lonely spaces and places of our lives, to turn away from distractions and toward you. Help us find the courage to stand before you in our loneliness so that we discover your gracious presence already present within our hearts, thus drawing us more deeply into love.

Jim Davison '69, retired staff

"Waiting" is a major theme during Advent. In the Lucan reading today, Jesus takes the disciples with him to Gethsemane, asking them to pray that they not enter into temptation. He says in effect, "Wait and pray." That's what Advent is all about, isn't it? As we go through Advent, waiting for the celebration of the Christ-child's coming into this world, we are encouraged to reflect on the mysteries of God's greatness and God's grace. And what better way to ponder these things than to be in a spirit of prayer?

From this passage, we might take the disciples as a model for our celebration of Advent, but there's a problem here. The disciples wait, all right, but instead of praying, they fall asleep. The cares of this world—not to mention their worries and anxieties—are too much for them, and they escape into sleep. While we may not fall asleep, will our own cares and anxieties keep us from praying as we wait during Advent?

Prayer

Lord God, as we wait during this Advent season, enable us to be awake to your greatness and grace, alert to the mystery of the coming Christ-child, and attentive to the movement of your Spirit in our hearts and lives. Assist us to “wait and pray” with joy and gladness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Luke 22:54-69

54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. 55 When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. 56 Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." 57 But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." 58 A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" 59 Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. 61 The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." 62 And he went out and wept bitterly. 63 Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; 64 they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" 65 They kept heaping many other insults on him. 66 When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. 67 They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe; 68 and if I question you, you will not answer. 69 But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

Tara Goodin '10

It is amazing what shame does to us. Shame has a way of distancing us from others. It is so intense an emotion; it can even distance us from God. We see this clearly in this passage about Peter.

Despite the fact that everyone around him knew exactly who he was, Peter continued to deny who he really was. He gave a false depiction of himself, but thinking he was safely hiding who he really was in the cover of the night. He denies himself to three different people who clearly know who he really is.

But the most intense part of the passage can be seen in the way that Peter's shame even distances him from Jesus. Peter was physically following Jesus at a distance. More than just the shame of that association, I would venture to say that Peter was afraid of what sacrifices would come about as a result of his association and relationship with God. I wonder if Peter not only carried the shame of being associated with such a radical man as Jesus, but I'll bet that he also carried the shame of knowing who Jesus was and choosing despite of that to deny Him for his own sake.

How often do we do this in our own lives? We think that by distancing ourselves from Jesus that we can avoid giving our lives for the sake of Him . . . whatever that may mean. Even more, as we feel the shame in knowing that we are not willing to fully sacrifice our lives for the one that sacrificed so much for us, we create illusions in the firelight of our lives. Pretending to follow God but refusing to know God and to be known by God intimately.

In this passage, God predicted Peter's denial to him. The passage says in verse 61 that had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." Jesus knew before he had even begun his journey to the cross, exactly who he was dying for. He knew the kind of people that He was sacrificing his life for. It is a miraculous event that Jesus would not only come and take on our suffering, but do it knowing how unworthy of it we are. It is miraculous that He would experience that rejection and all of the hurt that goes with it and choose to make that sacrifice anyways. It is miraculous that Jesus looks straight at the most shameful places in our hearts and loves us the same.

Prayer

Jesus, may we not distance ourselves from You in an effort to cover who we really are. Shine your light in the dark crevices of our lives. May we accept your grace and may your grace carry us through the places that you have called us to go. Amen.

Greg Steible '14

There's something cutting about Peter's three-fold denial of Christ. The problem for me isn't that Peter is one of Jesus' closest disciples, or that he is trying to hide even when others call him out, though these are certainly bothersome. No, the problem for me is that I see myself in Peter.

As we get further into Advent, church life becomes busier and more demanding. Family life gains added pressure due to the constant reminders of 'tradition.' Time with our friends even gets stressful as we play the 'are we getting each other gifts' game. Even though our pressures must pale in comparison to the pressure of the crowd around Peter, the temptation can remain the same. If only I could deny Christ, then maybe I could enjoy this season of presents, family, and happy music.

It's easy to get bogged down this season, but in Christ we don't need to.

Prayer

Lord, in your mercy, deliver us from the temptation to focus on anything but you this season, and help us to focus on you. 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."

Carolyn Cranston '99, staff, D.Min student

From the time that I was a young child, I have loved the candlelight service on Christmas Eve. My very favorite part is when all of the lights are turned out and the minister lights the Christ candle at the front of the church. The first time I saw this, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that it was very dark until that first candle was lit. Then, the pastor walked down the aisle lighting the candles of the first person in each pew. In turn, the first person passed the light to the next and they passed the light to the next.

Eventually the candles were lit throughout the church and what had been total darkness was now bright as day. It is a beautiful sight to behold as the darkness disappears and we enter into the light.

The symbolism is beautiful. God sent the light into the world in the form of Jesus Christ, his only son. Jesus, God incarnate, came because God loves us unconditionally. While we were still of a sinful nature, God chose to give us eternal life through Christ. It is right there in John 3 verse 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."

God called us to come out of the darkness and enter into a new world that was filled with the light of God's love. Christians generally understand and accept this concept with our minds. The difficulty comes when we have to translate what the mind knows into our everyday living. It is easy to proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior, but do we live as though we believe it?

If we truly love God, we are called to be like Nicodemus and be born again. That means that we are not Sunday Christians. We are called to a new way of living. It is out of the love that we have for God that we should desire from the depths of our very being to give up our selfish ways and die to self. We are called to live into the life of Christ and follow his teachings.

So, this Christmas when you stand in church on Christmas Eve, I challenge you to once again expect the unexpected. For who would have ever believed that God would love us so much that he would give us his son, Jesus Christ, the light of the world. As you stand in darkness, consciously turn your sin over to God and ask that as the light fills the room, you too will stand in the light. Ask that all that you do may be done in the light to the glory of God.

Prayer

Holy and loving God, creator of all things, we thank you for our many blessings and praise your Holy name. As we await the coming of the Christ child, we ask that you continue to call us out of the darkness of self and into a new way of living. Help us to always follow the Light that is Jesus the Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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.

John 3:22-30

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized 24 —John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. 25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

Amanda Horan '20

This passage holds a sense of loss, even as it speaks of joy. The author of the gospel carefully points out that John will soon lose his freedom. Those of us who know the story also know that he will soon lose his life. His work is coming to an end, just as Jesus' ministry gets underway. John's disciples seem to sense that something is about to change. They are touchy and sensitive; protective of their teacher's work. And who can blame them? They love him. And they love their shared ministry.

Even during this joyful season, many of us do not feel like raising our voices to sing out the words of the old carol “Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!” It is a lonely feeling to approach Christmas while also experiencing the grief of loss.

The truth is, life is usually a pretty messy business. Things like joy and loss don’t often stay in their carefully designated times and places. They mingle and collide. Our happy memories and the legacy of meaningful work and loving relationships live on for us even as we feel the sting of a hard ending.

Perhaps this passage may be an invitation to us who have been stretched thin by the pull between grief and joy. Maybe we find here an invitation to take time to name the something or the someone we miss. Maybe here is an invitation to decide not to put on the mask of easy holiday happiness. Instead, like John, may we seek out the wisdom of honest joy. John does not let the sting of a hard ending prevent him from honoring the legacy of his work within the larger story of God’s love for the world. He does not let loss steal his joy. May it be so for all of us.

Prayer

Help us, O God, to embrace this season with a heart that can hold both joy and sorrow. May we find solace in the truth that your presence is with us in all things. Let our hearts be both open and honest, ready to receive and to share the fullness of your joy. Amen.

Jim Graham ’66

Life has its ups and downs—personally, politically, globally. By the time you read this Advent reflection, written much earlier, you may have been called to a new, highly regarded position (or not); we may have elected new political leadership (or not); the coronavirus of 2020 may have been successfully dealt with (or not).

Advent means “coming.” Something is always coming, but what comes is not always what we want or are looking for. Israel’s anticipated messiah was one who would be a “King of glory,” a “Lord of hosts,” mighty, powerful, exalted! But what came was a powerless baby, born in a barn of poor parents, who later would enter Jerusalem’s gates not riding in a chariot as a conquering king but as a lowly servant “sitting on a donkey’s colt!” He came, he said, not to be served, but to serve. That is what true leadership, at any level, looks like.

Advent gives us the opportunity to get our priorities straight: to exalt the one who came with great humility to be our Lord; to humble ourselves to positions of servanthood; and to call on the powerful of this world to do the same.

John the Baptist got it right. When told that people were flocking to someone else, he told them, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Prayer

Humbling God, humble us. Lord of all, continue to serve us and save us from ourselves—from a sense of importance and pride; from failure to recognize who and whose we are; and from too often letting ourselves slip into thinking, “It’s all about me.” Show us how to get out of the way of your coming among us once more, that we may show forth in the way we serve that it really is all about you.

Robin Sharp '18

On the surface this scripture lesson seems straightforward. The Baptist's followers are concerned that more people are going to "the other guy" to be baptized instead of to John. Of course, looking at the text from our perspective we know who they are going to: the Messiah, known as Jesus. Throughout his mission, John proclaimed he was not the light, but he came to testify to that light (John 1:8). As the ministry of Jesus was growing, John knew his was going to diminish—and he was joyful about it.

I could not help thinking about this at a personal level. As Jesus becomes more central to our lives, we are made new, we are reformed. 1 John 2:17 tells us "the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever." For each of us that means as we allow the light of Christ to glow and grow within, that which keeps us from fully knowing Christ—sin—must decrease. In other words, the Jesus in us must increase, as the "I" within us must decrease.

The end of the poem *Thou Shalt Know Him When He Comes*, by Mark Sirett, reads

"But his coming known shall be,
By the holy harmony
Which his coming makes in thee."

As that Holy Harmony increases in each of us, how can we not be joyful?!

Prayer

Oh, Holy Harmony! Thank you for your dramatic disruption to our lives. As we respond to the "you" abiding in us, we can not help but be joyous at the new persons we become. During this season of Advent, help us to focus on the ministry of the "you", and less on the desires of the "I". Amen.

John 3:31-36

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath.

Bala Khylllep, staff

Are you confused yet? If you are like me, you find John's Gospel in so many ways difficult to understand. Nicodemus' confusion when Jesus talks about being born again or born from above resonates with me. I can empathize with John's disciples who seem to be confused about who to believe as superior—John, their prophet and leader who was way ahead of Jesus in proclaiming and baptizing, or this Jesus, whom they witnessed being baptized by John himself and just beginning his ministry.

In these verses, John the Baptist is confronting his disciples that he is nothing in comparison with this Jesus. He was just a messenger sent ahead to prepare the way for the one who comes from above. Therefore, he urged his disciples and those who question his authority to turn their ears and hearts toward Jesus and believe his testimony because he is the one sent by God, full of the Spirit, and is the very Word of God.

John set a great example for all of us. His willingness to set himself aside and with joy, allowing Jesus to be lifted above his popularity, is an important reminder for us as Christians, especially as we live in a world full of misinformation and disinformation. There is so much information we consume that is crafted to uphold control and power over others. It's confusing to know who to believe and what is true in these days, but John reminds us through humility that the truth will be and is revealed.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we come before you this Christmas Day knowing that often times we have failed to listen to your gentle and truthful word. We're often confused between the power and prestige of this world with the humble and lowly message brought through Jesus Christ. Give us the ears to hear, eyes to see, and a discerning heart to know and believe what is true and to cling to the truth proclaimed through your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 5:30-47

30 "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. 31 If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. 32 There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. 33 You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. 34 Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 36 But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. 39 You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. 40 Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. 41 I do not accept glory from human beings. 42 But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. 43 I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. 44 How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. 46 If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. 47 But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

Eric McIntosh '12, DMin student

I believe that sometimes we really get Jesus upset. Jesus comes with eternal life in his hands but often finds many of us rejecting his gift. Don't get me wrong—we want life . . . we just don't want Jesus. We look for life in our places of employment, in our degrees, in our spouses, our bank accounts, and our possessions. When we find that these temporal things or people fail us, we look to upgrade. We find ourselves in a lifestyle of acquisition and in turn really miss out on truth and blessing because we look for the eternal in the temporal. We make Jesus even more frustrated when we say we are His but live as though He is not ours. Jesus told those who rejected him, that neither the word nor the love of God was in them. This Advent season as he comes, is he telling us the same?

Prayer

Jesus, as you come to us, help us to come to you for life, eternal life, the most wonderful gift possible. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Don Dawson, retired staff

At least in recent history, presidents of the U.S.A., in order to establish their own agendas, claim that they have authority by virtue of their office to take certain actions. The courts are regularly asked to rule whether or not they actually have such authority on the basis of the law of our nation, the Constitution.

This way is so very different from Jesus'. He never argued for authority for himself. In fact, he said that if he had to assert his own authority, he should not be trusted. To those who challenged his authority to judge life and death, he simply pointed to two gauges of authority. First, what do his actions show, as declared in the testimony of those who can be trusted as messengers of truth? Here Jesus was referring to what John the Baptist said about him and to the testimony of people such as the paralytic whom he healed. Second, what is the testimony of the "constitution," in other words for Jesus' audience, the Law of Moses?

We should always be cautious of those who come beating their own drums and claiming power and truth for themselves. Power is given only by the Lord God Almighty, who has entrusted it to the only Son as both Savior and Judge. In Jesus only is eternal life.

Prayer

Ruler of the universe, thank you for sending your Son as the Arbitrator of all things. Bring all people to bow before him as the Giver of mercy and the only One in whom salvation can be found. In the name of our Savior, Jesus, amen.

John 7:53-8:11

53 Then each of them went home, 8:1 while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Mikayla Kovacik-Doepker '19

Today's lectionary reading, thought to be a later addition and not included in the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of John, is part of an ongoing narrative of opposition between Jesus and the legal experts and Pharisees. In an attempt to bring an accusation against Jesus, they presented a woman who was accused of adultery and raised the question of what should be done to punish her. The woman was undoubtedly faced with humiliation, shame, and fear as the judgmental eyes of the men in the temple looked on her. Perhaps the woman expected Jesus to condemn her or even to cast the first stone. Instead, Jesus bent over and wrote something on the ground. When they continued to hound him with questions, he bent over again and wrote on the ground. What exactly he wrote we don't know, but we

do know that one by one those who heard him went away. Jesus does not condemn the woman, but instead sends her out with words of blessing, “Go . . . don’t sin anymore.” Jesus takes what is meant to be a text of terror and turns it into a story of liberation for this woman. The elders, legal experts, and Pharisees were so limited by their own social constructs, binary thought processes, and clumsy theological imaginations that they missed a miracle of mercy. In place of condemnation or death, Jesus offers mercy, a new beginning, and abundant life.

During the season of advent, as we seek to prepare our hearts and minds to, once again, welcome the Christ child, we are reminded that we, too, have our own experiences of terror, shame, and sin. Still, we must acknowledge that we have been participants in others’ stories of shame and humiliation. The good news for us all is that the same God who turned the woman’s story in this text from terror to liberation is the God who has come for us. Christ comes with mercy, freeing us from sin and shame. Christ comes with mercy, freeing us to new beginnings and abundant life. Christ comes with mercy, turning our stories of shame, humiliation, and terror into stories of peace, hope, joy, and love. As we journey through this advent season, may God’s mercy extended to us in the Christ child bring us peace for our living.

Prayer

God of mercy, thank you for your grace that transforms our stories of sin, shame, and terror. We seek Your forgiveness for the times that we have allowed our own social constructs, binary thought processes, or clumsy theological imaginations to blind us to miracles of mercy. During this season of preparation, ready us to be witnesses to transformation, to mercy, and to peace that passes all understanding. In the name of Christ who comes to us in mercy and peace we pray. Amen.

Bala Khyllap, staff

We live in a very polarized world where we can’t seem to have an open conversation with one another without being in conflict. An open conversation with mutual respect for one another’s opinions even when we disagree seems to have lost favor in our society today. We are automatically programmed to point fingers, blame, disagree, and even condemn others. This is exactly what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing in the Scripture reading today. Just because they disliked what Jesus was teaching and doing for the least of these in the society, they sought ways to get rid of him. They dragged and shamed a woman who was caught in adultery not necessarily to settle the matter, but mainly to test Jesus and to see whether they could find ways to condemn him and have him arrested and then be killed.

Yet what Jesus did changed hearts. Jesus simply asked the religious leaders and then, in turn, asks every one of us to take a deep look within ourselves first, before we jump into negative conclusions about others. Doing so is difficult for us. And to be honest, one problem in our world today is the fact that most of us generally see ourselves as heroes, as good and righteous persons, whereas when evaluating others we tend to villainize or criminalize their behaviors we see as wrong. I think the world would be a better place if we could recognize that within ourselves there is a mixture of both evil and good and that through God’s grace and strength we are able to choose good for ourselves and for others.

I’ve been pondering lately the state of our country and our world—the hate, the prejudice, and the heartless attitude we as humans have toward one another. I can’t help but ask myself, “Is it possible for us to listen and understand one another ever again amid our current differences?” My hope and prayer is that as we are waiting for the coming of our Lord this Advent, may we have the courage to deal with

one another and with ourselves as Jesus would have us do—to love in the face of hate, to forgive in the face of condemnation, to be kind in the face of bigotry, and to walk in humility in the face of superiority.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for loving and accepting us even when we don't deserve it. Forgive our inability to listen and our desire to condemn others within our hearts. Help us to see our daily need of your forgiveness so that we can, in turn, offer grace and mercy toward others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Readings from Faculty-authored Publications

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.

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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

*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, Bosnia Herzegovina, 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.

A reading from pages 19-20 of *Journey through the Word: Exploring Biblical Themes*, by James Davison '69, retired adjunct faculty, 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.

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

". . . 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.

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."

A reading from page 141 of *Reclaiming the Old Testament from the Christian Pulpit*, by Donald Gowan (deceased), faculty emeritus

I'd like to tell you about the quietest 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 refreshments 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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.