

THOSE WHO DREAM

An Advent Reader

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church

Preface

Advent makes Christmas better. Don't get me wrong, Christmas Day is spectacular on its own, with all the gifts given and received. Add to that the food, the family, the holiday cheer, and the message that Almighty God came to earth as a vulnerable infant born to a virgin girl, and it can easily feel like it all passed by too quickly—as if you missed something. If Christmas is water waiting to be soaked up, our hearts are like brown paper towels that do a better job of spreading than absorbing it. Advent prepares our hearts. Advent makes us wait. Waiting builds anticipation. Anticipation magnifies joy. Advent gets us ready for Christmas.

The key is in the wait. We are not good at it. But humanity nonetheless experiences this wait. Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed, “The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.” In the fullness of time, unto us a child was born. This Jesus was crucified, died, and raised from the dead. After ascending to heaven, He will come again. Jesus will bring something greater.

While we wait, we work to help the inbreaking of God's kingdom. We strive to right the wrongs despite the frustration of slow and incomplete progress. We press on amid the pandemic by choosing to love our neighbor. We seek ways to relate with a binary world that tosses out nuance or complexity and simply sees us as either thumbs up or thumbs down. As we wait for something greater, this devotional resource is a gift to our community that supports us on the journey of life and faith.

This Advent Reader came into being in 2017 when Fifth Avenue Elder Kathy Henderson delved deep into our Archives, pouring over Advent sermons (both printed and electronic) delivered by clergy of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church over the past century and more. From these sermons, she curated a collection of pastoral messages from Dr. Jowett, Dr. Bonnell, Dr. Kirkland, Dr. Tewell, Rev. Ammon, Dr. Han Powell and many others. This edition has been updated to include the church's current clergy, Rev. Speed and Dr. So.

As you note the dates of these selections, ponder what was happening in the world when these sermons were preached, and take heart from the truth that the church has faithfully observed the season of Advent through many perilous times. This is our calling. As the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston attests: “On behalf of the world, the church scans the horizon, holding its breath, waiting, waiting, waiting for God to show up.”

As the body of Christ, let us wait for God together. Blessings to you this Advent season.

Rev. Dr. Jonah So
Executive Pastor

November 28

O Key of David

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. Isaiah 61: 1-2

The prophet Isaiah ministered during a dark and chaotic time in the history of Israel. There was a war going on. Jerusalem had been besieged and besieged again by the Assyrian nation. Citizens were exhausted by the unending conflict. They were also fed up with their own corrupt rulers. Nearly three thousand years later, the names have changed, but we still recognize the players—still nod at this story. Please, we pray, let those in authority be compassionate and wise, righteous, honorable, and good.

We pray petitions like this because we believe society should be just and fair. We also pray prayers like this because, like Isaiah, we believe this is who God is. Ultimately, God is the one with the keys. In fact, the Bible describes God's Chosen One, the Messiah, as the living embodiment of the Key of David, as the one with the power to set free those locked in the deepest and bleakest of dungeons.

According to Luke, in the very first sermon Jesus preaches, he opens a scroll to this precise chapter in the Book of Isaiah. When the Messiah comes, Scripture tells us, he will head toward the last place any human being wants to be during the holidays: a jail cell. God's Chosen One, says Isaiah, will be surrounded by captives and prisoners,

padlocks and keys. These are not, of course, symbols that shout Christmas to us. We prefer holly and ivy, bells and angels, candy canes and candles.

So, why does the church insist that we read from Isaiah's jailhouse blues during Advent? If you push past a thin veneer of tinsel and look beyond stressed-out smiles, you will discover all sorts of people struggling with chains and locks at Christmas. This is where God comes in. It does not matter how secluded the jail cell or how dark your circumstances, the Messiah will find you, will pick the lock on your door, and will light your way to freedom.

Do not despair, says Isaiah. Light will shine in this darkness. God's Anointed One is on the way.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 10, 2017

November 29

What Are We Waiting For?

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Luke 21:25-27

Welcome to Advent! Welcome to the waiting room. When and where have we waited? Doctor's offices. DMV. Test or application results. A response to a request. In nearly all cases, we do not wait just for the sake of waiting. There is something we are expecting, hoping to happen. In this season of anticipation, let's pause to ponder the curious

concept of the end times. After all, in Advent, this person of Jesus, who came and will come back, is the person we are waiting for.

The warning about the end times from the Christian perspective has been happening for more than 2,000 years. Jesus himself talks about it in this passage, declaring that natural disasters and distress among nations signify the end. He goes on to tell us that “people will faint from fear and foreboding” at what happens. Simply put, Jesus says, people are going to lose it. Some respond to this message by ignoring the end times, thinking, “Nah, not in my lifetime.” Others live in fear, seeing the outsider as an enemy or threat.

Whatever me might believe about the cosmic end times, I would suggest that we turn our attention to the times in our own lives when, in some symbolic way, we really felt that “this is the end.” The time you brought home a “B” rather than an “A” on your report card. The time you got into an accident in the car you shouldn’t have been driving. That time the person you thought loved you instead rejected you. The time you lost your job. That time you got caught lying.

In situations that seem like “the end,” Jesus gives a message of hope. Later in Luke 21, He says, “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.” Fear does not play into Jesus’s plan. Rather He exhorts us to wait and pray. Anticipate the coming, especially during Advent, and draw on the strength that comes from God, not ourselves.

This Advent, as we prepare, let’s focus on others, because in serving others, we are serving and loving Jesus. Be on guard. Be alert. Keep your attention on the One who is in the business of taking the greatest end, death, and bringing life out of it: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

—The Rev. Dr. Jonah So, December 02, 2018

November 30 “Come Down”

O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. Isaiah 64:1

Waiting... In a word, that is what Advent is about. It is a season set aside for studying the horizon, waiting for God to show up. Of course, that makes it an especially difficult season for us. We are not very good at waiting—not in this fast-paced, results-now culture of ours. In fact, most of us are not even sure that patience still counts as a virtue.

In all of this, we share a connection with the prophet Isaiah. “Where are you?” Isaiah asks. “God, if you are on the job, why are the Israelite people buffeted by war? Why has our beloved temple been destroyed? Why are you nowhere to be seen when everything is in such a mess?” The months of agonized waiting finally escape in the cry that begins our passage.

The prophet uses every rhetorical trick to try and get God to come down. First, he flatters the Holy One—reminding God that there was a time when awesome deeds from on-high shook the mountains, when no one doubted that there was a powerful deity who reigned above. After buttering God up, Isaiah decides to offer a confession: “Have we offended you, God? We are filthy rags stained by our own sin. We deserve to be ignored.” And then, just in case groveling didn’t get the job done, the prophet tries to give the Almighty a guilt trip. “Of course, if you were wondering why no one calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; it is because you have hidden your face from us.”

It's your fault, God. If you weren't an absentee parent, we your naughty children would know how to behave. Urging, cajoling, begging, provoking, Isaiah says anything and everything he thinks might stir the Almighty to action.

At the beginning of Advent, this ancient cry for help reminds us of a sometimes painful truth. We do not possess God. We worship that which is beyond our control. We stand watch, shouting out for God, hoping to see the Holy One appear. In starting Advent off with the words of the prophet, we are reminded that the people of God exist as a community that waits. On behalf of the world, the church scans the horizon, holding its breath, waiting, waiting, waiting for God to show up.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, November 30, 2008

December 1

A Shoot of Hope

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding. Isaiah 11:1-2

In the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, the prophet writes to a people who are living on a landscape seemingly devoid of hope. The holy city of Jerusalem and the sacred temple where the Israelites had worshipped God for centuries now lay in rubble in a land occupied by foreign invaders. The Israelites themselves had been forced to relocate to an altogether foreign land where they struggled to make a new life amidst strangers who did not understand their ways or worship their God. Prejudice and greed were the order of the day.

Yet it was into this landscape that Isaiah brought a word from the Lord: “Do you see that stump of a tree sitting out there in the midst of the lava field?” he asks. “Look closely at it with the eyes of faith. For that stump is not the only reality. The miraculous, powerful, re-creating Spirit of God is also blowing here. And through that Spirit's power, a small green shoot of hope will spring forth that will eventually become a great tree.

“For out of the stump of Jesse, God is going to raise up a new ruler for you, and under his rule a whole new peaceable kingdom will be established on God's holy mountain in which creatures that have been mortal enemies—wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion—shall live together in peace and harmony. This kingdom will not be inaugurated with a violent overthrow of military might. Rather it will begin with the birth of a baby. A little child will be your shoot of hope. And in him, all the longings of the world for peace and justice and righteousness will be fulfilled.”

Dear friends, in just a few short weeks the sky is going to be filled with messengers proclaiming the good news that the shoot long ago promised by Isaiah is being born in our midst. So be on the lookout this Advent season for shoots of hope. Seek them out in the cracks and crevices of the landscape around you, and rejoice when you find them. For God's Spirit is surely on the loose in this world—and in that power, all things are possible.

—The Rev. Dr. Nora Tubbs Tisdale, November 27, 2005

December 2

The Word Became Flesh

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. Hebrews 2: 17-18

During Advent, we talk about the anticipation of Jesus's arrival, our Emmanuel, a God who is with us. In Hebrews 2, the author writes that in Christ, God indeed became one of us, in human form—and that in this baby, God chose to break into the world and become someone who bleeds as we do, who feels like we do, and who is not ashamed to call us his siblings. Think about how huge this is. The creator of the universe has seen how humans have treated each other, how they have continually messed up, and still chooses to come in the form of a human, because God loves people.

My mother is extremely close with her sisters. There are six sisters, all Guatemalan immigrants who now live in the greater Los Angeles area. They do not always get along; they do not always agree; and yet they truly love each other. The six of them, plus my grandma, get together many times throughout the year to share a meal and then pray for what seems like hours. They are not ashamed to call each other sisters.

When I read this passage and see that Jesus, God incarnate, calls us siblings, I cannot help but feel humbled that Jesus cares for me even more than my mom and her sisters care for each other. In this Christmas season, we rejoice that God became human, like us, out of love. These verses also remind us that suffering exists in this cold and fallen

world, and that we are not exempt. Diseases attack our bodies; friends betray us; governments oppress the vulnerable; trouble and difficulty come. But in the midst of all that, Jesus our sibling is with us.

Two of my mother's sisters have battled cancer. It pained my mom and the other sisters to see one of them go through the pain and struggle of dealing with illness. Their world seemed to be falling apart, and yet the sisters still gathered to eat, pray, and be with one another. In fact, they met more often—they were never alone. Friends, Jesus is that sibling for us, the presence that does not leave our side. My prayer is that when you are suffering, Jesus will reveal Christ's goodness for you. Give joy for Christ who is a God with us, a God who has brought and is bringing salvation!

—The Rev. Werner Ramirez, December 29, 2019

December 3

The Best Messiah

Listen to the greatest prophecy ever told:

"For unto us a child is born. Unto us, a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulders and his name shall be called 'Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.'"—Isaiah 9:6

The four titles that Isaiah gives for the Messiah contain not only prophetic fulfillment in Jesus but also the potential to meet the deepest needs of our soul. The "Wonderful Counselor" is one who comes alongside us in times of distress and is our advocate. Our "Mighty God" has the ultimate power and authority. The "Everlasting Father" sees the

big picture; he knows how evil can be woven into something good in the tapestry of life. He is not shaken by political tumult or shattering violence. He sees the eternal perspective, because he is also the “Prince of Peace.”

Historically, the Hebrew word “shalom” and the Greek word “eirene” have meant more than the absence of conflict. They refer to authentic wholeness and what is ultimately good for all people. The idea of shalom is really the idea of reconciliation; not always agreement on every issue, but people working together despite disagreements. I’ve come to believe that this Messiah, this Prince of Shalom, this Prince of Eirene came to turn an upside-down world right side up. Not so everyone would agree on every issue—there are many advantages to diversity of thought and political approach. But there is no goodness in hatred, in animosity, in bitterness, in resentment.

Although I have great respect for the leadership of our government, I don’t believe that any Commander-in-Chief or any Speaker of the House is going to guide us out of chaos. The only One we can turn to is the real Messiah. The only opinion that matters is that of Almighty God. Human beings need to pray for one another, forgive one another, and listen to one another, because God can take all earthly events, even times of despair, and shape them into something entirely good.

In this holy season, I urge you to reach out for the hand of the only One who can help us and save us—not the head of any political party or any human being. No, not any of these, but instead the One who long ago was reaching out to us. It is only when we take his hand that we discover what Christmas is all about. Why? Because he is the Messiah, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He is the best Messiah of all!

—The Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Tewell, December 20, 1998

December 4 Standing in the Presence of God

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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” Luke 1:13

Zechariah was going through the motions. For years, this faithful servant prayed that God would grant him and his wife, Elizabeth, a child. As he grew older, Zechariah fulfilled his responsibilities as a priest, although no baby ever came. Eventually, he stopped waiting for God. Have you been there? Dreams get revised, downgraded, and abandoned. Life doesn’t unfold the way we planned.

One day, the old priest catches a break. He is chosen by lot to carry out an old, old ritual, igniting fragrant herbs inside the temple in hopes of catching God’s attention. When the smoke clears, the angel Gabriel is there, leaning on the altar. “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah,” says the winged messenger, “Your hope will be realized. Your wife is going to have a baby who will prepare people for the coming of the Lord.”

Afraid to leave the realm of low expectations, Zechariah asks, “How will I know this is so?” And, with a boom that shakes the temple’s walls, the holy emissary responds: “I am Gabriel. I spend my day standing in the presence of God. Think about it. And while you think, it’s probably a good idea if you don’t speak for a while.”

According to Luke, when Zechariah emerged from the temple, he was gesturing wildly,

and the people realized that the old priest had seen a vision. They were right. Zechariah had been given a gift—two gifts really. The gift of a child that he had hoped for, hoped beyond hope, until hope felt foolish. The second gift Gabriel bestowed was the gift of silence; a span of time without words—a time to marvel at creation. Nine months to walk around with his wife, to see God not as a being pleased by a man waving special herbs and saying special words, by a person going through the motions, but as an active force of love bent on changing the world.

This is the message of Advent, my friends. The message of Gabriel. Stop talking. Seek silence. When you find it, wait, watch, and pray. You will find angels there, sources of light illumining the world, lighting the faces of those around you and giving us all reason to hope.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 9, 2012

December 5 Most Highly Favored Lady

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Luke 1:26-28

Today's text contains the most famous salutation in the history of how-do-you-dos. "Greetings, favored one!" Gabriel says to young Mary. "The Lord is with you." The angel's greeting sounds fancy, like a hand-inscribed invitation, although "The Lord is with you" sounds more down to earth—almost comforting. Right?

Mary is not so sure. According to Luke, "Mary was perplexed by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Why the perplexity? Well, maybe it was Mary's humble nature. "This is strange! What have I, a teenager from Galilee, done to deserve this royal treatment?" Or, maybe she was overwhelmed. Maybe Mary knew that the favor of the Lord comes at a cost. The events of Holy Week draw to a close with Mary standing at the foot of the cross, witness to an execution that shatters her world. Is that the kind of "favor" we should seek? You don't even need to go that far into the future. Gabriel announces that this young maiden is pregnant. No wonder she weighs the angel's words—pondering what sort of greeting he has dropped in her lap.

So, what is it then? What is it to have God bless you—to bestow favor on you? What is it to be full of grace? To answer, we need to reclaim Mary. Over the years this poor, teenage girl has been coated with more gold spray paint than the statues at Rockefeller Plaza. In art and prayer and story, she went from being a lowly lass, nine-months pregnant and swaying on a donkey, to a glowing figure decked out in fancy robes being crowned by angels. This transformation reached its zenith in 1954, when Pope Pius XXII declared that Mary was officially "The Queen of Heaven."

You could argue that it is a good thing to take one so humble as Mary and to declare her queen of heaven. And yet, by making Mary so special, so sinless, so regal, and so powerful, we miss the meaning of Luke's Gospel. The point is not that Mary was an extraordinarily perfect person. The point is that God chooses to partner with ordinary people, people with big challenges, people who know hardship and pain—people like Mary of Nazareth—in order to bring about the redemption of the world.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 11, 2011

December 6 Mary's Brave "Yes"

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Luke 1:30-32, 38

I grew up in a church that had a popular Christmas Eve family service with a do-it-yourself pageant, and Mary was always one of the most popular characters to play. I think that's because she was brave. Mary could have been stoned to death for getting pregnant out of wedlock. She was young and unmarried and poor. The text tells us nothing about her family of ancestry, which is different than that of Joseph, Zechariah, or Elizabeth. Mary was a nobody. When the angel showed up and asked her to take a risk, she had every reason to say no—but she said yes.

So often Mary is portrayed in art as a passive, submissive figure. This text, however, paints her as asking questions, wondering, and boldly accepting her call. Not only was Mary brave, but I'll take it a step further: Mary is the only character in Luke's version of the Christmas story that is not described as being overwhelmed with fear when the angels appear. Instead, Mary is described as being perplexed and confused.

Why pay attention to this small emotional difference—the presence of doubt, the absence of fear? First and foremost, I think the fact that Mary is uncertain about her call and still God chooses her, still favors her, reminds us that faith is not a perfection game.

It's a journey. It's a growing process that will include seasons of great confidence and seasons of questions and doubts. Second, we would be wise to follow Mary's example and listen for God's invitation in our lives, even if God's invitation gives us pause. Mary's bravery in saying yes changed the world forever, and we have that same opportunity every day.

In other words, when we, like Mary, find ourselves wondering about our self-worth or about God's presence in our lives—when we ask ourselves, "Am I really enough for this call?" or "Is God truly here?"—the proof of this text is that despite our uncertainty, God still chooses us. We don't have to have it all figured out for God to be able to use us for good, and there is hope in that.

For Mary, being brave meant bringing about new life. For you and for me, bravery in our faith may look like letting go of fear to cultivate generosity or letting go of the need for perfection to cultivate creativity. It may look like being honest with ourselves and finally going to counseling. Bravery in our faith may mean practicing forgiveness with the people we love, or not being afraid to truly love the people around us, ourselves included.

If we learn one thing from Mary today, may it be a reminder that our call to faith is not a call for perfection, it's a call to try hard, to love deeply, to not give up on one another. It's an invitation to say, "Here I am. I may not know the plans you have for me, but I believe in love, so I am going to follow love." Our angels may not wear pipe-cleaner wings and glitter headbands, as in a DIY Christmas pageant, but if we listen closely, we will find ourselves face to face with messengers who invite us to be brave.

—The Rev. Sarah A. Speed, December 23, 2018

December 7 Spiritual Lamaze

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Luke 1:39-42

Our scripture passage is the beginning of a wonderful story of spiritual preparation—“spiritual Lamaze,” if you will. It is a story of two unexpectedly pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, who come together for three months. The gospel writer Luke does not tell us what happens during this time. But I imagine that Mary and Elizabeth spent much time together, taking walks to the market, tending to their homes, talking about their hopes and fears. I imagine they spent many hours sharing and preparing for these births in their lives, as God wants us to prepare our hearts and souls for this impending birth into our lives at Christmas.

As [the theologian] Thomas Troeger comments, in this first century where women were very much on the margins of society, it is amazing that Luke “places the incarnation (the coming of God) into this context of deep friendship between two pregnant women.” I believe this lifts up for us all the importance of spiritual friendships in our lives. We all need friends with whom we can share our thoughts and feelings, our fears and our dreams. I so believe God works in and through our spiritual friendships, as God worked in and through Mary and Elizabeth.

Another tremendous gift shared in this story is the gift of blessing. When Elizabeth sees Mary, the child leaps in her womb and Elizabeth says, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” These must have been wonderful words of affirmation for young Mary to hear. How we all need to hear words of affirmation and support from our friends, our family, our colleagues, our church.

How can you bless others this Christmas? Is there someone you know who needs the soothing balm of a healing word? Someone who needs to hear that they are forgiven? Someone who needs to hear that you love them? Blessed are you among women. Blessed are you among men. Blessed is the fruit of your life. Like with Mary and Elizabeth, God is waiting for us to bring life and light to the world.

—The Rev. Janice Smith Ammon, December 24, 2000

December 8 Tarnished Stars

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. Luke 1: 51-52

War raged and human evil accelerated through the mind and inhumane orders of Adolf Hitler. In a prison not far away, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached in Advent of Christ’s humble origins and the sacrifice of his death. Bonhoeffer preached the Christ who toppled thrones and powers, and confounded brilliant Magi and hard-scrabble Shepherds alike. He preached the re-orienting love of Jesus, from cattle stall to cross. Bonhoeffer pointed a laser light upon the fact that God came, Emmanuel, and came for all; for the tattered body and for the tarnished soul.

From his prison cell in Berlin in 1943, Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents of the odd depiction of the Nativity by German artist Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1538): “The painting portrays the Holy Family at the manger amidst the ruins of a dilapidated house. Whatever made him do that, 400 years ago, against all tradition? Perhaps Altdorfer meant to tell us, ‘Christmas can, and should, be celebrated in this way, too.’” He continued, “I don’t have to tell you how greatly I long for freedom and for all of you. But for decades you gave us such incomparably beautiful Christmases that my grateful memory of them is strong enough to outshine even this rather dark one. It is times like these that show what it really means to have a past and an inner legacy independent of the change of times and conditions.”

Jesus came to us in a scruffy stable, accompanied by frightened shepherds rather than well-trained bodyguards. Welcomed by an elderly father rather than one young and ready to coach t-ball in the dust of Galilee. As Will Willimon has commented, “Isn’t that just like God?”

With Christmas only inches away, we listen closely to Mary’s song of trust and acknowledge that we are God’s broken and beloved. Mary and her cousin Elizabeth were aware *and willing* to receive the holy predicaments offered by God; imperfect vessels made perfect for God’s wild and holy purposes. Mary’s song, “The Magnificat,” is a tune that crescendos with boldness, with trust. *God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree...* Isn’t that just like God?

God loves the tarnished and dented, the wild and the weary. “God in lowliness,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “*that* is the revolutionary and timeless word of Advent.”

—The Rev. Dr. Patricia M.B. Kitchen

December 9 Fire and Soap

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. Malachi 3:1-2

Every year, on the second Sunday of Advent, we learn that God is sending an advance team to prepare the way of the Lord. According to the prophet Malachi, God says, “I have heard your cries, I am going to show up, but first you have some prep work to do.” Well, Rev. Malachi, whoever you are, that’s fine by us. We’ve got our wreaths up; we are making our halls, our homes, our church, ready for your coming. We are sure God’s messenger will be pleased.

Not so fast, says the prophet. Just as we are getting into the holiday spirit, we are told that before God arrives, we need a bath. “Who can endure the day of his coming?” asks Malachi. “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.” A refiner’s fire is the white-hot blaze that melts metallic ores and brings their impurities to the surface. Fullers’ soap is the lye-based soap used to bleach impurities from cloth. Neither of these things seems especially Christmassy, and yet, we are told that the messenger who comes to *prepare us for the Lord* will have flames in one hand and a caustic detergent in the other. Currier and Ives, Malachi is not.

Why this concern for purification as we head toward Christmas? On a hygienic level, we

all understand the need to be clean. Yet, today's text takes this notion a bit further. Our spirits, we are told, need soap, too. As we make our way toward manger this December, Malachi shouts, "Hey, you need to wash before you can hold the baby." Does that surprise us?

We all carry things into the Christmas season that are less than holy. We approach family gatherings and company parties burdened with old grudges and hurt feelings that we simply cannot let go. In fact, instead of coming clean, we have secretly nurtured these wounds, allowing them to coat our souls with gunk. The gift of Malachi is to picture for us a God who lays out fire and soap this Advent, a God who wants to cleanse us from everything that would prevent us from standing in awe at the manger.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 6, 2009

December 10 Joseph and the Angel

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1:20-21

Matthew provides the only fleshed out account we have of Jesus' adoptive father. Unlike Luke's depiction of the treacherous road trip leading up to Jesus' birth, the drama in Matthew takes place in a more domestic sphere. Joseph and Mary have made commitments to each other, but they have not yet taken the final step of marrying, moving in

together, and consummating their relationship. For Joseph, learning that Mary has been "found to be with child" brings him face to face with one of those life-changing flashes in time when the predictable becomes topsy-turvy.

Joseph no doubt anguished over how to do the right thing in these unhappy circumstances. Having decided to spare Mary's honor and "dismiss her quietly," he goes to sleep and has the kind of dream that catapults him into a radical departure. From the angel of the Lord that appears to him in the dream, we hear a key theme of Matthew's gospel and of all scripture: "Do not be afraid." Joseph wakes up, resolved to do as the angel commanded. He recognizes the stark choice he faces: to withdraw from his betrothed in fear, or to embrace a relationship with Mary and her child in hope.

In Matthew's nativity story, Joseph is a man of no words; in fact, neither he nor Mary speak at all. But Joseph is a man of action: He plans, he resolves, he dreams, he hears an angel of the Lord, changes his mind, and obeys. He marries Mary, claims and adopts her son, bestows on the boy his own heritage, and as the angel commanded, names him Jesus. Joseph knew both fear and hope. And after his dream encounter with the angel of the Lord, he chose hope.

We know fear and hope, too. If there is any Advent message to glean from the story of Joseph's dream encounter with the angel, it is this: Dare to commit, dare to trust, dare to throw your passion into your art and your work, dare to bring children into the world, dare to befriend, dare to love, dare to believe in the mystery of the incarnate presence of God being born anew, again and again, and dare to hope for the redemption and reconciliation of this troubled and good and beautiful world that God loves so very much.

—The Rev. Kate Dunn, December 30, 2012

December 11

From Inhumanity to Hope

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Joseph went also from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem...with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. Luke 2:1, 4-5

There are some people who frankly advocate a moratorium on Christmas while war lasts. They say, “You can’t carry on the old celebrations in a world like ours.” But these people forget that the first Christmas Day dawned on just such a world as ours—a world of proscriptions, purges, enthroned despots, and enslaved people. Caesar Augustus, whose census decree brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, was a cruel tyrant. On that first Christmas night, how was he to know that in a far-off outpost of his empire, a little babe was born—a babe destined to become the cornerstone of the human race, whose name would endure centuries after the empire of the Caesars had crumbled into dust?

Something happened to mankind on the night Christ was born. Love came to make its dwelling with men. The world before Christ was a world without pity; flesh and blood were cheap. There were sixty million slaves in the empire. Human beings were bought and sold for less than the price of a sheep. If sometimes we become discouraged with the slow progress of Christianity in the world, we do well to remember that there was not a single hospital or orphanage or place of refuge for the poor and oppressed before Christ came. He was born into a cold, unfeeling, loveless world, but through his teaching, compassion was kindled in the hearts of men and women.

So at Christmas, above the noise and strife of warfare, there breaks upon our ears the

song of the heavenly choir: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” This message of undiscourageable hope is prophetic of a new and better day that will yet dawn upon this stricken world.

—The Rev. Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1942

December 12

Christmas at Our House

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

There’s a good reason why our church asks children, and not their parents, to put on the Christmas pageant every year; to re-tell us, to re-teach us, to remind us of the story of Jesus’ birth. I think it’s because we want Christmas at our house to look like the very first Christmas there ever was.

Sure, our “house” is a massive historic building in the center of one of the biggest cities in the world and not a humble stable in Bethlehem. But if you look really closely, you will see that the nonstop chaos behind our perfectly executed pageant looks a lot like the nonstop drama surrounding the birth of our Savior. Despite the serene pictures in our minds and on our mantels of a cozy little stable with a cute little manger and fuzzy little farm animals, the original Christmas was not cozy or cute or fuzzy at all. It was crazy.

To clarify: Upon finding out from an angel that she is carrying the son of God, Mary, who is super-pregnant, and her fiancé, Joseph, have to go on a week-long donkey ride

from Nazareth to Bethlehem. After they arrive, what's available isn't the quaint cottage of our imaginations, but a barn where animals sleep, eat, and do other natural things. On top of all that, Mary and Joseph's first visitors include renegade shepherds they have never met and foreign magi who apparently already know their son. The craziest part is that just one small thing was causing all this commotion: a helpless baby boy.

If we left it to the adults, the Christmas pageant might be more organized, measured and calm, but where would the magic be? Where would the hope be? It takes 100 kids with the innocence and immeasurable possibility of baby Jesus himself to remind us that Christmas hope isn't found in the mighty and expected or the beautiful and magnificent but rather the frail and unexpected, the unadorned and unassuming.

On Christmas, at our house, the hope of all humanity is found in the craziness of our infant Savior, the craziness of our kids.

—The Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell, December 15, 2013

December 13

The Night God Lost the Way

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:12

On Christmas Eve, God deliberately lost his way in order to lose himself among us. God left the beaten broad road to journey to the place where men are. He came to earth in a back alley stable, where there is no road and no marker, in order that men might find him lost among them in their lostness.

This is the dynamic of Christmas. This is the appeal of Christmas along the glittering avenues that are so bright and gay. This is the secret throb of joy at Christmas. God deliberately lost himself amidst our lostness that we might find him, and in finding him think that we ourselves had made the discovery.

How beautifully the Bible puts this in both symbol and fact. The whole purport of "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" carries a smile with it. There is a twinkle in God's eye. Ye shall find the babe—of all places—in the crudest feed box scarred with the teeth of hungry animals. The epistles put it in a more sophisticated way. St. Paul wrote, "God emptied himself and took upon him the form of a servant, and counted it worthy to be obedient all the way to death."

It is the same thing: It is the manger aspect of Christmas, signifying that God lost himself in man's humiliation in order that he might come here among us. God emptied himself into this little child born of a country girl and a carpenter in a Bethlehem stable. In order that he might lose himself in the depths of humanity, he left the road of known success and came to us who have no road, so that we might be reconciled to God.

—The Rev. Dr. Bryant Kirkland, December 24, 1964

December 14

Dancing in the Streets

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Luke 2:13-14

Theologian John Drane was leading a workshop in England at an Episcopal church struggling with the fact that attendance had been falling for years. Church leaders were feeling defeated, and Dr. Drane thought it was time for this dour group to *dance*. Starting with simple bobbing and stepping, they quickly loosened up and formed a conga line that spilled out onto the sidewalk. When they re-entered the church by another door, four or five smiling new faces had joined the group, wondering what was going to happen next. Dr. Drane said, “I think all of your questions about how to get people into the church have been answered.”

If ever there was a story that should fill the church with joy, dance, and light, it's the one in Luke 2. We anticipate and celebrate the incarnation—God of the universe born into a broken world. In fact, if we take the time to hear this story anew, I don't think we should be able to contain ourselves.

The characters in scripture certainly can't. As each one learns of God's transcending time and space to be with humanity, they, too, are filled with overflowing life and love and dance: The angel Gabriel bursts out of the heavenly realm to speak to both Mary and Joseph about Jesus' birth. Mary feels impelled to go out and help her cousin Elizabeth prepare for the birth of her son. Her words of greeting cause the baby in Elizabeth's womb to dance and kick. And then, as Christ is born into the world, more angels go out to the hills to dance and sing and tell the shepherds, who are compelled to go down and see this thing, then head out shouting the good news of God to all they encounter.

In this stable, God transcended the limited world of human ideas. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us*. What the Episcopal leaders learned that day, and what God has known from the beginning of time, is that creation is looking for a reason to be

filled with life and made whole. That's what the incarnation does. It fills not just Mary, but you and me, so that we are compelled to dance, to sing, and to share that life with everyone we meet.

—The Rev. Dr. Paul Rock, December 17, 2006

December 15 The Spirit of Christmas

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

Luke 2:16

Christ's birth marks the one great dividing line in the history of the world. This fact is recognized almost universally by the use of the symbols “B.C.” and “A.D.”

We see the difference that the birth of Christ has made when we contrast life as it was before he came with life after his spirit touched the hearts of men. One needs only to read the writings of the moral philosophers and the historians of that early period to become aware of this. When we read how the old and the infirm and helpless children were exposed and abandoned, we see how desperately the world hungered for love. For multitudes of people, life was like the dream of a tortured soul who cried, “Would God it were morning!”

What was it, then, that softened the cruel hearts of men and made them treat their fellow creatures with compassion? It was the vision of a little Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger—the vision of mother love and human helplessness. When the disciples came to the adult Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom

of heaven?” Christ set a child in their midst and replied, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Let this day not pass until we have vowed that something of the spirit of Christ will be manifested in us. If nothing else can be said of us when our little day is done, may this at least be true: “He added to the sum of human kindness.”

“Oh little child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.”

—The Rev. Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1950

December 16 Mary's Boy

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

Several years ago, I took part in an interfaith conversation with a Catholic priest, a Greek Orthodox priest, and an Imam about one of the common denominators of our faiths: Mary. I confessed to my fellow panelists that Mary sometimes makes Protestants nervous. Because we don't want a focus on Mary to get in the way of a focus on Jesus, over the centuries Protestants have minimized Mary's importance in the gospel story. On a practical level that means Protestants tend to bring Mary out at Advent and then, just like a crèche scene, pack her away after Christmas for another year with the sheep and the shepherds and the star.

We're at a time, however, when many mainline Protestants are open to rethinking their understanding of Mary, remembering her as one who had a relationship with

her son all the years of his human life and “treasured all these things in her heart.” We recognize her as one who engaged in spiritual contemplation while living fully in the world. Mary, whom Calvin referred to as “our teacher in the faith,” offers us an opportunity to consider how we relate to God and to our neighbors.

Who is Mary for us, here, today? She is the one who, when approached by the angel Gabriel and told of the plan God has to use her for the salvation of humanity, wonders, “How can this be?” She wonders at God's willingness to enter into our troubled world, at the lengths God will go to live among us. And she is the one who consents to God's plan, declaring, “I am the servant of the Lord,” and then proclaiming that great New Testament song of liberation, the Magnificat, praising God's liberating acts on behalf of oppressed and marginal people.

Mary alone, of all humanity, was present as the Living Word of Christ came into the world through her, and she was present when his human body died on the cross. She is the one who lived on, as her son's disciple, witness to the power of his resurrection, and joined with his other disciples in the formation of the church, spreading the good news of God's amazing love for all humanity. God calls us all to be disciples like Mary, to wonder at the magnificence of God, to declare ourselves servants of the Lord, and when we are faced with things we don't understand, to treasure those things in our heart, and pray for our understanding and our faith to grow.

—The Rev. Kate Dunn, December 27, 2015

December 17

Shining Stars at Christmas

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and we have come to pay him homage.” Matthew 2:1-2

Like the wise men, we all want to find God. We all want to see God. So we travel near and far, look up to the skies and down on the ground, go east and west, all in search for this amazing God who offers us abundant hope and unending love.

But this isn't a game where God hides and we have to find him. Actually, it's the opposite of hide-and-seek, because when Jesus came to this earth and was born in that humble stable on that fateful day, God showed up for us. We don't have to worry about finding God or knowing what God looks like, because God made himself known to us through Jesus Christ. That is the reason we celebrate Christmas.

Sometimes we aren't paying attention and we miss God. Especially during the holidays, we get so distracted by all the lights and decorations, the presents and parties, that we lose sight of God. But just as God did for the wise men so many years ago, God gives us stars to guide our path. The kinds of stars I am talking about are not the same ones the wise men saw. They aren't necessarily shiny or far away in the sky; they may be right in front of us. Because the kinds of stars I am talking about aren't stars at all—they are the people who remind us and assure us that God cares for us. That God knows us. That God loves us.

Friends, who are your stars? Who makes you feel loved and cared about? Who reminds you that God is real and God is here for you? God did not leave us to our own devices, but provides us the brightest of stars that shine in the darkest of nights. So look up, look down, look all around, and where you find a star, there you will find God.

—The Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell, December 14, 2014

December 18

If Jesus Had Not Come

“If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.” John 15:24

Jesus Christ has so entirely wrought himself into the fabric of our modern life that we have come to take him for granted. To think of what civilization and religion would be today if he had not come is one of those stupefying speculations before which we stand appalled and dumb. Christ brought into the world a new spirit, with powers and ideals corresponding to it.

The idea of holiness, for instance, before his time had meant simply separated, isolated from the common herd, cut off for religious purposes. Christ interpreted holiness as wholeness, health, natural human life functioning according to its plan. Love before his time, held out as the world's greatest prize, had never been able to fully disentangle itself from selfishness. It was he who turned love over to unselfishness and, by his example, impressed men with the idea that love is essentially a giving rather than a receiving.

Forgiveness of injuries was by many of the wisest of earth regarded as a moral weakness rather than a strength. It was he who insisted upon it and put forgiveness in the forefront of his morality as the wisest and most self-respecting thing to do. Humility had been in an age-long struggle to disentangle itself from humiliation and groveling. Christ, in the very teeth of the Roman world, revealed a humility that is at once the noblest and proudest thing in life. Liberty, for which Greeks had fought so magnificent and long a campaign, was achieved within the spirit of Jesus and made independent of outward tyranny. He may be said to have died rather than surrender it, and he enabled men and nations to achieve it as it had never formerly been conceived.

Finally, Christ confirmed our sense of powers higher than ourselves. There had been many gods and lords before and after he came, but if Christ had not come, you and I would be Masterless today, owned by no one, unclaimed by a universe that is supremely indifferent to us. He changed man's conception of God, and at Christmas-tide, he comes to stay forever on the earth, for every man and woman born. Christmas brings today the old welcome and invitation: "Come to Me, and I will give you rest."

—The Rev. Dr. John Kelman, December 18, 1921

December 19 God's Left-Handed Curve Ball

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Do you believe that the baby born in the manger in Bethlehem was really God made flesh? That is the question of Advent and of Christmas. What I wrestle with as a Christian is that the more I read about the incarnation and study its implications, the more I realize that if the incarnation is true—and I believe with all my heart that it is—then everything about life is different. If the incarnation is true, then our value system has to change—our priorities, the way we deal with power, the way we define reality. Everything is different if God became flesh in Jesus Christ.

The best way I can explain what's been going on in my own faith is to share something the German theologian Martin Luther said: "There is right-handed power, power of the world, and there is left-handed power, the power of God's kingdom." Right-handed power is hierarchical; left-handed power is egalitarian. Right-handed power is might, strength, money, glamour, bright lights—whatever is tallest! Left-handed power is love, justice, mercy, forgiveness—the last shall be first.

When we say "yes" to Jesus Christ and believe in the incarnation of God, it means we're committing ourselves to be instruments of left-handed power, the most powerful force in the world, according to Martin Luther. When we say, "Yes, I believe God became flesh," we don't worry so much about the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Instead, we look for ways to serve and reach out to the world in need.

Will you spend your life trying to create a taller and bigger right-handed power, or will you spend your life serving left-handed power, the one who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords? If you've given your life to Jesus and left-handed power, you will truly live.

—The Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Tewell, December 21, 2003

December 20

Unto Us a Son is Given

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Philippians 2:5-8

How gentle the coming! Who would have had sufficient daring of imagination to conceive that God Almighty would have appeared among men as a little child? We should have conceived something sensational, phenomenal, catastrophic, appalling! The most awful of the natural elements would have formed his retinue, and men would be chilled and frozen with fear. But he came as a little child. The great God “emptied himself”; he let in the light as our eyes were able to bear it. His wonderful presence not only illumines our life but banishes the fear of sin and death.

“Unto us a Son is given.” And that is the superlative gift! The love that bestows such a gift is all-complete and gracious. And the Son is given in order that we may all be born into son-ship. It is the Son’s ministry to make sons. “Now are we all sons of God,” and we are of His creation.

In this season, the heavens are not filled with hostility. The sky does not express a frown. Heaven overflows with good will toward men. Our God not only wishes us good, he wills it! “He gave His only begotten Son” as the sacred expression of his infinite good will. He has good will toward thee and me, toward mine and thine. Let that holy thought make our Christmas cheer.

—The Rev. Dr. John Henry Jowett, December 1914

December 21

Repeat the Sounding Joy

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. John 1:9, 12

Did you know that Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church lays a unique claim to “Joy to the World,” one of the world’s most revered Christmas carols? The arranger of the hymn was none other than Lowell Mason, the music director of this church in the mid-1800s. Mason apparently rearranged portions of Handel’s Messiah and fit them to the words of Isaac Watts’ hymn in a tune now sung throughout Christendom.

Joy is the keynote of the Advent season for people who grasp the spiritual significance of God in Christ descending and invading this world and providing the means by which humanity may be redeemed and live eternally. The words to “Joy to the World” are actually a paraphrase of the last half of Psalm 98, in which rejoicing before the Lord is not depicted as simply human praise. The psalmist indicates that the whole of creation rejoices: “Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord.” Watts picks up this theme with the words “and heaven and nature sing.”

This joyful response by nature itself to Christ’s coming is something that the Celts in the western isles of Scotland understood. Observe the essence of heaven and nature singing in the Celtic poem “Christmas Carol”:

This is the long night. It will snow and it will drift.

White snow there will be till day, white moon there will be till morn.

This is the eve of the great nativity. This night is born Mary Virgin’s Son,

*This night is born Jesu, son of the King of glory,
This night is born to us the root of our joy.
This night gleamed the sun of the mountains high,
This night gleamed the sea and shore together
This night was born Christ the King of greatness.
Ere it was heard that the Glory was come, heard was the wave upon the strand.
Ere 'twas heard that His foot had reached the earth, heard was the song of the angels glorious.
This night is the long night, glowed to Him wood and tree,
Glowed to Him mount and sea, glowed to Him land and plain,
When His foot was come to earth.*

And glow to him, too, this Christmas season as we lift our voices together in praise to the one who is Emanuel, God with us in Christ Jesus, God incarnate in the babe of Bethlehem, who comes to set us free and reign in our hearts forever.

—The Rev. Randy Weber, December 25, 2011

December 22

A New Way Home

And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, [the Wise Men] departed into their country another way. Matthew 2:12

A new journey begins for all of us as we go from this glad Christmas season into the future. As we reread the Christmas story, we are reminded that the shepherds made a quick run into nearby Bethlehem. However it is the Wise Men that I am going to focus

on, because they came a long journey of 1,500 miles by following a star to see this Babe who was to become the Savior of the world.

Have you ever stopped to think how many men and women have worked hard, suffered and died so that we might have this blessed Christmas in comparative peace and ease? I would like to suggest that there is a new way home for us, as individuals and as a nation, to make a major turn in the road. We have a Redeemer who is a Savior, Lord, Master, and King. Of course, I do not think everything will be resolved in the new year, but let us take a new turn in the road home to personal salvation, to cooperative living, to an awareness that we are bound together with our Lord Jesus Christ.

So let's advance into the deep issues of the day. Let's not be afraid that God can't handle things. In every issue, Christ has a new way home for each one of us. Let's discover that direction in which God is going and then let's move that way. Everyone believes in peace, but some are timid about it. Everyone believes that poverty should be eliminated. Let's move on with trying to do it. Let's find a new scope for righteousness and beauty.

You and I need to be driving on the road the Wise Men traveled as we follow Christ to the next point of contact, to the next challenge. Christ is not a Christmas baby now; he is a mature young man. Let's follow him today as he leads us to these new challenges. I appeal to you to let Christ be your Friend, your Savior, your Lord and Master, because this Christmas you can see your life change as you take a new way home, in your heart, where you live, in this nation. A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Let's find our way back home to Christ.

—The Rev. Dr. Bryant Kirkland, December 25, 1969 (televised on ABC)

December 23

Waiting for It All to Make Sense

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

Advent is supposed to be a season of waiting. It is a time to slow our heart rates, our psychic churn, and our compulsion to answer the next email as fast as possible. It is a time to stare at the horizon on a crisp winter's night waiting for the deepest desires of our hearts.

Some wait to feel excited again—to feel the thrill of the lights and the tree and life itself. We wait for our fortunes to look up. Some wait for their health to improve. We wait for depression to lift. We wait for individuals—people we love beyond reason—to stop making destructive decisions. We wait for some acknowledgment—some sign—that we count, that we matter, that we are loved.

On Christmas Eve, especially, we clutch candles and wait in a darkened church because we know that the world needs saving, and because nothing that we have tried has come close to saving it or us. So we gather on the edge of Christmas to wait for God to appear. We wait to hear the announcement caroled by angels to the shepherds-in-the-fields-as-they-lay: “Unto you a child has been born in a stable in lowly Bethlehem.” This means that we are waiting for something totally absurd.

Would anyone blurt out: “I want the creator of the universe to show up as a poor child, conceived out of wedlock, and born in a Middle Eastern barn”? Honestly, if you were in heaven’s design shop, would you draw up a plan for salvation like that? Life leaves us feeling awfully vulnerable. If we are going to be saved, we need a strong, durable, bulletproof figure.

Yet, here we are. Waiting for a baby. “The Word became flesh”—soft and small and vulnerable, with bones that can break and a brain that might bruise, with tiny quivering hands and tear ducts that work. This is the Savior God thinks we need.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 24, 2014

December 24

“O Holy Night”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” Luke 2:15

It is Christmas Eve 1906. On this night, Reg Fessenden—a 33-year-old Canadian scientist and former assistant to Thomas Edison—did something long thought impossible. Using a new type of generator and a special antenna, Fessenden spoke into a microphone in Brant Rock, Massachusetts, and for the first time in history, a human voice was broadcast over radio-waves. Fessenden read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke in a clear, strong voice, then he picked up his violin and began to play.

On ships across the North Atlantic and in newspaper offices as far south as Norfolk, Virginia, telegraph operators sat slack-jawed. Instead of the dots and dashes of Morse Code, a voice was emerging from the tiny speaker on their wireless. And then, wonder of wonders, a violin began to play. A voice started singing. Reg wasn't, according to his wife, an accomplished vocalist. Still, he managed to croak out "O Holy Night"—the first live music broadcast ever.

"O Holy Night" has quite the backstory. Requested by a 19th century priest, authored by a critic of the church, set to music by a Jewish composer, banned by French bishops, embraced by French people, translated into English as a rebuke to slavery, heard, as if by magic, on ships at sea, this mongrel of a carol keeps nosing its way into our hearts. The notes jostle us. The poetry prods us. Sure, the stars are brightly shining, but humanity (in case you haven't looked lately) is a mess.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'Til He appeared, and the soul felt its worth.

Something momentous, the carol proclaims, has happened "in lowly manger." God has shown up. How ought we respond? "O Holy Night" isn't shy. It rattles the stained glass. Behold. Fall on your knees. Really? Is anything (even some rumored messiah) worth that kind of devotion? Life—with its disappointments, mistakes, and unscripted chaos—threatens to turn every human heart cold.

And then along comes Christmas. Along comes "O Holy Night." Somehow Christmas invites us to reach out one more time in hope. Where once there were only dots and dashes, suddenly, magically, there is violin music and the thunder of shepherds racing toward Bethlehem to see if the promises of God are true. The tableau they discover in a stable is full of the stuff sensible people edit out of their Christmas letters. But instead of feeling

cheated, the shepherds linger. They watch. Something is going on here. Something much less and somehow a whole lot more than they expected.

Born to be our friend, He knows our need. To our weakness is no stranger. Behold your King.

The shepherds fall to their knees... of course they do. The beating heart of the cosmos has entered into the mess of ordinary life. To you is born, this day, in the city of David, a savior. God is with us. Amen.

—The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 24, 2019

December 25 A Christmas Prayer

Almighty God who, by the birth of thy Son,
has given us a great light to shine in our darkness,
vouchsafe unto us now the precious gift of faith
whereby we may know that the Son of God is come.

We thank thee that Mary and Joseph were guided to the town of Bethlehem,
reminding us of thy providence that watches over us.

We thank thee that our savior lay a helpless infant cradled in a manger,
that we may realize his human kinship with us.

We thank thee that the revelation of his Advent was made to humble shepherds
watching over their flock by night,
that amid our daily tasks we may ever be alert to the revelation of thy presence.

We thank thee that he was born in poverty,
that we may know that none of thy children
is ever outside the circle of thy compassion and love.

We thank thee that at Christmas,
wherever there are hearts willing to receive him,
the Christ child comes to dwell.

Take from us all narrow and bitter thoughts,
all resentments and ill will,
all selfish forgetfulness of the needs of others,
that we may enter thy kingdom as a little child.

In keeping Christmas in the spirit of love,
may we find that we have kept Christ—and are kept of him.
In his blessed name we pray. Amen.

—*The Rev. Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, December 1957*

The Pastors

JANICE SMITH AMMON is the Bryant M. Kirkland Minister of the Chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary. She was associate pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church from 1999 to 2006.

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