

# Synthesis

A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship following the Revised Common Lectionary

Advent 1 — Year B

December 3, 2017

## A Call for Vigilance

The Gospel readings for the past several weeks have focused on the theme of preparedness for the coming of the Son of Man. On this first Sunday of Advent, the Gospel passage from the conclusion of Mark's "little apocalypse" (Mk. 13; cf Mt. 24; Lk. 21), features dramatic images of what that coming will be like, with the warning: "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mk. 13:33).

In the longest single discourse in Mark, Jesus responds to a question of Peter, James, John, and Andrew concerning when Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple would be fulfilled (13:1-4). This conversation took place during Jesus' last week in Jerusalem before his Passion. Jesus warns of the coming "desolating sacrilege" (13:14), and calls for vigilant watching for the coming of the Son of Man. Verses 24-25 draw on the Old Testament prophetic tradition (Is. 13:10; Joel 2:10; Ezek. 32:7-8; Amos 8:9) to illustrate the cataclysmic nature of events when "the Son of Man [comes] in clouds' with great power and glory" (v. 26; cf Dan. 7:13-14; Mk. 14:62).

Celestial signs and images of destruction are a common feature of apocalyptic literature, interpreting present crises as a prelude to a final consummation of God's reign. Such writings hold out the promise of future hope for the faithful in the midst of their present suffering.

Jesus' description of the coming Son of Man gathering the elect from all corners of the earth and heaven (v. 27; cf Is. 11:11; Ezek. 39:25-29; Zech. 10:6-12) anticipates a final judgment with separation of the righteous from the wicked. Thus Jesus calls for vigilance on the part of all who seek to be the Lord's disciples.

Jesus was aware that his ministry signaled a new intervention of God into the affairs of the world, and he believed that others should be able to perceive it. Thus he compares the signs of the time to a fig tree (vv. 28-31; cf Mk. 11:20-22). Just as the change of seasons can be

predicted when the tree puts forth new growth—so, too, do the signs of cosmic collapse and social turmoil foretell that *the coming of the Son of Man is near*.

It was assumed that these events would happen shortly: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (v. 30). Although heaven and earth might pass away, the Lord's words—Jesus' teachings—shall remain (v. 31; cf Is. 40:8; 51:6).

The climax of the discourse is the call for ceaseless vigilance, for no one—not even the angels or the Son of God—knows the day or hour of these things. The time is known to the Father alone.

This truth is reinforced by the brief parable of a man who leaves his house in the care of his servants when he departs on a journey. At his return he will expect to find everything in good order, with each servant having fulfilled the tasks assigned. The implication is that there will be a severe reckoning if there is evidence of neglect at the owner's unscheduled return. Thus the servants must be prepared always for their master's reappearance.

Likewise, because we cannot know when the Lord will return, we must watch and be alert at all times for his coming. "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (v. 37; cf Mk. 14:34, 37, 38). Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead; and we are reminded that we must prepare for his coming and live in readiness to receive him.

Jesus' words must have rung true to Mark's first readers. For them the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (70 A. D.) by the Romans was a sign that the end was near, and that a new age was dawning. Thus they were to stand fast in their faith and await deliverance and vindication. In the end, this time of turmoil would yield immeasurable joy.

The Epistle reading expresses themes of expectation and hope as the Corinthians live in anticipation of the return of Jesus. The opening verses follow the usual pattern of greeting in Paul's letters as he

wishes the congregation grace and peace. He gives thanks for their knowledge in Christ and the strength of their witness.

As recipients of God's spiritual gifts, they are equipped to wait confidently for the "revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:7). With God as their strength, they will be "blameless" on the day of the Lord's coming (1:8). God is faithful, and it is through God that they have been called into the fellowship of Christ Jesus.

### SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18;  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

While the Gospel reading predicts God's climactic intervention in history, the verses from Isaiah begin as an appeal for God's presence: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . ." (64:1). This text is a lament of those who returned to Israel after the Exile to find the land desolate and the temple destroyed. Here God's coming is compared to a fire so hot that it causes water to boil. Such a conflagration will make the other nations take notice of the Lord's mighty power.

The image of the quaking mountains (v. 3) is reminiscent of the presence of God at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:16-18) after the liberation of Israel. The prophet's hope is that God's "awesome deeds" will once again be witnessed by God's people. For from ages past, the Lord is the only one who has brought salvation (v. 4).

The prophet acknowledges Israel's past sin for which God is justly angered. The people are unclean before the Lord—like a "filthy cloth" (v. 6), or a faded leaf that is blown away by the wind. Because of their sins, they do not call on the name of the Lord.

Yet there is hope—for despite their iniquities, the Lord is still their Father. He is like a potter and the people are the clay: "We are all the work of your hand" (v. 8). There is a poignant intimacy here as the people pray to the Lord for forgiveness: "Do not remember iniquity forever" (v. 9a).

**M**ark's Gospel: Written Where, When, Why, and for Whom? Given that this was probably the section of his narrative where Mark had most scope to be creative, some of the particulars that he mentioned can serve to help the attentive scholar to guess the particular nature of the issues affecting Mark's readers.

The details have led some scholars to suspect that Mark was indeed writing for a community resident in Palestine at the time immediately before the siege of Jerusalem. They would therefore presumably have been a group of Jewish Christians.

Mark's concern would have been to keep them true to the vision of Jesus. This would have involved a critical stance towards those factions recommending accommodation to the Roman occupation and, with it, the whole imperial ethos. It would also have involved an unwillingness to engage in violence and to actively take up arms with the rebels. That would equally have involved a lack of faith in the possibilities of the Kingdom (cf 3:22-30).

The alternative for the disciples in such a situation would have been to make use of what opportunities presented themselves to escape the bitter wrangling of the conflicting ideologies and to absent themselves from the potential conflict, that is, to "flee to the hills."

There are difficulties with this suggestion that Mark's community was composed of residents of Judea or Galilee. The difficulties arise mainly from

- Mark's translating the couple of Aramaic words found in the narrative,
- his explaining the ascetical practices of the Pharisees,
- and indeed his at times cavalier approach to Palestinian geography.

None of these would seem to be necessary if the readers were Palestine disciples.

The issue remains unsolved.

—John McKinnon in *Mark Gospel Commentary* (Mk. 13:24-37).

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Could staying awake, and being alert, and being faithful to Christ, mean being alert to "the bigger picture"? In

Australia, we have great problems with justice and compassion, with employment, with mental health, and with simply being decent. We *cannot* talk about these things without talking about the refugees who come on boats, but the boat people *are not the issue*. Our problem, our big issue, is fear for our security, and much of it is justified. What will happen to my house and mortgage if I cannot get more work? What will happen to my job if the economy collapses? What will happen if the obscenely rich keep getting richer?

The ruling powers-that-be protect themselves from our fears by channeling them into a misplaced hatred of boat people, who are no threat to us. Are we awake to this?

Be alert if you wish to be faithful to Christ. There *is* fear to be faced, and there are strategies to be devised. But to base them on racism and greed; to exploit the fears with populist policies to stay elected, or feather our nests, is not discipleship. And if we [are not awake to this] we are just as much a failure to Christ in his hour of need, as those disciples who slept in the garden.

In the same way as all this, we cannot talk about the Christ in our time without reference to a son of man coming in the clouds (13:26), but *the day is not the issue*. There is something more important, and that is watchfulness, or staying awake.

#### *The Open Gospel of Mark*

Let us come back to Mark. He understood very clearly that resurrection cannot be defined, and placed in print. He leaves us without a resurrection story. Australian scholar Alan Cadwallader suggests we must supply our own. All through the gospel, however, Mark gives us hints of resurrection. Jesus keeps "raising people up" in Mark, which is language of resurrection. We are invited to develop this; to tinker with it, to discover our own resurrection. ...

Is this openness restricted only to matters of resurrection?

I think the whole gospel of Mark is an open gospel. It is not a fixed text; a piece of *Apple* or *Microsoft* software which we are forbidden to alter, or to which we may not add. It is "open source." It expects us to tinker, and

adjust stuff for our situation, whilst maintaining the integrity of the program. It asks of us, "How will you live? How will you remain awake? How will you develop the story of Jesus in your time and place?"

—Andrew Prior at First Impressions (2011).

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#### Cursing of the fig tree *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*

On Matthew:

It would appear however, that the story is largely symbolic, at least in its present form. It points to the nation Israel which has not brought forth the fruits of repentance ... and is therefore depicted as under God's curse. Whatever historical elements there may have been behind this account have been obscured.

On Mark:

The barren fig tree is probably symbolic of Israel and the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Mark records the episode as an example of the power of Jesus. It is probably a variant version of an original symbolic teaching, now preserved in Luke 13:6-9. It is significant that Mark and Matthew have an incident but no parable; Luke has a parable but no incident. Tradition has apparently dramatized the parable.

#### *Harper's Bible Commentary*

On Mark:

The cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple are "intercalated" and interpret each other. The cursing of the fig tree may have developed from a parable such as Luke 13:6-9, where the unfruitful tree symbolizes an unfaithful people (Is. 5:1-7; Jer. 8:13; Micah 8:1).

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Now, more than ever, we must proclaim, "The Lord is at hand!" We are part of this, quietly and actively, through our faith and expectation. It is enough for us to know that God is weaving his design in the warp and weft of the world. His goal will be reached, not just for this or that person, but for everyone.

—Eleanor Roosevelt, "If You Ask Me" in *Ladies' Home Journal* (Nov. 1941).



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#### **Volume 30 No. 12**

A cold lump scooped from the earth, red, damp, slimy, formless—held in two hands, gazed at, imagined, hefted, and maybe loved for what it can become. The Artist, eyes closed, rolls the clay, allowing the dampness and color to stain hands and coat with the *stuff* of clay-ness. Artist and clay work together to begin creating, to imagine, to form, to dream.

What shape will the clay take as the Artist's hands push, mold, draw out, curve? The image begins to grow into a thing of graceful beauty. It takes on a life of its own, never being forced by the potter, only guided and held secure as the clay reaches out—becoming!

There's no despair if the clay collapses. It's scooped up and coaxed into life once again, stronger, perhaps in a different shape—but still the breath of the Artist bestows on it form and beauty. It never stops *becoming*. Colors will be spilled lavishly down its sides, hidden until the kiln's fire burns away the ash to reveal glorious lights. The Artist hands over the clay—generous gift—to new hands, on and on, each hand adding to smoothness and changed light.

Our Artist God scoops our formless soul from the heavens and gives us life. On Ash Wednesday we heard "Remember you are dust ..." Yes, dust to earth to living being, formed by God and held through all our years. God continues to shape and mold and form, often through the hands of others. Sometimes we collapse; but if we allow ourselves to be picked up, the Artist will repair, reform, and strengthen the creation that is us. "... And to dust we shall return," of course; but in that last transition, God scoops us up again—and then the glory of our Resurrected life will be truly and finally revealed.

—SM

...

During Advent I find God in the slight and easily broken. As autumn days grow shorter, God is working in miniature. God has put away autumn's acrylics and is now painting in watercolor. These days, God dances with children in playful games of make believe. As world leaders pass from the scene and new leaders are born; God soars with migrating birds giving eye to fragile wings. While we stand in awe of the world's wealth and power; God gazes on the refugee child as she clings to her yellow toy ball. (Yes, as nations unleash the tsunamis of military destruction, the future of God's reign seems dependent on a child keeping hold

of her precious toy.) And as God lies down in a dirty alley with the homeless we hear the prophet intone, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless."

—Lon Oliver, Executive Director: Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center, Berea, Kentucky.

...

The Old Testament reading speaks of God coming to his world in both judgment on the ways of the world and in hope. It also speaks of that coming being in ways and from places that we do not expect. We cannot divorce our waiting and anticipation of the coming of God in Christ from the turmoil of our world, its corruption and greed, its death and destruction. Nor can we presume that the coming of God in Christ will be in ways or

through people easily recognized or expected. Lament and hope go together but the fulfillment of that hope will never be in ways we anticipate. The God we wait for is one of surprises, even though God's story is "from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2).

—Howard Wallace at [unitingchurch.org.au](http://unitingchurch.org.au).

...

This then is to watch: to be detached from what is present, and to live in what is unseen. ...

—John Henry Newman.

...

Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything.

—St. Gregory of Nyssa.



H Y M N O D Y

**NOTE:** Happy New Year! New liturgical colors, simpler flowers, muted lighting, and of course the annual appearance of the Advent wreath, can all support the hushed expectation of the Advent Season. New service music should begin (in accordance with the language of the chosen liturgical Rite); and since it begins unusually late this year, it might be a good Advent for a less familiar, or even new, service music setting. This is made more practical since Thanksgiving week is not immediately prior, as it usually is, likely allowing for a midweek choir rehearsal.

**Opening Hymn 56** "O come, O come, Emmanuel"—*Veni, veni, Emmanuel*. Begin the New Year with this hymn of expectation, which is also a fine choice for the end of the season (see Advent 4). Some stanzas (perhaps s. 1) should be played in pure unison for variation, or with a pedal-E in the bass. Otherwise the printed organ part is serviceable.

**Kyrie Eleison or Trisagion** Both *Kyrie* and *Trisagion* are appropriate during Advent. I prefer a *Trisagion* during Advent, and a *Kyrie* during Lent; but either can be successful. (See note above about service music for this Advent.)

**Sequence 58** "Lo! he comes with clouds descending"—*St. Thomas*. The Sequence should be the most Lectionary-centric hymn in a service, since its execution is surrounded by the readings

for the day. This text accomplishes that goal, with two tunes to choose from. *St. Thomas* is a more subdued and Advent-appropriate tune than *Helmsley* (57); but use whichever is most appropriate for your congregation.

**Offertory Hymn 454** "Jesus came, adored by angels"—*Lowry*. This gentle and lovely four-part setting by Gerald Near is paired with words telling of both the first and second coming of Jesus, including references to "clouds," as mentioned in today's Gospel from Mark. Both the tune and the SATB parts are brilliant, in my opinion, especially in their unusual but effortless modulation from F major to G major and then back again.

**Communion Hymns 61** "Sleepers, wake! A voice astounds us"—*Wachet auf*. **640** "Watchman, tell us of the night"—*Aberystwyth*. **9** (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, Church Publishing) "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand"—*American Melody*.

**Closing Hymn 73** "The King shall come when morning dawns"—*St. Stephen*. Finish the first service of Year B with this hopeful call for Jesus to come again when "light triumphant breaks" (s. 1). Its regal references are especially appropriate for the week after Christ the King Sunday, and look forward to another completion of Jesus' journey next November.



**I With what eyes are we seeing Advent?**

Picture this in your mind's eye: a man—a samurai—is killed in a wooded grove. One by one, all the persons involved are brought before a court. The woodcutter reports of the horror that seized him when he stumbled onto the body. The priest testifies that he had seen the man earlier and describes a likely attacker.

Then the attacker, Tajm' maru, is brought in. He claims that he tied up the samurai, seduced his wife right in front of him, and afterward killed the warrior in a swordfight.

Some readers might recognize this plot outline: The film described is Akira Kurosawa's legendary *Rashômon* (1950), a "masterpiece of storytelling, provocative imagery, and innovative cinematography."

In the film, the Buddhist priest's lamentations are haunting: "War, earthquake, winds, fire, famine, the plague. Year after year, it's been nothing but disasters. And bandits descend upon us every night. I've seen so many men getting killed like insects, but even I have never heard a story as horrible as this. Yes. So horrible. This time, I may finally lose my faith in the human soul. It's worse than bandits, the plague, famine, fire or wars."

What meaning are we to glean from the "gloom and doom" warnings of our Gospel today in Mark 13? It is likely that reading this passage from different perspectives will yield varying interpretations.

The seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan captured the flavor of the Gospel's message on judgment when he wrote:

That day, when sent in glory by the  
 Father  
 The Prince of Life His blest elect shall  
 gather;  
 Millions of angels round about Him  
 flying,  
 While all the kindreds of the earth are  
 crying,  
 And He, enthroned above the clouds,  
 shall give  
*His last just sentence*, who must die, who  
 live.

These are trying days for our world—with millions displaced, threats of climate disaster, loss of respect and crass disregard toward others' lives. Yet Jesus reminds us also that we have the power of choosing action or inaction in response to the dire situation at hand.

And as we once again enter the

season of Advent, we must also allow room for *hope* within this bleak scenario: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

We also acknowledge that for hundreds of years this season has been considered not so much a preparation for Christmas—as welcome as that will be—but as a time to prepare for the awaited return of Christ to set things right.

Jesus' Second Coming, or *parousia*, which we read of today, has a firm place in Scripture (cf Is. 13:6; Dan. 7:13-14). And Mark the Evangelist wrote with this background in mind.

While looking forward to Christmas is certainly important—in a hopeful spirit—our Lectionary makes it quite clear that this expectation is secondary to the historic admonition of *keeping awake* for final judgment.

**II The key word is "Watch."**

The Holy Babe, so tender and mild, is nowhere to be found in today's harshly admonitory readings. Rather, we are forced to confront that theme that remains quite noticeably absent from so much of our religious thinking: an end-time accounting.

In all three years of the cycle of Scripture readings, the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent is taken from one of the Synoptic collections of the Lord's words regarding the end of the world. This year, we are called to give thought to Mark's demand for disciples to remain vigilant for the return of the Son of Man to "gather his elect" (v. 27). Throughout, the key word is: "Watch."

Mark's description of those days goes beyond mere sweeping social upheavals to depict the disintegration of the entire created order. Naturally, Mark takes his imagery from the accepted Scripture of the time, particularly First Isaiah and Daniel. Given our advanced understanding of the physical universe, in which the earth is not the center but one of the planets that revolve around the sun, we would use different illustrations to represent the collapse of nature. Yet the terror which once was seen in a darkened sun and falling stars can well stand for the more sophisticated horrors imaginable in our own age.

But whether in the Gospel images or in the explicit fears of our own generation, the importance of these Advent scenarios has to do with the future of the human race. Jesus lived among a people who had largely come to believe that the individual had an eternal destiny. From that time, such a conviction has been accepted within the faith of the Church. The human

soul is revered as immortal, with some sort of afterlife awaiting it. Moreover, the quality of that afterlife is surely connected to lovingkindness in this life. *What we do matters*, as we await our King.

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) wrote to a young poet of his acquaintance: "Why do you not think of him as the coming one, imminent from all eternity, the future one, the final fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? What keeps you from projecting his birth into times that are in process of becoming, and living your life like a painful and beautiful day in the history of a great gestation? ... Be patient and without resentment and think that the least we can do is to make his becoming not more difficult for him than the earth makes it for the spring when it wants to come" (from *Letters to a Young Poet*, N. Y.: Norton, 1954).

**III "Our spiritual life depends on his perpetual coming to us, far more than on our going to him"**

—Evelyn Underhill.

By keeping a faithful Advent, preserving its distinct and sometimes discordant themes, we bear witness to the truth that *God's promises will be fulfilled in God's good time*.

Christ will come in glory someday to judge the living and the dead. In order to "keep a good Advent," we are to prepare for his coming in *all senses of our understanding*. It is our task continually to dwell in a readiness to receive him.

Diana Butler Bass wrote in the *Washington Post* (11/25/2016): "Advent should not be a mini-Lent; it is not a time to examine sins, engage in self-denial, and confession. It is not about penance. Rather, Advent is of a different spiritual hue: It is a time of waiting, of expectation, of hope in the darkness. The blue candles symbolize the color of the sky right before dawn, that time when the deepest dark is just infused with hints of light.

"Blue holds the promise that the sun will rise, and that even after the bleakest, coldest, longest night, the light will break forth, as the new day arrives. Blue may be the color of sadness, but blue is also the color of hope [even] when darkness surrounds, when all seems lost. When we hurt and think we have been abandoned, when all promises seem broken. When we light candles against the night, trusting and believing that a greater light will arise. When a single flame becomes a conflagration of compassion and justice."

As Robert M. Herhold put it: "Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly! We do not understand what this means, but don't let that stop you. Amen." #

## ❖ Anticipation, Repentance, and Promise ❖

Advent themes of expectation, repentance, waiting, and the fulfillment of God's promises are found in today's passages, as the compelling figure of John the Baptist takes center stage for the next two Sundays. John is a key figure in understanding the season of Advent, as he plays an important role in all four Gospels, with Mark's story beginning—not with Jesus, but with John.

John had a successful ministry in his own right with his own disciples. Yet he clearly understood that his primary call was to *prepare the way* for the One to come, who was greater than he.

According to Luke, John was of priestly descent as the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah (Lk. 1:5-80), and was also related to Jesus (Lk. 1:36). In the Synoptic accounts, John had already been arrested and imprisoned before Jesus began his public ministry (Mt. 4:12; Mk. 1:14; Lk. 3:19-20). Thus there was no contact between the two men after Jesus was baptized by John (Mt. 3:13; Mk. 1:9; Lk. 3:2; Jn. 1:29-34). His influence caused Herod the Great's son to have John beheaded (Mk. 6:14-29). And when Jesus appeared, Herod feared that he might be John the Baptist resurrected (Mt. 14:1-12; Lk. 9:7-9).

The opening verse of Mark's Gospel conveys a sense of excitement and anticipation, with the announcement of "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (v. 1). This bold statement of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah encompasses the message of the entire Gospel and proclaims the beginning of a new age.

While the message of John points to the future, Old Testament references and images (vv. 2-3) describe John as the promised messenger who would "prepare the way of the Lord." Although the text ascribes the words to Isaiah, they are actually a combination of Exodus 23:20; Malachi 3:1; and Isaiah 40:3.

As the last of the prophets in the Old Testament tradition, John came out of the wilderness—historically symbolic as the place not only of testing, but of God's saving acts. John's attire (v. 6) was reminiscent of the Prophet Elijah (2 Ki. 1:8), whose return was to precede the coming of the Kingdom.

People from throughout Judea and Jerusalem responded to John's call for a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4). They came to him for renewal as they confessed their sins.

Whereas the Gospels of Matthew (3:1-12) and Luke (3:1-18) portray John as a fiery prophet with a graphic message of dire consequences for sin, due to God's wrath, John's major role in Mark is to divert attention from himself and announce the coming of the Messiah. Verses 7-8 make clear John's understanding that he acted as a herald to proclaim the greatness of the one who would come after him—John is not even worthy to perform the act of a slave to "stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."

John then draws a contrast between his baptism with water for repentance and Jesus' Baptism with the Holy Spirit—the breath of *new life* that comes through Jesus. Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his own Baptism (1:9-11); cast out demons through the power of the Spirit (3:22-30); and promised his disciples that the Spirit would be with them in times of trial (13:11).

Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus, we can look to John's example for our own work of preparation to *receive the transforming presence of Christ* in our lives. As we embrace the gifts that God gives us, we are called through our Baptism to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ" (BCP, p. 305), and to wait patiently for his coming.

As Israel returned from exile in Babylon, the eloquent poetry of the Prophet Isaiah expresses themes of expectation and hope in future promises. Here God's message to the people is reassuring: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (v. 1). The sins of the people are forgiven and their penalties paid.

In Mark 1:3, John the Baptist echoed the words of Isaiah to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (40:3). Even nature will respond as the mountains and valleys are leveled and the road made smooth. All this will occur so that God's glory may be revealed to all people.

When the prophet asks, "What shall I cry?" (v. 6)—the answer is that just as

the grass withers and the flowers fade, Israel's enemy, Babylon, will be defeated. But in contrast, the word of the Lord will endure forever (v. 8).

Therefore the prophet, as the "herald of good tidings" (v. 9), is to proclaim from Zion that the Lord will come with strength and comfort to bring them salvation. However, the Lord comes not as a conqueror who brings destruction but as a gentle shepherd to protect the flock (v. 11). Such was the hope for God's people then, and it is the same expectation that the Advent season brings us today.

### SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

The early Christian community expected an imminent Second Coming of the Lord. But the Epistle for today reflects the growing concern that this return was not going to occur any time soon. Thus the second letter attributed to Peter cautions that time is not the same to God as it is to us: "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (3:8; cf Ps. 90:4).

We are reminded that *it is not for us to know* when the Second Coming is to overtake the world. We cannot expect God to work on our timetable. Our waiting period is a time of self-examination and repentance in order to be prepared to stand before God. Thus, as Jesus' disciples we are called to live in constant readiness—for "the day of the Lord will come like a thief" (v. 10). The apocalyptic imagery of the heavens set ablaze and melting with fire on the Day of the Lord in verses 10-12 symbolizes the final judgment.

However, God's people are also given the promise of "new heavens and a new earth" (v. 13; cf Is. 65:17) where righteousness will rule. As expressed in today's Psalm: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (85:10). Therefore we are to live in peace, holiness, and godliness, for this time of waiting for salvation is a sign of God's patience and grace.



**P**repare the Way of the Lord—  
Make His Paths Straight

Catholic nuns are suing to protect their land from potential pipeline construction: They have erected a chapel directly in the projected path of the pipeline.

COLUMBIA, Pa. — The end of the road, where the street suddenly stops and the towering wall of corn begins, always called out to Linda Fischer. She would pedal her bike there slowly as a child, back before they built any houses on the road, when it was just the cornstalks growing thick toward the sky. It was the silence she found there, the holiness she felt in that stillness, that led her to dedicate her life to God. Fischer has always known this land as sacred. Now the 74-year-old nun and her sisters in their Catholic order [Adorers of the Blood of Christ] suddenly find themselves fighting to protect the land from an energy company that wants to put a natural gas pipeline on it. “This just goes totally against everything we believe in [principles of ecological justice the sisters drafted in 2005, known as their land ethic]—we believe in sustenance of all creation,” she said.

The Adorers and their supporters’ nascent faith-based resistance, which has been compared to the anti-pipeline activism led by Native Americans at Standing Rock, N. D., could eventually set a precedent in a murky area of religious freedom law. U. S. appeals court judges have ruled inconsistently on whether federal law protects religious groups from eminent domain in such cases. The U. S. Court [of Appeals] has yet to issue a ruling on the matter. Legal observers say a case could make its way to the U. S. Supreme Court. “There is something to this ‘holy land’ thing,” said Dan Dalton, a Michigan land-use and zoning attorney and the author of a book on the litigation of religious land-use cases.

The nuns have joined in protesting hydroelectric power in Brazil and worked with Guatemalans opposed to gold mining. So when a surveyor came by to tell the nuns that he was checking out their land for the company’s Atlantic Sunrise pipeline that will eventually cut across 183 miles of Pennsylvania, the nuns turned to their land ethic, and they told the surveyor that they couldn’t even discuss it.

Another federal law, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, could more specifically protect the nuns, depending on a judge’s interpretation. That law seeks to shield religious institutions from land-use laws that would

otherwise impose a substantial burden on their religious exercise. . . . The nuns may be the ones to set the precedent.

—Michael S. Williamson in *The Washington Post* (7/16/2017).

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“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1 NRSV). This declaration tells us two interesting things. First, it suggests the coming of Jesus as the beginning of a movement. Such things can appear to be abrupt, at least to us. Why now? Why does God decide that out of all the times God could have intervened in history, this is the opportune time? As Isaiah 40:13 asks, “Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him?” . . . One biblical scholar, Adela Yarbro Collins, wrote of this passage, “The narrative as a whole is open-ended, and important predictions and promises remain unfulfilled when the account ends.”

Second, the opening statement in Mark suggests a subtle, yet important, shift in the Christian movement at the time of Mark’s writing: the Jesus who is “good news” has become the “good news” about Jesus. To put it another way: Jesus as an event, as in the letters of Paul, is itself good news. Jesus as the vehicle—the conduit—for the proclamation makes the message good news. Jesus as the content—the bearer—of the proclamation in himself, as portrayed in the Gospels, is also a way to construe good news. This is the funny way movements work at times. We look for a “face” for it, especially when we have a difficult time understanding it. Yet, when we would settle easily into making Jesus the face of God’s movement, the writer of the Gospel calls us to see something far greater at work.

Mark wants to ground this larger movement in the prophetic history of God’s work through creation. Although technically a mistake, Mark’s invocation of Isaiah is meant to remind us that movements are the result(s) of a confluence of prior events that may not make an impression upon us before they occur in our midst. (The mistake is that the entire quotation is not from Isaiah. The first half is from Malachi 3. The second half is from Isaiah 40.)

This movement we encounter in today’s text stands out because it comes to us in the wilderness. As a topographic metaphor, the wilderness is that place outside of civilization. It is that place on the fringes. The wilderness stands for what is untamed by civilization, what is

outside of the structures and machinations of human beings. When God speaks, often it is outside of the noble confines of the stained-glass edifice. This is what Mark is attempting to tell us about how God works. God’s movement is often abrupt and unsettling rather than predictable and settling.

—Michael Joseph Brown in *Huffington Post* (11/30/2011).

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The only way we can begin to explain the births of Jesus and John is through the power of poetry and the language of myth—not in the sense of untruths and fairytales, but in the sense of truths beyond our comprehension.

—James Koester, SSJE.

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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.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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We are human and finite, and thus cannot live perpetually in a sense of expectation, or in a continuous Advent. We are distracted by many things. Our spiritual awareness waxes and wanes in intensity. . . . It is here that we need to see why it was necessary for Christ to come to the earth. God has come to us because we, by our own power of soul, by our own emotions, even the noblest and most sublime, can never attain redemption. True expectancy, the waiting that is genuine and from the heart, is brought about by the coming of the Holy Spirit, by God coming to us, and not by our own devices. No ladder of mysticism can ever meet or find or possess God. Faith is a power given to us. It is never simply our ability or strength of will to believe. The spiritual experience that is truly genuine is given to us by God in the coming of his Spirit, and only as we surrender our whole lives to an active expression of his will.

—Philip Britts.

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There is a voice echoing from the wilderness that invites us to come, assuring us that the obstacle, the mountain, that has grown up between us and God has been leveled by the coming of God’s Messiah, and assuring us that God is ready and eager to receive us, to forgive us, to heal us, and to reconcile us to himself.

—David Vryhof, SSJE.

*In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.* Today's passage from 2 Peter makes my mind explode with a rousing version of *Jerusalem*, Hubert H. Parry's hymn on the poem of William Blake, especially the words that always bring me to tears: "... till we have built Jerusalem, in England's green and pleasant land."

In today's Epistle, I also hear words on which the foundations of liberation theology are built: "what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness ..." What sort of persons, indeed? Peter says we wait for the new heavens and earth, but does he mean for us to wait passively, wrapped up in a cocoon so as not to be tempted to be unholy or ungodly? If we think about the kind of person Peter was, I'm fairly sure that's not what he meant. *Lead* lives of holiness and godliness—a verb assuming action. We're the ones who must be laying the foundations of the New Jerusalem right here, right now. Jesus says that over and over. Prophets from the Old Testament to present day shout that again and again.

There are many different interpretations of Blake's poem, many ways of reading it; but for today I'm also reminded that the women's suffrage movement and later the Women's Institute both adopted the hymn as a rallying cry for equality and human rights. Women have the vote, and there is today a much greater equality for all human beings; but there is sadly a very long way to go. Women still face great inequality in the workforce and in the Church. The New Jerusalem would have all people living in peace and safety, so it is still far from being complete, as many of God's people live in slavery, violence, and oppression.

"Bring me my arrows of desire." What is our desire today? For what are we prepared and willing to fight? How are we to *lead* lives of holiness and godliness that will engage others in the building of a just society? William Blake, on one of his own illuminated manuscript pages beneath the poem we now call *Jerusalem*, wrote, "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets" (Num. 11). All God's people are called to be prophetic voices for peace and unity. So, we might sing with Blake and Parry, "I will not cease from Mental Fight, Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: Till we have built Jerusalem ..." wherever we live, whatever we do. Speak peace, love, justice, and walk with our God.

—SM

When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case. The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest; to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for the long walk is not yet ended.

—Nelson Mandela, quoted in *Architects of Peace* (Novato, Cal.: New World Library, 2000).

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"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." This freedom applies

also and indeed above all to the religious sphere and our relationship with God. The Old Law was a religious system built on fear of the Lord, on constraint, on observance. It was not a spontaneous movement toward God. Life under it was an imposed life. But the new life is a life that wells up from within human beings themselves; its source is internal to them, not external. The Spirit guides the new humanity from within, replacing obedience with spontaneity. ... The spontaneity of sons and daughters conquers the submission of slaves: "The spirit you have received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons and daughters, and it makes us cry out, 'Abba, Father!'"

—José Comblin in *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 63.

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The strength we need to travel through life, to embrace the gifts God gives us, and to wait patiently for this final Advent all come from the power of the Holy Spirit poured out in baptism. By pointing to Christ, John reminds us that we too are called to point to Christ as we travel together.

—Donald S. Armentrout.



H Y M N O D Y

**Opening Hymn 53** "Once he came in blessing"—*Gottes Sohn ist kommen*. For the second Sunday of Advent, begin worship with this lovely unison hymn to the Savior who continually comes to release us from our sins. It serves as a perfect introduction to worship, concluding with the words "let us here confess thee till in heaven we bless thee" (s. 4). Throughout these weeks, keep your approach to hymn playing subtle to help distinguish this season of hushed expectation.

**Kyrie Eleison or Trisagion** Continue with your chosen setting for Advent.

**Sequence 75** "There's a voice in the wilderness crying"—*Ascension*. Introduce the Lessons about John the Baptist with this thoroughly singable melody accompanied by the fine work of Henry Hugh Bancroft. The text is also delightful, and links today's Old Testament and Gospel readings. A slightly slower pace than the recommended half=56 seems to work better for this particular marriage of text and tune; but acoustical realities should always play a role in tempo choices.

**Offertory Hymn 67** "Comfort, comfort ye

my people"—*Psalms 42*. A paraphrase of the Isaiah reading for today, this light Baroque tune deserves to be treated as such with a rather quick tempo. This better preserves the meter, as the third note of each phrase is syncopated in a way not clear unless the tempo is steady and moving, around half-note=96. (Even finger cymbals and/or a baroque drum can be used here with success.)

**Communion Hymns 69** "What is the crying at Jordan?"—*St. Mark's, Berkeley*. **63/64** "O heavenly Word, eternal Light"—*Verbum supernum prodiens/O Heiland, reiss*. **W723** (*Wonder, Love, and Praise*, Church Publishing) "Isaiah the prophet has written of old"—*Samanthra*.

**Closing Hymn 72** "Hark! the glad sound! the Savior comes"—*Richmond*. Dismiss the masses with this triumphant setting from *The English Hymnal*. The opening exclamation, "Hark! the glad sound!" parallels the cry of John the Baptist foretold in Isaiah, as does its call for us to "let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song" (s. 1). The printed parts and descant are nice, and provide a fitting end to worship.



**I. The Eighth Sin.**

The message of the Advent season is twofold: It proclaims God's *judgment* on us as individuals in terms of what we do, and of the character we develop—announcing God's judgment also on our culture and its institutions. At the same time, Advent broadcasts a message of *hope*. *Christ is coming* into this culture of ours, and to the individuals who live in it, *with power and great glory*.

How are we indicted as sinners? The Seven Deadly Sins may seem familiar to us and, with that familiarity, less a matter of life and death. Greed and envy, of course, are bad enough in their consequences. But when the list of Cardinal Sins was first created, they were a Big Deal: *eight* of the biggest threats to a devout life among monks in the desert.

Eight? One extra sin not included among the list of deadly sins today, *acedia*, was perhaps the greatest threat of all to those early monks. But the meaning of this dangerous quality is nuanced and has changed over time. And the evolution of the word's use reveals how much the concept of a Cardinal Sin has shifted through the centuries.

Acedia comes from the Greek, meaning "a lack of care." It sounds similar to today's *sloth*—and *acedia* is indeed considered a precursor to the contemporary idea of laziness. To Christian monks in the fourth century, however, *acedia* was more than just laid-back noninvolvement or apathy. It was more of a *dejection* that made it difficult to be spiritual; led to avoiding important ascetic practices; and gave way to boredom, falling asleep while reading, and frustration with life in a monastery.

To Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), *acedia* was the most noteworthy of the eight vices in that he felt it could tempt monks to abandon their religious vocations. The Greek monk listed gluttony, fornication, avarice, sadness, anger, vainglory, pride, and *acedia* as threats to devout monasticism in *Of the Eight Capital Sins*, but argued that *acedia* was "the last of the sins to conquer." Overcoming the other seven didn't mean a monk was safe; but defeating *acedia*, according to Evagrius, brought one closer to God.

At this point in our Advent journey, even as we examine our consciences and acknowledge our sins, we rejoice for the protection that envelops us in that judgment, and for the promise of redemption. We know that the One whose arrival we await is not only our judge, but our Redeemer. He comes with the answers to our human failures along the way. He will

bring blessing to the best of our aspirations, and renewal of what has been disordered in our lives.

As Jon Sobrino puts it, in Jesus' message "one thing is perfectly clear: it is impossible to profess God without working for God's reign. ... There is no *spiritual life* without actual, historical life. It is impossible to live with spirit unless the spirit *becomes flesh*."

**II. "In many ways, the Advent figure of John the Baptist is a walking icon in the Christian tradition"**

—Bishop Michael Marshall.

John the Baptist lived an actual historical life, a human voice crying in the wilderness of his day: *Prepare the way of the Lord*. John was the advance man who set the stage, the "stage manager" for a unique event. While the First Sunday of Advent always focuses on the end times, the second and third Sundays point our attention to John. His person and message nicely encompass the totality of Advent themes.

He prepares the way for the coming of Jesus, just as Advent paves the way for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. He proclaims the need for repentance, just as Advent is a partially penitential season. And, especially in Matthew (3:7-10) and Luke (3:7-9), he warns of the impending judgment that we associate with the Second Coming of Christ.

All of this brings us full circle to the theme of the End. Thus we can imagine no more suitable focus for half the Sundays of Advent than these looks at the one who made the path straight for Jesus.

John clearly felt that God's judgment was about to fall on the people. This was not a new idea; it had been at the heart of the Prophet Amos' message, and, with a clearer statement of hope, was within the voice of the Prophet Joel as well. Mark sees John's work as the fulfillment of the scriptural promise of a harbinger of the Lord's way: "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ..." (Mal. 3:1; Mark mistakenly ascribes the entire quotation to Isaiah).

John's activity in the Judean desert is further related to a pledge of renewal in Isaiah (40:3), where the prophet said that the way of the Lord would lead the exiles of Judah through the wilderness and back to their own land.

It is remarkable that, as far as Mark is concerned, the Gospel begins not with Jesus, but with the ministry of John the Baptist (cf Acts 1:22; 10:37; 13:24). Because the Baptist's ministry roused the expectation that God was about to act decisively

among the people, Mark's opening words declare that John is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."

**III. Becoming God's channels.**

Frederick Buechner wrote in *The Clown in the Belfry* (N. Y.: Harper Collins, 1992): "It is possible to say that in spite of all its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it. That means that the Bible is a book about you and me, whom he also made and lost and continually seeks, so you might say that what holds it together more than anything else is us. You might add to that, of course, that of all the books that humanity has produced, it is the one which more than any other—and in more senses than one—also holds us together."

The line that can be drawn from John to Christ constitutes a straight path. What is clear in the Gospel is that, in the thought of the Church, John's function was to proclaim the repentance and forgiveness that in Jesus became a reality. John's stance of humility and servanthood serves to "hold it together" in preparation for the entrance of an entirely new prophet: the Christ.

In this season of preparation and quietness before the mystery of Christ born among us, it is wise to consider John's example; what it cost him to live as he did; and what may be required of us as disciples, now and in the future.

Evelyn Underhill wrote in *The Fruits of the Spirit* (London: Longmans, Green, 1949): "At the beginning of her course the Church looks out towards Eternity, and realizes her own poverty and imperfection and her utter dependence on this perpetual coming of God. Advent is, of course, first of all a preparation for Christmas; which commemorates God's saving entrance into history in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. A tremendous spiritual event then took place; something which disclosed the very nature of God and his relation to his universe. But there was little to show for it on the surface of life. ...

"So the next lesson Advent should teach us is that our attitude towards him should always be one of humble eager expectancy. ... Every time a channel is made for him he comes; every time our hearts are open to him he enters, bringing a fresh gift of his very life, and on that life we depend. We should think of the whole power and splendor of God as always pressing in upon our small souls. *In him we live and move and have our being.*"



## The Witness of John



Following the reading from Advent 2, the Gospel passage once again centers on the figure of John the Baptist. John plays a pivotal role in all the Gospels, with today's reading taken from the Prologue of the Gospel of John.

As the passage begins, we are introduced to John: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (Jn. 1:6). Apart from Jesus, no one else in the Johannine story is described as having been sent by God—John was part of the Divine plan. The Fourth Evangelist always refers to him simply as John, without the identifying title of Baptist used by the Synoptic writers. There are no details here of John's personal background or appearance. He is the prophetic voice—a living presence of scriptural promise.

Verses 6-8 and 15 seem to interrupt the flow of the Prologue to John (1:1-18), and can be seen as an attempt by the author to refute any claims of John's followers that he was greater than Jesus. John possessed a forceful personality, and his effectiveness as the Lord's messenger led some to think *he* might be the awaited Messiah. Thus what we read here is more about *who John is not* rather than who Jesus is.

John's call was to be a witness to "testify to the light" (v. 7). It is made clear in verses 7-8 that John was not the light, but his task was to *enable others to see the light*—i. e., to witness to Jesus, the "true light" (v. 9). Verse 15 reinforces John's lesser role: "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."

John is called to be a witness; he claims nothing further for himself and carries out that role in what follows. Thus when priests and Levites were sent from Jerusalem to question him about his identity, John confessed, "I am not the Messiah" (v. 20). As they continued to press him, John further insisted that he was not Elijah or the prophet. It was a commonly held belief that the return of Elijah or another prophet would signal the beginning of the Messianic era (Mal. 4:5-6; Sir. 48:10-11).

John quoted Isaiah 40:3 (cf Mk. 1:2-3; Mt. 3:2-3; Lk. 3:4-5) to again describe his role (v. 23). He came as a witness, a "voice" to prepare the way of the Lord.

When the Pharisees asked John why he baptized if he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet, John replied that he baptized

with water, but there was *one whom they did not know* who was far greater. Indeed, John was not worthy to perform the duty of the lowest slave—to untie his sandal.

This emphasis on Jesus as the one the world did not know (Jn. 1:10) is a recurring theme in John's Gospel. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was misunderstood by many, including his most intimate followers.

John clearly understood his own role as the messenger who prepared the way for the Lord—*Jesus was the focal point, not John*. John had truly listened to God, knew what his own task was, and acted in humble obedience to follow that call.

Later, Jesus would say that no one who had lived was more a servant of God than John the Baptist (Mt. 11:11). Yet the person who is least in the Kingdom of heaven, whose light simply reflects the presence of Jesus, is greater than John.

Our responsibility today is to follow the example of John—to live in such a way that our lives reflect and proclaim the light of Christ in the world.

As we reach the halfway point in Advent, often referred to as "Gaudete Sunday," our Epistle begins by reminding us to "rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16). Paul's conclusion to his first letter to the Thessalonians reflects a sense of expectation as the community anticipates the Second Coming of the Lord. Like the other Epistle texts for the first three Sundays of Advent, this passage gives specific directions for faithful living in order that "your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23).

With a spirit of joy, the believers were to "pray without ceasing" (v. 17), giving thanks for all things, in accordance with God's will for them. They were to be fully receptive to the leading of God's Spirit and to heed the words of the prophets. Yet they were also to test whatever came to them in light of the Gospel in order to discern between good and evil. Through these things, the God of peace would sanctify them so that they would be ready when the Lord comes. Finally, they were assured that God, who calls them, would be faithful in accomplishing this.

We, like the Thessalonians, also live in the time between the first and second advents of our Lord. Thus we are

challenged to prepare ourselves as faithful disciples, ready to welcome Christ into our lives.

The Isaiah passage also reflects today's mood of joyful anticipation with a proclamation of the "year of the Lord's favor" (61:2; cf Ex. 23:10-11; Dt. 15:1-5). Writing in the context of the exiles' return from Babylon, the prophet envisions a time of *reversal of fortunes* in which the oppressed and poor will experience liberation and prosperity.

### SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126;  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24;  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

In verses 1-4, the speaker announces that he has been filled with the Spirit of the Lord and anointed to "bring good news" (v. 1): that conditions of oppression, despair, and captivity will be overturned. Jesus himself used the words of verses 1-2 to describe his own call as he began his public ministry (Lk. 4:18-19). Those who have been comforted and restored will now "raise up the former devastations" (v. 4) and rebuild the destroyed city of Jerusalem.

In verses 8-9, the Lord professes love of justice and hatred of violence. Thus the Lord will give recompense for the wrong done to the people and enter into an "everlasting covenant" with them. Those who have been powerless and oppressed will now have their fortunes reversed and be blessed by God.

In response, the anointed one rejoices: "My whole being shall exult in my God" (v. 10). Clothed in salvation and righteousness, his joy is like that of a bride and groom at a wedding feast. Just as new life comes forth in the spring, so will righteousness and praise to the Lord be made known in all the world.

These verses describe a complete transformation, as despair is turned into hope. All this will happen because the Lord wills it; then the rest of the world will see the glory of a just and loving God.

As we approach the end of the Advent season, we too wait with joy for the fulfillment of God's promises, as we proclaim with the Psalmist: "The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced" (126:3).

The Gospel of John identifies John in a unique way and serves as a marvelous Advent text. Unlike the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Gospel of John identifies this person only as John, and does not attach his identity as “the Baptist” with his person. Only in a very unique way do we hear about the baptism of John in his words: “I baptize with water” (1:26), and in reference to Jesus, John responds, “I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason that he might be revealed to Israel” (1:31).

John bears witness to the baptism event in this way: “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God” (1:32-34).

These verses are not included in the assigned text for this Sunday, but they are very important in filling out the portrait of John and his role in this gospel. What we begin to see is that the figure of John in the Gospel of John plays a unique role. John is not identified as the forerunner of the Messiah, which is his role in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the Gospel of John, he is portrayed as the primary witness to Jesus as he looks back on his relationship to Jesus. John is the first person in this gospel to bear witness and confess that Jesus is “the Son of God” (1:34). This confession is heard from a human witness not until the very end of the Gospel of Mark when we hear the confession of the centurion standing at the foot of the cross as Jesus has breathed his last: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mk. 15:39).

The role of John continues to unfold in the Gospel of John in 3:22-30; 5:31-35; 10:40-42. In these ongoing texts, it is always clear that John’s role is one of the primary witness to Jesus. John is identified as “the friend of the bridegroom” who rejoices in the presence of the bridegroom and announces: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:29-30). Jesus identifies the role of John: “He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (5:35). Finally, many who witnessed John’s ministry of witness to the Messiah offer their highest commendation of his God-given role: “John performed no sign, but everything he said about [Jesus] was true” (10:41). His role was now complete as the evangelist John

offers the final witness to the role of John: “And many believed in him [across the Jordan]” (10:42).

—Paul S. Berge at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

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Peter Steinke in *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, has a chapter called “The Immune Congregation.” In this chapter he states: “The immune system is a network of cells that recognize and attack foreign invaders. The system asks one profound question: What is self, and what is not self?” (p. 91).

A little later he applies this insight: The community needs an immune response, to determine what is self and not self. The community needs to ask, for instance, if a certain action continues, whether it will enhance the mission of the congregation or detract from it. Does an individual’s or a group’s behavior contradict or serve the congregation’s purpose? Is there clarity about who is responsible for what and accountable to whom?” (p. 91).

In a sense, that is what John does in verses 19-28. He is both defining who he is and who he is not. He is clear about who he is and his mission. When he states that he is not the Christ and he is not Elijah and he is not one of the prophets, he is not saying that the Christ or Elijah or the prophets are bad; but simply that he is not them. Being clear about who he is and his mission, also means that he is clear about who he is not and what things will not contribute to his mission. While such an understanding of self (and non-self) is important for individuals, Steinke goes a step further and says that it is an essential part of being a healthy congregation.

—Brian Stoffregen at Crossmarks, Faith Lutheran Church, Marysville, California.

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#### *Advent Credo*

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may

have life, and that abundantly. It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace. It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world. It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity, of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth. So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

—Daniel Berrigan, S. J., in *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).

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Advent is the time of promise; it is not yet the time of fulfillment. We are still in the midst of everything and in the logical inexorability and relentlessness of destiny. . . . Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But round about the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on them already the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and voices, not yet discernible as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening, today.

—Alfred Delp.

The early church fathers called this “compunction,” the recognition of one’s sinful tendencies. The love of God pierces the heart ... and helps us to recognize our need for conversion. Every day our human nature humbles but does not humiliate us, gently and naturally. No effort or great penances are required for us to experience our limitations and taste our sinfulness, both of which lead us to recognize our constant need for God. Thus it is a grace to know one’s sinfulness.

At the Jordan I came face-to-face with sin, in a small way. This was one reason John came to baptize: to call the whole people of Israel to conversion, but also to invite individuals to recognize their need for God. The gospels say that he was calling people to “the forgiveness of sins.”

—James Martin, S. J., in *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (N. Y.: HarperOne, 2014), p. 100.

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“Others may perceive the Divine Spark in themselves only by realizing through enlightenment that the spark resides in all things, and in that they find kinship. But because the Divine Spark resides in all, does not mean that all will discover it. Your dharma is not to learn, Joshua, but to teach.”

“How will I teach my people about the Divine Spark? ...”

“You must only find the right word. The Divine Spark is infinite, the path to find it is not. The beginning of the path is the word.”

“Is that why you and Balthasar and Gaspar followed the star? To find the path to the Divine Spark in all people? The same reason that I came to find you?”

“We were seekers. You are that which is sought, Joshua. You are the source. The end is divinity, in the beginning is the word. You are the word.”  
—Christopher Moore in *Lamb, the Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* (N. Y.: Perennial, 2002), p. 300.

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We need humor in our lives. It is like the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world. It is like the desert rejoicing and blossoming. In the midst of the laughter, it is as if the sorrow and sighing flees away. The message of the prophet Isaiah is so relevant for us because it acknowledges the pain and the loss and the devastation the people had been through; and at the same time, it points to something beyond the present condition. The creation will be renewed. The ruined cities will be rebuilt.

The exiles will come home. The oppressed will hear the good news. Those who mourn will be comforted. ...

And so we hear the word of the Lord, on this third Sunday of Advent, and in many faith communities we will light the candle of joy. Ultimately, our joy is all about who Jesus is. After his time of testing in the desert, which paralleled Israel’s exile, Jesus is worshiping in the synagogue in Nazareth, and he is reading the scripture for the people, and he opens the Book of Isaiah to this very passage: The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who are oppressed. To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Then Jesus closes the book and sits down. And everyone is looking at him. And then he says to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

And in that moment, we get it. It’s like the ending to a wonderful story and we get it; we sense that “this is where it was leading to all along.” We rejoice, we laugh, even in the midst of pain and loss and devastation, because in Jesus we hear the deep resonant laughter of God.  
—Kenneth Carter, “The Hand of God on

the Shoulder of a Troubled World” at Day1.org (12/11/2011).

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In *The Lion King*, Simba is also called back to his baptism when the baboon takes him to the lagoon to show him his father. Simba sees the reflection of himself, saying that it isn’t his father, it’s just a reflection of himself. Rafiki says “Look harder, he lives in you.” When Simba looks again he hears the voice of his father saying: “Simba, you have forgotten who you are, you are more than you have become. Remember who you are ...” Great for reaffirmation of baptism vows.

—Jenn Stiles Williams, Jacksonville, Florida.

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It is while waiting for the coming of the reign of God, Advent after Advent, that we come to realize that its coming depends on us. What we do will either hasten or slow, sharpen or dim our own commitment to do our part to bring it.

Waiting—that cold, dry period of life when nothing seems to be enough and something else beckons within us—is the grace that Advent comes to bring.

—Joan Chittister in *The Liturgical Year* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).



H Y M N O D Y

**Opening Hymn 59** “Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding”—*Merton*. This grand hymn foretells John the Baptist as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (John’s Gospel). If you have the choral forces to do so, use the four parts on stanzas 3 and 4, and have your sopranos sing the descant on stanzas 2 and/or 5. Naturally, always use softer registrations on stanzas sung in parts!

**Kyrie Eleison or Trisagion** Continue with your chosen setting for Advent.

**Sequence 76** “On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry”—*Winchester New*. In my view there is no better support to today’s Gospel reading than this simple and singable hymn. Use the four parts on the inner stanzas to add color, and vary registrations according to the text.

**Offertory Hymn 437** “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!”—*Birmingham*. Since the appointed readings for today include *The Song of Mary (Magnificat)*, use this paraphrase of that text as a meditation before Communion. Keep your musical approach soft and contemplative

rather than exuberant as it would be for an opening or closing hymn.

**Communion Hymns 597** “O day of peace that dimly shines”—*Jerusalem*. **462** “The Lord will come and not be slow”—*York*. **W722** (Wonder, Love, and Praise, Church Publishing) “The desert shall rejoice”—*Sterling*.

**Closing Hymn 70** “Herald, sound the note of judgment”—*Herald, Sound*. End worship today with this majestic hymn, for which the only downside may be lack of familiarity with the tune. Although the melody does contain some difficult-to-navigate jumps, I recommend trying it, as its four stanzas reflect on judgment, gladness, and pardon, the underpinnings of Advent preparation, and especially of this Sunday’s readings. It also has a fitting conclusion, sending the congregation into the world to “Tell the message! Christ, the Savior King, has come!” If the tune is unworkable for your situation, consider another with the popular 87.87 phrase structure (see p. 1039 of accompanying edition of *The Hymnal 1982*).



**I Word equal to the Very High one,  
our sole hope  
Eternal of both the Earth and the  
Heavens  
Of this peaceful night, we break the  
silence  
Divine Savior, cast your gaze down  
on us!**

As far as I'm concerned, Gabriel Fauré had his place in heaven secured on this one composition alone—*Cantique de Jean Racine*. Of all the stunning music Fauré composed, this canticle stands out for me as a perfect combination of poetry, prayer, and music. It's an anthem that would beautifully complement John's Prologue on Christmas 1. But for today—a day when we're still in expectation of our God coming, clothed with the flesh of humanity, Racine's poetry draws on our hope and begs God to look on us *now*.

Advent, by its nature, is a dark, but peaceful time. The light of summer has drawn in and we spend mornings and evenings wrapped in darkness; but in that darkness resides the velvet warmth of promise. As the choir sings, "We break the silence," the music begins to grow in intensity and longing. We might say, "Look at us, Lord, as you prepare to dwell among us." We might ask, "What do you see? Do you still see all your creation as *good*?" Our God would, I think, say *yes*.

Creation is beautiful. God's people are precious in God's sight, regardless of their behavior—the hope of repentance and forgiveness is always there, just beneath the surface. It's that hope and potential for goodness that God sees and longs to draw out. God will soon break into our humanity amid joyful *Alleluias* and the shouts of angels. It might seem that Christmas is all about Jesus in the manger; but Advent reminds us that it's also about us—our own shout. *We* break the silence of Advent with shouts of hope and longing, of wanting God to *look* at each of us, deep into our hearts—to bring healing and strength.

Isaiah's words show that God will do this: "... my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness." What a tender image—God *clothes* us as a parent clothes a child. We are protected, warmed, loved beyond measure by our God, who surrounds us not with human value, but with godly righteousness. That gives us power. Do we grasp it? It offers us confidence in our ability. Do we believe that?

Remember the Magnificat—God looks with favor on us, and all generations may call us blessed. Yes, that is Mary's song, but it's also ours. Have Isaiah's words in mind as you hear the final line of verse one. Fauré repeats the line, music and voices growing toward the climactic words: "Divine Savior ... gaze on us!" GAZE on us, Lord; look at us now, as we beg you to:

**II Spread on us the fire of your mighty  
grace  
So all of Hell flees upon hearing  
your voice  
Dissipate the sleep of a yearning  
soul  
Which leads us to forget your laws!**

We've begged God to gaze on us with strong, confident voices, but now the music begins gently again, pleadingly. It might remind us of today's Gospel, the appearance of John the Baptist, a witness to the Light for which we long. I can imagine John's voice in this second verse, "Wake your souls up! You've forgotten God's law, repent and return!" So often voices in Scripture tell us to wake up; but I love the image here that even in our sleeping, our souls yearn for God. From the beginning, God laid the path that would lead to his coming. John finally stands, resolute on this path, and tells us to *wake up, the time is here. The Light has come*, even though they did not yet know it.

The Light is here, and still we forget—and so Advent is a time of reminding, of coming back to the center. This Light would spread the fire of grace, of the Spirit, that would overshadow all that had gone before, vanquishing the power of hell in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Once again the voices begin gently, but quickly gain strength in harmony and confidence that *hell will flee* on hearing God's voice made manifest in Jesus. But as John's words remind us, his was a voice crying out in that wilderness—and this is still the case in the wilderness of our own souls. John reminds us that we, too, have been unfaithful and are called to repent and return. Isaiah tells the people that God hates "robbery and wrongdoing" and seeks to make a covenant with those who are faithful. Likewise, Racine's poetry calls us to come out of the sleep of forgetfulness and ignorance to grasp once again the laws of righteousness and godliness. This is so important that the music repeats the last line, bass, tenor, alto, then soprano, interweaving as if indi-

vidually we need to accept our sinfulness; but together we can awake our yearning souls to prepare for the Light once more.

**III O Christ, be favorable to this  
faithful people  
Now gathered to bless you  
Welcome the hymns they offer to  
your immortal glory  
And may they come back fulfilled!**

What makes us favorable in God's eyes? Isaiah's words give us the answer: "to bring good news ... to bind up ... to proclaim liberty ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ... to comfort ..." And how do we go about doing this, what impels us? Again, Isaiah tells us: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me ..." What amazing words—the Lord has anointed *me*. Yes, he has, each and every one of us, especially at our baptism. The prophet's words are powerful, showing us the glory that is ours when we open our eyes to the Light and proclaim good news, liberty, release, the Lord's favor, God's comfort—proclaim these things with conviction, with faith. We often gather to bless God with our hymns and prayers, but then do we go out and bring the blessing God offers us to others, or do our yearning souls still sleep?

Today's readings, the voices of two prophets, and of Paul who encourages us to *rejoice always* and *pray without ceasing*, place our Advent souls into our hands. What will we do with them? Shall we offer them, awake and ready, to be filled with God's blessing and returned to us to be used and spent in ministry? Fauré must have thought so, because the voices again sing individually, and then combined, that final phrase: "... may they come back fulfilled!" (or in another translation: "packed full!"). This phrase is sung three times. First, with joy-filled excitement; then thoughtfully; and finally with tender pleading—*come back filled!*

I think I may play this hymn in the original French for my congregation (translation provided in the leaflet), and let the absolute perfection of this glorious work wash over them and speak to them the spirit of Advent.

There are just a few weeks left before the exultant music of Christmas lifts us with its grandeur. We still have time to let the quiet promise of Advent begin to stir our souls from slumber to wakefulness. "Divine Savior, cast your gaze down on us!"

—SM





## “The Holy Spirit Will Come Upon You”



On this final Sunday of Advent, the closing words of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans express the hope of the season, as he reflects on “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” (Rom. 16:25). This mystery was disclosed through the prophetic writings and is now made known even to the Gentiles. It was part of God’s intent from all of eternity that is now fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Our response to this revelation is to be one of “obedience of faith” (v. 26). Receiving strength from the Gospel, the believing community can rejoice and give glory to God forever.

Advent is the opening up of this great mystery and the fulfillment of promises made long ago, beginning with the Divine promise to David of an enduring dynasty.

At the time of today’s Old Testament passage, David’s kingship is secure. With his foreign enemies defeated and Israel united, David proposes to the Prophet Nathan that he build a permanent home for the ark. Now that David himself lives in a “house of cedar” (2 Sam. 7:2), it does not seem appropriate that the Ark of God should remain in a tent.

Initially, Nathan approves of David’s plans; but in the night, the Lord speaks to Nathan and rejects David’s notion of building a temple. Yahweh had always moved freely among the people of Israel and had never desired or commanded that a house be built. Instead, God promises to construct a house for David (v. 11); but it will be a house in the sense of a *dynasty*.

Verses 8-9a recount God’s relationship with David from the time he was a shepherd caring for his father’s flocks until he was prince over Israel. In all that time, the Lord was always with David, and his enemies were vanquished. Now the Lord will make further promises: the nation of Israel will have its own land, secure from its enemies (vv. 10-11a), and David himself will have a “great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth” (v. 9b).

David’s descendants will continue his kingdom and build a house for the Lord. Thus David’s house—i. e., dynasty—will continue forever (v. 16). This promise will ultimately be fulfilled with the birth of the holy child to Mary, and he will be given “the throne of his ancestor David” (Lk. 1:32).

For the past two Sundays, the Gospel passages have focused on John the Baptist. As a prophet, John witnessed to the Word. This witness becomes a reality as Mary receives and consents to the presence of the Word at the Annunciation.

In Hellenistic culture the birth of an extraordinary person was often accompanied by signs and miraculous events; thus the prophecies and the appearance of an angel would have seemed familiar to the Greek readers of Luke’s Gospel. Luke’s Annunciation narrative follows similar Old Testament stories of special births and interventions of God into human history (Gen. 16:7-13; 17:1-21; 18:1-15; Jdg. 13:2-7), and has a number of parallels with the preceding announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:5-25). But whereas Zechariah’s response is *doubt* toward the angel’s message of the child to be born to him and his barren wife Elizabeth, Mary accepts her call willingly.

As the passage begins, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, a betrothed young woman in the small Galilean village of Nazareth. When the angel greets her as “favored one” (v. 28), she is alarmed by his appearance. But the angel immediately tells her not to be afraid. He then delivers the startling message that she has been chosen by God to bear a child who will be named *Jesus*, which means “God saves.”

Verses 32-33 of Gabriel’s message to Mary proclaim the core of Luke’s Christological understanding. This child “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.” The title Most High is used elsewhere in Luke-Acts as a designation for God (Lk. 1:35, 76; 6:35; 8:28; Acts 7:48; 16:17); thus this child will be the *Son of God*. He will occupy “the throne of his ancestor David.”

In verse 27, Luke has already told us that Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph of the house of David. This provides Jesus’ legal connection to the Davidic line (2:4; Mt. 1:1, 6, 17, 20), in accordance with the ancient prophecies (2 Sam. 7:12-17).

Furthermore, Jesus will rule over Israel (the “house of Jacob”) forever, and “of his kingdom there will be no end.” Jesus is indeed the promised Davidic Messiah who will reign for eternity (Is. 9:7; Dan. 7:14).

The angel answers Mary’s question

of how she can conceive a child when she is still a virgin by replying that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you” (v. 35); thus her child will be holy. While the Gospel of Matthew alludes to the virginity of Mary in the context of the fulfillment of prophecy (Mt. 1:22-23), Luke merely states that Mary is a virgin because she is engaged but not yet married. The focus here is on the miraculous power of God through the Holy Spirit to overcome human limitations.

### SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 or Canticle 3 (Luke 1:46-55); Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

This theme is further emphasized as Gabriel calls attention to the pregnancy of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren and beyond her childbearing years. “For nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37; cf Gen. 18:14). This is true throughout the Gospel as Luke-Acts recounts the events and miracles in the life of Jesus, culminating with the greatest impossibility of all in the Resurrection.

Mary’s response—“let it be with me according to your word” (v. 38; cf Lk. 22:42)—is one of faithful and courageous obedience (cf 1 Sam. 1:11). In the words of the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55, which may be used as an alternative to the Psalm for today), Mary gives voice to the wonder and joy of God’s presence and the revolutionary nature of God’s Kingdom through the Messiah.

As a poor young woman without a husband, Mary is among the most powerless in her world. But at the Annunciation, she is the favored recipient of God’s grace, serving as an example of faith and absolute trust in God. Thus future generations will call her *blessed* (v. 48)—for it is in Mary’s acceptance of Gabriel’s call that God would bring about the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ.

Although the Annunciation was an event that occurred at a particular time in history, it continues to speak to us today as a reminder of God’s grace and mercy. As an invitation to faith, it announces the continuing presence of Christ in our lives and in the world. And so we can rejoice as the Incarnation unfolds before us during these final days of Advent. ❄

Mary wins her place in history not for her cleverness, nor for her beauty, nor even for her goodness. She becomes the most important woman in the world simply because she is willing to say yes to an angel's strange proposal without a clue where it will lead her. Doing so, she becomes the prototype for all of us who are also invited to bear God into the world.

—Barbara Brown Taylor at Kirkridge Readings and Intentions (12/23/1990).

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The Gospel according to Luke is the only one of the synoptic gospels to begin with a literary prologue. Making use of a formal, literary construction and vocabulary, the author writes the prologue in imitation of Hellenistic Greek writers and, in so doing, relates his story about Jesus to contemporaneous Greek and Roman literature. Luke is not only interested in the words and deeds of Jesus, but also in the larger context of the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of God in the Old Testament. As a second- or third-generation Christian, Luke acknowledges his debt to earlier eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, but claims that his contribution to this developing tradition is a complete and accurate account, told in an orderly manner, and intended to provide Theophilus ("friend of God," literally) and other readers with certainty about earlier teachings they have received.

Like the Gospel according to Matthew, this gospel opens with an infancy narrative, a collection of stories about the birth and childhood of Jesus. The narrative uses early Christian traditions about the birth of Jesus, traditions about the birth and circumcision of John the Baptist, and antiques such as the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55) and Benedictus (Lk. 1:67-79), composed of phrases drawn from the Greek Old Testament. It is largely, however, the composition of Luke who writes in imitation of Old Testament birth stories, combining historical and legendary details, literary ornamentation and interpretation of scripture, to answer in advance the question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" The focus of the narrative, therefore, is primarily christological.

In this section Luke announces many of the themes that will become prominent in the rest of the gospel: the centrality of Jerusalem and the temple, the journey motif, the universality of salvation, joy and peace, concern for the lowly, the importance of women, the presentation of

Jesus as savior, Spirit-guided revelation and prophecy, and the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. The account presents parallel scenes (diptychs) of angelic announcements of the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus, and of the birth, circumcision, and presentation of John and Jesus. In this parallelism, the ascendancy of Jesus over John is stressed: John is prophet of the Most High (Lk. 1:76); Jesus is Son of the Most High (Lk. 1:32). John is great in the sight of the Lord (Lk. 1:15); Jesus will be Great (a LXX attribute, used absolutely, of God) (Lk. 1:32). John will go before the Lord (Lk. 1:16-17); Jesus will be Lord (Lk. 1:43; 2:11).

—U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Luke Chapter 1.

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It appears that Gabriel's words about Elizabeth prompted Mary to undertake the long trip to Judea without delay, hurrying to see her relative. A day's journey would have been about 20 miles, and so it may have taken Mary about four days to reach the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth in a city located in the mountainous region of Judea. When Mary entered their home and greeted Elizabeth, the infant in her womb leaped (Lk. 1:39-41). This confirmed the angel Gabriel's words that John would be filled with holy spirit from his mother's womb (Lk. 1:15). His joyous leaping, under the apparent impulse of holy spirit, served to acknowledge the superiority of the son to whom Mary would give birth.

Guided by Holy Spirit, Elizabeth, in a loud voice, pronounced her young relative Mary as blessed among women and the "fruit of her womb" as blessed. "How can I be so favored," Elizabeth continued, "that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" It had been her unborn baby's joyous leaping when she heard Mary's greeting that revealed to Elizabeth that her relative's son would be her Lord, the Messiah whom all godly Israelites eagerly awaited. Elizabeth acknowledged Mary (unlike her husband Zechariah who had doubted) as having believed and called her fortunate, happy, blessed or in a desirable state of felicity, for everything that God had spoken by means of Gabriel would take place (Lk. 1:41-45).

Mary's expressions of thanksgiving and praise parallel thoughts in the Psalms and in the words of Samuel's mother Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10). "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon the lowliness of his slave. For, see! from now on all generations will call me fortunate, for the Mighty One has done

great things for me, and holy [is] his name. And his mercy [is] from generation to generation to those fearing him. He has displayed might with his arm. He has scattered those arrogant in the reasoning of their heart. He has brought down sovereigns from thrones and exalted the lowly. Hungry ones he has filled with good things, and the wealthy he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, having remembered mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his seed forever" (Lk. 1:46-55).

Mary's "soul" or she herself exalted or glorified her God. Her "spirit" or the motivating and energizing force of her inner life was filled with boundless joy on account of God to whom she looked as the savior or deliverer of his people from their distress. Humbly she acknowledged herself as his slave, expressing her appreciation for his having looked upon her with favor.

—Hans Werner in *Werner Bible Commentary* (2017).

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It is an incredible story ... much harder to believe than if it consisted only of idle pleasantries accompanied by hearts and flowers music from the angel chorus. ... It says, if the text is to be taken seriously, that God in becoming man, placed Himself under the judgment of every hobbledehoy who takes it upon himself to laugh at the thought that a woman might not know the father of her child.

It is *this* Mary, *theotokos*, the mother of God, who in the midst of men's scorn can sing: My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

Here was not the blithe rejoicing of a young woman, happy in the knowledge that her husband would love her the more for his child she would bear. Rather there is the incredible joy of one who, out of the extremity of the human condition, could accept the fact that she was the chosen one of God.

—Eric Dean in *The Good News About Sin* (Crawfordsville, Ind.: Wabash College Press, 1982).

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Let all Christians imitate the humility of the Mother of God! O holy angels, honor the Mother of your King! He is at once our King and yours, the Redeemer of our race, the replenisher of your city. To Him Who with you is so glorious, with us so humble, be rendered for ages without end, both by us and by you, the reverence due to His dignity and the honor and glory worthy of His infinite condescension. Amen. Amen.

—*Sermons of St. Bernard on Advent and Christmas* (London: R. & Y. Washbourne, 1909).

We do tend to want to build a house for our God—a safe and secure box we can use to keep that God from straying outside the boundaries we build to protect our comfort zones, our ideologies, our club rules, our –isms. If we build a house, our God will be manageable, malleable, controllable—safe. We’ve seen what happens when God refuses to be contained. Moses’ face turned blazing white. Barren, elderly women gave birth to prophets. Ordinary human beings stood up to oppressors and gave their lives for truth and justice. African-American children marched in Birmingham.

Artists paint, compose, write, and perform, giving us images of mind-stretching beauty. LGBTQ people step out of the closets others have constructed around them to speak their truth and show a new meaning of love. When we try to contain God, we end up trying to contain others; but God will not be contained.

David’s wish to build God a house was born of gratefulness—why should the king live in a house of cedar while God dwelt in a tent—fair enough. But God’s response is a lesson to us all. “I have moved about among all the people of Israel . . . I have been with you wherever you went . . .” God moved about among the people, not confined to a house, but dwelling within each heart. God was with them, saw them, heard them in every area of their lives, good and bad. But, of course, we know Solomon finally built God’s temple. God understands our human need to *build*, to hold, to touch—and yes, often to contain; and so we’ve built our edifices both in our hearts and with our hands. But God still won’t be controlled. God bursts the boundaries we try to guard so fiercely. God’s people are burned with a power that opens their eyes and enables their hearts to do great things.

Certainly, the beauty of the spaces we do build to honor our God, the houses in which we gather to worship and feel God’s presence are important, and help us connect; but the doors must be always open. Our sanctuaries must be places both of gathering and of sending; of coming together to pray and of equipping ourselves to be God’s hands and voice to the needy world. If we build to contain and control, we will shrivel and die within those walls. If we build to be a beacon of hope and a repository of love, our doors will be wide open and we will move along with our God among God’s people, wherever and whoever they are. —SM

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When Mary says let it be to the archangel, it is an act of radical surrender.

She offers her yes not with the meek passivity that history has so often ascribed to her; this kind of surrender is born not of weakness but of a daring strength within her and a stunning grace that shows up to sustain her. Mary’s surrender is deliberate, the choice of a woman ready to give herself to the sacred with such abandon that she agrees, with intention, to give up every last plan she had for her life.

Mary’s audacious yes propels her onto a dark way. She sets out on a path almost completely devoid of signposts or trails left by others; she chooses a road utterly unlike any she had ever imagined for herself. What must it have been like to walk a way she could hardly perceive, while carrying within herself—in her heart and womb and bones—a light unlike any the world had ever seen?

What must it have been like for the archangel who witnessed Mary’s yes?

—Jan Richardson at adventdoor.com.

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Here is the final truth about all of this: it is about God’s Word. The Word God spoke at the beginning, through whom all things came into being, is the Word being spoken over Mary to begin a new creation in her. It is that same Word that is spoken

to you and to me, that same Word we speak in pulpits, over fonts and at table—the creative and gracious power of God, not only to cause things to come into being, but to give the gift of God’s self to whom God chooses—each of us.

It’s not about Mary. It’s about God, for whom nothing is impossible, God who is first and foremost a God of Grace, God who chooses ordinary humans of all stature and circumstance to become slaves for and to God’s own purposes, God who speaks and comes to birth in us as members of God’s new creation. In this story her name happens to be Mary. But hers is not the only story being told here. It is your story; it is my story as well. God has chosen each of us, favored each of us, graced each of us, and spoken God’s Word to, over, and in each of us. By the power of God’s Spirit, God has descended upon us and conceived Christ in us. Like Mary, you and I are God bearers, an identity and vocation that brings with it extraordinary privileges, significant hardships, and enormous burdens. But the promise remains the same: no matter the hardships or impossibilities this graced vocation may bring in life, nothing is impossible for the One we serve and bear.

—Fred Anderson at day1.org.



H Y M N O D Y

**NOTE:** The last time Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday was in 2006. Make sure to consider the eventualities, especially if Christmas pageants, midnight services, or other events will all occur on the same day as the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

**Opening Hymn 66** “Come, thou long expected Jesus”—*Stuttgart*. Prepare for worship on the final Sunday of the Advent Season with this plea for God to come and “raise us to thy glorious throne” (s. 4). A grand tempo works best, allowing each chord of this short hymn to resound, especially if you have a choir capable of the simple four-part harmony.

**Kyrie Eleison** or **Trisagion** Continue with your chosen setting for Advent.

**Sequence 265** “The angel Gabriel from heaven came”—*Gabriel’s Message*. This simple and lovely hymn tells the story of Gabriel’s message in a clear, almost childlike way. I prefer to play it a whole-step lower than written (in G minor); but if you lack the time and/or skill to do the transposition efficiently, the written key will serve well enough, if uncomfortably high for some singers.

**Offertory Hymn 60** “Creator of the stars of night”—*Conditor alme siderum*. The

readings this morning address God’s miraculous, transformative power to make us receptive. God transforms King David via Nathan (“the Lord will make you a house”); Mary the Virgin via the Angel Gabriel (“favored one! The Lord is with you”); and in the Collect, our very selves for the day of his coming (that “Jesus Christ . . . may find in us a mansion prepared for himself”). This hymn forwards that theme, speaking directly of Mary, and of our desire for God to “redeem us for eternal day” (s. 5).

**Communion Hymns 266** “Nova, nova. Ave fit ex Eva” (or “Tidings! Tidings! Promise of salvation!”)—*Nova, nova*. **54** “Savior of the nations, come!”—*Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*. **L12** (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, Church Publishing) “We’re marching to Zion”—Robert S. Lowry.

**Closing Hymn 56** “O come, O come, Emmanuel”—*Veni, veni, Emmanuel*. Finish the final Sunday of Advent as we began the first, with this mysterious chant to the coming Lord. As before, experiment with unison and other accompaniment approaches; and if you limited which stanzas were sung three weeks ago, use different ones this time, preferably the final few.



**I Listening for the good news.**

Garrison Keillor wrote in *The Washington Post* (1/3/2017): “Back when I was 16 and an idealist, I decided that our church youth group—I was president—should sit and listen to Handel’s oratorio *Messiah* and have a spiritual experience, so I brought my LP and sat everyone down in a circle and talked about how wonderful it was and set the needle down on the vinyl. They listened to the opening *sinfonia* and ‘Comfort ye, my people’ and ‘Every valley shall be exalted,’ but the bass recitative did not hold their interest, and whispers of conversation broke out and by ‘O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion’ a full-blown social hour had erupted, laughter even, and I glared at the violators but they were undeterred.

“I sat and seethed as the beautiful spiritual experience leaked away. The contralto sang ‘He shall feed his flock like a shepherd,’ and it was pearls before swine. People were jabbering about school and cars and hairstyles and what they expected to get for Christmas, all of them like sheep gone astray. . . .”

What about us? Who among us is eager for “good tidings” now that Advent 4 is upon us, and our focus on preparation shifts—from “making ready” for Christ’s future coming—to a welcoming of the long-awaited One? If we know and acknowledge our own internal condition, we are more likely to identify humbly with those who had room in their hearts for his entry.

The Third Evangelist was a Gentile writing to Gentiles, yet he has learned to see history through Hebrew eyes. In the Hebrew understanding, the focal point of the national story was “the mighty acts of God,” through which the character and purpose of the Lord of history have been revealed. Divine truth unfolds through history and in our experience, and is to be grasped by faith.

Unlike the Greeks, who regarded history more as the literal chronology of *when who did what to whom*—for the Hebrews, spiritual purpose and power were mediated through the mundane affairs of human existence.

Are we listening, eager to grasp the spiritual depth of this moment—or distracted by the call of the season as expressed in our self-centered culture?

**II “When the mystery of God’s love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Do I ask of it what it cannot answer? Shrugging,**

**do I retreat into facile cliches, the popular but false wisdom of what ‘we all know’? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a ‘yes’ that will change me forever?”**

—Kathleen Norris in *Amazing Grace*.

The Advent 4 drama of the “ordinary being invaded by the extraordinary” begins in the second trimester of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John. This is where Luke places the Annunciation to Mary—in the tiny, obscure village of Nazareth in Galilee (cf Jn. 1:45-46). Mary, whose name means “excellence,” is a virgin betrothed to Joseph, whose name means “may Yahweh add.” Joseph’s importance to Luke seems to lie in the fact that his lineage is of the house of David. This provides Jesus with a legal connection to the throne of David (Lk. 1:32; 2:4).

Yet in God’s plan, *all* of us are woven into the story and have the opportunity to show forth Christ in this season and in our lives. Joan Chittister writes in *The Liturgical Year* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009): “A friend recently gave me a textile wall-hanging from Peru that makes clear that the process of finding God in the small things of life is as profound as it is simple. A pastoral scene of palm trees and rural lean-tos has been hand-stitched by peasant women, quilt-style, across the top of a felt banner. Under it is a calendar of thirty small pockets, each of them filled with something we can’t see. Every day until Christmas, we are invited to find the part of the scene that has been pocketed for that day and attach it to the scene above, one piece of handwoven cloth adhering to the other as we go.

“Some of the pieces are of benign and beautiful things; some are not. There are bumblebees and angels, wild animals and dry straw, a branch-laden peasant man and a weary-looking woman. But there at the end of the days, as common as all the rest of the items in the scene, is the manger; the sign of the One who knows what life is like for us, who has mixed His own with ours. Now, we can see, all our expectations have been worth it.

“Advent is about learning to wait. It is about not having to know exactly what is coming tomorrow, only that whatever it is, some hard, some uplifting, is sign of the work of God alive in us. We are becoming as we go. We learn in Advent to stay in the present, knowing that only the present well lived can possibly lead us to the fullness of life.”

**III “We are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born”**

—Meister Eckhart.

When the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that her son will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, this news must have been as confusing as it was frightening—especially the thought of facing this event without a husband. And so she questions how all of this will occur. This Birth will be the ultimate miracle—similar to when the Holy Spirit brooded over the waters of creation before the coming to being of an orderly world (Gen. 1:2) in which humans would dwell. Now this same Spirit would overshadow Mary, impregnating her, as the new Eve, with the New Adam, the Son of God. “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk. 1:37).

Mary’s response shows that she is indeed the mother God has rightly chosen. She says: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38). In her acceptance of God’s marvelous gift, she stands out for us as the faithful person above all others. This obscure peasant girl, from a seemingly insignificant village, would startle the establishment of her day and set in motion the events leading to the deliverance of the world.

G. B. Caird wrote in *The Gospel of St. Luke* (N. Y.: Penguin Books, 1964): “Mary was not blessed because of any special understanding that she had for the mission of her son; for she and the rest of her family understood him as little as John did. . . . Her blessedness consisted simply in this, that, having been chosen for special service and having received an amazing promise, she believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

*Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

And so: Let the Spirit, who so long ago brought blessing and fullness to Mary, also be born in us, in the everydayness of our walk this Advent. We begin to open ourselves to the joy and abundance of Christmas when we surrender, as Mary did, *more and more* to God’s indwelling, and thus make way for God’s purposes in the world.





## Unto Us a Child Is Born



**O**n this celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord, the words of the Prophet Isaiah announce the promise of future salvation with the declaration that “a child has been born for us” (9:6). Writing during a time when Israel suffered under foreign oppression, the prophet promised that a time would come when *light would shine* on a world that has lived in deep darkness (v. 2).

With the birth of a Davidic king, the nation will rejoice at its liberation. In verse 6, the prophet proclaims that this king will rule with wisdom as a “Wonderful Counselor.” As “Mighty God” he will be an expression of God’s power and presence. He will be called “Everlasting Father” because he will look after the welfare of his people. And as the “Prince of Peace” he brings reconciliation. His authority will continue to increase, and his reign will bring endless peace, justice, and righteousness. This will come about by “the zeal of the Lord of hosts” (v. 7).

Although they were written in a particular historic context, these proclamations took on messianic overtones through the centuries—as the Christian community saw the salvation proclaimed by Isaiah become reality with the birth of Jesus.

The familiar words of Luke’s narrative announce the circumstances of the arrival of the Holy Child, as well as the attributes of his Divine reign. The passage can be divided into four sections: the historical and geographic setting (2:1-5); the birth itself (vv. 6-7); the announcement to the shepherds (vv. 8-14); and the response (vv. 15-20).

Luke intentionally sets the birth of Jesus within the broader political background of the Roman Empire. In contrast to the reign of Augustus Caesar, the birth of Jesus makes manifest the coming of God’s Kingdom into the world—not through coercive tactics or displays of power, but within the circumstances of ordinary life.

Luke’s chronology of the reigns of Augustus and Quirinius and the ordering of the census is inaccurate; however, Luke’s concerns are theological rather than factual. God’s purposes are worked out through human events, even when the participants in these events are unaware of their roles. Here the census serves to move Mary and Joseph from their home in

Nazareth to Bethlehem, the messianic city of David. Joseph’s ancestry connects Jesus to the Davidic line, as foretold by the prophets; thus Jesus is a son of the house of David as well as the only Son of God.

While verses 1-2 invoke the names of worldly power and glory, the birth itself depicts the drastically contrasting image of humble persons exemplifying *true* power and glory. In showing the Holy Family unable to find lodging (v. 7), Luke introduces the theme of the world’s rejection of the Messiah. Here at the beginning, “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk. 9:58).

In the limestone formations of the arid climate of Judea, there are numerous naturally dry caves. Some were used as dwellings or stables, and perhaps in such a place Jesus was born. At the very least, the stable provided Mary and Joseph privacy for the birth. Mary wrapped the child in bands of cloth to keep his bones straight and assure proper growth, and then laid him in the manger. Thus this child, God’s only Son, enters into human life in the humblest circumstances.

The birth of a royal child was normally announced with great fanfare and ceremony; but in keeping with Luke’s theological focus on the marginalized of the world, the birth of the Messiah was told first to a group of lowly shepherds (cf Is. 61:1). David had once been a shepherd; and in Old Testament tradition, the rulers of Israel were referred to as shepherds, with the Lord God as the true shepherd (Is. 40:11). However, shepherds were generally held in low esteem and would not have been the first choice as reliable messengers of this great news. But as the Apostle Paul would later write: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27).

Events on earth and in heaven came together when “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them” (v. 9). The shepherds were terrified, for no one can ever be prepared to face the reality of Divine majesty. However, the angel acted quickly to calm their fears, and announced “good news of great joy” for all the people of the world (v. 10): *In Bethlehem a child has been born who is Savior, Messiah, and Lord.* The angel’s announcement gives a summary of Luke’s Christology. None of the other

Synoptic Gospels uses *savior* as a title for Jesus. As Savior, Jesus will rescue humanity from alienation and restore right relationship with God. With this joyous proclamation, God’s salvation is inaugurated *now*—not in an undetermined future. Then a heavenly choir appears, praising God and promising peace to the world (v. 14; cf Lk. 19:38).

### SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14;  
Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Verses 15-20 relate the shepherds’ response to this incredible news. They go immediately to Bethlehem to see for themselves what the angel has told them. After visiting the Holy Family, they proclaim this wondrous event. In the Gospel of Luke, a faithful response to receiving the Good News is to *go out and tell others*. Thus the shepherds become the first evangelists.

Mary herself “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (v. 19). Just as every mother marvels at the birth of her baby, Mary continued to reflect on the events surrounding this child whom God had entrusted to her care (cf Lk. 2:51). We too continue to treasure these words and are amazed at the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation, as the climactic figure in God’s plan for human redemption visits us as a vulnerable child.

The letter to Titus summarizes the message of this Christmas celebration: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” (2:11). In response to God’s gracious gift in Christ Jesus, we are to renounce all thought and action that is not consistent with the way Jesus lived on earth, as we await “the blessed hope” (v. 13) of the Second Advent.

As Christ gave himself for us, so we now give ourselves to him in a disciplined life of righteousness. He alone was able to purify our souls from sin. And through his marvelous salvation he has united to himself “a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (v. 14).

This celebration of the First Advent of God’s grace in the coming of Christ Jesus is also a celebration of the promise of the Second Advent, when Christ will come again to judge the world with righteousness and truth (Ps. 96:13). 

A few years ago archaeologists in Israel, excavating a church from the Byzantine period (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries B. C.) uncovered a holy stone, “The seat” (*kathisma*, in Greek), where, according to early Christian tradition, Mary rested on her way to Bethlehem from Nazareth. Based on material found in early Christian sources, the church and nearby monastery were dedicated to Maria Theotokos (the bearer of God). Whether the tradition surrounding this particular rock is correct, the devotion to Mary, the bearer of God, as she anticipated the birth of her firstborn, offers an image for our reflection as we are asked to give birth to Jesus in our world.

We easily imagine Mary, pregnant with Divine Goodness and near to the end of her pregnancy, finding the arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem quite tiring. As she rested along the way, she must have pondered the meaning of “the great things that He who is mighty” had done to her.

Along with her delight in the anticipation of the birth of her first born, she might have worried about when and where she would give birth. Perhaps she dreaded the thought of the return trip to Nazareth with an infant. Like all mothers-to-be, she probably wondered what her child would be like and what the future would hold for her, Joseph, and the baby. A devout young Jewish woman, she undoubtedly prayed as she rested.

—Mary Durkin at agreeley.com, Andrew M. Greeley Homilies (12/23/2001).

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**Litany for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day**

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

Let Christ be born in us.

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices; together they sing for joy, for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord.

Let Christ be born in us.

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted the people and has redeemed Jerusalem.

Let Christ be born in us.

All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Let Christ be born in us.

As we light the Christ candle, we welcome the tiny babe, born in a manger. Hope of the world, bringer of peace, joy of our hearts, and love incarnate, we

welcome you. Let Christ be born in us today. Amen.

(Based on Is. 52:7-10.)

—Beth A. Richardson in *The Uncluttered Heart* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2009).

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The shepherds were blessed and unexpectedly so. They were leading ordinary, unassuming lives, keeping the night watch to protect their flock from two-legged and four-legged marauders when their reality was shattered by an angelic vision. In a moment, all that was rote, predictable and prosaic was turned upside down by angel-song. They themselves were rough and ready fellows who alternated between drinking strong wine and uttering colorful curses. They stank like the sheep in their care and were no cleaner. Night after night, they slept in the fields, no doubt passing the waking hours in story telling and crude jesting. On cold evenings, they would light a fire, huddling together to keep warm; as spring approached, they would be on hand for the lambing season, ready to help with a difficult delivery and to keep predators at bay. Socially speaking, they were “nobodies”—poor, illiterate and uncouth. How amazed they must have been when they found themselves bathed in heavenly light! How terrified they must have become when the angel entrusted them with the Good News, sending them on their way to find the Christ Child. And so it was that they left their fields and their sheep, traveling in haste to find the Holy One. ...

I wonder, sometimes, about what happened to those shepherds. From the moment they first felt the touch of angel wings to the moment they beheld the Holy One in the manger of Bethlehem, life was extraordinary. They, the riffraff of society, were the first recipients of the Good News; they were the ones commissioned to be the first witnesses of the Savior’s birth, the first to bend their knees in praise and to join their voices to the heavenly chorus. But what happened to them when they returned to their fields? Did they carry on as usual with their humdrum existence or were they changed in some way? Did they suddenly find that they had nothing in common with their families and friends but could only relate to those who had been with them in the fields that eventful evening? Would anyone have believed them if they had told them the tale of celestial happenings? Perhaps a great fire was lit within them, a burning desire to dwell in the presence of God. Perhaps

they drank less, cursed less, told fewer jokes and spent the rest of their lives trying to remember in great detail all that had befallen them.

And what of our lives? Has this Christmas season awakened in us an insatiable hunger for the Holy, or are we distracted by busy schedules and the cares of this world? Did an angel or two flap wings in our presence and, in so doing, set us free from our limited thinking, or did we miss the moment entirely? Perhaps we, like the shepherds, were blessed with angelic visitations but never awakened to behold the wonders in our midst. Perhaps we, too, were called to bend our knees and sing songs of praise—and perhaps some of us did!

—Elizabeth-Anne Stewart in *Sunday Bible Talk* (1/1/2017).

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**Prayer Litany:**

**In This Small Place Made Glorious**

God of unimaginable love, on the first Christmas You became one of us.

**We celebrate Your love for every person in every place and time.**

God of all humanity, You offered Your Peace to anyone who would be satisfied with Your presence.

**We celebrate Your peace in Your Church and accept Your mission to share it in all the world.**

God of the shepherds, You announced Your arrival among us to the poorest, the most humble.

**We celebrate Your good news to each of us and to everyone, right here where we are.**

God of the manger, You came to us through Your Son in a small and simple place.

**We celebrate Your presence with us this day in this small place made glorious by Your being in it.**

God of deliverance, You came to be one of us in order to deliver all of us.

**We celebrate Your protection and mercy toward all who are sick or in trouble.**

God of birth, when You became as we are, You opened Yourself to each of us, no matter who or what we are.

**We celebrate this day Your Kingdom and that we are welcome in it right now and always.**

**Keep us close, now and in the life to come.**

God of Christmas, bless us as we once again celebrate Your coming into Your creation. **Amen.**

—Brad Offutt, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, Washington.

The reality of Christmas, for many of us today, is millennia removed from the Christmas card image of a sleepy town of Bethlehem, a dazzling star, amazed shepherds, Magi, snow-covered hillsides (in Israel? well, maybe during a really cold winter), and “peace on earth” being shouted by angels. I imagine it could even feel far removed from Christmases in our own memories as children—a church service, family gathering around a heaving table of food, presents, “peace on earth” being sung by carolers, a sense of comfort and joy and safety.

Instant news reports, social media, internet, among many other 20<sup>th</sup>-century technologies, have thrown a sense of confusion and disquiet into our lives. Pressure to spend beyond our means, fear of terrorist attacks in our cities, videos of (or personally witnessing) crowds seething with hatred and racism tear into our hearts. The despair and anger we, and others, feel is shared instantly in our personal media. Christmas Day for many might be just one more day to struggle through.

But maybe we haven’t lost anything. That perfect peace of our Christmas cards or memories might not have been quite so sublime. Mary, too, must have had her own fears. She’d already suffered for being an unwed mother, and the terrorism of that day was as real and dangerous as the terrorism of today. My own mother, who never really recovered from losing her brother in World War II, announced one day, when I was an adult, that she never really liked holidays. She kept it from us as children, but I realize now the pain and disquiet she suffered on Christmas Day. It puts a twist on my memories of the “perfection” of Christmas.

So what is the reality of Christmas? We’ve spent four weeks in expectation and preparation—for what? We’re singing our favorite carols filled with exclamations of peace on earth, goodwill to all—really? We’re surrounded by images of the season from lights to trees to gifts to gatherings—is it all perfect, then? Of course not; it probably never was, on a human level.

What might bring us our greatest grace is to reflect on and remember that what we’ve prepared for is the Incarnate Word of God who comes into our broken, often inhuman world to *be* with us—to be *like* us, to share in our lives. The Word of God comes again and again, inviting us to recognize that presence in our hearts; to offer us strength in working for peace; to help us bear witness to God’s presence in our lives as Mary did; to know we are blessed. Take

time—make time, even amid all the frenzy of Christmas Day—to look at those gathered around you; to thank God for coming to dwell with us; to consider with a deeper heart those who are in need of the love and understanding you can give. The Incarnate Word of God comes today, as new as a newborn child, as old and unailing as eternity. —SM

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There was no trace of indifference or detachment in Our Lady’s attitude. She was not indifferent to Christ’s suffering, but there was something that she was deeply aware of which made her more than ready for it.

It was this: that little shivering mite in the manger was her own flesh and blood; her advent work was done; she had formed Christ of her own life, in herself; and now that she had brought him forth, she lived in him.

Quite literally, her life was in Christ.

Therefore there could never be anything he suffered which she did not. He would suffer and she with him.

—Caryll Houselander in *The Reed of God* (N. Y.: Sheed & Ward, 1944), p. 61.

The Nativity Grotto is the only place where one of my original objections to visiting the Holy Land—that the touristy sites would turn me off—proved justified. . . .

Under an altar that stands in the front of the cave is the holy site, marked by a large silver star affixed to the stone floor. . . . I knelt down to kiss the cold stone and said a prayer. A few feet away is the Chapel of the Manger, where by tradition Mary laid her baby. I kissed that spot as well and prayed for my family. . . .

Upon rising, I was immediately surrounded by pilgrims talking loudly, snapping photos, taking videos, gesticulating wildly, jostling one another, and reaching into crinkly plastic bags for a water bottle or candy bar. Over the years I’ve visited many other crowded religious sites . . . but had never found it so difficult to pray. Why? Perhaps nowhere else did the visitors seem so blasé as they did at the Nativity sites. . . . I wanted to say, “Wait a minute! Remember where you are!” On the other hand, who knows what was going on inside of them?

—James Martin, S. J., in *Jesus, A Pilgrimage* (N. Y.: HarperCollins Publ., 2014), p. 57.



## H Y M N O D Y

**Opening Hymn 83** “O come, all ye faithful” —*Adeste fideles*. For many, Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas without beginning the service with *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. The popular descants (s. 3) and harmonies by Sir David Willcocks, available in *Carols for Choir 1*, are still for me the epitome of the Christmas experience. The sound of children’s voices can be especially moving; but the raw power of a core of adult sopranos is perhaps more exciting.

**Gloria in Excelsis** Use a well-known setting; or if it is your tradition to sing a *Hymn of Praise*, use **96** “Angels we have heard on high,” which includes “Gloria in excelsis Deo” in the refrain.

Psalm note: If using the Christmas III readings, the hymn **413** “New songs of celebration render” —*Rendez à Dieu* is a lovely paraphrase of Psalm 98, especially if you have the luxury of “Trumpets and organs” to “make the heavens ring” (s. 2).

**Sequence 104** “A stable lamp is lighted” —*Andújar*. This hauntingly beautiful tune by David Hurd serves as a lovely reflection on the readings of this magical day/night. Even though it may be unfamiliar, with good choral leadership this can easily become a Christmas favorite in short order. (If the unfamiliarity of it will be burdensome, of course select

another more popular Christmas hymn.)

**Offertory Hymn 78** “O little town of Bethlehem” —*Forest Green*. This uniquely Anglican tune is essential for an Episcopal Christmas Liturgy. (The traditional “American” version at **79** should, in my opinion, be used only to avoid musical rebellion.) Ideally there will be a place for both versions somewhere in the many services of the twelve-day Christmas Season.

**Communion Hymns 98** “Unto us a boy is born!” —*Puer nobis nascitur*. **105** “God rest you merry, gentlemen” —*God Rest You Merry*. **99** “Go tell it on the mountain” —*Go Tell It on the Mountain*. **L21** (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, Church Publishing) “Go tell it on the mountain” — (Negro Spiritual). **111** “Silent night, holy night” —*Stille Nacht*. **L26** (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, Church Publishing) “Silent night, holy night” — (by Franz Gruber).

**Closing Hymn 100** “Joy to the world!” —*Antioch*. What else? Consult with your priest (and use your own judgment) as to whether to use the printed rhythm or the more familiar elongated version in bar 7. (At my church in Oyster Bay we use the printed version for the afternoon family service on Christmas Eve, and the more traditional elongated version at the “midnight mass” and Christmas morning.)

**I. “A new face to undermine the world’s powers.”**

The Birth is here. The Child has come. Doubt and fear and even preparation are transformed into joy at his presence—for us, and for those who welcomed him in his day.

But his entrance to our world, glorious as it is, is only the beginning. Christ has bestowed on us a pattern, and opened up a Way—and now it is we who need to heed and respond.

Philip Yancey reminds us that “the old man Simeon, who recognized the baby as the Messiah, instinctively understood that conflict would surely follow [the birth]. ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against ...’ he said, and then made the prediction that a sword would pierce Mary’s own soul. Somehow Simeon sensed that though on the surface little had changed—the autocrat Herod still ruled, Roman troops were still stringing up patriots, Jerusalem still overflowed with beggars—underneath everything had changed. A new force had arrived to undermine the world’s powers.”

Jonathan Jones writes in *The Guardian* (12/23/2016) that painter Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445–1510) goes even further: “His Mystic Nativity sees the holy birth not in cute human terms but as the event that ultimately foretells the Last Judgment, the end of days and the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. Devils flee into hell as angels soar aloft. Of course Renaissance and baroque artists find joy and hope in the nativity.

“Angels rejoice, dumb animals recognize the weight of this moment, and all eyes are on the child who will redeem the world. It doesn’t have much in common with the festive fun of our modern, highly secularized and commercial Christmas. These paintings are about death and resurrection and the shock of revelation. That nativity scene on a card is an opportunity for a moment of meditation amid the tinsel. More Silent Night than Jingle Bells. ...

“The seriousness of this birth is such that some artists simply shun cuddly domestic detail and portray it in an utterly sombre way as a moment of revelation. Piero della Francesca’s [c. 1415–1492] Nativity portrays Mary not nursing her child but kneeling on the earth to pray to and for him. The shepherds keep a respectful distance in front

of a stable so humble and broken down that it places this mystical moment outside all human comfort. Only a choir of angels brings a silent music of joy.”

As we look out at our broken world today, how will Jesus’ First Coming enliven our thinking, enable our own lives of grace, and make us even more attentive to the many needs of the others around us?

Our response will be the true test of whether we have prepared our hearts to receive him.

**II. “Love at the heart of all things”: Nurturing an unlikely hope.**

Evelyn Underhill also urges us to keep his coming in perspective: “It is easy for the devout to join up with the shepherds and fall into place at the crib and look out into the surrounding night and say, ‘Look at those silly intellectuals wandering about after a star, with no religious sense at all! Look at that clumsy camel, what an unspiritual animal it is! Look what odd gifts of self-consecration they are bringing; they’re certainly not the sort of people who’d make it in a church!’

“But we must remember that the child who began by receiving these very unexpected pilgrims had a woman of the streets for his faithful friend and two thieves for his comrades at the end: and looking at these two extremes let us try to learn a little of the height and breadth and depth of his love—and then apply it to our own lives.”

And Micahael Gerson wrote in *The Washington Post* (12/23/2016): “By any standard, this is an odd scenario for the entrance of divinity—to an occupied country, of disputed parentage, forced to flee as a refugee, living and working thirty years in silence, eventually betrayed by a friend, judicially tortured and dying in utter abandonment. On a small planet, near an average star.

“But this form of arrival does something important. It dusts off and reclaims every aspect of human experience and reorients our sense of low and high, weak and powerful. It is poverty given preference. It is the possibility of transcendence breaking in on any common day. It is the unexpected humility of God. [And] for countless millions who have accepted it, this story has divided B. C. and A. D. in their own lives.

“It has provided courage and comfort in the midst of the ordinary, the unjust and the unthinkable. It has given assurance that pain, while real, is not

permanent. And it has kindled and sustained an unlikely hope—that love is somehow at the heart of all things.”

**III. “The heaven of heavens cannot contain you ...”**

Our Epistle in Titus 2 today reminds us that we have a blessed hope for the appearance in glory of our Divine Savior—who gave himself up on our behalf, and thus transformed us from the results of our disobedience to God. Therefore God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, now has a people cleansed and set apart for himself.

*We are that people*—and we are called to live in sobriety, honesty, and devotion if we are to lay hold of the hope that God’s acts have set before us—today and on every day of our lives.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all ...” (Titus 2:11). We now come spiritually, year by year, to Bethlehem as we praise Abba our Father for all that has been revealed to us as well.

This is gift, and revelation, and new life. The Infinite came to earth, and now is a helpless infant lying in a manger.

The heavenly message is for us and all people. There is born a Savior, the Messiah, everyone’s Lord. We will find him, not in a manger, but at an altar where his own promise conveys his presence through the common things of the world that he has blessed.

Today, on this Day of Days, heaven is rejoicing: *Glory to God in the Highest!*

*“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”*

Come, receive again,  
All your desires, but better than your dreams,  
All your lost loves, but lovelier than you knew,  
All your fond hopes, but higher than your hearts  
Could dare to frame them. ...

Instead of your justice, you shall have charity;  
Instead of your happiness you shall have joy;  
Instead of your peace the emulous exchange  
Of love; and I will give you the morning star.

—Dorothy L. Sayers in *The Just Vengeance*.



December 31, 2017



## Jesus the Word



The celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord continues with the elegant poetry of the Christological hymn in the Prologue to the Gospel of John. Combining Hellenistic philosophy with biblical tradition, the Evangelist proclaims that the Word, the *Logos*, became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Whereas the Synoptic infancy narratives focus on the earthly origins of Jesus, John is concerned with the cosmic dimension of the preexistent Word—outside the constraints of time and place.

In Greek philosophy, *Logos* was the principle that gave the world its character and coherence. The *Logos*, as a mediating concept, presents Christ as the agent who gives reality to God's design in creation and links humanity to God. Jesus is this mediator, the *Logos* who was with God and whose purpose the *Logos* expressed (cf 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 19:13).

Hebrew tradition considered the spoken word to be a dynamic entity, with its reality and power rooted in *the personality of the one who utters it*. Ultimately, this word confers the reality it signifies. As the Word, Jesus is the most complete expression and revelation of God.

The first five verses of the passage focus on the relationship of the Word and creation. The opening words—"In the beginning"—recall Genesis 1:1, as well as the tradition that *Wisdom was present with God* (cf Prov. 8:1-36; Wis. 7:21—8:1; Sir. 24:1-22) and *was active in creation*. Through Christ all things came into being. The Word is the source of light and life for the world. "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (v. 4). The relationship of the Word and creation not only validates the goodness of creation, but shows that creation and salvation are linked.

The contrast between light and darkness in verses 4-5 is a frequent theme in John's Gospel, and recalls the creation of day and night (Gen. 1:3-5). To walk in the light is to choose life; but to walk in darkness is death. The light Jesus brings cannot be overcome by the darkness.

Verses 6-8 introduce "a man sent from God, whose name was John." The Word of God came to John so that he might "testify to the light." In John's Gospel, John is never referred to as "the Baptist," and he is the only person apart from Jesus

who is described as being sent by God.

John was sent to tell the world that Jesus is the true light who enlightens all. However, in verse 15, John clearly acknowledges that although Jesus comes after him in chronological time, he "ranks ahead of me because he was before me." The Gospel makes the role of John very clear with respect to Jesus. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (v. 9); but John himself "was not the light" (v. 8).

Although the *Logos* brought life to the world, those who were his own failed to recognize or receive him (v. 11). There were, however, some who did recognize him and put their trust in him. To them he gave the privilege of becoming children of God. This was not a matter of human ancestry or endeavor but a product of God's grace.

Verse 14 is the climax of John's Christology: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us ... " The Word now enters the realm of human history and dwells—literally *pitches his tent*—among us. Thus we can see the grace and truth of God's true nature. All of us, disciples then and now, continue to live in the glory that he bestows on us. "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (v. 16).

Law, instruction, and guidance for living were given through Moses; but grace and truth have now come to us through Jesus. No one has ever seen God; however, those who are disciples have encountered the only Son, the one who became what we are, and yet who remains forever "close to the Father's heart" (v. 18; cf 14:9). Through the Incarnation, Jesus became one of us so that we could see, hear, and touch the living Word of God and partake of the Divine fullness.

The major Christological beliefs of John's Gospel are found in the Prologue. Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God who shares God's divinity, while at the same time taking on the fullness of our humanity. In becoming flesh, the Word does not cease to be the Word, but rather exercises this reality to the fullest extent. This is the mystery of the Incarnation and the miracle of Christmas: the eternal Word taking on full human nature—a genuine enfleshment who could experience feeling and need, be crucified and killed. God not only dwelt with us in the past, but abides with us in the present through the ordinary moments of our lives.

While God is beyond the capacity of

human sight, the Incarnate Son, who is never separated from the Father, has made the Father's glory and gracious nature manifest to believers. *Jesus is the only one*

### SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Isaiah 61:10—62:3; Psalm 147;  
Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

*who has seen God, and through his life we partake of God's love for the world.*

Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, describes the Incarnation as the sending of God's Son, who was born of a woman "when the fullness of time had come" (Gal. 4:4).

Before Christ came, "we were imprisoned and guarded under the law" (3:23). Here Paul makes a distinction between a renewed faith that has been fulfilled *through the coming of Jesus Christ* and the former faith under the discipline of the law. The earlier instruction has been turned into the freedom of grace through Jesus. Christ has brought reconciliation and new life to believers through his obedience to the will of the Father.

As heirs with Christ, we are no longer slaves to the discipline of the law, but are adopted as God's children. Thus we can call God "Abba," just as Jesus did, and live in confidence of God's love for us.

The words of Isaiah anticipate the transformative power of the Incarnation, as the prophet rejoices at the expectation of a new era. Isaiah 60:1—62:12 is characterized by a series of oracles proclaiming *the restoration of Israel* that the Christian community would later see as a reflection of God's actions through Jesus Christ.

With a sense of joyful exuberance, God's people are compared to a bride and bridegroom clothed with the garments of God's salvation and righteousness. Just as new life sprouts from the earth, so will the Lord God cause "righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (61:11). All the world will know God's vindication of Israel, as Zion's glory and salvation will become a shining lamp for all the nations to see: a "crown of beauty" and a "royal diadem" (62:3). Once called Forsaken and Desolate, Zion will now be called "My Delight Is in Her" (62:4).

Psalm 147 gives thanks and praise to the Lord who has restored the people. It reflects our own joyous celebration of the Incarnation: "Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God" (v. 1). #

The prologue to the Fourth Gospel is not a metaphysical speculation on the incarnation. Rather it sings about the kind of God that is being revealed in Jesus. If in the Synoptics the question is “how is Jesus like God?” the Johannine gospel turns that question around, “how is God like Jesus?” It is this reversal, this turning from the violent god that calls us to reflect anew on the character of the One who “exegetes” God (1:18). It is He who imitates the Father so clearly that it can indeed be shown that God is love and has loved all humanity without distinction or differentiation and reconciles us without any vengeance or retaliation for our sin in rejecting the Logos of Peace. It is our hope that this text will be used not to simply rehash metaphysical flights of fancy but will rather focus on the character of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

—Michael Hardin and Jeff Krantz at preachingpeace.org.

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Thomas Merton (Fr. Louis) was speaking to a group of his novices:

There is only one thing for anybody to become in life.

There’s no point in becoming spiritual—the whole thing is a waste of time. What you came here for is to become yourself, to discover your complete identity to be you. But the catch is that of course our full identity as monks and Christians is Christ. It is Christ in each of us. ... I’ve got to become me in such a way that I am the Christ that can only be the Christ in me. There is a Louis Christ that must be brought into existence and hasn’t matured yet. It has a long way to go. There is a Louis Christ [a Thomas Merton Christ], a you Christ, a me Christ—each one of us is called and graced to be our true self—the self that God has made us to be.

“God has become what we are, what I am, so that I/we might become what God is.” —Irenaeus.

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The Jewish understanding of “Word”

For the ancient Israelites and Jews, the Word represents God’s creative power. It was by means of God’s spoken word that the heavens and the earth were created. Jewish people even regard their own spoken words as dynamic, as having an inherent power. This is why many Jews are careful with their words.

They are careful in pronouncing blessings and curses, and in choosing meaningful, significant names for people and places. They also believe that the Word represents the “Wisdom” of God which is intrinsically creative.

The expression “the Word of God” can even refer to God himself. Out of reverence for God, whenever he was mentioned in the Scriptures as having human feelings and actions, some people (particularly the authors of the Targumim) [spoken paraphrases of the Jewish scriptures] substituted the name of God with the phrase “the Word of God” to avoid anthropomorphism. This overscrupulous paraphrasing, however, overlooked the fact that sometimes God does indeed act personally with humankind in ways that we, as humans, can identify with both emotionally and practically.

The Greek understanding of LOGOS

Certain strands of Greek philosophy held that the world was created by a mediator called the Word or Logos. The Greeks considered that all matter was evil and so a transcendent, spiritual God could never have been in contact with evil, base matter, let alone create it. However the Greeks also recognized the beauty, order, and rhythm of the universe, and saw it as the work of a divine creator. Greek philosophers came up with the idea that the supreme God created the universe through an agent: the Word or Logos.

This Greek idea, that the world was created by the Word, interestingly enough, originated in Ephesus, where John wrote his Gospel. It was the Ephesian philosopher Heraclitus in 560 B. C. who came up with the idea of the Word as, not only the agent of creation, but also the sustainer and controller of the universe (cf Heb. 1:2-3).

Heraclitus also saw the Word as the Judge of Truth, and the mind, or Reason, of God. His philosophy spread and became established in many branches of Greek philosophy. The Greeks saw the Word, or Logos, as the creating, guiding, and directing power of the supreme God, so John cleverly used this Greek concept to introduce Jesus to his Greek readers.

—Marg Mowczko at margmowczko.com.

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For the Son of God in the fullness of time which the inscrutable depth of the Divine counsel has determined, has taken on him the nature of humanity, thereby to reconcile it to its Author: in order that the inventor of death, the devil, might be

conquered through that [nature] which he had conquered. ... Christian, acknowledge your dignity [*dignitatem*], and becoming a sharer [*consors*] in the Divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct.

Remember the Head and the Body of which you are a member. Recollect that you were rescued from the power of darkness and brought out into God’s light and kingdom. By the sacrament of Baptism you were made the temple of the Holy Spirit.

—From Leo the Great’s Christmas sermon (A. D. 440).

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The John 1 text this time around has gotten me thinking about dialectics and the synthesis of opposites within my self, my communities, and the world. Secular and sacred is certainly one of those dialectics, and one that perhaps the author of the gospel of John is exploring, not only in his prologue, but in his telling of the miracle stories, and of the story of Jesus in general.

I find myself uncomfortable with dialectics—maybe especially the “saint”/ “saved” and “sinner” one, and I find myself constantly wanting to “write” systematics that destroy the power of that particular dialectic in my own life, and in terms of my communities. ... Yet, maybe part of the wisdom of the prologue to the gospel of John is the wisdom that God in Christ holds these dialectics together. They exist together, integrated without destroying the other, in our own lives and in our world. What would it look like to simply meditate on these dialectics—these opposites—not as the Answer to Christian response to the gospel, but as humble recognition that I do not really HAVE the answer about Christian response to the gospel? How can I remain open to the power of the Logos/Sophia in my own life and communities?

—Paul Nuechterlein in Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary (12/28/2004).

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The remarkable feature of this presentation is that it employs categories universally known, possessing universal appeal, which would attract and have attracted alike Jews, Christians, pagans, Hellenists and Orientals in their varied cultures, followers of ancient and modern religions, philosophers and people of humble status who were seekers after God.

—George Beasley-Murray in *John* (Waco, Texas: Word Publ., 1987).

Once again, I'm struck with how many versions of what we call *Magnificat* are found throughout Scripture. The ones that spring to mind most often, of course, are the prayers of Mary and of Hannah. But today's passage from Isaiah is also a form of *Magnificat*. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God"—words that would be a perfect morning prayer for us every day of our lives.

How might our lives change if we used that as a mantra throughout the day, even in the face of difficulties? It might give us strength. It might remind us that we, too, are *blessed*, and, like Mary, are *called blessed* by our God. "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God." This image might remind us that the witness of our lives lived as believers and those who trust in God can *shine*; can draw others; can begin building hope again. It doesn't matter what we may look like on the outside; it's how we let God's light shine from within. But, of course, we all know that—it's truly believing it of ourselves that matters.

Leaning against a fence, completely covered in cow manure from milking, I've had some of my most pastoral and heart-touching conversations with my rural parishioners—heart-to-heart, eye-to-eye connections. Let us share *Magnificat* with each other.

—SM

...

According to the historical-critical consensus, this portion of Isaiah was written by disciples of Second Isaiah (ch. 40-55) after the return from exile. However, the return was not as glorious as Second Isaiah had envisioned (cf 62:4). Therefore, Third Isaiah continues to articulate the hope of a full restoration of the people and nation, with special attention on setting things right for Jerusalem (cf 62:1).

While this consensus is helpful and has not been abandoned, the past twenty years have seen the emergence of a new consensus—that is, the book of Isaiah should be read as a unity. Edgar Conrad, a major proponent of the unity of the book, concludes that the shape of the book itself implies it was addressed to "survivors." ... These "survivors" have witnessed the defeat of Judah by Babylon (39:5-8), and now await with hope for God to deliver them, just as Isaiah 1-39 (First Isaiah) recounted that God once delivered Judah from the Assyrians (ch. 36-39).

At this point, it is easy to detect points of congruence between Conrad's argument and the historical-critical consensus. But Conrad goes even further. He suggests that although the return from exile is anticipated in Isaiah 40-66, it is not explicitly narrated. Thus, in his view, the book of Isaiah positions its readers in every generation to wait with hope for a new act of divine deliverance. In addition, Conrad concludes the Babylonian exile can be understood metaphorically, not just historically. As a metaphor, then, the whole book of Isaiah invites its readers, whatever their time and place, to live in hope toward a future which is claimed and redeemed by God. Indeed, this redemption will ultimately involve the setting of things right not only for Judah and Jerusalem, but also for all peoples and nations.

—J. Clinton McCann, "Commentary on Isaiah 61:10—62:3" at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

...

Jesus's humanity is a stumbling block for many people, including a few Christians. Incidents in the gospel that show Jesus

displaying intense and even unattractive human emotions can unsettle those who prefer to focus on his divinity. ...

If Jesus's humanity is a stumbling block for many, his divinity is even more so. For a rational, modern mind, talk of the supernatural can be disturbing—an embarrassment. Many contemporary men and women admire Jesus, but stop short of believing him to be divine. ...

Thomas Jefferson went so far as to create his own Gospel by focusing on Jesus's ethical teachings and (literally) scissoring out the miracles and other indications of his divinity. Jefferson preferred his own version of Jesus, not the one he found in the Gospels. Like many of us, he felt uncomfortable with certain parts of the man's life. He wanted a Jesus who didn't threaten or discomfort, a Jesus he could tame. After studying Jefferson's edited version of the New Testament, New Testament scholar E. P. Sanders concluded that the Sage of Monticello created a Jesus who was, in the end, "very much like Jefferson."

—James Martin, S. J., in *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (N. Y.: HarperOne, 2014), p. 4.



## HYMNODY

**Opening Hymn 93** "Angels, from the realms of glory"—*Regent Square*. Begin with this familiar tune and text, which celebrates Christ as the Light of the world ("yonder shines the infant Light," s. 2). It also contains a foreshadowing of Epiphany, the season of light, with "Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar" (s. 3).

**Gloria in Excelsis** or **Hymn of Praise** Continue with the setting chosen for the Christmas season; or choose a familiar Christmas hymn.

**Sequence 86** "O Savior of our fallen race"—*Gonfalon Royal*. This text supports all of today's Lessons, singing of the "Savior of our fallen race" who "put our human vesture on," his "banished children to reclaim" (ss. 1, 3, 5). Play one statement of the theme with a solo stop as an introduction to help with familiarity.

**Offertory Hymn 82** "Of the Father's love begotten"—*Divinum mysterium*. The beginning of John's Gospel ("In the beginning was the Word") manages to sum up, in only four paragraphs, the entire theology of Jesus' Incarnation, from before creation to the present day.

This hymn does the same, beginning "ere the worlds began to be," and finishing with "eternal victory, evermore and evermore!" In my opinion, executing the rhythms as printed with half and quarter notes becomes too flippant for this meaningful text. Thus I suggest exercising the option to perform the hymn "in equal note values," which better matches the original chant melody.

**Communion Hymns 97** "Dost thou in a manger lie ... ?"—*Dies est laetitiae*. **324** "Let all mortal flesh keep silence"—*Picardy*. **L24** (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, Church Publishing) "There's a star in the east on Christmas morn"—(Negro Spiritual).

**Closing Hymn 87** "Hark! the herald Angels sing"—*Mendelssohn*. It is hard to believe that Mendelssohn actually wrote this tune for a cantata about the advent of the printing press; but nonetheless, it makes a perfect ending to a Christmas worship service, especially when coupled with supplemental materials such as descants or free harmonies. One such version is available here, free for use by Synthesis subscribers: <http://www.mchaigler.com/#!synthesis/cmcr>.



**I “What took place in the life of Jesus must take place in our lives as well”  
—Ilia Delio in *The Emergent Christ*.**

We are among those who have “seen his glory.” We are ones who have received from his fullness “grace upon grace.” How even to write or contemplate the import of *Jesus’ coming, enfleshed, among us*—bestowing on humans power to become children of God *along with him*?

Elia Delio, OSF, in her work *The Emergent Christ* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2012), writes in the chapter of her book “Jesus, the Whole-Maker”: “The teaching that Jesus is the Christ means Jesus is not any person but *the* fully integrated person in whom God has revealed Godself in the most complete way. In Jesus, the Christ becomes explicit; hence, the meaning of the cosmos becomes explicit as well. The whole creation is intended to be a unity in love in union with God. “Those who proclaim themselves Christian proclaim belief in the risen Christ and must be on the way toward development of a transcultural consciousness and thus transcultural encounters. In Jesus we see that the future of the material universe is linked to the fulfillment of the community of human beings in whom the world has come to consciousness ... from the birth of mind to the birth of the whole Christ.”

Delio brings a fullness to the concept of Jesus the Word, and the meaning of this ancient Prologue to John starts us on the journey she sees as the road to be traveled by all believers toward “whole-making.” Since “the Christ emerges in Jesus”—the Word who IS God—“the humanity of Jesus shows us what the Christ looks like; his humanity is our humanity, and his life is our life. What took place in Jesus’ life must take place in ours as well if the fullness of Christ is to come to be. ‘Our salvation is necessary for the completion of Christ,’ wrote the Cistercian Isaac of Stella [c. 1100–c. 1170s].

“Christ is the future of this evolutionary cosmos, the One who trinitizes creation into a household of unity; the integrated unified center of persons in love” (p. 70).

**II “Not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”**

Such “trinitization” opens to our

awareness the glorious gift of God the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, as well, to bring about this transformation. “The Spirit is the ‘holon maker,’ the One who breathes new life, generates new love, searches for a new future by uniting what is separate or apart, by healing and making whole. Where there is the Spirit, there is the divine Word expressed in the rich variety of creation, and where there is the Spirit and Word there is the fountain fullness of love.

“Christ symbolizes this unity of love; hence, the fullness of Christ is the creative diversity of all that exists held together by the Spirit of luminous love” (Delio, pp. 70-71).

How can we have become so dis-unified over the centuries—except by turning from this central truth that was intended to hold us together? There is an anonymous, cynical take on Christian history that goes something like this:

The Christian faith was born in Palestine, but then the Greeks took it and turned it into a Philosophy; next the Romans took it and turned it into an organizational system. Then the Europeans took it and turned it into a culture called Christendom. Then the Americans took it, and ... guess what they turned it into? The Americans took Christianity and turned it into a business.

Nathan Mitchell wrote in *Liturgy* (1980) of some of the implications of Jesus’ coming: “Christmas calls a community back to its origins by remembering Jesus’ own beginnings as a human child, a prophet of God’s reign, a judgment on the world and its projects. What the parish celebrates during this season is not primarily a birthday, but the beginning of a decisive new phase in the tempestuous history of God’s hunger for human companions.

“The social concerns of the season are thus rooted in Jesus’ proclamation of God’s reign: the renunciation of patterns that oppress others (holding, climbing, commanding) and the formation of a new human community that voluntarily embraces those renunciations. It is an adult Christ that the community encounters during the Advent and Christmas cycles of Sundays and feasts: a Risen Lord who invites sinful people to become the church. Christmas does not ask us to pretend we were back in Bethlehem, kneeling before a crib; it asks us to recognize that the wood of the crib became the wood of the cross.”

**III “I think that the purpose and cause of the Incarnation was that God**

**might illumine the world by his wisdom and excite it to the love of himself”**

—Peter Abelard (1079–1142).

John the Evangelist later describes those who recognize the Lordship of Jesus as having been *given* or *drawn* to Jesus by Abba the Father (Jn. 6:44). The community of the Church is called to represent the fact that the world’s rejection of the Word was never complete.

The “way back” to wholeness and completion is continually offered through Jesus’ own work on our behalf.

All of us are called to become children of Abba through faith in the Incarnate Word. This faith is not the acceptance of the proposition of the existence of the Word—but rather a personal commitment to Jesus (Jn. 1:12). Such acceptance precipitates a new birth, which has nothing to do with human generation but is a special gift from God.

Stop to contemplate it: the Word of God has “tabernacled” among us, and is not “outside” the camp as was the ark of the testimony (Ex. 33:7). We have *seen* the Divine glory!

What Moses asked for and could not receive—that is, the beholding of the face of God—John has seen.

And so it is joy unparalleled that we sing of today: Jesus become visible to us in the humanity of Jesus the Messiah. His light now shines in the world: not *a* light, but *the* light of the world. John the Baptizer bore witness to this light. John said to people who were floundering in the dark: “Look, there is the Light of the World.”

The Word has become a historical fact, born in human flesh to a woman named Mary.

This Son, this Word, this Light, is as near and as reachable as is the life of our neighbor, in whom he also dwells. *In Christ, the Ideal and the Real unite in the Actual*, wrote Alexander Charles Garrett in *The Philosophy of the Incarnation* (N. Y.: James Pott & Co., 1891). So much more than a “new law,” he is the fullness of the Divine, a visible revelation of the invisible Godhead.

Mark Brown, SSJE, writes that “Christ gives himself to us as the strong bread. In the rich, dense, chewy texture of our sacred text. In the bread and wine of the Eucharistic feast. In all occasions of joy and gladness and celebration. In all occasions of healing and new life. It’s what we were made for. And, having come to God’s feast for all people, the next thing to do is to make sure all are fed.”

