

**When  
Advent  
Doesn't  
Feel Like  
Christmas**

***A HomeLink Devotional  
Connecting Home and Church***

**Rev. Scott Hoezee**

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## How to Use this Devotional

We encourage you to explore ways of tying home worship into church worship. Integrating what happens from the pulpit and what happens around the supper table, or wherever you gather for devotions, will reinforce and focus during the week the Good News that you celebrate on Sunday.

As Scott Hoezee points out vividly, Advent is a time of preparation in which we do some solid, spiritual work. We ready ourselves to receive Jesus, who came the first Christmas as Savior and who will soon return as Lord of all. By concentrating our efforts, we help each other to look past the tinsel and treats. We find some sustained time—time we’re already spending together—to unwrap our greatest Gift.

When Advent Doesn't Feel Like Christmas is a “package deal.” Your church has already decided to plan Advent and Christmas worship on the same themes that Hoezee presents in the devotionals. Those of you who pay close attention to the order of Advent candle themes may notice a change from previous years. Traditionally, the candles go in the order of hope, peace, joy, and love. Hoezee modified this order to reflect the themes of the scripture texts from the revised common lectionary, year C: hope, joy, love, peace. As you read the devotionals on the days indicated, you will be using your home worship time to prepare for the message and the worship on the coming Sunday or reflect on the worship of the previous Sunday.

What this asks of you is simply that you read the suggested passage and the devotional as indicated, and that you attend the Sunday worship services. Should you miss some readings, you can play “catch up” within the same week. But as much as possible keep in step with the calendar during the Advent season.

As the message of each Advent Sunday echoes through your week, may the Holy Spirit introduce you more fully to the One who spent that first Christmas Day pitching his tent next to ours. Not sure what that means? Go ahead and take a peek at the devotional for the day after Christmas. And have a truly joyous Advent and Christmas season!

***Note on the calendar:*** The devotionals have been organized so that they begin on the Saturday before the first Sunday in Advent. For each of the four weeks of Advent there are seven devotionals. However, each year Christmas falls on a different day of the week. Therefore, when you get to the fourth week of Advent, follow the devotionals in the order presented until it is Christmas Eve Day, at which point you jump to the devotional for Christmas Eve Day, followed by Christmas, and finish with the two devotionals for the first and second day after Christmas. This makes this series usable no matter what year you choose to use the “When Advent Doesn’t Feel Like Christmas” series.

## SATURDAY BEFORE ADVENT

### Reading: Mark 13

Perhaps you have seen this bumper sticker: “Jesus Is Coming Again. Look Busy!”

Behind the humor, many of us detect something we’ve worried about at one time or another. After all, we know that the Bible tells us to watch for the return of Jesus. Passages like Mark 13 warn us not to be caught “sleeping” when Jesus comes again. But what does that mean?

Back in the days when many Christians frowned on theater attendance, parents sometimes asked their children, “Would you want to be at a movie when Jesus comes again?” The idea was that you wouldn’t want Jesus to catch you doing something sinful—especially at a time when it might be too late to say you’re sorry!

Mark 13 makes clear that no one knows when Jesus will return. So since we don’t know the time and the day, we need to be ready at all times for his coming. That’s not easy. After all, at the very moment when the sky splits open, it is unlikely that every Christian in the world will be in church singing a hymn, in church school learning more about the Bible, or at a rescue mission ladling out soup to the homeless.

Suppose that when the last trumpet sounds you are having an envious thought. Suppose you are literally asleep in bed. Suppose you’re on vacation, lounging in a lawn chair while sipping some lemonade. Suppose you’re having an argument with someone or cheating on a test. Then what?

Happily, the Bible assures us that because of God’s grace, it won’t matter exactly what we’re doing when Jesus comes again. God’s love will never let go of us. He’ll forgive our sins on that last day even as he forgives the sins we commit every day of our lives.

Why am I asking you to think about this? To help prepare you for Advent. That may strike you as strange. After all, we usually think of it as a time to focus on Christmas. But Advent is really about two things: one is the birth of a Baby in Bethlehem; the other is the coming of a mighty King at the end of time.

So in these devotions and in our church services over the coming season, we will try to get ourselves ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. But we must understand that a big part of what it means to be ready for Christmas is to be ready also for the day when Jesus the King returns.

What does it mean to watch and be ready for Jesus? Let’s think and pray hard about that question during these next few weeks. Let’s make this Advent a time to get ready not just for the baby Jesus but also for the crucified Jesus who died to save us and who will one day return to make our world beautiful for God once again.

#### Something to Think About

Think about the words “get ready.” When you and your family or friends talk about getting ready to go on vacation, what do you mean? How do we get ready for Christmas?

# FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

## Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12–17

Today you may have noticed the color purple in your church. Perhaps the pulpit or communion table was draped with a purple cloth. Maybe your pastor wore a purple stole. Or perhaps a banner on the front wall of the sanctuary featured some picture in purple.

Purple is the traditional liturgical color for the season of Advent, which begins today. By the color purple, which stands for penitence, we are reminded that like the season of Lent—which also uses this color—Advent is a time for self-examination, confession of sin, and asking for forgiveness.

During Lent the need for such a focus on sin and guilt is obvious. After all, the suffering of Jesus, the blood of the cross, and the awful death of Jesus are the main events of Lent. And each one of those events shows us how far Jesus had to go to remove our sins from us. So if Jesus had to suffer that much, we had better take our sins seriously.

But what about Advent? How does this colorful, wonderful, cheery, calm, and bright time of the year lead us to think about something as depressing as sin and evil? Shouldn't this be a “merry” time of the year, filled with eggnog and happy Hallmark cards?

Well, yes, this is a fun time of the year, and there's nothing wrong with that. However, if we want to be Christian about Advent, then we need to remember what was said in yesterday's devotional: this is a time to anticipate not just the birth in Bethlehem but also the second coming of Jesus on judgment day. One without the other is incomplete, if not meaningless.

For Jesus was born as a sign that God has judged sin utterly wrong. Sin needs to be wiped out! Eventually Jesus will die a bloody death to accomplish that goal. But first he is born in all of the ripping pain of childbirth. He is born to battle with sin and Satan, and one day he'll come back to cap off that work in a glorious flourish of renewal.

Why wear purple during Advent? Why think about the non-merry topic of sin to get ready for Christmas? Because if you are unwilling to admit that sin is your problem, then you are unwilling to welcome Jesus into our world. If you are unprepared for Jesus to come back to judge sin and evil, then you are unprepared for the baby to be born in the stable. Only those who by grace ask for and receive God's forgiveness in Christ are glad that Jesus was born and are eager for him to come back.

During Advent we drape our churches in purple and fall to our knees in repentance to show God that we “get it.” We understand why he came and are glad he's coming back to finish the job.

### Something to Think About

What does the color purple mean during Advent? Think of something purple you can add to your home decorations during this time of year to remind you of the meaning of the season.

## ADVENT 1: MONDAY

### Reading: Colossians 1:24–2:5

Many Christians have some household traditions that help them focus on the coming of Jesus. Some use the “Jesse Tree” or the “Chrismon Tree,” which they decorate with Christian ornaments that remind them that Jesus is Lord and King. My children use an Advent calendar. Each day has a pocket containing a velcro person (Mary, a shepherd) or symbol (a star, a donkey) that they get to stick somewhere onto a manger scene. This continues until December 25, when they place a little baby Jesus figure into the manger.

The idea behind all such Advent traditions is a good one. We need to find ways to focus our minds and prepare our hearts for that stunning event: the flesh-and-blood birth of God’s Son. In the month ahead we join Christians everywhere in contemplating bit by bit the mystery of God becoming one of us—a mystery so rich that we will never run out of questions to ask.

But how often do we in fact pause to puzzle over such matters? How much of the mystery of the incarnation do we even bother with? For instance, if God is infinite, filling time and space, then how could the Son of God limit himself to the confines of Mary’s womb? Also, where was the Son of God in those months before Jesus was born? Did the Almighty Son, by whom the world’s foundations were laid at the dawn of creation, really allow himself to become microscopic?

Do we ever wonder what Jesus looked like? We know that children usually resemble both parents, but usually a child looks a bit more like one parent than the other. So how much did Jesus look like Mary? And if he had features that did not resemble Mary, where did they come from? Did it ever bother Joseph that Jesus resembled Mary but not him? What did baby Jesus know? Did he have to learn things, as other babies do?

These questions are just surface scratchings when it comes to pondering the incarnation. Some of them are impossible for us to answer, of course. And some of these issues may seem silly even to raise. Still, in the coming weeks, we could do worse than to think a little more deeply about this mystery of God becoming one of us. After all, the Bible tells us that the birth of Jesus spells the start of salvation. Shouldn’t we want to think long and hard about it?

Maybe bumping up against questions we cannot answer is a good way to bring us the true wonder of Christmas and the truest joy of what it means to be a Christian.

#### Something to Think About

What does the word “Advent” mean? Why do we spend four whole weeks doing “Advent” things? What activity do you find most helpful during Advent?

## ADVENT 1: TUESDAY

### Reading: Mark 13:32–37

People who understand the first Advent watch for the second. That’s why in this passage Jesus repeatedly tells his followers to “Watch! Be on guard! Stay alert! Keep your eyes open! Take care!” Ten times in Mark 13 Jesus uses words along these lines.

But, as we asked in the first devotional, what exactly does that mean? Clearly it does not mean that we do no more than stare into the heavens. If Christians took these words of Jesus literally, we would never dare to go to bed at night! And clearly it does not mean that every moment of every day must be filled with nothing but prayer and Scripture reading.

So what does it mean to watch, to be alert, to stay awake? It means knowing what’s what and who’s who in our world. It means knowing who is in charge. It means knowing that in Bethlehem long ago Love came down, and that this baby has become the cosmic Lord of lords and King of kings. In short, it means knowing that Jesus is in charge of our lives. Jesus is our boss.

If Jesus is our Master, it should make a big difference in our lives—one that other people can see. Following Jesus must make a difference in how we make decisions, raise children, honor parents, use the media, live out our marriage vows, do our work, listen to our teachers, treat other people, preserve the creation, spend our money, worship our God, surf the internet, play hockey, shop at the mall, talk to our friends, regard the poor, plan our future, face our deaths.

“Watching” for the second Advent means that we know that this world is not all that there is.

We always take into account our loving God in Christ. “Watching” for Jesus means that we know that Christmas is not the end of the story but only the beginning. It means that long after the rest of the world has packed away the decorations for another year, we keep on living for Jesus.

In last Saturday’s devotional it was said that we could be doing almost anything on the day when Jesus returns. We could be vacationing, sleeping, eating, channel-surfing, walking the dog, brushing our teeth. If we live all of life with Jesus at the center, then no matter what we’re doing when Jesus comes again, we’ll be ready. We may be startled at the last trumpet, but we won’t be surprised. And when Jesus descends as the now-visible Lord of lords, we won’t be surprised at that either. For we will have been serving him as our Lord all along anyway.

### Something to Think About

Some Christians wear cloth bracelets with these letters: WWJD: What Would Jesus Do? Why is it important to act like Jesus on the playground, on the school bus, in the workplace, in the home, in the church, and so on?

## ADVENT 1: WEDNESDAY

### Reading: Isaiah 40:1–3

Isaiah 40 begins with God ordering Isaiah to proclaim a message of comfort to Israel: “Isaiah, comfort my people,” says your God.”

Some of us cannot hear these words without also hearing the sounds of Handel’s Messiah oratorio, which opens with this text. Often we hear these words while we’re comfortably seated in some lush auditorium.

Isaiah’s original audience didn’t enjoy that kind of comfort. In fact, most of the comfort had been wiped out of their lives. When Isaiah brought his prophecy, God’s people were living in exile. They were captives, prisoners. Some years earlier the kingdom of Judah had been wiped out by the Babylonian army. Jerusalem’s walls were shattered, Solomon’s glorious temple was reduced to a heap of smoldering rubble, and the people were either slaughtered or carted off to foreign concentration camps.

Psalms 137 gives us a glimpse into the hearts of these desperately depressed people: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept. Our tormentors demanded, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ But how can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?”

So here’s the picture: the people are living in tattered tents, sleeping with rats and cockroaches. Outside they cannot walk around without dodging puddles of raw sewage. Life is a misery. Suddenly, here comes Isaiah, slopping through the mud, a smile on his face, shouting out, “Be happy, everybody! Feel good and be comforted!”

Somehow you get the feeling that this message may not have sat well with those original hearers. A few may have thrown mudballs at Isaiah, sneering at him for his pie-in-the-sky optimism. When you’re depressed, the last thing you want is to have someone try to spackle over your grief by tritely saying, “Hey, come on! Cheer up!”

So the captive Israelites may at first have rejected Isaiah’s sunny message. But if they listened further—as we will do in the coming days—they heard a message that really was full of hope and promise. For Isaiah came to declare that God had not forgotten them. Salvation really was on its way.

“Comfort, comfort my people” should not be heard only in the plush seats of a concert hall. Instead it needs to be declared in communities riddled by drugs and alcohol, in the intensive care ward and hospice centers, in areas devastated by natural disasters, among those living through war, and in all places where life’s harshness is sapping people’s hope. At first Isaiah’s message may seem unrealistic and pie-in-the-sky. But listen on: God has great plans for this world and for all those who suffer from sin in this world.

And that is why Isaiah 40 really is a wonderful Advent text. For Jesus is the rising sun of a new world dawning.

### Something to Think About

What does “comfort” mean? What kinds of things make you “comfortable”?



## ADVENT 1: THURSDAY

### Reading: Isaiah 40: 3

Isaiah begins his prediction of the Messiah through these memorable words about building a highway for God in the wilderness. Curiously, this text will eventually get quoted in all four of the New Testament gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all saw something vitally significant in Isaiah 40:3.

What is it about these words that caught the eye of each evangelist? In the coming few days we'll try to answer that question.

First, notice that the voice is said to be calling out “in the desert.” All through the Bible, the wilderness is presented as a dangerous, life-threatening place. In fact, in the Old Testament the words used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the pre-Creation chaos (“formless and empty”) are later used to describe the wilderness. This tells us that the wilderness was seen as a place of chaos—the exact opposite of God’s orderly cosmos. The wilderness is the place where chaos reigns, where the devil runs wild, where temptations to evil are strong and common.

So, it is no accident that the wilderness is where Isaiah begins his proclamation of comfort to Israel. It is no accident that the wilderness is the place where John the Baptist went to conduct his ministry of preparation for the Messiah. It is no accident that the wilderness is the first place where God’s Spirit leads Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. For the wilderness is a concentrated symbol of all the sin, evil, decay, and demonic chaos that Jesus was born to defeat.

The wilderness is also where we most need to hear the gospel. This is a good reminder during Advent. As we noted last week, to one degree or another we have all bought into the rosy, glowing, Hallmark version of Christmas. Christmas now reminds us of happy families gathering in lovely homes around bright Christmas trees under which are mounds of expensive gifts.

But Christmas must really begin in and focus on the wilderness places of our world. In this season we dare not forget those who live in places of squalor and chaos, those who suffer from illness or oppression, those who live in fear or sorrow. These are the folks who so desperately need to hear that God is building a highway to them in their distress.

Of course, this message cannot be spoken lightly to those in the wilderness, and its fulfillment will not happen easily. In the deserts of life merely speaking a “Merry Christmas” will not bring the fullness of healing and new life that is needed. But that’s OK. After all, whoever said that the work of salvation that Jesus’ birth made possible was supposed to be trite, quick, or easy?

### Something to Think About

What do you think it would be like to live in a desert?  
What kinds of things would make life hard there?

## ADVENT 1: Friday

### Reading: Isaiah 40:1–5

Life is a journey. We travel from birth to death to whatever lies beyond death. Most people seem to have some sense of this journey. So it's not surprising that most of the major religions in our world give traveling advice—some kind of a map or guide on how to get to God and/or to the ultimate destiny for which we were made:

- Hinduism offers four paths that we can follow to attain what God desires.
- Buddhism teaches that to achieve the serenity of nirvana, we need to follow an eight-fold path.
- Taoism teaches us how to journey along the right roads to the divine. Indeed, the very word tao means “the path” or “the way.”
- Islam rests on five pillars of discipline by which we can please Allah and attain paradise. According to one religious expert, Islam could be summarized as teaching “man to walk in the straight path.”

Even books by secular psychologists often use the image of travel to symbolize the progress we make in life toward becoming whole, fulfilled selves. Think of the best-seller *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck or *In the Middle of this Road We Call Our Life*, written by psychologist James W. Jones.

Christianity also includes references to various roads, paths, and highways, the most famous of which may be Jesus' proclamation “I am the way.” Isaiah 40:3 is another famous “road” text: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.”

But there is something rather different going on in Christianity than in many other religions. Because Isaiah—and later the gospel writers who will quote Isaiah 40:3—is not drawing us a map of the paths we must follow to get to God. He's telling us that our God has already blazed a path to us.

This passage tells us that the gospel begins not when we carefully and deliberately travel a certain precarious path in order to just possibly reach God. No, the Bible announces that our God has already arrived among us. There is a road referred to in this passage all right, but it's one on which God himself has already traveled toward us!

Here is the grace of Christmas in a nutshell: because we could not save ourselves, because we would never be able successfully to reach God on our own, God came to us in the baby born of Mary. Into the wilderness of this sinful world, God arrived in Jesus in order to gather us up and take us home.

Salvation is not a reward for any journeys we've taken. Salvation is a gift—a present whose first gift-wrappings were those swaddling cloths around a baby in Bethlehem.

#### Something to Think About

What's the difference between a gift and something you earn?

Why do we think of Jesus as the most important Christmas gift ever?

## ADVENT 1: SATURDAY

### Reading: Isaiah 40:1–5

Isaiah predicts that when God travels his highway into our world, what follows will turn everything upside-down. Low places will be exalted, high places made low. Places that were rough and impassable will be smoothed out.

This reversal imagery reminds us of the parables and stories that Jesus told. Jesus was forever telling his followers that the people and things that look small and unimportant will become great, and the people and things that look great and important will become small.

The kingdom of God is the greatest “thing” ever. Yet Jesus claims it looks like a tiny mustard seed—or like yeast hidden in dough or a treasure buried in a field. In short, God’s most powerful ways often look weak and foolish (and sometimes they are not visible at all).

Yet this is how God has always worked in our world. When God needed to begin a mighty nation, he began with—of all people!—a retired couple who, even in their prime, had been unable to have children. Abram and Sarai were hardly the logical choice to begin a family. But from that time on, God repeatedly chose the small, the weak, or the runt of the family to get his work done. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the Christmas story, where God supremely reverses all expectations. The almighty Messiah, the very Son of God, arrives in our world. But does he come with trumpets blaring and fire shooting out of every cloud in the sky? No. Instead he is quietly born into poverty, attracting the attention of very few people even in sleepy little Bethlehem, let alone in major urban centers like Jerusalem or Rome. Jesus’ birth disturbed no one’s sleep that night in Bethlehem (except perhaps for a cow or two in the stable!) and it made no headlines. Although Luke tells us that Jesus’ birth was accompanied by songs of angels, even this spectacle was reserved for a handful of simple shepherds.

But considering the kinds of people Jesus came to befriend and save, this advent fits. For Jesus did not come to compete with Caesar for some lofty political office. Instead, he came to embrace lepers. Jesus did not come to take his seat on the ruling religious boards of the day. Instead, he formed a following out of uneducated fishermen, despised tax collectors, and former prostitutes.

Given what Jesus came to accomplish, his oddly unexpected and humiliating entrance into our world fits. Even in his birth, valleys were lifted up and mountains laid low as a simple stable and a dirty feed bin became the most exalted and celebrated delivery room and bassinet in history!

### Something to Think About

If Jesus were born into our world today—perhaps in your town or city—where might he choose to be born? Why?

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### Reading: Isaiah 40:6–8

In the past week we've looked at Isaiah 40, which is a text your pastor may have preached on today. We've seen that this famous message of "comfort, comfort" came to Israel and now comes also to our broken world. We've seen that the gospel begins in the deserts of life. For it is in places of disorder and pain that God takes the initiative to build his own highway to come to us by grace. And we've seen that when God does this marvelous work, it often reverses expectations, coming in great power and yet surprising humility.

But this beautiful passage contains still more, some of which is unsettling. For we also read about the frailty of human life, the grass-like nature of our existence. Our daughter loves to pick dandelions and other yard flowers and bring them indoors. Whether or not such blossoms ever get into a glass of water, in just a matter of hours they don't look very lively anymore. Whenever she expresses disappointment over her now-wilted bouquet, we typically say something like, "It's OK— that's just how it goes with flowers. You can pick more another time."

Isaiah tells us that the same is true of human life—sooner or later it withers. That's just the way it goes in this world. We don't last. Over the course of a lifetime we may gain significant splendor and glory. Through our work and the exercise of our gifts we may make a colorful splash in our world, standing out like a brilliant dandelion in a field of green. But even the most brilliant and colorful human blossoms eventually perish. Only God's Word endures, the prophet says. If it's lasting glory you are seeking, then listen to God's Word.

The first part of this message is rather distressing—no one likes to hear such gloomy stuff, especially not at Christmas. But the second part is full of hope, especially when we remember that the main message of Christmas is that the Word of God is now "the Word made flesh." "You who bring good tidings to Zion . . . lift up your voice and say, 'Here is your God!'" This is indeed an Advent proclamation: here is our God, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Beyond all expectation the Word of God comes wrapped in the very flesh and blood that Isaiah says always withers and dies. But because our God has taken on our frail nature, we have hope for an unfading glory and an everlasting body with which to enjoy God's kingdom forever.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." Let us then worship Him who is the unfailing Word of God come down for us.

### Something to Think About

Today in church you may have seen someone light a joy candle on the Advent wreath. What is joy? What things bring you joy?

## ADVENT 2: MONDAY

### Reading: Micah 5:1–5

In the last few years I have read several books that quote from the poem “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats. In this poem, composed in 1920, Yeats laments the situation of his day: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” Fearing that communism or fascism was soon going to rule the world in a totalitarian nightmare, Yeats concluded: “What rough beast . . . / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

Yeats and the prophet Micah had at least two things in common: they both lived in a frightening time and they both ultimately looked to Bethlehem for some new revelation. But Yeats seems to have feared a nightmare while Micah predicted a dream come true: the very Messiah would emerge from Bethlehem.

How badly Micah and his people needed this hope. During the years 715-687 B.C., when Micah did his work in Judah, the Middle East was in an uproar. The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, was surging from country to country and city to city, conquering and laying waste to everything in his path. There was no stopping this war machine, and Judah knew it was next.

Of course, Micah also knew that Judah deserved whatever it got. The people had broken covenant with God. They had become an unjust society that exploited the poor and that lived in decadent immorality. Still, Micah proclaimed, in the long run God would be faithful in a way Israel had not been. God would keep his promises to David and would one day bring the Messiah. This Messiah would not emerge out of Jerusalem or any other prominent place but from the little agricultural backwater of Bethlehem, the one-time hometown of King David. This new one to emerge from Bethlehem would represent a new beginning for Israel. The hopes and fears of all the years would be met in him.

A lot of people are quoting Yeats’s poem these days because a lot of people feel frightened in the modern world. Things are falling apart. The center of life does not seem to be holding. So in this Advent season we do our own slouching towards Bethlehem, longing for the peace and goodness that come from the Christ. Our world needs it as much now as ever.

#### **Something to Think About**

What things in our world make you frightened? How can remembering the Baby born in Bethlehem long ago help make you less fearful?

## ADVENT 2: Tuesday

### Reading: Micah 5:1–5

Bethlehem. Many eyes around the world turn to this little city during December. Despite the unrest that regularly plagues the Middle East, the fact that it is surrounded by a wall and can only be accessed through a checkpoint, people still look to Bethlehem for some kind of “peace on earth.” But as the world gazes at Bethlehem, what does it really expect? Yesterday we saw how the poet William Butler Yeats used Bethlehem as the starting place for what he feared would be a new terror unleashed on the world. Some people still think this way.

Some years back, just before Christmas, I was waiting in line at the supermarket when the headline of the National Enquirer caught my eye. The story claimed that a new star had appeared over Bethlehem—a star that signaled the end of the world! That's just tabloid silliness, of course. Still, beneath the silliness lurks something more—the fear that something earth-shattering may be attached to Bethlehem: something utterly good or something grimly bad.

From the outside looking in, it's hard to tell which it will be. We know the old story about God's Son being born in Bethlehem once upon a time. Yet it's hard for some people to see past the violence that surrounds the region today. But maybe something about this combination of the Prince of Peace and the soldiers of war can help us get at the heart of why Jesus was born.

For if there is to be peace at Christmas (or at any other time of the year), then it needs to be a peace like the kind you get in the eye of the hurricane. If Bethlehem is the place that holds the hopes and fears of all the years, then we cannot forget about the realities of violence around Jesus' place of birth and elsewhere around the world. If we wish to celebrate the peace of the season, then we cannot ignore the storm of evil swirling around us. To do so would be to ignore why Jesus came.

It is our very real, very violent, very frightening world to which Jesus came. And this same world needs Jesus today. We cannot ignore the violence of our world anymore than we can look at Bethlehem and not notice all those guns and soldiers. But because of Jesus, we can look at all of that and know that violence will not have the last word.

The last word will be spoken by the same God who had the first word. The same Word of God who said “Let there be light” in the beginning will say just that again in the end. “Let there be light and nothing but light, flooding the cosmos with shalom.” Or as Micah put it: “His greatness will reach the ends of the earth. And He will be their peace.”

#### **Something to Think About**

What is peace? What does peace have to do with Christmas?

## ADVENT 2: WEDNESDAY

### Reading: Mark 1:1–8

John the Baptist is the Pigpen of the Christmas story. If you've ever read or watched any of the Peanuts cartoons, then you know that Pigpen is the perpetually dirty, unkempt little guy who's always surrounded by a cloud of dust. Wherever Pigpen goes, dirt follows. Everything Pigpen touches gets smudged or smeared. No wonder proper little girls like Lucy avoid him!

John the Baptist is like that. He messes things up. He sullies and dirties our neat Christmas celebrations. No wonder many of us avoid him. Hallmark will never produce a holiday Keepsake ornament featuring John the Baptist. Few if any Christmas cards feature John's wild face on the cover. Few if any frontyard creches include John the Baptist (although I have seen Santa Claus standing next to the shepherds!). Even most Sunday school Christmas pageants don't include a little child playing the role of John. And "On Jordan's Banks the Baptist's Cry" is no one's favorite Christmas carol.

All of this is very odd considering that John the Baptist is a far more significant player in the Advent story than are the shepherds or the wisemen. The Magi appear only in Matthew's gospel, the shepherds only in Luke's. But John the Baptist is included in all four gospels as the absolutely necessary preparer for the birth and appearance of Jesus, the Christ. What's more, none of the evangelists claims that any Old Testament prophecies get fulfilled by the shepherds or wisemen, but all four see in John the fulfillment of those words from Isaiah 40:3 that we looked at last week.

Yet we avoid John. In a season of stillness and serenity, a prophet who shrieks a message of "Repent or die!" does not fit. In a season when we think everyone should work hard to get along with each other, a man who freely called people "snakes" and "vipers" seems like an unwelcome guest at a Christmas party.

But if we are Christian people who take the true meaning of Advent from the Bible and not from society, then we must give John room to do his work. We must listen to his words, unsettling though they may be. We must bring him into our Sunday school programs and church services and homes no matter how much dust he kicks up onto our neatly wrapped presents or how much eggnog he spills on the oriental rug. So in the coming days, let's listen to John. Because if we don't, the Bible tells us we will not be ready for Jesus either.

### Something to Think About

How do you think people in your neighborhood would respond to John the Baptist and his message: "repent or die"?



## ADVENT 2: THURSDAY

### Reading: Luke 3:1–14

The film *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a scandalous movie filled with heresy and hogwash. One thing it did well, however, was capture the wildness of John the Baptist. Standing half-naked in the middle of the Jordan River, the film's John the Baptist was scruffier than scruffy as he shouted insane-sounding tirades.

In so presenting John, this otherwise bad film for a moment managed to reveal some of the truth of the Bible. For the prophets were a weird group. Hosea married a prostitute. Micah stripped naked and howled like a jackal. Jeremiah wore an oxen yoke. Jonah got puked out of a fish. And all of them stood on top of old apple crates on street corners to condemn everyone from merchants to priests for everything from unjust businesses to sloppy religion.

Prophets were strange. But none more so than John. He lived in the wilderness as an antisocial hermit. As writer and preacher Fred Craddock points out, it's not just that John had long hair or a long beard; John never cut his hair or beard. He didn't just have a little ponytail like some entertainment executive in Los Angeles. John never cut his hair. Never.

What's more, John did not treat his listeners kindly. He was not seeker-sensitive. John called his audience names: "You brood of vipers! You sneaky snakes!"

John did it all wrong, and yet the crowds came to him in droves. Pharisees and Sadducees, men and women, young and old, Jews, Arabs, Romans, tax collectors, and soldiers—they all came. They came to hear John's message. Yet John had only one sermon in his file, and it went like this: "Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand, so repent or perish forever after!" No one was spared that blazing message. Unbelievers and well-educated clergy all had to respond to the same altar call.

John used deliberate insults as a way to shake people up. In Luke 2:10 the crowds ask, "What should we do then?" You can almost hear the ring of desperation in their words. And given the fiery nature of John's preaching, that reaction should come as no surprise. It's the same reaction we'd have if someone came running up to us saying, "Your house is on fire!" or "Your child is choking on a chicken bone!" We'd immediately cry out, "What do we do?"

There is a life-and-death urgency to John the Baptist. He knew that Jesus was coming and that those who were unprepared for that advent would be in trouble. It is an unhappy indicator of how far the true meaning of Christmas has slipped away that during Advent today, very few people feel the need to cry out, "What do we do? How do we get ready for Jesus?"

Indeed, how often do we find ourselves thinking this way when preparing for the birth of the King?

### Something to Think About

How do you get ready for Christmas at your house? How do you get your heart ready for Jesus?



## ADVENT 2: FRIDAY

### Reading: Matthew 3:1–12

The wonderful preacher Fred Craddock once told a poignant story to illustrate what it means to see your life in a different light.

Once there was a missionary family in China, he said, who were under house arrest during the time the Communists were coming into power. One day the soldiers barged in and told the husband and wife they had two hours to pack up—they were being sent back to America. They would be permitted to take two hundred pounds of stuff with them.

Since the family had been living in China for quite a while, they had accumulated a lot of stuff. So they got out the scale and began two hours worth of family arguments and wrangling. What to take? What about the books? Got to take the books. Well, maybe, but this vase has to come too. What about the stereo? What about this typewriter? It's brand new—got to take that. And so it went, putting things on the scale, taking them off, until finally they had collected two hundred pounds on the dot.

After two hours, the soldiers came back and asked, “You ready?”

“Yes,” the missionaries replied.

“Did you weigh everything?”

“Yes.”

“Two hundred pounds?”

“On the dot, yes.”

“Did you weigh the kids?”

“No.”

“Weigh the kids.”

Suddenly, in a flash, the typewriter, the books, the vase, and the stereo all became trash. Trash! Suddenly somebody said something so shocking that this family's perspectives were reversed. Things they had thought were valuable turned out to be garbage.

John the Baptist provided the same service for the people of his day. He arrested their attention by telling them that their situation was not what they thought it was. The Pharisees of the day thought they could fix sin by living morally pure lives. John blew away their smugness by forcing them to see how big a problem sin really is. Only the Christ of God can restore us.

When the soldiers asked, “Did you weigh the kids?” the missionaries were numb. They were stunned into embracing what was really valuable, trashing the rest. John's witness had the same effect on people. It frightened them, but it also made them hungry to embrace God's Christ. Because of John's ministry, many people in Palestine were ready and wailing to welcome Jesus into their lives when he arrived.

During a season when it is so easy to focus on all the wrong things, we need to let John help us to see our real situation and our deepest needs so that we, too, are ready to bring Jesus into our hearts.

### Something to Think About

How did the soldiers help the missionaries learn what was really important? How does John's message help us see what is really important?

## ADVENT 2: SATURDAY

### Reading: John 1:6–9

Whenever the President of the United States travels, the president is preceded by an advance team from the Secret Service. These folks scrutinize every section of roadway that the presidential motorcade will travel. They remove things like sidewalk newspaper dispensers and mailboxes in which bombs could be placed. They weld shut manhole covers and look for rooftops on which to place lookouts. They go into the President's hotel room and x-ray the walls to make sure nothing dangerous has been planted there. They choreograph the President's every move to make sure that the president will be safe during public appearances.

John the Baptist was God's advance team. It was John's job to get the world ready for the Christ. As we've seen in the last few days, John accomplished this task through his blazing call to repentance. For John the Baptist knew that the presence of God's Christ in our world was going to change everything. The Messiah was coming to die for sin, to banish evil, and to inaugurate shalom. If you are to meet and greet this Messiah correctly, you must admit that you need him in the first place.

Let's try a very homely analogy. If, to your knowledge, all of the pipes, faucets, and drains in your house are in good working order, then when a plumber shows up at your door, you will assume right away that he's got the wrong house. You didn't call him, and further you know of no plumbing difficulties that require his presence. So you will politely tell him to go away.

On the other hand, if a pipe bursts or if you have raw sewage backing up into your basement, you call the plumber immediately and are relieved to see him arrive on your front porch. Your situation and your perspective on it make all the difference in how you respond to a plumber at your door.

John the Baptist wanted to make sure that when Jesus knocked on the front door of people's hearts, they would be glad to see him. So John came, a man sent from God. He dressed wildly, ate weirdly, sat around in the desert, and talked in a wild-eyed frenzy. But in the end, what he did above all was make people hungry for Jesus. When the Christ arrived, John didn't want anyone to tell him he had the wrong house.

Still, there were those who said just that. As the apostle John writes, "Jesus came to his own people, but they received him not." Only those who paid attention to God's advance team were eager to open the door for Christ.

Are we more ready for Jesus now than we were a few weeks ago? Can we see the problems in our hearts that only Jesus can fix? As we prepare for the third Sunday of Advent, let us prayerfully consider these questions.

#### **Something to Think About**

Jesus came to fix our hearts because they were broken. What's wrong with our hearts?

## THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### Reading: Luke 3:1–14

What is repentance? What was it that John the Baptist urged on the crowds?

Repentance is responding to God with remorse and sorrow for our sins. In the light of God's shining holiness, we see ourselves as shabby. So we turn to God to say we're sorry. And then we stay turned toward God, changing the whole direction of our lives. If previously we had been heading west, we now head east.

Reformed Christians have always understood something more about repentance: it's not we who take the initiative to get saved. We merely respond to God's prior action. To be saved by grace means that even our desire to repent comes as a gift of God. God gets the salvation ball rolling. We can but respond in ways that are consistent with God's grace. In Luke's gospel John tells the crowds to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." This image of fruit is helpful. John did not say that we have to produce fruit so that God will love us. Fruit is the result of salvation, not the cause of it.

Think of it this way: The fruit on a tree does not produce the branch it's hanging on. Nor does it create the roots under the ground. It's the roots that produce the tree that produces the branch that produces the fruit. The fruit is the end-product.

And the fruit will be consistent with the tree we have become part of. If you are an apple tree, you make apples, not pears. So also if Jesus is the vine and we are the branches grafted onto him, then the result of his sap flowing into us will be the production of his kind of fruit.

That was John's message. If you know who God is, then you live like God wants you to. You share with those who have less. You are honest in your work and business dealings. You are kind to the lonely child on the playground. You don't mistreat people or lie or cheat or steal. Any repentance that is true will result in such a fruitful life for God.

Today in church we again saw the color purple, reminding us of our Advent need for penitence. But being penitent before God does not end when Advent does. The growing of good fruit goes on and on. As Jesus said, when the seed of God's Word lands on fertile soil, it produces a huge crop that is twenty, thirty, or a hundred times larger than usual.

#### **Something to Think About**

How can repenting and knowing who God is make a difference in how you behave in your workplace? On the playground at school? In your dealings with neighbors? In your home?

## ADVENT 3: Monday

### Reading: Mark 13:24–31

Every year postal workers tell us that December is their busiest month of the year, and it's mostly those millions of holiday greeting cards that weigh down the sacks of mail carriers everywhere.

With few exceptions holiday cards are cheery and warm. Paintings of the stable, the star, the shepherds, and the manger will grace the more religious cards, while other cards may feature a lovely portrait of a fire crackling on the hearth with stockings hung on the mantle "with care." Inside these cards will be heartwarming messages of "Peace on Earth" or "Here's wishing you and yours a blessed holiday."

These greeting cards reveal a lot about how we view Christmas. For most North Americans Christmas has become a silent, serene, peaceful season that glows with yuletide cheer. In fact, the holidays are such a happy time that you could probably get away with sending a moderately religious card to even a non-Christian. Even if they don't believe in Jesus, most people are willing to put up with a few Christian sentiments during the Christmas season.

But as we have been talking about this season, Advent is as much about Jesus' second coming as it is about his first coming in Bethlehem. In fact, if Jesus is not coming again to complete his work of salvation, then his first coming means nothing.

This passage we're thinking about in Advent is not very cheery. Imagine the folks at Hallmark trying to market greeting cards that promote Jesus' second coming! Nice paintings of the star over the stable are one thing, but a painting of the stars going dark and falling to the earth is quite another. A serene painting of the shepherds is one thing, but a picture of Jesus descending from heaven with armies of angels behind him is another. A card wishing "Peace on Earth" is nice, but not too many people would like a card that said, "Best wishes for a happy outcome on judgment day"!

Perhaps it seems silly even to consider such cards. But if the birth of Jesus means what we Christians think it means, then Jesus will come again to banish sin once and for all. In all of the holiday hubbub, we dare not forget that. In all of our cozy well-wishing for peace and good cheer, we dare not forget that what we need to tell people is that the baby in the manger is coming back, and we all must be prepared for that event.

Think of it this way: If Jesus is not coming back, then what's the sense in celebrating his birth in the first place?

#### **Something to Think About**

Think of some good Christmas card messages that tell who Jesus is and what he means to you. Consider making some of your own cards this year.

## ADVENT 3: TUESDAY

### Reading: 1 Corinthians 11: 23–26

At some point during the Advent season most congregations celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. To the world this may seem an odd practice: even as we anticipate Jesus' birth, we go through a ritual that celebrates his death.

In general people don't like mixing birth with death because death is the undoing of all that makes birth so wonderful. Sometimes we hear of a "still birth." The word "still" is appropriate in that situation—for not only is there no sound from the infant, but soon a stunned silence fills the whole delivery room. A room that should have resounded with the cry of new life and the happy exclamations of the new parents becomes deathly still. A couple of years ago my cousin gave birth to a child who they knew could not live more than thirty minutes. The little girl was born alive, but the knowledge that she would die within the hour prevented anyone from feeling joyful about her birth.

If the gospel began and ended with Jesus' happy birth in Bethlehem, then Advent talk of Jesus' death would be unnecessarily grim. But Jesus' birth is not the end of the story, and so Jesus' birth can never be an event of unalloyed sweetness and light. Last week and again Sunday in church we thought about that second, yet-to-come advent of Jesus at the end of history. That advent is as much a part of this season as the first one.

Partaking of the Lord's Supper at some point during Advent helps us to remember the whys of the season. For in the bread and the wine we see the flesh-and-blood nature of the incarnation—the Son of God really did become human! But in the Supper we also see the resurrection victory that will finally climax in Jesus' second coming. That's why Paul tells us that as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

But until he comes again, we are told to celebrate not his birth but his death. You would be hard-pressed to find Bible verses that demand that we celebrate Christmas in the same way we are commanded to celebrate the Lord's Supper. So today and in the coming weeks, while we proclaim Jesus' birth, we must also proclaim his death. Far from being the end of our Advent joy, remembering the death of the baby in the manger is actually the beginning of eternal joy!

#### **Something to Think About**

What do the bread and wine or juice of communion mean? What do they remind us of?  
What do they have to do with Christmas?

## ADVENT 3: WEDNESDAY

### Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12–20

Yesterday we said that in spite of our Christmas focus on Jesus' birth, we must also remember his death. After all, one of the main events of the gospel story that Jesus' birth made possible was his utterly human death.

But we actually need more. After all, very few people doubt that Jesus was born. They may question the virgin birth and raise a skeptical eyebrow about stories of angels singing in the night. But almost no one doubts that Jesus was a real person who was born once upon a time. Likewise very few dispute the fact that he died— since anyone who is born in this world sooner or later dies.

So proclaiming only Jesus' birth and death is not enough. We also need the resurrection. For without Easter, Jesus' birth and death equal no more than just another human life. It requires no faith to say that Jesus lived and died.

Just listen to how even secular newscasts talk about Christmas and Good Friday. On Christmas Eve it wouldn't be surprising to hear a newscaster say, "Tonight Christians remember the birth of Jesus." Come next spring another newscaster can report on the Pope's Good Friday mass and say, "Today Christians remember the day Jesus died." But when Easter arrives, everybody starts throwing in adverbs and qualifiers. "Today," the newscasters say, "Christians remember the time when Jesus *allegedly* returned from the dead. According to Christian myth, the man Jesus supposedly rose again on Easter morning."

A Jesus who was born, lived, and died is no threat. Even during Advent we need to remember that we do not call ourselves Christians because of Jesus' birth but because of his resurrection. Perhaps it seems like I am going too far in downplaying the importance of Jesus' birth.

And of course that birth is very important, because without it, Jesus' death and resurrection would not have been possible either! Still, there is good reason why most of the New Testament focuses on Jesus' death and not on his birth; there is good reason why we have a sacrament to celebrate Jesus' death but not one to celebrate his birth.

Jesus' birth is important—but most of its importance lies in the chain of saving events it set into motion. Remembering Easter during Advent ties us firmly to the most glorious part of the Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus. That event is one we speak of without qualifying adverbs and without hedging. Jesus did rise again from the dead! He is coming again! That is why we are Christians and that is what we proclaim to a dying world.

#### Something to Think About

We don't usually think about Easter eggs when we're eating our favorite Christmas cookies. So why did the devotion today talk about Easter even though it is getting close to Christmas?

## ADVENT 3: THURSDAY

### Reading: Luke 1:46–55

Often in Advent we spend time pondering beautiful Old Testament prophecies, but today we are looking at a New Testament prophecy by Mary. This is a song Luke tells us, and since we are now just one week away from Christmas, we're not surprised to find a Christmas carol even in the Bible. No time of the year is more associated with music than Christmas. Whether it is a secular jingle like "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" or a Christian hymn like "Silent Night, Holy Night," everyone knows that come December we begin to hear "Christmas music" everywhere we go.

But it doesn't take long to see that Mary's Christmas carol is very different from the ones we are accustomed to, that it contains some rather startling lyrics. This is no "Silent Night" or "Joy to the World" kind of carol. Instead Mary peppers her song with images of the violent overthrow of tyrants, of humbling the rich of this world and lifting up the poor.

This is a strange and terrible song—even more so when you remember that Mary was a young girl at this time, perhaps no more than fifteen years old. Hearing such strong sentiments expressed by an innocent teen arrests our attention almost as much as do the words themselves.

If you heard your own daughter singing these words, you might wonder if she had been soaking up too many violent movies. Maybe you'd decide it was high time to investigate getting parental controls installed on her devices. There's enough brutality and rough talk in our world already. We don't want our kids singing about it—certainly not at Christmas!

Yet Mary does.

What might this strangest of all Christmas songs teach us? We'll be thinking about this for the next few days, but for today it may be enough to see that there is more going on in the Christmas story than meets the eye. If Jesus' birth means that all of society will get overturned and that this world's fat cats will be sent away empty-handed, then we learn that for all the "glad tidings" and "good cheer" that people like to associate with Christmas, there is some bad news here as well.

For some of this world's elite—for any who exploit others in order to pad their own pockets or secure their own positions of power—the birth of "little Lord Jesus" spells trouble. In the long run, their kind of lifestyle will not prevail.

That hardly sounds like the kind of message you'd expect to get out of a Christmas carol. But this is one carol we cannot ignore. This one is in the Bible!

### Something to Think About

What is your favorite Christmas carol? Why do you like it?



## ADVENT 3: FRIDAY

### Reading: Luke 1:46–55

Telescopes are wonderful for magnifying the heavens. Even a small telescope can show you mountains on the moon, the rings of Saturn, and the major moons that orbit Jupiter.

Mary’s song is called the “Magnificat” because the opening words talk about her desire to “magnify” the Lord. That seems rather odd, doesn’t it? We usually magnify only small objects, and God is not small! You magnify the fine print in a contract, not the six-foot-tall letters on a highway billboard. You use a magnifying glass to look at a tiny ladybug on a leaf, not to look at towering clouds in the sky.

Mary knows full well that God fills the cosmos with his grandeur and might, yet she says that she wants to make him bigger still. She wants to magnify his image, love, and grace so that no one—including the rich and powerful of this world—will be able to miss seeing God.

For as Mary looks through the magnifying glass of her soul, she is struck anew by the fact that this huge, almighty God has chosen her, a humble young girl from a two-bit town. God magnified Mary by giving her an assignment that would insure that all generations would call her blessed.

So God magnified Mary, and Mary in turn magnifies God. But then Mary seems to realize that this hugely exalted God has always been lifting up the little people. And this leads her to remember that God opposes those in this world who think they are big shots.

So, as we saw yesterday, Mary predicts that those who do not humble themselves before God will ultimately be toppled off their high horses. In fact, to stick with our telescope image, Mary essentially says that God will view these folks through the wrong end of the telescope. If you have ever looked through a telescope backwards, then you know that it makes objects that are close and large appear distant and tiny. This is what will happen to the proud, arrogant boasters of this age: God will “microfy” them. They will be made to appear small and insignificant compared to the grandeur of God and of God’s Christ.

One of our tasks during Advent is to join Mary in magnifying God. We want to lift our God in Christ up high so that all may see him through our witness. Of course, not everyone will like seeing so grand a God. For our God cares for the poor and oppressed, but he opposes boasting braggarts and power-hungry tyrants.

With which group do we identify? Where do we fit? That’s not a comfortable question, but if we are truly going to be ready to meet our Lord in his birth next week, it’s a question we must face honestly.

### Something to Think About

Reflect on the questions Rev. Hoezee asks in the concluding paragraph.



## ADVENT 3: SATURDAY

### Reading: Luke 1:51–52, 4:16–21

God always takes what we expect and turns it upside down. That's the most basic message of Mary's great song in Luke 1. God is more likely to be found sitting among the poor and powerless folks in halfway houses than at the conference table with this world's power brokers. He's more likely to be found in dirty alleyways and homeless shelters than in penthouse offices with CEOs and politicians. He's more likely to be found with the lonely child that everyone mocks than with the popular crowd who everyone admires. By reminding us of this, Mary previews her Son's ministry. For the only time in Jesus' ministry that he entered a precinct of power was at his trial before Pilate. Otherwise he tended to hang out in much more modest, if not scandalous, places.

Jesus' birth in a feed box sets the stage for what would follow in his ministry. Jesus will go on to call into his service despised tax collectors and uneducated fishermen with feet of clay. He'll spend a lot of time among society's lowlifes, delighting in the company provided by auditors on the take, lifelong hookers, Samaritan adulterers, Roman thugs, outcast lepers, and even officers of the despised occupying Roman army.

Why he did so is reflected in Jesus' sermons, a few of which get pre-preached by Mary in the Magnificat! Mary anticipates Jesus' first sermon as it will shortly be recorded in Luke 4. For there Jesus uses as his text the words of Isaiah 61, taking for himself the task of preaching good news to the poor and freedom for those held captive by this world's systems of injustice.

Mary also pre-preaches the Sermon on the Mount as it is recorded in Luke 6. "Blessed are the poor, the weeping, the ones hungering for justice, for you will be made rich, you will laugh, you will be fed and your cries for justice answered. But woe to you who are rich, who are already well-fed, who laugh all the way to the bank now, for you will be made poor, you will stand in line at the soup kitchen, you will weep at how spiritually bankrupt you turn out to be." Mary's Magnificat contains a capsule summary of what will be the gospel according to Jesus, her Son.

We think of Christmas as "family time." But during his life Jesus always made clear that his real family was not Mary and his siblings but rather those who heard and did his will. He made clear that included in his family were the prostitutes and beggars and lepers among whom he spent most of his time.

Do we see these people as precious, valued, and in need of our help? Are there things that keep us from ministering to the less desirable parts of Jesus' family on earth? If so, we are missing a major component of what Christmas is really all about. More, we are missing a big chunk of what Christianity is all about!

### Something to Think About

During the next week or two, think of one or more ways that you and your family or friends could help a person or persons who have very little. How might that act be continued throughout next year?

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### Reading: Isaiah 61:1–3

The part of town where I used to live is peppered with old-growth oaks—massive trees that my neighbors and I often failed to appreciate. Like most people in our modern, mostly urban world, we tend to ignore creation. Our daily attention is focused on financial reports, social media, smart phones, video games, and the latest inventions.

The people of the Bible lived much closer to the earth. So it's no surprise that the Bible's writers drew most of their images from the realm of creation. Over and over again our lives as believers are compared to trees, shrubs, flowers, vines, and branches. These are probably the most common set of images in the Bible.

Today Isaiah delivers a most striking image, telling us that in the Messiah we will become “oaks of righteousness.” What might that mean?

As we saw yesterday, the first part of this passage was the very first text on which Jesus ever preached. Jesus declared that he had come to bring newness and hope back into lives broken by sin. Jesus was going to lift up the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and release those held captive by the chains of sin. And through all of that Jesus was going to create a new people: a people of gladness and joy, a people who would grow into “oaks of righteousness.”

Earlier in his prophecy Isaiah made clear that the Messiah would be humble and lowly. Isaiah's key image for this lowliness was also a horticultural one: the Christ would be a shoot from the stump of Jesse, a root out of dry ground. Now, near the end of this book, we see the stunning reversal: the one who begins as no more than a shoot will somehow establish a forest of mighty oaks! This, Isaiah says, is the image for the people of God as redeemed by the Messiah. We must be oaks of righteousness, towering examples of Godlike justice and holiness.

Over the past few days we have listened to Mary's song with its picture of divine righteousness and justice. Like these opening words of Isaiah 61, Mary's song reminds us that our focus on the downtrodden, our being pillars of concern for those who don't have a voice, is a major part of our “oak-ness” before God. As we draw closer to the day on which we will celebrate our Lord's birth, let us pray that God's Spirit will make us into just this kind of holy tree.

#### Something to Think About

Today you may have seen the peace candle lit in church. What does peace mean? How does Jesus give us peace?

## ADVENT 4: MONDAY

### Reading Psalm 90:1–2, Zephaniah 3:14–20

Zephaniah 3:17 gives us a wonderful glimpse into the heart of God. Although this is not an obvious Advent text, the God of the incarnation can be clearly seen here. After all, why did God the Son go through all of the trouble, pain, and hardship of becoming a human being?

Zephaniah tells us that it is because God delights in his people. The God of the universe adores us! He looks at these little images of himself, and his divine heart skips a beat in sheer delight.

He sings songs of rejoicing about us. It's not simply that we are supposed to sing songs to God; God sings songs to us. God, Zephaniah says, is forever calling his angels over and saying things like, "Say, have I told you about my kids? Have I mentioned lately how great they are?" God is forever taking out his wallet and showing off our pictures, singing our praises to whomever will listen.

God is indeed the Mighty One of the cosmos—the God who is tough and burly and strong for saving. But this same God talks about us with a tender gleam in his eye. God's arm may be strong enough to deliver the knockout punch to the devil, but those same divine arms can gently gather us to himself with motherly affection. In the long run, Zephaniah says, God will gather all of us together in a place that we'll just know is home.

The psalmist who penned Psalm 90 wrote, "O God, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations." Another way to translate that is, "God, you are our home." And what should a home be if not that place where we fit, where we belong, where we feel comfortable being ourselves, where we can love and be loved? God, Zephaniah says, is our home. Jesus is the revelation of God par excellence. He is truly God and yet truly human—utterly strong and yet also vulnerable in his love for us. Jesus is strong enough to raise Lazarus from the dead and yet tender enough to cry his eyes out before doing so.

Jesus is the Word of God who created this entire universe as a home for us. Yet when Jesus was born into this cosmos, he could find no home. "The Son of Man has no home, no place to lay his head." And Jesus knew that a lot of people feel that way—they feel hurried, harassed, and homeless. A lot of people are lost in the cosmos.

So before leaving this earth Jesus promised, "I'm going to go to make a home for you. In my Father's house there are many rooms, and if that were not so, I would not have said it."

God is our home where we are adored, delighted in, and rejoiced over. In Advent and at all times, it is our privilege to come home to God, from whom and in whom all blessings flow.

#### Something to Think About

What makes your home a special place? What do you think the home that Jesus has for us is like?

## ADVENT 4: TUESDAY

### Reading: Matthew 9:14–15, 11:16–19

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew* Philip Yancey says that he has watched just about every movie ever made about Jesus. Almost without exception Jesus is presented as a flat, emotionless character who strides through life completely unperturbed, delivering his lines in dull monotones.

Yet the Jesus who emerges from the gospels seems to have been zestful and, dare one say it, fun! Jesus loved to be around people and seems seldom to have turned down an invitation for dinner, even when it came from scoundrels like tax collectors and even if it were held on the first floor of a brothel. Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a wine-bibber, and I rather doubt that anyone would have bothered making such a charge had Jesus not been known for attending a lot of dinner parties.

People liked being around Jesus: Where Jesus was, joy followed. “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” Jesus once said. Well, take a look. Jesus came to serve people, not to be served by them. He came out of love for people because he delights in people, rejoices over their goodness, and sees through the waxy buildup of sin to discern the still greater goodness of which we’re capable.

Earlier we saw Zephaniah revealing to us the God who delights in us, his creatures. Of course, that divine delight does not mean that God takes us just as we are, sin and all. God is angry about sin (as Zephaniah wrote earlier in his book).

But we dare not forget that God’s anger is that of a wounded parent—a parent who cannot help but love his children even though they have gone so terribly wrong. If God were aloof and distant and uncaring, then he’d respond to our sin with indifference. The less invested you are in someone, the less their hurts hurt you. You may feel some sadness about all of those nameless teenagers in the world who are unloved and who are killing each other on the streets. You’ll feel more sadness, however, if a child within your own congregation is hurting. You’ll feel still more sorrow if the child of your best friend goes wrong. But nothing will compare to the life-altering grief that will overwhelm you if something happens to your own child.

Advent and all that it set into motion happened because God delights in us. Just as Jesus liked being around people and people liked being around Jesus, so God likes being with us. That’s why, by grace, he has saved us to himself—this way, we can be together for the ultimate dinner party: the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb.

### Something to Think About

Describe Jesus, as you usually think of him. Is he smiling? Do you think he will smile when you meet him someday?

## ADVENT 4: WEDNESDAY

### Reading: Zephaniah 3:14–20

Several years ago, just a few weeks before Christmas, most of the major weekly news magazines featured some stunning color photos taken by the Hubble space telescope. The photos showed the distant grandeur of enormous clouds of gas and energy—some towering many light-years “high”—as well as the birth of stars, the spectacle of quasars, the spinning of pulsars. They were awesome images.

A few weeks later, someone wrote a letter to the editor of Time magazine, saying that those images prove again how utterly small and insignificant we human beings on the tiny planet Earth really are. We’re fooling ourselves, this person claimed, if we think that we really matter in the cosmos. We’re just pinpoints of dust inhabiting a speck of dirt floating on the endless sea of space.

Of course, we humans either matter or we don’t; we’re either significant in the universe or we’re not. You can adopt whatever world-and-life view you want, resulting in whatever view of humankind you desire. But in the end you either draw a conclusion based solely on science and the immensity of the universe or you go beyond and take a step of faith.

For Christians that step of faith results in the firm belief that we do matter, that we are loved and delighted in, that there is a God who created those distant clouds of gas and vapor, who spins the pulsars and fuels the quasars, and yet who is a God with a big enough heart to delight also in us human beings who inhabit the third planet in this little star system we call home.

I have always enjoyed C. S. Lewis’s “Space Trilogy” in which he imagines the other planets of this solar system to be inhabited by various spiritual beings. One thing I particularly like is that whenever these beings refer to Earth, they always pause with a catch in their breath, saying to one another, “Ah, that is the Visited Planet—the planet where God came down to show his love in person.”

No matter how big the universe is, we remain the Visited Planet—the place where the Son of God was made flesh. No matter how vast space is, no matter how mighty our God is, the fact of Advent and Christmas shows that we do not escape the divine notice. As Zephaniah says when concluding his prophetic book: “At that time I will gather you, at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth,” and perhaps we could add “among all the creatures of the vast universe.”

Zephaniah can say that with confidence because our God is not the God of the philosophers. God is not the “Unmoved Mover” or the “First Principle” or “the Ground of All Being.” Our God is the loving Parent who looks at us, loves us, and says about us, “I’d give up everything for those kids.” And he did.

#### Something to Think About

What does it mean to say “God is Love”?

## ADVENT 4: THURSDAY

### Reading: Titus 2:11–14

In this season of gift-giving, it may be something of a cliché to say that Jesus is the greatest gift of all. But it's a cliché that happens to be absolutely true. In Christ we have received our life back again as a free and utterly unwarranted gift of grace. Once we unwrap and open this gift, salvation and eternal life are ours!

The gift of grace is not like the gift of a new outfit that you can hang in your closet and put on once in a while. This is not a gift to put up on the mantle or hang on the wall to admire whenever your eyes happen to fall on it. Grace is a gift that transforms us from the moment we receive it. It changes us, Paul once wrote to his friend Titus, because it gives us the constant strength to say no to a worldly way of life and yes to a God-glorifying lifestyle.

What's more, Paul writes in verse 12, our transformation takes place "in this present age." For it's in this life and this world where we need to respond to God's grace. Verse 13 then picks up on the dual focus of Advent that we talked about this month—Jesus came but he's coming again too. So as we live between Advent #1 and Advent #2, we work hard to respond rightly to his birth and life as a way to prepare for his second coming.

When you are given a gift, it's polite to say thank you. When the gift in question is a new cardigan, a rechargeable drill, or a video game, a heartfelt word of thanks will do the trick to complete the lovely circle of a gift given and a gift received. But when the gift in question is the Son of God who dies and goes through hell in your place, mere words of gratitude seem weak and not up to the task of expressing the hugely cosmic thanksgiving we feel.

Responding fully to God's Christmas present to the world requires a lifetime of grateful living—a lifetime and then some. Over the next few days we will all have plenty of opportunities to say thank you to friends and relatives. It's the natural, polite thing to do when a gift is placed before you. May we constantly keep also the gift of Jesus before our eyes so that we may say thank you to God every single day of our lives.

### Something to Think About

Think of three things you've done recently to show God you are grateful for his gift.

## ADVENT 4: FRIDAY

### Reading Titus 2:11–14

“He gave himself for us.” That line from Titus 2:14 is such a simple phrase in both Greek and English: he gave himself—the original divine gift of which all our current-day Christmas presents are but the faintest echoes.

He gave himself. He allowed himself to be wrapped up and placed before us as a gift. He allowed himself to be wrapped in swaddling cloths—a sign that the mighty God of the universe had become helpless. The Creator who clothed the lilies of the valley, the Savior who is the bread of life is now unable to survive unless he is clothed and fed by others.

He gave himself. Just two words in the Greek language of Paul, and just three words in English. Yet contained in them is all the gospel, all the grace of God. Truly to receive this gift is to be changed by the enormity of it. Truly to receive this Christmas present is to so fall in love with God and his Christ that we want to become part of his new people.

Sometimes people talk about catching the “Christmas spirit,” as though generosity were a contagion with which you can become infected just by breathing the air or drinking the eggnog at this time of the year. I don’t know whether that’s true or not—whether the Ebenezer Scrooges of this world ever really could wake up on Christmas morning as changed people. Most of the selfish or grumpy people I know are just as selfish and grumpy after Christmas as they were before. The Christmas season itself does not change too many people.

But God’s grace always changes people. Paul knew that. It wasn’t “Christmastime” when Paul received the gift of Jesus’ grace. It was just an ordinary day on which Saul of Tarsus was planning to arrest and maybe murder a few of those rotten Christians in Damascus. But God had other plans for Saul that day. Saul received the gift of grace on the Damascus road, and he was made new from the inside out. He got a new name and a new job: now he was Paul the apostle whose task it was to make even more Christians by preaching the good news of grace.

Given how his life was changed by God’s gracious gift of Jesus, it’s no surprise that Paul often closed his letters the way he closes this letter to Titus: “Grace be with you all.”

Two months from now if you had to sit down and make a list of all the Christmas presents you got this week, you would probably have problems remembering them all. But there is one gift we dare never forget: he gave himself.

May you receive this gift again this week. And then, by grace, may you never, ever forget it.

#### **Something to Think About**

Why did Jesus come to our world? What did he come to give us?



## ADVENT 4: CHRISTMAS EVE DAY

### Reading: Luke 2:6–7

In major cities like New York and Chicago, the papers occasionally carry stories about a baby being born to a homeless woman. Some of these babies are born in subway stations or under highway overpasses with the mother stretched out on a piece of dirty cardboard and surrounded by the squalor of heroin addicts and drunks. When the child is born, it is swaddled in an old coat and laid in a Styrofoam beer cooler.

When we hear stories like that, we're tempted to shake our heads and say, "With a beginning like that, this kid is doomed. He'll probably stay as poor as his mother, and someday he'll be the drunk, the addict, the hobo under the overpass."

With a beginning like that. Over time we have repainted Luke's picture in some very warm, rosy pastels. But it's not a pretty picture. It was a pathetic beginning for little Lord Jesus. No one in Bethlehem had room or gave any room to this family. So Jesus gets born in the midst of steaming piles of manure and the acrid smell of urine.

But if you look at this story from the right angle this evening and again tomorrow, something about its humbleness contains some very good news. Why? Because no matter what your situation is this Christmas—no matter how happy, stable, or joyful your life may be right now—there are many others for whom this is a very painful time. Perhaps a loved one died in the past year. Perhaps a job has been lost or is terminating at the end of the year. Perhaps a marriage is crumbling all around the Christmas tree, or a wayward child is refusing to put in a Christmas appearance.

For all such as this, Jesus' pitiful beginning is a reminder that the Son of God was born into our pain and suffering. The One who allowed himself to be born in a barn knows and understands us. He's been there.

He was born there, and he can still be found right in the midst of our pain, bringing his version of glory and peace into even the most troubled hearts.

### Something to Think About

Do you think that Christmas can make sad people feel better? Why?



# CHRISTMAS

## Reading: Luke 2:1–8

In the film *Apollo 13*, we are told the story of that fateful moon shot in April of 1970. As some of you may recall, on their way to the moon the three astronauts in the Apollo 13 spacecraft were jolted when an oxygen tank exploded, ripping a hole in their ship and making it highly unlikely that they would ever be able to return safely to Earth. To help them get back, another NASA astronaut, Ken Mattingly, was placed in a spaceship simulator in Houston where he experimented with various approaches, landings, and orbits.

At one point, Mattingly realized that the people in charge of the simulator had not fully duplicated the conditions in the Apollo 13 module out in space. In exasperation he snapped into his headset, “Just give me what they have up there!” For him to do the Apollo 13 crew any good, his simulator needed to be as damaged as the actual ship. Only then could he find a solution that would also work for them.

As the Son of God regarded the pathetic state of sinful humanity, he essentially said to the Father, “Just give me what they have down there! The sorrow, the hurt, the sting of death, the allure of sin, the laughter and the tears, the joy and the pity, the vulnerability, and the sadness. Give me what they have down there, and then I will be in a position to help them.” And he did.

On this joyous Christmas Day we marvel once again at the Word made flesh. We are agog at the spectacle of the Son of God taking on a body that was capable of being injured and even killed. We gasp in astonishment when we remember the life that Mary’s painful delivery brought into this world. Christmas is so amazing that even putting it that way sounds funny: Mary brought a new life into the world. Yet the mystery of Christmas is that this new life was not new at all: the Son of God had always existed.

Still, that birth in Bethlehem does represent something new and wonderful. By grace and because of his enormous love for us, Jesus took on a body that duplicated the conditions under which we live in a fallen world. Only by becoming human could Jesus come up with a salvation solution that would “work” also for us.

He has taken all the poverty of our lives down here so that one day he might take us into his kingdom and give us all the riches that he has up there. On a day when millions will wish the world a “Merry Christmas,” we Christians have more reason to wish that than anyone. For we know the Savior. He came down to be with us, and he is still with us, full now of a new resurrection life that can never die. A “merrier” message could not be conceived! So “Merry Christmas” and “Hallelujah!”

### Something to Think About

Do you know someone who needs to hear the good news of Christmas today?

# CHRISTMAS 1

## Reading: John 1:14

John 1:14 is one of the most famous texts in the Bible. If we translated it literally, it would read, “The Word became flesh and camped out among us.” The Greek verb in the verse means “to pitch a tent, to camp.”

I like the idea of Jesus’ time on earth being like a camping trip. When we camp, we’re out of our element. Instead of living inside, we’re out in the natural world. We live more simply and primitively. Our familiar home-habits, the stuff we do at home without thinking, often don’t work in the campground. We’ve got to stop and think about how to make coffee or cook an egg or wash our hair.

There is a real element of inconvenience in camping—that’s why some of us don’t like to “rough it” in the wild. To some, it actually seems like more work than just staying home (and who wants more work when you’re on vacation?). But there’s something lovely about camping too— that’s why others enjoy it so much. Waking up to the songs of the birds, seeing a blazing sunset, watching the moonlight shimmering on the waters of an inland sound—these are the experiences that make it all worthwhile.

The Word was made flesh and camped out among us. Jesus was out of his element. He was out of the glories of the divine Godhead, living more simply, more humbly, more primitively among his creatures. He was inconvenienced in a multitude of ways, and yet there was a loveliness about it too—a loveliness that made it all worthwhile. Because the purpose of this divine camping trip was none other than salvation—a goal that Christ achieved for you and for me.

The striking fact is that the Word of God appeared in a form quite unexpected. The eternal Son of God was, for a time, found not in the precincts of heaven, but in a tent of human flesh, camped out on earth like an ordinary person. Who would have guessed it? Small wonder, as John also writes, that many people didn’t recognize Jesus as God. Even among the Jews, who were so eager for the Messiah to come, there were many who “received him not.”

But for those who did receive Jesus, for those who recognized the purpose behind this curious, divine campout, God sent his Spirit to set up camp directly in their hearts, giving them the right to be called “the children of God.”

### Something to Think About

What do you think people expected God’s Son to look like? Where might they have expected him to be born?

## CHRISTMAS 2

### Reading: Luke 2:22–35

Traditionally, the days following Christmas are used to remember one of the few events from Jesus' infancy that the Bible records: his presentation at the temple in Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, Jesus' presentation ceremony did not take place exactly "by the book." Instead it was interrupted by an ancient-looking man who, Luke tells us, "was awaiting the consolation of Israel." In other words, Simeon was waiting for the fulfillment of Isaiah's words of "Comfort, comfort."

So on that day he shuffled up and asked Mary if he might see the baby. Mary may have hesitated. First-time parents tend to handle their baby like an egg, as though just holding him wrong might break him! So Mary was no doubt nervous about handing Jesus over to such an old person who may have been a bit unsteady on his feet. But she did so anyway.

The old man's eyes looked glazed over by cataracts, and yet he stared intently into little Jesus' face. As Jesus played with and tugged on Simeon's beard, tears welled up in the old man's eyes. "Well, now I can depart in peace. Now I've seen the salvation of God."

How did Simeon know this? Luke tells us that God's Spirit had told Simeon he would live to see the Messiah. Apparently on that day Simeon received the long-awaited sign. At first Simeon may have been surprised that the Messiah turned out to be an infant. At forty days of age, babies are just beginning to focus their eyes and may begin to smile. But they are still weak, helpless, unable to even support their own necks,

Simeon knew he would live to see the Messiah, but he probably didn't anticipate that the Christ he'd meet would be unable to hold his own head up! Yet when Simeon saw God's Son in this helpless state, then he knew: if God had to go to these lengths to establish salvation, then salvation must be a gift of grace. In that message was all the consolation Simeon could have ever wanted.

To see what Simeon saw requires the eyes of faith—eyes that cannot be dimmed by cataracts. These eyes of faith show us that this head-lolling, drooling, cooing little infant is the very salvation of God come to us as a gift.

Mary may have worried that Simeon would drop the baby. But Simeon knew there was no danger of that. For his eyes of faith showed him that although he was holding Jesus, by grace it was actually Jesus who had Simeon and the whole world in his hands.

#### **Something to Think About**

What does it mean when we baptize babies in church? How does today's Bible story remind you of baptism?