

The Good News

Advent
Devotions
for 2023

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Mt. Lebanon - Advent 2023
Edited by Theodore Somes, III and the Rev. Laura Di Panfilo

Our Advent Devotional this year features daily reflections to be read and contemplated throughout the season. Our four authors each aim to take you through the story of the Good News of the birth of Jesus as they have lived it. Their pieces are reflective, lovely, poetic, questioning, and draw from the depth of their

experiences both in the parish and throughout their lives. This Advent, I invite you into a special and prayerful consideration of their writing, along with the work of artist the Rev. Sarah West whose work can also be found at visiolectio.com. Her beautiful, and at times, challenging digitized woodcut illustrations are

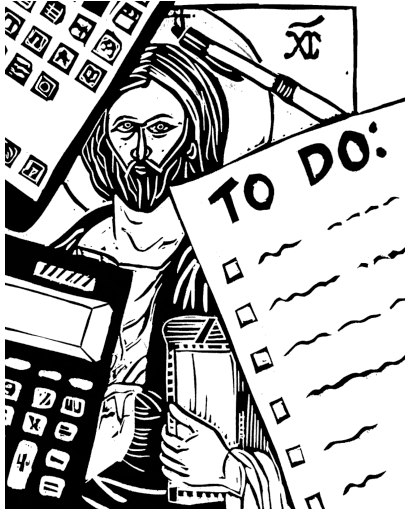
used throughout this work. As we seek to always dwell in the presence of the Lord, I hope you find this devotional to be a helpful and beautiful tool. Thank you, and blessings this Advent.

Theodore Somes, III
Lay Assistant for Christian
Formation



Turn

Sunday, December 3 by Pat Dunkis



“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” (Handel’s *Messiah*, based on Isaiah 9:6)

I am both humbled and honored to be able to participate in creating this Advent devotional for you, my much-loved St. Paul’s Family. For the next five days, I plan to tell you about some meaningful events in my spiritual life, and share how I see those experiences fitting into the season of Advent. My hope is that these reflections will spark in you a remembrance of times or places in your own spiritual development, and bring you more deeply into contemplation about the true meaning of this holy time of year.

Returning to St. Paul’s in 2018 after a long absence when we lived in another part of the city, one of the first experiences I remember was a Sunday Adult Forum focused on the Episcopal framework called *The Way of Love*. The Way of Love is a set of seven intentional spiritual practices for a Jesus-centered life: TURN – LEARN – PRAY – WORSHIP – BLESS – GO – REST. The forum leader that day explained that the first step, turn, means to turn toward Jesus, as one would turn one’s face to the sun. That image, turning my face toward Jesus as I would turn my face to the warmth and light and energy of the sun, has been a powerful one for me in these intervening years. To turn means to pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus. Episcopal author Miriam McKenney has written: “When we get lost or distracted, we need a way back that lets us join the path to Jesus with grace. *The Way of Love* spiritual practice of turn ... allows us to commit to our walk with Christ again and again, no matter how many times we feel ourselves slipping away from the path. I’m thankful to have TURN as a way back in when I need it...”

Beginning today, I invite you to TURN toward the season of Advent. Turn your face to the Son. Set aside these few weeks as a special time of waiting and watching for the Lord Jesus. Pause to be still, even if it’s only for a few minutes each day, as you await our celebration of the birth of the Savior of the world. Listen deeply as God says to us: “Here is my child. A baby who will show you the way. A baby coming for you to follow. Turn to Him.” All we need to do is turn, and Jesus is there, waiting to pour out love, forgiveness, wisdom, guidance, comfort, healing and grace.

Prayer

God of all hope and joy, open our hearts in welcome, that your Son Jesus Christ at his coming may find in us a dwelling prepared for himself; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*A New Zealand Prayer Book | He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, p.558)

Learn more about the Way of Love at www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

Holy Mother(s)

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

It was my good fortune to accompany our rector on the Holy Land trip he led in 2022. Because of COVID, the trip had been postponed a year. We were to leave on January 24, but in the early days of January, Israel's borders remained closed to travelers, and it looked as though another delay would occur. Miraculously, or so it seemed, Israel opened its borders on January 6, and the trip was on!

Because we were among the first crop of international visitors allowed back in the country, we were afforded nearly unfettered access to holy sites that most pilgrims stand in line for hours to experience. Standing in those spaces and listening to the scriptural accounts of what took place there, changed forever the way I hear and experience portions of the New Testament. For the remaining days that I write Advent reflections, I will refer to experiences from that trip.

On one of our early days in Jerusalem, we visited the Pool of Bethesda, the place where Jesus, on the Sabbath, and much to the consternation and condemnation of Jewish religious leaders, cured the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. (See John:5.)

What scripture doesn't tell us about that location is that it is within a stone's throw of the home where tradition says the maternal grandparents of Jesus, St. Anne, and St. Joachim, lived. A twelfth century basilica stands on the site today, dedicated to the beloved saint some church folks call "Granny Annie." In the rear of the church on the left side, there is an exquisite statue of a seated St. Anne with her young daughter, Mary, standing beside her.

Monday, December 4 by Pat Dunkis



Mary looked to me to be about eight years old in that sculpture, and it was staggering to me to reflect upon the fact that in not too many more years she would become the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Anne is holding a scroll of some sort in her hand, and the viewer can easily conclude that that child, Mary, was being taught by her mother, and raised in both knowledge and in faith.

My thoughts that day turned to the sculpture called Pietà, where we see a Mary, not too much older than the girl in St. Anne's Basilica, holding her deceased adult son in her lap. The Mary carved by Michelangelo is the young Mary who gave birth to our Lord and not the one who buried him a scant thirty years later. Additionally, I thought of my own dear mother who was also a very young woman in the post-war years when I was born, who also suffered the loss of a young adult son, and who herself had passed into God's arms not quite five years earlier. I thought that day about the things I learned at my mother's side.

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Scripture tells us that Mary replied to the angel, saying: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word.” Later, she told her cousin Elizabeth: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.”(Luke 1: 38, 46-49)

Prayer

Let us pray: Loving creator, you called upon your servant Mary to bring your Son into the world. We give thanks for her, and for all mothers who bear witness to your love. Their generosity and strength have blessed generations..

Please bless our mothers. Ease their worry for the families you entrust to them, guide them in times of doubt, and hold them close when they are overwhelmed by both joy and sorrow. May they know our deep gratitude for giving us life and love. In union with Mary, we ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen. (University of Notre Dame, FaithND.)



Shepherds Watching their Flocks

Tuesday, December 5 by *Pat Dunkis*

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were terrified.” Luke 2: 8-9

One Advent season, when I was little girl in about the third grade, my dad encouraged me to memorize the first fourteen verses of the second chapter of Luke’s gospel to recite them as a gift to my Presbyterian Sunday School teacher. Using the King James version, of course, I learned those verses by heart, more to please him than

her, and they are still in my head nearly seventy years later! The passage talks about a group of shepherds — already fearful that it is the nighttime, and knowing that many predators lurk in the dark to threaten the sheep they guard — are visited by an angel. The King James version says: “They were sore afraid!” No wonder. Being a shepherd was a hard and dangerous job. The sheep were stupid and got themselves into all kinds of trouble, and the dangers were many. Suddenly the night lights up with the “glory of the Lord,” and an angel speaks to them, bringing “good tidings of great joy.” Next, a multitude of angels join the one speaking, saying: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” Wouldn’t all of us be terrified?

As a small girl, learning Luke’s words, I could never have imagined that someday in the future I would stand at the place outside Bethlehem that tradition holds *was that very field!* It was not the smooth and grassy place that I imagined.

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Rather, it was a hilly, rocky and sparsely grown field. There wasn't grass all around; it grew in patches. (Seeing it helps one understand the part of Psalm 23 that speaks about being led in green pastures. Finding suitable grazing land for their sheep must have been daunting for the shepherds.)

On the rocky hillside nearby, we pilgrims stepped into an intact first century cave that our guide explained may have been similar to the "inn" that Joseph sought in the city of Bethlehem for Mary to give birth. It was excavated in the fourth century by Constantine's mother, St. Helena, and has several rooms. A church also stands quite nearby, as is common for most of the holy sites that pilgrims visit. The Chapel of the Shepherds' Field is a breath-taking space.



The words of the angel to the shepherds are inscribed in gold above the altar. There are lovely murals about the chapel depicting various episodes of the Nativity story. There is an exquisite domed ceiling, and the acoustics, we were told, are wonderful. After reading from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we stood together at the front of the chapel and sang "Angels We Have Heard on High," and we found it to be true. The sounds we made were angelic!

Prayer

Let us pray: With the shepherds of Bethlehem help us, oh Lord, to stand vigil on the eve of your coming, to run with haste to meet you, to see your face in the faces of others and to wake from our sleep as a new world is being born. Amen. (This prayer is part of a Christmas Eve prayer written by Miguel Alonzo Macias of Honduras.)

O Come let us adore Him Wednesday, December 6 by Pat Dunkis

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Luke 2: 6-7

In Bethlehem, on February 1, 2022, we pilgrims of St. Paul's walked to the Church of the Nativity. The church dates to the fourth century and was built at the direction of St. Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine. Parts were rebuilt in the sixth century after a destructive fire. It is the oldest site continuously used as a place of worship in Christianity and the oldest major church in the Holy Land. Since 2012 it has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. More than a half dozen religious affiliations share rights of worship and maintenance of the church. Inside there is a grotto where tradition says Christ was born. A free-form silver star in the floor to marks the spot of the Nativity of our Lord.

In form, the grotto resembles the cave we saw at Shepherd's Field that I mentioned in yesterday's reflection. From my journal: "It was our great fortune to arrive just in time to be invited to join the Franciscan Fathers and other religious in their noontime procession. *continued on the next page*"

Led by the thurifer (incense bearer) and a host of priests and sisters, we held lit candles and processed with other pilgrims to the entrance of the church and down the steps into the grotto. There we prayed or listened to prayers in English and in Latin. Incense filled the air, and in the candle light there was a feeling of deep reverence as we Christians, some from far-flung nations, came together to venerate the holy birthplace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We sang ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful,’ and the sound of our singing filled the cave. It was a poignant and moving experience that I will never forget.”

Now, when I think back to that day, I am grateful for several things. Because of the COVID border closing and recent reopening, there weren’t many visitors in Bethlehem yet; we easily accessed the Church and were able to go right inside. Our guide was well-known to the religious leaders at the church and they knew his group would be reverent and worshipful. Finally, our visit just happened to be close to noon, or we would not have been invited to join the procession. I am also grateful that whenever I sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” I am, and will always be, transported back to the grotto, the incense, the candle light and the star in the floor.

Prayer

Let us pray: Loving Father, help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate, and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift, and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with our hearts. May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children, and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus sake. Amen. (The prayer is by Robert Louis Stevenson.)



Holy Family

Thursday, December 7 by Pat Dunkis

“When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.” Luke 2: 39

For part of our pilgrimage in 2022, we stayed in Nazareth where the Sisters of Nazareth operate a simple guesthouse and embrace visitors in the warmth of their hospitality. Arriving from France in Nazareth about the mid 19th century, the sisters began a ministry serving children and the elderly. As they excavated to build a convent, a wonderful discovery was made.

From my journal: “Returning to the Sisters of Nazareth Guest House, we were taken to see a treasure which most tourists and even pilgrims miss.

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There is an excavation under the Guest House that reveals a first century home that may have been the home of the Holy Family. In addition, there is a burial site that would have been similar to the one in which Christ was buried, including the stone to roll over the opening. There is evidence of a Byzantine Church on the site, as well, indicating that — as early as the fourth century — it was already a holy site. We also saw a stone feeding trough like the one that may have served as the “manger” of the Nativity story. There is not much wood in Nazareth, but stone is abundant. St. Joseph may have been a carpenter, but was more probably a *tekton* (construction worker), which is what he has been called in Greek. Amazing to me is that the good Sisters of Nazareth have never promoted or advertised their ‘find,’ choosing instead to keep it as a sacred location. I was privileged to be among the few allowed to go there.”

In 2023, Advent is different for me than it used to be. It’s partly because I have grown older; I have more time to think about what it all means. I know now to TURN to Jesus as I wait and watch for His birth. But it’s also partly because I have a new set of pictures in my mind’s eye. When I hear about the stable where He was born, I see a small cave; the inn with no room, a larger cave. And when I behold the Holy Babe, the manger where He lies is not the wooden cross-legged box filled with straw; it is a stone feeding trough. The Nativity pictures in my imagination are changed because I was blessed to walk in the Holy Land. And I, too, am changed.

Prayer

Let us pray. Son of God, Child of Mary, born in the stable at Bethlehem, be born again in us this day that through us the world may know the wonder of your love. Amen. (*A New Zealand Prayer Book | He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, p.560)



About Pat Dunkis

Pat Dunkis has been an active member of St. Paul’s since 2018. She is a native Pittsburgher, now residing in Mt. Lebanon, and a retired public educator.

Be Prepared

Friday, December 8 by Bob Johnston

“For many are called, but few are chosen.” Matt 22: 14

The passage above comes from the Gospel of Matthew appointed in today’s Daily Office readings. This section of Matthew’s Gospel is the parable of the king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. Those who were invited to this banquet, refused the invitation “and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.” (Matt 22: 5). They did these things even after the king sent his slaves to tell them what he had prepared for them at the banquet, which was extravagant. The king was enraged and after having the murderers killed, he sent other slaves to invite everyone in the main streets of the city, since the original invitees were not worthy. After the wedding hall was filled with guests, the king spotted one who was not wearing a wedding robe and ordered him banished into outer darkness.

This parable has always been bothersome to me. Since this is supposed to be about the kingdom of God, I expect there to be a picture of a loving and welcoming king. Instead, we get what seems to be a wrathful king who wants to nit-pick someone who has not dressed properly. Why? Isn’t God all about love and, if so, how could he focus on something so minor as not being dressed properly for the banquet? However, in this time of Advent and preparation for the birth of our Savior, I see that there is a gentler message being shared by Jesus. The simple and more instructive meaning of this parable to me is to be prepared. We need to be ready for God’s invitation to the banquet. In that sense, it fits well into what we are attempting to do during this season. Get ready for the remembrance of the Lord coming into our midst on Christmas Day. Be prepared for the Good News that has come into the world, so that you and I do not miss the extravagant banquet prepared for us!



What about Loyalty?

Saturday, December 9 by Bob Johnston

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” Matt 22: 21

Today’s Gospel passage in the Daily Office is the next section of Matthew’s Gospel and it deals with divided loyalties. Have you ever considered where your loyalties lie? The Pharisees were testing Jesus when they asked him whether it was lawful to pay taxes. Do you think they expected him to give the answer he gave above? If he would have said it was not lawful to pay taxes, he would have had the wrath of Rome come down on his head and the Pharisees problems with him would have been easily solved. If he would have explicitly said it was lawful to pay taxes, the Pharisees would have accused him of having divided loyalties.

How could the Son of God support paying taxes to the empire that oppressed his people? As usual, Jesus is clever in his answer. After giving that answer, the passage states that “[W]hen they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” (Matt 22: 22). Problem averted by Jesus.

Back to my original question: Have you ever considered where your loyalties lie, or whether your loyalties are divided? It’s a tough question for a Christian living in this society. We pay taxes and know that at times those taxes do not go towards things that a Christian would support on their own. Does that mean we should stop paying taxes? Try that and see what happens! Some of you have served in the military. Were your loyalties divided between your service to your country and what you should do as a Christian? Are our loyalties divided when we choose to live in affluent suburban areas so our children can attend good schools when our faith may want us to live in urban areas to help support those schools that may not have the resources they need? And what about the choices we make during this busy secular season as we support the consumerism of society and we rush around to find those perfect gifts, rather than slowing down to contemplate what this season is all about from a faith-perspective? The latter is what God is looking for us to do at this time of year.

As I mentioned, this loyalty thing is very challenging and should push us to ponder what is right and just for us to choose in our lives. I do not pretend to have the answers and struggle with this, as well. Maybe this Advent season is a time to consider some of these questions about our loyalties more seriously, as we wait for the coming of our Lord at Christmas.



A Question of Faith

Sunday, December 10 by Bob Johnston

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” Luke 1: 68

Today’s Gospel from the Daily Office switches to the Gospel of Luke and the verse contain the first words of Zechariah at John’s naming during circumcision. Zechariah was rendered mute prior to this when the angel Gabriel appeared to him when he was serving as the priest in the sanctuary. The angel told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would conceive and have a son, even in their old age, and that the son would be named John. Zechariah did not have faith in what the angel told him and was made mute. Gabriel told him he would not be able to speak until these things came to pass.

This lack of faith contrasts with the following passages where Gabriel also appears to Mary announcing that she would give birth to Jesus and Mary accepted her role, and when Elizabeth acknowledged Mary’s



favored status when Mary came to visit her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and felt the baby leap in her womb.

I wonder whether I would be like Zechariah and react like he did by not believing the angel Gabriel’s words or whether I would have the faith of Mary and Elizabeth and instantly accept what I was being told. It’s interesting that this Gospel starts with women believing what they hear or see, when a man does not. As we know, this same dynamic happens when Jesus rises from the dead and the women are the first to realize it and announce it. Are we men just too practical and prone not to believe miraculous things?

What do we need to do to be more open to see what God is saying to us or doing in our presence? I know I would be eager to exclaim those first words of Zechariah once the angel’s words come true, but it would be wonderful if I were able to utter the words instantly because I had the great faith of Mary and Elizabeth. Advent is meant for pondering these types of faith questions and it is by having greater faith that we are more prepared for the coming of the Lord into our lives on Christmas and each day.

Some new Prophet

Monday, December 11 by Bob Johnston

“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Matt 22: 30

In today’s Gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus is questioned by some Sadducees about the resurrection, and specifically about the law handed down from Moses where a brother of a man who dies childless should marry his widow and raise up children for his dead brother.



Now these Sadducees take this to the extreme when they talk about a family with seven brothers who all happen to die childless, and the widow is taken by each. In the end, the widow dies, as well. The question, which initially seems a little silly to me, is to whom is she married in the resurrection? Jesus’ answer to this question is in the verse noted above.

This is another example of Jesus needing to teach the people that he has come to bring new meaning to the law and not be driven by the literal law.

This had to be a difficult position for Jesus. The Jews had been living according to the laws handed down for many centuries from their ancestors. Think about what it would be like even for us to understand or accept a new way of thinking that would appear in our time, after our Christian faith has taught us and our ancestors for a bit more than 2,000 years. It would be natural for us to ask many questions about how this new way of thinking affects what we have come to know and believe in our lives.

What seems like a silly question by these Sadducees is completely understandable, given their life experiences as Jews. I know I would be asking many questions of some new “prophet” that would appear today. What I think I need to take from this passage is the need to be open to new ways of thinking about God. Jesus’ answer in verse 30 is a whole new way of thinking about what things will be like in resurrection and pushes us to expand our understanding of God’s plan.

Advent gives us the time and space to free our minds to ponder what God is planning for us and is saying to us today.

Difficult Commands

Tuesday, December 12 by Bob Johnston

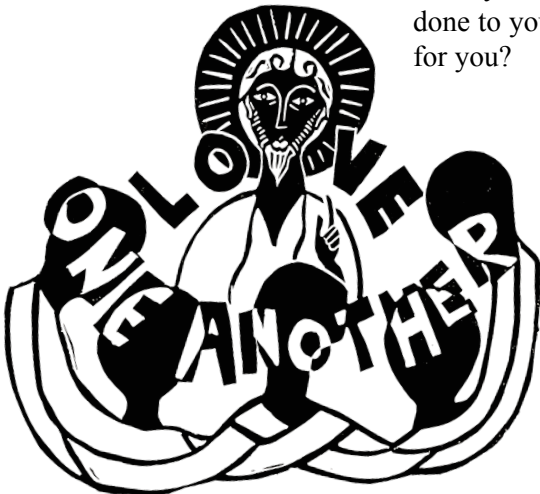
“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matt 22: 37 & 39

Not to be outdone by the Sadducees in yesterday’s passage from Matthew, the Pharisees test Jesus once again with the question about which is the greatest commandment in the law. Now this is a tough question to ask since the Jewish law is extensive with more than 400 things to obey! However, I believe it is so helpful that Jesus sums up the law in the two verses above.

These are two of my favorite verses in the New Testament because it lays it out there so simply. However, these commandments also make living up to them so difficult, once you think about them for a bit. Love God...well that is simple. I like to think of God as an all-loving being who carries me through whatever happens in my life. How can I not love such an all-loving being?

However, what happens when you feel that God has not been particularly good to you, because you blame God for things that have not gone well in your life, even though your core belief is God has your best in mind? How do you come to grips with the challenges in your life and return to God after having bad feelings about what you believe God has done to you or has not done for you?

Love your neighbor as yourself. This initially sounds simple, but, for me, this is the most challenging commandment. How easy is that to do when your neighbor, whoever that may be in a life situation, wrongs you in some way? We humans are so easily hurt and offended, and it can be so difficult for us to let things go and forgive, like God wants us to do. We can easily see the small faults in others but can ignore our own large faults. Sometimes, the faults we see in others are the exact faults of our own, but we are blinded by our own egos. How can we learn to be more gracious? Our God gives us unending grace and expects us to give the same to others. What can we do to allow that grace from God to flow out into the world and truly come closer to loving our neighbors as ourselves? Advent is also a time to ponder these tough commandments



About Bob Johnston

Bob Johnston, a former Roman Catholic, has been a member of St. Paul’s for nearly 31 years, and has served in many ministries both at the parish level and the diocesan level. He credits joining St. Paul’s with greatly deepening his spirituality through the many programs he has attended over the years.

Shepherd Boy

Wednesday, December 13 by
Kathy Bashaar

“Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth.” 1 Sam 17: 34-35

Before Mary and Joseph, before the prophets, even before the great temple that housed the Ark of the Covenant, there was a shepherd.

David was the youngest of eight sons, and so his father gave him the humblest job: guarding the family’s flock of sheep. Imagine this teenage boy, described in the Bible as ruddy and handsome with beautiful eyes. He has an overabundance of energy and daydreams of doing great things. The sheep are his only companions. He can tell one from another by a nicked ear or a lame leg, or by wool that is fuller or curlier or grayer or whiter or more yellow than the others. He’s named them. He talks to them. He loves to sing, so he sings to them, made-up songs of overlooked boys who win both epic battles and the hearts of beautiful girls.



He runs randomly through the thin grass and the poppies under the baking sun, exciting the sheep to chase. He practices with his slingshot, aiming at a jasmine bush or an olive tree. He gets really good with that slingshot, good enough to fend off the kinds of ravenous creatures that prey on sheep.

Good enough to slay a giant.

David will become a king, father to an even greater king, and ancestor to the King of Kings. He will write songs that we still sing three thousand years later. He will embarrass his wife by dancing before God. He will send one of his best and most loyal officers to certain death in battle, out of lust for that man’s wife. His favorite son will break his heart and die in battle against him. His life will be epic.

But, first, he was a shepherd boy, caring for his sheep and practicing with his slingshot, waiting for his real life to begin.

Watch by Night

Thursday, December 14 by Kathy Bashaar

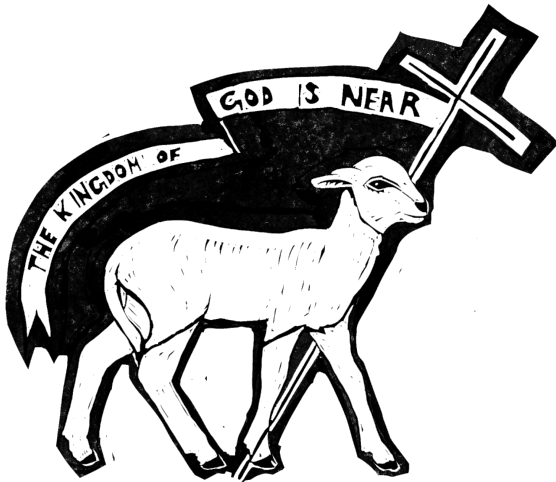
“In that region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” Luke 2:8

Have you ever had the experience of thinking it was an ordinary day, not knowing that something huge was about to break on you?

Everyone remembers that September 11, 2001, was such a lovely, ordinary September morning. But as we woke and got ready to go to work or school, the planes were already taking off, heading toward their cataclysmic moment.

On the day my mother died, I woke early and started making coffee and thinking about the day ahead. At 6:30, just as I was taking my first sip of coffee, I got the call that mom had died in her sleep.

But surprising news that turns your day upside down isn't always bad. Luke 2:8 is the shepherds' Advent moment. Although they don't know it, they are awaiting astoundingly good news.



Shepherds work hard. They have to make sure that their sheep find enough water and good grass. Sheep are notoriously stupid, and have to be convinced not to wander off, step in a hole, or trip over a large rock. If a sheep does get hurt, the shepherd has to be enough of a veterinarian to doctor it: set the broken leg, pull the thorn out of the hoof, clean the infected ear.

The shepherds in Luke were probably the best of the best. Some of their lambs were most likely destined to be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem. The law required that animals for temple sacrifice be born within five miles of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is about five miles from Jerusalem.

So, these sheep required special devotion. The temple lambs had to be less than a year old, male, and flawless. Imagine the pride these men must have taken in their sheep, and the care that they provided.

See them, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock, just like any night. The stars are bright in a cold sapphire sky. The sheep sleep, occasionally grunting or chuffing, or crying a grumbly, muted bleat. Some shepherds walk their rounds of the perimeter, alert for thieves or predators. Others sit close to their little fires, warming their hands, fending off sleepiness, telling each other stories or keeping counsel with their own thoughts. Maybe some of the older men good-naturedly tease the younger ones about pretty girls or about dumb things they've done. There is soft laughter. Their ears are vigilant for the howl of a wolf or the low growl of a stalking lion.

Something amazing is about to happen.

The Shepherds Today

Friday, December 15 by Kathy Bashaar

"Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'" Luke 2:9

Before the angel appeared, the shepherds may not have known that they were living in the first Advent. But they had been waiting for the Messiah all their lives. In a way, everything since King David had been Advent.

But they surely wouldn't have expected to be the first to hear of the Messiah's coming.

Although shepherding was important work, it was low-status labor, relegated most often to youngest sons (like David) or to young girls. It was dirty, exhausting, dangerous work, done outdoors in all weather.

And there was that night shift that probably nobody wanted. In our modern world, many people still do hard, low-status work. Workers in factory farms, slaughterhouses and meat-packing plants come to mind as the most direct descendants of our shepherds. I think also of the people who pick up our garbage or clean our offices. But I think especially of the aides in nursing homes. Often, they are not native-born and speak heavily-accented English. They work long hours, on all different shifts, for low pay. While my mother was slowly dying of dementia in a nursing home, I learned to be both deeply grateful and deeply awed by their patient, respectful treatment of the helpless elders in their care. Many of them were as tender and vigilant as the shepherds with their sheep. It is to humble, little-recognized workers like these that the angel appears. Something amazing truly has happened. The Messiah has come, heralded by an angel..

Even more amazing: these humble shepherds are the first to know they are given an importance and dignity that they would never have expected.

As they used to say on late-night TV: But wait! There's more!



All the People

Saturday, December 16 by Kathy Bashaar

*“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy **for all the people**; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’” Luke 2:10-11*

It is incredible enough that lowly shepherds are the first to hear the news that the Messiah has come. In four short words, the angel announces an even greater revolution: this news is for **all the people**. It’s not just for high priests, not just for kings and princes. It’s not just for devout Jews. It’s not just for the rich. And it’s not just for the poor. It’s not some bottom-rail-on-top revolution, where the mighty are brought down and the humble are raised up. It’s for **all the people**.

We know the next chapters of the story. Jesus will grow to manhood, teach and preach and heal. He will suffer and die. But this is still “good news of great joy.” Because we believe the part of the story where he then rises. The angels don’t say that he does that for a few elect, for people who follow the right rules, or perform the right rituals in the exact right way, or adhere to the right theology. That would be a very small god indeed. Our God is not small. He is not exclusive. This Messiah is big and inclusive. He is for **all the people**.



I wish I'd gone

Sunday, December 17 by Kathy Bashaar

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

Last year, I joined in an Ignatian Way study group with Jill Gordon, Ann Caffaro, Jan Littrell and Eileen Sharbaugh. I learned the technique of imaginative prayer: putting yourself in the place of a character in the Bible verse that you're studying. In Week 9, we reached the verses in Luke about the shepherds. I tried to put myself in their place when they made their decision to go to Bethlehem. They couldn't all have gone. Wouldn't some of them have had to stay back with the sheep? How did they decide who should go and who should stay? Even after the angel show, some of them might have felt safer on their familiar grassy hill than wandering around town looking for a baby, asking for directions from strangers. I ended up writing from the perspective of a young shepherd who decided to stay back with the sheep.

I pictured him looking a lot like my teenage grandson: tall, skinny and long-haired, all uncertainty and awkward, coltish limbs. I imagined him thinking, "I wish I'd gone. I wish I could see for myself. But I was afraid. I don't like the big city. And what if it was some kind of trick? What if we got in trouble? It felt safer to stay here with the sheep. But now I feel lonely and disappointed in myself."

We all disappoint ourselves sometimes. We all feel afraid sometimes. Most of us are backstage when the world's big events occur. But the angels remind us, again, that our doubts and fears and regrets do not exclude us, that Jesus is for **all the people**.



Love Personified

Monday, December 18 by Kathy Bashaar

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them”
Luke 2:16-18

The braver, more curious shepherds went to Bethlehem. There, they somehow found the right place and saw an exhausted mother, a relieved father, and a baby.

Did the baby radiate light or wear a halo, as often depicted? Was he fair-skinned and rosy-cheeked, already plump and cooing? When the shepherds saw the newborn child, what were they seeing?

They were seeing a newborn human child, almost certainly not fair-skinned, and more likely to be howling than cooing. A helpless, hungry little being, with unfocused eyes and flailing limbs. Our God entered our world not fully formed and powerful, but as a needy, vulnerable child.

They were seeing a shepherd, a loving, patient teacher, a friend and guide.

They were seeing a lamb, a sacrifice for **all the people**.

They were seeing a Messiah completely unlike the one they thought they were waiting for.

They were seeing a miracle, a finite human creature and yet a limitless God.

They were seeing a mystery to be explored in prayer and contemplation over many centuries.

They were seeing love personified.



Epic, Endless, Astounding

Tuesday, December 19 by
Kathy Bashaar

“There was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’” Luke 2:13-14

For Christmas of 1995, Al made a stable for the Holy Family figures that my mother had passed on to me. He built a frame, and crafted individual bricks by hand. Over the following years, each Christmas he bought a new figure to add to the manger scene. The shepherds are there, of course, along with the Wise Men, a little drummer boy, and several fictional characters invented for the purpose of selling expensive figures. We’ve also added quirky things here and there, like a fish our daughter made out of clay one year, and a Lego Christmas tree contributed by our son. It is my absolute favorite Christmas gift that Al ever gave me. Each year, we set it up on the day after Thanksgiving, and leave it out until at least Epiphany.

On at least one quiet evening during Advent, I like to turn off all the lights in the house except the little bulb inside the stable, and sit and just contemplate the scene.

Last year, as I sat in contemplation, I noticed the arm position of almost every figure. Their arms are flung open in positions of awe and/or welcome. Even the angel stands with her arms her arms open sedately, as she calmly heralds the presence of a history’s greatest miracle.

Awe is a given in the presence of such a miracle. Welcome is a given. What really struck me was the *openness*.

I think openness is as much a feature of Advent as waiting. When we are waiting, we might think we know exactly what we’re waiting for. Often, what arrives is not what we expected. The Israelites were waiting for a warrior king, who would lead them back to the glory days of King David. Instead, they got both a shepherd and a lamb. They got both a miracle and a fathomless mystery.

We can be astonished at what a seemingly-typical day brings. A shepherd boy can become a king, or be amazed to receive great news from angels. Stay awake. Stay open. We never really know what we’re waiting for, because our God is epic, endless, astounding, and **for all the people**.

About Kathy Bashaar

Kathy Bashaar and her husband Al joined St Pauls two years ago. Kathy has been active in Claudia Circle, the monthly women's book group and packing lunches for Neighborhood Resilience, and is currently co-teaching the Write Your Life class at St. Paul’s with Jill Gordon.

Wisdom from on High

Wednesday, December 20 by Jack Brownfield

O come, thou Wisdom from on high, who orderest all things mightily;

To us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go.

Lord, we call You “Wisdom from on high.” It makes me think of ivory towers, of secret knowledge locked up in old books above the understanding of the ordinary people down below. Or of the thousands and thousands of stars in the night sky that show how vast, how far beyond our ability to grasp Your universe really is. It makes me think of great mysteries and complex questions.

But maybe I am still thinking in human terms. To us, wisdom and knowledge are about those hidden, out of reach things. Wisdom and knowledge are only for the few. If everyone knows something, then it’s just common sense. It’s obvious. But if something is buried deep in a library, or emerges after months in the lab, or takes years and years to master, or requires us to travel to the ends of the earth, then we think that thing is really valuable. That’s true knowledge. And wisdom is even harder, even rarer. Wisdom, I suppose, takes a whole lifetime- if we ever acquire it.

We even think that way about You, Lord, or maybe it is just me. Knowing You means reading books of theology that talk about You, or it means studying the Bible until we know the verse to produce in every situation. Or it means daily prayer, contemplation, and mysticism. Visions. Pilgrimages. Ancient sages and wise old priests who can give us the hard-won knowledge of You. That’s the right word- hard-won. Because, Lord, You are the Wisdom from on high, the ultimate wisdom and knowledge of all. It only makes sense that You would be the final, the farthest, the hardest, thing of all to master. If we are going to know You, it is only fair that we put in the work, that we spend the time. After all, if knowing You was easy, then anyone could do it.

There I go, thinking in human terms. Thinking that Your Wisdom is like our wisdom, that if you give Yourself to everyone, give everyone the chance to know You, then knowledge of You must not be worth much at all. For us, if a thing is easy to get, if it doesn’t take much work, then it isn’t very valuable. If it’s free, we say it isn’t valuable at all.

But You, Wisdom from on high, are different. You are so wise, so high, that You do not hold yourself up out of our reach or bury Yourself away where only the most diligent, the cleverest of us can find You. No, You come *to us*. You come for *free*. You came to Your people, not in a book or a mysterious vision but as a child, a baby boy like the babies everyone has seen and cradled. You, God Almighty, came into this world, our world, to be God with us. You are not far away. You are not for the sages or the theologians or the church people but for all the people. And so we sing, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Lord of Might

Thursday, December 21 by Jack Brownfield

*O come, O come, thou Lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the law, in cloud, and majesty, and awe.*

You are the “Lord of Might,” and this is even more difficult than calling you the Wisdom from on high. You are mighty, powerful, strong- you are the Creator of all things, the Ruler of the universe. Whatever else it means, Your being Lord *does* mean this power, this authority, this rule. You are the power above every earthly power, above every bullying boss, every corrupt and tyrannical government, and above every oppressive and all-consuming system.



They throw their weight around and try to convince the people under them that they are in control. “That’s just the way the world works,” we say.

But from time to time, You intervene. You intervened for the people of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt, intervened against Pharaoh in leading them to freedom and even against the power of nature itself when You led them through the Red Sea. You said “I have chosen this people, and I love them, and I will not let anything crush them down.” You, Lord of Might, brought them to freedom.

And then, “in cloud, and majesty, and awe,” You gave Your people the law to be a vision of a different world, a new system, a better justice. Theft and murder, adultery and idolatry, every kind of oppression and violence- You declared them all to go against Your righteous will, Your holy purpose for humanity. In their place, You gave a vision of sister and brotherhood, of siblings bound in love, forgiving debts, freeing prisoners, and worshiping You alone.

This is Your law. You gave it to one people, to Israel, to be an example for the world. You, mighty God, stamped this vision of loving fellowship with Your seal, marked it as Your dream for us.

But they, and we, could not make that vision a reality. Your holy commandment tells us not to murder, but the killing, and the wars, and the hatred do not stop. Your holy commandment tells us to worship

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You alone, but each of us follows their own god- money or popularity, influence or a comfortable life. You are the Lord, powerful beyond understanding, and yet it seems You cannot make us live as we should. Might is not enough. "Thou shalt..." is not enough, no matter how powerful the speaker is.

And so, Lord of Might, You did something different. Since the booming voice, the cloud and majesty and awe could not scare us straight, You came quietly, not to give another law but to live out the law of love You had already given. You came to us as a human being, weak and fragile. You gave up the might that was Yours and obeyed the law, Resisted the temptations, and loved us to the very end. You came to make Your dream, Your vision, a reality on the Earth. You came, not to lay down more heavy commandments, but to lift the burden, to bear it with us and for us because we could not bear it ourselves. And so we sing, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Resisting Tyranny

Friday, December 22 by Jack Brownfield

*O come, thou Branch of Jesse's tree, free them from Satan's tyranny
That trust thy mighty power to save, and give them victory
o'er the grave.*

Lord, we are all about freedom. We call our country the land of the free, and our laws have slowly, imperfectly, and with so many exceptions today, tried to make that description a reality. Your average high school civics class covers them- freedom of speech and of religion, freedom to protest, and so on.

Freedom, in other words, from governmental oppression. This is good, but it is not enough. There are other burdens, other forces which imprison Your children from the inside. In our better moments, we try to fight against these, too, fight for freedom from racism, sexism, homophobia, freedom from prejudice and hatred and indifference. But still they hold our country, our world, in their grip, keep us from the real freedom to love and to live in fellowship. They keep some people on the bottom and others on the top, and they put up walls and spin out justifications for all this captivity. We want order, stability, predictability, and we're happy to put up with some unfreedom to get them, particularly if it doesn't fall on us.



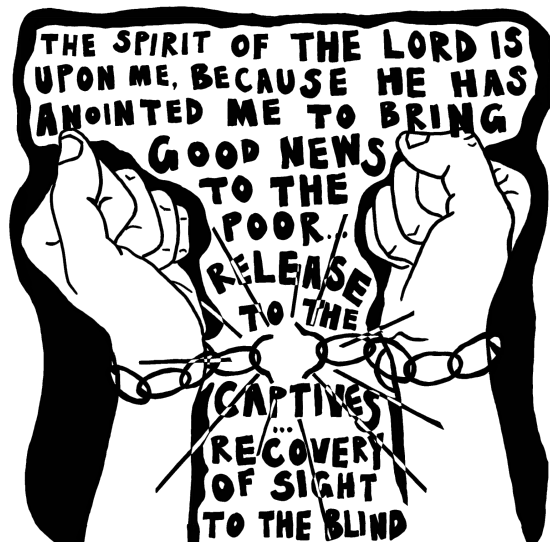
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And, Lord, it gets worse, because even if we could shake off those weights, we would still not be free from the old, unbeatable foes. Violence of every kind, disease and natural disasters, the awful accidents which no one can predict- try as we will, we can't free ourselves from these terrors. They come for us, or better, we are all coming for them, hurtling towards the great unfreedom which lies behind them all: the grave, which casts its shadow over all our life.

If You will allow me an illustration, it makes me think of a hill, and someone kicking a rock over the edge. Down and down it tumbles, bumping and scraping against other rocks, gaining speed. How can that rock stop its fall? How can it climb back up to the top? It has no freedom. It just goes down with the inexorable force of gravity, and waiting at the bottom of our hill is the grave which waits to swallow it up.

And so we live, hurting and being hurt, sinning and sinned against, scared of what we know will come but unable to stop it. This is Satan's tyranny; this is the power of the grave.

But You saw this history. You saw this inevitable fall, this slide into unfreedom, this destiny of destruction which has us in its grasp. You, the Liberator, the One who led Israel out of slavery, did not will that anyone should live in bondage to these powers. You, the Mighty Lord, were free from the grave and its deadly control. But You came to us, You gave up Your lordly freedom and became one of us. Caught and oppressed by Roman tyranny, by poverty and hunger, by rejection and fear, and in the end, by the grave which opens its mouth for us all. And then You rose, in freedom and victory, with that hard-won freedom for us, too. And so we sing, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*



The Journey

Saturday, December 23 by Jack Brownfield

O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home;

Make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery.

Lord, you know about going on a journey. You traveled during your earthly life- to Egypt as an infant, then back to Nazareth as a boy. When You were twelve, You went up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and during Your ministry, You traveled from village to village, proclaiming the good news. And Your parables were full of journeys: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...” and the prodigal son traveling to a far country. You knew what it was like to pack Your things, take a long, last look at a place, and turn towards the road.

We are all on a journey. We move about in our lives, of course, from hometown to new city, from one job to another, but all those little changes are just signs of the great journey, the one that only goes one way. We are born, we experience those days and years of childhood that seemed so long at the time, and then we grow older. Each day, each hour, springs up and then passes away. Places and relationships, jobs and experiences and friends, they come into our lives and then the journey takes us on. We are not made to stay. Each day we say our goodbyes, pull up our roots, and journey on. Or maybe we don't.

But that doesn't make much difference, because our journey does not wait, and new places, new people, new moods rise up to take the place of the ones we've left behind. And still the future, the destination, is hazy. Is it happiness? A loving family? A well-paid, fulfilling career, with plenty of free time for our favorite pastimes? Maybe You see, Lord, the point our journeys are aiming for, but we don't. The best we can do is dream, and plan, but time leaves behind those dreams and makes the best plans look silly.

Our journey feels like a wandering, like a hike without a map. That can be fun, can be liberating for an afternoon, but for a lifetime? For the only one we have? But what else can we do? We can't see where we're going.

But it's there, in our wandering, that You see us. You see us lost and journeying in the wilderness, and You make Yourself our destination. You are our Heavenly Home, our Sabbath Rest, our Promised Land. We cannot find the way to You, so You put Yourself where we, in our confused journey, will end. You weave the threads of our lives, the tangled pathways, into a road that brings us to You.

And You walked with us. One of us, You walked Your own journey, Your lonely road, to show us that through the twists and turns, the destination is certain. You walked through the darkest valleys to show us that there is nowhere we can go that You have not blazed the trail. Wherever we walk, You walk ahead, and Your footsteps light the way to our eternal home. Wandering in the night, we sing, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Cheer in Bethlehem

Sunday, December 24 by Jack Brownfield

O come, thou Dayspring from on high, and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight.

“Cheer” seems like a silly word for what You give. Cheer means hot chocolate and candy canes and Dean Martin singing Christmas carols. It means a card from an old friend or our favorite holiday movie, the one we can quote almost all the way through. Cheer means a little happiness, a little warmth, in the middle of the winter. There’s nothing wrong with this kind of pleasant Christmas cheer, and everyone likes it, even Your children who do not celebrate Christmas. What’s not to love about treats and fun, a chance to give presents and hum familiar tunes?

But we sense You are about more than that. Christmas in the Church is about more than that. This great mystery, God born as a helpless, human infant, isn’t that more important than baking cookies and playing in the snow? Shouldn’t we be more serious? “Keep Christ in Christmas!” we hear from some quarters, and others tell us that the real work of Christmas is to feed the hungry, to work for justice and peace and love. Not to eat our candy canes and put up our twinkling lights, all those trappings of a commercialized, secularized holiday.

But You are big enough for it all, and Your coming to Earth is big enough to enfold it all. Big enough to point us to what justice requires—You were born in a stable, because there was no room for Your parents at the inn, and how many thousands of people sleep on cold streets this Advent because there is no room for them, no apartment for them?

Big enough to point us to the deep meaning, the glorious mystery, of God incarnate as one of us. You spoke a word and the whole universe came into being, and on that Christmas morning You cried without words like every baby cries, held in Your mother’s arms. You made each star, and then You looked up at them in wonder from the eyes of a newborn child.



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God with Us

Monday, December 25 by Jack Brownfield

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God
appear.*

Israel, we are told in Genesis, means “Struggles with God.” Over and over in the Hebrew Bible, we read about the people You chose, Lord, to be *Your* people. The people You delivered from slavery in Egypt, the people You gave Your law and to whom You promised a kingdom which would never end. And this people, so blessed by their covenant with You- *this* people You named Israel. Struggles with God.

The pattern happens again and again. You save the people, and the people follow You, obey You, love You, for a while. But it can’t last. They struggle, they turn away, they do anything they can to make You leave. Like St. Paul, they kick against the goads. You invite them to covenant, partnership, union, but they struggle.

But the great mistake is to see this Israel story, this struggle with God, as someone else’s story, as the story of a different group of people a long time ago. Israel’s story is unique, but its uniqueness is like a great movie or classic novel that holds a mirror up to the world. In this one story, we can see all our stories. The refusal of Your grace, the turn away, the insistence to have it our way. And all the while You knock at the door, You pour out Your love, You knit Your heart to us, only to have us pull the threads away.

And yes, Your Christmas means cheer, simple joy and love. The night is dark, the clouds are thick, but morning has broken, and You, the Dayspring, have shined on us. The darkness is not gone, but the light shines through. In those sappy songs, in the nostalgic movies and the eggnog, in the little gifts we give to coworkers and the sight of snow on the grass, crisp and clean, the light is breaking through. In the joy of Christmas morning, wrapping paper thrown around the room, kids delirious with happiness over the new toy, the light is breaking through.

Such little things, but we are only little creatures, Lord. And these little things are signs, mirrors, of the great thing in Bethlehem. Each light on the tree reflects Your star, each carol on the radio echoes the angels when they announced Your birth. Each moment of contentment, each taste of holiday cheer, is a parable of Your coming, because You came to save us, to give us joy that will never fade away. And so we sing, *Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O
Israel!*

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And where does it end? Lonely exile? Surely You must eventually throw up Your hands, shake Your all-seeing head, and thunder out “Enough. Have it your way.” Will our struggle with You, God, make a final break, an end, a hard-won isolation from Your persistent love?

No. We have limits, but You are infinite. We only try so many times before we give up, but You are the Mighty Lord who cannot be thwarted. We can’t find the right way and lose interest, but You are Wisdom and know the secret paths of our hearts. We stray, we disobey, we do everything but love You and each other, but You name Yourself Emmanuel, “God with us.”

With *us*. Not with them, not with the people who’ve never gone wrong or who’ve long since shaped up. Not with some other people, more pious and loving and forgiving than ourselves. Not with the version of ourselves we wished we were. You, Lord, are God with us. This is the good news St. John rejoiced to describe:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...

And the Word became flesh and lived among *us*, and *we* have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” He comes to us, and so we sing, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*



About Jack Brownfield

Jack Brownfield is a Candidate for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church. He currently attends Virginia Theological Seminary’s Anglican Studies program.

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Mt. Lebanon

1066 Washington Rd, Pittsburgh, PA 15228

stpaulspgh.org