



NEW BRUNSWICK
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Think Critically • Act Justly • Lead Faithfully



MESSAGES OF GOOD NEWS

ADVENT-CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONALS
DECEMBER 1, 2024 - JANUARY 5, 2025

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Foreword

In the name of the Triune God, grace, mercy, and peace!

As we begin another Advent season, students and alumni of New Brunswick Theological Seminary are pleased to bring you these devotions for the four weeks of Advent and prayers for the twelve days of Christmas, organized by the Theological Writing Center. This year's devotions are organized around the four visits by angels—three in the Gospel of Luke, one in Matthew's Gospel—and some lighthearted imagined entries from the angel Gabriel's personal log. We hope the "log entries" will make you laugh and the other devotions, in poetry and prose, help you reflect on God's love and call to justice and faithful living.

The cover illustration is a stained-glass rendition of Gabriel that hangs in Gardner A. Sage Library, which celebrates its 150th birthday in 2025. Gabriel reminds us that the mission of NBTS is to train people to be messengers, and we have begun the twenty-fifth decade of that mission this fall. As we celebrate these milestones, we continue to train and equip new generations of messengers sharing God's Good News, just like the generations represented here.

May these devotions enhance your celebration of the season, and may you have a blessed Advent and a joyous Christmas.



James Hart Brumm

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All Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition unless otherwise noted.

Week 1 of Advent

Gabriel's announcement, Zechariah's doubt, Elizabeth's joy

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of God to offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of God, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of God. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what God has done for me in this time, when God looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Luke 1:5-25

Personal Log of Gabriel, Messenger First Class, Trumpeter Second Class,
Armies of the God Who Is and Was and Is to Come (also known as the “Heavenly Host”)

Delivered Good News to the Temple of God’s Chosen People in Jerusalem today. I met this priest named Zechariah in the Holy of Holies. He’s a good sort, and so is his wife, Elizabeth—honest, work-a-day folks, just the sort of people the Boss takes a shine to. I was sent with a Divine message: the Boss, who talks about not interfering, about letting the humans find their own way and free will and all that, tells me there’s a difference between the consequences of free will and a back door escape left by grace. It doesn’t make sense to me, but I’m not the Boss.

I tell Zechariah that he and Elizabeth finally get to have children. Of course, they’re at the age where they should invest in a nice, low maintenance place in a 55-and-older kibbutz. So, it’s perfectly legitimate to ask questions about how this will work, what’s in store for their son, and how he’ll fit into this grand salvation plan. Those would all be good questions.

But what he asked wasn’t good: “How can I be sure of this?”

One can question how any of this makes sense. One can question who I am, and how I got into the place. But nobody, I mean *nobody*, questions whether the GOD WHO IS will do what God promises. No, half of what the Boss says makes no sense to me, but you still don’t ask that. But Zechariah had the temerity to ask. Puny, mortal, mud-pie-with-a soul doubted the Divine Word.

So I took his voice away. Hey, any more questions? No? Not so glib now, eh, Mr. Smarty Priest?

Well, the mission was accomplished. I felt pretty good: no voice means very little priestly work. Zechariah should have a lot more time to stay home and help Elizabeth do whatever the humans do to get babies, right?

The Boss didn’t seem to think so. The Boss says free will means we don’t get to go around smiting any human who annoys us.

I said I’m military. I’m a good angel. I know all about faith in what is unseen and following orders, and we have to keep the others in line.

The Boss didn’t buy it. Says I’ll have to do better with the next mission.

Say Less

“It often shows a fine command of language to say nothing.” This statement was drilled into me and my classmates by our high school English teacher. This was a life lesson to teach us when and when not to speak. The teacher’s point was, “When we do not know what to say, it is better to say nothing.”

In Luke 1, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, had tried for years to have a child, with no success. Now they were at the age where they no longer held out hope that this was possible. One day Zechariah was faithfully performing his leadership duties as priest, in the holy place. While there an angel of the Lord appeared and told Zechariah that his prayer had been heard.

Zechariah’s assignment as priest was to burn incense, lifting prayers unto the Lord, on behalf of the people. While he was ministering on behalf of others, God sent a messenger to let Zechariah know that God heard the longings that he, and his wife, had given up on. And God spoke through the angel to let Zechariah know God would give him and his wife a child.

The announcement of the angel caused doubt to arise in Zechariah’s mind. As his hope sputtered to reignite, Zechariah began to question God’s messenger. “Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years’” (Luke 1:18).

How often do we question or doubt the word of God, especially regarding things that we feel are beyond the realm of possibility? How often do we speak without thinking? If Zechariah had been thinking clearly maybe he would have realized that the credibility of a message can be relied upon based on the character of the one who sent it. And, when God speaks, what God says will be fulfilled. This may have helped Zechariah with his response. Say less.

This was the time when Zechariah needed to practice the principle of saying nothing, if he did not know what to say. “The angel responded, to Zechariah, ‘. . . because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will be mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’” (Luke 1:20). And it was so.

This was a mild rebuke to Zechariah’s response. The angel put Zechariah on mute. Or as we might put it, the angel caused him to say less. Because when God speaks, it is often best to be quiet, and watch God be God!

Prayer

Gracious God,
thank you for sending your Word
to minister to the needs and longings of humanity.
Even when it seems impossible,
your Word never returns void, but always accomplishes what you intend.
Help us, in this season,
to hear what You are saying,
to say less,
and to witness the awesome things that you do!

Robert Williams
Doctor of Ministry Candidate

Getting In Your Own Way

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah for your prayer has been heard” (Luke 1:13).

Isn't it reassuring that God hears all our prayers? Have you ever prayed for something, however, when God's response was delayed? When this happens, many of us decide to go it alone without God. We find ourselves in situations that God did not intend for us, or we lose hope and give up. My grandmother called this blocking your blessings. I like to use the phrase “getting in your own way.”

There is a man in the Bible who also was “getting in his own way.” Zechariah was a priest who was in the Temple performing Temple duties. An angel named Gabriel came to give him a message from God that God heard his prayers and that his wife, Elizabeth, would become pregnant and give birth to a son named John. Zechariah's response was unbelief, and he asked Gabriel, “How will I know this is so?” (Luke 1:18).

Does this sound familiar? I know it does to me. It is a contradictory behavior. Praying for a blessing and, when it comes to fruition, then doubting it. In response to Zechariah's doubting, God made him mute. However, even with the doubt, God provided Zechariah grace and mercy, and he was able to speak once his son was born. The son, John, grew up to be “great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15).

During this Advent season, let us continue to put our hope and faith in the fact that God hears all our prayers, and you do not have to doubt that.

Prayer

Dear Sovereign Lord,
thank you for your grace and your mercy.
Lord, your timing is perfect.
Thank you for being patient with me when I “get in the way” of my blessings.
In Jesus's name,
Amen.

*Alicia Damon
Certificate Student*

Waiting

In our society, where we can order something online and get it an hour later, we often have a hard time waiting. Simone Weil, the French philosopher, said, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” This is easier said than done when many go years with their prayers unanswered while longings grow.

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had been waiting for a long time. “They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old” (Luke 1:7). There’s a painful irony, for though Zechariah’s name means “the Lord remembers,” in all the long years of waiting, it likely felt as if the Lord had forgotten him.

Everything changes in these verses. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and says, “You will have a son.” This news is so shocking, that Zechariah’s response is “This is impossible.” It’s hard for Zechariah to wrap his mind around this. He doesn’t believe it. Zechariah gets a case of angelic laryngitis for the next nine months until his son is born.

Zechariah and Elizabeth’s story reminds us that a faithful response to waiting is prayer. Gabriel told Zechariah, “Your prayer has been heard” (Luke 1:13). This statement gives us insight into how Zechariah and Elizabeth handled their long years of disappointment: They persevered in prayer. They prayed even when things did not unfold as they expected them to. They held on to God, amid social disgrace, disappointment, and hopelessness.

Of course, their waiting was not perfect. “You *did not believe* my words, which *will come true* at their appointed time” (Luke 1:10). Zechariah struggled in faith here and was suspended in disbelief. Yet, God still performed the miracle.

Advent reminds us that even though our faith is not always strong, God is faithful to come. We may doubt, get depressed, become discouraged, or want to give up, yet God is still gracious to come.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is both beautiful and frustrating. It’s beautiful because their long waiting ends with answered prayer. But it’s frustrating because we know that not all of our prayers are answered in this same way. This is the complexity of Advent—human suffering and divine grace—and we hold it all together. Whether it is in this life or the life to come, we know God will make all things new. So with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we hold on.

Prayer

Eternal God, you have assured us that you are with us.
God, you are present, living, and active in our lives
—not only present, but you are rejoicing in us and calming us with your love.
Yet, we often believe we are alone.
Help us to trust you more,
knowing you can use even our doubt-filled faith
to spark a deeper trust and love in you.
When the future is uncertain and our prayers seem worthless and unheard,
may we look to the examples of Zechariah and Elizabeth,
who remained devout to you, even through their pain and confusion.
God of faithfulness, help us to wait for you to move and speak.
May we be aware of your presence every day,
and walk in your ways of love!
In Jesus’ name, Amen.

*Leah Ennis-Gasero
MDiv, Class of 2013*

Believe It

I don't know about you, but this Advent season is finding a lot of us feeling overwhelmed. In that way, I tend to think that Zechariah is a very relatable figure. There he is, minding his own business, going about his day, just lighting some incense and not bothering anyone, when an angel of the Lord just appears, out of nowhere, next to the altar. Of course he is *terrified* by this; wouldn't you be? The relentless forward march of the daily mundane is suddenly interrupted by an unexpected something that shatters your very concept of reality. Whether it comes bearing good news or bad, that moment when the day you expect is yanked off course by the day you're actually going to have is often *profoundly* disturbing.

Is it any wonder Zechariah was *terrified*?

The angel gives poor Zechariah the assurances that not only does he not need to be afraid, but that this interruption of his regularly-scheduled reality portends wonderful news for him and his. Nevertheless, this assurance does precisely *nothing* to mitigate his shock, his disbelief at an impossible truth delivered by an agent of the Most High who just happened to pop in while he was quietly minding his own business, lighting the incense before church.

These are days in which good news defies belief, in which the darkness seems so absolute that the proclamation of a light, *any* light, seems too good to be true. These are days in which we often find ourselves too overwhelmed to believe that there is any good news of great joy to be had, and in which we are tempted to laugh in the face of any who would tell us to believe in the impossible hope of better things to come.

Believe it anyways.

Because to deny the existence of hope is to see ourselves struck mute, denied our chance to participate in the great things that are to come. And these are times when every voice that can carry a message of hope is desperately needed.

Prayer

Impossibly loving God, protect us.
Protect our hearts from developing an immunity to hope.
Protect our eyes from acclimating so fully to the dark that the light can blind us.
Protect our voices, that they might not be silenced by cynicism,
but emboldened by the hope you are bringing to us in this season.
Help us to always be ready to see that light
which even now is shining in the darkness,
which the darkness can never overcome.
In Christ's indefatigable name we pray, in hope.
Amen.

*Donald Van Antwerpen
Doctor of Ministry Candidate*

Week 2 of Advent

Gabriel's announcement, Mary's faithful questions

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! God is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of God; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. *Luke 1:26-38*

Personal Log of Gabriel, Messenger First Class, Trumpeter Second Class,
Armies of the God Who Is and Was and Is to Come (also known as the “Heavenly Host”)

I went to Nazareth, a no-place town in the nowhere province of Galilee, to this teenage girl named Mary who is supposed to marry a carpenter named Joseph. Everybody and their inbred cousin seems to be named Mary or Joseph in this day and age, so I've been sent to nowhere special to meet nobody special.

This nobody special is in big trouble: she's pregnant. And it isn't Joseph's. And this society deals with one surprise life by ending two lives; unmarried pregnant women can be stoned to death.

She may be a young nobody out of nowhere, but this girl has a head on her shoulders. I show up, and she's nervous, sure—there's a reason the manual tells messengers in the field to always begin “Don't be afraid”—but she doesn't panic. She asks questions; good questions. Well, she asks how she could be pregnant, and I would have thought her parents would have had that talk with her, but the rest of her questions are good, and I must admit the Boss has been a bit cagey about the particulars of this pregnancy.

What's clear is that this is a special baby: the Boss's baby. How does that even work? Never mind the biology—I get to tell her “Nothing is impossible for God”—whatever happened to free will? What happened to lines one doesn't cross? I get told the Boss has been considering this since before the beginning, and that it all has to do with love.

This love seems to make cut-and-dried rules into what the humans call “situational ethics.” While the justice of God is perfect, yet the mercy of God is endless. Somehow, the Boss, who is really quite adept with paradox, makes those two concepts co-exist. I must remind myself of that sometimes. I have to keep the faith and let the Boss be boss.

This is hard enough for me, an angel, used to eternity and paradoxes and the inscrutable will of God. How does she cope with it all? A supernatural being shows up, tells her a story about impossible, scandalous things that could get her shunned, abandoned by her family and her fiancé, even killed. She is clearly afraid, clearly confused, clearly out of her depth, clearly saying “yes” to things she can't possibly understand.

But she said “yes.” And she meant it. She has no idea what she's getting into or why, but she believes it is of God. And she seems to have what it takes to stick with it. At least that's what the Boss says.

This is a girl . . . a woman now, I guess . . . who bears some watching.

And, with all she's up against, she'll need it.

Are You Usable?

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

In this season of Advent here's my question: are you usable?

In this text we witness the evidence that "destiny moves forward one step at a time."¹ The preparation of God's promise of salvation for humanity was commencing through the angel Gabriel's message to Mary. She was highly favored and chosen by God to conceive a baby boy: "sweet little Jesus boy."² Although she was perplexed, her response was indeed an example of her serviceability for events to take place according to God's plan. Mary's wonderful and selfless response is a true model of her faith and obedience as she embraced Gabriel's message from the Lord.

Today as believers we can find peace in Mary's words when faced with what may seem impossible to us. Indeed, her response demonstrated great faith in both questions and obedience as it overshadowed the impossible. The Bible says this: "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Each day, let us continue to be mindful of our usability to God through faith, questioning, and obedience in our missions here on earth to "Think Critically, Act Justly, Lead Faithfully" (Micah 6:8).

Prayer

Dear merciful, righteous, and gracious God, we thank you!
We praise you for who you are in our lives.
We, too, can say "Here I Am Lord" as servants,
always be ready and usable for your adventurous plan and purpose.
Daily, we ask for your sustaining grace and direction
as we make ourselves available to you
through our steadfast faith and obedience,
in the beautiful, wonderful, and powerful name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Wilma Porter
MATS, Class of 2024

¹ <https://graceandpeacejoanne.com/2024/03/20/her-story-christs-ministry-the-wife-of-pilate/>

² <https://aaregistry.org/poem/sweet-little-jesus-boy-by-robert-macgimsey/>

Question Time

When we hear the story of the angel appearing to Mary, we often *live* in the humble submission of verse 38, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary’s willingness to not only accede to, not only to go along with, but to actively *embrace* the impossible mission being set before her by the angel of the Lord is something that we all aspire to as servants of God; so much so that we often jump right to that verse, and completely forget the rest of the passage along the way!

Our culture loves to tell us that doubt is a sin, and that questioning the Lord is a sign that perhaps we aren’t as committed to the faith as we should be. We treat our questions like dirty little secrets, things that we pretend we never have, telling ourselves that if we were truly the committed servants that we want to be, that we *claim* to be, then we wouldn’t have any doubts at all. If we were *truly* committed to the Lord, we would, like Mary—with receptivity and humility abounding—simply accept the truth and uncritically *roll with it*.

But . . . astute readers of the scripture may note that *Mary does no such thing herself!*

Mary’s first reaction to the appearance of the angel Gabriel is to look them in the face and ask, “How’s that gonna work?” And at no point does Gabriel criticize her for her question, or condemn her faith, or in any way assess her negatively because she had the unmitigated gall to bluntly question the representative of Almighty God. Her questions are never seen as a mark against her righteousness, never once viewed as a diminishment of her historic humility. In this moment, she demonstrates that it is totally possible to be committed, devoted, and humbly in service to the Lord while asking questions.

Inquiry is not unrighteous, and asking questions doesn’t make us unfaithful.

After all, if it was good enough for Mary, it’s good enough for us!

Prayer

God who defies all explanation,
we ask that you continue to inspire our hearts with questions abounding.
Help us to respond to the unknowable with a desire to know,
to the fearful with a desire to understand,
and to the impossible with a desire to see the fullness of all your wonderful possibilities.
Acquaint us with the unusual Lord,
and open our hearts to an infinite universe of possibilities,
and show us the one thread that binds them all together;
your unfailing and perfect love.

Donald Van Antwerpen
Doctor of Ministry Candidate

Do Not Be A Fraid

That's no misprint! I have deliberately separated the A of "afraid" from the rest of the word. Let me tell you why.

When I was a student at NBTS, I had the good fortune to live for a time in the household of a professor and his wife, helping them, both busy pastors and teachers, with their young children. It was a delight (at least, for me!). The children were lovely: bright and creative. One day, as Advent began, I was caring for them after school. The little girl was singing, as she so often did, while her brother concentrated intently on drawing something. He proudly showed me his work: a huge angel with feathery wings of bright gold, and beside the angel, a small, square shouldered person in blue. "That's Mary" he said, as if I needed telling, "and that's the angel!" Above the figures in bold letters read the inscription: DO NOT BE A FRAID. "It's for you!" he said.

"What a wonderful gift!" I said, because it was. But I couldn't help adding "But we usually write the 'a' right next to the 'fraid.'"

"Well, I don't," he said; so that was that. I kept that picture a long time, because it was, indeed, for me.

You see, there's wisdom in his separated "A." We humans are often afraid. We have much to fear, some years more than others. We need to feel our fears: to feel them, process them, express them, and let them go. If we suppress them, they can fester, turning into debilitating chronic depression or anxiety, even into hatred. The angel did not want Mary to deny her reasonable fears, fears any girl might have in that age or this, on discovering she is pregnant. But he said to her, and to us: "Do not be a Fraid. Do not be a person so full of fear that fear defines you." The person who is a Fraid allows fear, not faith, to rule them.

Mary was not a Fraid. She felt her fear, released it, turned it to faith, and went out to act on the good news that she was blessed by God to bear the Saviour of the world. Let's really hear the angel this year, and like Mary, let not one of us be a Fraid!

Prayer

God of Grace, I thank you
that you send your angels to announce the good news
that I can choose, like Mary, to say Yes to love and No to fear.
Help me hear your Word with all its promise and challenge,
and give me the courage to say with Mary,
"Here I am, your servant, Let it be!"
And so may I, too, bear the Christ child to be the Light of a world in darkness;
in his Holy Name I pray.
Amen.

Jennifer Reece
MDiv, Class of 1987

An Indiscriminate Love

Biblical culture, and particularly the Gospels, reminds us that God often chooses those in the margins of society to do God's bidding. Howard Thurman referred to these as "the disinherited"—people deprived of social, political, and economic power—who would never meet societal standards of greatness or even worthiness simply because the world's rubric is often superficial, self-aggrandizing and its metrics of classism are not inclusive.³

Simply imagine God as the God of DEIA—diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. God is! Thurman argues that Jesus was a model for the oppressed, and asserts that Jesus, as a poor Jew under Roman occupation, understood the plight of the marginalized. It is Jesus' understanding and his empathetic interactions and ministry that informs Hebrews 4:15a: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses . . ."

What if God had chosen an aristocrat to be the mother of Jesus? My sisters and brothers, instead of the centrality of love which is the touchstone of Jesus' ministry, fear, deception, and hatred would be the typical responses to the disinherited and their circumstances. There would be no King Davids, or Rahabs. There would be no such thing as a Jewish orphan leading an entire people in avoidance of annihilation. Consider your own context, and that of people you know. Consider that we are not chosen by God based on our abilities or socio-economic standing. No! A sovereign and just God indiscriminately rains on the just as well as the unjust, and in the same way that Gabriel announces to Mary, a poor and Jewish teenager, that she is blessed and highly favored, so are you!

This CHRISTmas and during this Advent season, remember the indiscriminate love of GOD that gave us all the greatest gift—LOVE as demonstrated at Golgotha but whose first demonstration was giving us Jesus—God the Son as the redemptive remedy for our sin. It was that very first CHRISTmas all those years ago in Nazareth and should be for us a memorial of love.

Let's replicate that love—indiscriminately. Remembering that we are all DEIA ambassadors, inclusive and deliberate because clearly, greatness lives even in the societal margins.

Prayer

Eternal, always God, thank you for Jesus!
Thank you for the example of indiscriminate love
—choosing Mary all of those years ago to birth the Christ child.
You could've chosen anyone.
May we not miss the message of Your sovereignty and inclusivity,
and may we too practice a non-judgmental love
and never judge the proverbial cover of my neighbor's book
based on where she lives or what she wears or how she speaks.
Make us more like you.
Give us the desire and hunger for righteousness
for you said, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be fed." In
Jesus's name, Amen!

Anne C. Tait
Doctor of Ministry Candidate

³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, reprint edition (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996).

When Mary Went into the Hills

When Mary went into the hills, the town where her old cousin dwelt,
The virgin's voice within the room caused John to leap within the womb.

Elizabeth, with Spirit filled, cried out exclaiming to the hills,
"Among all women Mary's blessed, the child within her womb's the best!"

"And I as well. Why? I don't know. I'm blessed that you've come to my door."
May all who meet with Mary's son rejoice in what the Lord has done.

Prayer

God who journeys with us and welcomes us in:
strengthen us in our questioning,
comfort us in our fears,
fill us with grace in our welcoming,
and bless us in our surprises.
Let us be strong supports to all those who struggle with bearing your Life
that as one we may live into the light of your Justice.

David Alexander
MDiv, Class of 1980

Mary Said “Yes.”

“You said what?” Her father glared at her across the dinner table. “How could you say ‘Yes.’? You have no authority to say *anything*, much less agree to this!” “But Papa, it was...” Do NOT ‘But Papa’ me, young lady. Angel my foot! You know the rules. End of discussion. Anne, what are we to do with our daughter? She’s beginning to show.” “Calm down, Joachim. I’ll get my cousin Elizabeth to take her for a while. She will show her what she said ‘Yes’ to.”

Maybe Mary was entranced by the angel and responded in awe. Maybe she knew exactly what she was doing and said yes to get out of the house. Maybe there were other reasons that we will never guess at, much less know. Scripture avoids conjecture; the underlying reason is not the point. The important thing is that Mary agreed to do what God wanted, regardless. Family jumble-brained and upset, Joseph blindsided, Elizabeth imposed upon – none of these carries the weight of God’s will. In the short run, Mary threw her world into chaos and herself into mortal danger. She took the long view of how her choice would make a difference. The rest of the Gospel bears out that she was right.

How often do we respond the way Mary did to the beckoning of God’s call? How often do we prioritize the things of the Spirit over the things we usually think of as of utmost import? How often do we choose what is right over what is “correct” or “convenient”? If we do as Mary did, what earth-shaking events might ensue? Do we have the faith to say “Yes” when we are asked to take a holy risk? If we do not, our answer will always be “No.”

Prayer

God of mystery and surprise,
grant us the grace to say “Yes” to your messengers
and act accordingly.
Amen.

Kathleen Hart Brumm
MDiv, Class of 1992

Trust

Have you ever faced a challenging situation in your life and wondered how it was going to work out? You may have spent sleepless nights as you worried, not knowing what to do. You had no choice but to trust in God because you could no longer do it on your own.

Trust. That is the word that comes to mind when I read this Scripture. An angel appears to a poor young girl, bringing the message of a promise from God. She will be the mother of the Savior of the world! But how could this be? Surely Mary must have experienced feelings of fear, wonder, and disbelief, yet she reacted in faith. She had questions and was unsure of how this promise would unfold, yet she chose to trust in the Lord.

As we journey through Advent and ponder the wonder of the season, let us choose to trust in the promises of God. Let us remember these truths: The LORD is with us and with God nothing is or ever shall be impossible!

Prayer

Gracious God,
we thank you for being our loving parent,
for watching over us,
and for taking care of our needs.
Thank you for your love, your grace, and the abundant ways in which you bless us.
Help us to keep our hearts and minds on you in this Advent season
as we await and celebrate the birth of our LORD, Jesus Christ.

Kimberly Trinidad
Doctor of Ministry Candidate

Week 3 of Advent

Joseph is visited in a dream, and given a promise and a challenge

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by God through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of God commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus. *Matthew 1:18-25*

Personal Log of Gabriel, Messenger First Class, Trumpeter Second Class,
Armies of the God Who Is and Was and Is to Come (also known as the “Heavenly Host”)

Things went well with Mary, but we need to help keep her alive until the baby is born; longer than that would be good. The Boss said we need to let Joseph—the fiancé—know the whole truth about what is really going on.

I must admit to being nervous about this. Sure, things went well with Mary, but they went lousy with Zechariah, and Joseph, like Zechariah, is a male. What if the stupid questions are some sort of testosterone thing? What’s even worse, Zechariah is a priest, but Joseph is a carpenter, used to dealing with things he can put his hands on. How will he cope with something like, “Oh, yeah, your bride’s pregnant with God’s Son”?

Fortunately, I got a little bit of discretion this time: just get it done before Mary gets back from Judea; and the Boss didn’t say anything about time of day. I visited Joseph at night, while he was sleeping. Most humans do precious little talking while they sleep. I decided I could slip right into Joseph’s subconscious, a vision he’d think was part of his dreams—no chance to talk at all.

Well, it worked. I told him everything that was going on: everything he’d hoped he and Mary would do for the first time together wouldn’t happen as planned. They wouldn’t expect their first child together—oh, he’d be brave enough and smart enough and faithful enough to take this baby as his own, but things would never quite be the same. He wouldn’t be able to name his first son—who wasn’t really his first son—after himself. The boy would be named after the Boss: “God Saves” and/or “God-With-Us.” He’d spend his life knowing that, in the end, this first Son might learn the family trade but would abandon the family business.

I had to tell him all of this, and I didn’t even get to say, “I’m sorry.”

But I am sorry. I’m sorry that this noble, kind man would become a bit player in his own life, remembered as the ceramic figurine standing in a fake barn behind what everybody thinks are the important characters in the story.

Maybe I didn’t want him asking any questions because I didn’t want to say all those sorries. Maybe I didn’t want to tell him all the truth, just the part that he had to know.

The funny thing is, I thought he kind of knew, somehow; if he right off, then surely by the time I saw him in another dream, to tell him he and his little family had to run for their lives, or the one a few years later, when I told him he could stop living in exile.

I said before that the world of this time is full of Josephs and Marys, that he’s nothing special. And yet he is; special enough to set aside his whole life and not be the hero. Sometimes, working for the Boss is like this. I’m so glad he was up to it.

And I am sorry that he had to be.

Dream Analysis

I don't get all the people in the bible who speak with God in their dreams. My sleeping dreams are far too bizarre for that—full of vacuum cleaners dancing in my elementary school, an oddness no therapist wants to decipher. Yet in the Bible, God shows up and tells people important things while they're sleeping. Joseph was one of those people.

Joseph was likely upset to find his intended was pregnant and telling him a weird story about angels. It's to be expected he would have strange dreams. Yet Joseph understands immediately that this isn't the result of a rough day or stress-eating nachos before bed. This, Joseph knows, is God speaking.

Knowing it is God speaking, Joseph is presented with a choice. He could ignore it (no one else heard his dream). He could tell God "No." Or he could do the difficult, not socially acceptable, and somewhat dangerous thing. He could do as the dream instructed.

I would never do what my sleeping dreams tell me—those things are just too weird. Yet I imagine Joseph's dream instructions felt just as odd. Marry her anyway? Believe her story about angels and God's son? Enter into an uncertain or even dangerous marriage? Why would anyone do these things?

Because Joseph knew. Joseph knew it was God speaking. Joseph knew it was God because of what the dream was asking of him. The dream asked him to be a man who wasn't afraid to follow God, even when the path was unclear. Joseph knew God would bring salvation through the small and meek, not the big and loud. Joseph knew God would save in ways the world didn't understand then and doesn't understand now—through unconditional love rather than violent victory. Joseph knew.

This season, in our world today, God needs people who KNOW. Who know God's call is to love everyone (Everyone!)—even when we look bizarre doing so—to hear the voiceless and follow their lead; to open ourselves to hear God's (sometimes unusual) call. Let us follow that call.

Prayer

Holy One who calls us all,
grant us the wisdom to hear you,
the courage not to dismiss you,
and the power to be agents of your love in a world that needs you.
Amen.

*Stephanie Salinas
MDiv, Class of 2002*

The Story of Jesus

The story of Jesus
the promised Messiah
who came as our brother
to stand at our side.
Before she was married
his mother was pregnant
so Joseph her promised
was fit to be tied.
He planned to divorce her
though not to disgrace her.
An angel came to him
while dreaming one night.
“Fear not and go wed her,
you couldn’t do better.
The child whom she carries
is Jesus the Christ.

“A prophet foretold it.
You get to behold it.
A virgin conceived
and a child will be born.
In him God is with us,
his name shall be known thus.
And you as his father
will not suffer scorn.”
So Joseph awoke and
he did what was told him.
He married a woman
with child in her womb.
They names the child Jesus
who came to release us.
So praise God for Joseph
whose heart had such room.

Prayer

God, who calls us to faithful acts which defy sense:
help us respond with Joseph’s faithful dignity,
willing to be heroic even when we aren’t to be glorified.
Amen.

*David Alexander
MDiv, Class of 1980*

(If you would like to sing this devotion, go to [Matthew 1:18-25 – The Story of Jesus](#))

A Promise and a Challenge

As we enter the third week of Advent devotions, we reflect on Joseph's encounter with the angel. In that moment, he was facing a personal crisis: he had just discovered that Mary, his fiancée, was pregnant.

We can all understand his first instinct, which was to quietly end the engagement. But God, knowing Joseph's thoughts, sends an angel in a dream with an incredible message: the child Mary carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and Joseph is called to take her as his wife.

Joseph's story is one of trust in the face of uncertainty. The angel brings both a promise and a challenge. The promise is that Joseph's child is the long-awaited Messiah, the one who will save His people from their sins. But the challenge is that he must act in faith, risking his reputation and embracing a future he could never have imagined.

Like Joseph, we, too, are sometimes called to trust in God's plans even when we don't fully understand them or know where they may lead us.

This is an invitation to listen closely to God's promises and to follow in faith, even when the path seems daunting, is a reminder that God's plans often come with challenges but also carry the promise of new life and hope.

Prayer

God of promises,
we thank you for guiding us in moments of doubt.
Help us, like Joseph, to trust in your plans, even when they challenge us.
Give us courage to follow your will with faith and obedience,
knowing that your promises bring life and hope.
May we always be ready to listen to your voice
and act with confidence that you are with us.
Amen.

Laura Caballero
Certificate Student living in Honduras

Commitment

In some ways, Mary's humble willingness to follow the plans God laid out for her at least *kind of* makes sense. After all, as a woman in those times, what else was she going to do, having found herself inexplicably pregnant? As long as Joseph was on the same page, had heard the same message from the Lord, and was willing to go along with it, things might be rough, but they'd be at least survivable, which was more than could be said about any alternative paths she might've taken.

Not so with Joseph. As a man who was already arranged to marry somebody, only to discover her pregnant, Joseph had every opportunity to profit. He was in the social position to absolutely *destroy* Mary and her family and walk away richer for it. Her falling pregnant was legally and socially damaging, and it would be on Mary's family to pay for it. That he was willing to dismiss her quietly said everything about his character, of course. He had already chosen mercy for her, at the expense of his own profit, but even still he didn't have to remain with her. To do so would be akin to admitting both paternity and legal guilt, thus losing his own social position along with hers, which is exactly what the angel is asking him to do.

There's commitment, and then there's *commitment*.

In this way Joseph is a fantastic inspiration, especially to those of us who aspire to Jesus' call to help the most vulnerable in our society. Joseph had a way out; Joseph didn't *have* to lose anything or suffer any social consequences whatsoever. God's call on his life required him to give up safety, security, and stability in the name of God's mercy for those who needed it most. It wasn't enough for Joseph to simply share in God's work in the way society expected to him; he needed to surrender his power, his privilege, and his position to walk humbly with God *beside* the vulnerable, rather than in authority over her.

In surrendering his privilege, Joseph *literally* prepared the way for the Lord. In this advent season, let us all seek to do likewise.

Prayer

God of challenging mercies,
we ask you for fortification of our hearts,
strengthening of our minds,
and a willingness of spirit,
that we might actively choose to follow the difficult-but-necessary path you have set
before us. Turn our eyes to the more challenging road, Lord,
and help us to walk in places that inconvenience us, but benefit those who most need it
knowing that, in so doing, we make a little more room for Christ in this world.
We pray this in Christ's lovingly difficult name, Amen.

Donald Van Antwerpen
Doctor of Ministry Candidate

God, to cure creation's fall

God, to cure creation's fall, sent us this best gift of all:
one small child who grew to be light for life and heaven's key.
Love of God, made present here, banish ugliness and fear
that we, too, may grow to be gifts to all humanity.

While the powers that ruled used force, God took on a milder course:
ordinary, loving hands that fulfilled divine commands.
Strength of God, made present here, banish ugliness and fear
that we, too, may grow to be gifts to all humanity.

Inconvenient though you be, overturn the way we see
so to make our lives your place, that we witness to your grace.
Light of God, made present here, banish ugliness and fear
that we, too, may grow to be gifts to all humanity.

Jesus, teach us by your birth, by your time spent here on earth
to mature beyond our flaws into souls who love your laws.
Word of God, made present here, banish ugliness and fear
that we, too, may grow to be gifts to all humanity.

Prayer

Feel our falling, O Christ.
Hold us gently, O Spirit.
Remember your children, O Maker.
Come quickly.

*Kathleen Hart Brumm
MDiv, Class of 1992*

Week 4 of Advent

Waking up the shepherds, announcing the invasion

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of God stood before them, and the glory of God 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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which God has made known to us.” 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, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. *Luke 2:8-20*

Personal Log of Gabriel, Messenger First Class, Trumpeter Second Class,
Armies of the God Who Is and Was and Is to Come (also known as the “Heavenly Host”)

We were finally doing what we trained to do, going into battle! You silly humans have this spiffed up, shiny, darn-near-Disneyfied version of how this happened: Mary all pressed and dry cleaned, Joseph noble and stoic, barnyard animals with no anuses, an upholstered manger in a climate-controlled stable with high-tech indirect lighting. And then the biggest lie of all: me and my squad as sweet little choristers with snowy white wings, little pullover robes, and tinsel halos orbiting our heads.

I was there. Mary was hot and sweaty; she screamed a lot, and may have said a few words which surprised her husband and would scandalize her parents. Joseph was well-meaning, but . . . well, never confuse a carpenter with a midwife. The animals were almost as noisy as the mother, with all the normal plumbing, and, as in any barn, you could smell it—I was grateful to be sent to the sheep herd. God, fully human and fully divine, was a human baby wailing in a feeding trough, not even swaddled very well, millimeters from death. Birth does that to human infants.

The Boss was invading the human world, omnipotent, sure, but utterly helpless. That’s why my unit was sent in. What King James’s scholars translated as “heavenly host” was actually a multitude of the armies of heaven. And we weren’t singing something pretty. It’s a strategy you humans use so often: charge over a hill in the darkness with bright lights and lots of noise, surprising and confusing the sleeping enemy: shock and awe.

And then there was the greeting. “Peace and good will” was what every invading Roman army said to people they were about to conquer. It was a politically correct sort of shorthand way for them to say, “Cooperate and we won’t slaughter all of you.” This was an invasion! None of this messenger stuff, no playing nicely with the humans. We had arrived! The Boss was invading, and we could secure the entire place and enforce the coming Kingdom. We were ready for it. We had trained for it.

And the Boss didn’t want it. “Just deliver the message,” God said. “Let them know I mean business,” God said, “then trust the shepherds and Joseph and Mary.”

Trust the shepherds? They were idiots! They weren’t allowed to testify in trials, they were so unreliable. As for Joseph and Mary: nice, faithful kids, but they traveled to the most crowded city in Palestine—David and Solomon got around; they left lots of descendants—without reserving a room. Trusting this lot with the future of the universe and the safety of almighty God was a ridiculous, unacceptable risk.

Still, orders were orders. Ours was a foolproof way of bringing about the Kingdom of God. The Boss, however, chose a path full of potential dangers, missteps, and misunderstandings, a path where God could and would be destroyed by the very creatures God wished to save. This was unimaginable, unbelievable, unacceptable . . . and, as it turned out, much better.

I guess this is why the Boss is the Boss. *Gloria in excelsis, Deo!*

Ain't-a That Good News?

Nobody knows what to do with good news better than folks who don't often get it themselves. As the angel of the Lord explodes into glorious being before a bunch of bedraggled, terrified shepherds in the middle of the night, we find ourselves struck by just how true that can be. The angel could have easily chosen to pull out the trumpets and the lightshow right in Herod's living room, or written Jesus' birth announcement in 10-story neon-orange letters right in the skies over Jerusalem, accompanied by a lightshow that would somehow make Emperor Constantine jealous 300 years before he was even born. But instead, the angel pulls out all the stops for a dramatic, show-stopping number highlighting that good news of great joy . . .

. . . for a bunch of dirty, overworked laborers, sleeping out in the fields one night. *Why?*

Because a message of salvation means about as much to people who are safe as the promise of water means to a fish. Good news isn't needed in the courts of kings, and the powerful don't need the promise of God's favor. Mercy doesn't mean sending the rich away full while the poor stay huddled in the fields for warmth, and God's justice doesn't come gift-wrapped for the privileged.

Every word the angels had to say had *meaning* to the shepherds because it was *for* them, in a way it could never be for those in warmth, and wealth, and comfort. They didn't need to be told to go to Bethlehem, they *wanted* to see this thing for themselves. They wanted to see the truth that our Lord had *chosen* to emerge into this world in vulnerability, to a poor and outcast family, huddled together in the cold *just like them*.

Emmanuel – *God is with us.*

That was the good news of great joy that the shepherds took away from that night. All that stuff about Messiahs and salvations, crucifixion and resurrection, that would come later. For today, in this moment, all that mattered was that God's divine self chose to be present here, in this place, outside the city walls.

Prayer

Unexpectedly merciful God,
we pray that you will be a God who is ever with us,
but more than that we pray that you will help us to ever be with you, as well.
Guide us out of the places of our comfort, out of our warmth and security,
and into those cold and lonely fields where you choose first to be.
Show us the light that we can never see from city streets,
the struggles that we can never know from warm homes and comfortable beds.
Identify us with the least of these, Lord,
so that we may, in turn, be identified with you.
In the name of Christ Jesus, the Lord of mercy and love, we pray.
Amen.

*Donald Van Antwerpen
Doctor of Ministry Candidate*

A Message to the Important People

Luke 2:8-20 shares with us the greatest announcement humanity could have ever wished for, an announcement that would have only brought joy and hope around the World. In a city described as the City of David, the village of Bethlehem, a future King, a Messiah, was born.

The Angel Gabriel, bearer of the news, appears to humble Shepherds tending their flocks and sharing with them the good news: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah” (Luke 2:11).

Why would Gabriel not have chosen a different setting to announce the greatest news on Earth? Why not share such news with the rulers of those lands, kings, or magistrates? Because God’s plan was to fulfill the promise God made to Israel’s ancestors, In *Matthew 15:24*, Jesus says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” indicating his initial mission was to reach and restore the people of Israel, who were God’s chosen people under the old covenant.

In today’s world, America resembles the land of hope, just as perhaps the City of David was during the years under the yoke of the Roman Empire. America now represents a beacon of light amongst the poor around the world and, as such, multitudes yearn to make it their final destination. Their quest for a better life uproots them from their birthplaces with hopes of finding a better future. Their arrivals nowadays are perceived as threats to political parties vying for control over each other. Just as Jesus birth was perceived as a threat to those that ruled, immigrants nowadays are perceived as invaders, thieves, rapists, in order to allow those in power to degrade them and neglect them.

Just as Herod the Great felt threatened, so those same feelings are felt by those opposing people yearning for better lives to be lived in America. *Matthew 2:3* states, “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

I pray that, just as God’s fulfilled his covenant with the Israelites, our leaders nowadays are touched by the love of God and led to enact legislation to prevent the unjust treatment of current and future immigrants regardless of their race, gender, or color.

Prayer

Dear God, as the date of your Son’s birth approaches,
Christians around the World prepare for celebrations to be had in your honor.
I pray that every Christian will rejoice
by honoring Jesus and keeping within their hearts
what it means truly means to celebrate your birth.
As we prepare our hearts and minds,
we pray that your presence can be felt amongst those seeking your love.
We pray that your birth celebration brings unity, comfort, peace, and most importantly love
amongst those with whom we share our lives.
In a world where humanity’s path differs from your path,
we pray that you might change those outside of your path and bring them in.
May this change be delivered to those who govern us and walk outside of your path
for them to act justly in favor of those they govern.
May this Christmas Season be filled with miracles all over Earth
especially where they are most needed.
In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray.

Elvis Alvarez
Master of Divinity student

A Terror of Angels

“Every angel,” says the great German poet Rilke, “is terrifying!”⁴ Those shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem would agree. After all, they were just ordinary guys, doing their ordinary and fairly boring job, out all night with the smelly, stubborn sheep, not well paid, not held in high esteem by anyone, not part of any religious or cultural elite. Why would they expect to see angels, hear choirs singing, and experience the skies parted to reveal the glory of God?

And yet it was to them, not to the scribes, priests, temple-goers or people of wealth, that the angel came. It was to them that God revealed the amazing news of incarnation: that the full presence of the divine was come to earth in an ordinary human being just like them. And they were to find this child in the feed-trough of a poor man’s barn!
The world was turning upside-down!

The Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn puts it like this: “For it isn’t to the palace that the Christ child comes, but to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums.”⁵ So, the first thing the angel says to them is, as it was to Mary, “do not be afraid.” But they were, as we are, terrified. Although by abandoning their sheep they were most likely putting their jobs in jeopardy, they nevertheless got up and made that trek into town.

But for the sake of joy and truth, we find we can do even the scariest things. When the night is darkest, the saying goes, if you lift your head up, you can see the stars. Like those first shepherds, when we accept that God wants to come even to us, when we hear that the message of hope and joy is for us, we will be empowered for a new journey. And we will find that the light of that birth shines in us and through us. As the Sufi mystic and poet Hafiz says, “I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the Astonishing Light of your own Being!” Poets, singer-songwriters, mystics: are these not all angels sent by God? Let us listen to them, from whatever field we are working in tonight. And let us not be afraid.

Prayer

God of shining love and mercy,
I thank you for the lights of this season that remind me
that the darkness of this world will not prevail.
Thank you for music, for song, for poetry, for art, for science,
and for every expression of the human spirit
that brings me closer to your divine Light of truth.
May they inspire me to rise up from my midnight field,
find Christ born again,
and share him with joy with all whom I meet.
In his Holy Name I pray.
Amen.

Jennifer Reece
MDiv, Class of 1987

⁴ Duino Elegies, 1912

⁵ “The Cry of a Tiny Babe,” 1990

A Worn World Sleeps

A worn world sleeps while, from the womb, a baby's form is drawn.
Though earth be cold, life will not stop for its freeze to be gone,
Nor will life's purpose be curtailed by inattention here,
it will develop, bear its fruit with its intention clear.

A weak world sleeps while God bursts in to rouse the drowsy soul
inviting it to quaff love's light, alive, aware, and whole.
For while God gives to the beloved graces while they sleep,
more treasures are in store for them who faithful vigil keep!

Like shepherds on that starry night who heard the angels sing,
or learned souls who saw the light and worshipped the youngling,
We do well too, to live awake, to seek God's life in bloom,
to shake our lumbering, slumbering sloth and in our hearts make room.

Where God invades the universe and deigns to join a life,
there love and light and rest and peace and pulchritude are rife.
Within us be that place of birth, though it be like a stall,
so dark and dank, still let ours be where Christ can bless us all.

Prayer

Bless us and disturb us, O Christ.
Wrest us from our sleep and show us your true Light.
Let our hearts be changed by the wonder of your Love,
that we may go on our way rejoicing, sharing your Good News.

*Kathleen Hart Brumm
MDiv, Class of 1992*

Abundance in Lack

The Gospel of Luke tells us that the birth of Christ comes amid a political move ordered by Caesar Augustus: a census “of the whole world” (Luke 2:1-7). In response, people travel to their hometowns to register. Joseph journeys to Bethlehem, the City of David, as Joseph is from the house and lineage of David. Mary accompanies with him and with child. It’s no surprise there is no room at the inn with so many others making a journey to Bethlehem for the same reason. Taking a census often provides a basis for assessing taxes thereby bolstering the governing body. Thus, the Christ comes into the world and is swaddled in a manger, the lowliest of birthplaces during a migration. Such travel costs inhabitants additional time to make a journey, and in the case of Joseph and Mary, care for the woman, and mother, and the blessed child who need attention and care.

Each of us has our own story of a forced migration, traveling elsewhere in response to the pressures of government, job, family, or other factors that we cannot control. Even if the costs are not significant, the inconvenience and the ways we are required to “make do” put us outside of our norms or comfort zones. Yet the story of Jesus’s birth is one that shows us that God is with us in the most mundane, humble, and inconvenient of circumstances. The Son of God does not arrive in privilege or fanfare, but amid inconvenience and obscurity.

The “lack” within the people of the story contrasts with the abundance sought by Caesar: keeping those in power well supplied with funds on the backs of those who are displaced. Yet it is precisely in this lack that God provides abundance: the Christ ushers in a new kingdom not of this world based on corruptible wealth but rather everlasting relationship and love. In humility, Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem where Mary bears the Child of Promise. There is no sanctioned fanfare or celebration by an empire. But with those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, there is much hope and rejoicing in the story of this child who is born in the humblest of circumstances.

In political seasons that are fraught with tensions, uncertainties, and inconveniences generated by those in power, let us remember that the Christ comes to be with us in the middle of it all. In Christ, we are invited to rise above the vicissitudes of injustices imposed upon us to share in a different kingdom that embraces and cares for all no matter one’s station in life. There is no arduous physical journey to reach Christ and register for someone else’s benefit. Christ comes freely in the midst of us and invites us into a realm of inclusion and love.

Prayer

Amid tension, uncertainty, and fears in this world, help us to see your presence.
Let us shift our focus not on the inconveniences of this world,
but on the blessings of your Kingdom that are with us always
even unto the ends of the earth.
May you lift our eyes about to see the blessings of eternal life,
leaving behind, even for a moment, the worries of this present life.
Your kingdom come!
May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

*Charles M. Rix
Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of the Seminary*

Christmas Prayers

The first day of Christmas

Out of your love, great God,
you have come to live among us,
to share in our best and our worst,
and to love us no matter what.
Your presence among us and in us draws us to you in prayer,
thankful for your love for us.

No matter what we do, you love us.
When we are at our worst, you come to us,
live among us,
and share our flesh
—you, yourself, your very presence,
lifting and carrying us.
So we raise our voices with the angels.

Knowing you love us evermore and evermore,
knowing you listen to our every prayer,
we rejoice in the gift of your Son.

The second day of Christmas

(This is also St. Stephen's Day and the first night of Kwanzaa)

O God of all creation,
thank you for bringing us once more to this holy season,
gathering us with so many others around the simple manger where Mary laid her child.
Make us one with each other and with you in this new birth.
Teach us to love our enemies and seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt.
As St. Stephen looked up to heaven,
help us look up and see the bright stars above us even in the darkest night
and fill us with hope and joy.
And may peace be upon the world as we light the candle of *umoja* (unity)
to honor our ancestors,
and commit ourselves to nurture your beautiful creation,
preserving it for those who come after us.
In the name of the newborn Christ, the prince of Peace, Amen.

*Jennifer Reece
M.Div., Class of 1987*

The third day of Christmas

All creation and all the hosts of heaven join in praising you, O God,
and we join in those praises,
and we pray for the world you created,
especially those who are not safe or warm this Christmas . . .
and we pray for those who lay down their lives . . .
and we pray for those who lead us . . .
and we pray that you will use us as good neighbors and good stewards,
that our lives may proclaim, "Let the whole creation cry, 'Glory to the Lord on high!'"

The fourth day of Christmas

We have heard the angels and seen the shepherds.
We have traveled back to a small town,
a place called House of Bread,
and we have discovered, there where the cattle feed, Divine food.
We know that salvation has come to us,
not by invading, not by overriding,
but by pitching a tent, to stay a while,
to share in who we are, to allow us to be who you are.
We are here, O God, bringing our prayers,
because a Savior has been born to us.
Let our lives shout "Glory!"

The fifth day of Christmas

We hear the Christmas bells,
calling us to celebrate joy and love and abundance.
We think of "peace on earth, good will to all,"
as a pleasant holiday greeting.
But we forget that
not everyone who hears those bells is safe and warm;
not everyone who hears those bells celebrates the coming of Christ;
not everyone who hears those bells is treated with good will.
Inspire us, O God, to answer the call of these bells as
a call to build systems of justice
and nurture kindness and decency,
showing the world you are not dead nor do you sleep.
May we work to assure the wrong will fail
and create the possibility for the right to prevail,
until Christ comes into every heart.

The sixth day of Christmas

O Christ, the prophets foretold your coming,
the poor longed to see you.
The heavens celebrated your birth;
the apostles, the martyrs, and the faithful down through the ages
repeated the song of the angels.
Your church praises you in every human language,
for we have seen your salvation.
Son of God, you humbled yourself and became a servant,
raising us up to share in your glory.
We were in darkness and you have given us
light and strength, peace and joy.
Lead us according to your loving will;
make us a people who follow you in holiness.
Give us generous hearts to hear your Word,
spoken by apostles and prophets,
and produce in us abundant fruit,
through the power of your Spirit. Amen.

The seventh day of Christmas

(this is also New Year's Eve)

As we celebrate this night,
cozy and warm with family and friends
or out in the crowds and lights and excitement,
let us be mindful of those who have no choice tonight:
those who must be out in the cold,
those who are frightened for what tomorrow will bring,
those who don't know if they will survive the night.
Show us the way to bring justice to more people.
Help us be a comfort to all those we meet.
Inspire us, not to long for a better year ahead,
but to build a better world today.
Hear our prayers in the name of Christ who comforts and challenges us.

The eighth day of Christmas

(this is also New Year's Day)

Is this a day of new beginnings?
Should we remember and move on?
On this day when, as a society, we declare a new year begun,
help us to remember that you are newly present in our lives
anytime we will welcome you in;
help us be aware that new life and New Creation
can come alive whenever we turn our lives around;
help us to make that promise of new life
real by working for the healing and wholeness of all those around us.
Remind us that every day can bring new beginnings
not because of the calendar,
not because of where the world is in space,
but because we bring your love to a world in need,
today, tonight, and always.

The ninth day of Christmas

Almighty God, you have poured upon us
the new light of your incarnate Word:
Grant that this light, kindled in our hearts,
may shine forth in our lives,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

The tenth day of Christmas

God of love,
our world encourages us to pursue power and money,
yet you come in weakness.
Our world encourages us to covet great material gifts,
yet you alone offer what is lasting.
Through the work of this Lord Jesus,
who comes among us full of grace and truth,
forgive us, heal us, correct us.
Then open our lips, that we may sing your praise with the angels,
and remake our lives, that we may witness to your transforming love,
through Christ, our Lord.

The eleventh day of Christmas

God, we know your Messiah has come, is coming, and will come,
and we must prepare.
We know your Messiah has come, is coming, and will come into our hearts,
but our hearts are not ready.
We know that we have sinned,
as individuals and as a society,
that we are destroying ourselves and one another
and all of your Creation.
We know that, for our world to be restored,
we must first be restored.
Let your Word pitch a tent in our hearts.
Let your promise be enfleshed in all of us.
Let all of us live into the promise to be your children.

The twelfth day of Christmas

God of infinite power and majesty,
who became finite and plain for us in an infant in a barn;
God whose face no one has ever seen,
who revealed your glory to unremarkable people who dared to watch and listen;
God on whom all our lives depend,
who for our sakes chose to become dependent upon us:
as your glory has filled us again this Christmas
and as your light gives us hope in a dark world,
give us the grace to carry that light and glory wherever we go,
to make your hope and grace real to everyone we meet,
and to share your light with others even as it has been shared among us,
that Christ may come alive, among us, through us, and especially in us,
to redeem our world for you, one life at a time,
wherever we may go.
Amen!



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