

SMALL, *Dancing* LIGHT

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

TERRY W. YORK

A hand holding a lit candle with rays of light emanating from it.
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INTRODUCTION

Many people, perhaps most, sleep through the dawn. They close their eyes when it's dark, and when they open their eyes it is, almost magically, light. The magnificent, mystical transition, the slow and patient transformation that is dawn, is lost on them. Darkness, it seems, is turned to light by blinking one's eyes. But we know better. We can take the dawning of a new day for granted because the earth's rotation is reliable. But to ignore the phenomenon is to miss a spectacular display of life-giving wonder. One cannot fully appreciate the day without experiencing its dawning.

Some people work the night shift, hard at their job when the sun comes up. In their case it's as if their work brings about the dawn. The sun is down when they start and up when they finish. They know they didn't really work the sun into position, but neither did they get to experience creation at work; yes, creation, the creation of a new day.

Whether asleep, awake, at work, or at play when the sun comes up, everyone's encounter with the dawn needs the spiritual reality of a new day. Advent is the season of spiritual dawning. Its rituals are reminders. The reminder of new beginnings is hope's poetry. The reminder of new beginnings is the most precious kind of light. The reminder of new beginnings is joy's defiant smile, even when it can't laugh. The reminder of new beginnings is for peace its unquenchable ember.

Advent—the ritual of a new day, of new beginnings—walks its post from Thanksgiving to Christmas guarding against the onslaught of self-sufficiency, meaninglessness, and despair. A light dawns: small, struggling, determined. Advent's progressively sharpening focus will reveal that the far-off waving and kicking of the baby's arms and legs in Bethlehem's manger are not helpless flailing; they are the early dance steps of unconfined redemption.

Every hope we have, every promise we hang on to, all anticipation that overcomes anxiety, each one is a small, dancing light on an otherwise dark horizon. As you make your way through this little booklet, read its pages from the vantage point of whatever darkness you will confess. Read closely to see if there isn't a small, dancing light to be found on the far horizon between the lines of text: the line above, the darkness of the night sky, the line below, the darkness of inevitable disappointments and failures.

It is always the case that something or someone is coming, and that the coming will forever change your life as you now know it. That truth contributes to the importance of these words: "The Lord is with you . . . and also with you." Amen.

—Terry W. York

Terry W. York and Taylor Scott Davis have written a choral complement to this devotional guide, also titled *Small, Dancing Light*. The choral settings are available separately as a choral service from MorningStar Music Publishers. Six of the anthem texts appear in this booklet as the source of the devotional thoughts for days 21–26.

I WILL FULFILL THE PROMISE

“The days are surely coming” is the opening phrase of this passage of scripture. “Days?” We would prefer a “day”; twenty-four hours from start to completion, promised project done and in place, our projects now front and center.

Though this promise will not be completed in a day, it will have a beginning day, and will stretch out into the future for as long as there is a Church on earth: the day of Jesus’ birth through the days of the Church. The promise is that God “will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David,” that justice and righteousness will be carried out in the land.

Those who waited for the birth of Christ were awaiting the beginning of a New Day, whether or not they understood it quite that way. Jesus was to be born on a particular day. He would also die on a particular day, declaring that “it” was finished. What was finished was the beginning. Jesus went back Home and left the Holy Spirit to breathe life into the project. The continuation of days in the New Day marches on. Jesus is the promise, and the body of Christ, the Church, is to live and model the justice and righteousness of the promise.

The coming of the baby Jesus will lead to the coming of the Church, which will lead to each Christ-follower becoming the vehicle for the promise. The surprise, if you want to call it that, is that the promise wants to be born in us each new day. We are to bring justice and righteousness to life each new day. Justice and righteousness are the promise and they are in Christ and we are in Christ and Christ is in us. The Church is a green branch of promise budding and flowering God’s beauty and fragrance into every day of the week and every facet of life. The promise is to be fulfilled through the Church and we Christ-followers are the Church.

This may sound like a dubious promise. The promise comes with a stiff tagline: receive justice and righteousness, but then live it. That’s true; it is a rather heavy burden. In fact, it’s so heavy that we are tempted to demand that people live up to our sense of justice and to our standards of righteousness before we will let the promise flow from us. But those angry and frightened demands are not the justice and righteousness of God’s promise. They are the demands of our self-centeredness.

We can only be the Church, the post-resurrection body of Christ on earth, by humbly receiving the promised justice and righteousness as individuals and as congregations; receiving it until we become it, until we become the justice and righteousness of Christ. At that time we will make no demands on those who receive what will then be simply flowing through us. We will receive the promise just like anyone else, and its flowing through us will result in the very joy of Heaven being ours as others receive it.

Not there yet? That’s okay. This is Advent, the time of moving toward that day. Not sure you even want to be an agent of such justice and righteousness—not yet, anyway, not in our day and time? That’s a confessed darkness that God’s Light can overcome in time. Night becoming day is not instantaneous magic. It is a dawning, a gradual coming into being that changes our hearts and minds to the point that we trust God’s justice and righteousness more than we trust our own. That’s good news for each of us. It is good news for the whole world.

The days of God’s promise are surely coming. Let us prepare gifts for the baby: gifts of heart, mind, and humility.

God, we receive and give ourselves to your promise.

Dawn in us and rise to a noontime that glows without shadow. “The Lord is our righteousness.”

THOSE WHO WAIT

Those who wait in this psalm are waiting for their trust in God to overcome their enemies (oh, and their own transgressions as well). Those who wait in this psalm are afraid that they, and their God, will be put to shame. It seems that the shame they fear is the shame of reckless naiveté and defeat. If anyone is going to be ashamed, let it be the treacherous enemy. Let them be defeated. Can we count on you, God? How long must we wait to find out? How long can we wait for you until our waiting is simply being irresponsible?

Waiting for Christmas is one thing. Waiting to find out if the Lord's teachings are reliable is quite another. This kind of waiting makes for long days of troubling questions. Do we really understand your ways and your paths? Do you really mean what you teach, or are we missing something in your truth? Are we missing something that would make us feel better about waiting on you to show your strength and the right-mindedness of your mercy and love?

The psalmist's prayer and concerns sound familiar—unsettlingly current. We even recognize his nervous monologue that fills the time and silence of his waiting: remember your longstanding love and mercy, and forget the sins of my irresponsible youth, and remember your goodness, and remember that you're about the business of lovingly teaching the right paths to humble sinners like me.

Waiting reveals some tough truths and risks. One of them is that God may notice that I'm not a great deal different than my enemies when it comes to personal righteousness before God. Another is that the mercy I am quick to claim is also extended to my enemy. Waiting gives me time to think about the fact that my enemies are not the only ones who stumble at the point of keeping God's covenants and decrees.

Those who wait for God have to grapple with truths that busy, hurried believers don't even seem to notice. But then those who wait have time to figure out that rushing by a hard truth doesn't make it go away. Further, those who wait begin to realize that waiting for the Lord does not mean that the Lord is absent. After all, who is the psalmist talking to?

More thoughts come, thoughts that live way down in the silence. Here's one: Would I rather triumph over my enemies while separated from the Lord, or would I rather be defeated by my enemies with the Lord at my side? Are those the only choices? "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame." Oh Lord, what if defeating my enemies outside of your teachings is the shame that would be revealed? Do not let my enemies exult over me by causing me to turn against your teachings.

My head and heart are spinning. "Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long" (v.5).

Those who are humble enough to wait for the Lord find that God will help them see and live the questions that cannot be avoided. "He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" (v.9). And then there is verse ten: "for those who keep his covenant and his decrees." And for those who write their own covenants and decrees? Wait...don't write your own. Wait...struggle with the Lord's. Wait...He brings instruction and mercy and forgiveness in the same bag.

Lord, help us. We lift our souls to you. We lift life's hard questions to you. We wait for you. When we stumble, help us to stumble in the right direction, struggling with your teachings, not ours.

WITH ALL HIS SAINTS

This Advent is “the coming of our Lord Jesus” of another sort, not the baby this time. To wait for this coming is to wait in the context of Jesus’ First Advent. Since the first time of waiting, the baby has been born, grown up, stirred things up by stating “Isaiah was talking about me,” changed the definition of strength, been killed, resurrected, and has ascended back into Heaven. This is who we are waiting for now. We call it the Second Advent; waiting for the return of the Lamb who was slain. But the circle continues and it is equally true that we wait for the baby in the context of the Second Advent.

Two Advents at the same time is a little tricky in terms confined to Earth’s time and space vocabularies. It’s not a problem in a context of eternity and omnipresence that soaks up time and space like a sponge soaks up water.

We are waiting and waiting. And that’s exactly what it seems like: waiting and waiting. But waiting can become for us a sedimentary state of being. Not so with Paul. The Apostle Paul is earnestly looking forward to the day when he can see the believers in Thessalonica face to face. It’s a sort of anticipation within the anticipation. That’s waiting with a growing edge to it. That’s being present in today while leaning forward toward an anticipated day yet to come. Paul wants to see the folks face to face so that he may “restore whatever is lacking in [their] faith.”

It seems there is work to do in the midst of our waiting. The work is to encourage each other, to restore whatever may be lacking in each other’s faith. This is a picture of the waiting believers teaching each other, ministering to each other, encouraging each other, even to the point of looking forward to being an active participant in such a relationship. To teach and to be taught, to encourage and to be encouraged; could Advent energize this kind of waiting-in-motion within us? This is not nervousness. It is not anxiety. Paul characterizes this kind of waiting as “abounding in love for one another and for all” (v.12). Advent, whichever coming you’re waiting for, comes with a tendency—an off-balance leaning—toward this kind of love for one another and for all.

The implications of Advent’s abounding love strip us of dependence on worldly power that would prop us up, taking the risk out of our off-balance leaning toward the coming of Christ. Congregations are made up of those whom we are willing to love. But Paul seems to understand the love of the coming Christ as taking us beyond congregational no-risk stability. “Love for one another *and for all* [italics added]”; we get a whiff of it in the context of the First Advent (moving toward Christmas), not so much in the context of the Second Advent (the rest of the year).

Advent reminds us that our hearts (our sense of being and identity) can be strengthened in holiness (v.13), an alternative to being strengthened by righteous use of earthly power. The reminder is important, lest we ignore holiness, having fallen in love with earth-measured righteousness.

Finally, it appears that Jesus’ Second Advent, like his First, will be with an entourage of heavenly beings. Angels made the trip from Heaven to Bethlehem seemingly escorting the baby and announcing his arrival. Our scripture for today says He’s coming again, with all his saints. Academics can’t agree on exactly who those saints are. Whoever they might be, I have an idea we may well call them angels when we see them because they will be with Jesus, reflecting his glow, making sure that the continuous worship He deserves is not disrupted. Come to think of it, I believe I’ve met some of the advanced team. Let us dedicate ourselves to preparing the way as well.

*Dear Jesus, having been born in us, live in us until you come for us.
Let us be counted among the Christ-crowd mistaken for angels.*

BE ALERT

As we read yesterday, Advent is more than anticipating Christmas. That is half of what Advent means to us. The other half of our Advent awareness is the anticipation of the return of Christ. You can find as many interpretations and descriptions of His return as you want. What you are about to read is a response to the reading for today; its intent is to be something other than an interpretation.

From observing our galaxy to keeping an eye on someone's fig tree, Jesus sharpens our senses to Advent. Waiting that culminates in the birth of a beautiful baby is full of promise and delight, even during the dark times along the way. Waiting that culminates in the Son of Man coming in great glory is a bit overwhelming, even disconcerting when we read of the distress that will be the prelude of the Second Advent. But, the fear and foreboding press toward a grand pay off. "When these things begin to take lace, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (v.28).

Things calm down a bit and our heart rate relaxes when our attention moves from the skies and seas to the old, deep-rooted fig tree. The stellar upheavals are something like a springtime. Their message is that the kingdom of God is near.

Living, as we do, in the midst of two Advents of Jesus, we are right in the big middle of this truth: the kingdom of God is near (v.31). "Near" can also mean "at hand" or "within reach": on the one hand in the birth of Jesus, on the other hand, in the return of the Christ who ascended. Both Advents stir in the hearts of the Christ-follower, giving balance to the already-but-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God here on earth. In that regard, Jesus is born *and* returns to earth each time the Church expands by the measure of one human heart opened to His presence.

Advent, then, becomes for us a daily alertness (not preoccupation) to how we can live the lessons of the Gospel. To the extent that we live the Gospel, in contrast to all other teachings, our lives become signs that the kingdom of God is near: at hand in the hands and hearts of Christ-followers. Be aware, be alert, our lives are positioned somewhere between the Milky Way Galaxy and a fig tree in terms of signals that the kingdom of God is near, is at hand, is here in Advent mode.

Being open to Jesus' presence and His coming seems to be our role in all this. Suspended between the moorings of two Advents of God the Son, our lives are buoyed in ways that signal a significant difference in how we act and react. Our sense of right and wrong is internally oriented—sometimes in step and sometimes out of step—with the world around us. We must be alert to any drifting that might take place in our kingdom orientation, drifting that happens when we disconnect with one or other of the Advents.

We have learned by experience that Christ-followers cannot avoid the perils of life on earth. But we can "escape" them. That is to say, we can come out on the other side; we can come through the perils with Jesus at our side through it all. Whether our life circumstances lean toward the son of Mary or toward the Son of Man this Advent season, we are to be alert to the presence of Jesus in our living and our longing. We should not be caught off guard when, in our lives, Jesus shows up as King to teach us the lessons of the Child. Let us watch in alert anticipation, for those lessons learned and lived will be a sign—stunning, but simple—that the Kingdom of God is within reach.

*God, it seems that in one way or another, every day of our lives,
we need Jesus to either be born in us or to return to us. Yet, we pray in the name
and the presence of Jesus. Hold our hand as we watch and walk. Amen.*

STAND AND ENDURE

Handel's oratorio *Messiah* rings in the ears and heart. No, not *that* part. I'm referring to the bass aria "But who may abide/For He is like a refiner's fire" and the chorus "And He shall purify"; these are the moments that rush from past performances to our hearts and minds as we read.

We read Malachi's words from our vantage point: "my messenger to prepare the way." Well, that turned out to be John the Baptist. "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" That turned out to be the day Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to Simeon in the temple for the prescribed ritual. We look back through the prophesied events to read the prophecy itself. It's a wonderful exercise. But in that light, Malachi's question, "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" stops us in our tracks. We, who live between the Advents, in the midst of His coming(s) have occasion here to stop and ask, "Who *is* standing? Who *is* enduring?"

Malachi was right. Jesus is, indeed, like a refiner's fire. His teachings sear our hearts and minds and inclinations. His model for our living is so far beyond our human tendencies that He, at times, seems almost out of touch with our reality, yet we are drawn to and toward Christ-likeness. We are humbled by all this. Who can stand in the presence of Christ? Who can endure (abide) the constant sense of falling short?

Our hope is in this passage of scripture as well. The refining that is prophesied, and now experienced, has righteousness as its end. The Child presented in the temple of Simeon's day is the Christ who resides in the temples of our hearts. He is also the triumphant king of Revelation's New Jerusalem and its Temple. Jesus is our righteousness and all advents lean toward him. He is our righteousness as well as our anticipated righteousness. Who can stand? Who can endure? We want to shout back through the ages and the Testaments and say, "Malachi, we found out that the One who will judge our righteousness is, in fact, Himself our righteousness! He is the offering that the Lord will be pleased to receive from us."

George Frederick Handel read and pondered this passage and others related to it until he finally had to write a magnificent "Hallelujah." And we're not far behind him. "Hallelujah," he wrote, and then "I know that my redeemer liveth," then "Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection," then "Worthy is the Lamb," then finally "Amen." There were some other compositions of praise and scripture, but you get the point.

Those who stand and endure are those who are firmly established in faith and experience between the Advents found in the Gospel of Luke and the Revelation to John, all the while experiencing the advent and birth and return of Christ in their daily lives. Lean forward. You are tethered behind and ahead, and you are buoyed in the present. Thus held, you can stand and endure. Leaning forward in anticipation is a faith posture. Advent is an "already and not yet" existence. Malachi could see it, but he couldn't explain it. All he could ask was "Who can do that? Who can endure, who can stand in the presence of the Messiah?" Now we know. Now we know that we lean more than we stand up straight. But we also know that we lean in Christ, toward Christ, growing in Christ-likeness all the while.

*God, you are indeed behind us, before us, above us, and below us.
We thank that our leaning has a name, Advent. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

ADVENT PERSONIFIED

The concept is rather startling. Could a person enter the life of another person and, by their very presence, prepare the way for the Lord to enter that life? We can see the Holy Spirit doing that, but to think that one human being could function that way in the life of another: it gives advent an entirely new facet. The anticipated Light might shine through us.

John the Baptist started out as John the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. But his parents knew from the beginning, and their neighbors soon caught on, that “the hand of the Lord was with him.” Zechariah said of and to his infant son, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (vv.76–77).

Those words helped shape and identify John. They set him apart as a prophet. The intriguing thing about this is that those words also apply to the redeemed lifestyle of current-day Christ-followers: “for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by forgiveness of their sins.” Those words are not strange to our ears. Stringing lights in anticipation of Christmas is one thing; being light in anticipation of Christmas is quite another. Some people dread Christmas. People who know us should never dread Christmas. The darkness of deepened debt, heightened loneliness, and underscored poverty should not be able to stand in the presence of the joy, peace, love, and light of Christmas properly understood and celebrated. Christ-followers can be walking advent candles, glowing a bit with the gentle, but persistent light of Christ anticipated and Christ in us.

Then there are these words to close our passage for today: “to guide our feet into the way of peace” (v.79). My fellow advent candles, there is no more noble or Godly glowing for us to do this season, or at any time in our lives. Peace and its light are of God; they come to us through Jesus. They shine through us as we determine to be participants in and vehicles of Advent. Peace is seen as possible when it is on display in everyday lives like ours. It is not so obviously possible when peace is but a concept to be debated.

Allowing ourselves to be guided into the way of peace, we can guide others, becoming embodied advent candles as John the Baptist. He pointed to, and followed, the way of Christ. His light shown brightly, but dimmed as he bowed before Jesus. Sometimes we find it difficult to shine. Sometimes we fall in love with shinning for ourselves. Advent is a time for us to adjust our shinning, both its brightness and its focus. John the Baptist shows us how until Jesus shows us how.

We join Zechariah in the opening lines of his canticle, “blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.”

*God, you are our life and our hope, you are the light we need and the light we are to shine.
Help us as we move our very being toward the birth of the Light in us, again and always. Amen.*

COMPLETION

The past can be seen in this particular advent photo. It's more than a shadow, it's the foundation upon which the present stands to look toward the future. Paul looks back as he writes his letter and sees people who have worked with him and encouraged him. He looks back and sees events and ministries—successes and even failures—that have brought this moment into its reality. He's thankful for it all, even though he is writing from prison.

His relationship with the believers in Philippi and their work together had a beginning that led to this moment of writing. He could have written a story that begins with them and ends with him in prison, but instead he turns his head and theirs toward completion, a culmination that has not yet happened. The word “completion” becomes for Paul, and for us, a pocket-sized advent that we can carry around with us. He writes of “the day of Christ”—and what we know as the Second Advent may well be what he is writing about. In the meantime there are other “completions” to look forward to.

Paul writes that he longs to see and be with the Philippian believers. However much evangelism he plans to do while in prison, he looks forward to the completion of his jail sentence. He entrusts to his readers some unnamed ongoing projects and ministries, praying that his brothers and sisters will have knowledge and insight to help determine what is best (anticipating completions at which he will not be present). He points these endeavors toward their completion, and then all these completions toward “the day of Christ,” so that at that time the people “may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God” (vv.10–11).

Looking forward to the birth of Christ and the return of Christ are big-picture emphases. They affect daily life, infusing every brightening light, yet seeming at times to be too big and too far off to fit into the moments and days of our little lives. We may even feel somewhat imprisoned, sharing a small cell with relatively big problems. Advent may simply look too big.

Paul has shown us the importance of remembering: remembering people and activities and projects and ministries and times of worship in which God was brightly present. He also helps us see that while today is the newest day the world has ever known, the gospel wraps around our today and leans forward in anticipation.

Completions are like rests in musical scores. You get to take your breath, even bask for a bit in what has been accomplished, but the song isn't over yet. Now is the time to remember other advent seasons. Now is the time to remember how God has worked in your life in the past. Now is the time to remember that today was way in the future for Christ-followers years ago, but today came and much has been accomplished.

Now look forward. Look forward with all others who are celebrating this advent season. Look forward with the smaller number of folks who know what you know about God at work in your life and in your church. Look forward in the context of what you pray for and anticipate within the depths of your soul. Advent is a good way and time to live. “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion” (v.6).

*God, thank you for the smaller completions along the way
as we look forward to and lean in to the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

A RIVER OF POETRY

Here is an advent realized: the appearance and preaching of John the Baptist. And as soon as he starts his prophesied work, he is proclaiming yet another advent: the appearance of Jesus the Messiah. It took a long time for the ancient prophesy of “one crying in the wilderness” to come about. But it didn’t take long for John’s preaching to culminate in the Christ walking up to him, asking to be baptized. The importance of the time between prophecy and realization seems to take a backseat to the promise itself.

The who, when, where, and what of John’s ministry could not be more specific in biblical times and terminology. In this passage of scripture we see a day when one advent blossomed and another was planted.

Luke, commenting on the work of John the Baptist, takes us back to Isaiah’s words—and they are big and beautiful words. They encompass the coming work of both John and Jesus; again, advents within advents, promises within promises. The fact that one day John looked up and saw that Jesus was next in line to be baptized gives us great hope that “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (v.5) What great poetry that is, and no wonder. Only poetry can describe the scene and the moment and the promise of Christ walking into the picture.

Specific year, specific region, poetic promise: this is the perfect picture of hope and joy for each person who opens their heart and life to the birth of Jesus. This is advent of the first order. The significance of any poem is found in the heart and experience of each reader. Any poem has truth at its surface that points to a still deeper truth. A poem is encountered at a specific time and place. At that time and place, public or private, the poem does its very personal work.

Isaiah’s advent poem—related to the John and Jesus scene at the Jordan River by Luke’s inspiration—allows us to interpret valleys that need to be lifted up, mountains and hills that need to be made low, crooked paths that need to be made straight, rough roads that need to be smoothed out, salvation that needs to be made real. And the poem and Isaiah and John and everyone being baptized and Luke all look to Jesus; he’s the center of this passage. A river runs through this passage, but it is Jesus who steps into the middle of that river. Time runs through this passage, from the ancient days of Isaiah to the eternity of God’s salvation. Jesus wades into the middle of that flow as well. Politics and government flow through this passage from the reign of Emperor Tiberius to that of Jesus, the Lord, who “shall reign for ever and ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah.” (Thanks again, Handel.)

It is easy to see why many consider Advent to be the greatest of all seasons on the liturgical calendar. We stand with Jesus in the middle of the river—the river of life. The flow, from beginning to end has to accommodate the presence of Jesus. There is a sense in which our very being is baptized again each advent, baptized with a fresh, breathtaking splash of Immanuel. Christ will be born, Christ is with us, Christ will come again.

God, be with us as we enter the river of promise that today baptizes Jesus and us. Amen.

DO NOT FEAR

“The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; . . . On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: . . . The Lord, your God, is in your midst” (vv 15–17). What Zephaniah saw led him to break forth in song. Our scripture passage for today is his song.

For many of us, “Advent” may mean moving toward that time, that place of heart and mind, in which we actually live as if Jesus were with us—next to us—influencing our actions, reactions, and decision making. This is more than deciding to be a nice person. This is life-changing and risky. The life-changing part has to do with how we see and interpret the world around us and how we are going to engage that world. The risky part is that we may start acting and thinking in ways that are seen to many in our world as unrealistic, disconnected, and weak.

For instance, just three verses into this song, the singer has these words coming out of his mouth, “Do not fear” (v.16). On the day that this advent is culminated, our lack of fear will be because the Lord, our God, is in our midst. We will not find our confidence in more or larger weapons, neither will we feel superior to those who do still find their confidence there. On the day this advent is culminated, we will no longer fear the dips and dives of the stock market or the slight improvement of living conditions of those who “do not deserve entitlements.” Neither will we resent or envy the rich. We will not fear, because we will be living in the full embrace of the fact that the Lord, our God, is in our midst.

Every day of a Christ-follower’s life should be a day in this kind of advent-awareness, leaning toward the day he or she can say in all humility (rather than bravado) “I do not fear.” If we must use the word “warrior,” let it be in the context of verse 17, where the Lord is described as the “warrior who gives victory” and “will rejoice over you with gladness”, “renew you in his love”, and “exult over you with loud singing as on a [festival day].”

What about disasters and those who cause them and those who experience them: still no fear? It is not stretching the point to read, as the NRSV translates it, that we will not be removed from disaster, but that it will be removed from us (v.18). Sadness, tragedy, and grief are as well known to Christ-followers as they are to anyone else, but it is hard for us to use the word disaster when the Lord is in our midst comforting, restoring, and providing even small glimmers of hope. Disasters are devoid of such light. These words do not appear in this passage of scripture or this essay in any sort of flippant fashion. They rise out of smoke and death and deep grief to say that the Lord is in our midst.

Let us remember that the Lord had not abandoned us on the terrible day of September 11, 2001. The Lord was in our midst. We may have said, “Why did You let this happen?” but in so doing, we were talking to the Lord who was in our midst. Christ-followers did not “bear reproach” (v.18) on that day, we simply went deeper into the mystery of suffering, with Jesus at our side, and Jesus within us, helping us consider the implications of loving our enemy, of saying “Even so, You are my God,” and of living life’s questions rather than defending a list of answers.

This is not easy. We are still in a state of advent, moving toward “that day” when what is described here is like breathing. But we can expect to limp along in that direction, becoming ever more the outcast as our transformed and transforming hearts become more evident to the doubters around us. Verse 19 wraps up this state of affairs promising that the Lord will deal with the oppressors at that time and will save the lame and the outcast.

Advent isn’t always about the birth or the return of Christ. There is a facet of advent for the Christ-follower that exists in the big middle of all that’s going on in our lives and our world, an advent that is as rough and ragged as life itself.

God, we pray that during this Advent season our fear will diminish, even disappear. Amen.

THE WELLS OF SALVATION

What an interesting sequence of statements: “Surely God is my salvation . . . he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name” (vv. 2–4).

Between verses two and three, a promise becomes a reality. But a sad thing is still true for many who have embraced that reality. Life contains little joy for them, even during Advent, even at Christmas. What a day it would be for these folks to quench their thirst for joy from a well that is already available to them, the well, even wells of salvation. It is a day, a beginning point in time, to look forward to.

Drawing water from the wells of salvation is a habit. We can move toward it, and grow in the moving, but it is a learned way of life. We move toward it, one dipper full at a time, until we learn to rely on the refreshing.

I remember a few times in which I got a drink of water from a common dipper at a pump on a well or from a bucket of well water when I was young. These times must have been at the farm of my aunt and uncle. It didn’t happen often for me, but it was a regular occurrence for them. One of the great stories in my family has to do with my father’s twin brother getting a very cold drink of water from a dipper on a very hot day. There are only a few of these moments in my experience, but they combine to create an important question; better said, an important lesson. Glasses and cups in the house, especially at the table, are not community property, even in our close family. Paper cups at picnics have our name written on them. But at the well, from the one dipper . . . we who drank were even closer to the water and to each other. Salvation was raw and real, community was close and vital.

Advent moves us from the careful cleanliness of our understanding of salvation to the special closeness of drawing from the same well—a reminder that the joy and foundation of God’s salvation are around us all the time. Advent simply heightens our awareness. Our scripture passage for today refers to this abundance as “his deeds among the nations” (v.4). Advent intensifies toward joy as a way of life when we see among the nations (all of them), deeds that speak of the presence, the power, the grace, and the joy of God’s salvation, springing up, baptizing us daily, even when we can’t quite see it. We are to call on his name. God, where is the well today? Advent: looking for the wells until the Living Water arrives.

Clean, accessible water is no small thing. This truth is known best to folks who are surrounded by a desert, whether that desert consists of sand, salt water, or a dry and thirsty life. But there is reason to sing, to shout aloud and sing, wherever in the world you may find yourself. Wells are everywhere. Spiritual wells of Living Water are everywhere. Current situations around the world where clean physical water is not available hang over this metaphor. First, the physical reality must be met by those of us who are used to seeing fountains as decoration. Second, the spiritual reality must be met by those of us who have become thirsty believers. Joy bubbling gently in our lives may be an important well to someone else. Thirsty believers looking for the coming of the Living Water have within them the capacity to see, daily, springs of Living Water. They have the capacity to become wells of salvation. They proclaim the coming of Living Water in their speeches and songs and conversations that call on his name.

Grab a dipper and offer water while shedding tears of empathy and joy, all from the Spirit who wells up inside of you.

*God, help me to draw water from the wells of salvation,
for my own thirst and for all those around me who are also thirsty. Amen.*

THE LORD IS NEAR

Advent reminds us on several levels that the Lord is near. While that truth is the source of great joy, today's passage suggests that we should also draw *courage* from the fact that the Lord is near. It will take courage to establish a reputation for gentleness. Why choose gentleness as our demeanor, our reputation, our relationship to the world and life? We choose gentleness because the One whose coming we anticipate with great joy is gentle...and near. Even the returning triumphant warrior of the Second Advent is the *Lamb* who was slain. He is gentle, and He is coming, and He is near in more ways than one. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Jesus doesn't stand offstage waiting for his cue on December 25, or for his cue on a date known only to God. In his eternal being, the Lord came, comes, and is with us. Advent reminds us of how time fits into God's being. The Lord is gentle. The Lord is near. We are to be known for our gentleness.

Gentleness should not be the by-product of benevolent power, rather, it should be the result of Christ in us.

Christ in us, however, may not equal gentleness, at least not yet. We are saved and are being saved. We grow towards being Christ-like; an advent of sorts. We are not to choose a state of discipleship that stops short of gentleness. We are "to advent," to develop into being more Christ-like each day, until Christ is seen, obviously and gloriously.

It is not uncommon to hear discussions of Christianity as being too gentle or too feminine to attract men in our day and time. That's where the courage comes in: the courage not to laugh at such a notion or not to cry at such a notion, the courage to rejoice because Jesus, the example and the source of strength for gentleness, is near.

But what about the need for guts and grit and muscle and firepower against the realities of our world? Where does that fit into our waiting, our gentleness? Paul writes that we are not to worry about such things or about anything, but in everything we are to make our requests to God. Can you imagine the confident pronouncement, "You have prayer meeting in there while I stand guard out here"? The concerns found there are caught up in the "anything" and "everything" of this passage.

The argument among believers continues, but Advent speaks into the debate. The Lord is coming, in fact the Lord is near. Let your gentleness be known. It is a sign that Jesus is our Lord. We give ourselves to gentleness as preparation and acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord and Jesus is near: Jesus came, is present, and is coming. We can't figure out all his comings any easier than we can figure out gentleness in a time of violence. But we are to live the questions knowing that the Answer is coming, is here if we would accept Him, and, however we figure it, is near.

This is why our worship should include as much mystery as it does revelation. We need the practice of embracing mystery, of living the questions, instead of molding and explaining away a list of answers. The Lord is near. Worship him. Gentleness will rise, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. There's the answer to the questions we live. The tough part is handing over the responsibility to One who we cannot see, and who may be gentle at the wrong time. Advent helps us lean into the answer, with all of its questions. Advent helps us learn to turn to prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving in times of difficulty and danger.

If this all seems too much, even for the duration of Advent, remember this: Jesus, the One who calls us to gentleness, once prayed for another way out of all this. Let's follow him. He's coming. The Lord is near.

*God, it is hard for us to be counterintuitive and vulnerable.
Guard our hearts and minds as we give ourselves to your teachings. Amen.*

DON'T BE GREEDY

This passage of scripture moves us from anticipating wrath to anticipating the Messiah. That's a long way in just a few verses, and right in the middle of it all is this: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Immediately, it seems, the "brood of vipers" are on board. "What should we do" to meet this requirement of "fruits worthy of repentance." John responds immediately with customized requirements for each occupation represented. Translated into common language, his answer was this: "Don't be greedy in your day-to-day responsibilities."

These same people were "filled with expectation," wondering if their particular remedial instructions were sufficient and if John were qualified to make the assignments. "Are you the Messiah?" they asked. No, not that easy, not that difficult.

John let them know that he only baptized with water. He had some qualifications, but Messiah wasn't one of them. Further, the water with which he baptized, as important as it was, would be surpassed beyond measure by the Holy Spirit with which the One who was yet to come would baptize. His baptism would not evaporate, it would be more than skin deep. It would bring about a change greater than being less greedy. Its change would be internal, spiritual, and ever present as a guide to how to live life itself. The change would be transformation, not adjustment.

Remarkably, it seems the people joined John in his anticipation of the coming of Jesus. They kept coming for whatever baptism they could get from John, and whatever hope they could get from his message. They were leaning in the right direction under his leadership.

Herod was having none of it; he had John locked up in prison. People who were wealthy, who were soldiers, who were tax collectors had some influence that would be affected by John's message, and certainly by Jesus' message. Why did they remain hopeful while Herod felt threatened? Many sermons have been preached at this point. I shall refrain. Even so, there is this observation: The people with clothes and food, the soldiers with weapons, and the tax collector with official and unofficial expectations fell into their greed almost unknowingly (almost). Upon the realization that they had become greedy over time and by increments, these folks repented, were happy to correct an almost undetected migration of their work and awareness. But Herod is described by Luke—and the Baptist would no doubt have agreed—as a doer of evil. Herod seems to have felt it his due to treat people however he wanted to treat them, to live a lifestyle that assumed others to be beneath him and their welfare none of his concern.

The coming of Christ would confront everyone with the same call to transformation. For many, the call to and the hope of transformation is life and breath itself. For others, the same call is heard as foolish. Who would give up or turn away from something desirable that was there for the taking? Who would worry about people who did not deserve my lifestyle? Absurdity, naïveté, unreality: the words reveal the depth at which transformation would take place for such a person.

This Advent season, the darkness from which we hope to emerge is deepened by greed: both unintended and reconciled. The baptism that Jesus brings transforms both by the work of the Holy Spirit and by opportunities to live the transformation, opportunities that seem like baptism under fire: hard decisions and counterintuitive values and thinking. During Advent, "don't be greedy" shines like an EXIT sign in a smoke-filled hallway. "This way to life" or "Do not take your carry-ons with you."

The One who comes, the One who waits at the end of the season, the One who will wade into the water even as we do, this One baptizes in a way that transforms greed into sharing.

*God, we approach your coming, uneasy about the depth and nature of our greed.
Bring your light and transformation to our hearts. Amen.*

WHEN SHE HAS BROUGHT FORTH

This passage of scripture is clearly a prophecy of the birth of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Christ. But the story itself waits for the one who is in labor to bring forth her baby. Advent moves through the will and the body of Mary directly to its culmination.

Any and every birth is about the baby, but the mother is there. In fact, she's been "there" for nine months. Before the baby was declared beautiful by family and friends, Mom and baby had bonded. Advent is about the baby, but the mother is there, in the scene and behind the scenes at the same time. "God brought the baby forth out of Mary" would complete the Advent trajectory, but would change the texture of the story and the role of Mary. Mary would bring forth the baby and wrap him in swaddling clothes. Micah didn't know Mary's name, but he knew her role in all this.

Advent has many facets of hope and light. The one common denominator in all of Advent's hope, light, joy, and love is Jesus. But there are many facets to be seen in the candle flames. Jesus was/is/will be the Son of God, for all to see when Mary has brought him forth.

No political statements will be made, but we will continue to ponder Mary and Advent. Everyone has a story of darkness that longs for light. The thought that Christ being born could make a difference in any life garners some attention, even from the most unconvinced sceptic. But our month of Advent has to consider, at some point, Mary's nine months of constant, internal awareness.

Every pregnancy is an advent of sorts, but no one lives with it in the same manner as the mother. The mother shares blood and food and water and energy and rest with the baby. For us who gather around the mother and find baby beds, baby clothes, and a place for the mother to sit down, it's a different nine months, a different advent.

This advent there will be the usual rushing around gathering props and costumes for the pageant. That's not bad. It is necessary work and fun. But what if, this year, we were partnered more with Mary than with Joseph? It was important that Joseph secure a donkey and a manger and some hay and some swaddling clothes for the baby. The logistical issues had to be taken care of. But, what if we grunt and groan and waddle with Mary a bit this year? What if we never lose our awareness that the one "whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" is on his way to becoming the Good Shepherd, the Prince of Peace, and that in large measure we will bring that one forth as Jesus works through the Church and us as individual Christ-followers.

We, too, are called upon to say "so be it" and then carry Christ within us. We, too, will either bring Christ forth or not: in opportunity after opportunity, in our very world view and daily decision making. We, like Mary, are called upon to bring forth the Prince of Peace. Advent reminds us of this constant inner reality. We are to bring forth the Prince of Peace, and it's a daily maturation within us, a daily birth of Christ in us. No wonder Mary was good at pondering things in her heart. We'd do well to get better at it.

Ponder what it means to have the ancient of days develop into the "one of peace" within you. Many of us would prefer to bring forth the ancient of days ready to fight. We are to bring forth the One of peace instead and that's going to take some time for inner development.

We would do well to learn from Mary. We are to pattern our lives after her son, but that takes some submission, some vulnerability, some pondering. And the pondering will take the rest of our lives...pondering and bringing forth every day.

*God, we say "Yes." We also ask that you hear our pondering as prayer.
Be our strength and shield. Amen.*

MARY'S SONG

Yesterday we focused on Mary; today we look closely at her song. The pregnant Mary went to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. The visit turned in to yet another affirmation that Mary's baby was the son of God. After Elizabeth (and the baby within her) acknowledged the miracle and magnificence of Mary's baby, Mary responded in words that had been incubating within her as surely as the baby Jesus was.

We refer to Mary's response as "Mary's Song," or the "Magnificat." I doubt that Mary sang the words we now know so well, but we sure sing them. Over the centuries, solos, anthems, and congregational song have taken Mary's words and put them in our heads, hearts, and mouths. Her humility and insight enrich these common words and help shape them into lyrical images.

Mary's pregnancy is just one step away from the fulfillment of God's promise made to her "ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (v.55). Mary knows the traditions and hopes of her heritage and is able to humbly say that their fulfillment is within her.

But then she turns her thoughts and words to what has been accomplished by the fact of her pregnancy, even before the birth. In the context of her earlier statement, "he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (v.48), she lists significant shifts in how things are now. The Lord "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (v.52). By blessing the lowly servant Mary in this way, the Lord "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (v.53). Images are powerful communication tools; these images are especially powerful. In literal terms, the powerful still sit on any number and descriptions of thrones. There are millions of "lowly" who have not yet been lifted up. The world still has too many hungry people spread across its landscape. Yet, the images are true even now, and they give hope of total fulfillment in a day yet to come.

The lowly servant Mary was chosen to bear the son of God, and poetry flows from her heart as she tries to describe the significance of that. The rich and powerful and full-bellied of the world are not excluded, they are simply repositioned by this one fact: Mary is going to have this baby. There's fulfillment of a promise for you, but there is more yet to come. That's Advent. Standing in the midst of fulfilled promises, we look forward to more that is to come: the blossoming of those promises into full flower.

Mary's song, much more powerful than what might have been Mary's essay, calls all who are rich and powerful in any way, all who are full, to rethink our position and our stewardship of such blessings. The movement of the ages and of God's promises is toward the poor, the powerless, and the hungry. If we want a front-row seat for observing God at work, we need to be with the people in these circumstances. If we want to explore the significance of Mary's son and God's promises within the context of our own lives, we need to know, respect, and learn from these people with whom Jesus walks.

Mary's song is a heads up to all adventists (whatever our denomination). What we are looking forward to is fulfillment already in that Jesus lives in us. We are the Church that is to be about the Jesus work that remains. Advent simply sheds light and direction to the Kingdom of God that is within us, waiting to be born in word and deed, attitude and humility. We should be as astounded as Mary that all this stirs within us. Let us speak more poetically, live more humbly, and look for the empty mangers around us, ready to facilitate Christ's birth into them.

God, give us Mary's humility, insight, and courage. Amen.

RESTORE US

The cries and prayers of this passage sound familiar. Restore us. Save us. What in the world is going on? For all the beauty and pageantry of Advent, this truth remains: our world seems to be rushing toward self-destruction. There isn't much that frightens us more than the thought of our world (nation, family, life) as we know it being dismantled by hostile forces and dangerous circumstances. Such prospects cause us to say, "God, if you're ever going to answer a prayer quickly and specifically, do it now." Restore us. Save us.

It would be artificial and demeaning to go through Advent pretending that this prayer was not in our hearts, or convincing ourselves that Christ, present and coming, is out of his league in these days and issues. If Jesus isn't real now, if the promise of advent offers no light for this kind of darkness, then we hope and celebrate in vain. But the love, hope, joy, and light of Advent *are* as real as our core concerns and prayers of "Restore us. Save us."

It is human nature to want God to fix things, or at least help us fix things. The instinct ranges from self-preservation to sacrificing our lives for others. The instinct is not a bad one. Our concerns about the restoration and salvation of our ways of life, however, do make us consider the relationship between our ways of life and our Christ-following. Christians around the world face displacement and abuse, hunger and homelessness—the destruction of their ways of life. Yet, they remain Christ-followers, having discovered that their relationship to Christ is more important than their way of life, even life itself.

Praying for restoration and salvation makes sense. It is good and right. But one wonders if the prayers of restore us and save us shouldn't be accompanied by prayers of give us courage, or let your light shine, even in these frightening situations. This is easy to write. Easy enough to read, but sickening at a deep level to actually contemplate.

Advent is a time to contemplate all darkness and to hope for light to shine in it. Advent can be as difficult as Lent. We have significant corners of darkness that need light. Our prayers for restoration are timely and well placed, but we must not ignore the questions we raise. They must not crowd out other prayers that are equally as important in dark times.

The psalmist concludes that God is angry with the people's current patterns of prayer, or else things would not be so difficult. I appreciate the psalmist's truthfulness and his courage to pray it, to get in God's face, as it were. But having neighbors and enemies laugh at us may not be a worthy concern. In fact, it may reveal a significant shallowness, a darkness all its own.

Wanting neighbors and enemies to respect us and, if necessary, even fear us, may not be desires that God shares. "How long?" It may be a very long time before God answers prayer for the restoration of power and place and prestige. Can we live with that? Can we pray within that kind of reality, instead of praying to be saved from it?

Tough advent, terrible darkness, calls for a light that might be different than what we're singing about at the moment. This kind of advent might keep one eye on the manger and the other eye on the cross. There is no suggestion of impending doom here, neither is this a call to abandon clearheaded thinking. But it is Advent. It is a time to consider darkness that needs to be changed by light. When light comes to shine on this particular darkness, "Restore us" might just mean to greater Christ-likeness and faithfulness. "Save us" might just mean from ourselves.

God, our fear is real, but so are you. Restore us. Save us. Amen.

TURNING THINGS AROUND

The coming of Christ did and does this: it changes annual religious festivals from remembrance of sin to remembrance of forgiveness and redemption. The heart rejoices in that kind of anticipation. Guilt is an effective motivator, but grace is more freeing. Guilt gives power to the proclaimer or accuser. Grace gives power to the Christ who dwells in us. Advent leans toward grace and away from guilt. It is our leaning that needs the light of Advent. Guilt sometimes seems the more effective tool in our lives and in our dealing with others. But the Light of Christ pulls us toward grace like the yellow faces of a field of sunflowers as the sun passes over.

Hanging on to guilt can sometimes be mistaken for being humble. Light reveals that knowing sins have been forgiven by the sacrifice of Christ results in true humility. Choose your advent: birth or return, in both cases grace overcomes guilt and the soul is freed. That is a bright light shining into a sad darkness. According to our scripture passage for today, this grace over guilt is God's will.

Grace angers some people, even believers, who feel that grace is license. They lean toward guilt as a lens for seeing the world. That's the dark side of the equation. Advent turns our head and hearts toward grace, towards God's will and the Spirit's leadership, rather than the leadership of a list of do's and don'ts.

The freeing that takes place is not in the heart of the offender, it is in the heart of the observer. The more light that is shed on grace, the more we are able to extend it to others, to receive it from others, and even extend it to ourselves. That is light-worthy anticipation. It is one of the major gifts of advent.

It is darkness for one who has been saved by grace to then resent grace that is extended to others. Lord, let the Light come quickly. In our darkness we keep track of sin. In our darkness we keep track of who deserves blessing and who doesn't. In our darkness we prefer fairness over forgiveness in the failings of others. Lord, let the Light come quickly. In our darkness we want to amend the teachings of Christ rather than being transformed by them.

Advent frees us. The light comes and we need only bask in it, confessing what it reveals, and rejoicing in its turning around our human tendencies. Jesus came to do God's will and in His light we can order our steps toward that same end, to do God's will. God's will shines in the light of scripture and of each new day. Advent is a festival of light. Jesus is our example and our lens for reading scripture, He is the One who introduced the Holy Spirit to us; light upon light upon light, all leaning toward grace.

According to our scripture passage for today, God has not desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices offered according to the law (v.8). God the Son came and comes in order to shed the light of grace on the law itself. Advent is the season of realizing that that sunrise can take place in our hearts, our minds, our world view, our own guilt.

Advent reveals a loving God: Parent and Child. Advent shed an ever-brightening light on a dark world, offering hope in a festival of light, joy, and peace. Advent promises the light necessary to turn things around toward grace. Thanks be to God.

*God, help us think in terms of light and joy and love and peace and grace.
Disperse the dark clouds of our orientation toward guilt. Amen.*

BACK AT ELIZABETH'S HOUSE

About three days ago, we focused our thoughts on Mary's Song—Mary's downloading to Elizabeth all she had been pondering up to that point. Today, we look at that visit from Elizabeth's point of view. It's one of the great scenes and perspectives in all of Advent.

When Elizabeth opened the door and invited Mary into her house (and Zechariah's), the baby Elizabeth was carrying “leaped in her womb” (v.41). Advent is bubbling and tumbling in joy and amazement at this moment. Mary is still reeling from the significance of her pregnancy, Elizabeth is overwhelmed with joy and amazement, and the unborn John the Baptist is leaping with emotion and insight that he'll have a hard time explaining even thirty years from now.

Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, is humbled that Mary, the mother of the Lord, would come and stay for a while in her home. This wasn't the first time these two women had been together. In fact, they were related. But something wonderfully unusual was taking place in both their lives and in the history of the world. The usual family gossip surely had to take a back seat to pondering and praising during this visit.

The scene of these two women—of differing ages, from the same family greeting each other as for the first time, given their pregnancies—warms my heart. I can see it in the context of my own family. I can hear aunts and grandmothers coming into the house through the kitchen door, talking, laughing, all at the same time. But then, in my mind's eye, I hear Elizabeth greet Mary, and the familiar noise comes to an unfamiliar focus. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (v.42). Why me? Why us? Why one so old and one so young? Why our family? How do we relate to each other now? Can we still talk about the same things? Can we still tell the same old family stories? Mary is not the only one who pauses to ponder during Advent.

I love the scene. Jesus is present in Mary's womb and family life suddenly deepens. The same recipes are prepared. Yes, the same stories are told, but maybe a bit more slowly and carefully. Everyone looks around the room, appreciating each other even more lovingly than before. Jesus being in that womb and that room is in keeping with his coming birth in a cattle stall.

Advent tries, again, to convince us that Jesus can be born to us, to our family, in our day and time, in our heritage and story. The birth of Christ is equally amazing every time it takes place: every Christmas, every person, every circumstance. The smells are real in Elizabeth's kitchen and, later, in a hotel's stable. The families are real, whether it be an old family like that of Zechariah and Elizabeth, or a newly forming family like that of Joseph and Mary. The individuality of Christ's coming is as real as a pregnancy.

Advent brings Christ and Christmas home. We don't have to be out or up to “be there.” Advent alerts us that a gift is going to be handed to us. The proper response to the gift will be to simply receive it. To us, our house, our life, our story, our language, our family, our station in life: the Light is coming. Elizabeth and Mary have nothing on us. And we have nothing on anyone else in the world. The Light that is coming is the Light of the World. Them, their house, their life, their story, their language, their family, their station in life: think of those most unlikely, the Light is coming to them, as well.

God, help us to accept the light and then to live in the light. Amen.

HOPES AND FEARS

This beloved Christmas carol takes us to the last moment of Advent and the first moments of its fulfillment. The scene is set in poetry and music of the first order. Delicate, quiet, fragrant (even odors were redeemed); this is the small town's big night. This is when the least become the greatest, the last are given the hope of being the first; stalls outshine hotels tonight, and, in a way, not just tonight.

The focus of and in this scene is astounding. The focus is identified in the first stanza: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." "All the years" is the right phrase; all the years before this night, all the years since this night. The hopes and fears of all the years meet and bow beside the manger, then find their existence within the person of the child. All the hopes and fears know each other, they are distant relatives. The family resemblance is revealed in the light of the manger. Our hopes exist in dynamic tension with our fears. Our fears are of the death of our hopes.

Advent and the moment of its full blossoming shed light on this relationship of our hopes and fears to each other and to Jesus. Light is also shed on *our* relationship to our hopes and fears. Hopes and fears are real and are an important part of life. But they are not to rule our lives. They are not to define us. Rule and definition are in the manger tonight, wrapped in swaddling clothes, with bits of hay and straw sticking to them.

Angels and donkeys are gathered around. Stars and manure are affecting the scene. Kings and shepherds are on the way. They will bow before the manger. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in the baby. The shepherds know about big dreams and hopes. The wise men and Herod know about deep-seeded fears. The baby just sleeps and eats and cries for Mary to hold him.

For those who are willing to be so vulnerable, their souls may follow their hopes and fears into the manger, into the person and body of the baby. That is the prayer of the carol. "Descend to us, we pray... be born in us today... O come to us, abide with us." Echoes from the future harmonize with the promise of the birth, echoes such as "our body being a temple," "Christ in us," "dwelling in Christ," "the church becoming the body of Christ," and "Communion."

How wonderful it is to deposit our hopes and fears in the person of Christ. Fully God, fully human: angels sing and bow in mid-air above a baby that needs an earthly mother to keep it alive. Revelation and mystery live side by side as closely as do hopes and fears, and that's encouraging because these opposites are present in us. Jesus redeems humanity from the manger as much as from the cross: wooden bookends that encase our story.

Hopes and fears, some forgotten until now, begin to cling to or challenge the idea of Advent. Here we are again. Yet, here we are, anew. An old hope pushes aside current fear. Our hopes and fears have another year's wear on them, like familiar Christmas decorations. But we dig out the decorations anyway... old, worn, almost a bother, but somehow important. In celebrating Advent we force our hopes and fears to peer into the manger one more time.

"No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in."

God, redeem our hopes and fears again this season. Amen.

HERALD ANGELS ALL AROUND

The herald angels are the ones who say to us, “He’s here. He’s the King. Glory be to God in the highest.” They are the ones who say, “You can open the gift now, after the long wait.” That’s the voice we want to hear, the voice of the herald angel, one who knows, one who speaks with authority, excitement, and in praise of the King, one who knows that we’ve been waiting. Those angels are all around us, even now as we get deeper into this year’s Advent season.

Herald angels of the more common sort have time to take us to the doctor’s office. They have the energy needed when our energy is gone. The herald angels of our day become stand-in parents, grandparents, and adult kids. The herald angels who declare “He’s here” in our lives seem to flock around hospitals and assisted living homes, shelters, and soup kitchens. The herald angels who we know declare “He’s here” by listening and understanding. The herald angels I’ve encountered don’t make much noise. They come quietly; they declare His presence quietly; they leave quietly.

The angels in our carol for today were singing. That seems to be a common characteristic of herald angels. They sing, they hum; their lives seem to have a discernable melody to them, a heavenly melody that says what the Bethlehem angels said, “He’s here. He’s the King. Glory be to God in the highest.”

The difference between the herald angels of the carol and the herald angels of the Church is this: Christ indwells the current batch. The carol declares that Jesus just showed up, He’s just arrived (“late in time behold Him come”). That’s what the presence of modern day herald angels declares as well: “Jesus just showed up. He lives in me. He cares for you. He can live in you as well.” Our herald angels, glowing with Jesus’ glory, show up at the right times. They seem to know through some sort of a heavenly sensor (Holy Spirit) that now is the time and this is the place . . . angel and Jesus in one individual Christ-follower.

The advent we experience may well be internal, a glowing light that others can see. The Christ who is to be born may well be born in us, a presence that others can detect. We are immersed: we are swimming in advent and the birth of Christ, surrounded by herald angels, ministering as angels, and the heavens are singing “Glory” and ringing bells as the soundtrack for the whole scene. Light and life radiate in and from all this to the glory of God.

Something else is supposed to radiate from the coming of Christ. Peace. With herald angels everywhere, angels who are also Christ-followers glowing with His presence, peace should break out all over the earth. “Peace on earth, and mercy mild”—one of the by-products of the birth of Christ seems to be missing. Advent is the season of hope that this missing facet might be recovered, and the story of the birth of Christ be completed. For this to happen, all we who claim to be followers of the newborn King must also accept the herald angel part of that discipleship. We are to be heralds of peace, angels of mercy, followers who can’t help but speak and live the message of the Prince of Peace who now indwells herald angels. Advent demands something of us. Maybe that’s why we rush from Thanksgiving to Christmas, or from Halloween to Christmas it seems now.

Actually, I think all Christ-followers want to be herald angels; it’s the new advent for long-time Christ-followers. Longing for the day, we will have the courage to say in quiet word and thoughtful deed, “Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” It’s a mouthful. It’s a heart full. It’s a life full, full of the presence of God. “Late in time behold Him come,” born again in me, making me an angel of peace, a timely herald angel.

God, we join in the prayer, “Make me a herald angel.” Amen.

OUR SONGS EMPLOY

One of the great lines in all of Christian hymnody is found in this carol: “Let all their songs employ.” Advent calls us to live this meaning. Advent blossoming into Christmas marks the time when the songs of the seasons should also blossom, from singing into living. Let us put the songs to work. This is not about preaching and guilt trips, it’s about paying attention to the words that come out of our mouths. We take care (or at least, we should) to sing the truth. We take care to sing with grace. Let us also take care to be shaped by what we sing.

The world at large may not yet show evidence of Jesus’ truth and grace. But our world can—the world of our work and leisure, investment and divestment, action and reaction. Our world can show “the wonders of His love.” Advent may need to be for us a movement toward a new birth of our songs into our lives.

The songs that often emanate from the lives of Christians are songs of militancy, triumphalism, and a sense of defensiveness. Advent and Christmas put songs of grace and peace back into our repertory. We sing the joyful songs of a Christ who is coming and who has come as King of kings, even if gentle and mild—not a Christ in hiding, or in fear, or in anger. If we employ the songs of the season instead of shelving them for a year, the world will see light, love, joy, and peace employed: put to work shedding the light of truth on the lies of violence and hate.

“Let earth receive her King... and nature sing.” Our songs are to be lived. Advent’s “hanging of the green” services, Chrismon trees, Christmas trees, wreaths, and poinsettias remind us of nature’s redemption at the coming of Christ, as well as our redemption. Our songs employed will have us relate with more respect to all nature, to all creatures, to all of creation. Advent affords us the time to think about the employment or implementation of the words we sing. The process needed for this facet of Advent to blossom into birth may well be a process of heightened awareness, a process of slowing down and paying attention to the things that are outside our notice in our routines. Should this happen, our care for nature would begin to benefit us, the caregivers. A trio emerges: heaven and nature and Christ-followers singing by living the songs. The world would have to notice. The sight and sounds would be overwhelmingly beautiful and convincing.

The songs we employ will either reinforce the message of violence or reinforce the message of peace. The songs we employ will either say this newborn baby is King or that He is, at times, irrelevant. “Let all their songs employ.” The repertory will be revealing. Advent allows us to ponder these things in our hearts, in our minds, in our response to Advent and Christmas.

The songs of Advent and Christmas bring a certain warmth and sense of family to all who congregate to sing them. There’s a reason for that warmth. We sing of a truth that is still alive and waiting to be born. We sing of a truth that has a heartbeat and longs to be on its feet, stretching its legs, and walking, even if it is a bit wobbly at first. We are warmed by the presence of a living, forgiving, encouraging Christ, present in the individual Christ-follower, present in the gathered congregation. The songs make the season. Let us employ the songs, singing them again this year. Let us employ the songs; gifts that make it past New Year, affecting the very lives we live.

God, use our songs to transform our lives. Amen.

DAWN

It doesn't take much light to induce a great amount of hope. It doesn't take much light to gain the advantage over darkness. Even a small light makes a difference. A small fire can warm heart and mind as well as body.

Advent sees a small light on a distant horizon. Advent catches a glimpse of darkness as it begins to flee and lose its power. Each of us has some sort of darkness within our being, a darkness that would be weakened if we were to allow the small light of Advent to enter our understanding of life and self.

The poem on this page depicts the small light as a dancing light. Certainly it is not difficult to see the flickering of a flame as a dance. But all light dances and shimmers with hope when it is introduced into our darkness.

The concepts of joy and peace and love "dawn on us." That's a great phrase that paints an image we can all relate to. "Dawn" is a word associated with light. Light, insight, and possibilities bring forth this wonderful dawning. They are small at first, shimmering in the cold and darkness that we know too well, but small, dancing lights are from God. We anticipate the flickering of small arms and legs, visible just above the manger in Bethlehem. Beyond cute, the small, dancing light of the baby Jesus seems to push the darkness back and send it on its way.

Once dawned, the sun rises, spreading its warmth and light. For some people at this time of year, a sky-high sun is unimaginable. But, a small, dancing light just might be possible. Distant? Yes, but possible. Thanks be to God.

*See, light dances
On a thin, vast horizon.
See, warmth shimmers
On the cold edge of night.
All earth awakes
In strange anticipation;
Darkness dispersed
By a small, dancing light.*

*Light is dancing
Hope, peace, and love.
Warmth is spreading
Peace, love, and joy.*

*Is there a word for this?
There must be a word for this!
Yes, there's a word for this;
The word is "dawn!"*

God, our prayer today is for even just a little light in that part of our heart known only to you. Amen.

HOPE

“Hopeless” is one of the heaviest, saddest, most feared concepts and conditions in any language. It declares that the end of something treasured is inevitable and probably near. Our lives become subject to the unwelcome intrusion. Options that are within our control reduce to a limited and precious few. Hopelessness says that we are “dead men walking.”

Then, by way of a smile, a song, an unexpected option, or a touch, “hope” flashes across the scene, even if visible for only a moment. In the poem on this page, a leaf falls, leaving a bare branch. But a bird appears: unexpected, alive, free. Does the bird stay, does it leave? We don’t know, but it appeared and brought with it hope. The bird doesn’t know it brought hope. It even asks the same, distressful question, but we see the hope in its appearance. And that is enough. Hopelessness must now retreat into its dark den, chased there by the momentary visit of a bird.

Advent affords us such moments and glimpses. In songs, in smiles, in story, in drama, in decoration, in cyclical return. Don’t let the moments land and leave without you noticing. Watch for the moments and declare them yours, declare them to be the moment of hope that you needed. It doesn’t matter if the bird knows about all this or not.

*Red leaves fall;
Can it be said
The tree that loses leaves
Is dead?
The evergreen
In that same scene
Says, “No,
No, not at all.”*

*A redbird lands
Where leaves once grew;
To ask, “Is this tree dead?”
Then falling snow
Says, “No, no, no,
In time all will be new.”*

*Is there a word for this
When red leaves fall and redbirds call?
Yes, there’s a simple word for this;
The simple word is “hope.”*

*God, the leaves have fallen and the branch is bare.
Please send the messenger bird. I will be watching. Amen.*

P E A C E

One could easily come to the conclusion that the only peace we'll ever really know is the peace that we can manage to garner and store within ourselves, for ourselves. Further, the concept of peace has been degraded to mean the momentary pause between wars. Peace talks on international stages strive only to reduce the bloodshed on our side.

What peace can the hungry know, or those dying of easily preventable diseases? What peace can the oppressed know—only the moments doled out by the oppressor?

It is too easy to paint a dark and dying picture.

And then we hear the story of the anticipated birth of a child. This child will be named “Jesus,” but he will have a number of meaningful nicknames. One of those nicknames is “Prince of Peace.” Further, anticipating the birth of the Christ child deepens the joy (or brings some joy) to the birth of any and every child on earth, even children born into poverty and want. This baby just might grow up to be the one, or one of those, who “gets it right,” who understands life and peace in a new and convincing way. Maybe this baby will grow to be a leader in matters of lasting peace.

We know this to be true of the baby of Bethlehem's manger. He will bring a new and convincing Way of peace. It will be internal, to be sure, but will be received as a gift from Him. Properly understood and lived, it will put real peace on display. Advent brings a child to us. His nickname is Prince of Peace.

*One straight path
Through teeming throngs,
One silent melody
Amid loud songs,
One small good
Surrounded by wrongs;
In this a child shall lead us.*

*One sure truth
To measure claims,
One deep identity
Though many names,
One clear call
'Midst meaningless games;
In this a child shall lead us.*

*Is there a word for this?
There must be a word for this.
Yes, there's a word for this.
The word is “peace.”*

God, let the Prince of Peace be born in me. Amen.

LOVE

Love, except that felt for family and friends, seems to be non-existent in our nation's and our society's "new normalcy." Christians rush as quickly as any other to build fences, to angrily ration food and health, to maintain what is for many an oppressive status-quo. "Common sense" and "responsibility" have new, frightened definitions.

1 John 4:18 rushes to our consciousness. Its day has arrived: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." For many, the introduction of the words "perfect" and "perfection" means this verse can be ignored because we do not live in a perfect world. But the Advent wreath has a love candle. Advent moves us toward the birth of Christ, our redeemer and our example. The strain of the struggle within us is more than we can handle.

But a child is born (or soon will be) and at the birth of this and every child, love demands a new hearing. Love demands a new hearing every Christmas, and Christmas is quickly approaching. Let us open our hearts. Let us open our minds. Will this Christmas be the day?

*Someday fear will leave us.
Someday strangers will be welcomed.
Someday differences will be a thing of beauty.
Someday we will open hearts and hands
To counter hate.*

*Someday greed will leave us.
Someday poverty will call us.
Someday people's pain will touch our hearts and hurt us.
Someday we will all know suffering
To be our own.*

*Someday pride will leave us.
Someday we'll embrace the world.
Someday we will live on earth, God's heavenly kingdom.
Someday we'll allow the coming Child
To shape our hearts.*

*Is there a word for this?
Give us a word for this!
And a word moves toward our prayer:
The word is "love."*

*God, we want to love, but we don't want to be irresponsible.
Help us. Show us the way, even in our day. Amen.*

JOY

The image I often get when I think about Advent is the image of watching a sunrise across a large open field or an ocean. The dawn is way out there and the sun that is dawning will finally come to me. But another image wants to be added to my Advent experience this year, the image of a fountain, bubbling up inside me . . . a fountain that just might become a river. The image is a fountain of joy.

Can you imagine this fountain? It seems to bubble more actively in times of stress. It doesn't make us silly, it makes us calm. It doesn't drown us in giddiness, it keeps our spirits hydrated. A fountain of joy is bubbling just beneath the surface, ready to overflow on Christmas. Then, we can anticipate its continuing flow, bubbling and flowing as a steady river; there to be seen when we look, there to be heard when we listen, there to quench our thirst when we get on our knees and drink.

*We sense a fountain,
A rising fountain,
Welling up in our hearts.
We sense a stirring,
A stubborn stirring,
A sense that God will come among us,
God will live within us,
God will be there with us
In the struggles of this life.*

*We sense a fountain,
A rising fountain,
Welling up in our hearts.
We sense a stirring,
A stubborn stirring
A sense that God will come among us,
God will live within us,
God will be there with us
In the struggles of this life.*

*Is there a word for this,
The rising fountain,
This strange new knowing,
This welling up inside?
Yes, there's a word for this!
The word is "joy!"*

God, smile or giggle. Help us to allow the joy of advent to bubble up inside us. Amen.

THE CHRIST

No longer words in a song or a sermon. No longer candles in a wreath. The words of Advent, gathered up and given breath in the Word, have become flesh. Jesus is born to show us what the words really mean. He shows us that love, joy, peace, and light are tough words, not soft ones. He shows us that these words are worldviews and ways of life, even when they seem to be overwhelmed by angry and frightened words.

The Christ, the Messiah, is Word and words made flesh in the person of Jesus and in the persons who claim Jesus as Lord. This Son of God is God the Son. He is truth and His teachings are truth. Love, joy, peace, and light are to be fleshed out with courage, every day. Emmanuel (another of Jesus' nicknames), as you know, means "God with us." If "God with us" walks with us and dwells in us, we can live love, joy, peace, and light.

Advent is "On your mark, get set." Christmas is "Go." Go into your world living the words of Advent with the Word made flesh living in you. As tough as living these words will be at times, a celebration is a proper and appropriate beginning. Merry Christmas.

*In Bethlehem
A baby was born
And God's love and God's Word became flesh.
Joy became flesh.
Peace became flesh.*

*Hope: flesh.
Peace: flesh.
Love: flesh.
Joy: flesh.
These words and God's Word
Became flesh,
And the baby's name was Jesus.*

*In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word became flesh,
And the Word dwelt among us.
In the beginning and in Bethlehem:
Emmanuel, Emmanuel!*

*These words became flesh
When God became flesh.
He is hope and peace and love and joy;
He is the Christ!*

*God, we cannot live the words of Advent unless Christ is born in us, today and every day.
Open our hearts to be mangers, we pray. Amen.*