ADVENT AT THE NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
2017

Sunday, December 3  ..................  First Sunday of Advent (Communion)

Sunday, December 10  ..................  Second Sunday of Advent
Pageant rehearsal, 10am Park Level/
12noon-2pm

Saturday, December 16 ...............  Pageant rehearsal, 8:30am-11am
Wrapping gifts for Radcliffe Room
Guests, 9am-12noon

Sunday, December 17  ..................  Third Sunday of Advent
Christmas pageant
ONE service, 10am

Thursday, December 21 ..............  “Longest Night Service” to
remember the homeless who
died during 2017, 12 noon

Sunday, December 24 ...............  Fourth Sunday of Advent
ONE service, 10am
Christmas Eve Services - 5:30
and 8 pm (Communion)
“Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down….” Isaiah 64: 1a

“God, bring us back, let your face shine on us and we shall be safe.” Psalm 80: 3

“And then they will see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.” Mark 13:26

“And so you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed; he will continue to give your strength till the very end, so that you will be irreproachable on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 1: 7

I’ll share a secret if you promise not to tell. I never think about the Second Coming, the end of the world, the Apocalypse. I guess I should, but there’s far more for me to think and worry and plan about than how End will come. And yet that notion is a preoccupation, really an obsession, of the Old and New Testaments. How do I reconcile my focus on today or tomorrow and the Bible’s seemingly non-stop concern with the end times? It’s not that I don’t concern myself about the world I’ve left my grandchildren; that I don’t yearn for a day when I might see a lost child, a beloved sister; that I don’t hope that an instant of holding a baby or making love might last forever; that I don’t crave a world in which every soul would be counted equally; that I don’t wish for once I could see somebody or some situation other than “through a glass darkly”. My question is how do I connect those inchoate yearnings with the Biblical promise of the Second Coming?

Let me share stanzas from two poems that express something of my many-mindedness about waiting into the fullness of time. The first, from a poem entitled “Waiting”, is by R.S. Thomas, Welsh-born Anglican priest, and the second is from a poem by David Whyte, entitled "Waiting to Go On".

Young/ I pronounced you. Older/ I still do, but seldom/ now. Leaning far out/ over an immense depth, letting/ your name go and waiting,/ somewhere between faith and doubt,/ for the echoes of its arrival.

It must be, deep/ down, we are creatures/ getting ready/ for when we are needed.//It must be that waiting/ for the listening ear/ or the appreciative word,/ for the right/ woman or the right man/ or the right moment/ just to ourselves.// we are getting ready/ just to be ready// and nothing else.// Like this moment/ just before the guests arrive/ working/ alone in the kitchen/ sensing a deep/ down symmetry/ in every blessed thing.// The way/ everything/ unbeknownst/ to us/ is preparing to meet us too.//Just on the other/ side of the door/someone/ is about to/ knock/ and our life/ is just/ about to change// and finally/ after all these/ years rehearsing,// behind the curtain,// we might/ just be/ ready/ to go on.

Prayer: Almighty God, as we stand in the midst of time and in the presence of eternity, unworthy to speak Thy name and unworthy to hear Thy name spoken, we pray, our Father, that a word might be said that will strengthen some life. Give that life, heart and spirit new insight and courage for the living of the Christian life, through Jesus whom we confess to be our Lord and Christ. Amen.  [Rev. Jack McClendon’s Invocation]

Paul B. Dorman
Hear ye! Hear ye! Hosea’s prophetic indictment of the Israelites reads like the script of a terrifying Law and Order episode. Could things get any worse? The Israelites are not just swearing and telling a few lies. They are murdering, stealing, and committing adultery! As I read the passage, I felt like I was sinking deep into an abyss – the way I feel when I receive a barrage of news updates on my iPhone during the workday:

“The land mourns
and all who live in it languish
as world leaders ignore ever-present signs of climate change…”

“Forgotten children roam the streets after the latest natural disaster…”

On these dark, chilly evenings when I walk from my office to the Metro and from the Metro back to my apartment, I often feel worn down and worn out from all that is going on in my life and in the lives of people all over the world. The people I pass on my walk must know the feeling. They look back at me with sad, tired eyes or they simply hang their heads, eyes glued to a phone screen.

In the Luke passage, Jesus reminds his disciples of the signs of the end times: war, vengeance, distress, and wrath. I am sad to admit that my friends and I have woefully talked about “the end of the world” more than a few times in the last year. How can we not? Gun violence. Racial hatred. Sexual assault and harassment. Fixed elections. Malaise.

Sin and corruption abound.

And yet, God remains steadfast. Like a centering prayer, the passage from 2 Peter reminds us that redemption from the corruption of the world comes from our faith, and that the foundation of our faith is love. In the same way that the language in the Hosea passage made me feel worn down, Peter’s words build me up. God’s divine power, which is love, fills the abyss. Peter’s salutation reminds us that through our knowledge of God’s love and through grace, we have been given the tools to recognize, escape from, and even defeat corruption:

“For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

Prayer: Dear God, forgive our ignorance. Help us recognize signs of corruption – great and small – in our lives and in the world. Help us gain greater knowledge of Your goodness. May our faith, with love as its sure foundation, continue to grow in knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, and compassion. Amen.

- Corinne Hester Crews
He told them this parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near’. Luke 21:29-31

The fig tree, part of the mulberry family of plants, is no ordinary tree. It is native to the arid lands of the Middle East and is one of the earliest plants cultivated by ancient humans for food. The earliest fig fossils predate the cultivation of wheat, barley, and legumes.

Figs were widely cultivated in ancient times. They were widespread in ancient Greece and Rome. Their cultivation was described by both Aristotle and Theophrastus, while Cato the Elder lists several varieties in one of his works on agriculture.

Figs figure prominently throughout the Bible. In Genesis, Adam and Eve clad themselves in fig leaves after eating the forbidden fruit. In ancient Canaan, as mentioned in Deuteronomy, figs were listed among the 7 indigenous plants that can provide food all year long.

The New Testament – both in Matthew and Mark – recounts a hungry Jesus who, upon finding a fruitless fig tree, curses it such that it shriveled and died. But it is in the Parable of the Fig Tree – most of an observation really, rather than a story – that Jesus teaches us the virtue of patience.

The early Christian church was clearly an impatient bunch – but we Christians today are also an impatient bunch. We need patience in the face of promises still to be fulfilled; patience as we wrestle with the stress of daily live, and patience when we think all our patience is gone.

So, it is that as we must wait with patience for the coming birth of Jesus Christ. So, it is that we must also wait with patience for the second coming of the Messiah.

Jesus uses figs and other trees as harbingers of the Second Coming. He admonishes us to be sensitive to the changes in plant growth and in the seasons. But only God knows when the Second Coming actually happens.

Like the fig tree, not everything is what is seems. The fig fruit is technically not a fruit but an inverted flower. In many varieties, they need a special wasp that enters through a hole at the bottom of the fig and pollinates the inverted flowers.

And so, it is with patience that we wait to commemorate the birth of Christ. It is with patience that we read the signs of the Second Coming.

Creator God, through trees and other plants, you recycle life that has come before. Through the air they process, the food they give us, and the homes they provide, you sustain us and our fellow creatures. Thank you. Amen.

Adlai Amor
When I was young, I always found the period before Christmas to be such a hopeful, magical, and exciting season. Sadly, that changed as I got older. It lost its more magical aspects. I’d like to recapture some of that feeling, and I hope to do so through a more engaged spiritual practice this Advent season.

In reading through my passages, I particularly focused on 2 Peter 1-10 and its message on time, and the difference between our conception of time and God’s.

“4 The [scoffers] will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”

It’s a reminder that God’s time is completely different than my sense of time. I’ve been very conscious of the passage of time, how busy I feel, how I waste time to procrastinate, and how I’ve spent it as another year winds to a close. I’d like to change my current approach to time and use it in a more godly way going forward. To be present and conscious, and not just see things as a checklist.

The passage’s portrait of environmental destruction resonates too. I’ve always really loved spending time in nature, and contemplating environmental disaster, alongside human extermination is a bleak image, but one that’s been weighing on my mind. And its image of the destruction through fire contrasted to the creation of the world through water and the Flood.

It’s a reminder that while we may not always see the signs or evidence of God’s return, that He is not slow but patient. And in the time when we celebrate Christ’s birth and the solstice, to repent, and celebrate the possibilities that exist for redemption and renewal.

Emily Sabo
The experts tell us that the book we know as 2 Peter was probably written sometime between 150 and 200 of the Common Era. So it is obviously not written by the disciple Peter, who had been crucified upside down in Rome in the previous century. As was common in those times, the author adopted a famous name to give a sense of authority to his writing. It is not addressed to any particular church, so it was for distribution throughout the Christian world at that time. It is generally thought it was designed to correct the actions and beliefs of Gentiles who had joined the church originally created by Jews. Thus these newer members did not have in their minds the strict commands of the Old Testament of what they should believe and how they should behave.

Therefore, although Paul in writing to the churches of the Jews of the Diaspora told them that they were free of such strict commands, he did not mean that they did not have to follow the spirit of the law. The writer tells his readers that if some things Paul writes are hard for them to understand, they are still not free to do anything they darn please. They cannot say that they are members of the church and that is all that counts. They must “be in lives of holiness and godliness” and not “be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability”.

Hosea, writing to the Jews of the Northern Kingdom some 900 year before, faced a similar problem. His description of the people of this time is devastating. See verses 7 through 10. “Gilead is a city of evildoers tracked with blood.” Priests are banded together like robbers. They “commit villainy”. They murder. Hosea has seen horrible things. And he accuses the people of loving God “like a morning cloud, like dew that goes early away”. Instead, we should know the Lord’s “going forth is as sure as the dawn…as the spring rains that water the earth”. God does not just want sacrifices and burnt offerings. He wants steadfast love and the knowledge of God.

So. What am I doing, sitting in the pew each Sunday? What have I done?

Phil Hanna

Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. (Psalm 86:11)
Matthew the gospel writer tells the story of John the Baptist in prison. John is afraid of his imminent demise, and does not want to have doubts about Jesus, so John sends his disciples to ask Jesus if Jesus is the real Messiah.

Jesus answers John's question by recounting the deeds he has done in Galilee, e.g., healing the blind and deaf and raising the dead. No sooner than Jesus answers the question, He begins to praise and elevate John as a true prophet, a person who delivers the message of God.

It seems strange that John, a prophet with so much courage, would question his own ministry. John preached a gospel of divine holiness, as did Jesus. However, John’s was not the gospel of good news, but a gospel of divine destruction. Jesus, on the other hand, preached a gospel of divine holiness with divine love. What did John the Baptist lack?

John lacked the cross, the essence of Christianity. John was the precursor of Jesus, and he pointed the way to the truth and the life. But it took Jesus to show us the real essence of God, the powerful love of God that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. Unfortunately, John never got to experience the cross.

But we do! The things Jesus did in Galilee He still does today, that is, those blind to the truth have their eyes opened; those tainted with disease, cleansed; the deaf hear the voice of conscience and begin to listen; and those who are dead and powerless in sin are raised to newness of life.

Prayer: Loving God, please continue to help us know the way of the cross and its meaning in our lives.

[The credit for most of these insights goes to William Barclay, Scottish New Testament interpreter. The devotion writer is a merely a mini-John the Baptist pointing to a real scholar.]

Ella Cleveland
Advent Meditation, December 9th 2017
Hosea 8:1-10
Matthew 11:11-19
Acts 17:24-31

When I consider the Old Testament writing of the words of a vengeful God in the first person, I have to try to make sense of it in the context of my faith in a God of Love and forgiveness. I’ve often realized that my discomfort in the process of finding truth in these ragings comes from the familiar ring of them when compared to my own feelings about the world I live in…if I’m honest.

It’s hard not to see the world with vultures circling and to “Set the trumpet to your lips!” as Hoseas says and try to self righteously call out in anger those in leadership and their supporters who live in selfishness chasing after money or other idols while the majority clip toward or into poverty. Isn’t there enough for all to prosper? Doesn’t God’s law forbid this? Aren’t we called to care for each other in love? Certainly this is my desire. Sometimes, though, the raging voice in my mind overwhelms the still small voice of my willing spirit.

Matthew writes, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” For me this is about the important purifying symbol of baptism. The pure beginning of God’s offspring on a path of continuing repentance and renewal of our purity.

I hold baptism as a lifelong commitment to resetting my own pure spiritual nature and going forward in love and service. More often there is more baptism by fire than we would prefer, burning away the chaff of our human failings and making way for the reinstatement of our native Christian purity. Advent speaks to me of this constant rebirth of the Christ spirit within me. The continuing purifying process of living God’s faithful love faithfully with the strength and courage of the spirit of the Christ. Jesus’ life and teaching renewing in my soul. So easy to speak of. So hard for me to do. Repentance. Renewal. Rebirth.

This Advent season I commit myself to this winnowing process. To continue to “search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we too are his offspring.’” Acts 17

In Love…
Nathan Moon
It’s About Time

Sunday, December 10
2d Peter 3: 8-15

When are we going to get there? What parents haven’t heard that question so many times they could scream! Or, more important and even harder to answer, when is He going to get here?

In his second letter to Jesus’ followers, Simon Peter addressed that burning question, but, probably, to their consternation. He offered not a timetable for Jesus’ return, but the rationale that, in essence, the longer the wait, the more time that people would have to achieve repentance. And we, all, would need it.

Peter reminded them that the predicted fateful day would come like a thief, ready or not, and “the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.” That day the heavens would be kindled and dissolved, in anticipation of new heavens and a new earth.

And here’s the kicker…”knowing this beforehand”, beware, and take advantage of the knowledge. And while we wait, what are we going to do with the time we have been given? Live it up? Eat, drink and be merry? Peter suggests that we use it to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Help us to live in love and service, remembering that each day is a gift to be used for the good of all.
Amen.

Mary Krug
Anticipating and Becoming a Suffering Servant

During Advent we anticipate the birth of our savior Jesus Christ. While we might expect a savior to be a powerful worldly king, the prophet Isaiah describes a “suffering servant.” Our savior is one who brings justice to the world, not by power and force, but by instruction and example. It’s not a top down relationship, but justice through service. As we learn through the life of Jesus, and especially in the passion narrative, Jesus’s service came with a price. Jesus suffered because the people would not listen to what he revealed. He was turned over to the authorities and crucified.

I believe today’s reading from Matthew calls us to be suffering servants in this world for Jesus. The mother of James and John asked Jesus to declare that her sons would sit on either side of Jesus in the kingdom. Jesus told the two men, that they did not know what they were asking. He said to them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink.” “Drinking the cup” is of course a euphemism for experiencing great suffering because Jesus is referring to his own crucifixion. Jesus noted that those who are great in this world, i.e., the “rulers of the Gentiles,” use their power as “tyrants” to “lord over” the people. But, he told his disciples that to be great in the kingdom, they must be servants: “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:27-28.

This ties in nicely with what our recent Scholar-in-Residence, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, discussed with us when he came to our church. He told us that our society is an “economy of extraction.” Our culture idealizes the “American Dream” of “making it” by accumulating power and wealth. The rich get richer off investments, while the poor are denied a living wage for menial jobs. Regressive taxes disproportionately hurt the poor.

Dr. Brueggemann told us that, as Christians, we are called to reject the “economy of extraction” and embrace an “economy of neighborliness.” Isn’t this what Jesus was teaching his disciples in the Matthew passage? Dr. Brueggemann said that Jesus called his disciples to a “radically different way in the world.” There is a big difference between being great in this world and being great in the kingdom of God. To be great in the kingdom, one doesn’t seek to extract power from others in order to be served, but rather one seeks to serve others through neighbor love.

Dr. Brueggemann said that there’s a price because the “economy of extraction cannot tolerate the economy of neighborliness.” Thus, the servant may suffer. Jesus told his disciples that they would have to drink from the cup. Indeed, we must sacrifice some of our own comfort and security in serving others. And, as Dr. Brueggemann remarked, the faithful church will always be a “minority covenant community.”

As we anticipate the birth of Jesus, let us dedicate ourselves to moving away from the economy of extraction and moving toward the economy of neighborliness by finding ways to serve others before ourselves.

Adam Bain
Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; “but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.” – Matthew 17: 11-12

Do we see the baby Jesus when we see a baby in the arms of an undocumented immigrant, facing deportation? Do we see Jesus when we walk by men and women living in homelessness? What are we recognizing, or failing to recognize, this Advent season? Who suffers at our hand because of our failure to recognize Jesus in our midst?

John the Baptist figures prominently in these passages—a harbinger of what is to come and a reminder of what’s at stake. His message of “repentance” is even more challenging for me than one of “recognition.” Repent is not a word that we often (or ever, really!) use in everyday conversation. It conjures images of a fringe evangelist on a corner, waving a poster with a doomsday message scrawled on it with a Sharpie.

Repentance is a tricky concept. Even confession, which is a part of our Sunday worship every week, can be uncomfortable for some. When Matt and I lived in San Francisco, we worshipped at a number of different Presbyterian churches in the area and found that none of them called the prayer after the call to worship the “Prayer of Confession.” I talked to one pastor about it and he said that confession was just too off-putting and made people feel bad. I can only imagine the reaction if someone had proposed calling it a “Prayer of Repentance!”

In addition to thinking about the ways we’ve fallen short and turned away from Jesus in our midst, I’m also struck by how profoundly lonely and isolating it must have been for John the Baptist. He was paving the way for a savior he knew was coming, but talking to people day after day all by himself, people who probably thought everything he was saying was crazy.

We, on the other hand, are part of a community of faith, just as the early apostles and believers were:

“When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them.” – Acts 19: 6-7

They may have been mistaken about the powers of baptism or in whose name they should be baptized, but these early Christians are following in John the Baptist’s footsteps to share the good news that God sent God’s only Son, who will “restore all things.” And through Paul, they were touched by the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: God, forgive us for the ways in which we’ve failed to recognize you or caused suffering to ourselves or others. Help us to repent and to pave the way, together, to celebrate the gift of Jesus Christ to all of us with a spirit of clarity and discipleship.

Kristin Ford
A Cogent Message for Our Time

In the first passage, from Hosea, God is complaining through the prophet that he repeatedly tried to help his chosen people, but they turned away from him. God is compared to a patient farmer, who has removed the yoke from the neck of Israel so they can feed. Hosea’s own personal life during the eighth century B.C. mirrored God’s relationship with the Israelites, as Hosea’s unfaithful wife rejected her vows and violated her covenant. Yet Hosea was directed by God to forgive her and reconcile with her, just as God forgives his undeserving and ungrateful people.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus admonishes the disciples to follow the laws of God and Moses, as articulated by the scribes & Pharisees, but not to follow the examples of their lives. Do what they say, but not what they do. For they are the classic hypocrites, doing things in a way that is calculated to be seen by others, only for show. Instead, Jesus says “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In the passage from Acts, Paul summarizes the history of God’s relationship with the Jewish people, starting with the escape from exile in Egypt, then continuing through the Judges and kings Saul and David, and the imminent advent of Jesus as a descendant of David, announced by John the Baptist. Paul’s history mimics the theme of Hosea—the merciful God giving us chance after chance despite our unworthiness.

As we prepare to celebrate God’s initiation of the New Covenant, all three passages illuminate the connections between the Old and New Testaments—the Law and the Gospel. The Matthew passage is particularly pertinent to our time. Elsewhere Jesus sums up the “laws of God and Moses” in two commandments—Love God and Your Neighbor, a touchstone for interpreting and applying the ancient moral code delivered in the Ten Commandments. We can all profit from self-examination in light of Jesus’s criticism of Pharisees, who talk the talk but fail to walk the walk. Such self-examination leads inevitably to humility. The sins of pride and hypocrisy are as fatal for the church’s (or the country’s, or anyone’s) moral authority today as they were for Pharisees in Jesus’s day. Recent events have demonstrated with unusual clarity the danger for Christians who have been outspoken about the specks in the eyes of others (particularly those who disagree with them theologically or politically), while ignoring the logs in their own eyes (and the eyes of those who agree with their positions). Jesus calls on Christians both to call out violations of the two great commandments when we see them—regardless of the identity of the violator—and to recognize that we ourselves are also violators, needing to both receive and allow repentance and forgiveness.

Lord, help us to strive for your limitless compassion and mercy in our relationships with others. Teach us to recognize pride and hypocrisy in ourselves and others, and to humbly acknowledge our needs for repentance and forgiveness.

Jim Bird & Betsy Merritt
Illogical Joy

My breakfasts on these dark mornings in Advent are faint echoes of summer. I spoon yogurt over hard strawberries with pale pink middles, or over frozen blueberries, thawed in the microwave. They aren’t the same as summer berries, but they remind me of bright days.

Bright words can be scarce in Advent lectionary passages, which are often dark and full of judgment (see Jesus’ woes against the scribes and Pharisees in today’s Matthew passage), so I was delighted to read the Philippians’ passage – a bright spark of joy:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians is, in fact, a joy-filled letter, yet this letter also has a shadow: Paul writes from prison. For Paul, the joy in knowing that the church he helped found in Philippi continues far outweighs the pain of imprisonment. Still, such joy seems an illogical response. It’s illogical to rejoice in prison, to rejoice on dark days. But, as the Hosea passage illustrates, God’s logic defies our own. Hosea finds hope in God’s mercy. Sin should lead to judgment, to punishment, but God is not bound by human logic: I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

During these dark days of Advent, we are moving toward the illogical impossible: the babe in the manger being a savior of the nations, and, even more difficult for me, the second coming of Christ. This trust in what is to come does indeed, as Paul says, “surpass all understanding.”

As we move through our daily lives, how do we find joy on dark days? How do we see God’s hope, even when it seems impossible? I have a feeling it has to do with practices. With the kind of practices of joy that Paul clearly mastered. What are these practices?

A few come to mind: A former pastor used to tell us that he woke up every morning with the same scripture on his tongue: “This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). Another: When our kids were young, we began lighting a home Advent wreath on Sundays, and soon decided to light it every night, so that one candle, then two, three and four, would burn in the center of our dinner table, our homemade creation moving from perhaps-charming to well-used.

Candles are flickers of hope in the dark. Winter strawberries are bites of spring. In December, we are in the darkest days, and yet we are turning a corner. The days will get longer, summer and fresh blueberries will come. What practices carry you through the dark days, what practices help you to say, “Rejoice, again I will say rejoice?”

Meg Hanna House
The 8th Century prophet Hosea lived in chaotic times. Israel had 7 kings in 30 years, a succession of corrupt rulers. The whole country had become corrupt and most prominently the powerful simply love to deceive and cheat. They boast, “I am very rich…with all my wealth, they will not find in me any iniquity or sin (Hosea 12:8).” They feel above the law or any special counsel. The Lord is said to despair at this arrogance and self-promotion.

In Matthew 23, Jesus is incensed at the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. He exclaims 7 times that they are hypocrites always promoting themselves. Then he says, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! (23:33)" “You give a tenth of your spices… but neglect justice, mercy and faithfulness (23:23).” They are “blind guides” and stand in the way of those who would be humble and faithful.

Paul does not say what a dark and dangerous time the Thessalonians are living in, but he strongly urges them to “put on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet (1Thes. 5:8).” As they are also living in a dark time, they should be “children of the light and inheritors of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness (5:5).” Like today, the people must feel the danger moving around and over them. Dark forces are pushing around our leaders.

Psalm 11 picks up this theme of desperation and makes it personal. The poet feels hunted; believers are ambushed before they can find sanctuary, as immigrants without papers are ambushed by ICE. “For look, the wicked bend their bows…to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do? (Ps. 11:2-3)” A great deal.

Yet this psalm of desperation moves to a hopeful ending. No matter how threatened and unsettled the people are, “the Lord is on His heavenly throne…He sees all the people (11:4).” He protects the righteous, “but the wicked and those who do violence His soul hates…On the wicked He will rain down liquid fire; their deeds will sear into their skin (11:6).” As for the righteous they are challenged to be upright and to love justice. Everyone should. For “simple good deeds to the broken are the true foundation of His kingdom (11:7).”

Even after Hosea’s bleak assessment of Israel’s leaders and merchants, he offers some hopeful advice:

\[
\text{But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always (12:6).}
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Advent is a great time to slow down, catch your breath and wait for God.

Tom Dunlap
God Perseveres… Shouldn’t We?

Reading the Hosea verses, one can feel the utter and complete frustration of God trying to take care of his people…the people in the wilderness who turn their backs when things are going well. “I have been the Lord your God since your days in Egypt….I cared for you in the wilderness…and being filled they forgot me.” God then shows wrath in threatening to be the panther, leopard, she-bear that will destroy Israel, but in the end, God is always there for his people, his creation. In Matthew, Jesus shows the same frustration and anger with so many "Alas’ees" for the lawyers and Pharisees, the “snakes, vipers….Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem….how often have I longed to gather your children…”

For all our human failings through the ages, however, God has stayed with us, as Paul writes in Thessalonians, “God has not destined us to the terrors of judgment, but to the full attainment of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Jesus remains faithful still to our salvation. If God shows perseverance, if Jesus shows perseverance, should we not also keep trying to be the people and Christians God wants us to be? Should we not persevere also? It is not easy to keep going in the face of challenges, frustration, exhaustion, pressure, or doubt. It takes determination to “be all that we can be” as Christians despite the obstacles and barriers. But try we must.

My model for perseverance is my sister Sheri who, after 10+ years of incredible work, frustration, setbacks, and barriers, completed her Ph.D. dissertation defense on October 24 with flying colors, a tour de force, according to her Committee. She never gave up working for her Doctorate in English with a Specialty in Literature and Language at Western Michigan University, all while teaching fulltime high-school AP Literature. Despite the constant roadblocks and barriers that only university graduate academia can heap on a graduate student, Sheri kept at it, fought back, persevered with such stellar accomplishment that her dissertation project in English Education, “16th Century Shakespeare and 21st Century Students” will be published as a book and several articles. A model for perseverance, indeed!

As Christians, should we not persevere to deepen our faith, to be God’s people for our families, friends, neighbors, the world? Shouldn’t we persevere despite the doubt, discouragement, busy-ness, whatever it is that keeps us from practicing our faith? Shouldn’t we persevere with ourselves in prayer, in efforts to follow Jesus? So, as it says in Thessalonians, “[be] armed with faith and love…hearten one another…fortify one another…” and persevere with your life in the Lord!

Prayer: Dear God, help us to persevere in faith and love and to follow the way of your son, Jesus Christ.

Marilyn J. Seiber
Is rejoicing a significant part of your lifestyle, your day-to-day life?

Stress, anxiety, “hanging in there,” - and when we stop worrying, gratitude; these are the conditions and attitudes that characterize the life styles of many, if not most, of us these days. Rejoicing, not so much.

Today, we light the Joy candle in the Advent wreath, reminding us that one of the major Advent themes calls us to rejoice in the Lord. Our Scripture passages remind us that God actually calls us to rejoice. The Gospel lesson introduces us to John the Baptist, who identifies himself as “a voice crying out in the wilderness, Make the Lord’s path straight.” The remaining passages tell us how that straight path leads us to a rejoicing life style:

Bring good news to the poor;
Bind up the brokenhearted;
Proclaim release for captives and liberation for prisoners;
Comfort all who mourn;
Love justice and hate robbery and dishonesty;
Faithfully give workers their wage.

Our mouths were filled with laughter;
Our tongues were filled with joyful shouts;
The Lord has done great things for us, letting those of us who went out crying and carrying their seed, come home with joyful shouts, carrying bales of grain!

Stay awake and stay sober, wearing faithfulness and love as a piece of armor;
Respect those who are working with you; think of them highly with love because of their work.
Warn those who are disorderly;
Comfort the discouraged; help the weak;
Be patient with everyone.
Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else.
Pray continually;
Give thanks in every situation; don’t suppress the Spirit;
Examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good.
Avoid every kind of evil.
Rejoice always!

Can there be any doubt that if each of us were to follow these instructions, all of us could and would be offering joyful shouts? Isn’t it interesting how relevant to our current anxiety-producing social, political and personal conditions and concerns these instructions are? Advent calls us to continue or begin our journey along the straight path that John the Baptist referred to and that Jesus, the prophets and Apostles laid out for us.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, we joyfully join with the cloud of witnesses singing -
    Count your blessings;
    Name them one by one;
    Count your blessings;

John H. Quinn, Jr.
God’s Beachhead in Dystopia

Hosea 14:1-9; Matthew 24:1-14; Jude 1-16

Monday, December 18

Why are these particular passages in a lectionary for Advent? When we are remembering with eager anticipation and preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ, why the focus on sin, judgment, and a dystopian picture of the human condition, apart from God? God knows, it seems, that humans and the world often are in a dreadful state, and that due to human sinfulness, things likely will get worse, before they get better. It was into this world that Jesus was born, to save it.

How are we to live as Christians in this dystopian world? Hosea proclaims that worldly powers and the work of our hands cannot save us, and we must repent of our faith in them rather than God. Jesus, whose birth we celebrate, cautions his disciples to take care not to heed those who will come in his name, saying “I am the Christ” and lead many astray. Jude cautions believers against those in their midst who pervert the grace of God. So, it seems, we must be repentant, faithful, alert, and discerning, in the midst of the evil and tumult of the world, just as Jesus was.

Roger has been describing the Christian community lately as God’s beachhead in the world. What does it look and feel like to be part of that beachhead, individually and collectively?

Hosea paints a beautiful picture of what will happen when we repent of our iniquity, and return to the Lord. Even in the midst of the evil ‘round us, God will have us flourish and be productive:

God will heal our faithlessness, giving us faith to go on

God will love us freely and will turn God’s anger from us

God will be as dew, refreshing and feeding us

We shall blossom as the lily—a beautiful flower that stands tall, after emerging from what long appears to be a buried, dormant, seemingly unproductive bulb

We shall strike deep roots, as a tree, and from those roots we can hold fast, grow, and reach out

We shall spread out productive shoots into the world, nourishing and soothing others as the olive tree and the fragrant cedars of Lebanon

We shall return and dwell beneath God’s shadow, protected

We shall flourish as a garden, and blossom

PRAYER: Jesus, you were born into this world, fully human, fully God, calling all to repent and believe the gospel. You call us, “o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea ... saying ‘Christian, follow me.’” You call us “from the worship of the vain world’s golden store, from each idol that would keep us, saying ‘Christian, love me more.’” “By thy mercies, Savior, may we hear Thy call. Give our hearts to Thine obedience, serve and love Thee best of all.” We pray that by our obedience, we may be a beachhead and a blessing in the world, as you intend. AMEN

Karen Mills
Tuesday, December 19, 2017

Malachi 3: 1-5  Matthew 24:15-31  Jude 17-25

These days feel like end days
With that one raging on the world stage
Creating chaos and darkness
Undoing the goodness of a dignified leader.
Prepare the way, O messenger
Let it be known that He is coming!

These days feel like end days
As the numbers of homeless
And victims of gun violence climb
In cities and towns across the land.
Prepare the way, O messenger
Let it be known that He is coming!

These days feel like end days
When I look inward and out
Toward my closest community
And see unresolved hurt…illness that will not cease.
Prepare the way, O messenger
Let it be known that He is coming!

What, dear Lord, is the answer?
From the greatest to the least we are suffering.
We live in a world weary with itself,
Groaning under a multitude of idolatries.

If ears may listen then hear this:
Now to him who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing,
to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever.

Amen.

Kathryn Sparks
Like many of you, I presume, when I was a kid, December was a month of eager anticipation … awaiting Christmas morn when presents under the tree would be opened, a big breakfast would be served, and a day of laughter and cheer with family and friends would be upon us. But it was also a month of patience … with each day seeming a bit longer and the birth of the baby Jesus not coming soon enough. Indeed, no amount of carols sung, cookies baked, or ornaments hung would hasten the arrival of Christmas morn. Patience was in order whether we wanted to be patient or not.

As an adult, December continues to be a time of anticipation and patience … for we are in the midst of the important liturgical season of Advent. Advent … a time when we eagerly recall the birth of Jesus while also prepare ourselves for the day when the Lord will come again and when wolves will lie beside lambs, when swords will be turned into ploughshares, when justice will roll down like flowing waters, and when the first will be last and the last will be first.

In today’s readings, we are reminded the importance of being patient and being prepared for that day when God’s beloved kingdom arrives in its fullest. But we are also reminded that this requires action on our part. James calls us to strengthen our hearts, to not grumble with one another, to be like the prophets; Matthew calls us to be ready, to stay awake; Malachi calls us to return to God.

In a season when each year seems more individually-oriented and consumer-driven, perhaps heeding the calls of James, Matthew, and Malachi are in order. For when we reorient ourselves to God and to one another, we become active participants as followers of Jesus; helping to make life anew … for individuals, for communities, for the greater world. And we do this knowing we not alone, for we believe in Jesus Immanuel, God with us. O come, O come Emmanuel.

Friends, in these five days before Christmas, think about how you might reorient yourself to God and to one another while patiently awaiting the day when we celebrate the birth of Jesus and all that that entails. Perhaps, it’s as simple as a smile or conversation with someone you do not know; perhaps it’s a call to a councilperson or a letter to Congressional representative about a systemic injustice; perhaps it’s a recommitment to the environment through a renewed effort to recycle or compost or a determination to buy locally grown produce from a nearby farmer. Perhaps, it’s something else … big or small.

Friends, during this season of Advent, may we recall our Brief Statement of Faith in which we affirm:

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth,
praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Gracious God, Compassionate Christ, Sustaining Spirit. During this season of Advent, may we patiently but not complacently await. May we be active in helping to usher in your beloved kingdom while ever being reminded that You, Immanuel, are in our midst. May be follow your ways, this day, and every day. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin
If a Tree Falls in a Forest…


Have you ever asked yourself, “Why am I a Christian? What makes me want to follow Christ?” (If you’ve never asked yourself those questions, this is a perfect season to do so!)

In the book of Malachi, the Israelites ask these same questions about God. They doubt the worthwhileness of following God when there’s no apparent punishment for those who don’t:

14 You have said, ’It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? 15 … Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.

God assures the Israelites that there will be a clear distinction in the end between those who serve him and those who do not. He promises that those who serve him will be rewarded.

In Matthew, Jesus’ disciples take it a step further by saying, “Okay, but when do we get that reward? When will we see the difference?” Jesus uses the example of a servant who disregards his master’s instructions while he is away – and is caught by surprise upon his master’s return – to demonstrate that we will not know the exact time of Christ’s return. In the book of Romans, Paul echoes this mystery by stating that no one can fully understand God’s infinite wisdom or compassion, but that all things come from God and will return to God in the end.

Without any context, these three passages might suggest that the reason to be a Christian is to “win the grand prize,” and since we don’t know the timing of the award ceremony, we’d better just always do the right thing so we won’t be caught by surprise or miss out on the reward.

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When I first read these passages, two quotes came to mind. The first is a classic question that may be familiar to many:

If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

Although this question was originally posed in the 1800s as a philosophical comment about the ties between observation and reality, the era’s physicists quickly jumped in to explain that “sound” refers to vibrations in a medium that can be sensed by human or animal ears. So yes, the tree made a sound.

But let’s return to philosophical version for a moment. The root of question is “If there’s no way to sense or witness something in the moment, does it exist?” That’s not unlike the questions the Israelites ask in Malachi. They have no proof that they’ll be rewarded in the future for serving God now, so they aren’t sure it’s worth the trouble. God assures them that there is a reward at the end, but that leaves us with another question: Is heaven the only reason to serve God on earth?

Both the Israelites and Jesus’ disciples were understandably drawn to the idea of a greater life after death. In this season of Advent, we think a lot about the coming of Christ – the gift God gave so that we might have eternal life. We’ve been describing this promise of life after death as a “reward,” but is that really the right description? Isn’t a reward something we earn? As Christians, we believe that God sent his son because he loves us, not because we did anything to earn it. Eternal life is a merciful gift,
but it's not the reward. So what is the reward? Is there one at all? If there's no reward, what's the point?

To answer that question, I recalled a second reading – an excerpt from the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

**Q:** What is the chief end of man?
**A:** Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

The Westminster Assembly wrote this catechism in the mid-1600s as part of its goal to align the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. The lines above are the first two lines of the catechism, and were likely the first two lines that many new Christians at the time would have learned to recite. According to this catechism, our chief aim is to glorify God forever – and that includes right now on earth.

We each have our own reasons to follow Christ, and that fact is among my favorite aspects of Christianity. One of my biggest reasons has always been the immense comfort I find in having a constant, peaceful presence to turn to for anything and everything that happens in my life – Something to remind me why I'm here on earth and set me back on the right path when I'm feeling lost. That's the great thing about Christianity. We don't have to wait until death to reap the benefits. We don't have to wait until we're in the forest to confirm the tree made a sound. We can begin to enjoy it now, starting any time we choose.

Abby Rosenson
Peace: What does it look like?

Isaiah 57: 14-21 (NRSV)  

Monday, December 18

14 It shall be said, “Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way.”  
15 For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.  
16 For I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry; for then the spirits would grow faint before me, even the souls that I have made.

17 Because of their wicked covetousness I was angry; I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways.  
18 I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips.  
19 Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the LORD; and I will heal them.  
20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud.  
21 There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.

As you read or ponder, what does PEACE look like? Can the image that you have in your heart and mind include your current location? Your current people? Your current life? In this Advent time, what always catches me is that as the Bible lifts up Peace in Old or New Testaments, Peace is usually spoken of or hoped for in a very dark and broken time: fighting, warring, fear, and loss. If you look back to the Peaceable Kingdom passage, Isaiah 11:1-9, while the passage is titled with Peace, this word is never mentioned…it is the image, the hope in a time of ‘lostness’ and warring madness. What is encouraging to me is that our faithful relationship with God is to be in God’s peace during the madness. Ponder this through three breathes…1…2…3…

While the divisions of anger and fear fester in our country and are articulated out of the mouths of our elected officials, I relish in the Isaiah 57 passage, “…peace to the far and near (for God will heal them)…but there is no peace for the wicked.” God of course is present with the wicked and does and will take the wicked on! Our peace is the consistency of faith.

Consistency Peace
Consistency Peace
Consistency Peace

If the peace is not in the macro today, stay consistent and be in the Peace of the Lord in the minor places and spaces of your day: how you acknowledge every child, every adult and every creature SO they can know the peace that surpasses all understanding, especially when we do not understand what is going on today. I offer this breathe prayer to you during our season of Advent: Consistency in Peace; Consistency of Faith; Consistent Peace. Amen

Tara Spuhler McCabe
Two days before Christmas, the 23rd of December. A day of not-quite-but-almost, a day that is neither here nor there. I can remember as a child saying, “I can’t wait for Christmas!” The 23rd counts for naught compared to the feast of gifts, the plethora of food, and the eager anticipation of Santa Claus descending the brick chimney having traveled through snow-dusted air of northern New England. When Christmas arrives, all will be well! Then we grow up and discover how much work goes into making Christmas special. By the 23rd, we’re exhausted but perhaps still have loose ends to tie up. A feeling of eager anticipation of what will come and anxiety that we will not be ready plague us. Regardless, we now must wait for the magical moment to arrive. We must reign in our tendency to leap forward and cool our heels. Easy to say, right?

Waiting comprises our very existence. We may sit in traffic or crowded trains, hoping that we will get to our destination on time. Attending classes or meetings, we often glance at our watches, waiting for them to finish. At the end of the day, we can’t wait to park our rears in an easy chair and put our feet up. We ambush our way through life, contemplating next steps, thinking that once “this” has passed, we will relax. We live in the future, or dwell on the past, while missing the present.

Wandering in the wilderness, often frantically and aimlessly, we keep ourselves occupied until we reach our destination. God waits for us to stop, to acknowledge the spirit that surrounds us, all the while guiding us to a “holy abode” (Ex 15:13). Do we know this?

As I write this meditation, in two days I will be meeting with my oncologist to go over the results of tests done last week. This meeting, set in stone three months ago, will mark the first milestone to determine if my cancer has returned. I work hard to quell my anxiety and remain optimistic that all will be okay, while alternatively preparing for the unexpected. My squirrely mind jumps from catastrophic outcomes to joyous news; I cannot focus on this penultimate day at all. I catapult into the future like the eager child. Whatever the outcome, I can’t wait to hear.

Of course, the older we get, the more we realize that holidays don’t always hold up to our romanticized visions of what holidays should be. We’ll have good years and disappointing years, and years that leave no real trace. The Parable of the Five Talents, when viewed through a December 23rd lens, sheds some light on how to proceed. Rather than focusing on the importance of investing money, rather than burying it in a field, we can invest our energy into making these pre-celebratory days more mindful. We can attempt to discover “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden” (1 Cor 2:7) in our preparatory days. Rather than waiting, we can be doing.

My news from the oncologist has ominous tones. Murky images on scans, abnormal biomarkers. More tests needed. “We’ll have to take a ‘wait and see’ attitude,” he says grimly. Wow. Wait and see. Isn’t that what life is all about? In two days time, we will hear the screeches of a baby on a cold dark night, born in a humble bed of straw. His parents will have to wait and see what kind of child he will be, although we already know the answer to that. “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (1 Cor 2:12). We no longer have to wait for that which we anticipate because it has already come. In the words of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, we have already arrived, we are already home.

Elizabeth Ross Young
Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-20
Titus 2:11-14

Christmas Eve has always been one of my favorite days of the year. It is a day where time seems to move a little slower. Ever since I can remember, Christmas Eve has been spent with my mom’s family. We have a Christmas Eve dinner consisting of waffles, hash brown casserole, sausage balls, and bacon. Then we all go to the Christmas Eve service and come home to watch “It’s a Wonderful Life”. But what is probably my favorite part of the evening is going to midnight mass with my dad. It’s just the two of us, and every year I look forward to the time I get to spend with him worshipping and growing in faith. We talk about why today means so much to both of us, and we reflect on the year.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness.” (Isaiah 9:2).

I don’t know about you but this past year has seemed to be filled with a lot more darkness. I often find it hard to turn on the news because every time I do, it seems like another tragedy has happened. It’s very easy to get so discouraged and caught up in the darkness that we forget about the light that shines every day around us and the light that is coming tomorrow morning. Today we are reminded of the good news “For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us...He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) God is again reminding us that we are never alone. Not today or ever. We are reminded to take a step back and find the light.

But the angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth, and lying in a manger.’(Luke 2:10-12)

After Jesus was born, an angel of the Lord came to some shepherds who were out in the fields attending their flocks to tell them the good news of Jesus’ birth. They immediately set off for Bethlehem to see Jesus. I often wonder why those shepherds were the ones God chose to tell first. The shepherds were ordinary people and often among some of the poorest. Little did they know, they were about to receive news that would change their lives and the world - and they were the first ones to know. But here’s the thing - the good news is for all people, not just the powerful or the elite. Today I hope you find God’s light that is always shining. Go out into the world knowing that the good news is for you. Tomorrow our Savior is born. Merry Christmas!

Sarah McGinnis
“Into this world, this demented inn
in which there is absolutely no room for him at all,
   Christ comes uninvited.
   But because he cannot be at home in it,
   because he is out of place in it,
   and yet he must be in it,
   His place is with the others for whom
   there is no room.
   His place is with those who do not belong,
   who are rejected by power, because
   they are regarded as weak,
   those who are discredited,
   who are denied status of persons,
   who are tortured, bombed and exterminated.
   With those for whom there is no room,
   Christ is present in this world.”
   - Thomas Merton

While the weary masses crowded the streets of Bethlehem, filling every inn and household to overflowing, the shepherds were probably the only ones left on the outskirts of town, keeping watch over their flocks as darkness descended and a hush settled over the fields. I imagine it was quite the contrast—the hubbub of a town swollen to accommodate the imperial decree and the silence of what appeared to be another unremarkable night spent watching and waiting. It’s no wonder that a city already over its capacity couldn’t offer a space of welcome or that bleary eyed travelers didn’t have eyes to see the miraculous or that the clamor of the marketplace drowned out the angelic announcement of good news of great joy. After all, we miss a great deal when we’re standing at the center of a story. Those with ears to hear are more often the people on the margins, people with a bit more perspective, people who have a little more room in their hearts for the unexpected.

It shouldn’t surprise us, then, that when the angels appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them, God chose the lowly shepherds to be the awe-struck audience. “For unto you a Savior is born,” the angels proclaimed. God became flesh and dwelt among us for people just like you, people who find themselves on the underside of the powers and principalities of this world, people who are disadvantaged or oppressed, people who long for God’s justice and the fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

Sometimes I wonder if that’s why the angels began with the reminder not to be afraid. They knew that the One whose birth they lauded would upend our human systems of power and privilege, the percussive politics of domination on which our world turns. As we sing in the Canticle of the Turning (G2G #100): “From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone. Let the king beware for your justice tears every tyrant from his throne. The hungry poor shall weep no more for the food they can never earn. There are tables spread, every mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.” The angels knew there would be a reckoning, and they understood that only those already on the outside would have the nerve to hear such news, let alone call it good. Their words to the shepherds echo through the ages, giving us the courage to welcome Christ into a broken and fearful world as we hear the voices of peoples long silenced and work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. “Don’t be afraid,” they tell us, “God’s begun something miraculous, and believe it or not, you’ve got a part to play!” Amen.

Rev. Emily Rhodes Hunter