



Extravagant Love

Worship Resources for the Creative Church Advent 2008

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Sacred Seasons:



Creative Worship Tools for Your Church

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Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group intends to seek out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

Editorial Address

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Extravagant Love

in this worship packet:

- 3 *The Extravagance of Love: A Poem*
- 4 *Extravagant Love: A Nested Meditation*
- 5 Art, Scripture & Meditation for the First Sunday in Advent
- 6 *The Light of the World is Jesus: A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent*
- 9 *Second Thoughts & Miracles: A Meditation*
- 10 Art, Scripture & Meditation for the Second Sunday in Advent
- 11 *The Manger's Reach: A Poem*
- 12 Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings
- 12 *Womb of All Creation Flowing: A Hymn*
- 13 Art, Scripture & Meditation for the Third Sunday in Advent
- 14 Litany for the Third Sunday in Advent
- 14 *Song for Bethlehem: A Meditation*
- 15 *I Am Worth: A Poem*
- 16 Art, Scripture & Meditation for the Fourth Sunday in Advent
- 17 *The Gift of Joy: A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent*
- 19 *The Supreme Mystery: A Poem*
- 20 *Rumors of Glory: A Meditation for Christmas Eve*
- 21 Art, Scripture & Meditation for Christmas Day
- 22 *The Word for Christmas is Passion: A Sermon for Christmas Day*
- 24 Benediction

a word about this packet

The cover art for this packet was created by Deborah E. Harris, a freelance writer who gives extravagantly and lovingly of her time to proofread and edit many of the Seeds of Hope materials. You will find on page 4 a nested meditation written by her. This packet is the first of a two-part set under the title "Extravagant Love." The 2009 Lenten packet is being designed around the same theme.

As always, we have tried to pull together worship resources and information to help you lead your congregation in responding to this crisis with hope and creativity. The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely and share with others as the need arises. May we together bring the news of God's extravagant love to a world of fear and struggle. May we together find ways of creating abundance for those who live in scarcity. Gratefully, *The Staff and Council of Stewards*

The Extravagance of Love

by Cameron Watts

I wandered a park
drawn to the crimson
of an autumn tree
I found
two different sandals tied
over a branch each with a well-worn
name on the sole
One shoe was Ruth and one
Naomi
in its bark
a heart carved around
a hole
two arrows ran through it
“Jonathan and David
Friends Forever”
Inside the hole a fading photograph of a regal
Family with the face of one son
speared out
a gold anklet around a branch
grown so it would never come
off “To my Beloved Gomer
Always your Hosea” beaten into the metal
a tap from which fragrant sap dripped
transportation to
an intimate moment between a woman and a man,
she
bathing his feet in tears and perfume he
completely unembarrassed
at the bottom of the tree breadcrumbs led
to a small plaque with a crude attempt
at a latin in-scription
Arbor Vita



art by Lenora Mathis

—Cam Watts is the pastor of Aylmer Baptist Church, Aylmer Ontario. His writings, revealing a refreshing slant on the Christian life, have appeared several times in Sacred Seasons.

Extravagant Love

A Nested Meditation

by Deborah E. Harris

Love.

Extravagant love.

Extravagant love of God, born a vulnerable child.

Extravagant love of God, born a vulnerable child
of Mary's womb.

Extravagant love of God, born a vulnerable child
of Mary's womb, and one day laid to rest in a
borrowed tomb.

Extravagant love of God, born anew within our hearts and minds,
living still in every act of mercy and compassion.

Extravagant love of God, born anew and living still,
by your advent we are forever changed.

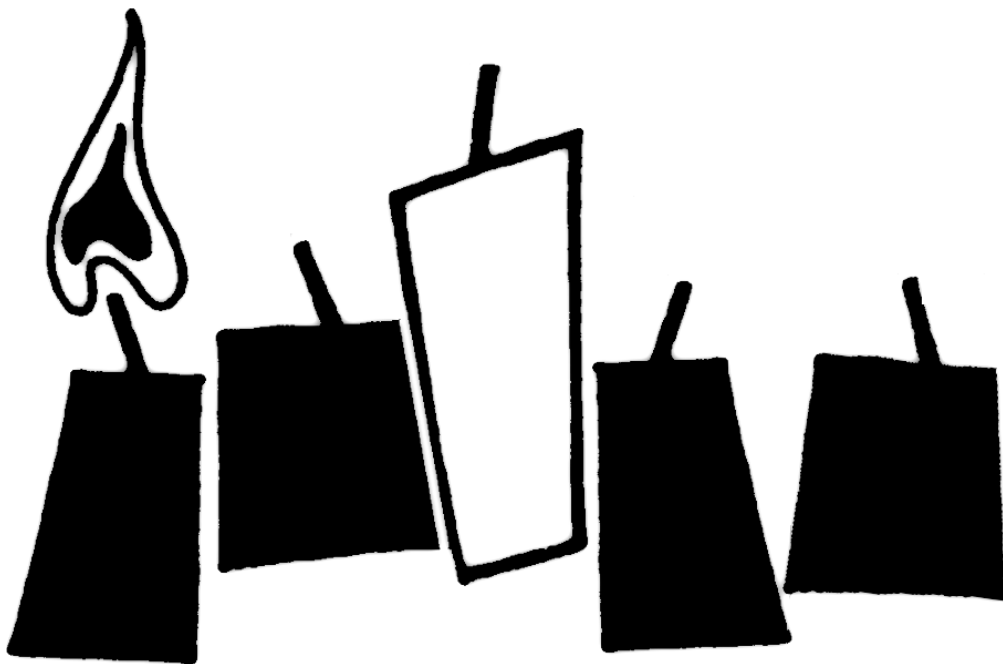
—Deborah Harris is a freelance writer and lyricist living in Waco, Texas. She is the copy editor for Sacred Seasons and created the cover art for this issue. The style of nested meditation is taken from Kevin Anderson's Divinity in Disguise.

art by Rebecca S. Ward

First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Oh Wondrous One,
Who rides the skies
and consorts with the earth—
haunting the heavens,
hounding mere mortals
with the expectation of ecstasy—
come and rouse hungry hearts
wandering this famined land
with the aroma of your presence.
—from “Advent Longing”
by Ken Sehested



The Light of the World Is Jesus

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

by G. Allen Grant

Text: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

New Christmas songs were very popular in the days of World War II and those following. Mel Torme wrote "The Christmas Song" during that time. Many of us know it by the first line, "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire." It was written in 1946, and soon became one of the most popular songs of the 1940s.

Of course, most Americans don't really know anything about roasting chestnuts. In the early days of our country, one in four American hardwoods was a chestnut tree, but most of them were wiped out when Chinese chestnuts were imported and brought a tree blight with them.

But the joy of this song is not really about chestnuts. Let's listen to it for a minute:

*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire,
Jack Frost nipping at your nose,
Yuletide carols being sung by a choir,
And folks dressed up like Eskimos.
Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe,
Help to make the season bright.
Tiny tots with their eyes all aglow,
Will find it hard to sleep tonight.*

That song makes your heart glad, doesn't it? As you were listening to that song, I could see in many of you a change in your appearance. You began to glow. Words that recall a happier time in our lives make us glow with happiness.

Christmas is coming, and we are sometimes confused as to what we should feel. I suppose my feelings change from day to day. One moment I am looking forward to Christmas, and the next I am dreading some activity that I know I must do.

I also know that, for many people, Christmas isn't at all about the glowing

happiness of a song. For them, Christmas is a drudge, a painful reminder of a past that just plain hurts.

Yet, even in those who hurt, there is usually a bit of a longing for a better time. We want to remember and restore those times when we were happy. We long for a time when the family was together, a time before...whatever it was that happened.

The Psalm for today is a sorrowful prayer. There is a bit of disagreement among scholars as to the calamity this Psalm speaks about. Some think it was written when the Assyrians overtook Israel.

Responsive Psalm

FIRST READER: Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!

SECOND READER: You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

FIRST READER: Stir up your might, and come to save us!

PEOPLE: Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

FIRST READER: O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

SECOND READER: You have fed them with the bread of sorrows, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

FIRST READER: You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

PEOPLE: Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

FIRST READER: But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

SECOND READER: Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

PEOPLE: Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

(Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19)

Others think that it was written in response to some other misfortune. Whatever its original historical setting, it belongs to the repertoire of an afflicted people who longed for deliverance.

The people were sorrowful. They were praying for restoration. Notice that the refrain from this passage is the same: *Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

As I prepared for this week's sermon, I noticed that the idea of God's face shining or God's light being present or some other form of the glory of God is mentioned many times in the Bible.

When Moses returned from the mountain where he received the Ten Commandments, his face glowed because he had been in the presence of God. The glory of God shone from his face so much that the people could not look at him.

Later, they were led through the wilderness by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night. This was evidence of God's presence, and God's presence meant safety, security and blessings.

Exodus 40:34-35 says:

Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

The Hebrew word for the glory of God is *Shechinah*. According to Jewish tradition, the radiance of the *Shechinah* gave untold blessings upon pious and righteous people. It was generally spoken of as brilliant light or radiance.

The desire for the shining presence is also known to us in the blessing that God gave to Moses, and which we often repeat:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace (Numbers 25:26).

Over and over again, the people of God longed for a time when God would be present and they would be delivered from suffering, from exile, from trouble. The Hebrews mostly pictured their deliverance as a political one. Still, in an act of faith, the people who prayed this psalm were daring to see and expect the reign of God where others only saw despair and expected nothing.

Isn't that what we do too? In his book, *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland writes:

Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you read these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help

me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

After Thanksgiving, the church begins to use a different language. We talk of Advent and have to explain that the word refers to something that is coming. The word "Advent" (in Latin *adventus*) actually has its origins in the pre-Christian Roman practice of holding a celebratory feast on the anniversary of an Emperor's rise to power. It was the "coming-to-reign" celebration, or the party marking each year of the Emperor's reign.

As such, it was an obvious term for the early Christians to adopt in celebrating the coming of our God and King, Jesus Christ.



I also know that, for many people, Christmas isn't at all about the glowing happiness of a song. For them, Christmas is a drudge, a painful reminder of a past that just plain hurts.

At first it was simply a time of celebration just prior to Christmas, which, from its inception in the 300s CE was a fairly minor feast day. By the 500s, however, Advent had grown into a period of six Sundays leading up to Christmas which, like Lent, had as its focus a period of quiet, interior reflection and spiritual preparation.

At the beginning of the seventh century, however, Pope Gregory had reduced the number of Sundays in Advent to four, while also increasing their importance as a period of celebration and preparation not just for the birth of the Baby Jesus, but also for the Second Coming of Christ.

We hold special services, assign meaning to greenery and light candles in a certain order each Sunday. In fact, we light candles in church almost every Sunday of the year,

because those candles represent the presence of God among us.

We light a candle of hope, a candle of peace, a candle of joy and a candle of love. We pray for these things to come and we believe they will come to us in the form of Jesus Christ. Then, on Christmas, we light the white candle that reminds us that Christ has come into the world and is still among us.

God never showed up to the Hebrew people as a mighty king. Never again did David rule the world with power and might the way they expected. God did not come. Yet, in an act of faith, they prayed for God to come and be among them.

In an act of faith and hope, not unlike that of the Hebrew people, the followers of Jesus dare to affirm that, in Jesus, the light of God shines and that, through Jesus, we are restored and have life. Like those people who prayed the words of Psalm 80 long ago, Christians dare to see and expect the reign of God where others see only chaos and expect nothing.

Many of you will remember this song by Philip Bliss:

The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin;

the light of the world is Jesus;

Like sunshine at noonday, his glory shone in,

the light of the world is Jesus.

No darkness have we who in Jesus abide,

the light of the world is Jesus;

We walk in the light when we follow our guide;

the light of the world is Jesus.

Each of us faces distractions of all kinds: busyness, misplaced priorities, disappointments. Those distractions often draw us away from the presence of God. We no longer see the face of God. We no longer feel the glow of happiness at Christmas, because we have wandered away.

So today is a time when we can come back to Square One. We can start over. We can remember that the hope that we have is, indeed, in the face of Jesus. The hope we have is in the glory of God. The hope that we have is in the presence of God in our lives.

And the message of the Bible is that God wants to be present with us. God enjoys being in our company. As Marjorie Thompson writes:

The human being is created in the divine image and likeness in order to have continual and intimate communion with the One who made us. We are created to love and be loved by God, born to serve and be served by Christ, destined to enjoy the vitality of the Holy Spirit, and in turn, receive God's delight in us forever!

This Christmas, you may find yourself in times of sorrow or even depression because things just didn't turn out the way you envisioned. You may find that you are praying, as the Hebrews did, "Come and save us, O God."

We've got to realize that Christmas is not just one long Kodak moment. The holiday doesn't usually deliver what we've been led to believe. We need to let go of the unrealistic expectations and traditions that have lost their meaning. We may not have chestnuts roasting on an open fire, but we do have the light of Jesus Christ.

The Psalmist cried out for the face of God to shine upon his people. Philip Bliss wrote:

*Come to the light, 'tis shining for thee; sweetly the light
has dawned upon me; Once I was blind but now I can
see; the Light of the World is Jesus.*

—Allen Grant is pastor of the China Spring United Methodist Church in China Spring, Texas. Sources: The New Interpreter's Bible; William J. Bausch, A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers; Marjorie Thompson, The Way of Forgiveness: Participant's Book.

For what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists...
but that there is a God right here
in the thick of our day-by-day lives
who may not be writing messages about Himself in the stars
but who in one way or another
is trying to get messages through
our blindness as we move around down here
knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery
and marvel of the world.
It is not objective proof of God's existence we want but,
whether we use religious language for it or not,
the experience of God's presence.

—Frederick Buechner



art by Lenora Mathis

Second Thoughts & Miracles

by James Schwarzlose, OEF

*...[she] laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
(Luke 2:7b)*

Second thoughts can open the gate to generosity and miracles. Many who tell the Christmas story expand upon Joseph's search for shelter for the Holy Family-to-be. Often the innkeeper is portrayed as first proclaiming, "There is no room!" and then having second thoughts: "Oh, but there is the stable out back." It was enough! Joseph and Mary gave thanks, and settled into the rude space in which the Star Child was born.

I saw similar, yet more ordinary, second thoughts in action in a Wal-Mart parking lot one cold day. A Romanian refugee was going from shopper to shopper, trailed by her thin daughter, asking each of us for help—using broken English and a handwritten card. She was without work; her refugee relief had long expired, but state aid had yet to come through.

She was not the first to seek help in this manner; but then, I am sure that Joseph and Mary were not the first to come to the innkeeper's door with pleas of extreme need.

At first the cynic in me took hold as it had before: I could not help everyone like this woman; besides, who knew if she were telling the truth! So she moved on to another man filling his truck with plastic bags; he also turned her away.

But then I had second thoughts. Of course I could help this one person! It may or may not have been a scam this time, but I, who work with folks such as her, knew all too well that there are many for whom her predicament is all too real and dire. So, I went to her and her daughter, and gave her what was barely enough for a meal for one of them. I hadn't made it back to my car with her expression of gratitude when I noticed two other people stirring.

The other man must have had the same thoughts and crossed the parking lot to offer her some aid. Then a woman came from another direction seemingly motivated by her second thoughts as well. Altogether, our pooled sharing



art by Mike Massengale

was probably enough to feed the refugee family for a day. What was more remarkable to me, however, was how one second thought led to another...and another.

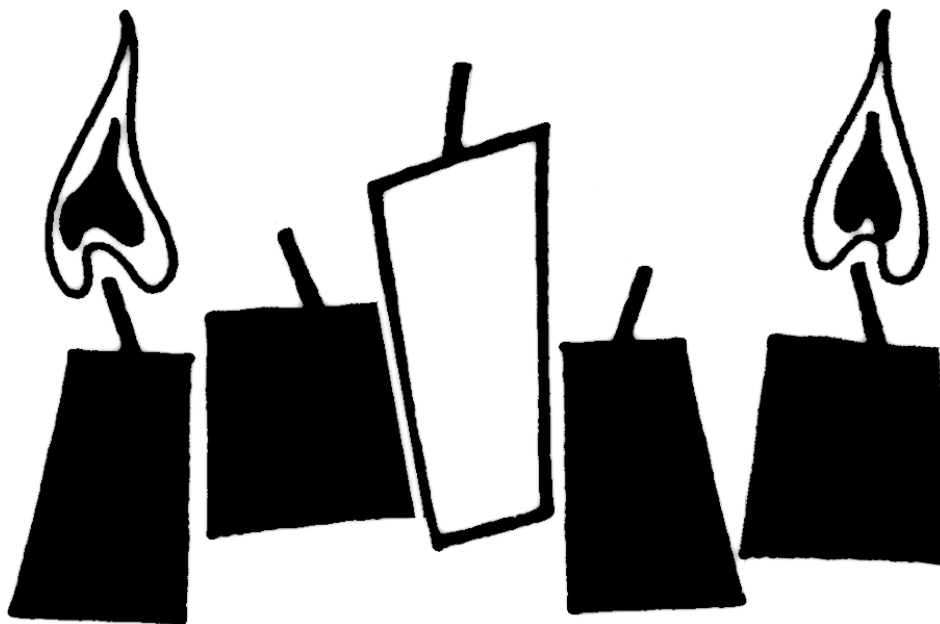
We, in this affluent nation—even in a time of economic downturn—are like the innkeeper who had extra resources to offer. We can be, like the innkeeper, easily overwhelmed with the appeals for help; it may seem like too much with which to cope! Yet, second (and even third) thoughts can expand our possibility thinking: "Oh yes, there is that space out back." Such thinking can make room for small miracles to be born.

—James Schwarzlose is a United Church of Christ minister in Atlanta, GA. He has served three decades as pastor and community advocate and, currently, works as a teacher and mentor to refugees and immigrants.

Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Come, angelic envoys,
with renewed announcement
of glory (to God) and
peace (for the earth).
Your people long for Messiah's rejoinder,
through wombs made welcome
to the news of reversal:
the annulment of enmity
and the Advent of promise.
—from "Advent Longing"
by Ken Schestel



The Manger's Reach

by Ken Sehested

Oh, Blessed One,

Beloved *Abba*, whose womb
squeezed forth all that is, humus and human alike,
animate and inanimate together,
sun and moon and galaxies without end.

Oh, Sweet Deliverer, fruit of Mary's annunciation,
troubler of worlds and troubadour of heaven's fidelity,
whose call to the table gathers the lame and binds
every shame with the promise of feast for the lost,
for the least, for the last, and all willing
to sing the angels' insurrectionary song.

Oh, Wisdom of Days, breath of life in lungs of clay,
pregnant promise to Sarai and Abram, flaming
visage to Moses, whisperer to prophets and
confounder of priests. Answer to Hannah's lament
and Elizabeth's regret, tongue of fire on the
seer's lips and Pentecost morning's dazzling display.
Light from darkling sky that surrounds and
protects our way, even in death, sowing
Redemption's harvest with each martyr's blood.

Blessed be Your Name, that christening which
cannot be spoken or tamed but only proclaimed in
the risk of deliverance from the river of vengeance.

We gather at this portal of praise to lift our hands in
adoration: *Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,*
for the aroma of baking bread, the jubilation of wine,
the kindness of friend and stranger and love alike;
for the sufficiency of grace and the warrant
of ransom 'mid the wreckage of wrath.

Yet we find ourselves, too, collapsed in the dust of
distress: *Help me. Help me. Help me,*
for the flesh we inhabit is shaken and shattered
by fearful threat and the agonized cries of
soil and soul who serve as fodder for the cannons
of discontent with your economy of *manna*.

As Isaiah foresaw: "The envoys of peace weep
bitterly; the land mourns." So now arise, as you
promised by the Prophet's scorched tongue,
and guide us to the safety and salvation for which
we long, earth and earthling in concert.

Make us rapturous lovers in this rupturing season.
Deepen the capacity for reverence, sufficient to
sustain the risk of Jordan's baptismal oath.
Oh, Shepherd of fearless night, awaken in us the
assurance that one day, in the crumbling of empire,
mercy will trump vengeance—that one day, the
Manger's reach will exceed Herod's grasp and
every child shall rest fretless at your breast.

—Ken Sehested, is co-pastor of the Circle of Mercy
congregation in Asheville, North Carolina, an organizer for
peace and a part-time stonemason.



art by René Boldt

Quotes, Poems & Pithy Sayings

During Advent, opportunities for works of charity abound calling out for Christians from every side: a sack of food for a needy family, money dropped in a Salvation Army kettle, a donation to an Indian school, a toy for Toys-for-Tots, etc. Unfortunately, these works of charity so easily can assuage the Christian conscience, while doing nothing to being about a solution to the root causes of the problem.

Works of justice, on the other hand, follow the road less traveled of Advent's hope to pursue solutions for difficult problems. Hope comes through works of justice rather than simply performing works of charity.

—Fr. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR

Blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love.

—Hamilton Wright Mabie

In the presence of myriad stars,
Yahweh summons humankind; God is commissioning us
to pulsating new life.

Bandage the wounds of vengeance!
Gather a harvest of extravagant, riotous dreams!

—Martin Bell, Street Singing and Preaching

It might be easy to run away to a monastery, away from the commercialization, the hectic hustle, the demanding family responsibilities of Christmas-time. Then we would have a holy Christmas. But we would forget the lesson of the Incarnation, of the enfleshing of God—the lesson that we who are followers of Jesus do not run from the secular; rather we try to transform it. It is our mission to make holy the secular aspects of Christmas just as the early Christians baptized the Christmas tree. And we do this by being holy people-kind, patient, generous, loving, laughing people—no matter how maddening is the Christmas rush...

—Fr. Andrew Greeley, 1981

Remember this December, that love weighs more than gold!

—Josephine Dodge Daskam Bacon

We are called to be witnesses of God's by the love we extend to others; precursors of his justice by our unfailing commitment to what is right and good; lamps reflecting the light of God's Christ in our forgiveness, mercy and compassion; harvesters of souls through our humble and dedicated servanthood.

—Connections, 1994

Womb of All Creation Flowing

by Jann Aldredge-Clanton

Texts: Genesis 49:25; Isaiah 44:2-4

Tune: PICARDY

("Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence")

Womb of all Creation flowing with your blessings everywhere,
Bring to birth in us deep caring that your fullness all may share.
Fill us with your gentle power that new ventures we may dare.

Holy Darkness deep within us,
nurture our creative seeds;
Bring our dreams to glorious flower
as your peace our spirits feed.

In your center we find wholeness as
your grace fills all our needs.

Loving Womb, your sacred darkness
brings forth treasures night and day,
Nourishing our deepest longings,
casting all our fears away.
May we join your holy labor, giving
Earth new hope, we pray.

—Jann Aldredge-Clanton is a chaplain
at Baylor Medical Center in Dallas,
Texas. She has written a number of books
about theological gender issues, including
God and Gender and *Christ-Sophia*.

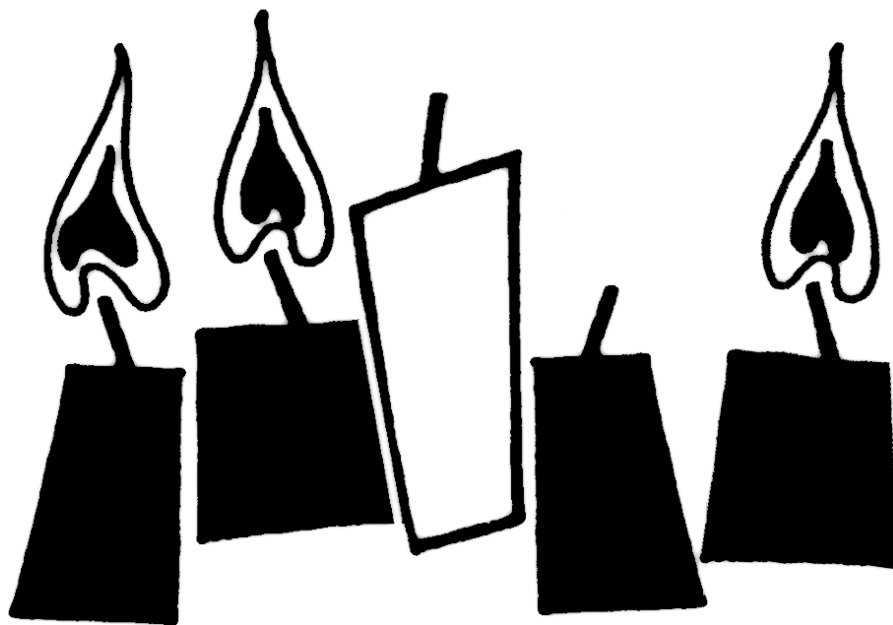


art by Peter Yuichi Clark

Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126 or Luke 1:47-55
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

From Jesse's ancient stump
raise again a voice consonant
with hope's manger-laid disclosure,
of delight with wolf and lamb alike,
and children marshalling the
cavalcade astride the Lion of Judah.
—from "Advent Longing"
by Ken Sehested



Litany for the Third Sunday in Advent

FIRST READER: When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
PEOPLE: Sing, O my soul, the greatness of the Lord
—From Psalm 126, Luke 1:47-55

SECOND READER: Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”

PEOPLE: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

FIRST READER: The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

SECOND READER: For God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant.

PEOPLE: Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.

FIRST READER: Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

SECOND READER: God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

PEOPLE: God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

FIRST READER: May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

SECOND READER: God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

PEOPLE: God has answered the call of God’s servant Israel.

FIRST READER: Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

SECOND READER: God has remembered in mercy the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to all his descendants forever.

Song for Bethlehem

by James Schwarzlose, OEF

Text: Micah 5:2

Bethlehem of Ephrathah!

You lie in peace beneath the stars.
But do you see the light of the Star of Peace in your midst?
From you shall come forth for God
The Child of that Star—the one in whom all war shall cease.

Do you see what Micah foresaw?
Or do you, like me, lie in half-belief, seeing and yet not seeing
What God Almighty is doing before our eyes?
And what is it that Micah, the shepherds and the Magi saw
That we do not?

Lord God, open our eyes that we—every grown, lost, sad child
May see the miracle gleam in the darkness.

Come O Micah, come again and shake us loose
From our desire for more—
Though we do not know
“more” of what.

Turn our eyes toward
wisdom and faith that we,
In this very moment, may
see
The holy, sleeping joy that
lies in our midst.

Amen.

—James Schwarzlose is a
United Church of Christ
minister in Atlanta, GA.
He has served three decades
as pastor and community
advocate and, currently,
works as a teacher and
mentor to refugees and
immigrants.



art by Caroline Oladipo

I Am Worth

by David Sparenberg

When the first rays of the start of day
Touch the rocky coast
Of the Atlantic seaboard,
I will be there like a whisper
In the long lines of the unemployed.

When the heat of the sun
In the middle of day
Drops like a blanket of splinters
Over broad midlands, old Indian lands
Rich with wheat and corn,
I will be there like a murmur
In the ranks of the poor.

When the last of the sun
At the end of day
Bids farewell to the long Pacific shore,
Setting under clouds over turgid waters,
I will be there as a voice
In the lines of the unemployed.

Look at me: I am dignity. I am people.
What I seek is work and not poverty.
What I want is peace and not war.
Give me opportunity and equality,
Not rhetorical terms.
Offer to me, with a friendly hand,
The action of honesty,
Not the concessions of squalor;
Not the residue
Of greed and war..

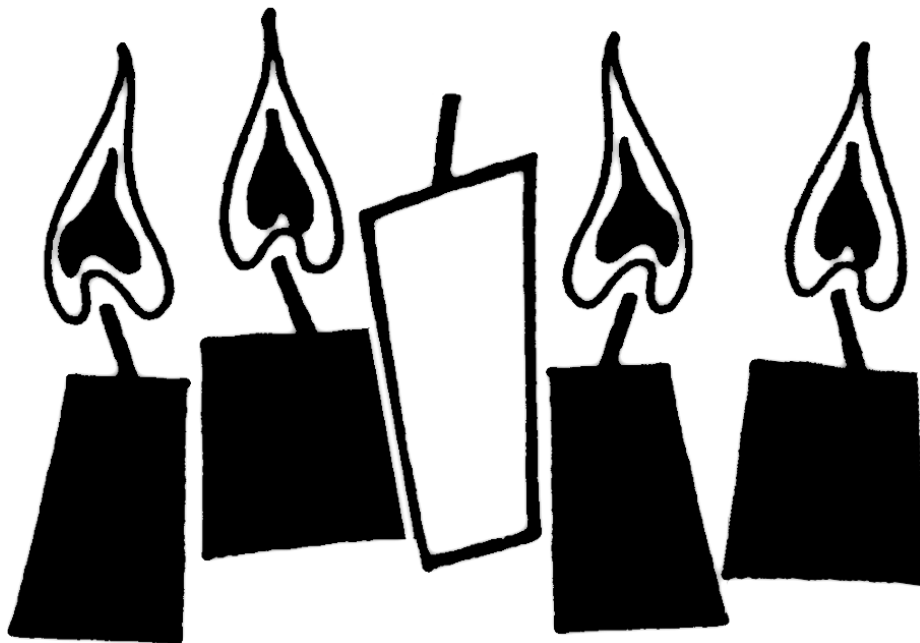
I am not
Statistics. I am not charts.
Look at me! Look!
I am dignity. I am humanity.
I am worth.

—David Sparenberg—a playwright, poet, storyteller, stage director, Shakespearean actor and novelist—works in Las Vegas, Nevada, but is about to move to Washington State. He uses his craft to help people cope with life-threatening illness and loss.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Oh, Majestic One,
whose passion spills
into flesh and blood,
set our hearts on the edge of our seats,
shivering in hope, longing,
longing for the age
when bitter memory
dissolves into magnificat.
—from “Advent Longing”
by Ken Sehested



The Gift of Joy

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

by Brett Younger

Text: Luke 1:46-55

In the intensive care waiting room a week before Christmas, family members are allowed to visit for fifteen minutes every two hours. This routine has gone on for two weeks and Beth is exhausted. Her husband is in the final stages of pancreatic cancer.

There is another woman in the waiting room along with her two sons. Maria's husband suffered a heart attack and is in critical condition. She holds her boys close to her as they wait for the next opportunity to visit. From the look on their faces, it's clear they're afraid. From the look of their clothes, it's clear they're poor.

After the noon visitation, the two families are back in the waiting room. Beth takes out her cell phone and calls a pizza place. In a short while the room is filled with the smells of cheese and pepperoni and the hunger of two little boys.

Beth says, "I made a mistake and ordered way too much pizza. Would you have lunch with me?"

Maria replies gently, "Thank you."

They tell their stories and smile for the first time in a long time.

The capacity for joy in the midst of difficulty is a gift from God. This kind of joy is deeper than happiness—which is tied to circumstances. Joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God's presence, but it takes a lot to make us really believe it.

When Gabriel told Mary she was going to have a baby, God's baby, she was afraid. She was probably around 14 years old, engaged to a man she hardly knew, getting ready to leave her parents' house for his house. The angel shows up with the pronouncement of this baby, now smaller than a thumbnail, who is going to grow inside of her. She's terrified of being a mother and terrified of what her mother will think.

Mary high-tailed it out of there and headed to her cousin Elizabeth's. She may have ended up asking about morning sickness and swollen ankles, but that's not why she went. She ran because she was frightened.

When she burst through the front door, her eyes went immediately to her much older cousin's sixth-months-pregnant belly. Elizabeth felt the child in her womb begin to dance. She shouted right there in her living room, "Blessed are you among women. Blessed is that child of God growing in you."

Blessed? Mary hadn't spent much time thinking about that part. She'd only been thinking about the hard part. She was speechless for just a moment. In her hurry to get to Elizabeth's she had completely forgotten what the angel said when he first laid holy eyes on her, "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you."

Before the angel tried to calm her down and tell her not to be afraid, he called this poor, unmarried girl "blessed." It's not until Elizabeth reacted with such joy that Mary remembered that part of what the angel said—"blessed, favored one."

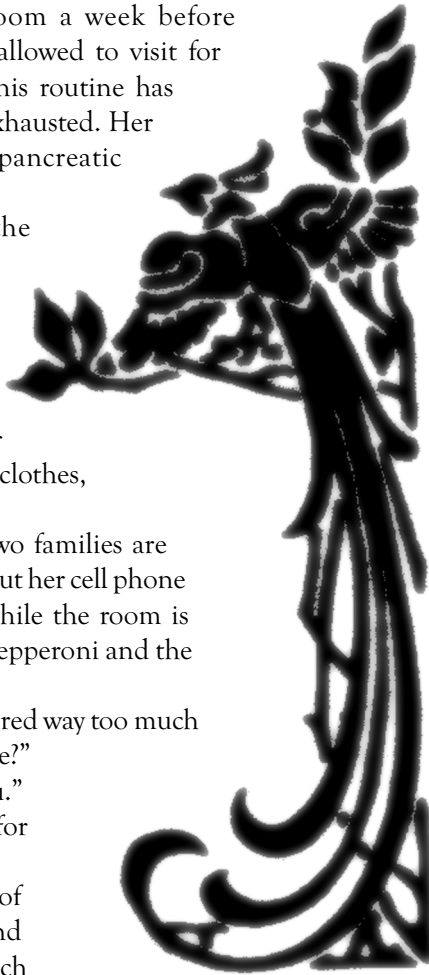
She stood there, trying to catch her breath, trying to get her mind around what was happening. She looked at Elizabeth's shining, wrinkled face, and God unleashed something in Mary's soul.

All of a sudden she realized that, for whatever reason, God had called her blessed.

No matter how scared she was, how ordinary she felt, or what others might say about her, Mary was filled with such deep joy that she began to sing.

"My soul gives glory to God. My heart overflows with praise. I'm bursting with good news. I'm dancing to God's music. I'm the most fortunate woman in the world. God's mercy flows in wave after wave."

Mary sang praise for all that God had done, is doing, will do—and not just for her. Mary sang for all who benefit from God's love. She praised God for relieving the proud and powerful of their swelled heads and overblown sense of self-importance.



She praised God for sending the rich away empty so they might have room in them for more than money can buy. She praised God for mercy and justice. Mary burst into song not just for herself, but on behalf of every son and daughter who thinks God has forgotten God's promise to be with them forever.

Mary sang until she fell on the couch, exhausted. She sang until, at least for a moment, she forgot the hard parts. She sang until, in the singing of it, she felt God with her.

Maybe Mary hoped that her song would be remembered. Maybe Mary hoped that, as the generations passed, her song would be sung by other women and men when they felt overwhelmed by their troubles. Maybe Mary hoped her song would be sung by other girls and boys who felt too ordinary, too poor, too unimportant to count for anything.

To sing Mary's song is to remember that God has blessed us, too. This song ought to be considered the first Christmas carol, but the Magnificat won't be heard nearly so often as *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, because Mary's song is for those who have been crying and have good reasons to pout.

This carol is for people in distress, ignored people, rejected people. Mary sang of the God who brings joy to people who are hurting.

For those who are facing Christmas for the first time, or the tenth time, since a loved one has died, almost everything reminds them of the one whose stocking isn't hanging from the mantle. Our sorrows—the ways in which our lives aren't what we wish, our shortcomings as families, health concerns, jobs that feel like dead-ends—are magnified at Christmas.

Some things aren't as easy as they once were. I'm old enough to have figured out that not all of my dreams will come true. I've seen some good people hurt terribly. I have a few scars of my own. Some of the people I've loved have died. It's when we realize that life is hard and won't be everything we've hoped, that we rethink where we'll find joy.

Mary's song is out of step with the way Christmas is usually celebrated. Most commercials indicate that this holiday is for happy, successful people with smiling, wealthy friends.

We tend to look for Christmas where most people look—giving good gifts, getting good gifts, bright lights, time off. We look for happiness in good jobs, nice homes and mostly-normal families.

But someone said, "Happiness is what you feel when you think you've got everything you want. That's why nobody is completely happy."

We either don't get what we want, or we get it and find out it doesn't deliver the happiness we're after.

Joy is a different experience. If happiness is what we feel when we think we've got what we want, then joy is what we feel when we discover we already have what we most need.

Joy is still present when life is hard. Christ comes for grieving people with broken homes and broken hearts. Christmas is the promise that God loves children who hunger for food, the lonely who hunger for love and all who hunger for peace.

The Word becomes flesh wherever there is sadness, fear or emptiness. God comes to be with us in our dark

Joy is still present when life is hard. Christ comes for grieving people with broken homes and broken hearts. Christmas is the promise that God loves children who hunger for food, the lonely who hunger for love and all who hunger for peace.

valleys, to bind our broken hearts, to carry us when we're tired and weary.

No matter how dark it seems, there is light. No matter how hurt we are, there is healing. No matter how abandoned we feel, there is someone there. Sorrow may come, but it cannot defeat God's joy. Sadness may bring tears, but Christ brings hope.

Christmas is for those who've known tragedy and discovered that grief isn't the final word. Wendell Berry writes, "Be joyful, even though you have considered all the facts." God's gift of joy doesn't deny sorrow, but overcomes it.

If God's joy could be present in the birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so difficult, but that God's joy isn't present there, too.

Let me tell you a story. A divorced mother wakes her teenager for school, and he immediately starts complaining about everything she tries to do for him. She's worried that he doesn't love her any more. She doesn't know what to do about it.

Her job is terrible. She's working more hours and not getting anything done. She feels older than she wants to feel. She's worried about her mother. Her mom can still care for herself, but in five years they'll have to make some hard decisions.

On the way home from work, the woman flips on the radio. The first station is playing "Winter Wonderland."

That's way too cheerful. The second station is playing the dogs barking "Jingle Bells." She turns off the radio. She

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used to love December. It was her favorite time of the year. Advent was magical, but this year she just feels tired.

On Sunday, she goes to church though she isn't sure she wants to, but then she begins to sing. The hymns aren't about a holly-jolly Christmas. They're about joy that comes in the midst of sorrows and poor shepherds out on a cold night.

The choir sings about a child born into poverty and a glory that's beyond all the grief we'll ever face. This tired and broken woman slowly begins to understand that Christmas isn't about happiness, but about joy that's deeper than all of our troubles.

—Brett Younger is professor of homilectics at McAfee Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Supreme Mystery

by Nadine N. Doughty

Are You up there? I scan the sky—
or are You here among us?
You are everywhere, the sages say,
in all we see and hear and touch.

Lord of all, do You appear
among the folk who make a home
amid a city's mound of trash?
Do You appear in store-front churches,
or join a long soup-kitchen line?
Do You stand with the ragged youth
selling newspapers in the wind?

Holy presence I can feel
more readily when robin sings
or tulip blooms, or baby laughs.
Your holy presence I can feel
in kindness shown, in music sung.

And yet I know such easy worship
can't begin to comprehend
Your power vast, your limitless love.



art by Robert Darden

—Dee Doughty, a longtime contributor to *Seeds* publications, has worked for many years in ministries for the poor in Evanston, Illinois, through her Episcopal Diocese and other organizations.

Rumors of Glory

A Meditation for Christmas Eve

by Katie Cook

*Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long,
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm.
So hallowed and so gracious is that time.*

*—Marcellus, Act 1 Scene 1,
Hamlet Prince of Denmark*

I have often visited that Shakespeare quote, and wished with all my heart that it were true—that nothing evil can happen during Christmastide. But I have to go no further than my own job to know that thousands of bad things happen every day, all over the world, even at Christmas. Knowing that, I sometimes find it difficult to be of good cheer.

And yet, there are those times when the words of Marcellus come true. It seems to happen more at Christmas, but it happens at other times as well.

Most of us have heard the story of German and Allied soldiers joining each other across trenches to sing “Silent Night” one Christmas Eve during World War II.



*art courtesy of Hermanolón
of the Franciscanos de Cruz Blanca*

When I think of such moments, I think of a story a defensive lineman told me, decades ago, when I worked as a tutor for Baylor athletes. With a measure of disbelief in his voice, Adam told me about a butterfly that wandered onto the playing field during a football workout.

The offense and defense were lined up, ready for signals to be called out, and this butterfly landed on the ground between them. The players, without discussion, straightened up and waited for the butterfly to flit away. When it was gone, they assumed their assault of each other as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened.

I think of the scene at the end of the movie *Camelot*, where King Arthur is talking to a young boy as the dream of Camelot dies in flames around them. He points to the flashes of brilliance on the ocean and says, “Do you see? Of all of the drops of water in the sea, some of them sparkle.”

I think of the Bruce Cockburn song “Rumours of Glory.” He sings, “Behind the pain etched on the faces, something is shining like gold, but better.”

I think of my church on Christmas Eve, when we raise the candles in our hands on the third verse of “Silent Night” to light the dark sanctuary. A glimpse of something holy and rare, a whisper that says there really ARE things on heaven and earth that are not dreamt of in our philosophies.

This is the gift of Christmas—rumors of glory, moments of holiness, whispers of hope. It’s what keeps me going.
—Katie Cook is editor of *Sacred Seasons*, *Hunger News & Hope*, and *Baptist Peacemaker*.

Christmas Day

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalms 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Isaiah 62:6-12

Psalms 97

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20

Isaiah 52:7-10

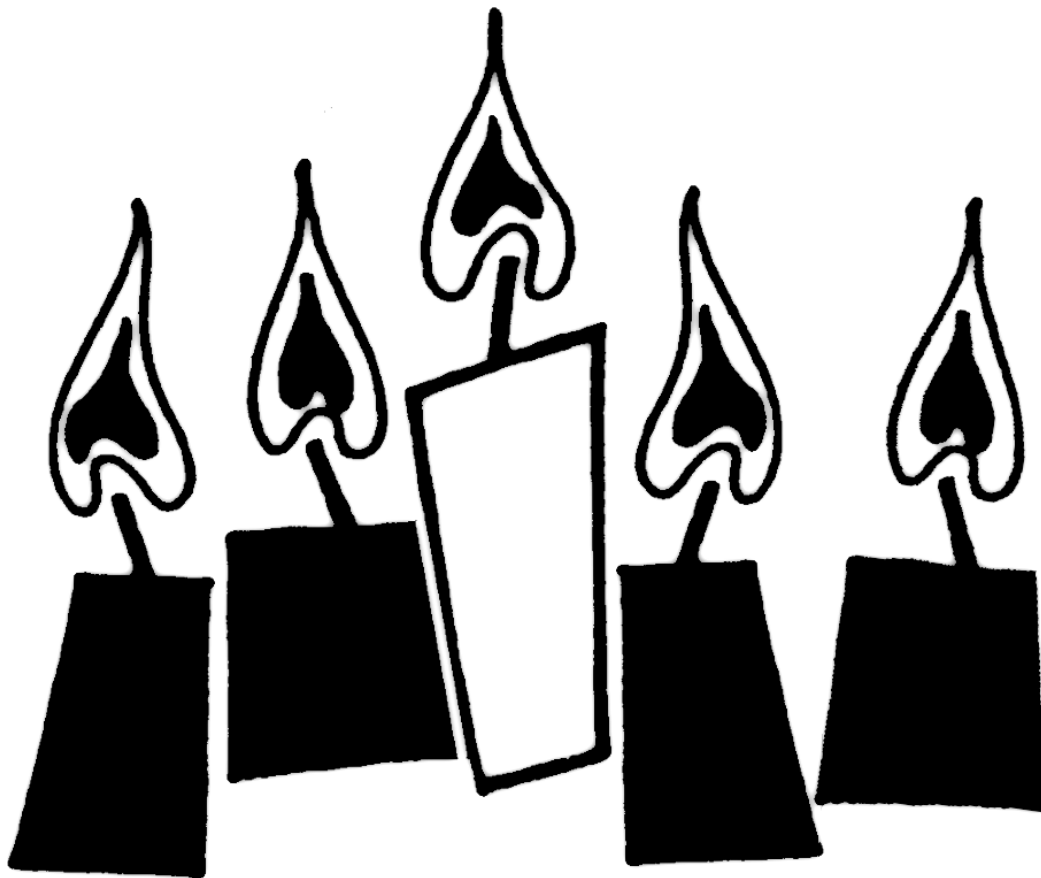
Psalms 98

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

John 1:1-14

As with our ancient sister Mary,
entreat us with the
subversive promise
of Only Begotten freedom, begat
in the belly of holy submission.

May our lips echo
the jubilant manifesto
of creation's destiny
with justice and with joy.
—from "Advent Longing"
by Ken Sehested



The Word for Christmas Is Passion



A Sermon for Christmas Day

by G. Allen Grant

In 1942, Irving Berlin wrote the words and music to the song “White Christmas” for a movie called *Holiday Inn*, starring Bing Crosby. War had just begun. The people of the world did not know for sure what to expect in the coming months.

I’m not sure anyone realized that the war in Germany and Japan would last for four more years. Soldiers were being shipped overseas, not knowing if or when they would be coming home. This song became very popular among them and their families.

In fact, the song was so popular that it came back in another Bing Crosby movie called *White Christmas*. The actors dress in red velvet and white fur. It is a festive movie.

As I began to think of the words to the song, “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know,” I began to realize that there may not be anyone in China Spring, Texas, who has ever seen a white Christmas. Back in Tennessee, where I grew up, they happened every few years, enough that we really could dream about seeing snow on December 25th.

Christmas is a time of waiting and a time of expecting. It is a hopeful time, as we wonder what we are going to find under the tree. It is a joyful time, as we think about sharing with our kids and grandkids. We look forward to seeing their faces as they open their gifts. We want everything to be just right—just like we imagine that it used to be when we were young.

But is that what Christmas is all about? What is it that we are anticipating?

If we were to ask folks on the street this question, some would talk about families getting together. Some would talk about the appealing, cute, cuddly baby in the manger without knowing what that birth means or even who the baby was. Some will use all of their sweetest words to talk about Christmas scenes, lights or trees.

If I asked you this question, I know some of you will say “Jesus,” and that is partly correct. But I think what we are hoping for, what we are anticipating, the real meaning of Christmas, is found in the word *passion*.

Does that surprise you? It shouldn’t. It is written all over the Christmas story. The truth of the matter is that Christmas is not about all of the sweetness and softness and gentleness that we tend to focus on. No. Christmas night is about plain, unadulterated, hard, raw passion.

Behind the façade of the cuddly baby in the manger is a fierce and passionate God.

Take a second look at the story, and you see God’s great love for us and God’s commitment not to leave us abandoned, not to leave us in the darkness of political, social and personal tyrannies.

Why would God want to come
and live among us? Simply
because God loves us, and
when you love someone, you
want to be with them.

The message of Christmas is summed up in the words that the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary. “You shall call his name Emmanuel, which translates ‘God with us.’” Did you get that? *God with us!*

Or in the reverential phrases of John’s gospel: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

Why? Why would God want to come and live among us? Simply because God loves us, and when you love someone, you want to be with them. God has a “thing” for us.

The real Christmas memory that we should have is not of a cuddly, cute, little Baby Jesus, but of an active and desiring God who longs with anticipation to be with us.

God wants to be a part of the human condition. God has a driving desire to “dwell among us.” That’s passion.

Nancy Dahlberg tells a story that might help here.

It was Christmas Day. Her family had spent the holiday with her husband’s relatives, but had to leave on Christmas

Day so they could get back home to work on Monday. They stopped at a restaurant on the road. It was nearly empty, so they got a really good table.

As soon as they had seated their children, they heard their toddler, one-year-old Erik, squeal with glee, "Hi there!" He pounded his fat baby hands on the metal high chair. His face was alive with excitement, his eyes were wide, his gums baring a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled. Then Mrs. Dahlberg saw what was exciting him, but she wasn't sure what to do about what she saw.

A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else eons ago, now dirty, greasy and worn. Baggy pants, a

The man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment. Then he opened his eyes, locked them squarely on the mother's and said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby."

spindly body, toes that poked out of would-be shoes. A shirt that had ring-around-the-collar, except that it was all over. And a face with gums as bare as Erik's.

"Hi there, baby. Hi there, big boy. I see you, Buster," he said. The husband and wife exchanged one of those "What do we do now?" looks.

The meal came, and the noises continued. Now the old man was shouting across the room, "Do you know patty cake? Atta-boy. Do you know Peek-a-boo? Hey look, he knows Peek-a-boo!"

Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hi, there!" Every call was echoed. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. The husband and wife were both embarrassed. Even their six-year-old asked, "Why is that old man talking so loud?"

Mr. Dahlberg went to pay the check and implored his wife to get the baby and meet him in the parking lot. You probably know what she was praying. "Lord, just let me get out that door!" But, she said, it was soon obvious that the Lord, and Erik, had other plans.

As she drew closer to the man and turned her back, trying to avoid any errant smells and get out as quickly as she could, Erik leaned over and began reaching for the old man. In the split second of trying to balance the baby and turning to counter his weight, she came face to face with the old man.

Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes implored, "Would you let me hold your baby?" Before

she could answer, Erik propelled himself from her arms into his arms. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby were in love.

Erik laid his tiny head on the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and she saw tears beneath the lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, ever-so-gently cradled the baby's bottom and stroked his back.

The man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment. Then he opened his eyes, locked them squarely on the mother's and said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." Somehow, she managed a weak, "I will."

He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as if he were in pain. She held out her arms to receive her baby and the old man addressed her: "God bless you, Ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." She said nothing more than just "thanks."

With Erik in her arms, she ran for the car. The husband wondered why she was crying and holding Erik so tightly and why she was saying, "My God, forgive me. Forgive me."

I think the real meaning of Christmas is found in this story. Simply put, Erik is God and the old man is us. Erik is God's yearning and passion for us tattered bums, with our tattered lives, our tattered hurts, our tattered relationships and our tattered sins. Erik is two arms determined to hug us. Erik is a fierce little baby who makes no distinctions, who would embrace the least likely: you and me.

And that's the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. It's not the sentimental "White Christmas" with snow and tinsel, packages and glitter. Christmas is volatile Erik doing whatever he can to come and be with us.

Of course, the world doesn't want that. The world wants us to forget Christmas and just have a holiday. But if God is not with us and if God has not embraced our tattered lives, then woe is us. There is no hope; there is no light. There is only darkness and despair. And if we are here today out of our fruitless socializing or our pressured routines or some empty sentimentality, then our lives are pitiful indeed.

But if we are here today because of love, and we are here like the rag-tag shepherds that we are, to kneel and rejoice, then we have caught Christmas's meaning.

Emmanuel, the passionate God, has had his way and has hugged us fiercely.

Merry Christmas to you all. Amen.

—Allen Grant is pastor of the China Spring United Methodist Church in China Spring, Texas. He says he is indebted to William Bausch, in *A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers* for his thoughts in the last part of this sermon.

benediction

Holy One of heaven,
mark these dark nights
with the brilliance of your star
to guide emissaries of exclaiming grace:
of contradiction and scandal
to the insolent innkeepers of this age;
of blessing and bounty to the indigent,
to all who find no lasting home
save in the age to come.
—from “Advent Longing”
by Ken Sehested

