

the Way

Preparings



**a worship packet
for Advent and
Christmastide 2000**

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Editorial Address

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Preparing the way

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a word about this packet

These materials are offered to you on clean, unattached pages so that you can more easily photocopy anything you wish to duplicate. We are constantly looking for ways to make the pages more attractive and easier for you to photocopy. Feel free to copy any of this, including art, and adapt these tools to your needs.

The art on the cover was created for our packet theme by Sharon Rollins, a counselor and youth minister in Waco, Texas. The emphasis on the "scandal of Advent" is inspired by a series of sermons and meditations by Dan Bagby, a professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. As always, we are indebted to John Ballenger, a minister in Atlanta, Georgia and our "editor of creative things." This year, Jackie Saxon, a minister in Austin, Texas, also contributed to the brainstorming. Two of those meditations are included here. We have featured several new writers: Mark Ashworth, a pastor in Monticello, Florida; and Chris Jones, a student at the Truett Theological Seminary in Waco. We also introduce a new artist: Robert Askins, a theater student at Baylor University in Waco.

The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We make a conscious effort to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams.

We prayerfully hope that these aids will enhance your congregation's Advent and Christmastide worship experiences and, at the same time, help you to creatively raise awareness of the needs of God's people.

preparing the way...

a brainstorming session

from editors and friends

Over the centuries since the birth of Christ, the nativity stories have been told and depicted millions of times. We think that they have been, over those centuries and in many ways, sanitized and gilded. So we have tried, in this packet, to go back to the earthiness and the scandal that this Messianic birth must have been.

The theme is “Preparing the Way” and the scriptural theme is from Isaiah 40:3-5a:

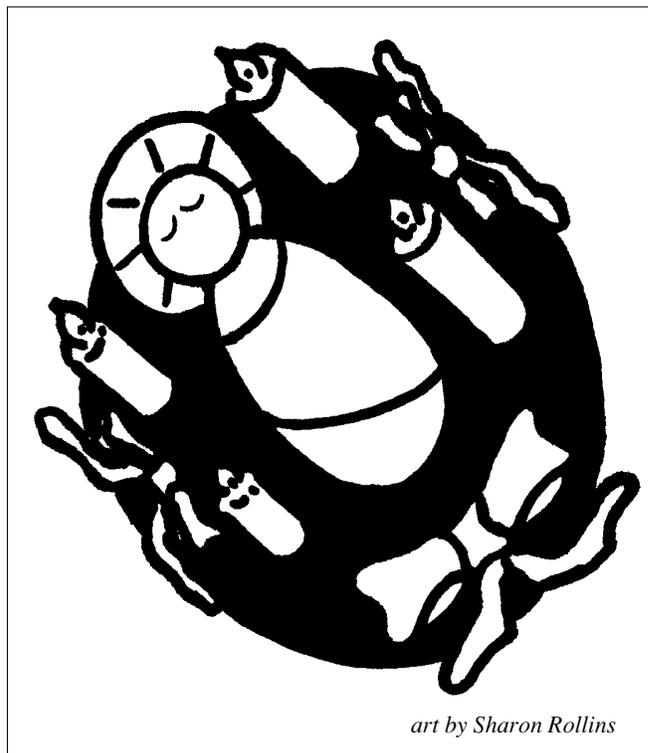
*A voice cries out:
In the wilderness prepare the
way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill
be made low;
the uneven ground shall become
level,
and the rough places plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall
be revealed,
and all people shall see it
together...*

We have done some brainstorming with ministers from around the U.S. and come up with some ideas that we hope will give your Advent interpretations a new clarity. We have tried to find ways to wake all of us up to the earth-shattering nature of this birth. Here’s a word of warning, however: carrying out some of these ideas will take a certain amount of nerve.

John Ballenger, a minister in Atlanta, Georgia, suggests making the sanctuary’s advent wreath a crib. You could do this by simply putting a baby doll in the middle of the wreath, where the Christ candle goes.

There are several allusions in our meditations and sermons about Jesus turning the world upside down, so one way of doing this might be to turn the altar table upside down and making a crib out of it. This could be used for a living creche (with homeless-looking people as the Holy Family), or just as a visual theme for the sanctuary.

John also suggests taping a baby crying—with silent spaces between cries—and placing the tape player near the pulpit or lectern during a reading (dare we do it during scripture reading?). Then, as the baby’s cries repeatedly interrupt the speaker, she or he might remind the congregation that Jesus was a real baby who undoubtedly did cry when he was hungry and cold (no matter what the Christmas carols say) and that he still wants to interrupt our mundane or busy lives with a new, perhaps unorthodox, truth.



Jackie Saxon, a minister in Austin, Texas, created an unforgettable call to worship for the first Sunday in Advent that fits this theme. She and the youth of her church put together a processional, in which they carried in all of the altar cloths, banners, wreaths, and candles for Advent and arranged them in their respective places while Marc Cohn’s “Baby King” (a kind of Memphis-blues song) played over the speakers. Jackie thinks this would go incredibly well with John’s baby-doll-wreath idea.

Another of John’s ideas is to play, at some point—perhaps during a pastoral prayer time on Peace Sunday, the Simon & Garfunkel song “Silent Night/Seven O’Clock News” (from one of their early albums.) The song begins with the duo singing “Silent Night” and a news commentator begins quietly reading news about the war escalating in Vietnam, protesters being arrested, serial murders in Chicago, etc. The singing slowly recedes and the news becomes louder until they end together with the commentator saying, “And that’s the seven o’clock news. Good night.”

If you have time and really want to be creative, you could update this. You could arrange for an ensemble or soloist to sing while someone reads from the newspaper of the very day that you do this. You could also show video clips of the news while the choir sings.—lkc

bulletin art



In the wilderness prepare
the way of the Lord...

Isaiah 40:3



In the wilderness prepare
the way of the Lord...

Isaiah 40:3



In the wilderness prepare
the way of the Lord...

Isaiah 40:3



In the wilderness prepare
the way of the Lord...

Isaiah 40:3

art by Sharon Rollins

theme interpretation

Somewhere in the darkness of our wisdom,
love labored once again
to show its cause:
how to communicate to distant people
something of their value
to the Maker of them all;
searching for a gesture
that might say it all;
love reached deep inside itself—
and shaped a fragile child,
took it gently
to a quiet corner of the world
and trusted it to people
too young and poor to be spoiled...
—Daniel G. Bagby



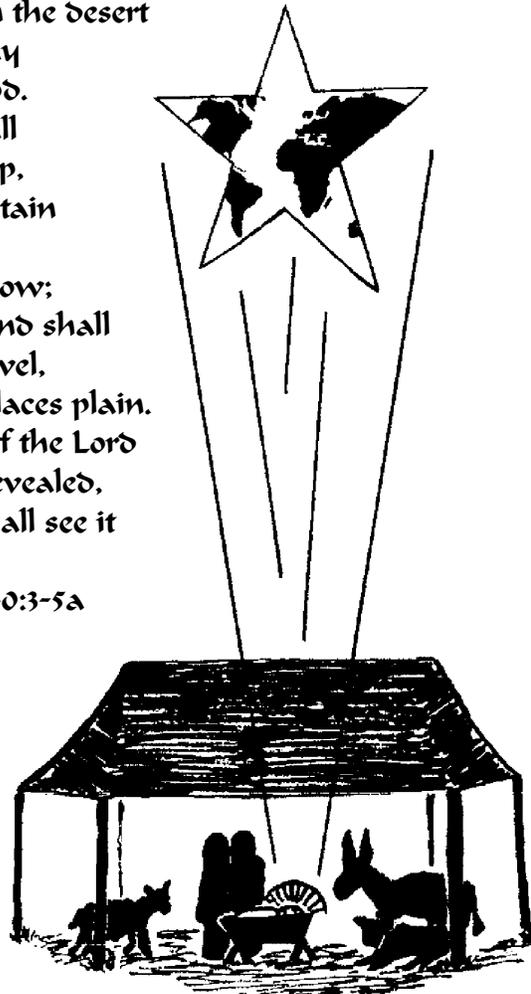
bulletin art



Scrooge
bah humbug...
bah...animals lowing nearby
hum...the night is still
Baby born
unto us
God's grace grasped!
-Dawn Darwin

bulletin art

A voice cries out:
In the wilderness prepare the
way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert
a highway
for our God.
Every valley shall
be lifted up,
and every mountain
and hill
be made low;
the uneven ground shall
become level,
and the rough places plain.
Then the glory of the Lord
shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it
together...
— Isaiah 40:3-5a



art by Sharon Rollins

rejoice

an advent reading for two people

by Katie Cook

Rejoice, I say: rejoice!

What? Are you talking to me?

Yes! Rejoice! This is the happiest time of the year!

It usually is, yes. I really like Advent and all of the wonderful Christmas feelings. Usually. But this year I don't much feel like rejoicing. It's been kind of a hard year...you know?

Yes. I know. I have felt your pain. But you can still rejoice. Have joy in all things.

How? How can I rejoice when I don't feel like it? You know that this is also the most difficult time of year for some people.

Yes. I know I feel their loneliness, their pain, their loss.

Well, then, why are you telling me to rejoice? Even if I had no loss myself, these other ones are all around me. Do you expect me to dance a jig?

Not all joy is boisterous. You know that.

Yes. I do. But—

And you know that deep within you, in the silence, even in the tears, you have an undercurrent of peace. And you know that this Christ Child came for just this purpose—to become one with us in our pain.

Yes. I know that.

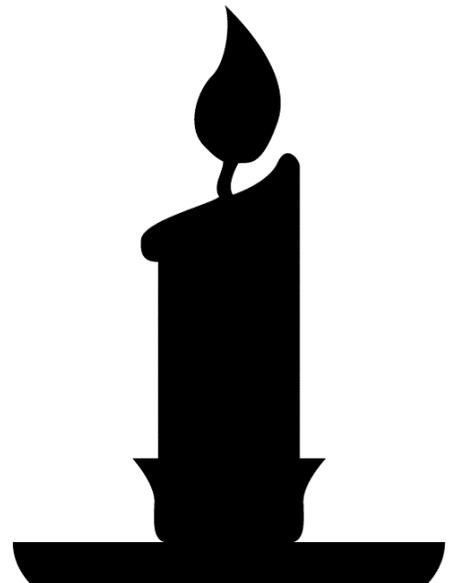
Isn't that cause for hope? And what is hope but the expectation of joy?

But how can I hope for joy when I am bleeding and broken?

You are not alone in your pain. You wonder sometimes if life is worth the aching and the bleeding. But you are not alone.

So, it is. It is worth it. So I can rejoice, just knowing that. I can raise my face, wet with tears, toward heaven and laugh. Out loud! And welcome this Christ Child, who joins me in my pain. Welcome!

O gentle Child of Bethlehem, help us to see beyond the sentimental pictures of Your birth, to the real and holy purpose of Your coming. Help us to know the hope that is the expectation of joy, even in our sorrow. Help us to celebrate the light, even in our seasons of darkness. To You, the one who joins us in our pain, we pray. Amen.



the first Christmas carol

a sermon for the first Sunday in Advent

by Brett Younger

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Well, folks, believe it or not, it's already time to begin preparing for Christmas. It's time to make out our Christmas lists and schedules and try to feel inspired about going through the whole process again.

It's time to get the greenery and the bows and the manger scenes out of the church closet (and to wonder whatever happened to that third wise man.)

It's time to renew the debate between those of you who have bought into the absolute heresy of artificial Christmas trees and the more virtuous real-tree people. (I'm trying not to let my prejudices show through here, but...)

It's also time to take another, closer look at all those traditions.

Our Christmas traditions serve as wonderful reminders of the season, and yet they can also keep us from really experiencing Christmas. The familiar rituals make us forget how outlandish this whole celebration really is. The connection between the first Christmas and our Christmas gets more vague each year.

The story begins with a girl hardly old enough to have any child, let alone this child. Nazareth is a rundown village in an obscure province of Rome. Mary is a simple peasant girl with no status, no identifiable qualifications, seemingly no preparation for such a role. The angel looks several times to make sure the address is right.

Gabriel begins, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." It's hard to say exactly what it is that makes her favored. It must be something most people don't recognize. It may be something Mary herself doesn't recognize.

She is overwhelmed and bewildered by the appearance of an angel. She wonders what it means. Mary will do a lot of wondering. At several crucial moments she keeps "all these things in her heart." She has far more than most to fit in her heart.

The angel calls her by name: "You must not be afraid, Mary." Gabriel, who doesn't come across nearly as confident as Denzel Washington in *The Preacher's Wife*, knows that, in spite of his assurances, fear is an appropriate response. Gabriel tells her what the child will be named, and who he will be, and something of the mystery which awaits her. The superlatives Gabriel uses are stunning: the child of the Highest, the throne of David, a reign that goes on forever, and a kingdom that has no boundaries.

It is then that Mary thinks she has come up with a loophole. She knows that a baby doesn't fit the facts of her relationship to Joseph. She starts to explain to Gabriel the process by which

babies are conceived. The angel understands that it is all hard to believe so he gives her a sign. Her aunt Elizabeth, childless and far beyond childbearing age, will have a son, too.

The whole future of creation now hinges on the answer of a teenage girl. It makes you wonder who the second choice would be or if Mary is even the first one asked. Her response is stunning, "I am God's servant, body and soul. Let it happen as you say."

Her courageous answer doesn't mean that Mary isn't afraid. She wishes that she was older or somehow more prepared—though it's hard to imagine how anyone could prepare for such a thing. Her parents will be heartbroken. Joseph is an understanding person, but this is asking way too much.

Mary hurries to Elizabeth's, half to see if it is true, and half to have someone to talk to, if perchance it turns out to be true. When Mary arrives, she immediately knows that every bit of it is so. Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb, and just like in a Broadway musical, Mary breaks out in song.

Mary sings with gratitude for what Christ's coming will mean for her personally, but she sings about herself for only a moment. God's goodness towards Mary is only a single example of God's overwhelming grace: "God has swept away the high and mighty, has brought kings down from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands."

Our traditions serve as wonderful reminders of Christmas, and yet they can also keep us from experiencing Christmas. The familiar rituals make us forget how outlandish this whole celebration really is.



Mary's song should be considered the first Christmas carol, but the Magnificat will not be heard nearly so many times as "Silver Bells" or "White Christmas." The theme of this radical, revolutionary song is that the hungry are really the lucky ones and the rich are in big trouble.

Mary's song couldn't be more out of step with the way Christmas is celebrated today. It's hard to read the Gospel of Luke and see how our Christmas celebration could have possibly begun with this story. Christmas 2000 will be seen by many as an economic indicator. The average American family will spend well over \$700 on things for Christmas. Much of that money is spent with the bizarre assumption that the more money we spend the more fun we'll have.

Parents feel enormous pressure to join in the buying frenzy. Families spend themselves into debt. The poor are affected the most. Those in poverty have their noses rubbed in it because they aren't able to provide their children with all the toys they see advertised on television or all the ones their friends at school are getting. It's no wonder that in a recent survey only 38 percent of Americans said they consider Christmas to be "a strongly religious" holiday.

Instead of seeing Christmas the way the retailers, wholesalers, and discounters want us to see it, we should see Christmas as it really is. "God has swept away the proud. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones. God has sent the rich away empty." Mary's song isn't a carol rich people like us should enjoy singing.

Christmas turns the world upside down. God rotates everything 180 degrees. Ours is a society based on acquisition. The underlying assumption is that everyone wants more. Gathering wealth is foolishness according to Mary's song. The people on the Fortune 500 list have bet on the wrong horse. The self-important have missed the boat. Climbing to the top of the ladder is foolish because Christ is going to turn the ladder upside down.

Christmas challenges the status quo. Mary sings that her child will see life from the point of view of the disadvantaged. Jesus sees every system from the point of view of its victims, every religious hierarchy from the point of view of those who are left out, every political structure from the point of view of those who are burned by it. Christ's coming reveals the peril of trusting in our own wealth. Christ came to make what is commonly considered success irrelevant.

One of the remarkable qualities of this song is that Mary sings of the justice God will bring in the past tense. God has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful, and has sent the rich away empty. Why is it all written in the past tense? According to the newspapers, these things haven't happened yet.

In scripture, the faithful express trust in God by speaking of the future with such confidence that it is described as already here. Such faith is a promise to be a participant in the efforts to achieve that future. The Magnificat celebrates the future as a memory and praises God for having already done what lies before us to do.

Christmas reverses everything. Most television commercials seem to say that Christmas is reserved for happy,

successful people in smiling, wealthy families. It's not so.

Christ comes for grieving people with broken homes. Appearances are deceiving. The people who look favored aren't. The self-centered don't have it made. Christmas is the promise that God cares for children who hunger for food, for the lonely who hunger for love, for all who hunger for hope. The word becomes flesh to walk with us wherever there is sadness or fear or emptiness. God comes to be with us in our dark valleys, to bind our broken hearts, to lift us tired and weary to new life.



Mary's song couldn't be more out of step with the way Christmas is celebrated today. It's hard to read the Gospel of Luke and see how our Christmas celebration could have possibly begun with this story.

No matter how dark it seems, there is a light. No matter how abandoned we feel, there is another. No matter how hurt we are, there is healing. We need to see the Christmas story by the light of our worst troubles. It's when we're hurting that we see that Christ comes to be the comfort we need.

Browning Ware, a retired pastor in Austin, wrote this about the grace of Christ's coming: "When I was younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time, I knew all of the answers. I knew about parenting until I had children. I knew about divorce until I got one. I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year. I knew about the death of a child until my child died. I'm not as impressed with answers as I once was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers leads us to make pronouncements. I still have a few friends or acquaintances who are 100 percent sure on almost everything, and are ready to make pronouncements on marriage problems, teen pregnancies, AIDS, or whatever is coming down the pike. But when we get shoved into our valley of the shadow, a pronouncement is the last thing we need. We try to make everything fit our easy answers, but more important and satisfying than getting all the answers is knowing the one who is the answer."

Christ comes to be the companion who will comfort us when we mourn. God comes for the unpretentious people who recognize scars that won't heal—theirs and others, too.

Christmas is the beginning of a small, counter-cultural community of people who put their trust in God's way, and none of their faith in the materialism and selfishness of the majority. Advent invites us to have different standards, different hopes, and different dreams than those who don't know the meaning of God's coming.

William Willimon tells of a friend who visited the Soviet Union in the 1970s and made a tour of churches. This friend

One of the remarkable qualities of this song is that Mary sings of the justice God will bring in the past tense. God has shown strength, has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful, and has sent the rich away empty. Why is it all written in the past tense? According to the newspapers, these things haven't happened yet.



reported that the church was irrelevant because the only people there were “little old ladies.” Looking back at the collapse of communism and the difficulties of rebuilding the Soviet Union after a long period of spiritual bankruptcy, it was the little old ladies who were right. They bet on the stronger power and won.

They provided a continuing, visible rebuke to the powers of this world. They were on God's side.

Who notices the faithful servants of God, the people who do what's right and good and caring? Who notices? God does. It may not seem like those who serve are winning, but they are. Christmas belongs to the few who live in wonder at the coming of Christ, and respond as servants, “Here am I, body and soul.”

No one who understands Christmas stays the same. If we believe that God's coming changes the world, then we'll change the way we see our world. God's way of seeing will become our way of seeing. The work of Christ's hands will be continued in the work of our hands. We'll have compassion for all people—especially the ones that usually go unnoticed. We will care for the hungry, elderly, and children, pray for the hurting, and comfort the brokenhearted. We'll live with a passion for what's right in a world that's mostly wrong.

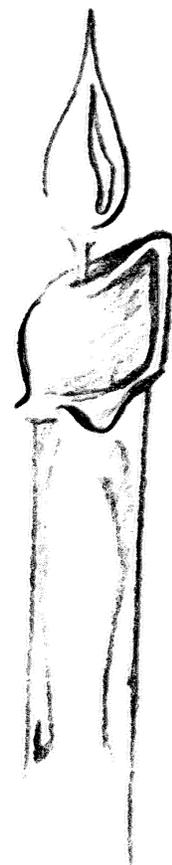
The way to celebrate Christmas is to believe in the God who fills the hungry with good things and who turns it all upside down. God's people discover that God's ways are wonderfully peculiar. Because Christ has come, we are invited to walk out of step with the rhythms of the world.

—Brett Younger is a minister in Waco, Texas. This sermon was previously published in *Lectionary Homiletics*. Brett thinks that at least eight people on the East coast have probably already read it.

Part of my problem in relation to God, I am sure, is the way the term itself was used in my religious education. God the Mighty King, God the Pillar of Life, God, God, God. When you asked who God was, there was a categorical answer: God is.... Around you, though knowing who God was made little difference in the way people lived. The belief did not noticeably increase one's love or one's concern. In the speaking and defining of the word God, the efficacy and the spirit were lost.

Here there is no speech, no definition of character, no easy answer to who God is and what [God] does. Sometimes you feel God emerging from and merging into the experience of service. Perhaps it is in service that the spirit is found. It is not, to be sure, a large and bold God, but a subtle one. Sometimes you feel a presence suffering here with you and the others. Sometimes you feel a body being broken.. At other times you feel yourself surrounded by grace.

—Marc Ellis, *A Year at the Catholic Worker*



art by Lenora Mathis

Are your hands cold?

a children's emphasis for the beginning of Advent

by Mark McClintock



An idea for Sunday school:

Find the book *A Rose for Abby* and read it to the children during a Sunday school or church school session. It will probably take about 10 minutes to read the book. (We recommend that you do this before you lead with the following children's sermon, but perhaps the same day.)

Children's sermon

Bring a bucket of ice cubes (one for each child). You may want to put a cloth or towels on the floor to catch any drips. Give each child an ice cube to hold in her or his hands while you read the scripture passage (James 2:14-17) aloud. When the ice cubes have had a minute or two to do their work, collect them (or their remains) in the bucket.

Ask the children, "Anybody have cold hands?" After the children respond, say, "Well, we don't want anybody to go away with cold hands, do we? Let's see... 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill.' How's that? Everybody's hands warmer now? No? You mean, just telling somebody to be warm doesn't work? Well, I guess that's what the Bible means when it says we need to do more than believe in God. We need to DO what God says. Let's see if this works better."

Take a child's hand in your own and hold it for several

seconds. Say, "How does that feel?" Do the same for another child. Continue warming up hands as you speak. "Now I'm doing something to warm your hands. I could have done other things. I could have told you to sit on your hands or put them in your pockets until they warm up. I could have built a fire and had you hold your hands close to it. But there is a special kind of warmth that comes from my hand touching your hand."

Say, "Right here in our city, there are people who have no home. They wander around during the day and sleep on the streets at night. Do you think some of them might have cold hands? Should we go up to those people and say, 'Keep warm'? What could we DO about their cold hands?"

Listen to the children's suggestions. Say, "You've had some good ideas. One idea that we are going to use comes from a book called *A Rose for Abby*. Abby was a little girl who gave a pair of gloves to a woman who lived in the street. We're going to make a wreath full of gloves and mittens to donate to a homeless shelter. Then, as people without homes come to the shelters, they can choose a pair of the gloves and keep them to warm their hands."

Explain how, where, and when church members may donate gloves and when the children will help assemble the wreath (or wreaths).

End with a prayer. "God, thank you for our hands. Thank you for smooth hands and wrinkled hands, hands with dimples and hands with scars, hands of every shape, size, and color. Help those of us with warm hands share that warmth with those who have cold hands. Help us join hands with others to make the world a place where nobody is left out in the cold. Amen."

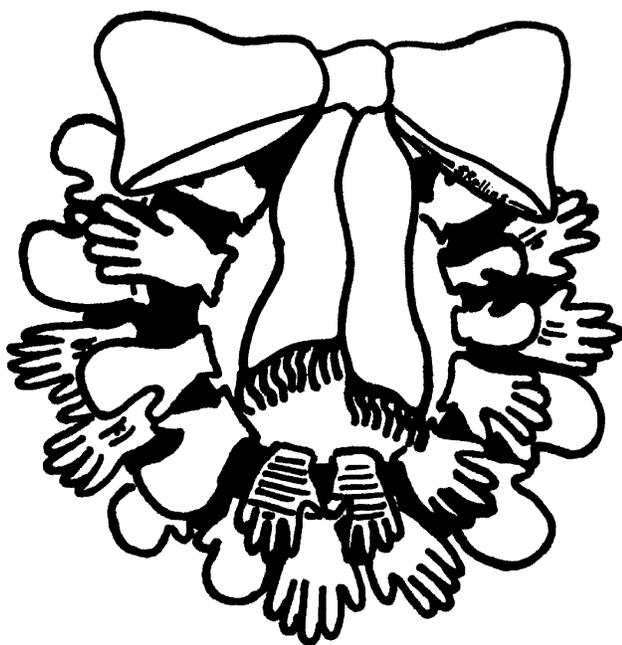
(Although this is written as a children's sermon, it could also be used during church school or as a children's lesson.)

"Wreath of Hands" missions activity:

With the children's help, collect gloves and mittens from people in the church and pin them to a hoop or artificial wreath. (We recommend a styrofoam form wrapped in cloth.) Remind the children of the lesson that they learned during the children's sermon.

Depending on the number of children in your group and how many gloves you collect, you may choose to make several wreaths. Choose a day when the children can go with you to take the wreaths to a homeless shelter or other distribution center.

—Mark McClintock is a minister in Waco, Texas.



art by Sharon Rollins

pastoral prayer for the week of peace

by Katie Cook

Holy God,
We know that this is supposed to be the advent week of peace,
and we are told that the messengers sang of peace on earth
when they confronted the shepherds
on the night your Son was born.

We read the prophetic Old Testament passages
about the lion and the lamb lying down together,
the kingdom of lasting peace,
and we want—
how very much we want
those things to happen in our world.

But we look around, and everywhere we look,
and in spite of all we try to do,
we see guns and bombs and terrorism,
the violence of poverty,
the atrocity of hunger.
And all we feel like doing
is to wring our hands in despair.

Do not let us give up, God.
You are the source of our hope
and our imagination of a better world.
Teach us the inner shalom,
the wholeness that cannot be understood with the mind.
Make us instruments of that peace,
so that we can truly, truly
beat our swords into plowshares
and that our people
will never, ever study war any more.

We ask this
in humility for what we have made of our world,
in gratitude for your patience and love,
in hope that you will show us the way,
in the name of the Prince of Peace himself,
Amen.

quotes, poems, & pithy sayings



Christmas speaks above all else to the poor and homeless, the hungry, oppressed, and friendless of our world. We must never let ourselves forget that, or our celebrations will be false as Santa's whiskers. But it also speaks to those who are burdened in any way, whether with regrets for the past, heartache in the present or foreboding of the future. God says to us this night, "Be strong, fear not, for I am with you. I am for you and I will never let you go. Here is my son to prove it."

—*J. Barrie Shepherd*

Saint Lawrence [(or Laurence) of Rome, d. 258] was a protector of the the poor. When the prefect of Rome demanded the Church's treasures, Saint Lawrence presented to him the poor and the sick, announcing, "This is the Church's treasure!"

—*from the Good News Ministry of Tampa Bay website*

Start by doing what's necessary, then what's possible and suddenly you are doing the impossible.

—*attributed to Francis of Assisi*

But is it not true that among these bent bodies and bowed heads, perhaps in the corner patiently waiting to be served a bowl of soup, is Jesus himself?

—*Marc Ellis, A Year at the Catholic Worker*

And where there is no love, put love, and you shall find love.

—*St. John of the Cross*

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;

It was never between you and them anyway.

—*Mother Teresa of Calcutta*

If we hold on to any beliefs, ideologies, or world views we consider Truth, then these must make us true—true to ourselves, to God and to our fellow human beings. We genuinely become true by loving God and our neighbors as ourselves, and the social manifestation of love is justice.

—*Laju M. Balani, doctoral student in world religions*

Santa has gotten a bad rap. St. Nick personifies something older than the legends, stories, and customs of the past 200 years. Santa Claus embodies a sense of charity, giving, and loving that pre-dates even the Babe of Bethlehem. The spirit of Father Noel is a faint reflection of the original Good, giving the original Gift. Santa is the palest, faintest tribal memory of God's incredibly lavish gift of a New Creation.

—*Robert Darden, editor of The Door*



the scandal of salvation

a meditation for advent in three parts

by Chris P. Jones

1.

The yuletide log burns brightly and the voice of Nat King Cole fills the air.

The lamplight flickers and the constant lowing of cattle disturbs the newborn baby.

Friends and relatives visit wearing their holiday best.

Shepherds come wearing simple clothes tarnished with the marks of a hard week's work.

The enticing aroma of a perfectly cooked turkey drifts in from the kitchen mixed with the scent of freshly baked bread.

The stench of manure from the dirty animals mixes with the odor of the decomposing, mildewed wood of the barn.

Two different scenarios—one inviting, the other unenticing—but both pointing to one familiar event. In the original affair in which the filthy was to be juxtaposed alongside the holy, the supposed husband of a pregnant teenager asks for a room at the inn.

The innkeeper, who by asking a few direct questions and performing simple mathematics, could probably determine that Joseph and Mary may have put the familial cart before the donkey. In the appearance of generosity, he makes another shekel off of them by allowing them to have the 4th class honeymoon suite. Joseph and Mary would have the luxury of bedding on the straw that formed a prickly shield underneath them, reproaching the cold earth.

Undoubtedly, the innkeeper casually spread the word around to the other occupants that there was a young couple, great with child, renting the resort's last resort that night. There would be nothing like a little juicy gossip spoken with the demeanor of sharing a prayer request to spice up the evening...a little scandal to justify their own personal evils.

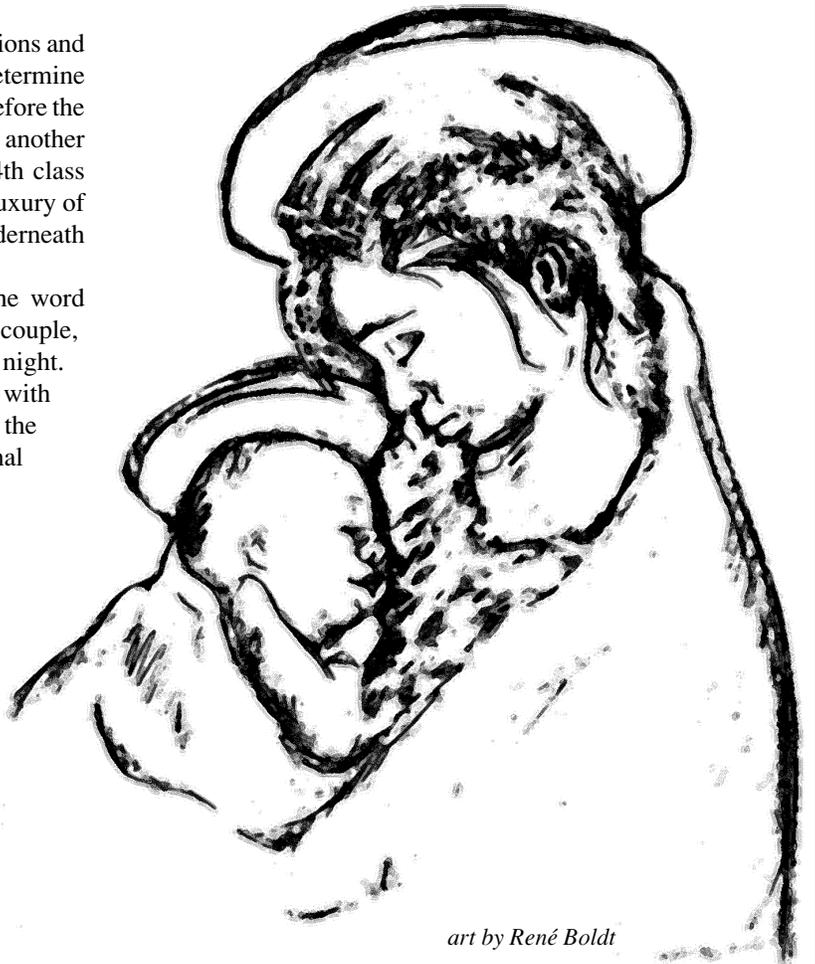
Have we, then, whitewashed this shameful story into something that barely resembles the actual event? By representing the original cast with expensive porcelain figures that are safe and immune from the flies, the elements, and the hay fever, are we, in effect, personalizing, trivializing, or even sanctifying the coming of the savior?

By choosing the Christmas parties which we are to attend based on the stature of the hosts, the décor of their house, and the lavishness of the food, do we forget that many will celebrate Christmas in the conditions of the firsthand players—disgraced, uncomfortable, hungry, and unkempt?

But let us not judge ourselves too harshly. Perhaps we have discovered how to extract true beauty from something that is seemingly unattractive. In so doing, we are enjoying the same experience as the shepherds did on that day so long ago. Underneath the sweat and the dirt, behind the stench and the discomfort, resided the sweetness and pleasantness that is intrinsic to the discovery of something great.

The shepherds found it, and so have we. Before we go tearing down our cathedrals and canceling the holiday events that we enjoy, let us remember that we have extracted the beauty of an event, choosing to associate it with what is pleasing, what is joyful.

But let us not lose the mystery of our grimy gospel. The scandal of salvation is truly mysterious, the juxtaposition of the



art by René Boldt

holy and the defiled, the reconciliation of what is perceived and what is reality. It is up to us to determine the motives of our hearts, to confess where we find the beauty in this pageant. Is it in the costumes, or is it in the message?

Regardless of where we focus our remembrance, let us not separate the one from the other, struggling with the difficulties and celebrating the joys of this remarkable event.

2.

The freedom marchers came from the North to the South as saving angels or scandalous interlopers, depending on whose side one's allegiances fell. As the civil rights movement took hold in the 1960s, many on the side of oppression rejected the move for equality, claiming that the northerners were trying to change the southerner's way of life.

As we look back on a generation gone by and judge them from where we stand today, we think self-righteously that anyone should be willing to give up a little of the way that they enjoy living for the sake of justice for the many. Surely, if we were alive or old enough to make a difference, we would have stood on the side of the oppressed, decrying the injustices that prevailed.

Hindsight is always 20/20, and the mistakes that we make today aren't so evident until we have a number of years to reflect upon the actions of the present. Quite frequently, those who lie by the wayside, battered and bruised, robbed and left for dead,

...the man with the broken-down car on the side of the road and the pregnant woman begging on the street corner remain in their current state of being, desperately hoping for a good Samaritan to make an appearance. Bringing hope and justice is always so inconvenient! The "let them fend for themselves" approach justifies our lifestyle as it is—our arrogance leads us to keep things the way they are, and wasn't that the problem during the 1960s? Hasn't that been the problem of the ages?

come to us as obstacles rather than as opportunities. How hard it is to change the steps of our day! We only leave the confines of our safe and comfortable homes to attend to time-constrained business and pleasure.

Consequentially, the man with the broken-down car on the side of the road and the pregnant woman begging on the street corner remain in their current state of being, desperately hoping for a good Samaritan to make an appearance. Bringing hope and justice is always so inconvenient! The "let them fend for themselves" approach justifies our lifestyle as it is—our arrogance leads us to keep things the way they are, and wasn't that

the problem during the 1960s? Hasn't that been the problem of the ages?

What were we expecting, really? As believers, we usually focus exclusively on the importance of the sacrifice that Jesus made in offering his life as the atonement for sinful humanity. Could it be, though, that we are not giving another sacrifice, of equal importance, its due? Choosing to experience human death, although painful, was a release from a lesser state of being, acting as a form of relief for Jesus as he reclaimed what was rightfully his. Choosing to experience human life, though, was no less painful as a decision.

Before embarking on his earthly mission, Jesus, the Word, was with God—he even was God, but he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. So he emptied himself, leaving the heavenly kingdom where he was royalty and took the form of baby in a kingdom where he had no inherent clout. He gave up riches, power, and glory in exchange for poverty, weakness, and rejection. He opened himself to the possibility of contracting diseases, experiencing hunger, and feeling sadness. He knew the job description before he accepted the position, yet he changed his way of life so that God would be just in crediting filthy humanity with heavenly righteousness through the gift of faith.

If the Son of God voluntarily chose to change his standard of living to save the lowly, then should we expect to be required to do anything less? Jesus does not mince words:

"Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it."

"Go and sell all that you possess and give to the poor."

"If you love me, feed my lambs....tend my sheep."

Contrary to what we hope, changing the channel to avoid the sight of famished children does not eliminate starvation, and giving a handful of pocket change to a poor child does not alleviate her poverty. To attack the problem head on, we have no other choice than to voluntarily change our way of life. To unconditionally offer our time, our money, and our resources—the very things that determine the way in which we live—is the only way to understand the mysterious joy that would cause a king to leave his kingdom...to trade strength for weakness...to change his way of life so that we would know to change ours.

3.

In an insignificant instant, everything changed. The rules did not change, *per se*, but the interpretation thereof. A poor baby was born, one who could not speak but would eventually explain to us the true meaning of the law. Contained within the diminutive body of a newborn was the key, the trump card, the final word on the way things were to be. Those who knew and believed in the significance of this child could only eagerly anticipate the profound expressions that would one day come from these tiny lips.

And when those lips would begin to move and express the thoughts, truths, and commands from above, very few chose to continue to believe, to follow. "Peace I bring to you...love your neighbor as yourself...do not neglect justice and mercy and faithfulness."

“Yes, Jesus, we hear you, but what about the details of the law, and what about those who oppress us? How is God going to set the chosen people free? Peace...love...justice and mercy and faithfulness.”

**Could it be that the rocks are crying
out because of the silence of the saints?
Would God be so scandalous to use
those who do not acknowledge God's
own name to carry out the desires of
God's own heart?**

In the mind of modern culture, peace, love, and justice have been associated as the pursuits of free lovin', dope smokin' hippies. Surely, nobody with such unseemly appearance and disreputable behavior could possibly bring a needed message. The peace love and justice that they preach is certainly a self-serving pursuit cloaked in holy language.

However, where are the orderly, the shipshape, the tidy when it comes to speaking out on these issues? Where are their radical works? Where are they seen in pursuit of justice and in opposition to oppression? Where are the marchers, the demonstrators, the protesters? Could it be that the rocks are crying out because of the silence of the saints? Would God be so scandalous to use those who do not acknowledge God's own name to carry out the desires of God's own heart?

Those who held, cuddled, and poked this little baby had little-to-no idea of what was in store. They just knew that he was coming to receive the throne of David, to reign over the house of Jacob, to rule a kingdom with no end. They had no idea that this baby would have no place to lay his head, be rejected by his own people, and die a painful and lonely death—all for the truth that resided within him, the truth that they held so close to their breast. And it was better that way, for the scandal of redemption earned its dishonor by coming not with the face of an innocent child, but through the image of a dirty, homeless hippie.

—Chris Jones, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, is a seminary student in Waco, Texas.

rediscovering the mystery

an Advent meditation

by Mark Ashworth



Scripture: Mark 13:32-37

“Stay awake!” “Keep alert.” “You don’t know when the time will come.”

Jesus’ words in Mark 13 come to shake us from our slumber, to prod us not to miss the mystery of Advent. Advent is the great season of anticipation. Probably at no other time of the year do we devote so much energy and effort just to preparing. Putting up a tree, buying presents, decorating the house, planning the parties—we scurry to get ready. But ready for what? Too often, I suspect that we are only preparing for

the familiar pleasantness of Christmas. Nothing wrong with that, of course. Christmas ought to be a joyous time. But have we quit looking for anything new, anything fresh?

The Jesuit priest Richard Rohr has commented that when we stop believing that life has anything more to offer, we become, for all practical purposes, atheists. Advent invites us to rediscover the hope and the expectation that life does have more to offer—to us and to the world.

I remember Christmas Eves when I was growing up. We often had relatives staying with us, and my sister and I would have to sleep in the same room. Or at least we would try to sleep. Sometimes those nights seemed to go on forever. It wasn’t that we were unhappy—or bored. We were simply too excited to sleep. Sometimes we could hear noises in the morning, and we knew it would be good.

Maybe we need to recover some of that Christmas Eve anticipation and excitement. What have you got in that package, God? I wonder if you’ve got something special stashed away in a closet. And what are you busy putting together that we can’t even see yet?

This Advent season, let Jesus’ words rouse you from the slumber of dulled expectations. Stay awake! Don’t miss out on God’s wonderful surprises. Stay awake! Life has more to offer than you could ever dream. Stay awake! Christ is coming. Live in hope.

—Mark Ashworth is a pastor in Monticello, Florida.

God with us?

a youth-led reading for advent

by Jackie Saxon and Katie Cook

Authors' note: This reading (taken from Job 23, Psalm 139, and Isaiah 7) calls for a small vocal ensemble of about four people, a vocal soloist around the age of seven (or younger), and two readers. The readers are standing (possibly at lecterns) on either side of the platform area. The vocal ensemble is behind the congregation, if possible. The child is sitting (very still) on the floor in the middle of the platform, with arms around his or her knees. The lighting should be muted; if you can, cast a light so that the congregation can see the child's silhouette.

(As always, please adapt these readings and settings and incorporate your own ideas until it fits your congregation's needs.)

Before the reading begins, the ensemble begins to sing slowly, a cappella, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."

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

After the ensemble complete the first verse (not the chorus), the readers begin. The ensemble continues humming quietly through the chorus and into the next verses.

First Reader: Today I will bitterly complain because I cannot find God. God, your hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

Second Reader: O God, where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

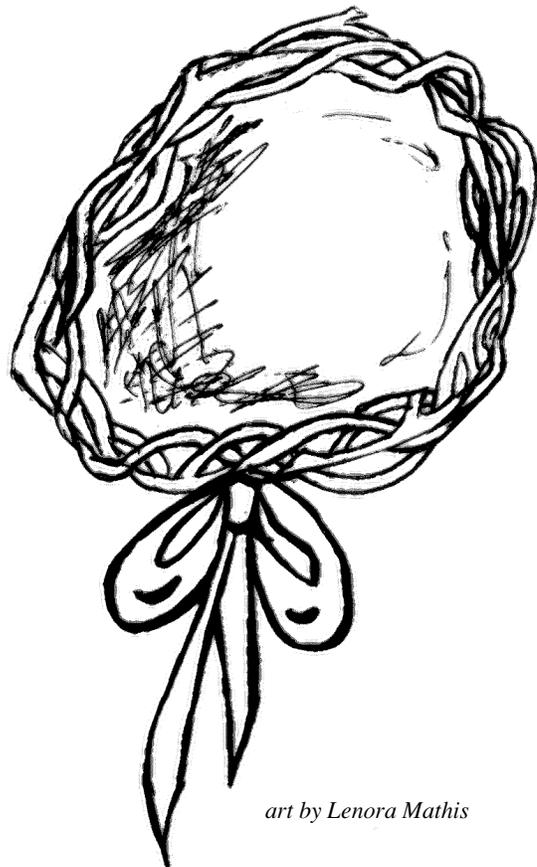
First Reader: Oh, that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to the holy dwelling.

Second Reader: If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in the realm of the dead, you are there.

First Reader: If I go forward, you are not there; or backward, I cannot find you.

Second Reader: If I take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and hold me fast.

First Reader: On the left you hide, and I cannot behold your presence. I turn to the right, but I cannot see you.



art by Lenora Mathis

Second Reader: Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

First Reader: God spoke to me and said that I should ask for sign, be it deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. But I am afraid to ask for a sign.

Second Reader: Hear then, O House of David, God is giving you a sign anyway: Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel, which is to say, "God is with us."

At this point, the child soloist stands and sings the chorus slowly into the quiet:

Rejoice, rejoice; Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel!

—Jackie Saxon is a minister in Austin, Texas. Katie Cook is the Seeds of Hope editor and lives in Waco, Texas.

theme interpretation

Not just a baby
born to make us feel good
once a year, he
came to change us
so completely that our neighbors
would have trouble
recognizing us:
a small collection
of people rich in compassion
and not easily distracted
by self-preoccupation;
a people so Christ-struck
as to wage peace everywhere
the whisper of war is blessed;
a clan so responsive to the face of Christ
among the homeless—so as to bring
each hungry, shelterless child
out of the cold,
and into the sanctuary
of their lives;
a community so strung together
that its weakest member
is treated like royalty;
a family who has found
the secret of the greatest
human joy—in serving someone else...

Not just a baby—
but the powerful Presence
of One who doesn't want us
to admire him,
but too follow.

—Daniel G. Bagby



a meditation for Christmas Eve

by David Tatum

I don't think anyone would say it was easy traveling over dusty, barren land with barely a road to follow—with only your feet or maybe an animal to carry you. But this time it was even harder. On Christmas eve, this young couple was trying to get to Bethlehem and she was about to have a baby. Nine months pregnant and out in the middle of nowhere on a donkey.

Getting to Bethlehem was only the beginning; there were other problems to face. Once in the city, there was no place to stay and Mary's body was telling her that this baby would not wait much longer. Joseph must have been frantic trying to find a place for him and Mary to rest so that this baby could be born.

Finally, with no other choice, Mary and Joseph settled in a stable. Surely this was not the place to bring a new life into the world. But it happened. This child was born.

Every Christmas Eve I am filled with anticipation for the promise that this child brought with him. A promise that no matter how hectic life gets, and no matter what the circumstances, hope will be born and it will change the world.

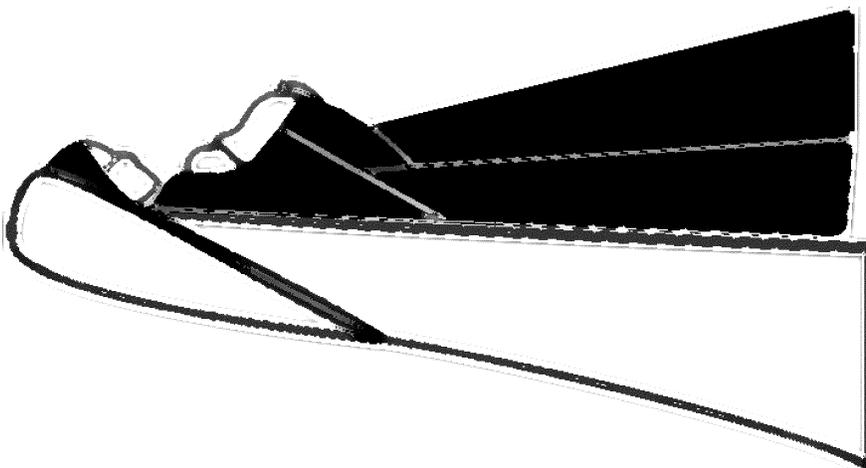
Prayer: Thank you, God, for the hope
that was born in this child Jesus,
And the promise that this hope is still alive.
Use us, that the world may be changed.

—David Tatum is a furniture maker in Greensboro,
North Carolina.



art by Lenora Mathis

bookmark



If God's incomprehensibility does
not grip us in a word,
if it does not draw us into God's
superluminous darkness,
if it does not call us out
of the little house
of our homely, close-hugged
truths...
we have misunderstood
the words of Christianity.

Karl Rahner,
Poetry and the Christian

How to make your Christmas more meaningful...

from Alternatives

An Alternative Christmas Community Festival is a concrete, exciting way to offer ideas and support for those who want to have more meaningful Christmas celebrations. It is also a positive way to introduce the need for change to people unaware of the problems connected with the way we celebrate Christmas.

Many churches organize alternative Christmas events in the fall to encourage alternative giving and to help members simplify their celebration. The three basic plans are as follows:

1. Sell crafts and clothing from the developing world. This encourages fair trade and the second pillar of voluntary simplicity: the importance of learning from the world community. Family and friends get beautiful gifts at reasonable prices. Developing-world artisans get a better price for their work through these volunteer fairs and shops than through similar commercial importers.

2. Encourage people to give funds to worthwhile organizations in someone else's name instead of a purchased gift. The gift is doubled—for the recipient of the funds and the recipient of the honor. Usually a gift card goes to the honoree telling something about the recipient organization.

3. Hold a workshop on alternative ways of celebrating Christmas. Such a workshop goes beyond gifts, to the “why’s” and “how’s” of celebrating Christmas. Use the classic *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season* (\$10 from Alternatives) and the leader's guide to the *Unplug the Christmas Machine* workshop (also \$10 from Alternatives).

“Let's Talk About Christmas” is a shorter guide for holding a workshop (\$1). Alternatives also has a network of volunteers who help with such events.

Alternatives offers two helpful Christmas festival and workshop guidelines for planning fall events. In addition to a step-by-step plan, “How to Organize a Alternative Christmas Community

Festival” (\$3) includes a section on publicity and an extensive list of resources. “Planning an Alternative Christmas Workshop” (\$2) includes a plan for various workshop lengths, ranging from 60 minutes to 2 1/2 hours. Both resources together are \$4.

Both also come in the new resource: *Simple Living 101: a Toolkit for Sharing the Joys of a Simpler Lifestyle Through Speeches, Workshops, Events and Study/Actions Groups* (\$10).

Alternatives is a nonprofit organization that “equips people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly, and celebrate responsibly.” Through its mail-order resource service, Alternatives sells books on simple living and related topics, both for Christmas and for year-round use.

For a current free catalog, call anytime 712/274-8875 or 800-821-6153, fax 712/274-1402 or e-mail Alternatives@SimpleLiving.org. Visit on-line: www.SimpleLiving.org. ■



Christmas carols with a justice emphasis

from Alternatives for Simple Living

O Little Town of Bethlehem

*When lives of humble service preach
The Good News to the poor,
When troubled minds or bodies find
A welcome at our door,
When healing hearts and hands lift
The lowly from the dust,
Then ring the bells and sing Noels:
For Christ is born in us.
(new words by John Becker)*

Most people love to sing Christmas “old favorites.” Alternatives for Simple Living has added new stanzas to give a strong element of justice to familiar traditional carols.

“Our new collection of favorite Christmas carols appeals for social justice, care of Creation, and discipleship through simpler living,” said Gerald Iversen, Alternatives’ National Coordinator.

“Jesus’ birth has taken on much cultural significance as a celebration of good will, warm feelings and excessive consumerism. These stanzas help to connect his birth with real life discipleship,” Iversen said.

Carols with Justice is ideal to use in the car, during group caroling, in homes, at church, etc. The booklet includes the music for accompaniment or singing in parts by choirs or for fun.

The collection can be ordered for \$2 (or less in quantity) by calling 800-821-6153, or visiting www.SimpleLiving.org (click on Catalog, then Christmas).

Selections from the collection can be used in worship bulletins, newsletters, holiday cards, and letters. To save you money and time, you may request Alternatives to e-mail the words so you can format your publications electronically. The e-mail text file is free when you order a reprint license for this collection.

“This project has not been without its dissenters. Some folks object to us “tinkering” with beloved carols. These are not parodies,” Iversen said. “We provide the first traditional stanza for each carol. Then we add freshly written stanzas in contemporary English.”

Samples of the new stanzas are printed in Alternatives’ family-oriented Advent booklet “Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?” for the year 2000, and on

its web site (www.SimpleLiving.org). From the home page or site map, click on Resources: Whose Birthday: Stories.

Alternatives provides other resources appropriate for re-evaluation of Christmas and for simpler living all year. For a current free catalog, call anytime 712/274-8875 or 800-821-6153, fax 712/274-1402 or e-mail Alternatives@SimpleLiving.org.

Visit www.SimpleLiving.org. The complete catalog is also on the web site, as is information on Alternatives’ services. For hundreds of inspiring articles, click on Information: Archives.

A free copy of the popular “Ten Tips for a Simpler, More Meaningful Christmas” is available upon request on paper. On the web site, click on Information: Media Releases: Christmas: Ten Tips.

Alternatives’ mission is to “equip people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly and celebrate responsibly.” Since 1973, Alternatives has promoted responsible living and celebrating through resources for Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, weddings and other celebrations, some in Spanish.

“Carols with Justice” is partially funded by New Road Map Foundation: www.NewRoadMap.org. ■



the baptism of Jesus

a youth-led call to worship and offertory

by Buddy Vess

Editor's note: This call to worship could be dramatized by a pantomime, using two players or liturgical dancers interpreting as the litany is read by two readers. We envision players wearing black or brown leotards or first-century costumes.

Call to Worship

(taken from Matthew 3: 13-17)

LEADER: The wonders of God never cease. God is with us through Jesus Christ. Epiphany really is a time to celebrate the coming of the extraordinary through and to the ordinary.

SECOND READER: Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

FIRST READER: John tried to dissuade Jesus, saying,

SECOND READER: "I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!"

FIRST READER: But Jesus replied,

SECOND READER: "Leave it this way for now. We must do this to completely fulfill God's justice."

FIRST READER: So John reluctantly agreed. Then, immediately after Jesus had been baptized and was coming up out of the water, the sky suddenly opened up and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and hovering over him. With that, a voice from the heavens said,

SECOND READER: "This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests."

FIRST READER: God's wonders abound. The light has come. Jesus' baptism reminds us that we, too, have been baptized into the family of faith. God's favor rests on us through Jesus, the Christ.

ALL: Thanks be to God.

—Buddy Vess is a minister in Arlington, Virginia.

Offertory Invitation

FIRST READER: The message is clear, God shows no partiality. That message needs to be spread to our community, to our country, to our world.

SECOND READER: How can we help? Through the combined efforts of our ministry teams, our programs, our worship, our voices and lives in telling the Good News.

BOTH READERS: The gifts we bring through our tithes and offerings help us to proclaim God's truth, to bring about justice and to carry on the work of our Savior.

Offertory Prayer

FIRST READER: God, may these gifts, our tithes and offerings, be used to carry out your work in this world.

SECOND READER: Use them so that others too, might know the joy of our baptism—the newness and completeness that comes through you.

BOTH READERS: Use them as an Epiphany for others. Amen ■

