



O rest
beside
the weary
road

and hear
the angels
sing...



creative resources for Advent and Christmastide

*Worship tools with a peace and justice emphasis from Seeds of Hope Publishers,
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Statement of Purpose

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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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 is taken from an old worship bulletin of Seventh & James Baptist Church, who house the Seeds offices, and is the gift of the church to you. Much of the art in this packet was created by Sally Lynn Askins, a costume and design professor at Baylor University, out of a her abiding love for angels. Other pieces were created by returning artists: Peter Yuichi Clark, a hospital chaplain in San Francisco, California; Van Darden, a student at Vanguard Preparatory School in Waco, Texas; Lenora Mathis, a student at Austin College in Sherman, Texas; and Rebecca Ward, a student at Midway High School in Woodway, Texas.

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.

For more on how we have tried to "flesh out" our theme, see the brainstorming session on page 3.

A Brainstorming Session

from editors and friends

This collection of resources is an attempt to blend the “normal” Advent sense of hope, joy, and awe with permission to rest, to take care of ourselves, to stop and be quiet so that we can hear the song of the angels. Visually, we have used many different interpretations of angels. Our featured artist for Advent 2001 is Sally Askins, for whom angels are a passion.

We have included, instead of a sermon, some meditations encouraging us to care for ourselves, to slow down, to muse upon the mysteries of Advent. We have also included a short section on gift-giving (see page 24 and the accompanying calendar), compiled by Ken Sehested, which we hope will inspire you with ideas for celebrating simply without making you feel guilty.

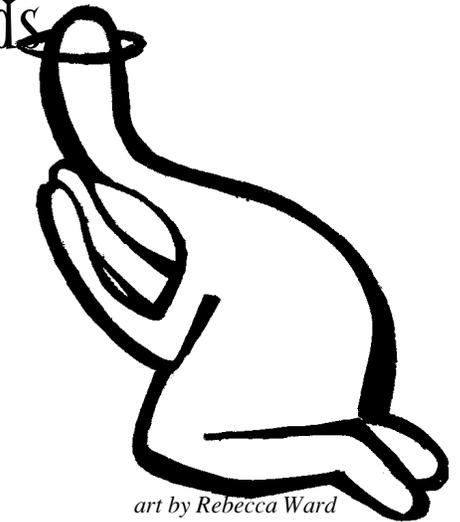
It is true that the messengers depicted in the scriptural stories are scary. We must remember that, and resist painting them as sweet, sentimental, blonde-and-blue-eyed women with wings. We need to see them as they are in the stories, feel how it is to meet something totally alien, something awe-striking. Then we need to get over the fright and hear what they are trying to tell us.

With all of our traditional Advent decorations, we may not need much “window dressing” to go along with these readings and activities. But some “bringing them to their senses” is important. John Ballenger—our poetry and drama editor and chief brainstormer—suggests a visual aid in which you collect objects that are often associated with angels and display them across the altar area. Bring harps, lutes, trumpets, and other musical instruments and place them across the front of your sanctuary. To remind the congregation of the “good news to the poor,” intersperse grocery bags with canned food, blankets, winter coats, etc.

Another display idea would be to gather (with your congregation’s help) all kinds of carvings and pictures of angels. It would be good to be able to represent different nationalities and different settings with these angels—to show visually that the messengers of God do not belong to any specific nation or ethnic group. You could ask people to bring angels from their nativity sets or Christmas trees—or perhaps any representation of an angel that is special to them.

Ask them to bring these to an early Advent service, and work into the service a time in which people bring them to the altar. Leave them there until after Christmas. Schedule different times during the season for people to share stories about why these “angels” are meaningful. (Encourage them to think outside the box on this; someone may have a drawing he or she made as a child, or that a child made for him or her. Someone’s angel may be threadbare or missing a wing. Emphasize the fact that this should not deter them from bringing it.)

For the week of peace (or for the whole season) you could make a display of paper cranes. Find a tree branch or small leafless tree and place it, upright, in the worship area. Find



art by Rebecca Ward

We need to see the messengers of God as they are in the stories, feel how it is to meet something totally alien, something awe-striking.

someone in your congregation who knows how to fold paper cranes, or get hold of an origami book that gives instructions. Hold a folding party on a Saturday afternoon or after church on Wednesday evening. Make sure that the folding party makes enough cranes for every worshipper to hold one. Attach string or wire to each one so that they can hang from the empty tree branches. Pass them out as worshippers enter on Peace Sunday. Ask them to come forward with them during a special song (John Michael Talbot’s “Prayer for Peace” is nice). Ask them to place their cranes on the tree with a specific prayer for peace. If it is a more informal time, invite different congregants to share what their specific prayer might be.

The traditional array of Advent music is also rich and beautiful, so you probably don’t need to go out looking for good music for the season. However, Judy Prather, a specialist in contemplative retreats, suggests the hymn “When God Was a Child” to add to your normal repertoire of carols. If your hymnal doesn’t include it, you can find it in the *Chalice Hymnal*.

An old Norma Young cartoon, once printed in *Seeds Magazine*, depicts two extremely wealthy gentlemen sitting in an opulent living room, one saying to the other, “Have you heard the angels sing lately? Don’t they sing any more?” Norma’s message in this, of course, is that the men have insulated themselves from the good news with a cocoon of materialism. We know that this holds much truth. But materialism is not the only stuff of which these cocoons are made. We are too busy, too frantic, too worried about this and that. It will do the reign of God no good for us to destroy our spirits in our work—no matter how important, no matter how sacred.

It is time to stop and listen. And rest. We hope that these resources will help you to find that sanctuary of rest beside the road, and to lead your congregation there as well. —lkc

Advent Dream

by Katie Cook

Dreams.
Some of them float before me
like a gauzy mist
or a bright balloon.

Then
when the mist clears
and the balloon floats away
or bursts
What do I have? Is there anything left?
And why do I keep dreaming
even though
balloons burst
and mist floats away?

Because...
because the real Dream,
the underlying Dream,
the one that goes before me
as I live each day,

Doesn't go away.
Sometimes I feel the Dream;
Sometimes the feelings are stale.
Sometime I act the part
while feeling nothing.
But always the Dream is real.

Advent.
Advent is a time when all of us
try a little harder
to feel the Dream.
We take it off the shelf,
dust it off,
and cover it with tinsel
and holly.

We listen,
straining,
to hear the music
of the Dream;
And sometimes we do hear it.

Advent is a time when something
causes us to remember
what it's all about—

art by Rebecca Ward

or when we find our foolish fantasies
dashed to pieces—
So that we turn again
to find the real Dream
of the Christ Mass.

I once dreamed of mistletoe
and sugarplum fairies,
But now my dream is different.
I dream now of a commonwealth...
where hands of different colors
and hearts of different persuasions
join freely
without frowns from anyone,
where no one bedfast
goes unattended;
no one heartsick
goes uncomforted;
no one lonely
goes unvisited;
no one hungry
goes unfed;
where nations cooperate
with sincere motive;
where the wealthy share
their bounty
joyfully;

Where love really does rule all.
The peaceable commonwealth of God
On earth.

Sometimes
all that I can see
Is that Advent is the time
when the festers and hatred
of the world
are most laid bare.
When I see the ugly exposed
by the bright light
from Bethlehem.
But there are times...
times when we can see
beyond the dirt and pain,
beyond the greed and prejudice.

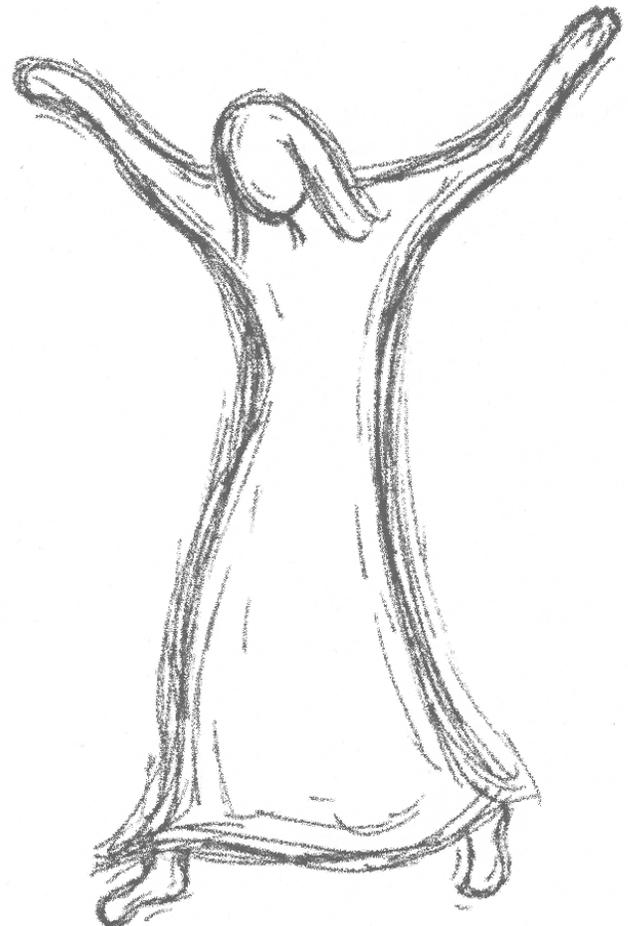
It's a vision, I think.
Like the mystic discernments of the saints
when they could see the Holy City;
like the perception of Don Quixote
when he saw nobility and beauty
in a den of squalor;
It opens our eyes to see beyond our confusion

into the true longings of our hearts,
into the Eden that we forgot,
to see the possibilities around us,
to the why-not.

It defeats our enlightened fatalism
and our vogueish cynicism.
It cannot be conjured;
It comes at will.

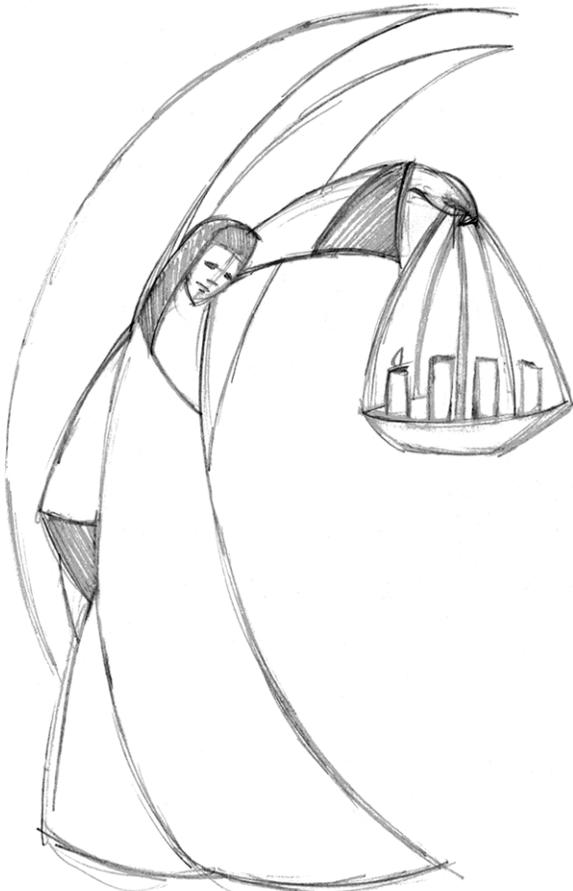
And
when it does,
we can see
really see
the Word-become-Flesh
bringing
peace
joy
hope
and salvation.

On earth
As it is in heaven.



art by Rebecca Ward

First Sunday in Advent: Hope



art by Sally Lynn Askins

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold;
“Peace on the earth, good will to
all,” From heaven’s all-gracious King,
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.
—Phillips Brooks

Slow Us Down, Lord responsive call to confession and hope

by Mark Ashworth

LEADER: O Lord, we are busy people. We fill each day to overflowing with the necessary and the unnecessary, with the crucial and the trivial.

PEOPLE: In the rush of life, help us to pause long enough to reflect, to remember. Remind us once again of your grace to us in the past. Open our eyes to the love and care you have show us throughout our days.

LEADER: O Lord, sometimes the pace and pressure of our lives is almost all-consuming. We move from deadline to deadline, defined and confined by the demands of the moment.

PEOPLE: In the strain of life, Help us to see beyond today. Call us forward to new challenges and fresh perspectives. Open our eyes to undiscovered possibilities.

ALL: God of our past and our future, sharpen our memory, enlarge our vision, and sustain us in the present by your steadfast love.

—Mark Ashworth is a pastor in Monticello, Florida.

Finding Your Christmas Gift

musings on a midnight clear

by Gary L. Hardwick

“It Came Upon A Midnight Clear” is a Christmas song filled with inviting images. It speaks of a world in “solemn stillness” that “rests beside the weary road” so it can “hear the angels sing.” It speaks of “heavenly music floating o’er a weary world.” It speaks of Christmas as a wondrous, joyous time. And yet, this wondrous, joyous time is also a dangerous time for caregivers.

As caregivers we are sensitive to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those to whom we minister. Those needs are greater, or at least more magnified, during the holiday season. And that is exactly what makes this such a dangerous time for caregivers.

The angels proclaim, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and good-will to all.” These words are a profound declaration of what the living God is doing in the world. But, for some reason, as caregivers, we hear them as marching orders. We do not hear them as words that invite us to celebrate; instead, we hear them as words that tell us what we must do. It’s like we add a sentence to the angels’ declaration: “Okay, this is what God wants. Now go out and do it; go out and make it happen.”

I think of all the conversations I’ve heard among caregivers about the season of Advent and Christmas. They talk about how busy, how demanding, how exhausting this time of year is. They speak of how they can’t wait for the new year to get here so things can get “back to normal.”

I have to admit that I am troubled by these statements. I am troubled by the perspective that is the source of these complaints. It seems, for caregivers, that this time of year imposes even more demands on their ministry. So many people seeking the real meaning of the season. So many people who are robbed of joy by their spiritual and emotional struggles. So many people who don’t have the basic needs of life met, and that lack is highlighted even more in a season filled with lavish celebration.

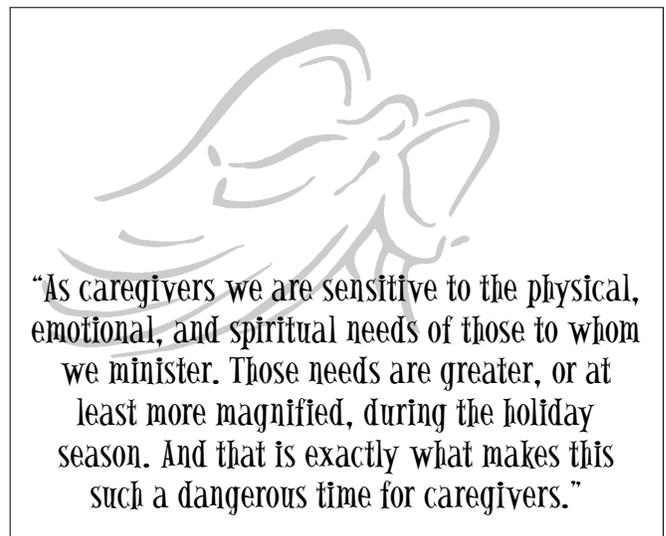
I picture a group of caregivers gathered at the manger scene in Bethlehem. Some of us would give our attention to Mary and the baby, making sure all their needs are met in this wretched place for birth. Others would focus on Joseph, making sure he isn’t left out, as fathers sometimes are at the birth of a child. Some would hurry away this nosy group of shepherds who insist on invading the family’s privacy at this special moment. Others would storm off in righteous indignation to confront the innkeeper with his lack of compassion and his glaring injustice for making these people stay in a place like this.

I want to suggest that, perhaps, the shepherds got it right. They came, saw, and walked away praising God. Maybe the magi got it right as well. They bowed down and

offered extravagant gifts. Maybe all of us, as caregivers, need to take our lead from these people and find our own personal response to this season that reflects their attitude.

During this glorious season of new beginnings, I suggest we get a little greedy. Greedy enough to go out and find and claim the gift that is offered to us. Go out and find the presence of God in the lives of those whom you have set apart to be the objects of your ministry. Go out and find the kingdom of God among these people, and when you find it, ask them to join you in celebrating it with complete abandon.

After all, this same Jesus, during his ministry, did not point to the children and say, “Give them the kingdom of



“As caregivers we are sensitive to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those to whom we minister. Those needs are greater, or at least more magnified, during the holiday season. And that is exactly what makes this such a dangerous time for caregivers.”

God.” He said, “In these people, you will see the kingdom of God.” Jesus did not point to the thieves and prostitutes, the poor and needy, and say, “Make the kingdom of God happen for them.” He said, “These are the greatest in the kingdom of God.”

Go out and take this gift that God offers. Find some time to be a part of the world that lays in “solemn stillness” and “rests beside the weary road” to “hear the angels sing.” Not just hear the angels sing, but let the message of the angels sink deep into our hearts and do its work, instead of finding more work for us to do.

If we can do this, if we can find a way to be more like the shepherds and the Magi, we might find the gift of Christmas that was intended for all of us. A gift intended for caregivers and those to whom we minister. The gift of Immanuel—God with us. God with us all.

—Gary Hardwick is a pastoral psychotherapist in Waco, Texas.

Hear the Angels Singing

a conversation for two readers

by Helen Humphrey

Listen! Hear the angels singing!
Yes, that's nice, I guess. Kind of pretty.

"Kind of pretty"? "Nice, I guess"? The angels are singing for you—you and anyone else who needs rest!

Me? I mean, I know it's Christmas, a time for joy and wonder, but I'm just so preoccupied with the daily stresses of life. And anyway, the holidays just add to the stress: there are presents to buy, food to cook, parties to attend, Christmas cards to send.

Yes, I know there is much to be done around the holidays. But there is so much to rejoice about during the Christmas season!

Like what?

Like what? Like God's promise to build a new kingdom for true believers, a kingdom full of peace and joy! Like a chorus of angels, singing just for you, if only you'd take a moment to listen!

I know that's what I should be focused on. But it's easy to lose sight of, you know?

Yes, I know. But God wanted so badly to remind us of the joy and fulfillment that comes only from believing in that kingdom. He became a lowly baby named Jesus, reliant on imperfect human beings *like you and me*, just to show us how much he loved us! *Know what else?*

What?

Christ calls us to be humble servants, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick.
Yes, that's what he dedicated his life on earth to doing.

And even though Christ is no longer on earth, he promises always to share our burdens, restore our weary souls and renew our hearts so that we, in turn, can become who God calls us to be—humble servants.

So when we are tired and preoccupied with stress and worry, God so desperately wants us to share our burdens with him—not turn away from him in shame or embarrassment!

Prayer: Dear Lord, our suffering servant, remind us that Christmas is far more than cards and presents. Teach us how to be joyful every day, not just during Advent. Give us the courage to help and serve one another humbly and lovingly following the example you set for us. Remind us that even in the midst of our worries and weariness, you are there, sending a chorus of angels to sing songs that delight our ears. We ask all of these things in your holy name. Amen.

—Helen Humphrey, an Oklahoma City native, is a senior journalism major at Baylor University.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

When Days Grow Short

an Advent hymn

John Ballenger, b.1963

Carol C.M.D.
Richard S. Willis (1819-1900)

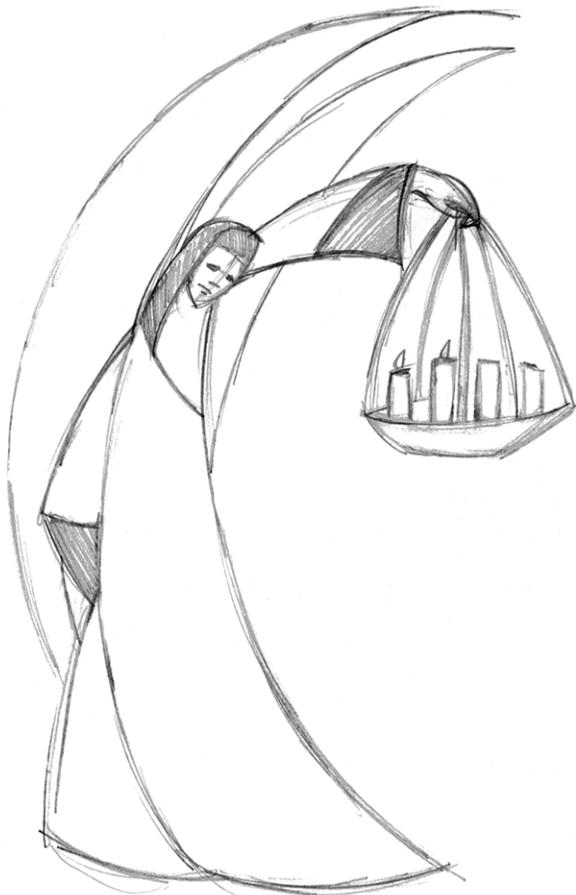
The First Sunday of Advent
Year B
Mark 13:24-37; Psalm 80
Isaiah 64:1-9

1. When days grow short and nights are long,
the season's stars shine bright.
Beneath the snow and frozen ground,
lie dreams of warmth and light.
Within the worst of winter's grip,
is joy that hopes bestow.
The advents there of arctic doom—
encased in ice below.
2. The deepest yearnings of our heart,
we seek to meet all ways.
This longing prompting discontent
our desp'rate need conveys.
Within our hunger still we pray
that we might yet be filled,
and looking far beyond ourselves
find hope in us instilled.
3. The seeds of God's redeeming love
are sown in truth and grace.
And in the flower of their bloom,
are contours of God's face.
Remind us, God, in wintry times,
your seeds surround us still.
And in the course of holy time,
will all creation fill.
4. We call upon your name this day,
warm our hearts with your love.
Oh, tear the heavens open now
shine your face from above.
Heaven and earth will pass away,
your Word, our God, draws near.
The presence of your love full-grown
will never disappear.

John Ballenger, a minister in Decatur, Georgia, is the poetry and drama editor for Seeds of Hope. John asks that you let him know if you use the hymn, and, if possible, send a copy of your church bulletin for that service. Send it to the Seeds of Hope office at 602 James, Waco, TX 76706, and we'll see that he receives it.

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Second Sunday in Advent: Peace



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Still through the cloven skies they
come, With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lonely plains They
bend on hovering wing,
And ever o'er its Babel sounds The
blessed angels sing.
—Phillips Brooks

“And in Despair
I bowed my head:
“There is no peace on earth,”
I said,
“For hate is strong,
and mocks the song
Of peace on earth,
good will to men.”
Then pealed the bells
more loud and deep.
“God is not dead,
nor doth God sleep;
The wrong shall fail,
the right prevail
With peace on earth,
good will to men.
Till, ringing, singing
on its way,
The world revolved
from night to day;
A voice, a chime,
a chant sublime
Of peace on earth,
good will to men.
—from *I Heard The Bells*
On Christmas Day
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Who Could Believe Such a Story?

a service to be led by youth and children

by Mary T. Meadows

Editor's note: This service is designed to be used with the script that follows on pages 13-14. The scenes should come as interruptions of the normal worship service. If you use a printed bulletin, you may choose not to print the scenes in your order of worship and allow them to be surprises to the worshippers. This in itself makes a strong theological statement about the interruptions and surprises we encounter when following Christ. As always, please feel free to adapt this to your own congregation's needs and skills.

Call to Worship

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Ceremony for the Advent Candles

READER 1: My name is Disbelief. I trust my experience to sort truth and illusion. Established rules of order and ritual make comfortable boundaries. I have little use for stories of God in human form. Who will light a candle for me?

READERS: We will.

READER 2: The angel Gabriel visited Mary. He told Mary she would bear a son conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph made plans to divorce Mary quietly.

PEOPLE: Who could believe such a story?

READER 2: The angels appeared to the shepherds, singing "Glory to God in the highest. Today the Christ is born." The shepherds shook with fear.

PEOPLE: Who could believe such a story?

READER 2: The wise men followed a star from the East to pay homage to the child king of the Jews. Herod and all Jerusalem plotted in the midst of their fear.

PEOPLE: Who could believe such a story?

READER 2: The evidence reads like tabloid news. "Virgin gives birth to the Son of God." "Shepherds see visions of otherworldly creatures." "Astrologers follow stars, seeking signs and wonders." "God loves creation enough to risk life in human form."

PEOPLE: Who could believe such a story?

READER 1: Dear Jesus, we light these candles in anticipation of your birth in our hearts. May we follow the bewildering light announcing your coming.

READER 2: May we come trembling in wonder and awe to bow before the Christ. There may we offer ourselves, our most costly gift. Amen. *(Readers light the appropriate candles.)*

Opening Hymn

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:26-38

Welcome and Announcements/Scene 1

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:1-7

Scene 2



Responsive Scripture Reading

LEADER: In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them,

PEOPLE: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

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

PEOPLE: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors."

LEADER: When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,

PEOPLE: "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Hymn

"Angels We Have Heard on High"

Scene 3

Concerns and Celebrations

During this time you are invited to share with one another any prayer concerns you have, needs or joys you are experiencing, a scripture, a word of testimony, or whatever you would like to share with the rest of the congregation.

Hymn

"The First Noel, the Angel Did Say"

Scripture Reading

Matthew 2:1-11

Scene 4/Offertory

"We Three Kings of Orient Are"

chorus:

Star of wonder, star of night

Star of royal beauty bright.

Westward leading, still proceeding

Guide us to thy perfect light.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 2:13-15

Scene 5

Benediction

Closing Hymn

"Joy to the World"

(See page 11 for the accompanying script.)

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

(Hebrews 13:1-3)



JUST KEEP YOUR
EYES OPEN.

This art was created by Van Darden as an interpretation of the scripture above.

Who Could Believe Such a Story?

(script to be used with service on pages 11-12)

by Mary T. Meadows

Editor's note: These scenes are designed to be interspersed throughout what looks, at first glance, like a normal advent worship service. In order to keep the intentional mood of interruption, you may choose to keep your two journalists in normal worship clothing. The other players could be in "period" costume, if they are kept out of sight prior to their scenes. "Zach" could deliver his lines from behind the pulpit or lectern. "Liz" should have a large microphone for her "on-camera" interviews. If you have spotlights, it would be effective to have the two on opposite sides of the stage area and keep the areas dark unless they are speaking. Your shepherd could be a girl or a boy, but should be fairly young. Your "wise people" could number as many as you want. Since they will be collecting the offering, you may want to use the number of offering collectors that your congregation normally uses.

SCENE 1

(takes place as Zach appears to begin announcements)

ZACH: Welcome to (name of church). Does anyone have announcements—wait. (Someone hands you a paper). This just in from Bethlehem. It seems that the long-anticipated Messiah is expected there. Let's go live now to our special City of David correspondent, Elizabeth. Liz, is there any word yet on this coming Messiah?

LIZ: Zach, Bethlehem is buzzing with the news of this Messiah's arrival. It seems that this Deliverer, long thought of as a warrior, is expected to come as a baby! According to reliable sources, Gabriel—a messenger of God—appeared about nine months ago to a young girl named Mary in some region to the north. I've been able to locate the angel Gabriel and he has agreed to give us an interview. Gabe, thank you for coming. Can you tell us exactly what it is that you told this young girl?

GABE (Singing:)

Hail, O blessed One, the Lord is with you.

Hail, O Blessed One, the Lord is with you.

LIZ: (Interrupting) Yes, uh...thank you, Gabe. But exactly what did you mean by "the Lord is with you"?

GABE: Oh, that. God simply asked me to tell Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that she would have a baby, Immanuel. That means "God with us."

LIZ: And this happened as you said it would?

GABE: Oh, yes. No problem there. Well, okay; Mary may have had some difficulty telling her parents that she was pregnant. She was pretty young and not married. Joseph, her fiance—he was another story; he wanted to break up with her quietly. But I came to him in a dream and explained the whole situation. So he came around, and eventually they were married.

LIZ: Thank you Gabe, this has been very interesting. Now, Zach, back to you in Jerusalem.

ZACH: Thank you, Liz, and now, back to our regularly scheduled service.

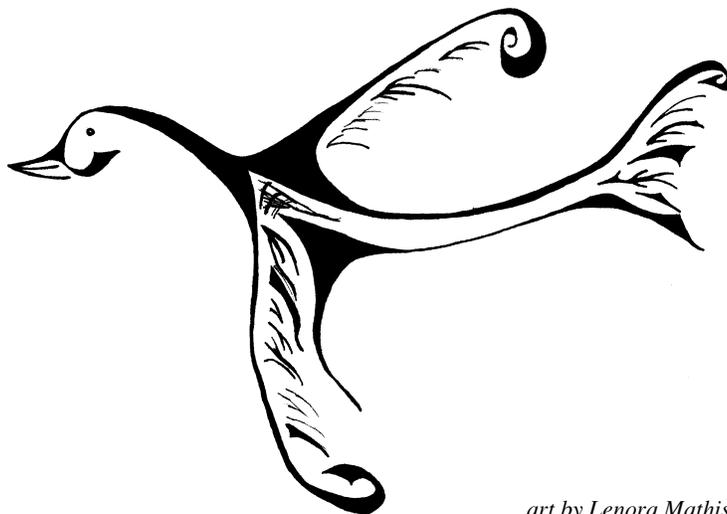
SCENE 2

ZACH: Welcome back. This is Zachariah, and you have returned to the Jerusalem Nightly News. Let's see whether our City of David correspondent has any more news for us. Liz?

LIZ: Zach, this town is swarming with people who have come for the Roman census—it's startling to realize that one person has so many descendants. I understand that Mary and Joseph of Nazareth have just come into town and are looking for a place to stay. My sources tell me that this is the same Mary and Joseph whom our friend Gabriel told us about. (Pause, as though looking).

ZACH: Do you see something, Liz?

LIZ: Yes, I can see them now. It's unbelievable, Zach! Mary



art by Lenora Mathis

is obviously pregnant and they appear to have been turned away from the only inn left in town. It looks as though they are heading to the stable out back. Let me see if I can get a word with the innkeeper. Sir? Sir?

INNKEEP: Yes, what is it? I'm a little bit busy here.

LIZ: Sir, I notice that you just turned away a man and his obviously pregnant wife. Couldn't you have made room for them?

INNKEEP: My inn has been booked for weeks, ever since the Emperor called for this census. I can't let out my reserved rooms to just anyone who comes around looking for a place to stay.

LIZ: But haven't you heard the rumors that the baby this woman is carrying is to be the Messiah?

INNKEEP: The Messiah? Please. A baby? That would be like saying something good could come out of Nazareth! I have a business to run, and I'm running it. Now, if you don't mind...

LIZ: And there you have it. This couple has arrived to a very uncomfortable welcome. Zach?

ZACH: Thank you, Liz. And now, a responsive scripture reading.

SCENE 3

ZACH: Zachariah here again. Let's check in again with our Bethlehem correspondent. Liz?

LIZ: Zach, there seems to be a bit of a commotion in the stable I mentioned earlier. I understand the baby has been born. Since the birth, several strangers—shepherds, actually—have arrived at the stable claiming to have been told of the baby's birth by a large number of angels. They have come to give praise to this child. I have one of the younger shepherds with me now. Miss, can you tell us why you are here?

SHEP: Why, yes. See, we were in the fields, minding our own business, watching our sheep—when suddenly there was a blinding light and a huge crashing sound and there it was. An angel! And everywhere around us was a strange glow, as though God was all around us.

LIZ: Did this angel give you any news?

SHEP: Oh, yes. That's why we're here. The angel told us we would find this baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And, well, you can see for yourself—there he is.

LIZ: Do you have any words to describe how you're feeling right now?

SHEP: Stunned, mostly. Who would have dreamed that I, a young shepherd *girl* no less, would see the Savior of the

world? And, God as a child? Wow.

LIZ: Thank you, young friend. Zach?

ZACH: Thank you Shepherd, Liz. And now it is prayer time.

SCENE 4

ZACH: It's time now for the morning offering—

LIZ: (Interrupting) Zach, Zach! We have quite an interesting phenomenon occurring here in Bethlehem. An incredibly bright star has settled over the stable where the baby Messiah has been born, and three strangers—astrologers—have just arrived. These wise people say they were guided by the star from the Far East, Zach. Here they are now. I'll see if I can get an interview.

WISE LEADER: Good morning. May we help? (Take the offering plates from Zach. Prompt the congregation to sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Your pianist or organist could begin to play, and Zach could motion for the congregation to join in.)

SCENE 5

ZACH: And now back to your Holy Land Nightly News. Let's check in one last time with our Bethlehem correspondent. Liz?

LIZ: Zach, things have calmed down dramatically here in the City of David. It has turned into a quiet night at the stable. The star is still shining brightly, as you can see behind me. However, sources have just informed me that the young family is packing up to move to Egypt. Here is our angel friend. Gabe, can you tell us why this family is leaving?

GABE: Certainly I can. I told them to go.

LIZ: Do you not think that it is dangerous to travel with a newborn baby? Can you tell us why you told them to go to Egypt?

GABE: The word came down from the Lord. God said, "Tell Joseph to take the child and his mother to Egypt." Seems like Herod, King of the Jews, is after him. The king even tried to get those Eastern astrologists to tell him where the baby is, so that he could worship him. So he said. Like Herod is going to worship another king!

LIZ: Thank you, Gabe. I guess that just about wraps it up here in Bethlehem. Zach, back to you.

ZACH: Thank you, Liz. And thank you for watching. Goodnight to all of you, from your Jerusalem news bureau. —*After serving as children's minister for several churches across the country, Mary Meadows now pastors a church in Chatham, Illinois. She is currently working on a book that will help ministers use their own creativity in leading children to worship.*

Lessons & Carols for Children

by Mary T. Meadows

The Lessons and Carols are set up for 8 readers. The readers can simply stand together at the front of the church. You may find it easier to use a different set of readers for each of the five readings (perhaps a different Sunday School class for each reading). The hymns can be sung by the congregation between each reading. If you have children who are interested, you might also try asking the children to sing the first verse of the hymn and then asking the congregation to join in., You may even have a child who would like to sing a solo! Your children might also suggest different hymns. Experiment! —MTM

HYMN: *Silent Night*

READING 1

Reader 1: Once, many years ago, Jesus was born in a...

Reader 2: Wait a minute. That's not the beginning of the story. First, an angel came to Mary, Jesus's mother.

Reader 3: Yeah! The angel Gabriel.

Reader 2: Gabriel told Mary, "Don't be afraid. God has good news for you. You are going to have a baby, and that baby will be the Son of God."

Reader 3: Emmanuel, which means "God with us."

Reader 1: You know, I bet Mary was scared. She was probably only fourteen years old, and she and Joseph weren't even married yet. What would she tell him? Or her mom?! Or her dad?!

Reader 2: Well, Gabriel told her, "Don't worry Mary. There is nothing that God can't do. God will be with you."

HYMN: *What Child Is This?*

READING 2

Reader 4: Several months passed and it was time for Mary to have the baby. She and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because somebody wanted to count up all the people.

Reader 5: And, while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, she gave birth to Jesus.

Reader 6: Did you know that there wasn't even any room for them in the inn? They had to stay in a stable with all the animals.

Reader 7: I bet it was really smelly!

Reader 4: Yeah! If I had been the innkeeper, I'd have made a place for them in the inn and moved everyone else to the manger!

Reader 6: But that innkeeper didn't. So Jesus was born in a manger.

HYMN: *Away In A Manger*

READING 3

Reader 4: Well, after Jesus was born, you know what happened?! An angel went to some shepherds in a field...

Reader 1: Shepherds?! They're a bunch of crooks!

Reader 4: Well, that's the way God worked it. God sent an angel to these shepherds. The shepherds were the first to hear the good...

Reader 8: Wait a minute. Do you know the first thing the angel told these shepherds? "Don't be afraid." How come every angel starts its message with "don't be afraid?" Kind of makes you wonder what those angels looked like, don't it?

Reader 4: Their looks aside, the angels told the shepherds about Jesus' birth.

Reader 1: Then the angels sang a great big song: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all people!"



HYMN: *Angels We Have Heard On High*
HYMN: *Hark The Herald Angels Sing*

READING 4

Reader 5: After the shepherds went to see Jesus, Herod, who was the king of the land, heard about a baby being born and sent some wisemen to find out about him.

Reader 7: The wisemen brought gifts to the baby.

Reader 5: But they decided to go back another way and not tell Herod where to find the baby.

HYMN: *O Come All Ye Faithful*

READING 5

Reader 2: You know, I think Herod was afraid that Jesus would take over as king.

Reader 3: It's kind of funny that a king would be born in a manger.

Reader 8: The whole Christmas story is sort of funny. Jesus was the Messiah—the Savior, but everything that happened to him was backwards to what people thought would happen.

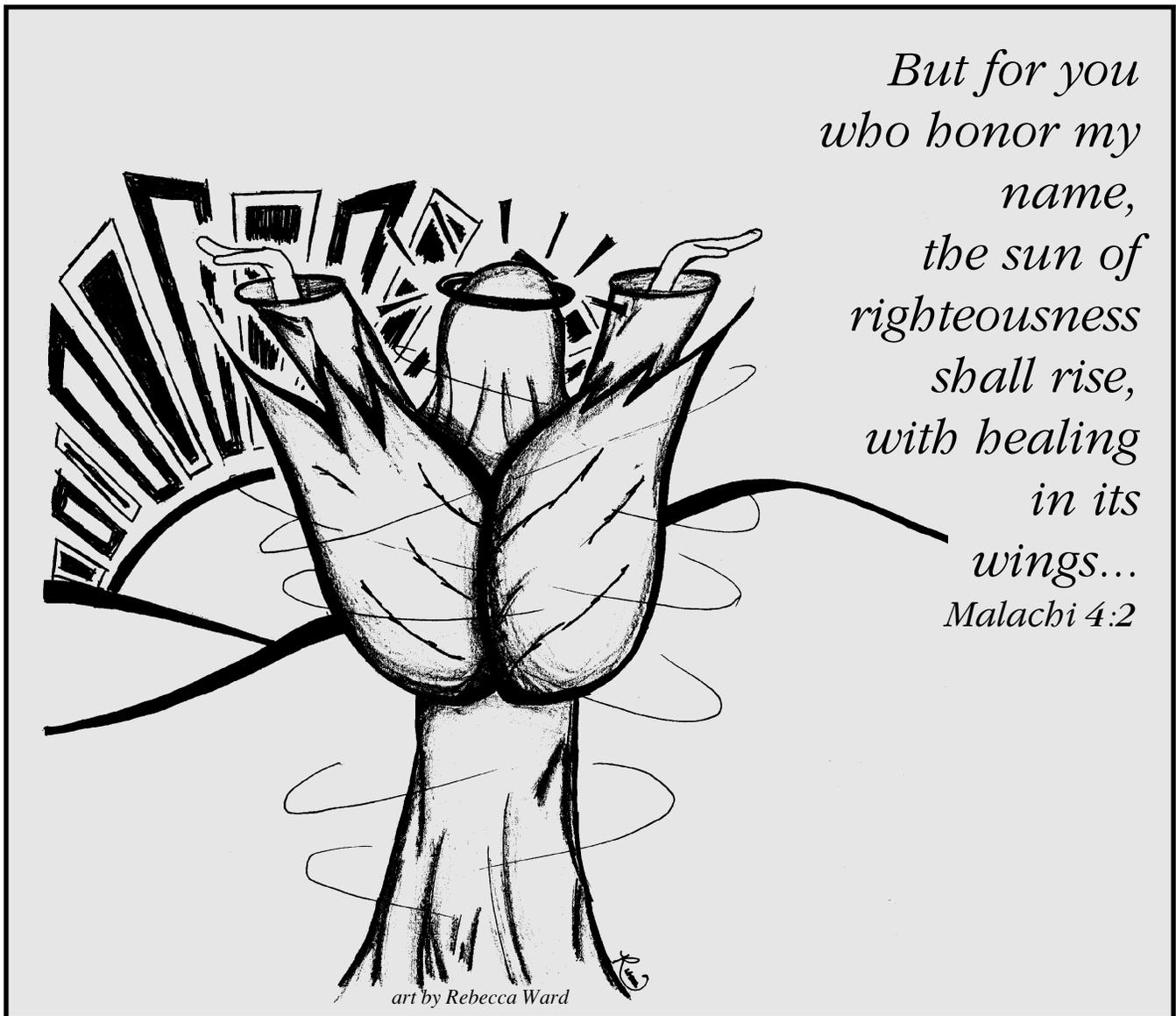
Reader 1: The best news of all though, is that Jesus is for everyone! Even the poor heard the good news about him: Mary, a poor peasant girl. Lowly shepherds. They were the first to hear the good news.

Reader 8: That's why we celebrate Jesus's birth at Christmas...to tell everyone the good news!

HYMN: *Go Tell It On The Mountain*

HYMN: *Joy to the World*

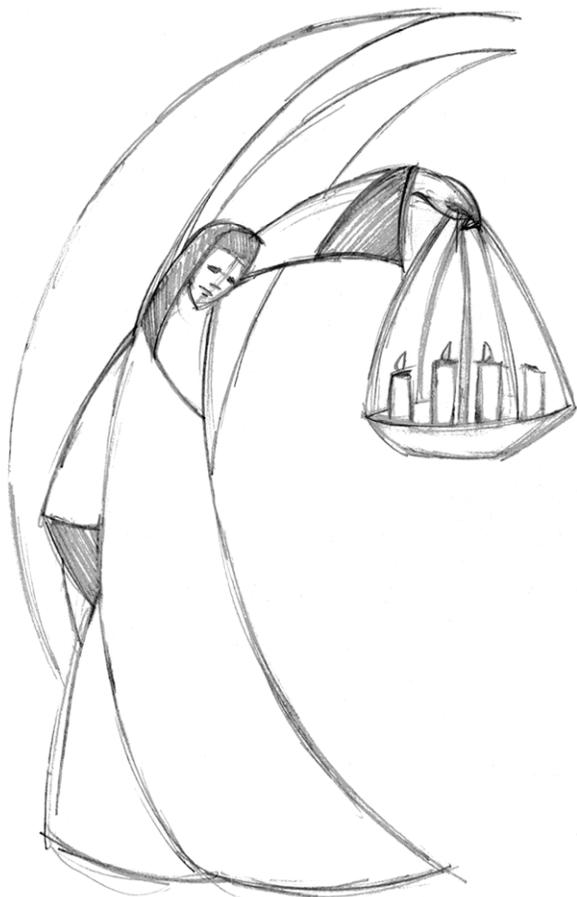
—After serving as children's minister for several churches across the country, Mary Meadows now pastors a church in Chatham, Illinois. She is currently working on a book that will help ministers use their own creativity in leading children to worship.



*But for you
who honor my
name,
the sun of
righteousness
shall rise,
with healing
in its
wings...
Malachi 4:2*

art by Rebecca Ward

Third Sunday in Advent: JOY



art by Sally Lynn Askins

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way With
painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road And hear
the angels sing.
—Phillips Brooks

*Jesus said, "Come
to me, all you
who are weary
and carrying
heavy burdens,
and I will give
you rest."
Matthew 11:28*

My Guardian Angel Drives a Cadillac

a personal story

by Van Darden

Okay. See, you have to understand that I had this job two summers ago. It was a pretty cush job for a fifteen-year-old. I was a crossing guard for the children's summer programs at the local community college. I'd set up my lawn chair at seven-thirty and don the bright orange vest and wait for the first troop of children to cross the street. I'd hop up and stop the line of cars to let the little one cross in safety.

Anyway, the summer wore on, the day camps ended, summer school ended, and only the summer-weary "Kids College" children were left. It was getting to the end of July, and, around Waco, 100 degrees and above is the norm. Take into account a constant fifty-five percent humidity, and three mind-numbing afternoon hours of no children to get up for, and you get a pretty apathetic view of life.

So for the last three hours of the day, there was nothing. There were no clouds, no birds, and no people. I was sick of reading and sick of listening to the radio. So I just sat. And sweated. I couldn't blink without feeling a fresh wave of

perspiration wash over me. It got so bad I think I began to hallucinate, to talk to people who weren't really there.

So it was one of those days, that it all really happened. I was sitting there, listening to some moron cicada off in a bush—the only other living being, it seemed, in this hot wasteland of July heat. I heard a kind of low rumbling, behind me, that got louder and louder and closer and closer until I heard it stop and sort of taper off near me. I opened my eyes and looked to my left and felt a fresh wave of sweat drench me.

I was not really surprised to see a brilliant white Cadillac Coupe de Ville, purring softly, windows tinted, gleaming in the sun. The passenger window began to roll down and a rather large arm shot out and beckoned me to come over. I was still not surprised, because stranger people in stranger cars had asked me for directions before.

Anyhow, I slowly got up and walked over to the car. I peered inside the cool, dark-red interior. Sitting serenely at the wheel was a very large older black lady, dressed in an equally large white dress. The soft strains of gospel music filled my ears, and I basked in the wave of cool, air-conditioned, warm-vanilla-cookie smell that hit my face. She looked right into my eyes—and I mean right down into them—and said finally:

"You been saved, ain't you."

It was more of a pointed declaration than a question. And I had, in fact, been baptized three years prior.

So I, quite taken aback, stammered an affirmative.

She sighed, and grabbed my hand, and launched into a beautiful prayer.

"Lawd," she said, "I give this boy up to you, that he may walk in your mercy and light for the rest of his days. He's been saved by the mighty power of the blood, shed on the cross, by Jesus, the Lamb..."

She went on for several minutes, and I loved it.

She dropped my hand and looked right into me again. (One usually does not meet a stranger with this kind of directness, but for some reason I was not offended or put ill at ease. It was almost like sitting with your grandmother for a couple of hours on a cool spring morning.)

"God," she proclaimed, "is going to do great things with you. You just wait." And with that she roared off, leaving me with a strange sense of overwhelming peace and contentment. Like sitting with your grandmother for a couple of hours on a cool spring morning.

—Van Darden is a junior at Vanguard Preparatory School in Waco, Texas—where it does, indeed, get to be 100 and more on most July days. Look on page 10 for Van's insightful art.



art by Sally Lynn Askins

"She dropped my hand and looked right into me again. (One usually does not meet a stranger with this kind of directness, but for some reason I was not offended or put ill at ease. It was almost like sitting with your grandmother for a couple of hours on a cool spring morning.)"

A Prayer for the Third Sunday in Advent

by Helen Humphrey

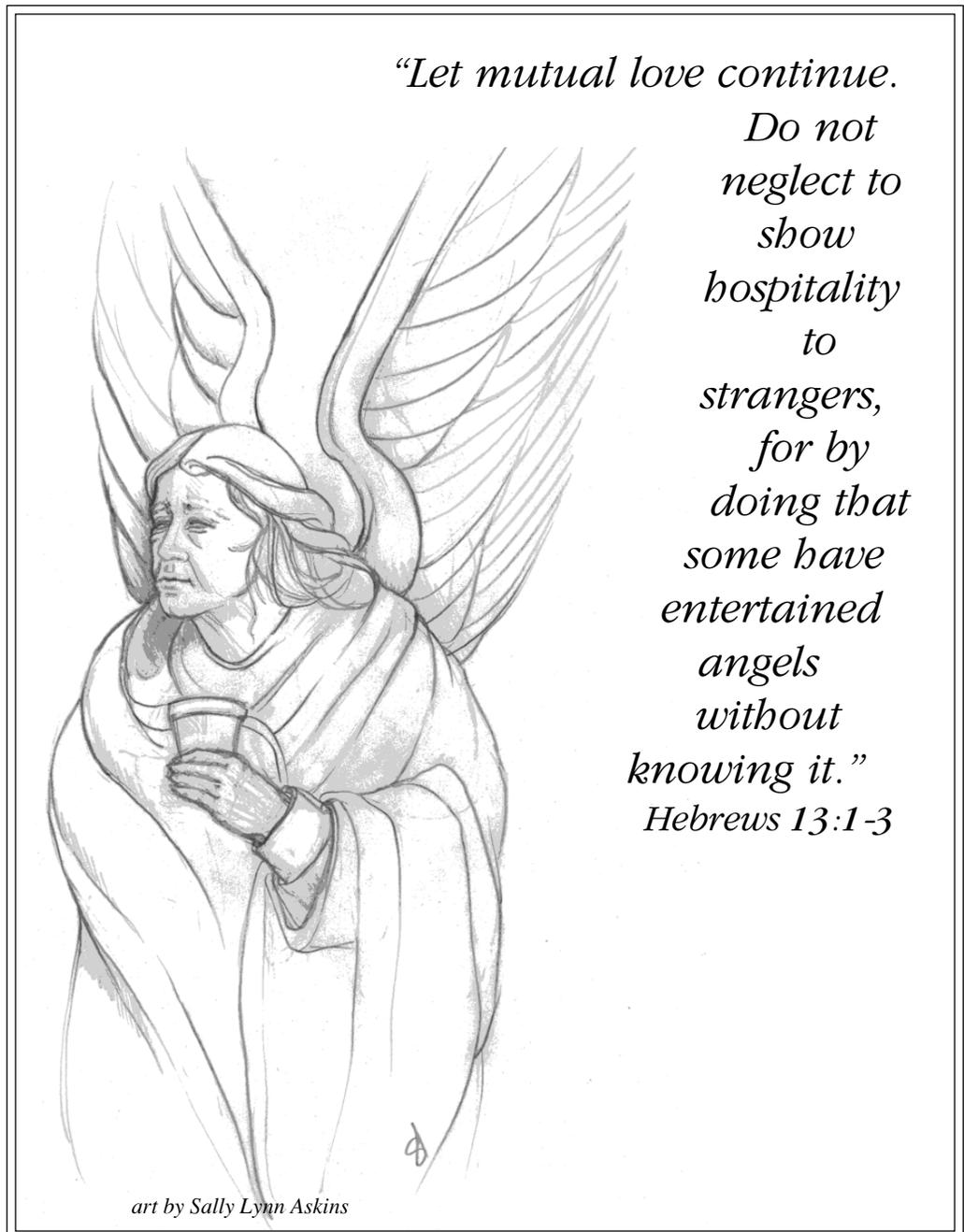
Dear God, We confess that often we forget to be joyful, and we forget how much you give us to be joyful about. We are often too wrapped up in our problems and obligations, especially during the busy holiday season, to see the blessings and beautiful things you give us each day. Lord, we ask you to open our eyes to the treasures you provide.

Lord, just as there is much in this season of Advent about which to rejoice, there is much about which to be discouraged. Indeed we feel guilty sometimes that we have so much when so many others have little. We feel helpless in a world where stomachs go hungry, bodies succumb to disease, families fall apart, and nations go to war. It seems there is little we can do about such big problems, and this helplessness paralyzes us.

Indeed, we even feel guilty for finding joy in our own lives when others are less fortunate. Help us to see that, working together, we can help alleviate the world's problems. Help us also to not lose sight of the joy, for we know deep down that you give us blessings to offset our despair at seeing others hurt.

We humbly ask for all of these things in the name of the Anointed One who has brought everlasting joy to the world. Amen.

—Helen Humphrey, an Oklahoma City native, is a senior journalism major at Baylor University.



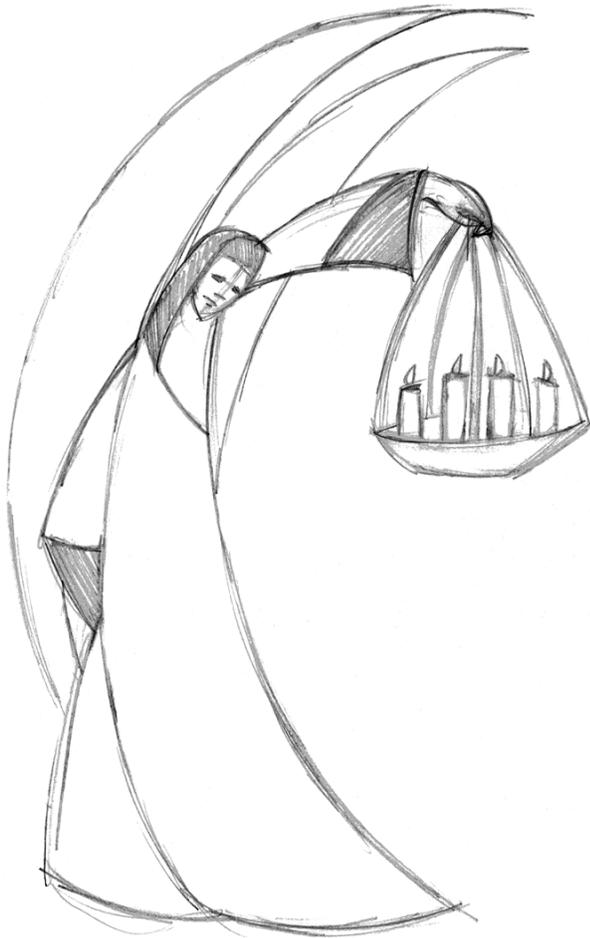
“Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Hebrews 13:1-3

art by Sally Lynn Askins

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Love



art by Sally Lynn Askins

For lo! the days are hastening on By
prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the
song Which now the angels sing.
—Phillips Brooks

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and died a selfless, obedient death...

*Phillippians 2:5-8
(The Message)*

Quotes, Poems, & Pithy Sayings



art by Rebecca Ward

They were first scared out of their wits; we must never forget that. "Sore afraid" is how the King James translation renders it, and that was a natural reaction to what they saw and heard, a human reaction. Some of those who received the message never got past the fear. It would have been easy to stay scared. But with the shepherds, other emotions got involved. Maybe they were simple folk, uneducated. Perhaps their knowledge of theology was inexact. But their hearts were open, and they

responded to the message.

They left their flocks—their livelihoods—and hurried away to see the message in the flesh.

—Greg Garret

The best metaphor for our world of today is astronauts speeding through the cosmos, but with their life-supporting capsule pierced by a meteorite fragment. But the Church resembles Mary and Joseph traveling from Egypt to Nazareth on a donkey, holding in their arms the weakness and poverty of the Child Jesus: God incarnate.

—Carlo Carretto

We don't take Jesus anywhere. Wherever we go, Jesus is there before we are.

—Kenneth L. Carder

Despair is not permitted to the meek, the humble, the afflicted, the ones famished for justice, the merciful, the clean of heart and the peacemakers. All the beatitudes 'hope against hope,' 'bear everything, believe everything, hope for everything, endure everything' (1 Cor. 13:7).

The beatitudes are simply aspects of love.

They refuse to despair of the world and abandon it to a supposedly evil fate which it has brought upon itself.

Instead, like Christ himself, the Christian takes upon his own shoulders the yoke of the Savior, meek and humble of heart.

This yoke is the burden of the world's sin with all its confusions and all its problems.

These sins, confusions and problems are our very own.

We do not disown them.

—Thomas Merton

Christmas is about the King of Glory joining the ranks of the rabble to be our God and to know us. I am that rabble, and I am grateful.

—Paula Clouse, *Order of Ecumenical Franciscans*

Nowhere does the Bible tell us that we are called to be nothing.

Rather, we are told that we are made after the divine image, that we are heirs of the Kingdom, children of God, priests and royalty.

Any supposed humility that denies this is sinful, for it rejects the divine plane for creation.

And yet, traditional theology has often been bent

on promoting the virtue of humility, particularly since those who are humble will stay in their place

and refuse to claim their rightful status in human societies

as children and heirs of God.

—Justo Gonzales

"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning...You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forevermore."

—Psalm 30:5, 11-12

We humbly bow before you this morning
recognizing that
because you gave us eyes, we see,
because you gave us ears, we hear,
you give us arms so that we may embrace
our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers.

Please lord
give love to those who hate,
give strength, to those who struggle,
and give warmth to those who are cold.

Thank you for words
that encourage and inspire,
thank you for your son
who takes a storm and calms it,
thank you for the spirit
that makes us soar.

—Heather Herschap, a native of Laredo, Texas, is a psychology student at Baylor University.

The Sky Displays Your Glory

A Paraphrase of Psalm 19

by Thomas Turner



art by Rebecca Ward

I

Day and night, the sky displays Your glory and power.
Each day adds new meaning to Your unfolding story.
Each night imparts new knowledge of Your wisdom.
The silence heard throughout the earth proclaims the holiness of creation.

You make the sun a resting place in the evening.
In the morning it rises renewed like lovers waking from sleep,
poised like a runner at the start of a race.
It moves across the sky from one end to the other,
bestowing light and heat on all the earth,
its grace withheld from no one.

II

Your story, in all its fullness,
revives the soul.

Your truth, learned through patient practice,
confirms the wisdom of simplicity.

Your instruction, offered in love,
makes the heart confident.

Your commands, clear and plain,
are easy to understand.

Your teaching, studied in reverence,
nourishes the life of prayer.

Your discernment, gently given,
is more desirable than great treasures of gold,
sweeter than honey dripping from the comb.

Your word is a trustworthy guide.
It provides the warning Your followers need.
It brings joy to all who trust and obey.

III

Who can perceive all their sins?
Cleans me of unknown faults.
Keep me from the wrongdoing that tempts me.
Do not let my deficiencies control my perceptions
and choices.

Make me whole.
Make me completely Yours.
May my words and thoughts be pleasing to You,
the solid rock on which I stand,
the source of life and healing.

—Tom Turner is a spiritual director and writer who lives in Greenville, South Carolina.

Solstice Song

by Katie Cook

We need Sister Sun;
without her kiss we die of sadness.
She can shine, as we feel during the August dog days, to much;
She can seem relentless.
But without her, as even scientists have noted, we would die—
not first of cold, but of sadness.

The suns of the dark solstice are like no other visions...
the advent skies are heavy with snow
and burnished with cold;
they reflect the pastel evenings
like precious metals
blazing across the barren horizon,
burning fuchsia
between the intricate black fingers of the winter trees,
rumors of the full sunfire,
quietly exulting
in the midst of the cold, stark, deadness of the deep winter.

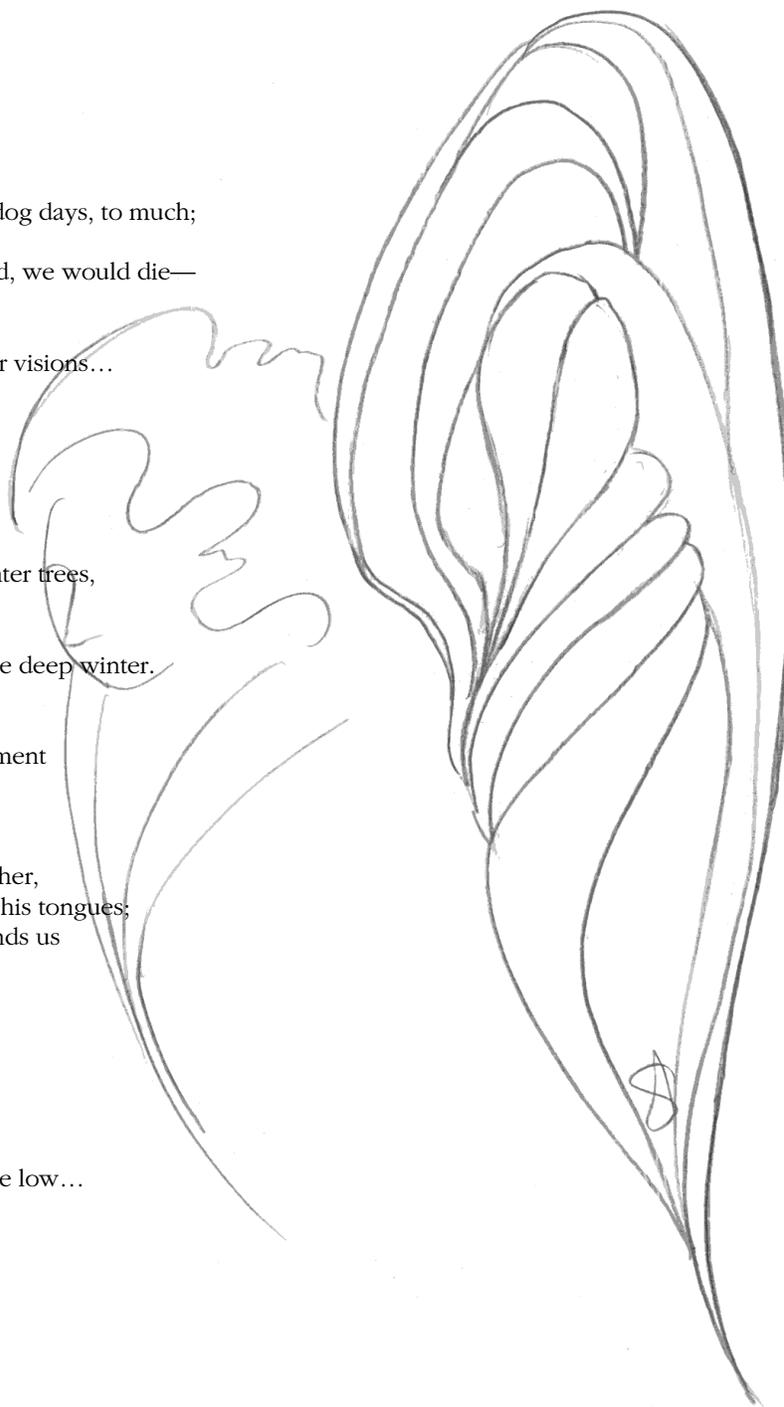
The solstice season is a time of biting cold,
of winds that whip through our layers of garment
and the sudden quiet and gradual warmth
of shelter;
the intimate song of Brother Fire,
who scorches us on one side and then the other,
and sings to us with the inimitable hilarity of his tongues;
The smell of the crackling cedar then surrounds us
and we begin to think...

It is the time of year
when we think of the spent ones
who have slipped out into eternity and rest,
a time when we wonder
why the unspent slip away as well,
a time when faith is often weak and spirits are low...

They say
that today the sun began to return,
or (in our newer scientific knowledge)
the earth began to move closer to the sun,
but how do I know that this is so?
The day lengthens, but imperceptibly.
How do I know the sun has really begun to return?
How do I know she is real?
How do I know that she is who they say she is?
Is it really becoming warmer,
or are we abandoned to the darkness and cold and death?

It is good that we celebrate holy days at this time,
for the darkness is deep.
It is a good time of year
to watch for sunreturn.
It is a good time to listen for newborn cries.

lkc



art by Sally Lynn Askins

Giving Good Gifts

ideas and resources for avoiding the malls

by Ken Sehested

We have a problem.

On the one hand, gift-giving is not only fun, but it is also a reflection of our most cherished convictions. Maybe the deepest current of Scripture is God's gift-giving character, with the parallel notion of recipients being transformed into givers themselves, partners in God's gratuitous drama. Gratitude is the root of our piety; gift-giving is its flower.

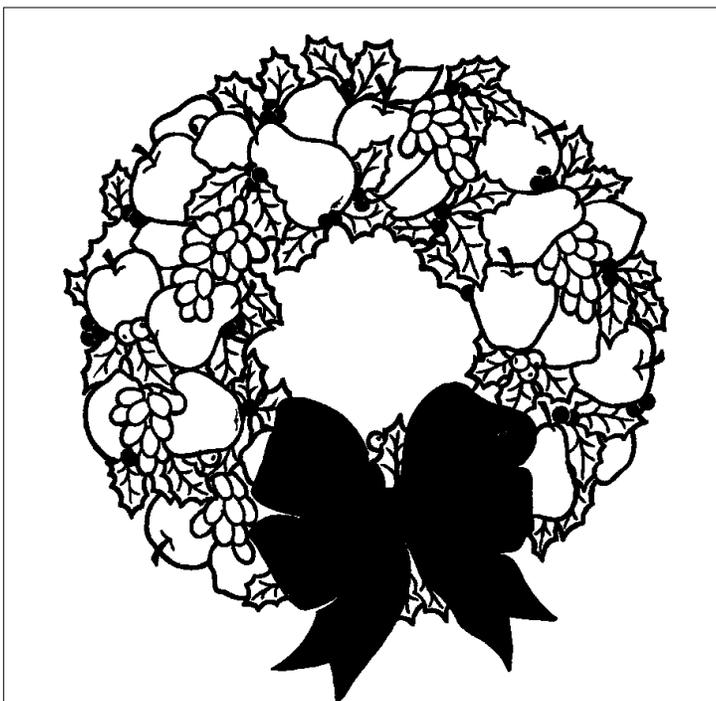
On the other hand, the spirit of consumerism—particularly around the Christmas season—is choking the life out of us; literally so, given the environmental impact of accumulated trash. “Shop ‘til you drop” is more than a humorous bumper sticker; it is a prophetic judgment.

In North America we are entrapped in an economic system whose very success depends on waste, gluttony, and overconsumption. And like all systems, it is driven by a spirituality—in this instance, one which is in direct competition with the Gospel for our souls. “You get what you deserve,” is its invocation: “you have what you horde,” its doxology; “you are what you can buy,” its benediction. It bootlegs an atheism—an implicit rejection of God's gratuitous nature—more potent than any mere philosophical statement denying God's existence.

Quite naturally, many gift-givers recoil in the face of this travesty. In overreaction, we begin to disdain extravagance. Like Judas, grumbling over the wastefulness of a woman's expensive anointment of Jesus, we begin to begrudge lavish gifts; like Scrooge, we tend to refuse festivity. It is an understandable response to the commercialization of life. But it is wrong.

We have great need—as North Americans, living as we do in a culture of wanton idolatry—to practice the discipline of giving good gifts. Our hope is that the “out of the ordinary” gift ideas in the “advent calender” on the following page will provide some hints, suggest some resources, tickle some imagination.

May God's hilarious hope infect your heart, filling your life with gratitude, unleashing good gifts. Not just at Christmas, and not just with ribbons and bows. But it's a good place to start.



“Quite naturally, many gift-givers recoil in the face of the consumerist Christmas. In overreaction, we begin to disdain extravagance. Like Judas, grumbling over the wastefulness of a woman's expensive anointment of Jesus, we begin to begrudge lavish gifts; like Scrooge, we tend to refuse festivity. It is an understandable response to the commercialization of life. But it is wrong.”

—Ken Sehested is the executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. This section is reprinted from *Peacework* (a periodical publication of the BPFNA) Double Issue Numbers 4-5, 1999. For more information about *Peacework*, contact: Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, 4800 Wedgewood Dr., Charlotte, NC 28210. Ken adapted some of the ideas on these pages from the *Alternatives* publications *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back Into the Season* and *To Celebrate: Reshaping Holidays and Rites of Passage*. For more information about these resources contact: Alternatives for Simple Living, PO Box 2857, Sioux City, IA 51106; 800/821-6153; www.simpleliving.org.