

# ***A Light in This Present Darkness***



## ***Creative Resources for Advent and Christmastide 2003***

*Sacred Seasons, a quarterly series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis, from Seeds of Hope Publishers:  
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## Sacred Seasons: Creative Worship Tools for Your Church

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

### Editorial Address

Seeds of Hope is housed by the community of faith at Seventh and James Baptist Church. The mailing address is 602 James; Waco, Texas 76706; Phone: 254/755-7745; Fax: 254/753-1909; Email: SeedsHope@aol.com.  
Web address: www.seedspublishers.org  
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Material in this packet is for the use of the purchasing faith community to enhance worship and increase awareness in economic justice issues. ISSN 0194-4495

Seeds of Hope, Inc., holds the 501C/3 nonprofit tax status. All contributions above the subscription rate are fully tax-deductible.

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# A Light in This Present Darkness

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## *a word about this packet*

The quarterly Seeds worship resource materials have a name now; they are called *Sacred Seasons*. As always, with or without a name, 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.

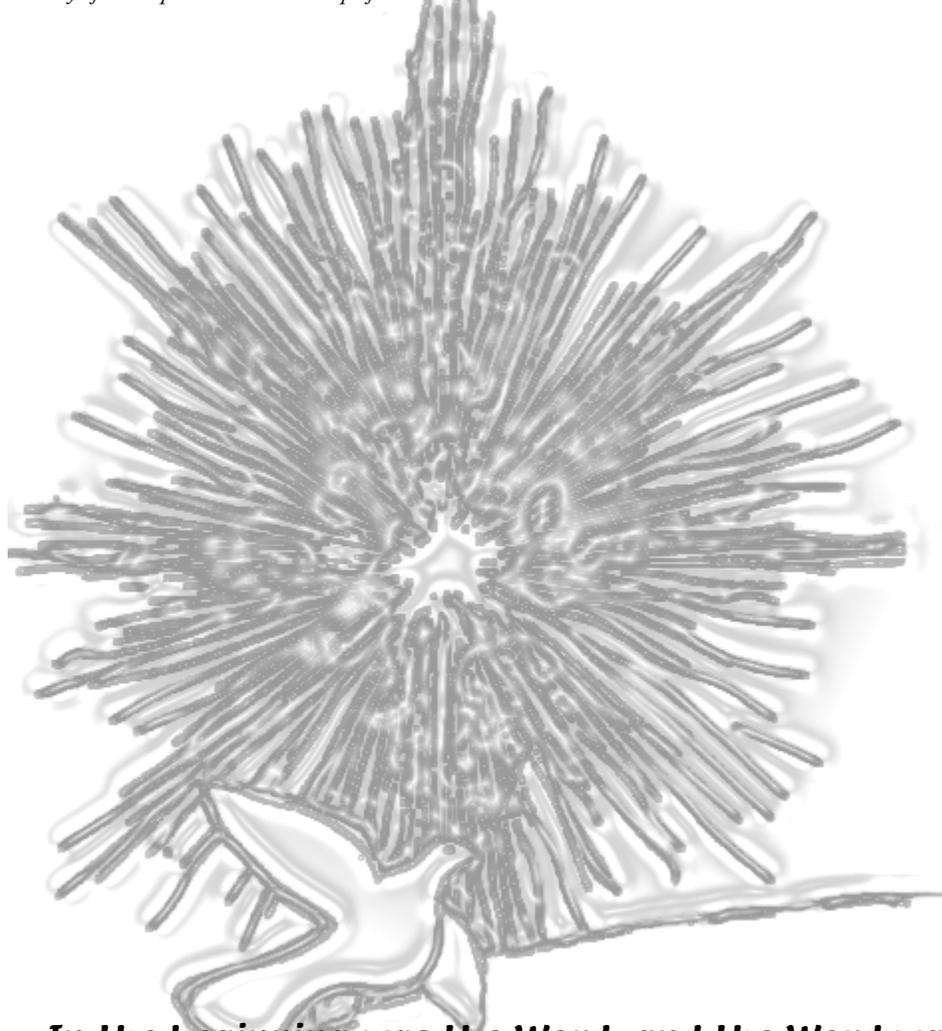
The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to 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.

The cover art for this packet was created for you by Sally Lynn Askins. It is called "Angel of Prague" (or "Andel" in Czech.) You will find a variety of artists, with many renditions of the theme of light and nativity. Two new artists are Caroline Oladipo, a first-year student at Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas, and Garrett Bursleson, a senior at Reicher Catholic High School in Waco, Texas. One of the writers featured this Advent is Richard Groves, a pastor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, whose sermons you have seen before. We hope you will be inspired and challenged by Richard's fresh insights. Another featured writer is new to the Seeds resources. Rachel Hunter is a young and gifted writer who is currently teaching in Rindge, New Hampshire. We hope you will be seeing her dramatic offerings for many packets to come.

# *bulletin art*

*art courtesy of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America*



***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1: 1-5)***

# How to Fight Darkness

## A Short Skit for Advent

by Rachel C. Hunter



art by Rebecca Ward

NARRATOR: The sun sets with dramatic flares of color, sending deep crimsons and violets cascading across the densely packed snow. Then the velvet quiet of darkness sets in. Raven treads through the snow towards her friend's wooden cabin, embedded deep within mountainous drifts. She longs to be there where Miriam will have a crackling fire and a steaming cup of cocoa ready to ward off the icy night. She turns the corner with expectancy and is appalled. Deep in the shadows, Miriam's cabin stands silent and dark. The emptiness echoes through her vision. She gingerly opens the door to reveal a shadowy room.

RAVEN: Hmmm. I wonder where my friend Miriam is? I hope she's okay. It's really dark in here. Darkness frightens me. It reminds me of fighting and slimy creatures. It reminds me of war and cruelty. I really wish it wasn't so dark. I guess there's not much I can do about it, though.

NARRATOR: Raven sits on the cabin floor shivering. And waits. After an hour of waiting, Raven has a brilliant idea about how to make it less dark. Raven begins to sing, her voice quivering, hoping that she can flush out the darkness with noise. She starts with her favorite song, "This Little Light of Mine." [Raven starts humming] She then thinks of all the brightest and most illuminating hymns she can and sings them all. She sings "Give Me Oil For My Lamp" and she even starts singing "Silent Night." But by the time she reaches the line "All is calm. All is bright," her voice has begun to ache. But she has another idea. When the singing doesn't seem to work, she prays. She asks God to repeal the darkness.

RAVEN: O powerful and almighty Creator of the Universe, please take away this darkness so that I may see clearly all that is and will be in front of me, forever and ever. Amen.

NARRATOR: Even after praying, the darkness seems to have prevailed. Raven begins to worry that it will be dark forever. In a panic she frantically paws and slaps at the air in front of her in an attempt to repel the darkness. She wildly threatens the darkness and she begs the darkness to leave her alone.

RAVEN: Please leave, darkness. Please! Pretty please! All right, I wasn't going to do this, but now you've provoked me. I'm going to banish you. Accursed Darkness, I demand that you leave this poor innocent cabin. Be gone from it and haunt it no longer. I'm serious. I'm getting really angry with you, darkness! I have a large broom here and if you don't leave in five seconds I'm going to start beating you with it!

NARRATOR: Strangely enough, these words seem to make the darkness even worse. Defeated, Raven crawls into a corner of the cabin, trembling, and hugs her knees. She has nothing left to do but sit and wait. [Pause] Suddenly, a sound emanates from the silence. Raven looks up with expectancy. Could those be footsteps drawing near? Relief floods through her. Miriam approaches quickly with elegant strides. She opens the door and lets her eyes adjust. As she spots Raven huddled in the corner an odd expression washes over her face.

MIRIAM: Why are you sitting in the dark?

RAVEN: I tried everything I knew to get rid of the dark. I sang songs. I said prayers. I screamed and cursed it. I attempted to banish it...

MIRIAM: Did you try turning on the light?

RAVEN: Well...no.

MIRIAM: There's a light switch on the wall right to the left of the door; did you look for it?

RAVEN: I was concentrating on expelling the darkness.

MIRIAM: Don't you think that was rather silly? You could have just turned on the light. There are also emergency candles up there on the hearth right by that box of matches.

RAVEN: Oh.

MIRIAM: You could have lit one of them.

RAVEN: I suppose.

MIRIAM: Why didn't you?

RAVEN: I was praying about it.

MIRIAM: Well you didn't really need to do all that; you could have just lit one.

RAVEN: Funny, it just didn't cross my mind. I guess I'm kind of dumb, huh?

MIRIAM: Well, I would say that, except I think there might be a lot of people who are trying to curse darkness when they could be turning on lights.

RAVEN: Really? Like who?

MIRIAM: It's kind of like people who pray about hunger, but don't find ways to feed hungry people or change the circumstances that cause poverty. In Matthew 25:42 Jesus admonishes those who did not give "the least of these my people" something to eat when they were hungry.

RAVEN: Who else is cursing darkness?

MIRIAM: People who start wars to get rid of evil are cursing darkness. They're kind of just adding to the evil. It's very similar to you beating darkness with a broom, don't you think?

RAVEN: You mean if they found some creative way of problem solving they wouldn't have to kill each other?

MIRIAM: Quite obviously things aren't always as simple as turning a light on, but Jesus did say "Love your enemies." And usually love involves not killing people.

RAVEN: Hey, look! The sun is coming up!

MIRIAM: What a beautiful sunrise.

NARRATOR: The two women watched with amazement as a vibrant orange glow crept up into the sky, aided by a brilliant pink streak painted just above the horizon.

RAVEN: So what took you so long, anyway?

MIRIAM: I was working at an AIDS clinic down the road. We had this bizarre infestation of silence there; I was busy lighting candles and buying lamps in an attempt to get rid of it...

—Rachel Hunter, a graduate of the College of Wooster in Theatre and Religious Studies, is a theatre and writing teacher at The Meeting School in Rindge, New Hampshire. She was assisted in the preparation of this drama by her writing class.

***The Word was first,  
the Word present to God,  
God present to the Word.  
The Word was God,  
in readiness for God from day one.***

***Everything was created through him;  
nothing—not one thing!—  
came into being without him.  
What came into existence was Life,  
and the Life was Light to live by,  
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;  
the darkness couldn't put it out.***

***The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes,  
the one-of-a-kind glory,  
like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out,  
true from start to finish.  
(John 1:1-5, 14, The Message)***



art by Sharon Rollins

# Week One: Hope, Prophets



*Each year we light the candle of hope and do our best to put ourselves in the place of one of the magi patiently studying the stars in hope that one night they might see the star of God's coming; or in the place of Simeon or Anna who went to the temple every morning, hoping that they would be there when the Messiah came.*

—Richard Groves

## Hope

by Rachel C. Hunter

LEADER: In the midst of restless anxiety and depression, the people cry

PEOPLE: ...where is hope?

LEADER: In the midst of cynicism and incredulity, the people wail

PEOPLE: ...where is hope?

LEADER: In the throes of perpetual war, famine and strife, the people plead

PEOPLE: ...where is hope?

LEADER: Hope is in the lilt of a familiar melody that drives you to joyful dancing in the midst of sorrow. Hope is the ability to remember light when there is darkness.

PEOPLE: Where is hope?

LEADER: Hope is an act of creation, carefully-laden visions and insights, woven to create a tapestry of faith, beautiful and elegant.

PEOPLE: Hope is the ability to remember warmth, in frigid and icy storms.

LEADER: Hope is belief magnified and intensified by pure tenacity and mindful action.

—Rachel Hunter, a graduate of the College of Wooster in Theatre and Religious Studies, is a theatre and writing teacher at The Meeting School in Rindge, New Hampshire. She was assisted in the preparation of this litany by her writing class.

# Prisoners of Hope

*a sermon by Richard Groves*

text: Jeremiah 33:1-11

Prisoners of hope. It is a surprising image, isn't it? It is one of those insightful puttings-together of words that jiggles our brain and causes us to think new thoughts precisely because it is the opposite of what we would expect to hear. We would expect to read that we are trapped in our despair, bound by the bonds of hopelessness. But not that we are prisoners of hope. Some people are good at putting words together in surprising ways; the rest of us are amazed at how such strange combinations of words cause us to see some aspect of our experience that we had not seen before.

Jeremiah, the author of the passage from the Hebrew scriptures that serves as our text, was not the creator of the phrase "prisoners of hope." It comes from an obscure prophet named Zechariah, who lived a few centuries after Jeremiah. But if anyone could have said it, Jeremiah could have. For no figure in scripture was more imprisoned by hope than was Jeremiah. He was in for life, with no possibility of parole, though an objective observer of his circumstances would be able to find little reason to hope.

Jeremiah lived in a terrible time, and he had an unenviable prophetic task. He lived in the last days—literally, the very last days of the existence of his country, Judah, the Southern Kingdom. The end was in sight. Anyone with eyes to see could see that. Babylonian armies had laid siege to the capital city of Jerusalem, and people were dying in the streets. Those poignant, pathos-filled words that were cited by Matthew, centuries later, as a commentary on the murder of Bethlehem's babies at the hands of Herod's soldiers, were written by Jeremiah as he described the national tragedy that was taking place before his very eyes:

*A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, for they are not (31:15).*

It was Jeremiah's task—part of his task—to tell his people that what was happening to them was the will of God! "*The Chaldeans are coming in to fight,*" he quotes God as saying, "*and to fill them with the dead bodies of men whom I shall smite in my anger and my wrath...*" (33:5) If ever a preacher had reason to run from his/her calling, it was Jeremiah. Compared to his assignment, Jonah's job looks like a piece of cake.

Can you imagine Jeremiah getting the latest e-mail from God, containing his sermon for the day?

*Say to the king and the queen mother:  
"Take a lowly seat,*

*for your beautiful crown  
has come down from your head" (13:18).*

You want me to say *that* to the king?!

Or this message, that was to be delivered to the women of Jerusalem:

*Teach to your daughters a lament,  
And each to her neighbor a dirge.  
For death has come up into our windows,  
It has entered our palaces,  
Cutting off the children from the streets  
And the young men from the squares (9:20-21).*

Or how about this message that he was supposed to deliver to the leader of what was left of his country:

*Thus saith the Lord,  
Behold, I am giving this city into the hand of the king  
of Babylon,  
And he shall burn it with fire.  
You shall not escape from his hand,  
But shall surely be captured and delivered into his hand  
(34:2-3)*

You will not be surprised to hear that absolutely no one welcomed Jeremiah or his so-called prophetic word. In fact, people were furious. They hated him. The city was under siege, the walls were coming down, the temple was about to be burned to the ground, and this guy was walking the streets saying that those awful Babylonians were simply doing the bidding of the Lord!

The higher-ups decided that Jeremiah's preaching was treasonous, a threat to national security. It may sound strange to say that a preacher was considered a traitor to his country because of what he preached, but that is only because in recent decades we have become accustomed to seeing preachers wrap themselves in the flag, and so intertwine Christianity and Americanism that there seems to be no way to unravel the sometimes disparate threads. If you weren't around during the civil rights days, or the anti-Vietnam-war days, or the anti-nuclear disarmament days, it might be hard for you to imagine governmental agencies keeping tabs on selected pulpit-thumpers.

But it happened (and may happen again) in our time, and it happened in Jeremiah's time. He was arrested and thrown into jail. That is what is meant when it is said in the opening line of our text that "*the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was shut up in the court of the guard.*" (33:1)

He was in jail, and the word of God came to him again, and I imagine he was not too thrilled about that! He must have thought, "Oh, no, not again! Look what happened last time! There are people out there who want to kill me. So, now, there is something else I'm supposed to say? Give me a break; give someone else the honor of being your prophet for a while. I've been blessed about all I can stand."

But this was a different word. Strikingly different. Jeremiah looked beyond the impending national tragedy and spoke a word of hope:

"Behold, I will bring to Jerusalem health and healing, and I will heal the people and reveal to them abundance and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me... And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the world..." (33:6-9)

It was not the first word of hope Jeremiah had delivered. Far from it. Indeed, perhaps his most famous act as a prophet was astoundingly hopeful. When it became clear to everyone that the city and the country would fall, one of Jeremiah's cousins asked if he (Jeremiah) would buy a piece of family property. If one were cynical, one could say that, if ever there was a good time to buy land cheap, this was it! But this was not a good business deal.

**Hope that was grounded in the faithfulness of God took Jeremiah prisoner and enabled him to endure one of the most tragic moments in his nation's history. That is what hope does.**



art by Lara Luksis

This was a bold prophetic act. It was an act of hope. Jeremiah bought the land, going to considerable lengths to make sure that every legal *i* was dotted and every *t* was crossed. He told his secretary to seal the deed and put it in an earthenware vessel so it would last a long time.

The message of this symbolic act was: *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land (32:15)*. "Do not despair," Jeremiah was saying. "We will return. One day the land will again be ours." That is what I mean when I say that

no one was more imprisoned by hope than was Jeremiah. Even in the darkest of times, he spoke a word of hope.

But we must be clear about something: for Jeremiah the reason for hope was not a simplistic faith in the goodness of humanity, or in impersonal fate, nor was it, as one the dippy songs of the 1960s put it, that "things are gonna be fine, it's just a matter of time," the quaint notion that somehow things are just going to turn out okay. Jeremiah had seen too much suffering to be that naïve. Rather, the reason for hope was the faithfulness of God.

The theologian Jurgen Moltman said, in his book *Theology of Hope*, "Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God."

*Thus says the Lord: "In the place of which you say, 'It is a waste without human being or beast,' in the cities of Judah and in streets of Jerusalem that are desolate... there shall be heard again the voice of laughter and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing... For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord." (33:10-11)*

The emphasis in scripture is always on the faithfulness of God. How often is the line repeated in the worship literature of Israel, *the steadfast love of God endures forever*? If there was anything that could be counted in all of life it was the steadfastness of God. Without that steadfastness, biblical writers said, the sun would not rise. But with God's faithfulness as a fundamental assumption, one had reason to live a hope-fed, hope-full life.

Hope that was grounded in the faithfulness of God took Jeremiah prisoner and enabled him to endure one of the most tragic moments in his nation's history. That is what hope does. In one of his better known passages Paul said that *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us* (Romans 5: 3-4).

With all due respect, I must disagree with Paul (though hardly for the first time). For he makes hope the end-product. Suffering produces endurance which produces character which produces hope. But that is not the way it is, is it? Suffering does not always produce endurance. It does not always toughen you up, giving you strength to go on. Sometimes it weakens you. Sometimes it breaks you. Sometimes it makes you cynical and bitter.

There is nothing inherent in the dynamics of a human being interacting with a tragic, stressful, painful situation that produces endurance or character. Certainly, there is nothing there that necessarily leads to hope.

Hope is not the end-product; it is the beginning point. It is hope that enables a person to endure suffering. Hope produces endurance, which in turn produces character. That is what Viktor Frankl discovered in the concentration camps,

as reported in *The Will to Meaning*. He discovered that people who had a reason to live, i.e., hope, were more likely to find a way to survive than people who had no reason to live. Suffering did not produce endurance; hope produced endurance. Suffering did not lead to life; hope led to life.

I am quite sure that Paul understood this. For later in his letter to the church in Rome he encouraged his readers to *rejoice in hope; be patient in tribulation; persevere in prayer* (Romans 12:12). Notice the progression: rejoice in hope, and you will be able to be patient in tribulation. Hope produces endurance.

And that is not all. Hope that is grounded in God's faithfulness gives us a glimpse of the larger reality of God's kingdom and enables us to live toward that vision with courage. There is something that is obvious in the Hebrew scriptures, but no one ever talks about it, namely, that God's acts of deliverance never came in time to save every individual. Generations of Abraham and Sarah's descendants died in Egypt. Moses came too late for them.

But then the promised land came too late for Moses, didn't it? He looked across the river into the land of God's promise, but he died where he stood, and his burying place was known only to God (Deuteronomy 34).

Jeremiah did not live to see the day of return about which he prophesied. One tradition says that he was taken to Egypt by friends just as the end came. Presumably, he lived out his remaining years as an exile. One wonders whether his contemporaries, spending their last days in Babylon or among the rubble in Jerusalem, remembered him fondly, or whether his name was a curse on their lips.

It is hard for us, who have been shaped in and by an individualist-oriented culture, to appreciate the fact that biblical history is peopled by the faithful children of God who lived and died but did not receive what had been promised (Hebrews 11). Our "if religion doesn't do something for me, what's it good for?" attitude does not know what to make of that, nor does it understand those biblical saints.

Why did they do that? How could they do that? Taken prisoner by a hope that was bigger than they were, they courageously endured, sometimes even unto death. Their hope-drawn faithfulness moved the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews to say that *the world was not worthy of them* (Hebrews 11:38).

In our own time we have seen a breathtaking example of hope that enables one to live courageously toward one's vision. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that he had been to the mountaintop and had looked over. But he knew that, like Moses, he might not make it across the Jordan. On the night before he died, he said, "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land." He had been granted a vision of God's righteous work, and it enabled him to live and to die with courage.

I submit that the vision he saw was not of the "promised land," rather it was of "we, as a people." The vision that captured his imagination was his realization that he was part of a people in whom and for whom God was taking righteous action. That was the hope that took him prisoner and gave him the courage even to sacrifice his life.

The theme of the first Sunday in Advent—today—is hope. Each year we light the candle of hope and do our best to put ourselves in the place of one of the magi patiently studying the stars in hope that one night they might see *the* star of God's coming; or in the place of Simeon or Anna who went to the temple every morning, hoping that they would be there when the Messiah came. It is a role we play, to be sure, but

***Hope is not the end-product; it is the beginning point. It is hope that enables a person to endure suffering. Hope produces endurance, which in turn produces character.***



art by Lara Luksis

one we have a need to play. For in truth, in deepest truth, we have been taken prisoner by hope. We live in and by hope that is engendered by the faithfulness of God. Or we live in the hope that we might live in hope, that we might be invigorated, energized, clarified by life-giving hope. At the most profound place within us, we know the truth as Paul put it, that it is in hope that we are saved (Romans 8:24).

My prayer is that we as believers might rest our hope on God's faithfulness rather than on our own competence; that we might see ourselves as part of a people, both in the larger sense of the worldwide body of Christ and in the narrower sense of a local body of believers, in whom and through whom God is doing a righteous work; that we might catch a glimpse of the stirring reality that as the people of God we are on mission with God; and that we might be enabled by a hope that is grounded in God's faithfulness to endure what must be endured and to live courageously toward our vision.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope* (Romans 15:13).

—Richard Groves is a pastor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His church is located on the campus of Wake Forest University.

# Week Two: Peace, Shepherds

*When Mary's baby was born it was said that the very heavens sang of peace on an earth that was, at that very moment, seething with a bitterness and an anger that threatened to explode into violence at any moment.*

—Richard Groves



## Peace

by Rachel C. Hunter

LEADER: We will never find peace.

PEOPLE: Peace is a choice.

LEADER: Peace is taking deliberate strides towards an unknown battlefield, armed with love.

PEOPLE: Peace lets her silent power seep into and embrace even the most violent encounters.

LEADER: Steadied by hope, peace is a vehicle for travel into the realm of God.

PEOPLE: Peace is a journey of tremendous fulfillment.

LEADER: Peace cannot be granted.

PEOPLE: Peace must be chosen.

LEADER: Peace cannot be achieved.

PEOPLE: Peace must be carried out.

—Rachel Hunter, a graduate of the College of Wooster in Theatre and Religious Studies, is a theatre and writing teacher at The Meeting School in Rindge, New Hampshire. She was assisted in the preparation of this litany by her writing class.

# The Darkness Will Never Conquer It

*a dramatic reading for youth and others*

by Katie Cook

*Note: This reading would be appropriate for a nighttime service any time during Advent. You will need a number of candles (about fifty small hand-held tapers and nine tall pillars) and something to light them with. You will need five readers and several people to light candles. Position the pillar candles in a semicircle around the back of the stage. The readers should have hand-held candles, which they will keep concealed until near the end. The candle lighters should start at the back of the stage area and move toward the front as the reading progresses.*

*If the number of congregants is small, give each a small hand-held candle, and lead them to stand in a circle around the worship area. If your group is large, select around forty of them (perhaps the first ones to arrive, or perhaps the youth group) to stand around the perimeter with candles ready to light.*

*In the beginning, the entire worship area should be as dark as possible. You could choose to have a prelude (perhaps one of the hymns suggested below) played by the pianist or an instrumental soloist. The mood should be somber and respectful.*

*After the prelude, Reader One steps out onto the platform or podium. The other readers should be sitting in the darkness on the platform, ready to stand and speak when it is their turn. The candle lighters should be spread out around the stage area. The first lighter should be ready to light the first candle (at the center and back of the stage) while the readers say "Light!" Then the lighters should move away from the center, alternating from left to right as they light the pillars. As the readers reach the section about the Word, the lighters will begin moving to the participants in a circle, lighting their candles and indicating for them to pass on the light.*

READER ONE: And God stepped out on space and said, "I'm lonely. I'll make me a world. As far as the eye of God could see, darkness covered EVERYTHING."

READER TWO: And God spoke into the darkness,

READERS THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE: Light!

*The first pillar is lit.*

READER TWO: And God sang into the darkness,

READERS THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE: Light, light, light!

*The next two pillars are lit.*

READER ONE: And there *was* light. Lots of light.

READER THREE (*speaks from a dark corner*): But there seems to be so much darkness now. What happened to the light?

READER FOUR (*also speaks from the darkness*): Sometimes it seems impossible to see the light. Sometimes the darkness sinks into our hearts and minds and we can't feel any hope.

READER ONE: When the people entered the Promised Land, there was killing and stealing and betrayal and pain. And yet they sang,

READER THREE: The Lord turns my darkness into light.  
*Another pillar is lit.*

READER TWO: And they sang,

READERS THREE AND FOUR: You are my lamp, O God.

*Another pillar is lit.*

READER ONE: And again they sang,

READERS THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE: God is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth.

*Another pillar is lit.*

READER ONE: When Jerusalem was destroyed and the people had been taken captive into Babylon, there was nothing but darkness in the hearts of the people. Their world was gone, their temple was gone, and their God was silent.

READER TWO: And yet the prophet wrote,

READER THREE: "Arise, shine, for your light has come."  
*Another pillar is lit.*

READER TWO: And he wrote,

READERS FOUR AND FIVE: "The glorious light of God rises upon you."

*Another pillar is lit.*

READER ONE: It was also dark in first-century Palestine, under Roman occupation, under the kings of the Herodian dynasty, and under the tyranny of religious fanatics. Poverty and oppression covered the face of the sun.

READER TWO: But then something astounding happened!

*The last pillar is lit.*

READER THREE: The Word became a creature, and lived among the other creatures.

*Lighters move to the circle of participants, lighting the candles of eight people—two near the stage and two in the back of the worship area and two in the middle of each side, indicating for each pair to begin passing the light in separate directions. One of them should light the candles of the readers, one by one.*

READER FIVE: The Word became flesh, and dwelled among us. Among US.

READER FOUR: In him was light, the true light, the light that illumines every creature.

READER FIVE: And that light shone out into the darkness,

READER THREE: And the darkness could not conquer it.

READER FOUR: The darkness could not overcome it.

READER FIVE: The darkness could not extinguish it.

READER ONE: This man said,

READER FIVE: "I have come into the world as a light."

READER ONE: And he said,

READER TWO: "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness."

READER THREE: Even now, he calls us out of the darkness into his light.

*By this time the readers' candles should be lit.*

READER FOUR: Even now, he calls us to be light for the world.

READER FIVE: Even now, in this present darkness.

*Readers indicate, by holding up their candles, that candles should be held high.*

*The service could then end with a hymn and the passing of the peace. Appropriate hymns include "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," or "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light." If you don't want the participants to have to worry with hymnals or song sheets, you could opt for "Silent Night," since most of them will be familiar with the words. You could ask a soloist or ensemble to offer the song. If you prefer a more exuberant ending, you could bring up the house lights a little and ask the congregation to file out of the area singing, "We Are Marching in the Light of God," an African hymn available from the Walton Music Corporation. Then you could ask for the passing of the peace outside, as the participants leave.*

*Sources: James Weldon Johnson, The Creation, John 1:9, John 8:12, 2Samuel 22:29, 2Samuel 23:4, Psalm 43:3, Isaiah 60:1; John 12:46; 1Peter 2:9. Special thanks to Emily Mann for searching out the scriptures that refer to the light of God and Christ.*

***The very least you can do in your life  
is to figure out what you hope for.  
And the most you can do is live inside that hope.  
Not admire it from a distance but live right in it,  
under its roof.***

***What I want is so simple I almost can't say it:  
elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around.***

***The possibility that kids  
might one day grow up to be  
neither the destroyers nor the destroyed.***

***Barbara Kingsolver,  
Animal Dreams***



*art by Sharon Rollins*

# quotes, poems, & pithy sayings

Advent is the waiting season, hoping to be rediscovered. She is seasoned waiting, wishing wisdom and pregnant with promised life. She is a season conceived every day.  
—Joseph J. Juknialis

A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.  
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

Instead of the normal questions which we put to ourselves, and these are the questions that the world asks us: “Well, what am I doing with my life? What can I do that the world needs?”

Try out this observation from the black theologian Howard Thurman: “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

The hard part for me, as I repent and repent, is the understanding that what our children need, what the world’s children need, is to grow up around people who have come alive in God’s calling, that is certainly different than as the world would have us live, work and breed.

Reducing, better yet, eliminating the garbage dump of the Payatas is to simply surrender all that I am over to God. This, I think, is the act, that of imitating Mary, is what Luke holds up for us to be about. Come alive as Mary came alive.  
—David Nybakke, Order of Ecumenical Franciscans

In deep nights I dig for you like treasure.  
For all I have seen  
that clutters the surface of my world  
is poor and paltry substitute  
for the beauty of you  
that has not happened yet.  
—Rainer Maria Rilke,  
“In tiefen Nächten grab uch dich, du Shatz”

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are changing. God alone is changeless. Patience attains the good. One who has God lacks nothing. God alone fills our needs.  
—St. Teresa of Avila

In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst babel, I repeat, speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, defend the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God, expose death and all death’s works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience.  
—William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*

**Only a handful of shepherds, poor boys working a minimum wage job watching someone else’s sheep overnight, saw the star and heard the singing of angels. Those who had eyes to see saw. Those who had ears to hear heard. That is the way it always is when God moves in the human realm.**  
—Richard Groves



art by Sharon Rollins

# Week Three: Joy, Angels

*...while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,  
repeat the sounding joy... and heaven and  
nature sing." At the core of creation there is  
joy. Deep, profound, exuberant joy.  
—Richard Groves*



## *Joy*

by Rachel C. Hunter

LEADER: A peaceful feeling of contentment interacts suddenly with a surge of hope, and the offspring is joy.

PEOPLE: Joy drinks the bubbling and gurgling of clear fresh love.

LEADER: Joy revels in the innocence of birth.

PEOPLE: Joy's soft blankets and fresh hot tea coat the coolness of misery.

LEADER: The abrupt purring of a feisty cat is a song of joy.

PEOPLE: Celebrating life is song of joy.

LEADER: The rustling of a congregation adjusting positions in their seats is a song of joy.

PEOPLE: Awareness of living is song of joy.

LEADER: Joy crackles and smacks like a fire on a cold night,

PEOPLE: And like a fire it spreads.

LEADER: Share your delights, share your tee-hee-hees and share your ha-has.

PEOPLE: Ha, ha, ha, ha.

LEADER: Make a joyful noise unto the Lord!

PEOPLE: Ha, ha, ha, ha—

LEADER: Hallelujah.

*—Rachel Hunter, a graduate of the College of Wooster in Theatre and Religious Studies, is a theatre and writing teacher at The Meeting School in Rindge, New Hampshire. She was assisted in the preparation of this litany by her writing class.*

# God the Singer

a sermon by Richard Groves

texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

Our scripture texts—one from an obscure book in the Hebrew Bible, the other from the well-known story of the early ministry of Jesus—present us with two figures who were remarkably similar in many ways, but who were strikingly different at one critical point. And the point at which they differ overshadows all their similarities and makes all the difference in the quality of their message in their own day and in our day.

As we look back over the two millennia that stretch to the biblical period, the ages seem to get closer and closer, like rings on a tree, obscuring the fact that Zephaniah and John the Baptist were separated by seven hundred years. Zephaniah—whose book is nestled snugly between Habakkuk and Haggai, lived in a time of religious syncretism.

Judah, what was left of the old nation of Israel, was dominated by mighty Assyria, as were most Near Eastern nations. Over the years the worship of Yahweh had been mixed with elements of Canaanite, Ammonite, and Assyrian worship. Zephaniah railed against what he considered to be the polluted religious practices of his people.

John the Baptist also lived in a time when his people chaffed under foreign dominance—that of Rome. But John did not ally himself with those who fought a nationalistic guerilla war against Rome. Instead, John's preaching was geared toward preparing the people for the advent of God's Messiah, whom he was convinced could come at any moment. For John, preparing to meet the Messiah meant repentance, changing one's way, especially in the moral realm.

Though they lived centuries apart, Zephaniah and John the Baptist had much in common. They were both prophets, a once-revered calling that had lain unclaimed for some time before they picked up the mantle. In all likelihood, both John and Zephaniah came from "establishment" backgrounds. John's father is identified as a priest, which



art by Lara Luksis

would locate him in the temple in Jerusalem. Zephaniah is identified as the son of Hezekiah. Since that is not a common name in the Hebrew Bible, it is possible that Zephaniah was the son of one of the last kings of Judah.

Not unexpectedly, both Zephaniah and John the Baptist were heavy into forceful expressions of moral indignation and calls for repentance, with a strong dose of the judgment of God thrown in. Zephaniah thunders,

*The great day of the Lord is near,  
Near and hastening fast...  
That day will be a day of wrath,  
A day of distress and anguish,  
A day of ruin and devastation,  
A day of darkness and gloom,  
A day of clouds and thick darkness,  
A day of trumpet blast and battle cry (1:14-16).*

Strong stuff! You can bet John the Baptist cut his teeth on words like that when he was a young prophet-in-training.

“*You brood of vipers!*” he later cried. “*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*” Zephaniah, perhaps.

But here is the point where the work of the two prophets diverge. There is in Zephaniah’s prophetic vision a joyful, expectant conclusion, a glimpse of what God had in store for Israel on the other side of judgment.

*I will save the lame and gather the outcast,  
And I will change their shame into praise  
And renown in all the earth.*

*At that time I will bring you home... (3:19-20)*

As he provides us with a glimpse of God’s joyful conclusion, Zephaniah gives us an image of God that is, so far as I know, unique in the Bible. “*The Lord, your God, is in your midst,*” the prophet declares, “*a warrior who gives victory.*”

That is not unique as an image of God; it is as ancient as the song of Miriam, which may be the oldest piece of literature in the entire Bible (Exodus 15:3). “*God will rejoice over you with gladness,*” Zephaniah continues. “*God will renew you in love. God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*” That is the unique image: God the

***“God will renew you in love. God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” That is the unique image: God the singer! The joyful, exuberant singer! I know of no other place in scripture where God is described in that way.***

singer! The joyful, exuberant singer! I know of no other place in scripture where God is described in that way.

The closest we come to this startling, provocative image is the God who confronts Job, saying,

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements?... who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (38:4,7).

The ancient creation account in Genesis 1 is reserved, even solemn, understated. *In the beginning God created... And God said... and there was... And behold it was very good.* And when the work of creation was finished, *God rested from all the work that he had done in creation* (2:3) But the author of

Job says it wasn’t that way at all. When God’s work was finished, all of creation burst forth in—song! Creation sang—for joy.

“...while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy... and heaven and nature sing.” At the core of creation there is joy. Deep, profound, exuberant joy.

Zephaniah was of the same spirit as the author of Job, and the same spirit as the psalmist who wrote, “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (30:5). Or again, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy” (126:5). For Zephaniah the judgment of God was but the prelude to God’s joyous redemption.

Then there is John the Baptist. You never quite get to the joy part with John, do you? I don’t know what happened with John. Maybe it was the desert. I’ve heard it will do strange things to your soul. Or maybe it was whatever drove him to the wilderness in the first place.

Perhaps he had made a connection with the Essenes, the wilderness-dwelling ultraconservative extremists who thought that even the worship that took place in the temple in Jerusalem—where his father worked!—was too liberal.

Susan Parker, in a sermon several years ago, wondered whether John’s mother, Elizabeth, whose tender relationship with her cousin Mary is depicted so movingly in the Gospel, ever “looked down at adorable little John and imagined a camel-hair wearing, locust-eating, hell-fire preacher.”

Can you imagine the conversations between the young mothers-to-be as they waited for the Lamaze class at the Jerusalem “Y” to begin? One young woman says, “I want my child to grow up to be a doctor.” Another says, “I want my child to be a biblical scholar.” Elizabeth says, “I want my son to grow up out in the wilderness, all by himself, wearing animal skins and eating bugs. And I want people to think he is a raving lunatic.”

I don’t know what happened to John. What I know is that somehow he got stuck. He could not get past the judgment part. There is a disconnect between the angel’s song, “*I bring you good tidings of great joy,*” and John’s introduction of Jesus thirty years later: “*One who is more powerful than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*” Images of judgment. He is announcing the coming of God’s Messiah; what happened to the joy part?

Jesus had great respect for John. “*Among those born of women no one is greater than John,*” he said (Luke 7:28). But even Jesus recognized John’s limitations. Jesus saw himself—life-affirming, joyous, *eating and drinking*—as inviting people to a dance; he saw John—austere, harsh, *eating no bread and drinking no wine*—as inviting people to a funeral (Luke 7:32).

There even came a time, as John sat in prison awaiting execution, when he began to doubt that Jesus was the Promised One of God. It was a sobering thought. For if Jesus were not the One that would mean that John had pointed to and encouraged people to follow one who turned out to be a fraud. John's life would have been wasted. That is the danger inherent in being a forerunner; you never know for sure whether you *are* one. Maybe, long after you are dead, people will look back and honor your name as a forward-looking visionary whose ideas paved the way for the breakthrough figure who followed you. Or maybe they will remember you as a fool whose ideas have value only in

***We wear ourselves out trying to be joyful. The reason we try so hard is because our culture, especially our religious culture, tells us that we are supposed to be joyful. If we are not joyful, there must be something wrong with us.***

that they demonstrate clearly the route not to take. You never know for sure. That is why it takes great courage (or foolhardiness) to assume the mantle of a forerunner.

The Gospels say that doubts arose in John's mind precisely because of who Jesus turned out to be, how he went about being God's Promised One. Did he hit John's themes? Yes. Was there judgment in his preaching? To be sure. But nothing like what John, the fire-breathing wilderness preacher would have wanted. So, John sent messengers to Jesus asking desperately, "*Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?*" (Luke 7:20).

John served a vital purpose in the work of God. He said a word that needed to be said—God's judgment on all unrighteousness. But that is not the only word in God's redemptive vocabulary. There is also a word of grace, which is the cause of great joy. Like people we have known, well-intentioned, sometimes high-minded, strongly ethical people, John got stuck on the judgment part.

He never got to the joy part. Yet it is joy on the other side of judgment that completes the Gospel. Perhaps that is why Jesus said that even those who are least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than John.

But as we think about joy we have something to learn from Zephaniah. At Christmas we talk a lot about joy. We

sing about joy. Mostly, it is *our* joy that we talk and sing about. How we can be more joyful. How we ought to be more joyful. How Christmas brings joy to us, makes us happy. The joy of Christmas is the joy that is in our hearts, or ought to be in our hearts.

Consequently, we spend a good portion of our holiday energy trying to be joyful. We employ all the seasonal aids to get us in the proper, i.e., joyful, mood—we wear bright clothes, we decorate the house, we play Christmas music, we smile a lot, we go to a lot of parties.

We wear ourselves out trying to be joyful. The reason we try so hard is because our culture, especially our religious culture, tells us that we are supposed to be joyful. If we are not joyful, there must be something wrong with us. Which only makes things worse, because if there is something wrong with us and we can't be joyful, not only are we not joyful, we feel guilty about it! So, we are going to be joyful if it kills us!

But Zephaniah says that we have it backwards. It is not *our* joy that is the underlying theme of the season; it is *God's* joy. It is not *our* song that is sung at Christmas; it is *God's* song.

The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness...

*God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival* (17).

Quite frankly, I do not know what to do with that marvelous, tantalizing image—God the joyous singer. We shouldn't analyze it, I'm sure of that. It was the creation of devotion and love and imagination, and thus it stands outside the domain of rational, hard, cold, logical dissection. Perhaps devotion, love and imagination, which gave the image birth, will somehow mediate its meaning into the deep places in our souls.

Twenty-five years ago Calvin Miller, a pastor at the time, wrote a fanciful retelling of the story of Jesus, in the spirit of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. In his book, *The Singer*, the figure for Jesus is called not to preach a sermon but to sing a song—a song that is not of his own creation but which belongs to the heart of the universe.

*When he awoke, the song was there.*

*Its melody beckoned and begged him to sing it.*

*It hung in the wind and settled  
in the meadows where he walked.*

*He knew its lovely words and could have sung it all,  
but feared to sing a song*

*whose harmony was too perfect  
for human ear to understand.*

*And still at midnight it stirred him to awareness,  
and with its haunting melody it drew him  
with a curious mystery*

*to stand before an open window.*

*It rippled through Andromeda*

and deepened Vega's hues.  
It swirled in heavy strains from galaxy to galaxy  
and gave him back his very fingerprint.  
"Sing the Song!" the heavens seemed to cry...  
... it played upon his heart and swept his soul,  
until the joy exploded his awareness –  
crying near the edge of sanity –  
"Sing... sing... SING!" (pp. 6,9)

If, as Calvin Miller and Zephaniah suggest, it is the song of God that is sung this Advent and Christmas season, then it is not necessary for us to write our own lyrics or compose our own tune. We can simply listen for the song that ripples through Andromeda and deepens Vega's hues, the song the shepherds heard. If it is God's joy that permeates this holy season of the year, then we do not have to manufacture our own brand of holiday cheer. We can tap into the joy of God, a joy that *is deeper than the good times and bad times life metes out, stronger than our best attempts and sorest failings—a joy that lifts us when we cannot lift ourselves. A joy that lies not in our circumstances, but in God* (Barbara Gerlach, *The Things That Make for Peace*).

Is there place in your life for a joyful God? A brooding God, perhaps. An angry God, maybe. A benignly disinterested God, possibly. An eternally thoughtful God, yes. But a joyful God? Is there a place in your life for a singing God? God as a judge, yes. Architect, designer, scientist, yes. Artist, painter, maybe so. But *singer*?

That is the question that is posed for us this Christmas. That is the challenge that is placed before us. Can we set aside all the other gods, the ones who exist because for subtle and complex reasons we need them to exist, and listen for the song that filters down through history and permeates from the soul of the universe? "*There must be always remaining in every person's life,*" Howard Thurman said, "*some place for the singing of angels... Despite all of the crassness of life, despite all of the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels*" (*The Mood of Christmas*, 10-11).

Listen. Do you hear what I hear?  
—Richard Groves is a pastor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His church is located on the campus of Wake Forest University.

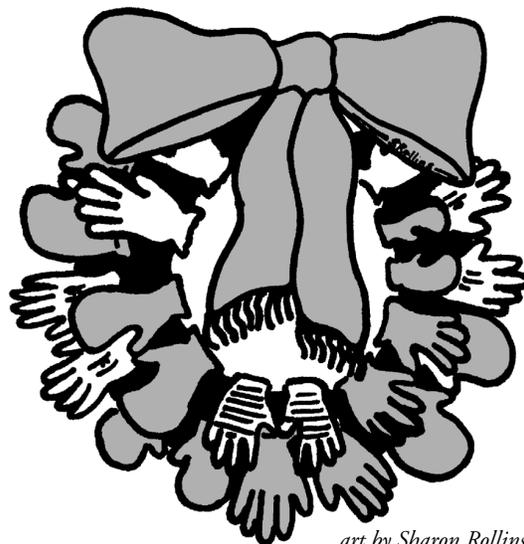
## Ideas for Children's Activities

Instead of printing a children's sermon this time, we decided to have a brainstorming session concerning children's activities. We have a number of ideas from various people. LeAnna Bryant, an educator who lives in Atlanta, Georgia, suggests using a "trick" candle in a children's sermon. When it is blown out, the light comes back. LeAnna suggests using this to illustrate how the darkness of the world can't ever blow out the light that we have in God and Jesus Christ.

Mark McClintock, an organizer of children's camps in Birmingham, Alabama, shares ideas for Advent activities with a justice theme. One of these is a "recycled" nativity crèche, made by the children completely out of disposable household items. An emphasis on the environment, with part of our theme passage from John 1, "all things were made by him," could accompany this activity.

Another of Mark's ideas is to give the children a chance to make creative Christmas cards, also out of household items (the point would be not to buy any materials to make the cards) and take them to a nursing or retirement home. The children could sing Christmas carols for the residents when they deliver the cards.

Another twist on this idea would be for the children (or youth) to take the names of members of the oldest Sunday school class in your congregation, and to make cards (or some other kind of gift) for each one. Perhaps



art by Sharon Rollins

one Sunday morning in Advent, the two groups could meet to together, and sing carols.

An idea which we printed before, but which is worthy of repetition, also comes from Mark McClintock. Ask the children to bring gloves and mittens to your group's activity. Make a Christmas wreath out of them, using a styrofoam form (make sure it's the kind made without CFCs that are harmful to the environment.) When Christmas is close, take the wreath to a homeless shelter or emergency assistance center.

# Week Four: Love, Mary

*And when we give one another our Christmas presents in His name let us remember that He has given us the sun and the moon and the stars, oceans and all that lives and moves upon them. He has given us all green things and everything that blossoms and bears fruit—and all that we quarrel about and all that we have misused. And to save us from our own foolishness and from all our sins He came down to Earth and gave himself. —Sigrid Undset*

## Love

by Rachel C. Hunter

LEADER: A yearning need as poignant as hunger.

PEOPLE: We all strive for love.

LEADER: And there are countless emotions which we mistake for love.

PEOPLE: But love is big enough to embody countless emotions.

LEADER: Love is not the opposite of power; it is the antithesis.

PEOPLE: Love provokes change in gentle strengthening.

LEADER: Love eats away at evil and hatred as a passionate sculptor chips away at a formless boulder to reveal an exquisite form.

PEOPLE: Love is the creator river composing a stunningly breath-taking canyon.

LEADER: Love is the view from a canyon height encompassing everything in sight.

PEOPLE: Love is the ability to recognize humanity even in the midst of one's own fury.

LEADER: Love is the force of eloquence in the midst of silence.

PEOPLE: Love has the power that light has in darkness.

LEADER: Love renders darkness nonexistent.



art by Rebecca Ward



*—Rachel Hunter, a graduate of the College of Wooster in Theatre and Religious Studies, is a theatre and writing teacher at The Meeting School in Rindge, New Hampshire. She was assisted in the preparation of this litany by her writing class.*

# Music, Sweet Buns, Coffee, and Love

*a service for Christmas Eve, based on the Moravian Love Feast*

compiled by Crystal Carter

**N**ote: The Moravian church is one of the few churches who hold services dedicated to the concept of Christian love. Moravian Christians in the New World, particularly around Pennsylvania and the Carolinas, have historically embraced the coming of Christmas with a “Love-Feast.” The name comes from the practice of the apostolic church described in the second chapter of the book of Acts. The Love-Feasts of the early church often preceded the practice of the Lord’s Supper with a common meal.

Moravian Love-Feasts are musical services in which the congregation partakes of simple food while the choir sings appropriate hymns and anthems (or while the organ plays quietly). The congregation is traditionally served plain sweet buns and coffee (or tea, or chocolate) in the time it takes to sing three hymns. Beeswax candles are distributed (as late as the 15th century, devout people believed that bees came straight from Paradise), and as the choir and/or congregation reaches the last phrase of the final hymn (often “Joy to the World! The Lord is Come”), participants raise their lighted candles in praise and celebration of the birth of the baby king.

Moravians generally think of the Love-Feasts as separate from the Lord’s Supper—saying that, while the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion, celebrates the relationship between God and each believer, Love-Feasts celebrate the holy fellowship that believers enjoy with one another. Herbert Spaugh, a Moravian historian, wrote, “Since love is the greatest power in the world, and Christian love is the greatest of virtues, I have often wondered why more branches of the Church do not adopt the Love-feast as one of their appointed services.”

## **The Prelude** **“What Wondrous Love is This”**

This could be played by the organ, or sung as an a cappella solo.

## **Opening Collect for Christmas**

Eternal God, by the birth of Jesus Christ you gave yourself to the world. Grant that, being born in our hearts, he may save us from all our sins, and restore within us the image and likeness of our Creator, to whom be everlasting praise and glory, world without end. Amen.

## **Carol: “O Come, All Ye Faithful”**

*This carol could be introduced with the following:*

One of the most popular Christmas hymns, “O Come All Ye Faithful” (also known as the “Latin hymn”) might never have been known by the English-speaking world if it had not been by the chance work of a wandering



art by Caroline Oladipo

scribe. In 1750, John Francis Wade, who was a professional copy writer, included an “original” Christmas poem, called “Adepter Fideles” in a manuscript compiled for the English Roman Catholic College in Lisbon, Portugal. Thirty-five years later a copy of the hymn was sent to the Portuguese Chapel in London and from there its popularity spread throughout the world.

### **Carol: “It Came upon the Midnight Clear”**

*This carol could be introduced with the following:*

The peace of Christmas, proclaimed by the heavenly chorus, is one of God’s greatest gifts to humankind. As 2 Cor. 5:19 says, “God was reconciling the world to himself.” This message of reconciliation involves us in three different aspects: peace with God, peace with our brothers and sisters, and peace within ourselves. It is this blessed concept that hymn writer Edmund Sears, wanted to emphasize in this unusual carol.

### **Responsive Affirmation of Faith**

*(taken from Luke 1:46-55)*

LEADER: In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

PEOPLE: This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

LEADER: All went to their own towns to be registered.

PEOPLE: Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

LEADER: He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

PEOPLE: While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

LEADER: And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

PEOPLE: In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

LEADER: Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

PEOPLE: But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see —I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

LEADER: To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

PEOPLE: 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 he favors!”

### **Introduction to the Love Feast**

*The following should be read aloud:*

From the time when the Church was only a few days old, all the believers lived in wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful as they praised God. Therefore, we as a community of believers will now share with each other in a Love-Feast. *(adapted from Acts 2:44-47a, The Message)*

### **Distribution of the Love Feast**

*Note: The sharing of buns and coffee takes place during the next three hymns. As they serve one another and partake themselves, participants are asked to pray in love for one another, especially for those seated on either side of them.*

### **Moravian Table Grace**

After all have been served, the congregation joins in the saying of grace:

Come, Lord Jesus, Our Guest to be,  
And bless these gifts, Bestowed by Thee.  
Bless our dear ones everywhere,  
Keep them in Thy loving care. Amen



## **Carol: “What Child Is This”**

*This carol could be introduced with the following:*

The question posed by this well-loved carol is “the” question present in the hearts of those who witnessed Jesus’ birth. We can almost hear the question being asked from one to another as they gazed into the human manger: “Why lies He in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christian, fear—for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.” These beautiful words were written by William Dix. While a successful insurance salesman in Glasgow, Scotland, he was stricken by a serious illness at age 29. He was confined to a bed and then suffering a deep depression until he called out to God and met him in a new and real way. Out of this spiritual renewal came this beautiful carol.

## **Carol: “Angels from the Realms of Glory”**

*This carol could be introduced with the following:*

This Christmas hymn is one of James Montgomery’s favorite compositions. Considered to be one of the greatest of the Moravian hymn writers, he wrote this carol in 1816 and it appeared first as a poem in his newspaper on Christmas Eve of that year. Considered by many students of hymnody to be one of our finer Christmas hymns. In a unique style it addressed first the angelic chorus in the first stanza, then the shepherds in the second, the wise men in the third, and finally today’s believers—calling all to worship Christ our King.

## **Carol: “Angels We Have Heard on High”**

*This carol could be introduced with the following:*

A traditional French carol, this hymn tells of the vast numbers of angels swiftly descending toward earth through the star sprinkled sky. They hovered with folded wings over a silent field near Bethlehem. “There they are,” said the lead angel, “the humble shepherds who have been chosen by God to receive our message. It will be the most wonderful news that mortal men or women have ever received.” The shepherds were terrified. Covering their faces in the brilliance of the angelic light, they listened with awe as the heavenly host before them began to speak in their own language: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”

## **The Dismissal Carol: “Joy to the World! The Lord is Come”**

*Note: During this carol, leaders distribute candles and the participants light each other’s candles. At the end of the last verse, participants raise their candles high.*

*—Crystal Carter is a freelance writer who will be entering a graduate program in communications in the spring.*

*Sources: “A Short Introduction to the History, Customs and Practices of the Moravian Church” by Herbert Spaugh; letter from Bass Mitchell, Hot Springs, Arkansas; Homilies and Bible Study by Email: [www.homiliesbyemail.com](http://www.homiliesbyemail.com)*

*Bun recipe from “Holiday Traditions-United States of America”(California Mall: copyright Mayaco)*

### **MORAVIAN LOVE-FEAST BUNS**

- 1 cake yeast
- 1/4 cup tepid water
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1/4 cup soft butter
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/4 cup warm mashed potatoes
- 2 cups or more lukewarm water
- Melted butter or cream for glazing
- 2-4 cups flour



Dissolve yeast in 1/4 cup warm water. Add sugar to beaten egg, then softened butter, salt, warm mashed potatoes, and yeast mixture. Add alternately flour and warm water to make soft but firm dough. Knead until smooth on lightly floured board or in hands.

Cover with clean, warm cloth and set in warm place to rise until double in bulk. When dough has risen, punch down and make into buns 3" to 4" in diameter. (If preferred, any other shape may be made with this dough.) Place so they do not touch on greased sheets. Cover with warm cloth and let rise again.

Place in 400 F. oven and bake until brown, about 20 minutes. Brush with cream or melted butter just before removing from stove. Makes 18 to 20 buns.

# The Birth of Jesus

## *a sermon for Christmas Day*

by Richard Groves

text: Luke 2:1-20

*In those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.* Israel, the once-proud nation and still proud people, was an occupied territory and had been for longer than even the eldest of the elders could remember. Evidences of the occupation were everywhere: Roman soldiers on the streets; Roman bureaucrats strutting the sidewalks; Roman coins crossing palms every time produce or goods were bought and sold. Even the great public works that had been built by Rome—the roads, amphitheaters, and aqueducts—were architectural taunts to the fiercely nationalistic Jews.

Now, on top of everything else, an enrollment, a census. “Rome wants to know exactly how many of us there are,” some must have said, “how many despise them for being here.”

*And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.* You could not sign up just anywhere, not even in the city in which you lived and worked. You had to enroll in your ancestral hometown. “They are just keeping track of us,” some must have guessed. “Making sure they know where we are.” Guessing the motives of the oppressor can become a full-time obsession for the oppressed.

The enrollment was deeply resented by many Jews who thought it was Rome’s way of rubbing salt into their national wound. There was talk of striking back, talk of an insurrection. Most of the talk seemed to come from the volatile north country, where there always seemed to be something brewing. There was a brief, bloody outbreak in the Galilee, led by a man named Judas. Not *that* Judas. It was a common name.



***God has chosen the weak things to overcome the strong, foolish things to confound the wise, lowly things to humble the haughty. That is God’s way, and it ought to be a reminder for us when we wish to know where to look for God or to know what God wants us to do in the world.***

art by Garrett Burleson

The uprising was ill-advised and ill-fated. Judas was killed by the Romans, and his fanatical followers were scattered. But it was a measure of the times. And it lends an air of seriousness to the Christmas story when we realize that the “census” that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was the occasion for politically-inspired violence, bloodshed, and death.

*Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in the Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.* Surely, he had heard about Judas and the “recent unpleasantness.” But politics was the farthest thing from his mind. He had more pressing personal problems. Mary was his “espoused wife,” as the King James Version puts it classically. They were engaged but not yet married. Admittedly, engagement meant more than it does today; it had legal standing. Still, it was not the same as marriage. And Mary—well, she was far, dangerously far along with her first child. So you see the problem. When Joseph had heard that Mary was pregnant, his first thought had been divorce, for he knew that he was not the father. But they had talked, and there had been strange visions—appearances to Mary and to Joseph—and he had decided to remain at her side, come what may.

Surely, people would talk. Nazareth was not a large town; everybody knew everybody else. People knew that Mary and Joseph were not married, and they could plainly see that she was pregnant. And, ancient stories about a prophet’s mother and a divinely ordained conception notwithstanding, you can bet that they would not be in a mood to buy a tale about a virgin birth.

So, political considerations aside, it was remarkably good luck that Caesar Augustus called for an enrollment when he did. It gave Mary and Joseph a good excuse to get out of town, go down south, sign Rome’s papers, and find a place to have the baby. Maybe they could even stay a while, a couple of years perhaps, until the talk died down back home.

Their trouble began when they tried to get a room in Bethlehem. The small town was overflowing with people who had come to enroll. No rooms were to be had. Is it just me, or do you suspect as well that if Joseph had been better-heeled or if he had been better placed some innkeeper could have found him a room? But he knew no one, he had no connections. That is why he and Mary spent the night in a barn. And that is where *she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.*

When Mary’s baby was born it was said that the very heavens sang of peace on an earth that was, at that very moment, seething with a bitterness and an anger that threatened to explode into violence at any moment. Not everyone heard the angels sing. My guess is that angels sing only at private auditions. The mayor of Bethlehem did not hear the song, so far as we know. If anyone else saw the

strange, imposing star overhead, his/her story did not survive the years. Certainly, King Herod—dangerous, paranoid Herod—did not see it. Only a handful of shepherds, poor boys working a minimum wage job watching someone else’s sheep overnight, saw the star and heard the singing of angels. Those who had eyes to see saw. Those who had ears to hear heard. That is the way it always is when God moves in the human realm.

Thusly did his life began. The son of an ordinary carpenter and his teenaged wife-to-be. The baby and his parents, destined to become the most famous of all young families, were mere extras in a cast of thousands. They moved unobtrusively across a set on which the main characters were the major players of the day. History was taking place around them, but like all “little people” they were busy about things that had a more direct impact on their lives, things like having a baby.

Ironies abound. His birth was dated by the current Caesar, Augustus, and by Quirinius, governor of Syria. None of us would have ever heard of Quirinius if it had not been for the man the baby grew up to be. In time, all of history, even the great cataclysmic events, would be dated not by the mighty political or military leaders of the age but by that seemingly insignificant birth in Bethlehem.

Who could have foreseen that on that first silent night? Who, in his/her right mind, would have bet on the baby? But Quirinius is gone, and no one cares very much any more. Caesar Augustus is gone. The Roman Empire, for that matter, is gone. But Jesus lives on in the hearts and lives of millions of people who call him Lord.

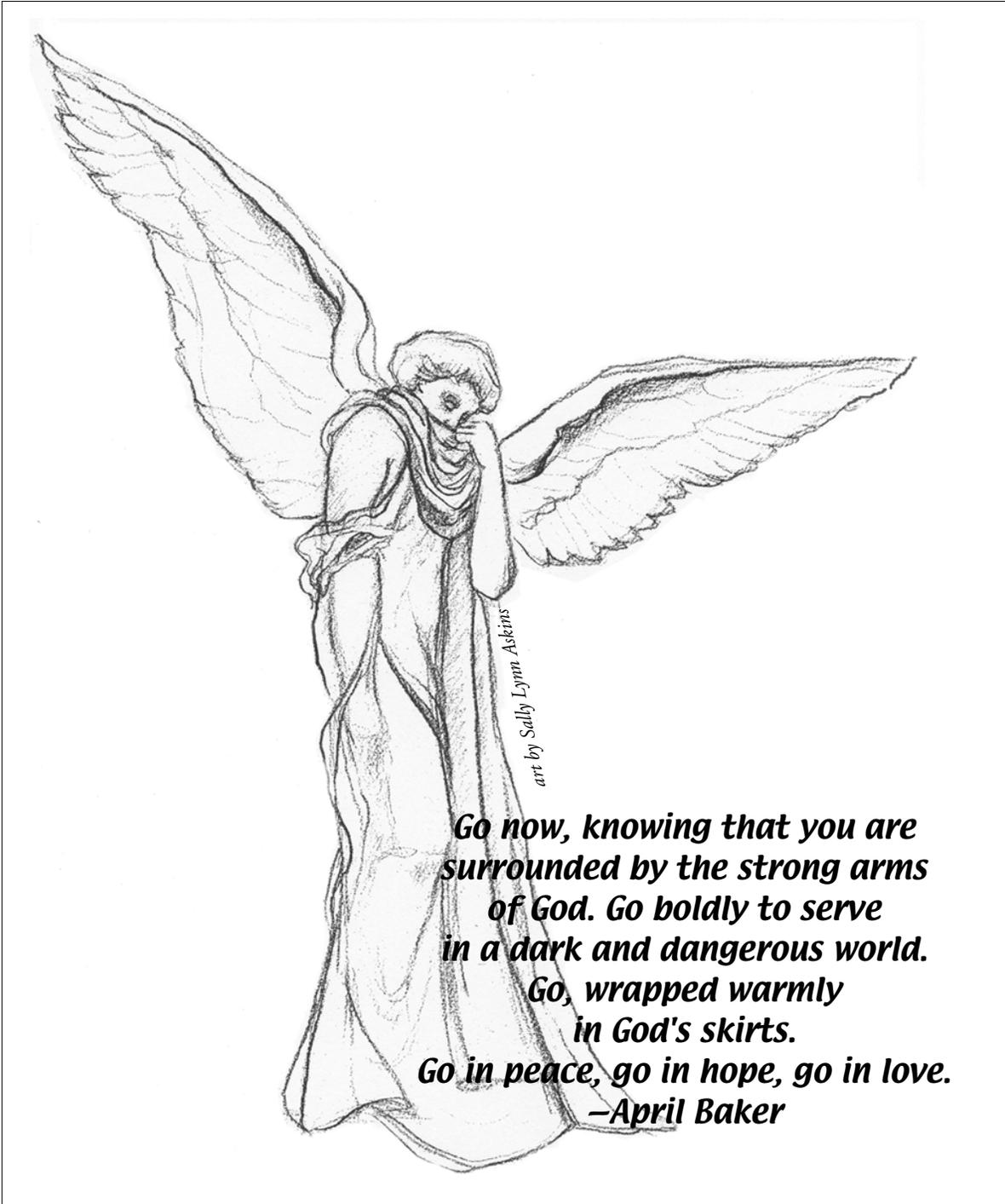
What is the message? It is that God has chosen the weak things to overcome the strong, foolish things to confound the wise, lowly things to humble the haughty. That is God’s way, and it ought to be a reminder for us when we wish to know where to look for God or to know what God wants us to do in the world.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace to all people,  
To make music in the heart.*

(Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*)



—Richard Groves is a pastor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His church is located on the campus of Wake Forest University.



***Go now, knowing that you are  
surrounded by the strong arms  
of God. Go boldly to serve  
in a dark and dangerous world.  
Go, wrapped warmly  
in God's skirts.  
Go in peace, go in hope, go in love.  
—April Baker***