

A New Song



for Silenced Hearts

Creative Resources for Advent and Christmastide

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

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a word about this packet

This packet is designed to take your congregation on the journey through Advent with resources that are both traditional and creative. We gathered these resources to help you to begin dreaming, dancing, singing, and hoping—in times that sometimes seem hopeless. The theme is taken from a prayer by Howard Williams. The sermon is by Lanny Peters, who our readers have met before. You will find another hymn from John Ballenger. We have incorporated some writing by Wally Christian, whose meditations you have seen before. You will find a dramatic reading by teenagers Jonathan Barrow and Tim Van Treuren, and also one by Jonathan Reynolds, a college senior. We have included a dialogue written by Mark McClintock to present the Christmas story to children in a fresh way.

Along with these rather unusual resources you will find lessons and hymns—for the Sundays in Advent, Christmas Day, and Epiphany—based on the Revised Common Lectionary for Year A.

Much of the art in this packet, including the cover art, is by Susan Smith, our newest artistic discovery. Susan, a mother of three and grandmother of eight living in Bellmead, Texas, also writes poetry “and other writings from the heart.” Other art is by Rebecca Ward, an art student at the University of Texas, and Van Darden, a student at Baylor University.

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. May it be so.

Gratefully,
Katie Cook, *Sacred Seasons* editor



A New Song for Silenced Hearts

by Howard Williams

O God, in this hour, may you cause our silenced hearts
to sing a new song—

A song that comes from the melody whispered
in our ears by the Spirit.

Cause us to be renewed, that our song
will sing your praises—

for your faithfulness and unending love.

Holy Spirit, whisper a song, a new song,
that will cause us to dance
with the floods and the hills
as they, too, sing and clap
and seas roar.

Draw near, O God,
that we might sing this new song together
as your people in this community,
here in this place of worship.

—Howard Williams is a minister in Huntsville, Alabama.

art by Susan Smith



Dreams and Visions:

A Sermon for Advent

by Lanny Peters

Luke 1:26-55

Had it really happened or was it a dream? To Mary, it seemed so vivid, so real, and yet so impossible to believe. Mary remembered the angel so clearly, the way he looked, and each word he spoke. She could still sense all the different emotions she had felt. She remembered being perplexed, then afraid, then full of wonder, and finally filled with a deep sense of peace.

She had said, “Yes,” to this dream or vision. She had believed the last words she had heard, that nothing was impossible with God. She could even call to mind the exact words she had spoken, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

But now the angel was gone, and Mary was left alone, wondering if it was real. It must have flashed through her mind that this dream could well become a nightmare. She surely wondered, “Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stick by me? And what about Joseph? How will he take this? What will happen if he does not believe me? I could be dragged into town and stoned for betraying him.”

Who should she tell first? The she realized the angel had given her a clue just before he left. “Your relative Elizabeth—the old one who could never have children—is now six months pregnant herself.” As soon as she could, Mary set out in haste for the hill country where Elizabeth lived with her husband Zechariah the priest. Elizabeth had hidden herself away for six months, not ready to face the public with her pregnancy.

Her young relative, Mary, shows up unexpectedly. It is one of the most tender moments in the Bible. At the sound of Mary’s voice, Elizabeth feels her baby jump. Feeling the mystery within and without, she is filled with the Spirit and a blessing for Mary flows out of her. Mary basks in her words.

One of the principle themes of Advent is love. The story of God’s love is seen in the relationship between these two women. For the next three months, the secret of the incarnation is shared only in the friendship of two pregnant women in a remote mountain village, one about fourteen years old and the other pushing sixty. They each give and receive love and encouragement. The new life

in one brings out the new life in the other. Together they realize that “I am part of you and you of me. Your pain and your joy are mine also.”

Elizabeth blesses Mary for her faith, for believing that there would be a fulfillment of the vision that came to her. Mary accepted that blessing and passed it on to her baby. There is no doubt Mary had a tremendous



But now the angel was gone, and Mary was left alone, wondering if it was real. It must have flashed through her mind that this dream could well become a nightmare.

influence on who Jesus became. The positive nature of Jesus' relationship with women, so very unusual for his time, started with his relationship with his mother, Mary.

When my church's Advent team was studying today's text, we recalled the story of a woman accused of adultery who was brought to Jesus by an angry crowd to be stoned. They asked Jesus to give his approval, since this was clearly within the bounds of the law. Jesus sat quietly and scribbled in the dirt for a long time. Perhaps he was

We have too often turned Mary into some idealized image of motherhood. She has become someone to adore, rather than someone to inspire and empower us to address social injustice.

thinking that this woman could have been his mother had Joseph turned against her. When he finally spoke, Jesus saved the woman's life by confronting the crowd and helping them to see their common humanity.

Mary's influence on Jesus might also be seen in her response to Elizabeth's blessing. It is called the Magnificat, because of the first line, "My soul magnifies the Lord." What a wonderful image. Just as something small can suddenly be seen when it is magnified, through Mary, God can be seen more clearly.

She realizes that she is one of very low estate in her society, and yet God has still chosen her. Mary reminds us that God often works in our world through those considered insignificant by others.

The poet Gwendolyn Brooks understood this. In one of her poems, she reflects on seeing the President of the United States appear for a press conference. But she looks behind the pomp and circumstance, and thinks, "Someone came into that room and cleaned it all nice and clean. Someone polished those shoes so shiny and pressed those shirt collars so perfect."

Gwendolyn Brooks grew up in the slums of Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century and made history in 1950 by becoming the first African-American to win a Pulitzer Prize. Her poems dealt with family and friends and what it was like to grow up black in a racist society. She spent much of her life working with children and helping to get obscure black poets recognized.

Sterling Plump, a professor at the University of Chicago, said of her, "At a time when black people were being clubbed into submission because of their race, it was her eloquence that got many African Americans to look at their community, and to see their minds as something of great worth."

Mary realized that what was happening was not just about her. If God was breaking out in her life, and breaking out in Elizabeth's, then God would break out in the lives of others like them. Mary sang out about how God would scatter the proud and bring down the mighty from their high places. God would lift up the lowly and insignificant and fill the hungry with good things. The rich would go away empty, perhaps because of the lack of satisfaction in placing their hope in wealth, or maybe as a means of restitution.

Mary's vision was a radical one. The Magnificat has even been banned in certain times and places because of its revolutionary nature. We have too often turned Mary into some idealized image of motherhood. She has become someone to adore, rather than someone to inspire and empower us to address social injustice.

Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic and theologian, said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to (God's) Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This then is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us."

Mary's vision is that the world is pregnant with the possibility of God's love and justice. The courage to sing of new life, which flows from God, creates the new reality that can then be lived.

In 1988, in the midst of the struggles against racism in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached to the leaders of his country, "You may be powerful, indeed very powerful, but you are not God. You are ordinary mortals. God, the God whom we worship, cannot be mocked. You have already lost. We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!"

His words and his vision echoed those of a peasant girl who sang with an old woman, the two of them sharing a secret that would change the world forever.

God's grace is not limited to any particular class, but certainly has a special concern for the poor and oppressed. —Lanny Peters is a pastor in Decatur, Georgia. This sermon was preached in conjunction with the celebration of Human Rights Sunday, which commemorates the day in 1948, the United Nations adopted a Universal declaration of Human Rights. Lanny wrote, "It reflects one vision for how God wants to be magnified in our world. Like Bishop Tutu and Mary both suggest, may we live it into being." We have enclosed in this packet a bulletin insert which features a litany for this commemoration, produced by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

“Once the Music of Creation”

by John Stewart Ballenger

Tune: HYFYRDOL; Meter: 8.7.8.7.D
Music by Rowland H. Richard (1811-1887)

1. Once the music of creation,
summoned all into the dance.
The whole world's participation
was the joy that still enchants.
God in leading did us gather
all around the One who sings-
bound to music, bound together-
in the freedom dancing brings.

2. But our freedom we do squander
thinking to escape all ties.
As if God exists to ponder-
others us to satisfy.
In our depths we're all connected
one to all and all to One.
In the dance is God reflected,
and salvation is begun.

3. In the dance of all creation,
we are asked to take our place-
to express our adoration
and embrace the gift of grace.
Long have we been out of step now-
long have we ignored the beat.
God is dancing us to show how-
dancing dying to defeat.

4. Once the music of creation,
summoned all into the dance.
The whole world's participation
is the goal we now advance.
God in leading does us gather
all around the One who sings-
bound to music, bound together-
in the freedom dancing brings.

—John Ballenger is a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland. The hymn above was originally written for the Sixth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary. The art on this page is adapted from art created by Chris Dupere for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

First Sunday in Advent

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thine advent here;
and drive away the shades of night,
and pierce the clouds and bring us light.

—12th-century Latin hymn,

translated by John M. Neale, 1851

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

—Isaiah 2:4



Lessons & Hymns for the First Sunday in Advent

Reading from the Psalms:

Psalm 122

Reading from the Prophets:

Isaiah 2:1-5

Hymn:

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Text: 12th-century Latin hymn,
translated by John M. Neale, 1851;
(verses added by Henry Sloane Coffin, 1916)

Music: 15th-century French;
arrangement and harmony by Thomas Helmore, 1856
Tune: VENI EMMANUEL, Meter: LM with Refrain

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thine advent here;
and drive away the shades of night,
and pierce the clouds and bring us
light.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emanuel shall come to thee,
O Israel.

stanzas by Henry Sloane Coffin, 1916

O come, thou Wisdom
from on high,
and order all things far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show
and cause us in her ways to go.
(Refrain)

O come, Desire of nations, bind
all peoples in one heart and mind;
bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease;
fill all the world with
heaven's peace.
(Refrain)

Reading from the Epistles:

Romans 13:8-14

Hymn:

“Savior of the Nations, Come”

Text: Martin Luther, 1523 (stanzas 1, 2);
translated by William Reynolds
Music: Enchiridion Oder Handbüchlein
by Johann Walther, 1524; harmony by J.S. Bach
*Tune: NUN KOMM, DER HEIDEN HEILAND,
Meter: 77.77*

1. Savior of the nations, come;
Virgin's son, here make thy home!
Marvel now, O heaven and earth,
that the Lord chose such a birth.
2. Not by human flesh and blood;
by the Spirit of our God
was the Word of God made flesh,
woman's offspring, pure and fresh.

Reading from the Gospels:

Matthew 24:37-44



I Hope

by Kris Kaiser Olson
Hebrews 10:23-25

I hope. In the midst of all this anger and despair? Yes, I continue to hope! How? Why? Because someone before me hoped. That hope encouraged me, inspired me, challenged me, changed me. I am part of a ripple effect that began in a barn in Bethlehem. Dare I break the chain of 2000 years? No matter how awful the world seems, with a faith and knowledge of eternal life I can still hope. And as others have infected me with their hope, perhaps mine can spread as well. And change the world? You've got to be kidding! No. But this chain that started with that baby depends on me—and you. We'll help each other, support and pray for each other and our friends, and their friends, and so on. See how it grows! Suddenly it's larger and more powerful than anything I alone could hope for. Let's celebrate as we work and hope together in Christ Jesus.
—Kris Kaiser Olson is an organizer for educational justice issues.

Quotes, Poems, & Pithy Sayings

Spirit's Love

Awesome beauty, Presence sublime,
Forever within and without all that's
Created and all that's not.

Seen, heard and touched in part—
Hints in gentle smiles
Songbirds aloft the wind,
Inner stirring of unbounded joy
Not fully perceived or understood.

Gift of Light, Breath of Life,
Spirit of Christ—
Compassionate, whole and vibrantly real.
Granting trustful Innocence
The experience of your world
In ways that cynical cleverness
Can only begin to imagine.

Sweet freedom to love fully,
Our holy birthright, forsaken for shekels
Of worldly acceptance, status and power.
By virtue of your extravagant Grace,
Daily, hourly and eternally we can choose,
Again and again, hell or heaven—
Hellish imprisonment in selfish desire, or
Heavenly liberation in Spirit's love.

God who spins human logic round,
Somehow you've made certain—
The more we take, the less we have.
The more we give, the more we receive.
The more proud we are, the less we understand.
The more peaceful and gentle we are,
The more fearless and effective we
become.

The more grateful our hearts, the more
Aware we are of the extravagance
of your gifts! Amen.
—*Skip Londos*

There is also a legend that Mary was not the first young woman to whom the angel came. But she was the first one to say yes. And how unsurprising it would be for a fourteen-year-old girl to refuse the angel. To be disbelieving. Or to say: 'Are you sure you mean-but I'm unworthy-I couldn't anyhow-I'd be afraid. No, no, it's inconceivable, you can't be asking me-I know it's a great

honor but wouldn't it upset them all, both our families?
They're very proper, you see.'

—*Madeleine L'Engle, And It Was Good: Reflections on Beginnings*

Christmas is no less a cataclysmic event than Easter and resurrection. The world order is altered and will never be the same. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth." Christmas is not just for the kids. Here is the essence of Christianity; grace is a person, it is the gift of Godself to us in a person. The truth is greater than that which can be explained. The truth of God must be received by faith.

—*Raymond Bailey*

Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept. Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking. Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.

—*Frederich Buechner, Wishful Thinking*

The gospel is...a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, rendered inane. Partly the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes.

—*Walter Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet*



What we have lost... is a full sense of the power of God—to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hopeless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory.

—*Barbara Brown Taylor, Home by Another Way*

Second Sunday in Advent

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.
—Charles Wesley

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the
knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
—Isaiah 11:9



Lessons & Hymns for the Second Sunday in Advent

Reading from the Psalms:

Psalms 72 or 72:1-8

Reading from the Prophets:

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Hymn:

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”

Text: Charles Wesley, 1744

Music: Rowland H. Pritchard, 1830;
harmony from The English Hymnal

Tune: HYFRYDOL, Meter: 87.87 D

1. Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.
2. Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Reading from the Epistles:

Romans 15:4-13

Hymn:

“Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming”

Text: 15th-century German;

translated by Theodore Baker

Music: Alte Catholische Geistliche
Kirchengesang, 1599;

harmony by Michael Praetorius, 1609

Tune: ES IST EIN ROS, Meter: 76.76.676

1. Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
from tender stem hath sprung!

Of Jesse's lineage coming,
as those of old have sung.
It came, a floweret bright,
amid the cold of winter,
when half spent was the night.

2. Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
the Rose I have in mind;
with Mary we behold it,
the Virgin Mother kind.
To show God's love aright,
she bore to us a Savior,
when half spent was the night.

Reading from the Gospels:

Matthew 3:1-12

Advent Prayer

by Beverly Walker

Almighty God, creator of all humankind, loving Lord who sends to us the Prince of Peace, we give praise and honor to your name. Look with compassion on the whole human family. In this season of promise, lift from our hearts the burdens of arrogance and hatred. Lord, break down the contrived walls that separate us and unite us in bonds of love. Give us strength in our daily struggle to accomplish your purposes on earth. In this season of hope and promise, our prayer is that all nations and all people may serve you and labor for Peace on Earth. We ask your blessings on those who lead us as we worship through scripture reading, prayer, and music. We offer our prayer in the name of the Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

—Beverly Walker is a professor at McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas.



Third Sunday in Advent

Heal us, Emmanuel, hear our prayer;
we wait to feel thy touch;
deep-wounded souls to thee repair,
and Savior, we are such.

—*William Cowper*

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water...

Isaiah 35:5-7a



Lessons & Hymns for the Third Sunday in Advent

Reading from the Psalms:

Psalms 146 or 146:5-10

Reading from the Prophets:

Isaiah 35

Hymn:

“Thou Hidden Love of God”

Text: Gerhard Tersteegen, 1697-1769;

translated by John Wesley, 1703-1791

Music: Geistliche Lieder; harmony by J.S. Bach

Tune: *VATER UNSER*, Meter: 88.88.88

1. Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
whose depth unfathomed no one knows,
I see from far thy beauteous light,
and only sigh for thy repose;
my heart is pained, nor can it be
at rest, till it finds rest in thee.
2. ‘Tis mercy all that thou hast brought
my mind to seek its peace in thee;
yet while I seek, but find thee not,
no peace my wandering soul shall see.
O when shall all my wanderings end,
and all my steps to thee-ward tend?
3. Is there a thing beneath the sun
that strives with thee my heart to share?
Ah, tear it thence and reign alone,
the Lord of every motion there;
then shall my heart from earth be free,
when it hath found repose in thee.
4. O Love, thy sovereign aid impart
to save me from low-thoughted care;
chase this self-will from all my heart,
from all its hidden mazes there;
make me thy dutiful child that I
ceaseless may “Abba, Father” cry.

5. Each moment draw from earth away
my heart that lowly waits thy call;
speak to my inmost soul and say,
“I am thy love, thy God, thy all!”
To feel thy power, to hear thy voice,
to taste thy love, be all my choice.

Reading from the Epistles:

James 5:7-10

Hymn:

“Heal Us, Emmanuel, Hear Our Prayer”

Text: William Cowper, 1779

Music: Johann Crüger, 1647

Tune: *GRAFENBERG*, Meter: *C.M.*

1. Heal us, Emmanuel, hear our prayer;
we wait to feel thy touch;
deep-wounded souls to thee repair,
and Savior, we are such.
2. Our faith is feeble, we confess
we faintly trust thy word;
but wilt thou pity us the less?
Be that far from thee, Lord!
3. Remember him who once applied
with trembling for relief;
“Lord, I believe,” with tears he cried;
“O help my unbelief!”
4. She, too, who touched thee in the press
and healing virtue stole,
was answered, “Daughter, go in peace:
thy faith hath made thee whole.”
5. Like her, with hopes and fears we come
to touch thee if we may;
O send us not despairing home;
send none unhealed away.

Reading from the Gospels:

Matthew 11:2-11

Fourth Sunday in Advent

For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.

—*Edmund H. Sears*

Therefore the Lord will give you a sign. Look,
the young woman is with child, and shall bear
a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat
curds and honey by the time he knows how to
refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the
child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the
good, the land before whose two kings you are in
dread will be deserted.

—*Isaiah 7: 14-16*



Lessons & Hymns for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Reading from the Psalms:

Psalm 24 or 24:1-7

Reading from the Prophets:

Isaiah 7:1-17

Hymn:

“O Come, All Ye Faithful”

Text: John F. Wade, circa 1743;

translated by Frederick Oakeley and others

Music: John F. Wade;

harmony from Collections of Motetts or Antiphons

Tune: ADESTE FIDELES, Meter: Irr.

1. O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem.
Come and behold him, born the King of angels;

Refrain:

O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

2. True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal,
lo, he shuns not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father, begotten not created;
(Refrain)
3. Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation;
O sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, all glory in the highest;
(Refrain)
4. See how the shepherds, summoned to his cradle,
leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
we too will thither bend our joyful footsteps;
(Refrain)
5. Child, for us sinners poor and in the manger,
we would embrace thee with love and awe.
Who would not love thee, loving us so dearly?
(Refrain)
6. Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning,
Jesus, to thee be all glory given.
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing:
(Refrain)

Reading from the Epistles:

Romans 1:1-7

Hymn:

“It Came upon the Midnight Clear”

Text: Edmund H. Sears, 1849

Music: Richard Storrs Willis, 1850

Tune: CAROL, Meter: CMD

1. 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 men,
from heaven's all-gracious King.”
The world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.
2. 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 lowly plains,
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.
3. 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!
4. For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.

Reading from the Gospels:

Matthew 1:18-25

Readings & Carols for Christmas Eve

Note: This service could be easily celebrated as a candlelight service. Light the four advent candles and have the Christ Candle ready for lighting. Pass out small candles with drip-catchers to worshippers as they arrive or just before the last song. Just before the singing of "Silent Night," lower the lights. Then begin the lighting of candles from the Christ Candle while the congregation sings the carol. Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas adds an element they call "White Christmas," in which participants bring food for the local food pantry wrapped in white. They place the packages under the Christmas tree as they receive candles and form a circle around the sanctuary for the candlelighting. As they reach the last verse, they raise their arms, holding the candles high. Then they blow out the candles and leave the sanctuary quietly, placing their candles in baskets as they go out the doors.

Meditation of Preparation:

As we stand now on the brink of Christmas, let us seek for the stillness of which life the carol sings. It is not the empty stillness and loneliness which life sometimes thrusts upon us. It is the deep mystery of meaning that fills us with awe and presence and reawakens our hearts to love. Let us indeed be joyful, for Christmas is a time of joy! But joy is not always boisterous. Isn't it, at its best and most abiding, a solemn joy that stands with its eyes aglow and its tongue silenced before the mystery of the manger?

—C. W. (Wally) Christian

Lighting of the Christ Candle

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 1:18-25

Litany:

ONE: The Christ Candle is burning; the hour draws near;

MANY: the stillness of the watchful night comes on us.

ONE: Hush! No idle words!

MANY: No tinkling sound of temple or bazaar!

ONE: Only deep silence!

MANY: Only the pregnant plentitude of mystery!

ONE: We stand with open mouths.

MANY: We cannot fathom how the Word again is flesh and dwells among us.

—from "Eve of Nativity" by C. W. (Wally) Christian

Hymn

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Text: Liturgy of St. James,
4th century;

adapted by Gerard Moultrie, 1864

Music: Traditional French
melody, 17th century;

Harmony from English
Hymnal, 1906

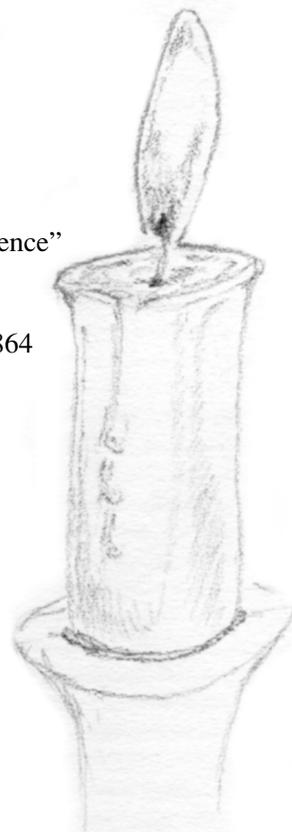
Tune: PICARDY,

Meter: 8.7.8.7.8.7

1. Let all mortal flesh
keep silence
and with fear and
trembling stand;
ponder nothing
earthly-minded,
for, with blessing
in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to command.
2. King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of Lords, in human vesture
in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heavenly food.
3. Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of Light descendeth
from the realm of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.
4. At his feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
"Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,
Lord most high!"

Scripture Reading:

Luke 2:1-14



art by Van Darden

Hymn:

“Angels from the Realms of Glory”

Text: James Montgomery, 1771-1854

Music: Henry T. Smart, 1813-1879

Tune: *REGENT SQUARE*, Meter: 87.87.87

1. Angels from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story
now proclaim Messiah's birth:

Refrain:

Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king.

2. Shepherds, in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing;
yonder shines the infant light:
(Refrain)

3. Sages, leave your contemplations,
brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of nations;
ye have seen his natal star:
(Refrain)

4. Saints, before the altar bending,
watching long in hope and fear;
suddenly the Lord, descending,
in his temple shall appear:
(Refrain)

Scripture Reading:

Luke 2:15-20

Hymn:

“While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks”

Text: Nahum Tate, 1700

Music: Harmonia Sacra, 1812; arranged. from G.F. Handel

Tune: *CHRISTMAS*, Meter: C.M.

1. While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
all seated on the ground;
the angel of the Lord came down,
and glory shone around,
and glory shone around.
2. “Fear not!” said he, for mighty dread
had seized their troubled mind.
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
to all of humankind,
to all of humankind.”
3. “To you, in David's town, this day
is born of David's line
a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,

and this shall be the sign,
and this shall be the sign:”

4. “The heavenly babe you there shall find
to human view displayed,
all meanly wrapped in swathing bands,
and in a manger laid,
and in a manger laid.”
5. Thus spake the seraph and forthwith
appeared a shining throng
of angels praising God on high,
who thus addressed their song,
who thus addressed their song:
6. “All glory be to God on high,
and to the earth be peace;
good will henceforth from heaven to earth
begin and never cease,
begin and never cease!”

Hymn

“Silent Night, Holy Night”

Text: Joseph Mohr, circa 1816-1818;

trans. by John F. Young, 1820-1885

(stanzas 1, 2, 3) and anon.(stanza 4)

Music: Franz Gruber, circa 1820

Tune: *STILLE NACHT*, Meter: *Irr*.

1. Silent night, holy night,
all is calm, all is bright
round yon virgin
mother and child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.
2. Silent night, holy night,
shepherds quake at the sight;
glories stream from heaven afar,
heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born!
3. Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light;
radiant beams from thy holy face
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.
4. Silent night, holy night,
wondrous star, lend thy light;
with the angels let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born!

The Christmas Story According to Frank and Bob:

or

The Adventure of Two Lambs

By Jonathan R. Barrow and Tim Van Treuren

Editor's Note: The following is the result of a writing workshop exercise in which the students, all of middle-school age, were given pieces of a ceramic nativity set and instructed to write the Christmas story from the point of view of whatever character they held in their hands. Jonathan and Tim both received ceramic lambs, so they asked permission to write their accounts together. This piece could be used as a dramatic presentation for children or by children for a Christmas Eve service.

Frank's Account:

One night while I was with my friend Bob, something amazing happened! Hundreds of thousands of angels appeared in the sky. Bob and I were astounded! Then what appeared to be the head angel said something in people language.

I did not understand it, but my little friend said, "Baaa, baa baaaa." ("I think we're supposed to do something, Frank.") So then the angels started this wonderful singing. After they finished, Bob and I felt so peaceful we let out a big, "BAAAAAA!"

The angels left us after that. Our shepherds discussed whatever it was they were supposed to do. After a few minutes, they stopped and took us down the hill toward the city. We had to go slow because it was so dark—until this giant star appeared in the night sky.

It was amazing, and centered right above the city. Our shepherds stopped and gazed at the star. After a couple of minutes, we proceeded again. When we came to the walls of the city, our shepherds picked out a few of us to go in with them. They picked out Bob, but left me, so I will let Bob tell his part of the story.

Bob's Account:

Well, after I left Frank and the rest of the flock, we traveled into the city. It was scary! There was no grass

anywhere, just dirt. There were a lot of people and a lot of big things on the side of the street.

(Those were houses, Bob!)

Oh yeah, houses. Anyway, we went into the middle of the city and found this tiny little...What was it, Frank?"

(A stable, Bob!)

A stable, right. Well, we went into this stable and it had a lot of animals in it. After I introduced myself,

I asked, "Baa ba baaa ba baa baaaa?" ("What is so exciting?") Everybody pointed their noses toward the manger. I could not see what was in it, so I nudged the shepherd who was closest to me and he lifted me up. What I saw made me want to cry. The nicest little baby in the world. From the way the shepherds acted, I knew this must be some big savior or a king! Then, all too soon, we had to go. So we left, and our shepherds were dancing and singing and telling others about that little baby.

Your turn, Frank.

Frank's Second Account:

When Bob got back, I knew that something had happened. Then Bob told me all about it. I was in awe. A king born in a stable?!? I didn't understand it, but I guess some things will always be a mystery.

—Jonathan Barrow now attends Lorena High School in Lorena, Texas and Tim Van Treuren attends classes at Brazos Valley Educational Cooperative in Waco, Texas. Both are active in their church youth groups.



art by Rebecca Ward

Readings & Hymns for Christmas Day



Reading from the Psalms:

Psalm 96

Hymn:

“Ye Servants of God”

Text: Charles Wesley, 1744

Music: Attributed to William Croft, 1708

Tune: HANOVER, Meter: 10 10.11 11

1. Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious of Jesus extol,
his kingdom is glorious and rules over all.
2. God ruleth on high, almighty to save,
and still he is nigh, his presence we have;
the great congregation his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation to Jesus, our King.
3. “Salvation to God, who sits on the throne!”
Let all cry aloud and honor the Son;
the praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb.
4. Then let us adore and give him his right,
all glory and power, all wisdom and might;
all honor and blessing with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing and infinite love.

art by Rebecca Ward

Reading from the Prophets:

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7

Hymn:

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”

Text: Henry van Dyke, 1907

Music: Ludwig van Beethoven, 1824

Tune: ODE TO JOY, Meter: 8.7.8.7.D.

1. Joyful, joyful, we adore thee,
God of glory, Lord of love
hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
drive the dark of doubt away;
giver of immortal gladness,
fill us with the light of day!
2. All thy works with joy surround thee,
earth and heaven reflect thy rays,
stars and angels sing around thee,
center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
flowery meadow, flashing sea,
chanting bird and flowing fountain
call us to rejoice in thee.
3. Thou art giving and forgiving,
ever blessing, ever blest,
well-spring of the joy of living,
ocean depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother-
all who live in love are thine.
Teach us how to love each other,
lift us to the joy divine.

Reading from the Epistles:

Titus 3:4-7

Hymn:

“Joy to the World! the Lord is Come”

Text: Isaac Watts, 1719

Music: Lowell Mason, 1836 or 1848

Tune: ANTIOCH, Meter: C.M.

1. Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
let earth receive her King;

let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

2. Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns;
let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.
3. No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.
4. He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness,
and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Reading from the Gospels:

Luke 2:15-20 or 2:1-20

Benediction/Hymn:

“Sing We Now of Christmas”

Text: Traditional French Carol

Music: Traditional French Melody

Tune: NOEL NOUVELET

1. Sing we now of Christmas,
Noel, sing we here!
Hear our grateful praises
to the Babe so dear.

Refrain:

Sing we Noel, the Kind is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas, sing we now Noel!

2. Angels called to shepherds,
“Leave your flocks at rest,
journey forth to Bethlehem,
find the lamb-kin blest.”
(Refrain)
3. In Bethlehem they found him;
Joseph and Mary mild,
seated by the manger,
watching the holy child.
(Refrain)
4. From the eastern country
came the kings afar,
bearing gifts to Bethlehem
guided by a star.
(Refrain)
5. Gold and myrrh they took there,
gifts of greatest price;
there was ne'er a place on earth
so like paradise.
(Refrain)

A Reading for Youth:

*adapted from the poem
“Incident at the Manger”*

by C. W. (Wally) Christian

FIRST READER: The gray ass nodded as if in prayer,
standing beside the brindled ox.
An old bellwether ram was there
and ewes with yearlings from the flocks.

SECOND READER: Dazed by the rare and radiant sight
they gasped and stopped their breath in awe;
there, in that pure and holy light,
they adored the baby upon the straw.

FIRST READER: A spotted pig stole out of the mist,
slipped past the ox and the ass unseen

and into the stable. The barnyard hissed,
“Go back to your mud hole! You’re unclean!”

SECOND READER: He hoisted his rough,
bewhiskered chin
up on to the trough where the infant lay
(no easy thing for a fat boar’s kin)
and saw the Christ child on the hay.

FIRST READER: He gazed at the baby wonderingly;
no creature whinnied or scoffed the while.
“Ox!” said the ass, “Did I rightly see?”
“Ass,” said the ox, “Did the baby smile?”

—Wally Christian is a retired professor of theology.

Author’s Note: This poem has an interesting genesis. I carve hardwood crèches, with wise men, shepherd, and appropriate animals. One year I carved a pig. Then I realized I had a theological problem. Would there be a pig at a Jewish manger? But I liked my pig and I explained him this way: As the wise men are often seen as representatives of the gentile nations coming to the light, the pig represents the unclean animals of the world coming to Jesus for cleansing.

What Christmas Is About

A Dialogue for Children

by Mark McClintock

MARK: Merry Christmas, Sidney!
SIDNEY: Merry—Christmas? Is it Christmas already?
MARK: Just about.
SIDNEY: Whoa; I'd better get busy!
MARK: Do you have a lot to do?
SIDNEY: Yeah; I gotta clean my—
MARK: Oh, good; you're finally going to clean your room.
SIDNEY: Clean my room? Do I look like I'm crazy? I'm going to clean my chimney.
MARK: Clean your *chimney*?
SIDNEY: Yeah, and grease it down real good.
MARK: Oh, I think I get the picture. Santa Claus, right?
SIDNEY: Well, I don't want the big guy getting stuck on the way down, do I? When your belly's a bowlful of jelly, you need all the help you can get!
MARK: There's a lot more to Christmas than Santa Claus, Sidney.
SIDNEY: Oh, I know what you're thinking. There is more to Christmas. There's candy canes, hot chocolate, and presents! But I really like Santa Claus. I know everything there is to know about Santa Claus.
MARK: Oh, you do? All right, where is Santa Claus supposed to come from?
SIDNEY: That's easy. He comes from Taiwan.
MARK: Taiwan??
SIDNEY: That's what it says on the toys he brings: "Made in Taiwan."
MARK: That's not right. *(to the children)* Where is Santa supposed to come from, kids?
SIDNEY: *(waits until the children say "North Pole")* the North Pole?? No way!! Who would want to live up there in all that snow and ice? Brrrrr!
MARK: That's what they say. The North Pole. And do you know what Santa is supposed to bring with him every year?
SIDNEY: Yeah; pneumonia!
MARK: No. What is Santa supposed to bring? Gifts for all the children in the world.
SIDNEY: Yeah, right. I heard that one, too.
MARK: Sounds like you have a little trouble believing it.



SIDNEY: Well, think about it, Mark. How could one guy get toys to all the kids all over the world in one night?
MARK: It does stretch the imagination, doesn't it?
SIDNEY: It's harder to swallow than my grandma's Christmas cookies! Blechh!
MARK: If you've really learned about Santa Claus, you know that he started out just giving to a few people.
SIDNEY: He did?
MARK: Yes. Another way of saying his name is Saint Nicholas.
SIDNEY: I knew that!
MARK: Nicholas heard about a family with lots of children and very little money. One night, he secretly went to their house and tossed some gold in through the chimney to help them out.
SIDNEY: Wonder why Santa did that?
MARK: I think he had learned the love and the joy of giving.
SIDNEY: How did he learn something like that?
MARK: Because Nicholas was given the greatest gift of all.
SIDNEY: A Tickle Me Elmo?
MARK: Nope. Nick's gift came from God. *(to the children)* Does anybody know what that gift might be?
SIDNEY: Jesus?

MARK: Exactly. Jesus is God's Christmas present to all of us. Including St. Nick.

SIDNEY: That's right; Christmas is Jesus' birthday, isn't it?

MARK: Yes, it is.

SIDNEY: How old is the birthday boy, anyway?

MARK: If you counted since he was born, he would be more than 2,000 years old.

SIDNEY: Two thousand! You'd have to call the fire department in to hose down the candles on the cake!

MARK: I don't think Jesus had a cake on his birthday, Sidney. Don't you know the Christmas story?

SIDNEY: You mean "Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer"?

MARK: No; I mean the story of Jesus' birth.

Yeah, but the pictures don't look right without Wise Guys there. That way, you've got rich, important folks and poor, ordinary folks worshipping Jesus together.
—Sidney

SIDNEY: Oh, yeah. I was in our church's Christmas play last year.

MARK: What part did you play?

SIDNEY: I was Frank.

MARK: Frank? I don't remember anybody named Frank in the Christmas story.

SIDNEY: Well, that just shows how much you pay attention in church!

MARK: Who in the world is Frank?

SIDNEY: You know; Frank N. Sense. He's one of those Three Wise Guys.

MARK: Wise Men. I think you need a little help remembering, Sidney. Let me tell you the story.

SIDNEY: Can I go to sleep first?

MARK: No, listen. There was a young teenage girl named Mary. God sent an angel to Mary to tell her some good news.

SIDNEY: If I saw an angel, I think I'd hide in the closet!

MARK: Mary must have been a little scared, too, because the angel said, "Don't be afraid." The angel told her God had chosen her to be the mother of the Savior of the World. She would have a baby who would be God's own son, and she would name him—

SIDNEY: I know! Jesus.

MARK: That's right. The man who was going to be Mary's husband was named Joseph. At first, he didn't like the idea of Mary having somebody else's baby, but

God let him know in a dream that it would be all right.

SIDNEY: And then they had the baby in a barn, right?

MARK: You've skipped a part, Sidney. Do you know who declared that all the world should be taxed?

SIDNEY: Must be the Democrats.

MARK: No, it was the emperor in Rome. So Joseph took Mary to his hometown, Bethlehem.

SIDNEY: *(Singing)* "Oh, little town of Bethlehem..."

MARK: That's the place. It was so crowded that they couldn't even get a bed in the inn.

SIDNEY: In the what?

MARK: The inn! An inn is like a hotel.

SIDNEY: Then what is an out?

MARK: I don't know.

SIDNEY: It's what you get in baseball.

MARK: Sidney, just listen! They must have stayed in a sort of a barn or a stable that night because when the baby was born, they laid him in a manger.

SIDNEY: What's that?

MARK: A feeding trough. Where the donkeys and cows ate their hay.

SIDNEY: Eeeew, they laid him in donkey slobber?

MARK: Apparently, they didn't have much choice. Now, let's pretend for a minute, Sidney. Pretend we live a long time ago.

SIDNEY: How long?

MARK: Two thousand years. We're high on a hill with a cool breeze blowing.

SIDNEY: *(Shivers)*

MARK: We're shepherds, camping outside the city of Bethlehem.

SIDNEY: I don't wanna be a shepherd!

MARK: Why not?

SIDNEY: Nobody liked shepherds. They were dirty and sweaty and smelled like soggy underwear.

MARK: Shepherds were outcasts. But stick around, something wonderful is about to happen! We're sitting up on that hill, taking care of our sheep, and suddenly a bright light flashes in the sky.

SIDNEY: An air force jet!

MARK: No.

SIDNEY: It must be Santa Claus.

MARK: No. It's an angel.

SIDNEY: Oh, yeah.

MARK: Do you remember what he says?

SIDNEY: Same thing he said to Mary. "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news!"

MARK: And the good news is that today in the city below the hill a baby has been born.

SIDNEY: Our Savior; Christ the Lord!

MARK: Right.

SIDNEY: Let's go see him!

MARK: And leave our sheep? They might run away!

SIDNEY: Well, yeah, but—

MARK: Or the wolves might get them.

SIDNEY: I know, but—

MARK: We might lose our jobs and starve!

SIDNEY: But Mark! This is Jesus! Our Savior! Wake up and smell the coffee!

MARK: Why would someone so important as God's son want to have anything to do with us poor, measly little shepherds that nobody cares about?

SIDNEY: Who cares what we are?? Jesus is God's gift for everyone! Kings, millionaires, shepherds, construction workers, liars and thieves! Lawyers, even!

MARK: You're exactly right, Sid. The shepherds in the story understood that, and they went to see the baby. And as they went home, they told everybody the good news they had heard. And that's the Christmas story.

SIDNEY: Hold on, you left out the Wise Guys.

MARK: Wise MEN. They probably didn't come until a couple years later when Jesus was a toddler.

SIDNEY: Yeah, but the pictures don't look right without Wise Guys there. That way, you've got rich, important folks and poor, ordinary folks worshipping Jesus together.

MARK: You're right, Sidney. I like that picture too. And that's the story of Jesus' birthday.

SIDNEY: Cool! Next to my own birthday, I like Jesus' birthday best.

MARK: Why?

SIDNEY: 'Cause his is the only other birthday when I get presents!

MARK: I hope you never get for your birthday what most people give Jesus for his birthday.

SIDNEY: Why? What do they give him?

MARK: Nothing.

SIDNEY: Nothing! They go out and get all those things for themselves and don't give Jesus nothing!?

MARK: Most people forget about Jesus on his birthday. They're more interested in Santa and presents...

SIDNEY: I know, and candy canes. But Jesus deserves the very best present, and I'm just a little kid without any money. What could a kid give Jesus?

MARK: Just give him YOU.

SIDNEY: Me?

MARK: That's what Jesus wants us to give him. Our lives.

SIDNEY: So we can do what he wants?

MARK: So we can be children of God.

SIDNEY: Great, he'd want me to clean my room all the time and eat spinach!

MARK: There's nothing wrong with cleaning your room or with spinach. Spinach is good for you. It puts color in your cheeks.

SIDNEY: Well, who wants green cheeks?

MARK: Anyway, Jesus never asks us to do anything that he won't give us the strength and the courage to do.

SIDNEY: Wait a minute, who's doing the giving? We give our lives to Jesus or Jesus gives his life for us?

MARK: Both. And when we give to other people in Jesus' name, that's a gift to Jesus, too.

SIDNEY: So Jesus gave his life so we could give our lives to him so we can give love to others so we can give love to Jesus?

MARK: That's it!

SIDNEY: I give up!

MARK: Jesus uses us to give his love to others. That way, Jesus' love spreads on and on and on, all around the world.

SIDNEY: Hey, I just thought of something! Do you think Santa Claus works that way?

MARK: What do you mean?

SIDNEY: Just like we help share Jesus' love with others, maybe we help Santa Claus share gifts with kids all over the world.

MARK: Sid, I think you hit the nail right on the head.

SIDNEY: Ow!

MARK: No, not your head, the nail's head.

SIDNEY: I think I've got the idea. Well, see ya later!

MARK: Whoa! Not so fast!

SIDNEY: Oh, okay. See...you...la-ter...

MARK: I mean, don't leave so soon.

SIDNEY: I'm in a hurry!

MARK: Where are you going?

SIDNEY: I'm going to J. C. Penney!

MARK: J. C. Penney?

SIDNEY: Yeah, see ya!

MARK: Wait! Why are you going to J. C. Penney?

SIDNEY: So they can gift-wrap me.

MARK: Gift-wrap you?

SIDNEY: Yeah, so I can give myself to Jesus.

MARK: Sidney, Jesus doesn't want us in gift-wrap. He wants us just the way we are.

SIDNEY: The way we are? Sometimes I'm not so good. He might not like me the way I am.

MARK: Jesus knows we're not perfect, Sid. But he loves us just the same and wants us to be children of God.

SIDNEY: Really?

MARK: Really.

SIDNEY: *(Looking heavenward)* You are the greatest Christmas present ever! Happy Birthday!

MARK: And a joyful Christmas to you all.

—Mark McClintock is a former children's minister who is now in charge of Passport for Kids, a children's camping program. An accomplished ventriloquist, he originally performed this dialogue with Sidney, a much-loved dummy.

Drater's Beauty

A Drama for Youth

by Jonathan Hal Reynolds

Ext. Middleton High School Gymnasium Stage — Evening

DRATER, 17 years old, sits backstage on the ground next to a Christmas tree, making a PAPER AIRPLANE. Several stagehands move Christmas decorations on and off the stage. There is something bluntly strange about Drater. His mannerisms are odd, and he mumbles mindlessly to himself. LEROY, dressed in a royally ornate outfit, enters with his script in hand, rehearsing his lines for the school Christmas play. His passion for articulation gives the audience the idea that he is the intellectual type.

DRATER: Hi... They call me Drater. D-R-A-T-E-R. I can write it too. What do they call you?

Leroy doesn't reply. Drater is used to being ignored, and tries once again to spark a conversation.

DRATER: I made a plane. *(he holds it out to Leroy)* Wanna fly it?

Leroy looks at it out of the corner of his eye and begins to laugh to himself.

LEROY: You call that a plane? It looks more like a piece of wadded up trash to me. I bet it wouldn't fly past the tips of your toes.

Drater sadly looks at his paper airplane.

DRATER: I bet it would.

Drater rears back and throws it, and it falls to his feet just as Leroy said it would. Drater hangs his head low.

Leroy laughs harshly at Drater's failed flight. While he is laughing, he knocks several books off of a nearby shelf. Drater goes to his knees to help Leroy pick the books up.

DRATER: It's okay. It's okay. It's okay...

LEROY: Stop it, you retard! You'll tear the pages.

Leroy pushes Drater onto his back. Drater hits the ground with a thud. Leroy kneels down and begins picking up his books. He picks one up and examines it.

LEROY: O. Henry's "Gift Of The Magi"... Extraordinary story. One of my favorites.

DRATER: What's it about?

LEROY: Something someone like you couldn't understand. GIOVANNI enters. *He is practically a clone to Leroy. They dress alike... even part their hair on the same side.*

GIOVANNI: *(teasing)* Nervous about the play, huh, Leroy?

LEROY: It's that half-brain's fault. If he weren't so stupid...

DRATER: I was just trying to help. I didn't mean to make a mess.

DRATER: It doesn't matter. You did anyway.

GIOVANNI: Leroy, you're just a wise man... you've only got like what, three lines? Stop torturing yourself.

GIOVANNI bends down to help Leroy pick up the books.

Drater goes back to making paper airplanes.

LEROY: *(whispers)* I told you... it was his fault.

GIOVANNI: *(whispers)* That's Drater Robinson. I heard he sleeps under the bridge downtown... you know... with the rats and hobos... His parents dropped him there two years ago, and never came back to get him...

LEROY: Figures. Look out ugly he is. Who WOULD want him? He's the most filthy human being I've ever seen... *(sniffs in the air)* He smells like rotted fish.

GIOVANNI: Can you imagine trying to have an intelligent conversation with an obtuse, dumb-wit like that? Might as well not even try.

LEROY: I feel sorry for someone who has to live life like that...

Drater zooms his hands like he is flying. He is free and happy in his daydreams.

LEROY: ...so miserable and ugly. It's just one of Nature's mistakes.

GIOVANNI: You can just look at the idiot, and see that he can't understand ANYTHING about the world around him.

Poor fool... Can't even make a paper airplane.

Giovanni picks up the wadded paper that Drater threw moments earlier.

LEROY: I bet he can't even tie his shoes either. *[short BEAT]* What's he doing here anyway?

GIOVANNI: I heard he's got some special part in the play that Mr. Vaughn wrote for him.

LEROY: He's special alright. Special Ed.

Leroy and Giovanni exit. Drater watches them leave, then stands up and makes sure no one is looking. He puts his arms out and closes his eyes... pretending to fly.

DEE and JEE enter. You can't get any more gangsta' than these two clowns. They're dressed up like shepherds... ghetto style. They both walk slyly with their canes, their headbands and belts sagging much lower than they should be.

DEE: Yo, Jee! Look at this dope... thinks he can fly like Superman!

Embarrassed, Drater opens his eyes and quickly puts his hands down to his side.

JEE: Heh-Heh... That fool is on crack! Yo, fly-boy, where you get your stuff at? I want to take that ride.

DEE: That homey is smokin' something funny!

JEE: Crazy grass or crazy trees... I want some of 'dat!

DEE: Hey, Superman, you dumb or something?

Drater is nervous and doesn't know how to respond. He holds out his plane to Dee.

DRATER: Wanna fly my plane?

JEE: You hear that Dee? He wants you to fly his plane!

DEE: I tell you what, Superman... you stand up on this here chair, close your eyes, and say 'I believe in fairies' ten times, and you'll be able to fly for real.

DRATER: Really?! But how's this gonna work exactly?

Drater stands up in the chair and closes his eyes.

JEE: Don't worry about the little things. Just do like Dee told you... say 'I believe in fairies' ten times, and you'll be up in the air flying before you can say 'Bang-a-rang'.

Drater begins his wishful chant. Dee and Jee give each other a silent look and count to three with their fingers... they pull the chair out from under Drater, and he goes crashing to the ground.

Dee and Jee run off.

Drater sits up, dumbfounded and in pain. He stands up and brushes it off. He hides his hurt feelings and goes back to trying to make a paper airplane next to the Christmas tree.

RALPH and MINDY and RUSS and CINDY enter, all dressed up like angels.

Drater notices them, and his face grows with excitement.

DRATER: Hi Ralph!

Ralph's companions look at him funny.

RUSS: You know this guy, Ralph?

Ralph obviously knows Drater, but he doesn't want to reveal that he knows him.

RALPH: Drater? Sure. He grew up down the street from me. My mom made us play together when we were kids. That's when I gave him his name... Drater. It's 'Retard' spelled backwards.

The three other "angels" laugh unabashedly.

DRATER: Hey Ralph! Look at this... I'm making paper airplanes. Remember when you showed me how to make them when we were kids? I've forgotten exactly how to do it. Will you show me again?

Drater stands up and begins walking toward the "angels," offering Ralph a sheet of paper.

RALPH: Drater, stay away, man. You're scaring the girls. Keep your paper airplanes to yourself. You're too old for them now anyways.

DRATER: But you showed me...

Russ rears back as if he is going to back-hand Drater.

RUSS: Take a hint, you stupid fool!

Drater flinches, then Russ, the "angel" walks off laughing.

RUSS and MINDY, and RALPH and CINDY exit.

Drater is left alone backstage. He sits back down next to the Christmas tree. The sullen look on his face reveals that his spirit is broken. He looks at his pile of attempted paper airplanes, then looks upwards...

The truth of his mumbling is revealed in the scene that follows... they are not mere mumbblings, they are prayers... conversations with God.

SPOTLIGHT on Drater.

DRATER: God, what is wrong with me? I don't understand why people can be so mean. Why they look at me like I am so different from them.

VOICE OF GOD: You are different, my child. You are all different. But you know who you are. It does not matter who you are not.

DRATER: But God, I just want people to see me. No one sees me, God. All they see is what I am not.

VOICE OF GOD: That is because people are afraid to see. They are afraid of what is different. They are afraid to approach... afraid to look... afraid to ask... afraid to dare... afraid to dream... afraid to be.

DRATER: I am afraid too, God. Afraid of what's going to happen in life. Afraid of...

VOICE OF GOD: There is no reason to be afraid, my child. I have your part in Life all written out. Before the beginning of Time, I had a plan and purpose for your existence.

DRATER: God, but I am so different. I can't think the way other people do. I can't do things as fast or as good. People make fun of how I am.

VOICE OF GOD: My lovely child, you are full of beauty. I gave you two of the greatest gifts a human can possess... a caring heart and a soul that sees. You see the Truth more than most people do... You see past the shells that most of my children create... the shells that hide the true beauty I gave to them when I made them. You see the deep beauty inside every soul, James. That is why I made you.

DRATER: So what do I do?

There is no answer. Drater's wonder is broken by three stagehands carrying a large, wooden cross backstage, which they place next to Drater, near the Christmas tree.

MR. VAUGHN accompanies them and coordinates their placement of the giant prop. Mr. Vaughn, the theater teacher, glances over and notices Drater sitting by himself.

MR. VAUGHN: (*immensely joyful*) Ah-ha! Just the man I wanted to see. Are you ready for your big part in the play, Mr. Robinson? I wrote it just for you.

DRATER: I... I think so. I am just a little nervous.

MR. VAUGHN: There's no reason to be afraid. I've got it all planned out for you.

You're gonna be great!

Mr. Vaughn pats Drater on the back, then exits.

Drater is startled by the sound of a girl crying. ELIZABETH, dressed in first century attire and carrying a plastic baby doll at her side, walks in and sits on the other

side of the Christmas tree, unknowing of Drater's presence. She buries her face in her arms.

Drater shyly walks up behind her.

DRATER: Are you okay?

Elizabeth is startled. She glances up, then buries her face back in her arms.

ELIZABETH: Yes, I'm fine.

DRATER: You don't look fine.

ELIZABETH: Thanks for reminding me. You're not the first person that's told me that today.

Drater doesn't understand.

ELIZABETH: Look. It's alright. I'll be okay. Sometimes I just feel like if I was gone, the world wouldn't miss me one bit.

DRATER: That's not true. What about your mom and dad... and your friends?

ELIZABETH: Mom and Dad, sure. But they have to love me. As far as my friends go... What's a friend?

DRATER: I'm a friend.

Drater smiles, but Elizabeth still won't look up.

ELIZABETH: I look in the mirror, and I hate what I see. I walk down the hall with my 'friends' and am scared that they won't like me if I don't dress nice enough or talk a certain way. I'm just tired... The harder I try, the more ugly I feel.

DRATER: I think you're beautiful, and I haven't really even seen your face yet.

ELIZABETH: Really?

Elizabeth looks up and sees that Drater is "different."

ELIZABETH: Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize... Do you really think I'm beautiful?

DRATER: Of course I do. You glow. You shouldn't always listen to what other people say about you. Know who you are, and it does not matter who you are not. Realize the beauty that lives inside of you, and believe in it.

ELIZABETH: Are you some kind of genius or something?
Elizabeth smiles.

DRATER: No. I can't even tie my shoes.

ELIZABETH: You know, Einstein couldn't tie his shoes either.

DRATER: Ein-who?

ELIZABETH: It doesn't matter. Say, what are you making over here?

Elizabeth walks over to Drater's paper airplane station.

DRATER: Oh, I was trying to make a paper airplane, but I've forgotten how.

ELIZABETH: Really? I haven't made one of those in years. Let's try it together.

Elizabeth sits down at Drater's paper airplane station, and Drater follows.

DRATER: Really? You'll show me how?

ELIZABETH: If I can remember...

Elizabeth takes Drater's hands and helps him fold the paper



art by Susan Smith

in just the right places for a valiant flight.

DRATER: Are you in the Christmas play?

ELIZABETH: Yes, I am playing Mary in the nativity scene.

DRATER: You'll be a great mother for Jesus. You're kind just like she was.

ELIZABETH: Thanks. [short BEAT] Are you in the play?

DRATER: (*excited*) Oh yeah. Mr. Vaughn wrote me a very special part.

ELIZABETH: Really? That's great. What is it?

DRATER: (*smiles*) It's a surprise.

Elizabeth smiles back.

The two continue their attempt to create a paper airplane together.

DRATER: Thanks so much for helping me make this plane. I couldn't have done it without you. Someday, I want to fly in a real plane.

ELIZABETH: There's an airport by my house. I sit on the roof and watch the planes take off and land at night. I like to wonder about the people on them... where they're going... where they've been. I always wonder what their reasons are for living. People are funny, you know... [BEAT] Say, I didn't catch your name.

DRATER: They call me Drater. But my friends call me James.

ELIZABETH: Well, James. Let's see if this baby will fly...

Drater stands up with the paper airplane. Elizabeth eagerly watches, while holding the baby Jesus doll by her side. Before he throws the plane, Drater spreads his arms out like he is going to fly and closes his eyes. Without him or Elizabeth realizing it, his body is a perfect fit against the wooden cross that is standing behind him.

Drater throws his paper airplane into darkness, and it soars...

—Jonathan Reynolds is a professional writing student at Baylor University. He also works with youth at a church in Woodway, Texas.

Lessons & Hymns for Epiphany

Reading from the Psalms:

Psalm 84

Reading from the Prophets:

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Hymn:

“O Word of God Incarnate”

Text: William W. How, 1867

Music: Gesangbuch, Meiningen;
harmony by Felix Mendelssohn, 1847

Tune: *MUNICH*, Meter: 76.76 D

1. O Word of God incarnate,
O Wisdom from on high,
O Truth unchanged, unchanging,
O Light of our dark sky:
we praise you for the radiance
that from the hallowed page,
a lantern to our footsteps,
shines on from age to age.
2. The church from you, our Savior,
received the gift divine,
and still that light is lifted
o'er all the earth to shine.
It is the sacred vessel
where gems of truth are stored;
it is the heaven-drawn picture
of Christ, the living Word.
3. The Scripture is a banner
before God's host unfurled;
it is a shining beacon
above the darkling world.
It is the chart and compass
that o'er life's surging tide,
'mid mists and rocks and quicksands,
to you, O Christ, will guide.
4. O make your church, dear Savior,
a lamp of purest gold,
to bear before the nations
your true light as of old.
O teach your wandering pilgrims
by this their path to trace,
till, clouds and darkness ended,
they see you face to face

Reading from the Epistles:

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Hymn:

“O Young and Fearless Prophet”

Text: S. Ralph Harlow, 1931

Music: John B. Dykes, 1872

Tune: *BLAIRGOWRIE*, Meter: 13 13.13 13

1. O young and fearless Prophet
of ancient Galilee,
thy life is still a summons
to serve humanity;
to make our thoughts and actions
less prone to please the crowd,
to stand with humble courage
for truth with hearts uncowed.
2. We marvel at the purpose
that held thee to thy course
while ever on the hilltop
before thee loomed the cross;
thy steadfast face set forward
where love and duty shone,
while we betray so quickly
and leave thee there alone.
3. O help us stand unswerving
against war's bloody way,
where hate and lust and falsehood
hold back Christ's holy sway;
forbid false love of country
that blinds us to his call,
who lifts above the nations
the unity of all.
4. Stir up in us a protest
against our greed for wealth,
while others starve and hunger
and plead for work and health;
where homes with little children
cry out for lack of bread,
who live their years sore burdened
beneath a gloomy dread.
5. O young and fearless Prophet,
we need thy presence here,
amid our pride and glory
to see thy face appear;
once more to hear thy challenge
above our noisy day,
again to lead us forward
along God's holy way.

Reading from the Gospels:

Matthew 2:1-12 or 2:1-18

art by Susan Smith

For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old,
when, with the ever circling years, shall come the time foretold,
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and all the world give back the song which now the angels sing.

—Edmund H. Sears, 1849

We stand amazed in your presence,
and we marvel at the gift of every breath!
Even if we lie down in despair,
fearing the darkness will swallow us,
you still sustain us...
and, indeed, we wake again!

Let this awakening and renewal we experience
in relationship with you
be a beacon of holy energy, peace and compassion
in this shell-shocked world.

Allow us the privilege of serving in your name,
making us more and more awake
to the needs of your children far and near.

And may we surrender our hearts to the
simple, “let’s do it again” joy
of joining in your eternal mission of grace!

—Deborah Harris, *New Year’s Day 2004*

*So Christmas comes and goes, celebrated in
many ways around the world. What remains is
the song and the story.*

—John Shepard

