

**The people who walked
in darkness
have seen a great light...**



**a worship packet for Advent,
Christmastide, and Epiphany**

*worship tools with a peace and justice emphasis from Seeds of Hope Publishers, people you've come to trust;
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from
Seeds of Hope

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Editorial Address

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The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...

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a word about this packet

These materials are offered to you on clean, unattached pages so that you can more easily photocopy anything you wish to duplicate. Feel free to copy any of this, including art, and adapt these tools to your needs.

The art on the cover is used with permission from Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. Some of the art in this packet is some of the more popular vintage Seeds art. Some of it is entirely new, created especially for this packet by Erin Kennedy, an art student at Baylor University, and David Shoemaker, a Baylor religion major.

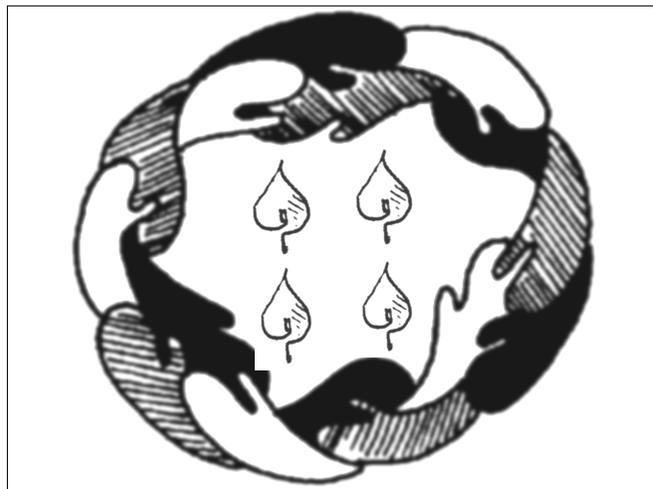
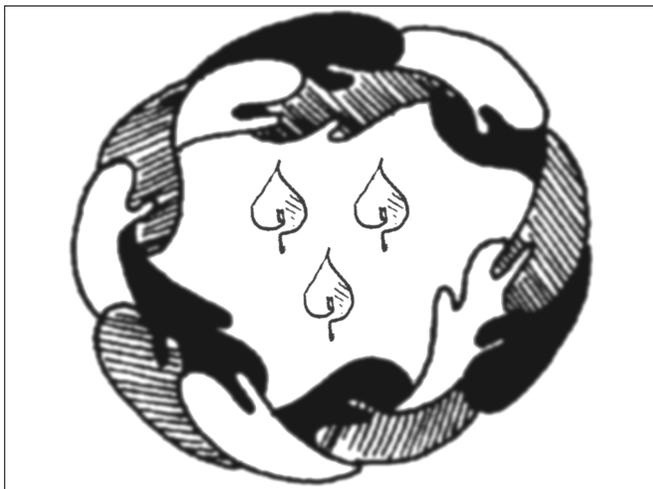
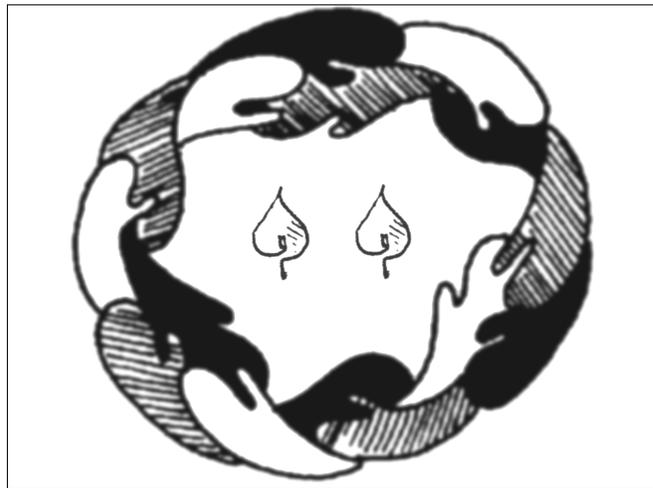
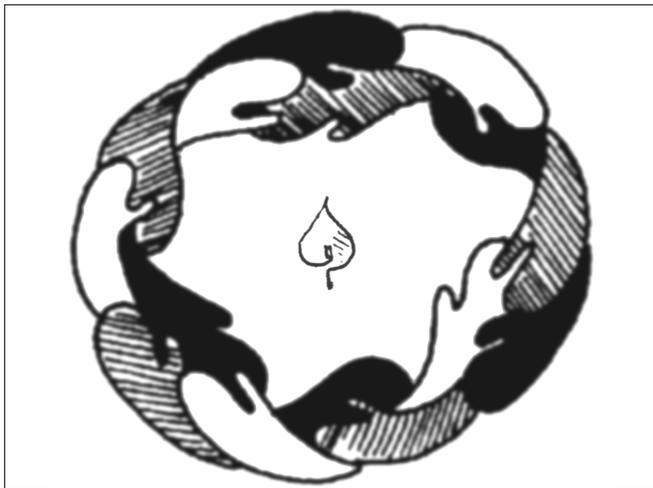
The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together resources that can be used during Advent, Christmastide, and Epiphany.

We have tried to provide these tools to you in a user-friendly, yet attractive presentation. We also 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 see to the struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams.

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

A Challenge for Advent



art by Erin Kennedy

The season is upon us. We get out our Advent candles and turn our choir stoles over to show the purple side. We read and sing the waiting of the ancient Palestinian Hebrews for the promised Messiah—six hundred years of waiting for someone to come and set things right.

And we join in the waiting.

We hear the beginning of the Infancy Narratives—the coming of the messenger Gabriel to a young Galilean maiden with an amazing pronouncement. And we think of her waiting—nine months of accusation and misunderstanding—before the birthing of the Child.

For us, too, the angel comes—tonight, and tomorrow, and the next day. And he says, “You have been chosen to bear this child, this word-become-flesh, this God-with-us. A special task has been appointed to you.” And we, each of us, will say—tonight, tomorrow, and the next day—“My soul magnifies the Lord,” or we will turn away and leave the Child in the cold.

As the waiting of Advent begins for us, we can choose which way to respond to this season. We can fill our world

with the sounds of our own discontent, or we can listen for a truth we’ve never heard before.

We can be angry at the way our society turns a sacred season into a time of crass commercialism—or we can find positive alternatives, ways to celebrate the birth of Christ without selling out to the marketplace god.

We can turn inward and see the lonely rooms in ourselves, and we can fall down before the things that make this time a sad one for us—for many—or we can look around for someone whose pain is worse and whose loneliness is more intense, whose despair could be lessened by some small part of our time, resources, and effort.

We can choose to embrace the season, to remember the adventure, to journey to the stable somehow in our deeds, and look—really look—at the Christ Child. (He will tell us later, when he is a man, that to give to the forgotten and despised ones—the ones who have fallen through the cracks—is to give to him.)

We can find some labor of love to lay before him now as he sleeps. We have four weeks to do it. I dare you.—lkc



Responsive Call to Hope

LEADER: The people who walk in darkness have seen
a great light.

PEOPLE: Blessed are they who believe the promise
of God.

LEADER: In the Word was life, and that life was the
light for us all.

PEOPLE: The light shines in the darkness and the dark-
ness will never overcome it.

LEADER: Even that which is barren will spring forth
in hope.

PEOPLE: For with God nothing is impossible.

LEADER: And Mary said to the messenger, "Let it be
with me as you have said."

PEOPLE: Blessed is she who believed that God's
promise would be fulfilled.

LEADER: For to us is born this day in the city of David
a Savior which is Christ the Lord.

PEOPLE: And our eyes have beheld the salvation of
God.

LEADER: May each of us have the courage to say, "Let
it be with me as you have said."

PEOPLE: May God's promise be borne in us today.

—written by David Tatum, Debbie Lester,
and Katie Cook

—art by Erin Kennedy

Tiny Hand in Mine

Mary's Lyrical Reflection

by Deborah E. Harris

Tiny hand in mine, dearest little one,
You're the treasure of my heart, Jesus firstborn Son;
Tiny hand in mine, heaven's gift to me,
Born to be the Lord of all, nations to redeem.

I carried You close to my heart,
So blest to be part of God's plan;
How great are the wonders I touch
As I hold Your tiny hand?

Tiny hand in mine,
What power do You hold?
What suffering will You touch and heal?
What kindness will You show?

I carried You close to my heart,
So blest to be part of God's plan;
How great are the wonders I touch
As I hold Your tiny hand?

Tiny hand in mine,
I will watch You grow;
And one day when God calls to You

I
will
let
You
go.



Deborah Harris originally wrote this lyric as a part of the musical "Make His Praise Glorious," published by Word Music.

Bulletin Art for Advent

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

Nor more shall there be in it an infant
that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
they shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat...

They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for sudden terror;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord...

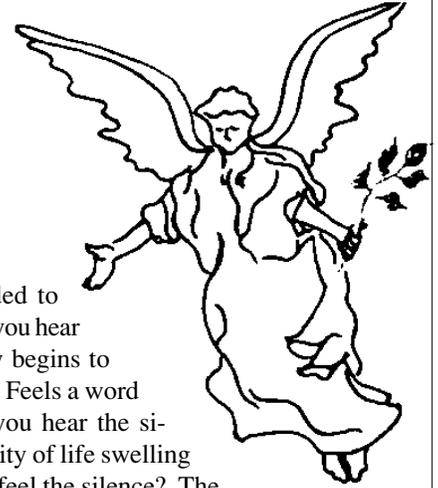
Before they call I will answer,
while they are speaking I will hear...

—Isaiah 65:17-23

Silent Night

a special advent reading

by John Stewart Ballenger



Center stage is a stereo cued to Mannheim Steamroller's "Silent Night." A small child enters from the side going over his or her Christmas list: "I want this and this and this and that and..." (The list should be contemporary and age-specific.) The child takes his/her place and stops speaking, as a group of carolers enters from the rear and makes its way down to the front. The carolers take their place at the front and stop singing as someone enters from a side, going over his/her Christmas plans. You can add other people coming in as wanted: shopping lists, flight plans, chores to be done, etc. When all are at the front they all begin again at the same time. Into this noise comes one who goes to the front and listens to each group carefully before going to the stereo and starting the music, at which point everyone becomes silent. Working with the lights is also a possibility, depending on your location and facilities. It would be nice to fade the lights when the music starts. Speaker should be "miked."

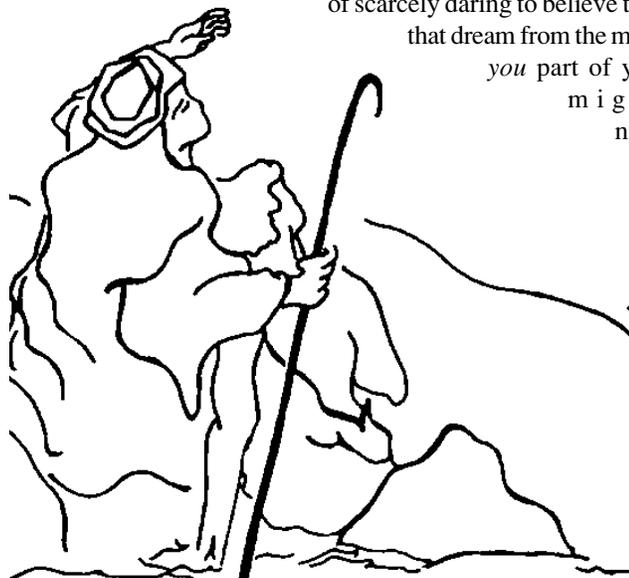
Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way: in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be taxed. Familiar words, no?...In between all the words, do you hear the silence? Listen for it—fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God, and will now conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. Silence.

Fear not, Joseph, Son of David, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Silence.

Fear not, for I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Silence.

The silence of hope that has not expected fulfillment and is now filled with wild wondering. The silence

of scarcely daring to believe that that dream from the most
you part of you
m i g h t
n o t



just be met—but exceeded to unimaginable extent. Do you hear the silence? When Mary begins to feel life swell inside her? Feels a word being made flesh? Do you hear the silence? When the possibility of life swelling inside you is felt, do you feel the silence? The silence of the shepherds—twisting their robes—gripping their staffs because they have no idea what to say—because they stand before their deepest dream—the one that is, at heart—who you are—who you are meant to be. People like you and like me—beginning to wonder if it can be different—if there is another way—if there is perhaps a power to fill us—to fill the way we live—to fill what is with what should be. Do you hear the silence? Do you hear your silence? Listen.

And then—into the silence—the cry of God newborn—the squall of God incarnate—the wail of the Word made flesh—the incredible new song of hope and possibility—of God working through what *is* toward what *can be*—what *should be*—a melody never heard before in such fullness—reaching deep—into yearning hearts—aching hearts—filling silence—with music. Do you hear? Do you hear echoes? Do you hear individual voices joyfully echoing the song they've looked for all their lives—the unique sound of who they are now finally, truly heard and celebrated in the song of God. Do you hear the heart sung *yes* that can only follow silence?

In the silent darkness a star rises—a new star—be still—fear not—listen—to the Word made music—singing your silence—filling your emptiness with the sound of the one who made you to be full of the sound of God, and to ring—to resound—to resonate—to echo—to be flesh for God's word—to sound the note of God's joy amidst pain—to offer warmth in the cold—for the light shines in the darkness. Will you echo? Will you echo light in the darkness—the music of the star—calling those with eyes to see, to see the advent of holiness? Will you echo a shout in the silence—the music of deep fulfillment? An echo saying nothing will ever be the same—I will never be the same—you don't have to be the same. Will you?

Inside, in the warmth, the sound of the wind is pleasant; inside, in the warmth, the sound of the wind magnifies our warmth; inside, in the warmth, the sound of the wind is unconnected from the feel of the wind; inside, in the warmth, cold is an abstraction; inside, in the warmth, sleigh bells are the sound of movement from warmth to warmth.

But under starlit skies—outside—in the howling cold—the sound of bells is the echo of God—music still made flesh...do you hear?

—John Ballenger is a minister in Waco, Texas.

Magnificat

My soul overflows with songs
of the enormity
and power
and mystery
of God;

My spirit is full of joy
because God will be my redemption;
God has looked around the world of assorted humans
and found a poor woman,
a peasant,
a serf;

God has given that woman a noble, majestic quest—
to participate in the act of creation;
to bring a new life to humanity;
throughout history people will speak of this quest
and say,

What joy she must have felt!
God is holy and filled with power;
God has done wonderful things just for me;
I am overflowing with joyful words.

God does take care of those
who remember the original instructions;
God is sometimes overpowering
to confuse those
who think power is theirs,
who think they know what power is,
who think that people can be ranked according to worth.

Their own arrogance will cause them
to be scattered upon the earth.
God takes those in positions of earthly power
and watches them destroy their own structures,
their thrones,

and those things that they hoard;
they will be stripped of this earthly power,
and their toys of destruction and exclusion
will be useless.

Those who are now thought
to be of little worth
will be in power.

Thus the hungry will be fed at last,
and those who had been greedy
are sent away
without their material securities.
God never forgot the promises
made to Abraham and Sarah;
They have been kept,
and will be kept forever.

lkc

an interpretation of Luke 1:46-55

Quotes, Poems, and Pithy Sayings

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” faltered Scrooge.

“Business!” Marley cried. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

—Charles Dickens,
A Christmas Carol



“There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I daresay,” returned the nephew: “Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round ... as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really

were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!”

—Scrooge’s nephew, Fred
A Christmas Carol

This time of year we kindle lights to illumine the darkness of long chilly nights. These lights are kindled to illumine not only the darkness of the night but the darkness of despair. They warm our hearts as they symbolize the warming of our bodies. The tragic truth is that with all of this beautiful inspiring light, despair and shivering cold remain steadfast in the lives of many.

—Rabbi Joshua Taub, Congregation Benai Jehudah
Kansas City, Missouri

The best definition of the Gospel message I’ve ever heard is that the Gospel is the permission and command to enter difficulty with hope.

Donna Schaper,
A Book of Common Power

To announce...that the Liberator is sitting among the poor and that the wounds are signs of hope and that today is the day of liberation, is a step very few can take. But this is exactly the announcement of the wounded healer: “The master is coming—not tomorrow, but today, not next year, but this year, not after all our misery is passed, but in the middle of it, not in another place but right here where we are standing.”

Henri J. M. Nouwen,
The Wounded Healer

People reject the incarnation by the deification of Jesus. We create in our minds an image of him as a super-being, and thus safely remove him from our present experience and his insistent demands on us. We manage to keep him in this elevated and removed position by not allowing any familiarity with him or the Scriptures. Any attempt to make him human and embarrassingly present is angrily denounced as sacrilegious. By carefully preserving our image of him as God, we no longer have to deal with him as the Son of Man. That is, by protecting his deity we can escape his humanity. Preachers by the dozens who vehemently affirm his deity shamelessly deny his humanity if he is black and poor.

Clarence Jordan,
cited by Dallas Lee in *The Cotton Patch Evidence*

This morning
I felt creative
cutting a star
in a half of a potato
for my son to dip
in bright red tempera
and stamp on tissue paper
to wrap his grandmama’s gift,
until I remembered
the mothers
who would thank the Creator
for a miracle
if they had one potato
to cook for their son’s
entire supper.

—Trish Holland is a parent of four young
adults as well as being a pastor in Colorado.



A Multi-Media Christmas Pageant Extravaganza

by Katie Cook

art by David Shoemaker

We've all been involved, in one way or another, in one of those wire-hanger-angel, bathrobe-shepherd Christmas pageants. Some churches, opting for more sophisticated Advent and Christmas programs, have given up the old pageants without much regret. Others have held on to the belief that taking an active part in a dramatic presentation is the best way for children to learn about the Infancy Narratives.

The last time I was involved in a children's Advent performance was in a small, rural church with kids whose parents allowed them to be involved in our programs, but didn't really participate themselves. The pastor and I, therefore, with the occasional help of a towns person who felt compassion for us, did our best to produce and direct your basic typical Christmas pageant. I had put on pageants in the inner city and in extremely remote country churches. I could do this. Or so I thought.

The evening of the pageant was more like a South American military *coup* than a church service. Our shepherds made the Herdmans of *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever* look pretty tame. The angels revolted during the middle of the arrival of the Magi. The pastor considered locking herself in a closet and not coming out for a decade or so. I, the associate pastor, had a hard time finding any redeeming value in what had taken place.

The next year, when Advent planning time came around, I balked. I swore I would never be involved in a Christmas pageant—ever again. And yet, I believed firmly in the concept of active learning, and I believed that there had to be a way to allow the kids this learning experience without violence or chaos. And it struck me. We could do a slide-show pageant! The pastor thought I might be missing a screw or two. But she was still a little shell-shocked from the previous year, so she was willing to try something different.

It was maybe a little more time-consuming—okay; it was quite a bit more time-consuming. But it was peaceful, manageable, enjoyable, and successful. The parents loved it, and the kids themselves were able to watch the play unfold. Here's what we did.

We cast the major roles, and then we scheduled "shoots" on different Saturdays beginning in November. We used the same flowing clothing and drapings of Mediterranean-looking fabric that had been used the year before. The beauty of this plan was that the clothing had to stay on the child a much shorter time, and we only had to keep up with a few actors at a time.

The cast was, in order of appearance:

Mary of Nazareth,

Gabriel (*played by a girl*),

Joseph,

Innkeeper,

Shepherds in the Field (*twelve eight-to-ten-year-old boys*),

Angel with Tidings,

Heavenly Host (*eight elementary-age girls*),

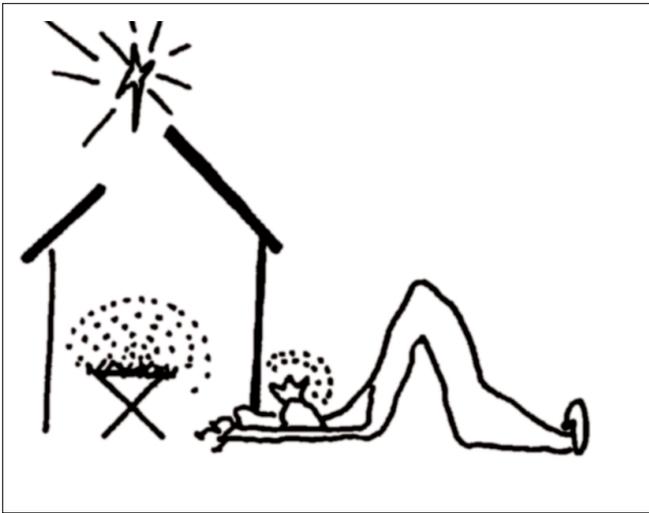
Shepherds at Manger (*we didn't round them all up twice; there were three this time—the three least boisterous ones, as I recall*),

Astrologers (*three boys*), and

Herod (*a girl*).

For the script we used the narrative from the musical *Celebrate Life* by Buryl Red and Regan Courtney. We recruited four teenagers to read the four parts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John on the evening of "The Big Show." We began looking through musical recordings to choose appropriate songs.

We put Gabriel and Mary in a room that looked like it might have been Mary's home. We took the Holy Family out to a barn. (The bitter cold made the acting more authentic.) During the scene with the Heavenly Host and the shepherds, we opted to put the Angel with Tidings on a ladder above the still-some-what-unruly Shepherds in the Field. We had a wonderful shot of a diminutive Joseph and Mary walking down a long, empty dirt road (with Joseph's arm around Mary's waist). The shoots involving shepherds and the heavenly host were done separately—a decision for which we congratulated ourselves repeatedly. The Magi we shot in a different place, walking down a road with their gifts.



art by Erin Kennedy

When the slides came back from the developer, several of the youth sat down with me to choose the best shots and put them in order, and to choose the most appropriate music for each tableau. Then we dubbed all of the songs onto one tape, in sequence.

For music we chose (with input from the youth) the following:

- “Unto Us a Child is Born” from *’Specially for Shepherds* by Ralph Carmichael
- “Mary’s Song” from *Celebrate Life*, performed by Cynthia Clawson
- “The Road to Bethlehem” from *’Specially for Shepherds*
- “Sweet Little Jesus Boy,” the spiritual, performed by Andy Williams
- “Glory to God in the Highest/I Found Him” from *’Specially for Shepherds*
- “We Three Kings,” the traditional version, performed by the Longines Symphonette
- “For Us a Child is Born/Finale” from *Light Eternal* by John Michael Talbot

For the performance, one person was stationed at the tape player, to start each song at the right moment. Another changed the slides according to the script. (We numbered the slides in the carousel. Then we typed out the narrative and the lyrics of the songs, and marked which slide went at that exact place. We held a “dress rehearsal” with the narrators, slides, and tape to make sure all was smooth.) We called it, “The Word Became Flesh: a Multi-Media Presentation of the Christmas Story by the Children and Youth of Bible Methodist Church.”

It was an incredibly enjoyable evening. The children’s attitude was light years away from that of the previous year. Instead of hiding in the vestibule with attacks of stage fright or starting fist fights in the Sunday school room in back of the sanctuary, they watched eagerly for their shots to be flashed onto the screen. Instead of “forgetting” to tell their folks about the pageant, they urged their families to come and see it, alerting them when their shots were coming up. Some of the youth were so moved that they actually admitted to having tears in their eyes.

Any semi-creative youth minister or children’s minister can adapt this project to his or her own congregation and situation. You might opt for live music as well as live narration—or you might want to record everything. You might decide you prefer a cam corder to a slide projector. You might want to write your own script (maybe setting it in modern times), or simply use the birth narrative passages from scripture. (Pastor Hervey and I highly recommend using older youth to help produce and direct the show.) You may end up using wire-hanger halos and bathrobes again, but the phrase “the Word became flesh” will take on a whole new meaning. ■

—art by David Shoemaker



**The fact is that Mary is not simply
 Mary, the Mother of God.
 The Mother of God is
 Mary, the independent woman;
 Mary, the unmarried mother;
 Mary, the homeless woman;
 Mary, the political refugee;
 Mary, the Third World woman;
 Mary, the mother of the condemned;
 Mary, the widow who outlives her child;
 Mary, the woman of all time
 who shares in the divine plan of salvation;
 Mary, the bearer of Christ.**

—Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB

Advent Hymn

by James R. Strange

—James Strange wrote “Advent Hymn” in Jerusalem, where he drew pottery for an archaeological expedition. He is a minister who now lives in Florida.



art by Rene Boldt

Absolute who swells beyond us
Gibraltar-rock, wide ocean, sky
Faceless face that mirrors for us
Our own dream, fears, protests, foot-stamps

Galaxy of whirlpool dust
Turning titan on your throne
Canyon deep that echoes to us
What we sing, scream, shout and sigh

We do not seek your absence, silence
Nor merit your unyielding void
Your rubber-necking outward, elseward
Your gaze telescoping the cosmos.

Come to us an infant, tyrant
Lover, satyr, mother, judge
Curl in our arms or arms around us
Or squeeze us, bruise us, block our blows.

But come to us.
Smell our breath
Wear our clothes
Hear our hearts
Strike our hips.

It won't be enough.
We'll want more—love and peace
comfort, care, trust
justice.
We'll worry about that when you get here.
For now just come.

Just come now.

December 7, 1993
Jerusalem, Israel

art by Robert Darden



Open Letter to Harry

A Sermon for Christmas Day

by Bruce McIver

It was thirty years ago. I was a relatively new pastor in Dallas, Texas. I woke on Christmas Day to a wonderful surprise. The entire city seemed to be blanketed in soft, white powdery stuff called snow—a rare event in Dallas. The little child in me exclaimed loudly as I looked out the window and saw the beauty of the untouched snow. I ran on downstairs to make a cup of coffee, look over my sermon notes, and then get in my car and drive to the church facilities.

The family would join me later for the second service at the church that day. As I drove along on the icy, snowy, slippery streets, I could not contain the joy within me. What a beautiful experience! I thought of the hills of North Carolina where I grew up as a boy. I remembered then some of the beauty in those hills when the snow came. But by the time I reached White Rock Lake, other thoughts began to come into my mind. “It’s snowing. It’s overcast. It’s Christmas Day. They won’t come today. Attendance will be down, and if the attendance is down then there will be gaps in the leadership, and if there are gaps in leadership then the offering will be down.”

So I began to mumble as I slid along those slippery streets toward the church, “Lord, you know we need a good offering at

the end of the year in order to meet the budget.” But soon the little child in me began to take over once again. “Who cares if the attendance is down? Who cares if all of the teachers aren’t there? Who cares if the offering plates are not filled? It’s Christmas Day. And it’s snowing.”

I slowly turned the car into the parking lot to face a happy surprise. I got out and people were coming from all directions! Old folks were slipping along, holding one another up, little boys and girls were frolicking in the snow...everyone saying to everyone else, “Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” I got out of the car, and they began to call to me. “Merry Christmas, Pastor! Merry Christmas!” And soon the little child escaped from my body, and I shouted back “Merry Christmas to all of you!”

I walked into the warmth of the facilities and thought to myself, “It couldn’t be any better than this. To be pastor in a church in a city like Dallas, a caring church, a church made up of good people, to come into church on a snowy day. It just can’t get any better than this.” I moved slowly along with the others into the sanctuary, and I saw people pick up hymnals who hadn’t sung in months. And they sang together joyously: “Joy to the world, the Lord has come.”

I saw grandparents and fathers and mothers reach down and hug little children who were caught up in the ecstasy of the moment. And I preached. I told the people about God, and I told them about God’s son Christ who became a baby. I talked about a manger in a

little village called Bethlehem. I talked about cattle, a young girl named Mary, a man named Joseph. I talked about a handful of shepherds who came and surrounded that manger.

And then I shared a story, from *The Saturday Review of Literature*, this little article:

Last night John Elsey, night watchman at the Grand Eagle department store, while making his rounds of the bargain basement, found the body of a man lying behind the counter. He was thin to the point of emaciation. He was apparently in his mid-thirties and was shabbily dressed. His pockets were empty. There were no marks of identification upon his body. Store officials believe that he was trampled in the Christmas rush and crawled under the counter for shelter. They are unable to account for what appear to be nail wounds in his hands. The police are investigating.

I concluded my sermon and we had a prayer and everyone stood and sang the closing hymn with gusto. “O come all ye

faithful, joyful and triumphant...o come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem. Come let us adore Him.” From the depths of our hearts we sang those words. The hymn was easy to sing because in the hearts and lives of everyone it was a joyful and triumphant moment. Benediction was pronounced, and I made my way out the door and down the hall.

I had only fifteen minutes between the two services. Time to get a drink of water, time to look over my notes once again, time to relax and then go back into the worship service. As I rounded the corner down toward the library I saw two policemen, and I saw huddled around those two policemen some very anxious church members.

I walked up and said “What on earth is going on?” The members said, “Pastor, we have a real crisis on our hands!” And I said, “What’s the crisis? Someone hurt? Someone died?” One of the members pointed through the glass partition leading into the library and said “Look right there, Pastor! Look right there!”

I looked, and seated at a table for little boys and girls sat a young man, with long stringy hair matted down his back, shabbily dressed, a sweater held together by one button, the old kind of tennis shoes made out of rubber, no socks. He was looking at books designed for little boys and girls. The folks standing outside that glass partition kept saying, “Pastor, what on earth are we going to do?”

I looked at one of the policemen. He shook his head and said, “Sir, my partner and I were called here. We were told there was a problem at your church. We showed up a few moments ago and there’s that young man sitting there at a table. He’s not bothering anyone. I don’t know if he can read or not but sir, you have a sign out there that says ‘welcome.’

“He doesn’t seem to be disturbing anybody, so you people will have to take care of it in your own way. The roads are slippery out there...my partner and I will be needed elsewhere, so if you’ll excuse me, we’ll move on.”

I stood there in absolute disbelief as intelligent, wonderful people continued to say, “What are we going to do? We have a crisis on our hands!” Down the hallway I heard the music begin, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room. Let heaven and nature sing, let heaven and nature sing.”

I knew that the second service had already started. I knew I was late. I was trapped, caught between leading a congregation in worship as they sang “Joy to the world, the Lord is come,” trying to figure out what in the world we were going to do in the midst of this “crisis.” I was frustrated. The child in me had long gone, the adult in me became angry...

But I wasn’t sure what I was angry about. Was I angry that the police had been called? Was I angry because a young man with matted hair and tennis shoes sat in the library designed for boys and girls? Was I angry that some wonderful people kept saying to me, “What on earth are we going to do?” I wasn’t sure why I was angry but the emotions were rampant. I shook my head and stood there in bewilderment.

No one had spoken to the young man—no one. For all I knew, he was oblivious to the “crisis” that he had created. I watched as he slowly closed the book, put it carefully back on the shelf, got up and walked out between the members of our

church who stood in the hallway. There was total silence. I watched him as he walked to the end of the hall. I heard the door close behind him. I slipped over to a window and saw him climb onto an old rusty bicycle and pedal away.

Everyone sighed with relief because the “crisis” was over and he was gone. I made my way down the hall. As the pastor, the preacher, I was to tell the congregation about God, tell them about Jesus, tell them about the lowly circumstances of his birth. To sing with them, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come.”

That was thirty years ago. I have never told that story before. I’ve been haunted by the face of that young man, by his

**I looked, and seated at a table for
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no socks.**

matted hair, by his unkempt appearance, by his tennis shoes with no socks. I’ve wondered about him. I don’t even know his name. Somehow he got past the ushers at the door, down the hall where the deacons were stationed, into the library where workers were on duty. Nobody—nobody—knew his name.

I’ve tried to give him a name...was it Bill? Was it Joe? For a moment, let’s just call him Harry. I’ve wondered all this past week what I would say if I had another opportunity to visit with Harry. Indeed, I’ve wondered if he’s still alive. I think I’d tell him about the shepherds out on the hillside, how the glory of the Lord shone about them, how they were awestruck, overwhelmed with a sense of awe at the majesty and the beauty of God that they didn’t understand.

I think I’d say to Harry, my nameless friend, “Christ came to be among common people, like you and me. You don’t have to be afraid...you don’t have to be afraid of church people. You don’t have to be afraid of people who’ve dressed up in suits. You don’t have to be afraid of people who talk the language of the church. And you sure don’t have to be afraid of God.

“For God loves you. And God’s Son came to get down on the level where you and I are. To put his arms around us and tell us that he loves us. Harry, that’s the gospel truth. Like the angels said, don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid. I bring you good news which will be to all people.

“Harry, I don’t know whether you have a family or not: mother, father, brother, sister. I don’t know whether there’s

someone for you to go home with today to have Christmas lunch. But God loves you. This message is to all people, and in this moment you can be a part of the family of God.

"You don't have to be alone. There is a Christian fellowship here. We sing 'What a fellowship, what a joy divine.' We'd like for you to be a part of that fellowship. Harry, there was another person who lived in Jesus' day, his name was Zacchaeus. Oh, he was an outcast. No one thought highly of him. And he was afraid. One day Jesus passed by his house and he was so afraid and so alone that he climbed in the sycamore tree to hide from the Christ.

"But Jesus knew he was up there. He stopped, looked up and called him by name. He said, 'Zacchaeus, come down. I want to go to your house today.' Zacchaeus came down joyfully. Invited Jesus home with him.

"Harry, you don't have to be afraid. You don't have to be alone. And you don't have to be sad. Everything about Christmas is concerned with joy. Mary rejoiced at the news that she would give birth to the son of God. The shepherds came to Bethlehem rejoicing on their way, even though they didn't understand what was happening. And a little later, wise men came from afar and brought their gifts joyfully.

"You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to be alone. You don't have to be sad. For, joy to the world, the Lord has come to me and to you, and Harry—we're brothers; we're brothers."

That was thirty years ago. I have never told that story before. I've been haunted by the face of that young man, by his matted hair, by his unkempt appearance, by his tennis shoes with no socks. I've wondered about him. I don't even know his name.

Dear Lord, wherever Harry may be today, bless him. And forgive me for not telling him those words thirty years ago, and forgive us, as a church fellowship, for calling an opportunity a "crisis." Make us sensitive in this moment to people who are afraid, who are alone, and who are sad this day. May indeed the child within us leap for joy as we understand what Christmas is all about and why the Christ came. In His name we pray, Amen.

—Bruce McIver is a retired pastor and author of several books, including *Grinsights* and *Stories I Couldn't Tell While I Was a Pastor*.

Editor's note: Sylvia Niedner—a minister from Granville, Ohio—wrote this sermon, which follows on the next page, for friends on an internet forum about twelve-step recovery programs. She says that this came to her "after several conversations about the offensiveness of the Christmas season, and general wastefulness of our society." She originally dedicated it to the people who participate in the recovery program at the family abuse shelter where she works. The art, by Rene Boldt, is modeled from Rene's newborn son, Ryan.



In the Eyes of the Baby

a Christmas sermon
by Sylvia Niedner

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. (Matthew 2:1-4)

The birth of a baby, to a poor, unwed teenage girl. Rather an ordinary event to be so troubling to such great multitudes over the millennia, and to continue disturbing people to this day.

I live in the wealthiest country in the world, and work in a domestic violence shelter for women and children where the mothers will be severely challenged to find living quarters and enough to nourish their children and themselves after they leave our program.

The baby continues to trouble Herod.

In the two weeks before Christmas, the common social question, rather than being "How are you doing?" was, "Are you ready for Christmas yet?" implying, "Is your shopping all done?" Read: "Have you done all your commercial worshipping?" I heard this over and over. Then I would go into work and look into the innocent eyes of a baby there, whose mother did not know where she would be going, or how she'd support the two of them.

Those eyes are looking at all of us. There is such anxiety evoked by that question:

- Financial anxiety—how will all this commercial excess be paid for?
- Agenda anxiety—how can everything be fit into such a limited amount of time?
- Social anxiety—we don't want to disappoint anyone, we want to present properly at all the parties, etc.
- Relationship anxiety—if the right gift isn't purchased, will that person still love us?

The baby reaches out her arms to me in complete abandon.

Time stops. The frantic bustle slips away. She cuddles close for a moment. The questions are, just for an instant, meaningless. Just for an instant, all that exist are human warmth, connection, affection, a glimpse into the hope of the future.

The phone rings—someone is asking, "What do you need? Is there something we can give?" There are, of course, the concrete answers to that question—the practical Christmas list: new clothes that fit, warm boots and jackets, special toys, nice jewelry or coveted treasures, food, household supplies, furniture, china, or silverware for people setting up their own places.

But then there are other things to give—a different Christmas list:

- Loving ears to listen to the horror of domestic violence;
- Caring hands to tend the wounds;
- Tender arms to hold the babies for a little while;
- Watchful eyes to supervise the active, angry children so mom can rest, just for a bit;
- Strong voices to speak out against the farce: against criminals living in comfort—victims uprooted, trapped, and afraid; against a social/legal/political system that continues to regard people as property—commodities in a free-market world—pawns in a power battle;
- The healing presence of loving people to counter the ravages of multigenerational addictions and abuse;

- Adamant voices that cry out: "No more violence! No more abuse! No more murder in the name of love!"

To whom is this Christmas wish list given? To the caring soul(s) on the phone? To friends? To the world? To the mercy of a loving God?

Is it merely confessed to the baby?

Then there is the quiet tapping of fingers on the keyboard—a refugee from the rage and anguish, coming to a haven of healing. There are souls rebelling against commercialism run amok. There are agnostics/atheists asking, "Is this all there is to Christmas?"

They are also feeling the troubling power of the baby—the wistful question in those compelling eyes. "Is this all there is to Christmas?"

What answer do we give? Can we look steadily back, secure, knowing that we have done all we can? Have we used the power at our fingertips to check off that different Christmas list? Have we helped those we know in recovery deal with their broken relationships, as well as their addictions? Have we faced the violence inside ourselves, and in our lives? Have we made amends for ways we have abused? Are we standing up and saying, "No more violence! No more abuse! No more murder in the name of love!"

The baby fixes his eyes on us intently.

In the troubling hours of the late night, there are loving ears and eyes open to receive the pouring out of hurting souls. Continually, there is loving support for doing tough work. There is ongoing questioning about true healing paths. There are people steadfastly spreading the word, welcoming and nurturing newcomers, celebrating those in the great meeting in the sky, dealing with past and present fractured relationships.

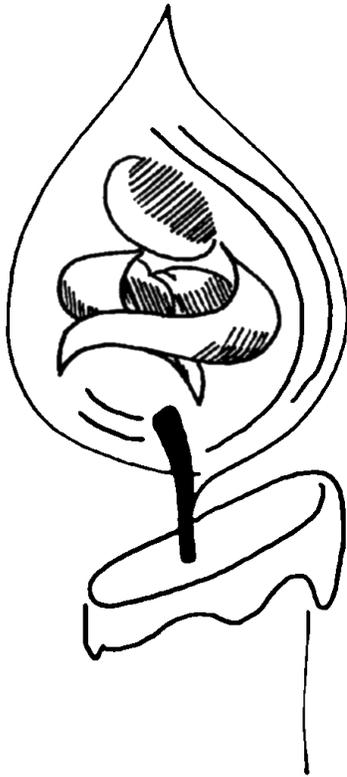
The baby smiles and continues to look at us intently. Amen. ■

Children's Sermon Ideas

We called Mary Meadows, a specialist in children's ministry, to glean a few ideas for your children's story time during worship. Mary suggested using the theme of lights throughout the season, using candles, Christmas tree lights, flashlights, etc. At Christmas and Epiphany you could incorporate the Bethlehem star.

Here are some ideas on which to build your dialogue with the children: ask them if they ever wake up at night in the dark; turn out the lights in the sanctuary briefly, then talk to them about how that felt; use the lighting of the Advent candles as the children's time, explaining to them why the congregation does this—perhaps explaining the weekly themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. Discuss the difference between light and darkness—why were the people waiting in the dark for Jesus to come?

Mary also suggests including the historical story of St. Nicholas. She has employed this story in her church in Raleigh, North Carolina, where the children wanted to know how Jesus related to Santa Claus. Why doesn't Santa come to poor children? some of them wanted to know. It would be good to remind them that perhaps Santa does not, but Jesus does. —eds.



meditation on miracle

by Daniel G. Bagby

There is no miracle today.
 Not here. Not where we live.
 At least in our eyes and to our ears
 what we repeat is common, average, fair...
 Is there no shock left at the news
 that into a stagnant, mangled, dying world
 there suddenly was someone representing
 the opposite of all that dies
 and wastes away?
 Unless there is a remnant of a scandal left
 when we hear the now too common word
 that creator became a creature
 to reclaim creation—
 then miracles are dead
 Christmas is just another season
 and advent is just another cycle in the tread...
 But, if instead
 the God of all that lives
 made human visitation, took on flesh
 then—and maybe only then
 can miracles occur again!

—Dan Bagby teaches pastoral care to seminary students
 in Richmond, Virginia. This meditation is companion to
 a series of sermons called "The Scandal of Advent."

—art by Erin Kennedy

Litany for Christmastide

Behold My Servant

by Katie Cook

FIRST VOICE: Behold, my servant.

SECOND VOICE : The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
 because God has anointed me to bring good
 tidings to the afflicted.

FIRST VOICE : Behold, my chosen one.

SECOND VOICE: God has sent me to bind up the broken
 hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and the opening of the prison to those who
 are bound.

FIRST VOICE : This is the one in whom my soul delights.

SECOND VOICE : God has anointed me to proclaim the year
 of God's favor, and also the day of God's
 vengeance.

FIRST VOICE : I have put my spirit upon my servant.

SECOND VOICE : God has sent me to comfort all who mourn,
 to give them a garland instead of ashes, the
 oil of gladness instead of sorrow.

FIRST VOICE: My servant will bring forth justice to the
 nations.

SECOND VOICE : They shall have the mantle of praise instead
 of a faint spirit; they shall build up the ancient
 ruins; they shall repair the ruined cities, the
 devastation of many generations.

FIRST VOICE : Behold, my servant.

ALL: Let earth receive her king.



Karen Groman created the above art for Central Presbyterian
 Church in Waco, Texas. She says that it was originally printed
 with black ink on red paper.

Let Them See Christ in Me

A Christmastide Reading for Three People and Congregation

by Deborah E. Harris

Reader #1: Several of the people we meet in the Infancy Narratives had hearts prepared to embrace the truth of Christ's coming. They saw Him, held Him, and believed He was the Son of God. And blessed are you who have seen Christ with spiritual eyes, heard Him with your heart, and have believed.

Reader #2: But what of those who have missed His coming? Those in our world—like many in Christ's day—who are often so weary, they haven't the strength to hope...so lonely, they haven't the heart for loving...so frightened, they haven't the courage to believe? In this world full of noisy distractions and things that block the soul's vision, can there be room for Jesus?

Reader #1: How we long to make Christ visible to those around us—to love people with His heart of compassion, to be His arms around the weak.

Reader #2: What greater blessing can there be than to glorify Christ and to let His praise find expression in our lives that others may see Him and believe.

Reader #3: *Jesus is so real to me; I see Him through eyes of faith,
And I have felt His presence near in the moments of each day;
Yet, so many do not know of the love He longs to give—
Oh, how will they come to see Christ and believe?
Let them see Christ in me, let them see Christ in me...*

Readers #1, #2, and Congregation:
Let me be His eyes of compassion and His ears to hear their need.

Reader #3: *Let them see Christ in me, let them see Christ in me...*

Reader #1, #2, and Congregation:
*Let me be His heart of boundless love,
Let them see Christ in me!*

Reader #3: *People struggle all alone in the darkness of this world,
Some imprisoned by their greed, some who've given up all hope;
Let the Word be flesh again in my life and in my deeds,
That people may see Jesus and believe.
Let them see Christ in me, let them see Christ in me...*

Reader #1, #2, and Congregation:
Let me be His eyes of compassion and His ears to hear their need.

Reader #3: *Let them see Christ in me, let them see Christ in me...*

Reader #1, #2, and Congregation:
*Let me be His heart of boundless love;
Let them see Christ in me!*

Reader #1, #2, #3:
*Oh, may I let His light so shine that others soon will find
His grace, His peace, His strength, His joy!*

All: *Let them see Jesus Christ in me! Amen.*



Deborah Harris—a freelance writer, editor, and lyricist in Waco, Texas—originally wrote this as a song and narration for a musical called "Make His Praise Glorious," published by Word Music.



the packing around my hopes

by *dorisanne cooper*

it's hard to hope. i mean to really hope for something—
whether it be the answer to a problem,
or the solution to a difficult situation.
i use the word often and rather casually, too;
but even so,
i still feel i must pad my hopes
with all kinds of alternative outcomes:
“i hope this will work out...but something might interfere.”
“i hope this is right...but i'm not really sure.”

i pack in all the possibilities so airtight
that i don't leave room for surprise.
i think i do this partly for protection,
protection from being disappointed or embarrassed or wrong.
i say i'm just being realistic.

but realism can only take me so far.
surely mysticism can play a part as well.
but it's harder to plan for that.
thinking realistically... how believable is it
that the birth of a child in a stable could change the world?
well, i believe it now; but
i can't help wondering, if i had lived then,
whether that would have been on my list of possibilities.
somehow i doubt it.

this season reminds me...
it reminds me that if i hold too tightly
to my list of possibilities,
i may overlook an answer that's staring me in the face.

it reminds me of the many ways
in which hopes can be fulfilled.

it reminds me to relax...
not relax my hopes,
but the packing around them.

i need to leave room for God in my hopes.
not just now, but all through the year.

who knows?
i might even witness a miracle.

—*Dorisanne Cooper is a newly ordained minister in Greensboro, North Carolina.*
The art on this page was created by Erin Kennedy.

My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation

A Dramatic Reading for Three People and Congregation

by Deborah E. Harris



Leader. . . When I'm reading the Bible and certain individuals are mentioned only briefly, it's all too easy to overlook the real dimension of their humanity and the depth of their spirituality. Sometimes a few sentences or a couple of paragraphs in Scripture sum up a lifetime of "waiting for the light," and I find it helpful to read between the lines a bit.

I have long been intrigued by Simeon and Anna noted in connection with the day Mary and Joseph brought their young son to the temple in Jerusalem. Simeon, a devout and righteous man who had been promised through the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. And the prophetess Anna, an 84-year-old widow who never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. I have imagined they might have said and sung something like the following:

Simeon. . . I am an old man. But in this moment, I am as a young boy in my heart—leaping with delight and praising my God who has kept a sacred promise to me. I have seen the Lord! The Holy Redeemer who brings consolation to Israel. And as I hold the Christ Child in my arms, so now my life rests peacefully in your arms, O God. For my eyes have seen Your salvation!

*The silence has been broken with music that rings true,
And all my deepest longings put into words by You;
In my heart I know it—You are the Holy One,
Redeemer of the people, Jehovah's only Son.*

*For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared for all women and men;
This Light of divine revelation,
A Holy Child born in Bethlehem.*

Leader, Simeon, and Congregation. . .
*Yes, my eyes have seen Your salvation,
And now by Your grace I can say,
"This Savior of hope for all nations
Is reborn in my heart today.*

Anna. . . The years of waiting seem as one day now that I have seen Him! How I wish my dear husband were here to share my joy. There were days when the loneliness and silence within these temple walls seemed to suffocate me. And times when my own weakness and self-doubt battled hard against my commitment. Yet God, in mercy, sustained me. And now the truth is so clear to me: through these years my heart has been prepared to recognize You, Lord Jesus. You are heaven's resounding "YES!" to all my prayers. For my eyes have seen Your salvation!

*The waiting now is over; my strength has been renewed,
And every prayer I've offered is answered "yes" in You;
So now my heart rejoices, and my spirit sings—
You are my own Messiah and my King of Kings!*

*For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared for all women and men;
This Light of divine revelation,
A Holy Child born in Bethlehem.*

Leader, Anna, and Congregation. . .
*Yes, my eyes have seen Your salvation,
And now by Your grace I can say,
"This Savior of hope for all nations
Is reborn in my heart today."*

Prayer. . . Again this season we join Simeon and Anna in waiting for Your light and in praying, "Come, Thou long-expected Jesus! Set us free from our fears, release us from our sins. For You are the hope of all the earth and the joy of every longing heart." Amen.

—Deborah Harris is a freelance editor, writer, and lyricist who lives in Waco, Texas and volunteers frequently for Seeds of Hope. She originally wrote this piece as a part of the musical "Make His Praise Glorious," published by Word Music.

